

Mezzanine

E. F. Benson

fadedpage.com

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Mezzanine

Date of first publication: 1926

Author: E. F. (Edward Frederic) Benson (1867-1940)

Date first posted: Aug. 5, 2023

Date last updated: Aug. 5, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230809

This eBook was produced by: Marcia Brooks, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

MEZZANINE

By

E. F. BENSON

Author of "Peter," "Mike," etc.

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LTD
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne

First published *May 1926.*
Second Impression June 1926.

Printed in Great Britain.

Mezzanine

PART I

CHAPTER I

The first of the autumn frosts had come, scenting the windless morning with its clean undefinable odour, and promising a radiant October day. When Elizabeth Langdon came down to breakfast the sun on this hill-top was already warm, and the air a-sparkle, though down below the cup-shaped hollow of the valley, where the town stood, was full to the brim of white mist. Level as a lake it stretched across the basin and along the course of the chalk stream, but it was fast drying up, and the tops of the trees in the Close and the Cathedral tower pierced it and rose above it, luminously gleaming in the pale sunshine.

The dining-room bore signs of an earlier meal than hers, hastily partaken of, and not yet cleared away; a cup of coffee only half drunk stood there, a plate on which was the more fluid part of a poached egg and a burned-out match, and the crisp smell of a cigarette spiced the air. Elizabeth rang the bell to show she was down, and opening the long window that gave access to the garden, strolled out while she waited for the arrival of her breakfast. Walter must have had a rush to catch his train, she thought; he had just looked in on her as she dressed, with a greeting for her birthday, and a moment afterwards she had seen from her bedroom window the top of his head skimming past along the top of the garden wall, and heard the sharp tingle of his bicycle bell as he curved into the main road below; five minutes later she had seen the London express slide along the embankment into the town. But if he had missed it he would have been back by now.

The sun was infusing the frost-scented morning with the odour of dead leaves and damp earth, the very essence and spirit of autumn. A gravel path ran spaciouly along the garden front of the house; the wet pebbles of it glowed like topazes, and the lawn below, where melted rime lay thick, was shimmering white. On each side of it gleamed herbaceous beds backed by high brick walls, where sunflowers, already seeding and dispetalled, hung their broad heads, circular and solid like great buns. The rooting up of these, thought Elizabeth, should be her first task in the garden that morning, for

their moultings left them shabby, but she would keep the heads as winter provender for the tits, hanging them on strings outside the windows. It was pretty to see the small, bold birds cling to their swinging table and pick out the oily seeds. The dahlias were but little blackened by the frost of the night; they would be gay for another week yet, crimson and orange perches for the late red admiral butterflies that were already sunning themselves there. At the bottom of the lawn were three or four trees of fine growth springing from a space of rough grass, which was bright in spring-time with the bulbs she had planted there. Below was a half-acre of kitchen garden, fenced from the road that led steeply down into Maychester by a thick thorn hedge.

Elizabeth took in all these items with a glance of general recognition, as if greeting an expected and familiar friend, and then gave them a further attention in detail, for she was one to whom these independent little natural existences had each an individuality of its own. She was tall and solidly made, and like most big women carried herself well; she looked brisk and capable and serene, as if she had dealt very successfully with life hitherto, and was assured of efficiency in the future. You would guess, too, from that sensitive mouth and those large grey eyes that had so direct a gaze that it was not so much by diplomatic methods that she had managed to keep on such good terms with others and herself as by the wisdom of goodwill and simplicity; she might be expected to solve a difficulty less by acuteness than by a breezy and indulgent handling of it.

She strolled along the walk above the lawn with the paper, which she had picked up in her passage through the dining-room, still unopened in her hand, for possible events of public interest had less allure for her than her own personal concerns, in the forefront of which, for the moment, was this morning of strenuous gardening which she had promised herself. Autumn did not present itself to her mind as a season of gradual decay and approaching death for her garden, nor hitherto had she read warning and a wintry outlook in her own whitening hair, or, this morning, in the undoubted fact that it was her forty-seventh birthday. External autumn was to be taken day by day on its merits, and here was a warm and sunny impression, which the spice of the night's frost but accentuated. As for winter, it was not death for these adorable creatures of the earth, but rather a sleep that restored their blossoming energies.

For herself, too, she liked the winter; she made plans, at any rate, to do the things which it had been impossible to do during the summer; to improve her mind with books, to encourage a nimbleness of finger on the piano, and, best of all, there would be long, cheerful evenings by the fire,

when dusk fell early and the curtains were drawn, and she and Walter would be uninterruptedly alone together. They were both quite sociably disposed, but really they were happier at home on wintry nights than anywhere else. He was quite of her mind about that; he groaned at the idea of accepting an invitation to dinner at such seasons. "Why go out of doors when we're so well off at home?" he would ask. "Write a tactful note, darling, and imply, if you don't want actually to say it, that I've got a toothache. Or say straight out that we don't expect to be hungry next Thursday. Or say that there are only three more days of January left, and that in consequence we're very busy." But this winter she felt that she must take him out a little more, even at the sacrifice of her own inclination, for it wasn't good for a man to be eternally alone with his wife in the evening. Last year his health (even if not his toothache) had been a valid excuse, but now he had recovered with a completeness for which once she had hardly dared to hope. That was the joyful cause of his expedition to London to-day; he had gone on what she felt sure would be the final visit to his doctor, to get a clean bill of health given him.

It was this, she knew, that most conduced to her sense of exhilarated content this morning; it was the sword in the side of the dragon of fear with whom she had waged so long a combat. Fear for the last two years had been the arch-enemy of her soul, and sweet it was to see it lying stark and slain. Walter had been invalided home in the last summer of the war, an emaciated shadow of himself, and all this weary time he had been subject to continual attacks of the malaria he had caught on the poisoned plains round Salonica; as fast as he made a pallid recovery from one, another broke him down again. But now for the last few months there had been no recurrence of them; it looked as if he had finally routed them. With that his general vitality had enormously improved; he seemed to have recaptured the spring of youth again. He had become as young, she told him, as he was when first they met, eleven years ago, and when, so soon after that, they had married. That rejuvenation had not been physical alone, he was young again in outlook, in activity of mind as well as muscle. His long period of illness, indeed, had done for him what winter did for the plants and trees; he had lain quiescent and recuperating, storing the sap which now so briskly flowed again to the beckoning of spring.

All this presented itself to her contented consciousness more like a picture flashed before her mind than a sequential train of thought, and hovered before her like some bright transparency without obscuring her perception of the garden sights and sounds. Across the lawn a big horse-chestnut tree, yellow-leaved, stood gleaming like new-minted gold in the

early sunshine. Now and then a prickly husk dropped from its stalk, softly rustling in its fall through the foliage, and she heard the thump of it on the grass below. That would burst its ripeness open and disclose, embedded in the leathery cushion within, the shining mahogany nuts, which her nine-year-old Anthony would search for presently, to be strung and do battle against each other. He and his father waged these terrific wars with squeals of agony as well as of triumph, for knuckles were liable to receive the fierce random blows which were intended for your adversary's chestnut. And not only were the nuts falling from the tree, but the five-fingered leaves also. Silently, one by one, they detached themselves, and twirling round and round in the windless air, settled on the ground. They were falling fast now as the sun warmed the sapless stalks which had been chilled by the frost, and the grass underneath the tree was yellow with them.

They fell in one piece, she noticed, stem and leaf together, not like the foliage of the ampelopsis on the garden wall; there the leaf was first detached, and the bare stem of it clung for a few days more to the mother-tendrils. A neater plan, she thought, was that of the horse-chestnut: if you had to shed your leaves, shed them stem and all, and have done with decoration. To do otherwise was to cling to the undecorative remnant of your summertime. Besides, the other was more convenient for gardeners, since one sweeping-up made everything tidy again. There lurked a parable, Elizabeth felt, in the compared conduct of the two, and she would think it out when, as soon as breakfast was over, she spent her morning according to plan—that disgusting Teutonic phrase—in her garden. It had something to do with the ways of growing old.

The appearance of her parlour-maid with glad news of breakfast and the simultaneous ringing of the telephone-bell brought her into the house. Parish attended to the latter, and presently returned with an inquiry as to whether Mrs. Gosson might look in at tea-time. Mrs. Gosson was the energetic wife of a most tranquil Dean: Walter's name for her was the "Home-breaker," for on the errands of charity and good works which so incessantly occupied her, she often made the fell discovery that a husband was a drunkard, or his wife a woman of loose morals, and then Mrs. Gosson greedily tore them asunder, and arranged separations and allowances and the custody of the children, whereas, said Walter, they would all have been much happier muddling along together. But Mrs. Gosson's day was wasted unless she had got on the scent of a tale of sin and sorrow, which she followed up, like an excited terrier with enthusiastic yappings. She had a cast-iron code about conduct, and in spite of her ceaseless administration of charities was essentially uncharitable. She looked on the world as a very dangerous and wicked

place; but then she was there to help, and to haul delinquents by the scruff of the neck into the way of salvation. Those who were not delinquents—sadly few—were “dear saints” or “sweet things,” according to their sex, and God, in Mrs. Gosson’s view, a sort of tremendous clergyman who observed Sunday very strictly, and was a rabid teetotaler. She was one of the most zealous of His district visitors.

Elizabeth knew she was an admirable woman, but she did not want her to tea. Walter detested her, and, unfortunately Walter’s absence in town made rather a good opportunity. Elizabeth sighed.

“Oh, I suppose so, Parish,” she said.

“Yes’m,” said Parish.

Elizabeth had rather lost herself in rumination over the subject of Mrs. Gosson. Would she be a better woman if she was like Mrs. Gosson? But the sound of her own words brought her to the surface again.

“Oh, Parish, don’t tell her that,” she said. “Don’t say that I suppose so. Say I’ll be delighted, so pleased. Half-past four.”

Parish unfroze into a grin.

“Yes’m; I understand,” she said.

There was nothing in Elizabeth’s post that required an immediate answer, though one letter certainly demanded consideration. This was from the owner of the house they now occupied, of which, when Walter had been invalided home she had taken a three years’ lease, with a break on either side at its termination. It had been clear that for some time he would not be able to get back to his work in the City, and he was ordered out of the fogs and blacknesses of London to seek recovery in a purer and more bracing air. Now there was but a year more of their lease to run, and the owner inquired whether she would entertain the idea of purchase. The price asked was very moderate, and it was well within Elizabeth’s means to buy the house. Though she had lived most of her life in towns, these two years had brought her to believe that at heart she was a country-lover. She had grown very fond of the place. She liked the big down-land and her garden and the convenient house; above all, she felt warmly to the spot that had so marvellously restored Walter. She would love to have it as a permanent home; but there were many things to be considered. She chose just now not to consider any of them; there was no immediate hurry, and she could settle nothing without consulting him.

Manual work, especially if it is of a rough and simple kind, like the uprooting of sunflowers and the sweeping together of dead leaves is a fine incentive to meditation, and Elizabeth's mind was soon as hard at work as her active and robust body. The autumn seemed to have given her a good text on which to discourse to herself, but she did not find her own homily disagreeable. She had never shunned the approach, nor did she now shun the advent of middle age. It promised, so she began to tell herself, a soft mild climate, which ought to be pleasant enough, provided you banished from your mind all desire for unsuitable activities. Often she had imagined that it would be possible to enjoy it very greatly, so long as you picked no quarrel with the afternoon light and the tendency of shadows to lengthen. She fancied she had schooled herself into acceptance of its inevitable limitations whenever they began to assert themselves, and had seen no difficulty, prospectively, in meeting them with friendliness, convinced of their kindly intentions. Decorations, physical charms naturally fell off from the middle-aged, even as the leaves were falling from the chestnut-tree, underneath which she was now busy with broom and wheelbarrow, and the right thing to do was to let them fall and sweep them away. Off they came—and now the parable of contrast between the chestnut-tree's method of defoliation and that of the ampelopsis, which had eluded her before, declared itself. It was wiser to let the summer decoration go completely, and not retain a remnant of it for a day longer. The bare stems, once crowned with green, only called attention to what had vanished.

Suddenly the whole of this silent and edifying sermon rang untrue to the inward ear that listened to it. The preacher who occupied her private pulpit was that mild old parson who had harangued her so often and so suitably in those two years of Walter's illness, when all the values were different. She knew now that when she had listened to that very proper discourse, she had never really believed that Walter would get back full measure of health, or recapture the youth that was still rightly his, much less that exuberance of living which had been restored to him. She had figured him as never likely to be robust again, never young any more, easily tired, a stranger henceforth to the spendthrift extravagance of youth, which so gaily squandered its energies in the certainty that its balance in the bank of life would always be made good. That forecast of his future, she saw now, had been chiefly responsible for her own quiet acceptance of a middle age in which so much vigour and vitality would remain, all of which should minister to him. He, in his untimely loss of youth and health, would lean on her, and find in her all that he needed in the ways of care and tenderness.

But now the imagined situation was utterly changed by that amazing recovery of his, and their relations to each other, as she had forecast them, would bear not the faintest resemblance to reality. He would no longer be in need of the strong, capable arm to lean on in invalid fashion, nor of her robustness to reinforce his languor. The ten years difference in their ages was no longer a gulf to be bridged over by her health and his weakness, but would yawn ever more widely between them. In three years she would be fifty, and those same three years would only consolidate him on the firm heights of his manhood. A man of forty, and she fifty. . . .

The sun had dispersed the mists which so short a time ago had hidden the town that clustered in the hollow, so that it lay softly blurred and only dimly visible. Some illumination like that dispersed the acquiescence in middle age which hid its real features from her, and she saw, sharply defined, what had not been visible to her before. She had heaped together the scattered gold from the chestnut-tree, raking it up into a shining heap, but leaving the plump burst nuts for Tony to collect. There was plenty more to occupy her hands, but, as the new preacher in her private pulpit ousted the old, she abandoned her physical activity, and, drawing off her thick gardening gloves, sat down on the seat below the tree, to listen with undivided attention to a very different discourse.

She had embarked, so he reminded her, on one of the most hazardous expeditions in which a woman can adventure herself, when she had made up her mind to marry a man ten years younger than herself. Her friends had tried to dissuade her, but her ear had been deaf to their arguments, though some small voice in her own heart, croaking common sense, had ranged itself with them. But her heart had been so full of glad music that it was easy to disregard that little melancholy caviller. She had fallen in love with Walter—who wanted to find an excuse for that?—and quite deliberately she had done all that a self-respecting woman could to attract and absorb him. She was, at thirty-six, very young for her age, she was big and beautiful, and she was well off, for her mother's death, which had taken place shortly before she met him, had left her in more than easy circumstances. For ten years before that she had devoted herself, with gay courage and cheerfulness, to the despotic whims of a hypochondriacal and self-pitying woman; what wonder then that when she came out of that tunnel of a life into sunshine and the free air, and by divine chance found this young man with eyes ready from the first to regard her admiringly, she gave him of her best, using the dower with which Nature had so abundantly enriched her in the service of love? His admiration and interest were soon infused with a

more glowing quality, and before six months were past he had asked her to marry him.

Elizabeth wanted to state the case fairly. The fact that she had fallen in love with him was excuse enough then, and perhaps still, for her deliberate deafness to the voice of the cautious and the sensible, but she had had, she knew well, an ally to fight for her more powerful perhaps than any of those intrinsic attractions which were legitimately hers. Just as she first saw him in the reaction of daylight and freedom after the long dimness of her mother's self-centred invalidism, so he first saw her when he was just reacting from a disaster of his own affections. He had, not a year before, been engaged to a girl of his own age, who had thrown him over for a more brilliant destiny. There had never been a more heartless proceeding. Evie Glazebrook had merely dropped him, when wealth and position as the wife of Lord Ambleside had presented itself, turned from him with a scarcely regretful smile and a shrug of her white shoulders, and passed on to a more attractive future. And then Elizabeth had appeared, breezy and warm-hearted and infinitely welcoming. He wanted comfort, he wanted love, and there they were ready to be poured out on him. Strange, indeed, would it have been if she had rejected his acceptance of them.

She had her choice. She was not blind to the fact that she was marrying a man ten years her junior, nor did she wish him to be blind to it. She had, in fact, been perfectly open with him, had told him that the day would come when she would be old, and he still young, and that the envious years would send in their bills. She had—how vividly she remembered it to-day—put to him exactly the situation which was now upon her, bidding him consider what manner of companionship would be theirs when she was within the three-year limit of her fiftieth birthday, and he still as far off from forty. But she had known that he would not be able to realize that any more than she did, and with what incredulity had she suggested it. Her reason knew it to be true, but not for a moment had her heart admitted it, and with what incredulity had he listened to her. His gay disregard of such chilly and remote imaginings had been wine to her. Surely, he had said, there was a quality in love which scorned the corrosion of the years. He affirmed that he knew it was so; did she suppose he loved her merely for her eyes or her hair? Even if he did, what then? They would be there still, he supposed, and he would kiss them then, even as he kissed them now.

The memory of his confident ardour blazed before her now; she warmed her heart at its sunlight before she passed into the shadow which must be

explored. How right they had both been, for their confidence had borne a splendid fruit, in that it had yielded them ten years of excellent happiness. Surely that was a great harvest, safely garnered now and imperishably possessed. For there was the magical quality of the happiness that springs from love, that the happy days may be past, but the golden grain of them remains still safe in the storehouse of the heart. Would that storehouse be conceivably half as full as it was now, if she had listened to the sage counsels of prudence? She knew it would not, for the world did not hold another man for her, such as him. And he had been happy too; his devotion to her had never waned; never, so the pride of her heart assured her, had the smallest regret or sense of lack made the flame of his content to flicker.

There, in this justified optimism, was the lantern to take with her into the shadow that was outlined before her. Strange, indeed, was the origin of it, for, to look at its nature precisely, it was just the removal of her fear and anxiety over Walter's long illness which cast it. The unspeakable joy of that should surely have kindled for her a sunshine that made dim the liquid glory of the morning, but, instead, it spread in front of her this disquieting darkness as of some commencing eclipse, which threatened to plunge the world in a noonday blackness. Such a shadow did Walter's rejuvenation and restored health cast across her path. She must step into it and scrutinize it.

A little shiver went through her; then stiffening herself, she looked and saw. For the last two years she had been a wonderful nurse to him, selfless and utterly devoted to his care. But now, so she was convinced the medical verdict would be, there was no need for the nurse any longer. She must take off that uniform of the sick-room and resume her wifely relations, be to him all that he had a right to look for, and satisfy all the male needs, subtle and straightforward alike, of a man much younger than herself. She must have the sensitiveness and quickness of youth, as well as youth's vigour in demand and response. A man wanted what youth gave him unconsciously and without effort; could she do that? Physically it gave him smooth skin and the brightness of eye and hair, mentally it gave him the attributes which exactly corresponded with these, the quick perception, the mind of infinite and fresh variety that intrigues him with sudden surprises and delights. Every man in his degree was an explorer, and the woman-country which he penetrates must have fresh features for ever coming into view to keep his wonder alive. In the early days Walter was always finding out new things about her; then had come the four years' severance from him in the war, followed by two more of his invalidism, when her business with him had been that of a nurse or a mother, and she had fed him, like a baby at the breast, with the milk of her splendid vitality. But that office of hers, which

had so surely helped in bringing him back to a rejuvenated life, had just as surely aged her, and now he was restored to her, younger by far than he had been, and would by that dominating, demanding instinct which characterized a man's way of love, look to her for the rapturous fulfilment of his needs. She, on her side, must be as vitally responsive, with that glowing tenderness, which, in the woman's part, as ever before, to all that it was natural for him to seek in her. How much, in these ageing years, had she lost of that responsive spring?

It was not that she felt old; to herself her pulses seemed to beat as brisk a measure as ever; her eye was as vivid as ever in its welcome to loveliness, her capacity for service still indefatigable. But she was aware that some shadow had silently crept up till the edge of it enveloped her, and that out of it, some presence, invisible as yet, regarded her. The difference in age between them had from the first been accepted by him, even as it had by her, and together they had laughed to think that there was anything disquieting there. But now her laughter had ceased; not the wintriest of smiles remained of that incredulous merriment. As yet there had not been, even to her sensitiveness, the smallest sign that Walter was conscious of the insurgent spectre, or of the shadow in which it sat. But in the very nature of things the time must come when he would see the presence of which she was now conscious, and with what sort of defiance would he face it? Long ago they had agreed that love was of a quality that scorned the marauding years, and that whatever they might pilfer, its sanctuary would remain unrifled, and the light on its altar undimmed. But now age figured itself to her as eddying like some cold draught round the flame, blowing it this way and that, and making the firm wax to gutter, till finally it quenched it. And she would shudder and feel for him in the darkness and find only the touch of cold and unresponsive hands.

Elizabeth had let her mind drift along in the current of these thoughts without control. But now with a spasm of self-contempt she took up her oars, and pulled her way into sunshine again. It was not those who allowed themselves to dwell in shadows who could successfully fight them, but those who made the sunshine which dispelled them.

She got up from her seat. Here, at any rate, was a creature of the sun come to make illumination, for Tony, freed from his morning lessons, was galloping towards her across the lawn.

"Hurrah!" he cried, "I've finished. Mummy, can't you have a birthday every day, and then I shall have a half-holiday every day? Why not?"

He gave an enraptured squeal.

“Oh, chestnuts!” he said. “Ever so many chestnuts! Come and help me to collect them.”

“Darling, I can’t just yet,” she said. “I must go on with my gardening. There are all those sunflowers to pull up.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re getting shabby. Come and help me first. We’ll cut their heads off and make a bundle of the stalks with all these dead leaves, and get Game to make a bonfire of them.”

“Real fire?” asked Tony.

“Genuine,” said Elizabeth.

Tony hesitated, balancing the rival merits of these occupations. Surely there was a medicine for shadows in that adorable incarnation of youth, that was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. The boy was dressed in knickerbocker shorts and a jersey; his head and legs were bare but for some wisp of a sock that flapped over his canvas shoes. She lived again, and so pre-eminently did Walter in that tumble of yellow hair and gay grey eye.

“I don’t know what to do,” announced Tony. “I want some chestnuts, but I want a bonfire too. Which should I like best?”

CHAPTER II

Elizabeth had not yet come downstairs from making herself tidy when Parker announced the arrival of Mrs. Gosson. Tony and his mother had had a delectable afternoon, for Game made a pile of dry rubbish in the corner of the kitchen garden which burned with absolutely genuine fire, and they fed it with sunflower stalks which fizzled and bubbled and then with loud, mysterious reports burst into flame. The chestnut leaves were quite as satisfactory; their five-fingered hands writhed and curled and were easily seen to be those of witches duly suffering at the stake for their iniquities. Elizabeth enjoyed herself immensely and quite forgot she was forty-seven; she forgot also that Mrs. Gosson was coming to tea until close on the hour of her appearance, and hurried upstairs to change her dress which smelt strongly of the reek of burnt leaves. Mrs. Gosson had lately taken to calling her by her Christian name, but Elizabeth had not yet found herself able to respond with "Hermione." It seemed so very unlikely that Mrs. Gosson was Hermione; the idea offended the sense of probability.

Hermione was never idle; she was always provided with something useful or improving to do, in case she found an unexpected moment of leisure. She seldom did, because her day was a succession of duties, none of which she ever neglected, but in case, as now, of having to wait a few minutes for someone less practical than herself, there was always ready a piece of sewing or knitting, which she carried with her in a small serviceable sack, or, if improvement of the mind was what she felt she needed just then, the sack supplied her with a pocket edition of some standard work of a serious scope. But most of the day she was busy with hard, charitable employments.

She rose as Elizabeth entered, and putting her piece of needlework into the sack, screwed up her face into a contortion of welcome. This agreeable grimace entailed opening her mouth very wide and fluttering her eyelids with great rapidity, as if dazzled by the sight of "such a sweet thing." In person she was large and stout, and if anything so unlikely as an inquest ever happened to her, the coroner would certainly have described her as "the body of a well-nourished female."

"Elizabeth!" she said. "How dear and sweet of you to let me come to see you! My dean had unexpectedly to attend a meeting this afternoon, so I said

to myself, 'I will pop in and see sweet Elizabeth, if she will let me.' And how is all with you, and how is dear Mr. Walter?"

Elizabeth shook hands.

"What a good idea of yours," she said. "But Walter's gone up to London to-day to see his doctor—no, not to be told he's ill, but just the opposite. To be told, I trust, that he is perfectly well again and of no further interest."

"Ah, what a joy, what a thankfulness, dear!" ejaculated Mrs. Gosson. "Tea? Thank you. A teeny cup of tea, with one weeny bit of sugar. So naughty of me: sugar is a self-indulgence I seldom permit myself. And so you're all alone."

That she was not all alone was instantly demonstrated by the entry of Tony ceremonially bearing his mother's birthday cake, which was to be a complete surprise to her. For the last three days she had seen it in process of construction in the kitchen, and this morning her cook had been fixing the forty-seven little wax tapers, now bravely burning, round the edge of its foundation. So she was fairly well prepared for the surprise and could adequately express her amazement and gratification. Then Tony had to count the tapers to make sure the number was right, and so sometimes Elizabeth was fifty, and sometimes forty-three. After which the tapers were extinguished and the cake cut, and Mrs. Gosson was naughty again, on a larger scale, with sugar.

She had coaxed the reluctant Tony to sit on the edge of her chair.

"I know who's a lucky little boy to have such a sweet mamma," she observed.

"I don't. Who's that?" said Tony uncompromisingly.

Mrs. Gosson gave her great grin again, and followed it by the laugh which she had reason to believe brought cheerfulness into sad hearts. Walter said you could see her uvula when she laughed.

"A little boy, oh, not nearly a hundred miles from where you're sitting, darling," she said.

Tony condescended to guess and was rewarded by a tender squeeze.

"Such a happy little boy he ought to be," said Mrs. Gosson, "and such a good little boy too, for fear of vexing his sweet mamma."

Not having any children of her own, Mrs. Gosson knew exactly how they should be brought up, with the constant consciousness of a loving

Providence and some angels to look after them. When they grew up they might of course become wicked, and then she looked after them pretty sharply; but while still in the age of innocence they were lambs and little joyful ones. . . . She pointed up to the middle of the ceiling.

“Do you know who lives up there, Tonikins?” she asked.

Tony followed the direction of her finger.

“Yes: daddy,” he said. “That’s his bedroom.”

Mrs. Gosson enfolded him closer.

“Yes, darling,” she said, “and above that, oh! so far away in the blue sky. Do you know who lives there Tony?”

“Of course I do” said Tony.

“And don’t you want to go there?”

“No,” said Tony.

Elizabeth desperately wanted to laugh.

“Tony, dear,” she said.

Tony turned on her an aggrieved but logical face.

“Well, I don’t, mummie,” he said. “I should have to die if I went there. You don’t want me to go there either.”

“Well, finish your cake,” said Elizabeth. That was a dreadfully feeble answer, but she could think of nothing better to say.

Tony finished his tea, and wriggling out of Mrs. Gosson’s chair, without allowing himself to be kissed, scampered from the room. Mrs. Gosson followed his retreat with an ecstatic smile, but was not really sorry when the door closed behind him.

“Little joyful one!” she said. “Oh, what a dear responsibility, Elizabeth! Does he love saying his prayers? Yes?”

That did not quite express Tony’s attitude towards his devotions.

“Well, he’s fairly good about them,” she said. “His nurse always insists on their being said.”

Mrs. Gosson drew in her breath as if wincing.

“But, sweet one,” she said, “the mother’s knee! . . .”

Elizabeth got up. Her cordiality was quite unabated, but she did not intend to discuss Tony's religious upbringing with her visitor.

"Tony and I have been having a wonderful afternoon with a bonfire," she said. "The rubbish we burned figured as witches at the stake. You'll be glad to hear there isn't a witch left in the garden. . . ."

She was standing opposite the long window, and at that moment heard a step on the gravel outside, and there was Walter, who must have caught the earlier train. Luckily he caught sight of her visitor and very stealthily retreated. She longed to ask him what the verdict had been, but that must wait, for meetings between him and Mrs. Gosson were not socially successful. . . .

She turned quickly back, trusting that Mrs. Gosson had not heard his step. That lady was still tenderly smiling, but with a puckered brow, as if trying to recollect something.

"Ah, I have it," she said. "There is something I wanted to ask you, dear Elizabeth. Something that it is my duty to ask you."

"I hope I shall be able to tell you," said Elizabeth.

"Your speaking of your garden fortunately reminded me of it," said Mrs. Gosson. "Your gardener—Game is it not?"

"Yes."

"It's a painful question, dear," said Mrs. Gosson. "But have you ever had any reason to think that he drinks?"

Elizabeth had plenty of reason not only for thinking that but for knowing it. It only happened occasionally, and Game was always very sorry afterwards. Any idea of dismissing him, if that was Mrs. Gosson's ultimate goal, with a view to his reformation, was utterly out of the question and need not be discussed, for he was a very old man and an abominably bad gardener and would never get another place. So on the whole. . . .

"Oh, dear me, no," she said. "What could have made you suppose such a thing?"

Mrs. Gosson gave a great sigh. It might have been a sigh of relief, but it had more the timbre of resignation.

"That's off my mind then," she said. "Oh, how pleased I am! But in the dusk, a few nights ago, as I was going home, I passed a man in the High

Street, reeling and staggering, and I thought it was Game. But I'll find out who it was."

She got up.

"Sweet one, I must go," she said. "Such a lovely visit. But my dean will be back, and he is lost without me."

Elizabeth saw her off, taking the precaution of talking to her all the time in a loud clear voice, so that Walter might have knowledge of their approach, if he was anywhere about, and as soon as Mrs. Gosson was gone went to look for him. He and Tony were under the chestnut-tree so busily engaged in collecting further champions for their duels that neither of them heard her approach. Tony was giving a shrill version of his agreeable conversation with Mrs. Gosson.

"And then she asked me if I didn't want to go there, daddy," he said. "And of course I told her no. And I said that mummie didn't want me to go there either."

"And what did mummie say?" asked Walter with deep interest.

"She told me to finish my tea, which wasn't a real answer."

Walter straightened himself from his gleaning and saw her.

"Hurrah!" he said. "Has the hag gone?"

"What's a hag?" asked Tony.

"Yes, this minute. Oh, my dear, you were nearly caught."

"But what's a hag?" repeated Tony.

"It's French, darling," said Elizabeth. "You wouldn't understand it. Well, Walter?"

"I wasted my day in the train," he said. "I'm beyond the reach of medical aid. In fact, they aren't going to try to reach me any more."

"Oh, blessed news! I was sure it would be so. Absolutely discharged?"

"Yes, they're sick and tired of me, and I'm sure I don't wonder. Tony, that's enough chestnuts. We've got troops sufficient for Armageddon."

"I don't know what that is," said Tony, "but I want some more."

Walter emptied his bulging pocket into Tony's basket.

"And did Mrs. Gosson only come to inquire whether Tony wanted to go to heaven?" he asked.

“No, there was more. Tony, darling, take your basket indoors.”

“And will you come and play Happy Families?” asked Tony.

“Yes, in ten minutes. Run along; I’m going to have a stroll with daddy.”

The two walked off down the path to the kitchen garden.

“Oh, my dear, she was so embarrassing,” she said. “And she’s so sincere and high-minded and improving and detestable. I wish I could like her, but I can’t, and it’s no use asking you how I’m to set about it.”

“Not a bit. But how was she embarrassing?”

“She wanted to know if Game drank, for she thought she had seen him reeling about. And that forced me to lie to her. I think I shall have to send her a small subscription for her Girls’ Friendly Society by way of atonement. What silly gabble it all is! As if anything mattered compared to what your doctor said. Go on, what else did you do?”

“I hadn’t time for much. I wanted to catch the earlier train back if I could. I did a bit of shopping, and lunched at the club with one foot in a taxi. And whom do you think I saw at the station?”

“That’s a silly question,” said Elizabeth. “How on earth can I guess?”

“Evie and Lord Ambleside,” said he. “They were going down to Garth, which they’ve opened again. I haven’t seen her for eleven years, you know, but she came up and spoke to me at once. She called me Walter too.”

Elizabeth found it difficult to frame any reply that should be sufficiently colourless. The chance meeting meant nothing whatever to Walter and nothing to herself; it was hard in fact to say anything adequately meaningless.

“I’ve never seen her,” she said. “And what’s she like? Changed much?”

“Not an atom. She introduced me to her husband, a withered little old fellow but frightfully alert. And we all stood talking for about three minutes. An odd encounter after all these years.”

“I think it’s odder that you shouldn’t have seen her for so long,” said she.

There seemed nothing more to say on the subject. Walter had nothing more to tell, nor she to ask, and yet the momentary silence had some quality, felt by both, of strain and unusualness. But Tony’s shout from the drawing-room window that the ten minutes were over and the Happy Families ready relieved it.

“Yes, darling, we’re coming,” she called back.

“At once!” screamed Tony.

Elizabeth turned to Walter.

“Come and make another happy family, Walter,” she said. “You and Tony and I.”

The most notable fruit of Walter’s shopping was presented to Elizabeth after an exciting hour over the cards. This was his birthday present to her, which took the form of a fur foot-warmer lined with wool. Only a few days before he had found her with her feet wrapped up in a rug as she wrote her letters one chilly morning, and it was like him to have made a mental note of that for the choice of his gift to her. These birthday presents always presented features of difficulty. When asked, she could never tell him of anything she wanted; besides, the fact that he wanted to give her something contained, according to her, all the essentials of a birthday gift. But that would not do for Walter; his good wishes, he said, must incarnate themselves.

“Think hard,” he used to say to her. “Think in a serious and concentrated manner. Try to remember when last you said to yourself, ‘Oh, I wish I had got’—whatever it was.” But she was certainly deficient in the perception of her needs, and year by year he must exercise his ingenuity in detecting them for her. One year he had given her two return tickets to London because she had so nearly missed her train through having to wait in a queue at the booking office; another year his gift was a thousand boxes of matches, because he saw her laboriously rolling a paper spill to light her cigarette. Some small domestic joke, in fact, had to do duty for her lamentable lack of imagination.

But this year his gift sprang from the solid foundation of her need. Walter was delighted with himself for having found something she really wanted, and presently he and Tony had evolved a new game out of it, and he with both feet in it, and consequently unable to walk, but only progress in constricted bounds, had to catch Tony. They adjourned to the hall, which furnished an arena less encumbered with furniture, for this athletic pursuit, and Elizabeth, a little tired with her gardening, made herself comfortable by the fire, for in spite of the heat of the day the evening was chilly and promised another frost.

Shrieks and heavy bumps, as Walter hopped after his son with lithe, athletic bounds, made an accompaniment to her fireside musings, and indeed

supplied the material for them. She wanted really to bask and soak in the atmosphere that surrounded her, to realize it and her own supreme content with it, rather than pursue any deliberate train of thought. The door of the drawing-room was left open, and every now and then Tony, if sore pressed, rushed in, followed by the leaping Walter, calling out, "No, Tony; it isn't fair to come in here. Of course I can't catch you round the table, and besides, we're disturbing Mummie. Come out, you little brute. . . ." There he was, his hair tumbled over his eyes, hot, dishevelled, lissom as a boy, with his feet manacled in the beautiful foot-warmer which was designed to keep her warm, and Tony, insulting him from behind the sofa, and, wriggling out of the hands that nearly clutched him, careering out into the hall again.

That was surely atmosphere enough for her. A year ago Walter had been a languid invalid, white and shivering and feverish; now health and youth had come back to him. She knew all the summer how vastly he was improving, but this verdict of the doctor that he need not show his face again gave seal and signature and endorsement. There was no more nursing to be done; she had got him back, young and well and wholly restored. And there was Tony, that piece of quicksilver, eager and robust, whose strength kept pace with his lengthening limbs. Those two immeasurably outweighed the rest of the world to her, and if it was well with them there was nothing she asked for further.

She smiled broadly and deeply to herself; the smile rose from her very heart. . . . Surely no foot-warmer on the market would stand that sort of usage. A foot-warmer was meant for a sedate and sedentary person who sat quietly at her table and inserted her feet into it with care and kept them still. It was ever so ingenious of Walter to have thought of that for his birthday gift, for her feet did get cold if she sat writing or reading for long at a time. Walter had noticed that, and suddenly she found herself wishing that he had given her a skipping-rope or some other device which promoted warmth by the employment of greater activity. A skipping-rope with her initials enamelled on the handles would have been quite in the humorous spirit of his usual birthday present. But the foot-warmer had seemed to him more suitable. She wondered what he would give her next year: perhaps a pair of crutch-handled sticks to support her tottering steps.

There was a final shriek from outside. The penalty for being caught was to be tickled, but the tickled apparently was giving as good as he got, for Walter was shouting, "No, Tony, that's not fair. You mustn't tickle me; it's against the rules. Besides, it's very bad for me to be tickled. . . . Well, then, it's pax. I'll stop too."

Tony's bed-time had come, and when he had gone upstairs Walter came in and sat himself on the floor by the side of her chair. His sun-browned face was streaming; a plume of yellow hair was plastered on to his forehead.

"Heavens, what a heat I'm in," he said. "I was never so hot in my worst fevers. And a wonderful foot-warmer, darling; I am pleased with myself. It appears, if properly used, to warm the entire body. Half an hour with it is as good as a Turkish bath. Now put your feet in it; you shall have a share in your own foot-warmer."

He took hold of her shoes and placed them inside.

"My dear, it's too lovely," she said. "And what a baby you are."

"I know. So would you be if you had been told this morning that you had got out of the grip of that fiend. For two years it has had its claws in me, and now it's gone, and there isn't a scratch. And whom have I got to thank for that?"

He leaned back his head as he spoke, looking up at her over the arm of her chair. His face was flushed with the strong wholesome colour; his breath, still quickened by his romp, dilated his nostrils.

"You've got yourself to thank," she said, "for having been patiently hopeful and not giving up."

"That's a shallow answer, Lizzie. You're not really appreciating the question. Who made it possible for me to be patient and hopeful, I should like to know. At least I should like to be told; I do know. But haven't you any idea?"

She had no direct answer to this.

"And what a reward I've got," she said. "Out of all proportion to what I did. An infinite reward! That's your birthday present to me."

He laughed.

"Well, I do call that ingratitude," he said. "Not a word about the foot-warmer."

Unreasonably, so she told herself, his answer chilled her. Her whole heart had been in her words, singing to the tune of them; the sense of his having been restored to her filled her whole consciousness, and even while she spoke of that with lips that trembled he was back at the foot-warmer. . . . And yet that abrupt transition was like him. Deadly serious at one moment, he was laughing at some absurd triviality the next. And perhaps that was a

man's way. If you were in trouble, no woman could be so comprehendingly sympathetic as a man, but he never cared to speak of his deeper emotions, as a woman did, just for the sake of expressing them. . . . Men were like that in love too; they expressed it in passion, not in tenderness of speech. Passion, of course, spoke for them, but when it had had its say and its lips closed again, a man went to sleep and went off to play golf in the morning as if nothing else mattered. Women hung and brooded over love; men gave their exultant shout and thought about something else. . . .

His head was still bent up and back towards her, and presently her silence curbed the gaiety of his laughing mouth.

“Not tired, Lizzie?” he said. “Tony and I haven't ballyragged too much for you?”

And there he was again entirely thoughtful for her. . . . Only he didn't understand (or he would never have done it) how he had broken in upon her absorbing joy in his restoration.

“Not an atom,” she said. “I loved your bally-ragging. It was a demonstration of what your doctor told you. . . . Now what have you got to tell me? I know you've got something you want to say.”

“How did you guess?” he said. “I hadn't given you the slightest hint.”

She laughed.

“I hardly know. It was the way you were sitting, I think. You're on springs; you haven't settled down.”

He let himself relax against her chair.

“Well, there is something I should like to talk about,” he said. “In fact, we must talk about it. It follows on my dismissal from the doctor to-day.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“Doesn't it strike you? I've got to get back to work again. I don't in the least want to; I should love to continue just as we are, you and Tony and I. But it wouldn't do. Career: the dignity of labour, the dignity of man, and all that sort of thing, not to mention the advisability of earning a livelihood. Or shall I get a barrel-organ and play it up and down the streets of Maychester? But I suppose Mrs. Gosson would have me run in for a vagrant.”

Elizabeth recognized the justice of what he said, but it fell on her like a blow. She had never looked forward to what would happen when he was well again; she had devoted all her thoughts and energy to that, fixing her

eyes on it so singly that nothing else with regard to the future came within range of her vision. Even to-day, when the assurance of his complete convalescence had arrived, she had not given a thought as to what change that must make in their way of life. The place had become home to her; she had not contemplated the notion of going back to London, where his work had been before the war. But with what vividness had she pictured to herself the enchanting winter they would spend here, with Walter well once more, after the stress and anxiety of these years.

The moment he spoke she knew he was right. But surely there was no hurry. In spite of the disquieting shadows into which she had penetrated this morning, she knew she had been hungering for this quiet, secure winter with him as for some renewed honeymoon.

“Ah, surely we needn’t talk about that yet,” she said.

“But we must, darling,” said he. “I’ve got to get back to work, haven’t I? I must write to Ellingham to ask if they will take me back into the firm. I feel sure they will, but I mustn’t waste any more time. Stockbroker! What a foul profession, but it’s the only one I’ve got. The City on a Monday morning in November, where one expects not to see real daylight till the Saturday following! And on Saturday it usually rains, and on Sunday it pours and then it’s Monday again. But there’s nothing for me to do here unless I decide on the barrel-organ.”

She had scarcely known how adorable was the picture she had perspectively painted of the coming winter till these obliterating strokes began to be scrawled over it. And they were drawn by a hand that was quite unconscious that it was superimposing another design over that cherished one of hers. She had spent herself so rapturously and intensely on the task of making him well, and surely it was her due to be allowed to hold her work close to her for a little, to look at it and love it. . . . And yet it was entirely proper for a man to want to go out into the world again and do his work as soon as he was fit for it.

“What do you propose then?” she asked. She knew the joy had gone out of her voice, but she could not keep it there.

He noticed that too, for he looked up again at her.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Elizabeth made an effort with herself.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” she said. “Why should there be anything the matter? Tell me your plans, Walter.”

“Why, just that,” he said. “I shall write to Ellingham to know if they’ll take me back. If he says they will, I’ll get into harness at once.”

He pulled himself forward a little and propped himself against her knees.

“There are lots of possible ways of managing,” he said. “I might, for instance, get up at cock-crow every morning and get back here at curfew every night; but somehow I don’t feel as if I could face the double journey every day and spend the interval in an office.”

“Oh, that’s out of the question,” said she. “Four hours in the train every day, with your work as well! I shouldn’t permit that for a moment.”

“Well, the next plan would be for me to go up to town on Monday morning and get back on Friday night,” he said. “I could get a bedroom at my club. Not very nice, rather cheap and nasty, in fact, but possible. A third plan, nicer and more expensive, would be that we should take some small furnished flat in town while we were looking about for something permanent, and come down here sometimes on Friday. Finally, of course, there would be the alternative of living altogether in town, and giving this house up. We’ve got only a year more of our lease to run, and I suppose we might be able to let it furnished for that time.”

She had asked for the plans he had thought of, and now he was giving them in answer to her request, with excellent lucidity. It was just what she had asked for, and yet some undefinable heaviness of heart grew on her as he detailed them, due not wholly to the abandonment (which they implied) of her own anticipated disposition of the winter months, nor yet to the fact that each in turn seemed to her utterly joyless in comparison with that. It was something in his manner of presenting them that gave them their leaden quality. It was as if he showed her patterns of chintz to cover a chair for her selection, as if the choice was a mere matter of taste, and had no bearing on intimate feelings. There was one pattern that represented sprigs of roses, another a trellis with tendrils of ivy, another some purple sprawling vegetable. Like a shop attendant, he seemed to say that they were all suitable and would wear well. A little difference, of course, in price.

She was silent a moment.

“We must think it over,” she said. “I don’t see any further alternatives.”

He shifted his position, leaning forward to push the poker through the bars of the grate.

“But you must help,” he said. “You’ve got to say which plan you personally prefer, or suggest another. The expense of a flat in town needn’t

matter, because I shall be at work again and earning enough to run that. Or, again, I'm quite willing to stay at the club, though it will be a fearful bore being away from you from Monday till Friday every week. Then there's the third idea of giving up this house altogether. The reason for it has gone, you see. We only came here because of my illness; if I hadn't been ill we should never have come here at all. . . . Oh, do say something, Lizzie, I can't do all the talking, though you may remind me that I appear perfectly capable of it. But you've just got to say whether you would dislike to give this house up. I've got an idea that you're really attached to it, but how can I be sure if you won't tell me?"

Elizabeth knew that he was being perfectly reasonable, and it was his very reasonableness that lay heavy on her spirits. She had been indulging in imaginations that were quite fantastic, and now she saw that she could not expect or even wish him to continue living here, now that he was well, without regular employment. It was no life for a man to play golf, to sit reading the papers at the County Club, to amuse himself with Tony. It had been small and selfish of her ever to have dreamed of that, and to have felt cast down at the idea of his instantly planning to get to work again. He could not have known how enchanting the prospect of these coming months seemed to her, unless he, like herself, had looked upon them as some renewal of their honeymoon. But then, why should he?

She shook the thought of that from her mind, for she had been looking at him and his future entirely from her own point of view. He could not tell that she had been scrutinizing the grey face of approaching age, and telling herself there was a little time yet.

She sat up briskly.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said. "I will try to be useful. Now it was rather a shock to me that you wanted to get back into harness at once——"

"Wanted?" said he. "I don't want to."

"Well, then, that you should need to. But I see now that it's absolutely right that you should. About getting rid of this house; I should hate that, for I'm very much attached to it. Indeed, only this morning I got a letter from the agent, inquiring whether at the end of my lease I would consider the purchase of it. I certainly felt inclined to, for I've got to think of it as home, and I am very fond of it. But now that you point out—quite rightly—that you must be getting back to work, the idea of buying it looks rather different. It would be better perhaps to see if we can get a renewal of the lease, for I don't want to give it up. It was stupid of me not to have realized

that you couldn't go on living here with nothing to do. Just like my selfishness! But the thought of having got you back, well and strong at last, put everything else out of my head."

Elizabeth got rid of that speech bravely. It was all genuine, it came from the very marrow of her will, for it was her clear and unreserved intention to settle all these matters in the way that would be best for him. She completely accepted the necessity of his returning to work, and, as with a sponge, wringing wet, she effaced all that made her ache and long. There must be no half-obliterated sentiments on the slate to confuse the new writing on it.

He had whipped round on the hearth-rug, and now sat with his back to the fire, looking steadily at her.

"There's something more," he announced, "and I want to know what it is. You say you're selfish, Lizzie, and that's such a thumping lie that I must get to the bottom of it. You know quite well that your whole intention is to do what I like best. You needn't answer; it is."

Walter leaned forward.

"So what does the woman mean by saying she's selfish?" he asked. "She's been wanting something, and she hasn't said what it is. So we'll have to ask questions. The woman's on oath, by the way."

"No, she isn't," said Elizabeth.

"Ah! That's important. It means that she proposes to tell some more lies."

Serious though it all was, she could not help laughing.

"Don't be so silly," she said. "We're here to discuss the best arrangements for your getting to work again. You mustn't go up to London every day, and I don't want to give up this house. The other two plans are that you should live at your club all the week, or that we should take a flat in town. Of the two, I certainly vote for the flat, because I don't want you to be away all the week. It will be great fun having a flat in London again. We must go up immediately, you and I, without wasting any more time, and hunt for one. London is delightful in the winter, and there are so many dismal days then in the country with fogs above and mud below. But in London you don't notice that; there are tubes and taxis. And there are friends to see, and music to hear, and theatres to go to."

He put his head a little on one side as she enumerated these delights, as if trying to catch the flavour of her voice.

“And that’s all a little overdone, Lizzie,” he said. “You shouldn’t have been quite so enthusiastic.”

He got up, springing to his feet with that brisk agility which she loved to see again.

“Overdone, overdone,” he repeated. “That’s the optimistic voice in which you used to say that I was ever so much better, when you knew I wasn’t. Now you’re not my nurse any more; it isn’t your duty to deceive me for my good. You don’t really look forward so much to a winter in London; that’s how you want to feel. But how do you really feel?”

“Just as I tell you,” said she.

“Ah! That’s why you said you weren’t on oath! But how well I know that matter-of-fact voice of yours, which wants to believe just what it says, but doesn’t really believe a single word of it. In fact, the moment it begins I can be sure that you really mean exactly the opposite of what you say. You’re so unlike Bismarck; Bismarck used to tell the truth in order to make people believe he was telling lies, whereas you tell the most whopping fibs in order to make me think you’re telling the truth.”

“But you’ve got no right to say that——” began Elizabeth.

“I know I haven’t. That’s why I’m doing it. Now I’m going to talk, and you may have the last word.”

He perched himself on the arm of her chair.

“Lizzie, you don’t want to go to London at all,” he said, “and you don’t want me to start at office work again yet. Your voice went perfectly flat when I first suggested it. I believe you had it in your mind that we should spend a lazy, cosy winter down here. That’s my guess, anyhow. I challenge you to say that it’s wrong. Now you’d better tell the truth; I shall detect it at once if you don’t.”

She shook her head.

“Whatever it was that I wanted,” she said, “I see it’s out of the question.”

“You think I shouldn’t find anything to do,” said Walter with extraordinary artfulness.

She was taken completely off her guard.

“Yes, just that,” she said. “I hadn’t considered that. I——”

His shout of laughter interrupted her.

“Now we’ve got it,” he said. “I caught you there, Lizzie. Let’s go straight on. You want to spend the winter here, and so do I. There we are! I told you I did; I said I wanted to buy a barrel-organ, but you wouldn’t attend. You don’t think I look forward to mugging in the City, do you?”

“But you suggested it. You thought over all possible plans for doing so.”

“Never mind about my plans,” he said. “We’re talking about yours. I think it’s a delightful one. I shall have heaps to do, and nothing that I must do. So that’s settled. We’ll have a holiday.”

Elizabeth felt all the determination with which she had seconded his schemes oozing out of her, as her own private project became realizable. It was emerging now not as a fantastic dream of her own imagining, but as a firm and solid scheme, which he approved and welcomed. Yet still she hesitated.

“But what about the dignity of man, and the dignity of work?” she asked.

“Time for that,” said he. “Let’s have a holiday first, and be dignified afterwards.”

“But supposing it’s not a success? Supposing you feel unoccupied and bored?”

He laughed.

“Or supposing you do,” he said. “You won’t have your nurse’s duties to occupy you.”

“Thank God! Don’t I know that?” said she. “But don’t interrupt, Walter. Supposing, as I say, that it’s not a success for any reason, we must abandon it at once, and you must get to work at once. Is that agreed?”

“Yes; that’s agreed,” said he.

Elizabeth got up. Age might be coming soon; but there would be sunny days first, and the full tide of her content came flowing back into her.

“Oh, my dear, you’ve no notion what a day-dream it has been to me,” she said. “And do you wonder, if you consider just for a second, what you mean to me? There were four years of the war, and the two more of your illness, and all that time I’ve had nothing of you. Of course, it was a joy beyond telling to see your coming back to life again; but until to-day almost, there has been that undercurrent of fear. Now it’s gone, and I feel as if I were

meeting you again after a long absence. Let's have a few weeks together, if you don't think you'll be bored and dull."

Her eyes shone; her face was as young and eager as his. He sprang up from the arm of the chair where he still sat, and pulled her close to him.

"Lizzie, you're enchanting," he said.

CHAPTER III

Elizabeth was walking home up the hill from Maychester after accomplishing some small errands which had taken her into the town that morning. The day was of November, dripping and dispiriting; not a breath of breeze, even when she had come to the lip of the hollow in which the town nestled, invigorated the air, which thus contrived to be both chilly and stuffy together. Usually she managed to enjoy pleasant climatic conditions without being in the least depressed when they were discouraging; but to-day it was with conviction that she told herself that it was a most disagreeable morning. She would have done better to take Walter's advice and by an extensive use of the telephone have spared herself this sloppy tramp. He had tried to persuade her to do so, and they had chattered on, until, when she finally made up her mind to go, it was already too late for the execution of all her jobs, and she had been obliged to leave out one or two of them and now to hurry up the hill in order to get back in reasonable time for lunch. A taxi would have saved time and trouble; but she wanted, for some unformulated reason, to show herself that she could enjoy going briskly up the long steep slope, and arrive all the better for her walk. But she had told him to begin without her, if she was late, and, remembering that, she moderated her pace. To take the slope as if she was storming a breach was quite unnecessary, and she dropped into a more leisurely rate of going.

She paused a moment to get her breath at the corner by the bottom of the kitchen garden, where the high-road plunged steeply into the town. The last few hundred yards had been arduous, for the road had been newly mended, and the stones, not yet crushed into a uniform flatness by the steam-roller, made an uncommonly wearisome surface for quick walking, while the edges of it were deep in a yellow broth of mud. The quickset hedge at the side was quite bare now, save for a few withered and crinkled leaves which still precariously hung to it, and a few thinned bunches of dark crimson berries; only raindrops gathering and falling and gathering again clung to the bare angled twigs. The five-fingered foliage of the horse-chestnut had now been utterly stripped from it, and lay in brown dishevelment underneath the tree. A few nuts were there still, but it was not worth while to pick them up, for Tony had certainly got sufficient to conduct the fiercest of winter-long campaigns. Besides, she had tried to be useful in this regard only yesterday, and he had scorned her offerings as being useless from having lain so long out in the wet. "All rotten," said the disdainful General.

Opposite, the line of the downs across the valley was blotted out by the thickness of the dripping air, and even the town itself was half expunged. The sharpness of its outlined roofs and spires was blunted in the veiling moistness, but this was no morning mist which the sun would disperse and flood with autumnal brightness. The sun had, presumably, tried its best and given it up as a bad job. It all looked very cheerless, and the uniform grey of the low clouds held no promise or prospect of a clearing-up later in the day.

Elizabeth tried to uncouple her mind from these purely external depressions. She would be back at home now in a few minutes, and she and Walter and Tony would spend a thoroughly pleasant afternoon in the warm cheerful burrow. The evenings were closing in, by tea-time curtains would be drawn and lamps lit, and there would be long hours, busy with delightful leisure, before bed-time. How often and how yearningly, six months ago, had she pictured just such a day as this, with Walter, shivering and burning no longer, but well at last! The imagined dismalness of conditions out-of-doors had given brightness to the picture; all happiness would be concentrated into one curtained room, which would be thick with the fume and the spice of it. That vision had seemed then, in spite of her sturdy optimism, to be almost too sweet for material realization, but it would be hers to-day. In a few minutes now she would reach home, and the door would be shut on her and Tony and Walter. She asked for nothing more.

The talk which she had held with him a month ago, which decided that they were to spend the winter here, had, up to the present, justified its conclusion. Subsequent discussions had made it quite clear that his notion of an immediate resumption of work in his firm had been an impulse derived from what he thought he ought to do and not from what he felt inclined to do. She had, of course, further arguments, beyond those of her own personal desire, to confirm him in the decision. It was far wiser, for instance, that he should consolidate his convalescence, only just declared, by country life, rather than risk it by cooping himself up in stuffy offices and foggy streets. As yet she had no impression that he felt unoccupied and was getting restless in consequence, for he had given himself enough congenial employments to make the day seem short rather than long. He had taken Tony's education in hand, and, with a view to his going to school next spring, had routed out old books and primers of his own boyhood, and managed to keep a short way ahead of Tony in the rules of Latin grammar and the elements of English history.

Which was the younger of the two, she sometimes wondered, when together they intoned "Nominative: mensa, a table; vocative: mensa, O table!" to a species of Gregorian chant? Walter had thrown himself with great enjoyment into this new rôle, and when Tony's mental exercises were over, there were physical requirements to satisfy. He generally played golf in the afternoon, and thus rarely found time even to glance at the morning paper till tea-time. Indeed, if anybody was unoccupied, it was Elizabeth herself, for up till now she had been tutor to Tony and nurse to Walter. Now both these ministries were gone, and for the vanishment of the latter she gave thanksgiving seven times a day. It was business enough for her to be busy no longer in that regard, and bask in the cause of her idleness.

Yet, as she turned in through the iron gate of the garden, she knew she was conscious of some load of disquietude that clogged her briskness. She tried to think it was the day that made her weary and depressed; the hurried walk up the hill had tired her; surely it was legitimate for the spirits to sink a little on such a morning. But she could not be satisfied with that, and, like bubbles from the bottom of a lake rising and breaking on the surface, the question kept asking itself as to what these days represented to Walter. Did he find them just pleasant, just easy to fill with trivial pastimes?

She waited in some vague and troubled vacillation of mind, absently watching the gate swing to and fro, with the latch clinking metallically as it swept across the fastening. The pendulum-movement back and forth grew shorter and shorter, and at last with a click the latch clutched and caught it. That was better than the aimless swinging.

She found on reaching the house that she was later than she had thought, and supposed that Walter would nearly have finished lunch. On her way upstairs to change her wet shoes she just looked into his sitting-room, more because it was his sitting-room than with any expectation of finding him there. But there was the top of his head above the back of the chair drawn close to the fire, and he did not move on her entry. His feet rested on the sides of the chimney-piece; a rucked-up trouser showed the bare skin above his sock. Before she could take hold of herself, she had a sudden spasm of fear that he was ill. That was a survival, and a hated one, from her nursing days, when sometimes, after leaving him for a few hours, she came back to find him drowsy with the on-coming of an attack. The fright was echoed in her voice; she heard her breath catch:

"All right, are you, Walter?" she said.

He took his feet down.

“Oh, is that you?” he said. “Yes; of course I’m all right. Is it lunch-time?”

“Long past. I told you to begin if I was late.”

“Did you? I went to sleep instead. It seemed the most amusing thing to do.”

He got up yawning, and looked out of the window.

“Lord! What a day!” he said. “Fancy calling that a day! Come on, Lizzie; let’s have lunch. Anyhow, the morning’s over.”

The thought of her wet shoes went completely out of her head.

“Yes; it’s a beast of a day,” she said. “I’m glad to get back; I shan’t stir out again.”

“Tony’s in disgrace,” he said as they sat down. “Lost his temper with me. I’m sure I sympathized with him; but it’s against the rules, and I said he was to have his dinner upstairs. Oh, did you get me the book I wanted? I shall read it all afternoon.”

She made a despairing gesture.

“My dear, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I forgot all about it. I hadn’t time to do all the jobs I set out to do, and that one absolutely went out of my mind. I am so sorry; tell me I’m a beast.”

Walter was pressing on the handle of a siphon. It was stiff, and then gave way with effusive completeness, and a fountain of water flooded his hand and the tablecloth. Instead of swearing, he said no injudicious word, but mopped himself, and answered her.

“It doesn’t matter an atom,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll go down after lunch myself. But I don’t suppose I shall.”

Elizabeth had been watching the mishap.

“Darling, why don’t you curse?” she said. “I hate this unnatural calm.”

He gave a faint grin of acknowledgment to this small joke.

“I dare say it won’t last,” he said.

“Really, I rather hope not. And is there any news? You’ll have had time to read the paper this morning.”

“None; there never is when one has time to read the paper.”

“That’s quite true. And on the days when one is particularly busy, it always teems with thrilling excitements. Papers ought to be intermittent; they should not be published if there’s nothing to read.”

“Quite,” said Walter.

Elizabeth tried a few more subjects without kindling the smallest spark, and then, feeling that she had made sufficient sacrifice on the altar of initiatory conversation, waited for him to start a new topic. None came, and presently she asked him to ring for coffee. He did this, and strolled across to the window, where he stood with his back to her.

She began again:

“And what shall we do this afternoon?” she said.

He turned back into the room.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” he said. “Nothing, I suppose. Or shall I go out just to see how beastly it can be?”

“Why, you hate rain like a cat,” she said.

“Well, I hate going to sleep in front of the fire, unlike a cat. It’s just a question of which I hate most.”

This was all rather discouraging, and Elizabeth had to keep her mind in hand in order to prevent it painting the situation in tragic colours which were quite unwarranted. All it really came to was that Walter did not know quite what to do with himself on a streaming November day. She continued unweariedly cordial and apparently light-hearted.

“Why not go out then?” she said. “Go to the picture palace. You like movies. And that will fill up the time till tea.”

“We might do that,” he said. “Oh, I forgot; you said you weren’t going to stir out again.”

She got up; the coffee tasted rather bitter to-day.

“Of course I’ll come out again,” she said. “An afternoon at the movies: just the thing for a wet day.”

He followed her back into his sitting-room.

“No; you shan’t come out,” he said. “I know you don’t want to. I don’t want to either. Why don’t we all hibernate for the winter? Far more sensible. Let’s stop at home and be comfortable.”

It was all trivial and utterly unimportant; how could it matter whether they went out or stopped at home? He was bored; he didn't know what to do with himself, but boredom was not a fatal mental disorder. You invariably got better. And yet, somehow, her heart sank.

“Would you like a game of piquet?” she asked.

She saw the suggestion irritated him; she suspected that she also, with her cheerful proposals, irritated him. He wanted to be bored in fact.

“Oh, I think cards always look rather shabby in daylight,” he said, “though there isn't much of it.”

“Well, whenever you want,” she said.

There was no reason why, if Walter chose to do nothing, she should condemn herself to a similar inaction, and with very good sense she left him and went to occupy herself at her piano. She was aware, too, that she wanted to think about something—anything would do—rather than let her mind continue painting these unwarranted and depressing pictures. And there was nothing so salutary for a slightly apprehensive mind as manual occupation which it was obliged to direct. Among the plans she had made for this leisurely retired winter, she had determined to learn, say, half of Bach's forty-eight preludes and fugues. It was a large order, but Elizabeth's plans never erred on the side of being compassible; she always set herself to do more than she could, and, thanks to that spring of youth which still, in spite of her years, bubbled limpidly within her, her failures never taught her to plan more modestly in the future. She had made an edifying rule of life for the winter, designed to keep her intellectual activities alert, which was to include two hours' serious reading every day, and one hour's serious music. These would take the morning; after that she would hold herself free for Walter.

Soon, as far as her fingers were concerned, she was busy enough; but she was giving them no more than a mechanical attention, and the rest of her brain was concerned with anything that would divert it from that which already had assumed a fictitious importance. She had been idle during October; it was that which rendered her undisciplined of thought to-day. She had hardly opened her piano during the last month; as for the serious reading, two hours all told would have been a liberal estimate for her studies during these weeks. Of course, the tucking-up of the garden for the winter had taken a lot of time; but she had certainly been lazy, letting herself dream and drift, and after all immensely enjoy. That was why she had felt, when her boat to-day had only just grazed some shoal, a jar and a jolt quite out of

proportion to the shock; and this would never do, for she was back again at the subject which it was her express purpose to avoid.

She turned her attention more strenuously to the task that demanded all her concentration, and when from the corner of her eye she saw the door open and Walter saunter in, she took no notice of him, but industriously repeated with separate hands the last two or three bars. She must get that run for the right hand more smoothly; the subject was in the bass. No; the first two notes of it were for the right hand. That was awkward, but it had got to be done, for it was no use attempting to play a Bach fugue unless you condescended to get it right. Yes, rather better, but not passable yet. And then her mind informed her that she did not really care two straws whether she got it right or not.

Walter had moved out of the range of her eyes, which she would not divert from this arduous page; a creak from the sofa behind her indicated where he was. Though she would not look round, she could not help wondering if he was reading or in any way occupying himself. What a fool she had been to forget the book which he had asked her to bring up from the town; that would have amused him for the afternoon. But she was determined not to stop her practice in order to renew her offers of entertaining him. He must learn to occupy himself on a wet day; it was childish that he should go to sleep in the morning, and moon about like this. And why did he come in here while she was playing? He always said that a fugue represented itself to him as a tiresome person who kept on repeating what he had already said too often. But she had no intention of cutting short his remarks; she meant to practise for an hour, and back she went to the top of the page.

She heard him move, and longed to know what he was doing. She fancied that he was not doing anything, and that vaguely annoyed her, for it suggested the idea that he had come in here to show her that he was doing nothing. Certainly it would have been an apostasy in him if he had come to listen to Bach, and if he was doing nothing, why should he not have continued doing nothing in his own room unless he wanted to call her attention to his pitiable plight? As far as inclination went, she would have abandoned her Bach instantly, and devoted herself to his amusement, but she hardened her heart. He must be shown—it was good for him—that other people found employment for themselves. It was ludicrous if every wet day was to render him as helpless as this. Of course, if ever there was a person of moods, that was he; no one that she had even seen was so easily exhilarated, no one so easily cast down. Was it a defect of character, that want of steady

stability and control? She supposed it was—but then it was Walter. His spontaneity, his complete absorption in the mood of the moment, so characteristic of youth, was an essential part of his charm and his individuality. She adored it, and occasionally she could have cried with rage at it. He was her lover, and she found her fulness in him; but sometimes he was her child, and she could wish that he would grow up.

He was being very much of a child now—and a tiresome one—and she felt she was being educational as she sat there sticking to her Bach and playing with a touch out of which every vestige of intelligence had vanished, for her intelligence insisted on concerning itself with him. She could hear what an ugly noise she was making; but she held grimly on, and intended to do so till she had played for an hour. By that time it would be four o'clock, and they would have tea early, and shut out the ugly day. She wondered if the clock on the mantelpiece had stopped; it seemed years since it had chimed the three-quarters. And how petty all this preoccupation was, which had got between her and her music, for it was entirely based on the fact that Walter found it hard to amuse himself on a wet November day. But she knew it was not that alone which troubled her, but, far more than that, the consciousness that her presence, her companionship was not sufficient to beguile him. Yet, after all, that was a man's way; however much he loved, he wanted to be amused as well.

The querulous chimes clinked on the air; she brought the fugue to a conclusion more abrupt than the composer had planned, and turned round.

“That's done,” she said. “Badly done, I allow; but done. I've played a solid hour, and feel ever so much better for the discipline. Aren't you glad? Now what's the next diversion?”

Walter was sunk into the sofa, with one leg curled up on it, the other extended towards the fire. It was clear that he had been lolling there for the best part of an hour, without any pretence at employment. In answer to her question, he nodded towards the darkening window.

“It's still the same diversion,” he said.

Certainly the prospect was not cheering; the rain dripped through a thickened mist of moisture, and the day was fading out drably. Elizabeth clicked on the electric light, and swept the curtains over the window.

“You'll make the rain self-conscious and conceited if you stare at it so much,” she said. “Really, darling, you are paying too much attention to a very second-rate afternoon; it isn't worth it. So we'll shut it out and have

done with it. Let's have tea early, because we had luncheon late, and then, whether you like it or not, you shall play piquet with me, because I like it, and then Tony shall come and play Happy Families, and we'll all be very cheerful and busy. Poor old boy, I know you hate a wet day; but do buck up. Don't notice it; if you don't notice it, it may be fine for all you know."

She rang the bell.

"Tell them to bring tea in at once," she said. "I'm just going upstairs to change my shoes. I forgot all about them, and my feet are like ice. I shall put them in my foot-warmer, unless you want to hunt Tony in it."

Elizabeth found waiting for her in the hall a letter which she had been expecting, and which delayed her return from her expedition upstairs. It was from her brother Richard Pershing, and concerned the divorce which she had seen that morning had been given him. That had been a matter of course, for the evidence against his wife was ample, and the suit had been undefended. Dickie discussed this in his finished and flowery style: the broom of the divorce court had swept his wife out into the street through the door which justice had flung open. She had been rubbish, and now the dustman had taken her away. She was not, however, so this carefully florid simile continued, to be dumped on the rubbish-heap, for the dustman, the golden dustman, the co-respondent Hylton, had picked her up, and would, so Dickie understood, shortly invoke the blessing of the registry office on this damaged acquisition.

Elizabeth read as far as this almost at a glance, for Dickie's exquisite handwriting enabled you to take in a whole paragraph at a time, and so characteristic was it of him that whenever she saw it she almost heard his voice, equally exquisite, speaking what he had written. But seeing that there were half-a-dozen pages more, she took the letter upstairs with her. As she went she mourned for him, and wondered at him. How could a man write like that of a woman who, whatever she had done, had been his wife, and the mother of his daughter? She could understand how in the hot rage of detection he could have struck her; or, if he had loved her, could have killed her. Any immediate explosion of violence was comprehensible, but not this polished expression of irony. And what a lot, she felt sure, there must have been to say on the other side. Dickie as a husband, or a lover of anybody but his own exquisite self, was wholly anomalous; she had often wondered how Helen could have stood him for so long. For with all his grace and gifts, he was the most symmetrically selfish man she had ever seen; he transcended any flight of the imagination, and you had to know Dickie in order to realize that such a being was possible. No one, in his eyes, had anything to do

except make him comfortable, and like all selfish people, he thought everyone selfish except himself. But it was not so much for himself as for his work that he claimed immunity from all worries and anxieties. Beautiful work it was: delicate prose, in the form of fiction, about phantasmal folk and shadowy situations developing in the melodious twilight of his rhythmical sentences. Everyone of culture—Elizabeth did not include herself in their ranks—was convinced of his supreme artistry; but not the most fervent of his disciples could exactly explain what his stories were about. Once every three years or so a new masterpiece was distilled from his pen, full of atmosphere—they were all agreed about that. But, alas, for those who were responsible for the daily ministrations required by the creator.

She turned the page, and found the sequel to his news. She knew there must be something he wanted, or he would never have written to her.

‘As you may conjecture, dear Lizzie’ [he wrote], ‘the horror, the revolting publicity of all this has completely thrown me off my balance: I have been paying a bitter price for my sensibility. While it was hanging over my head I was unable to do any work at all, for an artist like myself requires absolute tranquillity of mind for the exercise of his gifts, and you may judge what sort of tranquillity Helen’s infamy has procured for me. It is necessary for me now—I think even your robust attitude towards life will grant this—to have an entire change of scene, and to take with me nothing that can possibly remind me of the sordid and degrading experiences through which Helen has dragged me. [“He writes as if Helen had divorced him,” Elizabeth permitted herself to reflect.] I propose, therefore, to go abroad at once, in the hope, a forlorn chimerical hope, of recapturing some peace of mind and restoring my shattered vitality. The custody of my darling Margaret was, of course, given to me, but naturally I shall not take her with me. In the first place, it would never do to interrupt her studies at Cambridge—some girls’ college—and in the second she is inexplicably devoted to her mother. I need hardly add that her presence would be a continual tearing open of my wound, and my mind would bleed to death.

‘You will, therefore, I am sure, recognize with a leap of welcome from your kind heart the reasonableness of my request that she should spend her winter and Easter vacations with you. By the summer I may conceivably be strong enough and sufficiently advanced with the work I am now contemplating, to

take charge of her again. She is a sweet girl, as you know, fond of hockey and that sort of thing. It would be well that I should see you and talk things over before I leave England, and though I am not really fit to travel, I will come down to-morrow if you will have me, and stop the night. I enclose a telegraphic form for your reply. In order to avoid any financial discussion, which to me, as you know, is inexpressibly sordid, I will say in advance that, should you insist on it, I will pay you a reasonable sum for the cost of her maintenance. In fixing this you will not, I hope, forget that the bulk of our mother's fortune was left to you. I shall not, therefore, allude to this subject at all, and will wait for you, if you wish me to defray the cost of Margaret's board, to state the sum you consider fair. . . . Love to Walter; how nice that he has made such a good recovery.'

Elizabeth knew that the sense of humour must be kept alert in dealing with Dickie; without it you might be betrayed into detesting him. It was not a nice letter; but, thank goodness, it was a funny one. To enclose a telegraph form without stamping it was like him; it was like him also to remark that Margaret was a sweet girl who liked hockey, for irony could not be sharpened to a finer point than that he should find that and nothing else to say about her. Finally, but not so funnily, it was like him to say that, "if she insisted," he would pay a moderate sum for Margaret's maintenance. That was masterly; he could not have devised a surer means of not being expected to contribute. He knew perfectly well that she would never have dreamed of wishing him to do so; but the suggestion served to introduce his sense of the wanton injury she had done him by being left her mother's money. But, after all, it had given him so much pleasure to barb these wicked little sentences, and that was to the good.

She came downstairs again with the letter in her hand. She must talk to Walter at once about Dickie's proposal, or rather demand, and he would want to read Dickie's letter. But it was much better that he should not; he would only dance with irritation, instead of being amused. So she gave it one more glance and tore it up. Walter would have quite enough to bear with Dickie's visit, for they mixed like oil and vinegar, Dickie being the bland imperturbable oil.

"I've heard from Dickie," she said. "He has got his divorce."

"Good for her," said Walter. "I shall write to congratulate her. I always liked Helen. Let's ask her to come and stay here, Lizzie. What else does he

say?”

“He’s going abroad to—to recover. He’s going at once. But he wants to come down for a night first.”

“I would sooner have Helen,” said he.

“I know. But I’m afraid Dickie must come,” she said. “He’s got a plan, Walter. He wants Margaret to spend her next two vacations with us.”

“Isn’t he going to take her with him?”

“No; he wants to be alone. He’s got to get over all he has been through.”

“Oh, do show me his letter,” said Walter. “I bet it’s rich.”

She laughed.

“It is rather,” she said, “but it’s in pieces. I didn’t keep it. But about this plan of his——”

“His coming down for the night?” asked Walter. “Well, Lizzie, it’s one of those little acts of God, like a wet day, that have got to be borne, but isn’t popular.”

“No; about the other plan,” said she.

Elizabeth realized, as she spoke, that Walter’s feeling on this subject had a secret and an immense significance for her. Margaret’s presence would mean a month’s break in their solitary winter, and it was with held breath almost that she waited for his comment. They were both fond of the girl, and felt the charm of her gay energy; but how did Walter view the abandonment, for a month at least, of their projected winter, of the solitude and complete dependence on each other in daily intercourse and long uninterrupted evenings? They had spent a very happy month, and up till to-day, when some disquieting little wind had arisen to shake her confidence, Elizabeth had looked forward to the months to come as a time of unimaginable content. But it was necessary for the fulfilment of that, that he should be of the same mind, and the doubts that had hovered near her all day began to settle on her. If he had felt just as she did, surely, when first she had told him of Dickie’s suggestion, some *cri du cœur* would have risen to his lips. He must have said: “O Lizzie; our plan to have the winter all to ourselves! It will be spoiled.” And no such cry had come; he had merely asked whether Dickie was not taking Margaret with him.

All this flashed upon her in that quite brief pause during which he stirred up the flame of the spirit-lamp underneath the tea-kettle. And not even now

did he think of that.

“Well, Dickie is a cool hand,” he said “Apparently—I wish you hadn’t torn up his letter—apparently he just says: ‘Take care of Margaret for me, with my blessing. You, needn’t take the blessing unless you like, but take Margaret.’ Doesn’t he, Lizzie?”

She had got his answer then. Obviously, the idea that Margaret would be with them for a month did not entail any tragic disappointment, any forfeiting of an anticipated delight. She winced for a moment under that, then pulled herself together. How unreasonable even to have expected anything else! They had been married ten years, and who ever heard of an old married couple planning a winter’s isolation for themselves, as if the wedding-bells were still pealing? But she knew that she had planned it.

That was done with then. She laughed.

“I don’t think we should get much of a blessing from Dickie unless we took Margaret,” she said.

The flame of the spirit-lamp burned better now, and he straightened himself up from his task.

“There; it’s begun to boil,” he said. “Make tea, Lizzie, and we’ll talk it over. What would happen if we told Dickie it was inconvenient? And what do you feel about it yourself? Margaret’s a dear, of course; we both like her. Perhaps we ought to say we’ll take her.”

Elizabeth went to the tea-table.

“I think I agree,” she said. “Dickie certainly won’t let her join him abroad, and she would have to stay about with friends, probably with intervals in hotels or lodgings. It would be very dreary for her. And, after all, I’m her nearest relation.”

For a moment he looked at her, as if he had caught some glimpse of what was in her mind.

“It’s rather angelic of you,” he said.

“Just as angelic of you not to mind her being here so long,” she said. “Yes; toast, please. At least, I gather that you don’t mind.”

“Not much use minding if she has got to come,” said he.

And still there was no shadow of reluctance in his voice, no hint that he was giving up anything. But it would have been so lovely a miracle to have detected that in him.

“Well then, we’ll take it that she shall come,” she said briskly. “Now, about Dickie’s visit. He wants to come to-morrow for a night. Now, I’m afraid you’ve got to bear him for one night, dear.”

Walter made a heroic gesture.

“I can, I will, I must, I shall,” he said. “Besides, he’s priceless. I hate him like poison at the time, but I love thinking him over afterwards. And he’ll be wonderful as the stricken and betrayed husband.”

She got up.

“I’ll telegraph to him, then,” she said. “Oh! he sent you his love. Shall I send yours? And I shall write to Margaret, saying how we will both welcome her.”

“You can do that to-morrow, after you’ve settled it with Dickie,” he said. “Let’s have a game of piquet, and then Tony will come down for his Happy Families. Lord, we shall be playing Uncomfortable Families to-morrow at this time.”

He fetched the cards, cut, and elected to deal.

“Hurrah! the silly day is over,” he said. “Now let’s have a delightful evening.”

CHAPTER IV

Elizabeth and Walter were both out when her brother arrived the next afternoon. She had suggested to him in her telegram a suitable train to travel by, with the promise of being met; but he preferred an earlier one, and was vexed that she was not on the platform to welcome him and make herself useful about his luggage. So he left Parish to pay for his taxi.

He was a few years Elizabeth's senior; but his face, more delicately modelled than hers, had remained extraordinarily young. No anxiety or care for others had ever delved a line or wrinkle there, and his hair was still untouched with grey. Unlike her, he was small in build and stature, and was dressed with the most scrupulous carelessness; his loose coat and soft collar were no haphazard habiliments, nor were they assumed for the sole sake of comfort. Comfortable they were, but they were part of his scheme. So, too, was his magnificent fur coat, and the Greek intaglio on his finger, and his leather dispatch-case, which bore his late wife's initials.

He had established himself very comfortably in Walter's sitting-room on his arrival, with some proof-sheets to correct. The position of the table was not quite to his liking, so he had got Parish to draw it nearer the fire for him, and bring him a couple of candles, for the afternoon was dark, and he wished to sit with his back to the light. He was nicely installed and busy with his proofs when he heard the front-door bang (somehow that sounded the sort of robust entry to be expected from dear Elizabeth), and he hoped that no mistaken idea of hospitality would cause her to disturb him. It would be nice to see dear Elizabeth when he felt he would like a cup of tea. Luckily, she would not know that he had arrived, since he had not come by the train she suggested; he should have told that huge grenadier-like parlour-maid not to say that he was here. Parish, however, had already done so, and Elizabeth entered.

"Ah, my dear Dickie," she said. "So you came by an earlier train. All the better. How are you?"

He did not rise; for the moment he did not even look up. Then, having inserted a comma with great care, and having called attention to it in the margin, he held out his unoccupied left hand.

"Dear girlie," he said (she always hated that name). "Sweet of you, kind of you to let me come. I ought not to have travelled, perhaps; but I made a

great effort. We must have a talk. Not tea-time yet, is it?"

"No; unless you want it now. It isn't four yet."

"Ah, then I have a clear hour. That is nice. I brought down the proofs of a little article—it would not interest you—that demanded my immediate attention."

She had sat down; now, with a broad smile, for Dickie was very much himself, she got up again.

"Shall I leave you, then?" she asked.

"Well, it sounds very churlish to assent to that," said he. "But I know that our talk must inevitably be very trying to me, and I doubt whether, after it, I shall be able to concentrate again. So, perhaps, till tea-time, girly, I shall have done as much then as I am fit for without a break. I can leave my papers here quite confidently, I hope. No one will disturb them?"

"No; I'll tell Walter when he comes in," she said.

"So kind! Dear Walter! I suppose he is playing Rugby football, or cricket, or something. Au revoir, dear Elizabeth. A great talk presently."

Certainly Dickie had a quality which, in her experience, was quite unique. He took it so completely for granted that his convenience must override any other consideration, that, by virtue of his faith apparently, it did so. So unique a self-centredness was really a marvellous protection. Nothing from outside yourself reached you; it was like some magnificent mackintosh, which enabled you to go about the world untouched by the driving storms that drenched other folk to the skin. You stood there bland and protected, and watched, quite without malice, your friends getting wet. Dickie made her boil with rage one moment; the next, she could scarcely help laughing at his splendour. Of the two, it was much better to be amused, and she sat down, as good as gold, in the drawing-room till Dickie was ready for her. She would have liked to play the piano, but that might disturb him.

His hour was not up when he joined her. Her visit to him, brief as it had been, appeared to have shattered the tranquil critical surface, on which, even in proof-correcting, he must see his work reflected.

"So I thought we would have part, at any rate, of our talk now," he said. "I understand, of course—perhaps, dear Elizabeth, you had better ring for tea—I understand that you have decided to give me such little help as is in your power, in this storm of misery that has burst upon me, and to provide

my Margaret with a home for her brief vacation, in place of that which has been wantonly desecrated and broken up.”

“Yes; we shall be delighted to have her here,” said Elizabeth. “Walter and I agreed about that at once.”

“I felt sure you would,” he said. “I knew you would see how impossible it was for me to have her with me, and that your kind hearts would welcome her. It will be nice, too, for Walter to have an active girl to play golf or cricket with, or whatever it is that he does. I thought of that. Walter will like having a girl of his own age about.”

Elizabeth reminded herself that this was “only Dickie”; but, really, such nonsense!

“Rubbish!” she said roundly. “Don’t be absurd, Dickie. Margaret is nineteen; Walter is close on twice her age.”

“Is he, indeed?” said Dickie imperturbably. “I am sure you are right; but when we get to our years, Lizzie, we think that everyone so much younger than ourselves is about the same age. Just as boys and girls think that people of forty, and fifty, and sixty are contemporaries.”

Elizabeth quenched her little flame of temper, rather ashamed of it, for how should Dickie know that his nonsense could touch her on the raw like that?

She laughed.

“Yes; we’re old, old things,” she said, “though no one would think it of you. About Margaret, then; that’s quite settled, and she will be ever so welcome. I will write to her this evening, telling her of the plan we’ve been making for her.”

“No need for that, dear,” said Dickie gently. “I have already told her she will spend her Christmas vacation with you.”

Elizabeth stared at him.

“Before you consulted Walter and me?” she asked.

“Yes, dear Lizzie. I knew your kind hearts. And how right I was. Would you kindly pass me another cushion? This chair—ah, that will make it quite comfortable.”

“Dickie, you’re the limit,” she said.

Dickie looked slightly puzzled.

“The limit?” he asked.

“Yes; you would call it beyond the pale. Have you told her which bedroom she is to have?”

The crease in his smooth forehead erased itself again.

“No; I will leave that to you, dear Lizzie,” he said. “I am sure you will give her a nice one. She had a horrid one in my house. No doubt, if she and I ever live there again, she will have her mother’s. Or shall I take that myself? I shall have it re-papered if I do.”

He passed his hand over his eyes.

“And now for myself,” he said. “It is impossible for you to conceive what I have suffered. The shock has been indescribable. Sometimes I think I shall never get over it; I am sure you see how sadly I am altered. Complete change of scene, anyhow, and that for a long period, is the only thing that can restore me. I shall go straight to Rome, I think. I find the Rome express runs through from Paris. I dare say I shall not be very uncomfortable.”

He took off his intaglio ring, breathed on it, and polished it against his sleeve.

“The moral squalor and the expense into which that woman has dragged me!” he said. “I put that very forcibly before Margaret when I wrote to her of our plans, for incredible and revolting as it sounds, Margaret has still a strong affection for her. That is a very painful thing, for I should have thought that her mother’s conduct towards me would have been sufficient, now that it has been thus glaringly exposed, to have cured her of any feeling at all towards her mother except disgust and abhorrence. I have, of course, forbidden Margaret ever to see her again. You will please remember that, Lizzie, when you are in charge of the girl.”

Elizabeth was silent a moment.

“Dickie, you don’t see how awfully hard it is on her,” she said. “She loses her mother, and her father goes off abroad and leaves her behind.”

“Dear Lizzie, you would not have me, shattered and bewildered as I am, take Margaret with me?” he said. “Even the sight of her in my present condition, would be more than I could stand. You seem to think I am made of stone, instead of being, as I am, of an extraordinary affectionate and sensitive nature. I am too sensitive for this rough and tumble of a world. I don’t ask much of it, I never have asked much of it; but it appears that I am not even allowed to live my life in that tranquillity and modest serenity

which is essential for my art. You are lacking in sympathy, dear. I don't say you are hard-hearted; but you have no imagination. You do not put yourself in my place, or form the slightest idea of what I have been through. I was once very fond of Helen: she satisfied my taste; she was enchanting."

Elizabeth looked at him with all her compassion and kindness welling in her eyes. She felt terribly sorry for him, but for reasons which, had he known them, would have completely puzzled him. She pitied him deeply—it must be quite awful to be like that.

"Poor Dickie," she said. "I do grieve for you; I'm not unsympathetic. It's a wretched business."

He became more pitiable yet.

"Her grace, her charm," he said. "I really adored her. She was like one of my Tanagra figures. And now that creature of exquisite delicacy is smashed to atoms. I deplore the waste, the wantonness of it. Some day, perhaps, I may be able to write something very poignant and wonderful on that theme. All the choicest treasures of my heart were poured out on her; the sanctuary of my artistic life was open to her—yes; that is precisely the phrase, I must remember that—and she never had the slightest appreciation of it."

Elizabeth wondered if anything she could say would reach him at all. It seemed hopeless.

"What did she give me in return for all that?" he went on. "Years of complete indifference: first of all starving me of what my nature needed; and then this, this wanton smashing, this hooliganism. Ah! 'The Hooligan.' That is a title worth considering."

She turned an appealing face to him.

"But, Dickie, you're not really thinking of writing a story about it?" she asked.

"And why not? The only possible use of such bitter experiences is to turn them into the material for art."

"But your own wife——" she began.

"Certainly. That is why I am qualified to do it."

An interruption occurred at this point, which Elizabeth welcomed, for Dickie's attitude towards his wife made her feel ill. But now there came

from just outside the noise as of an angry man violently wrestling with a door-handle, and Walter bounced into the room.

“I say, Lizzie, what’s happened to my door?” he cried. “I can’t get in. Is it burglars inside? Hullo, Dickie; glad to see you. If it’s a joke of Tony’s, I’ll kill him.”

Dickie extended a limply cordial hand to his brother-in-law.

“Dear fellow,” he said, “I’m the culprit. I took the precaution to lock your door, as I had left some papers about, which mustn’t be disturbed. Peccavi! There’s the key. You won’t touch them, will you?”

“Thank you so much,” said Walter. “And shall I lock the door again when I’ve got what I want?”

“Aha! You’re speaking sarcastically; you’re ragging me. But perhaps it would be wise if you locked it again. All papers are equal in the sight of a housemaid, and their office to light the fire. Be circumspect, dear Walter, with my poor proofs; they cover your table. But I shall have finished with them in another half-hour.”

Dickie went gently back to his proof-correcting when he had quite finished his tea, and Elizabeth attempted without the slightest success to induce Walter to see the humorous side of him. He saw it, if possible, even less, when on Tony’s advent for Happy Families, a message came from next door asking if they could manage, without inconvenience, to make rather less noise.

In the week that followed Elizabeth had experience of indecisions and uncertainties which were new to the broad simple lines on which hitherto she had directed her life. Her policy (the expression, that is to say, of her convictions and instincts) had always been of the most simple kind: namely, to devote herself to the larger issues and let the details manage themselves. Small jars and minor disturbances, such as must be incidental to the domestic itinerary, had never hitherto claimed her serious attention, nor had power to disquiet her; her plan was to bowl breezily along, and not ever notice the existence of trivial frictions. But now she began to find herself wondering whether these infinitesimal checks and slurrings were not the early symptoms of less negligible trouble, and she read into Walter’s moods—which, as always, were variable enough—tokens and hints of a sort that would never before have occurred to her. Was he a little bored with her sometimes; was her very presence just now and then an irritation, ever so

small, to him? From long nursing of him, the duties of the sick-room seemed to have worn a groove in her mind, and now that there were no longer physical symptoms to watch, and physical warnings to attend to, the habit of watching and being warned appeared to have transferred itself to the psychical sphere, and she noted, sometimes with an uplift of satisfaction, if he was gay, or with a vague sinking of the heart if he was not, the ups and downs of his condition, with glances at the clinical thermometer, and entries on his temperature chart. She tried not to let him see the tokens of her supervision, which in itself added another to these trivial anxieties, for she told herself that it always chafed and annoyed a man to know that he was being watched.

The success of this experiment of spending a winter of leisure in the country was the most incessant of her preoccupations, and there again, it was uncharacteristic of her usual habit of mind that it should be a preoccupation at all. For they had talked the plan over fairly and squarely, and had agreed on the wisdom and pleasantness of it; and that being so, it would have been more like her not to have been troubled with any further doubts and reconsiderations. The thing had been settled by their joint assent, after due weighing of its merits, and it seemed to her that the Elizabeth who up till now had managed life so well, would have concerned herself no more with the decision when once it was made, and have devoted herself to its success, disregarding these inevitable little checks and drawbacks, and, by her enjoyment of the whole, creating an atmosphere of jollity. It had been due to her, it was true, that this disposition of the winter had been made, for no doubt if she had seconded Walter's notion of returning to work at once, he would have done so; but she knew that if that had been the way of it, she would, in her present mood, have always felt herself responsible for his weariness of office-work, and the tyranny of fogs and darkness and indoor-life, just as now she saddled herself with his hours of tedium and unresponsiveness. True, they were rare, for with his golf and his superintendence of Tony's education, and other diversions, his day was reasonably full.

But somehow that one particular rainy day, when he had so childishly despaired of finding anything to do with himself, had sown in her mind seeds that were germinating, and promised a disconcerting crop, unless she could weed them out. For this winter of delectable and lonely leisure was not finding either for him or for herself the rapturous fulfilment which she had anticipated. To him it was pleasant enough: he often in the evening referred to the "jolly day" he had had, or to the "jolly day" which he expected to-morrow; but what made it jolly was so often a pastime in which

she had taken no part. It was not enough for him that they had been together; her companionship did not in itself make him content, and just because it did not her day had often been a day of unsatisfied hunger. She told herself (and endorsed her verdict) that it was demanding of human nature what human nature could not give, to expect that. Indeed, it would have been unnatural if it was so; a man in the still early prime of life with his vigour just restored to him after a long illness could not help demanding, without even formulating his demand, more than she could give him. But for herself she desired nothing more of the passing day than that he should be consciously and acutely content, that his cup should be brimful, that he should drink eagerly and ask for more. As it was, he sipped and enjoyed it, and let it stand before he turned to it again.

She had expected him to act a part in a fairy tale, that was the truth of it; her vision of these months was an unsubstantial dream. Indeed, she had confessedly thought of them as a honeymoon, and nothing less than that would have fulfilled her expectations. This restoration of Walter after the long twilight of his illness had for her been lit with the glamour of a renewed dawn; but how could it be dawn? For the day has only one dawn. They had seen the wonder of awakening love together, and the freshness and the dew of its birth could not come again to him and her. A man did not fall in love twice with the same woman. Enough if he did it once, and if in the cooling of passion and the dying of the fire there was left in the cauldron the wholesome broth of affection, which had not boiled away, nor in its cooling turned bitter.

Yet with that love of the impossible, that belief in the permanence of high romance, which kept her spirit so young and so capable of ecstasy and of misery, she had allowed herself to dwell on her fairy tale, until she believed it to be realizable. She had never ceased being in love with him—that was what ailed her—and now with the strain of his long illness removed, the flame leaped up to the height of its first burning. She was in love with him, and if that was ridiculous, she, to the inmost core of her being, was ridiculous too. And she was forty-seven years old; that made the flame fiercer, for now so soon, so soon. . . . Indeed, Walter's last birthday present to her had been a foot-muff. That was the most suitable thing he could devise for his gift.

Which was the most absurd, she asked herself that she at forty-seven should still feel as she did, or that anyone who felt as she did should be forty-seven? Long ago she and Walter had argued that age could not dim an immortal quality, nor had any such dimming come to her. But with regard to

him, though the sound of his step still made her heart alert, and the touch of him made it leap, she was not to him what she had been. Something had been lost, something had faded. Not for a moment did she doubt his deep and abiding affection; in that she was as dear to him as she had ever been. But his heart was not alert and leaping when she came near him, while she, who by every law of natural adjustment, should have been quietly acquiescing in age and its merciful bluntings, could not understand even the possibility of them. She was not being blunted by age; her desire for the sting and rapture of lovely experience was as keen as ever; so, too, her desire of life and its friendly pleasures. But they seemed, though still she denied this, to have lost a little vividness in their contact with her. They were there just the same as ever, and the same as ever was her will to appreciate them. But did they actually produce the same response from her perceptions? Or was it only Walter who still kindled in her those eagernesses?

She was sauntering to and fro on the gravel walk that bordered the lawn as these questions drifted like floating leaves along the current of her mind. The morning was one of brilliant sunshine after a long spell of wet weather, and even as this last interrogation presented itself, she caught sight of a drop of moisture clinging to a blade of grass, which the sunlight transformed into a diamond of matchless brilliance. Yellow and sapphire-blue and crimson gleamed there, and some memory vivid as the drop itself came to her of having seen and having been arrested by that very sight one morning, ever so long ago. She did not trouble to recall the occasion; what recalled itself was the sense she had experienced then of a revelation of transcendent beauty. It had filled her heart with a mysterious joy; it had made her happy for hours. Now she just noted the brilliant colours, wondering what had happened to the joy. It was pretty, but she did not care.

She lost the prismatic point of view and strolled on. She was waiting for Walter, and had to stop herself wondering whether some accident had happened. After breakfast that morning, on this return of sunshine and clear sky, she had hustled him off to the links, telling him not to waste a minute of such a day, and constituting herself Tony's tutor in his stead. He had suggested that they should lunch early, for he would be down again after his game by one o'clock, and start off for a tramp over the downs. It grew dark so early on these afternoons of late November, and he would be back punctually for a quick meal. Already he was a quarter of an hour late; but just then she heard the tinkle of a bicycle-bell at the gate, and feeling sure that this was he, went into the house to order lunch to come up at once.

Parish was just opening the front door. On the gravel outside, leaning on a bicycle which looked like Walter's, was a small boy. He gave a note to the maid, and instantly a crop of vague, baseless fears thrust themselves up in Elizabeth's mind. Something had happened to Walter, she told herself; he had hurt himself somehow, and this note was to tell her; or he had been taken ill and the steward had dispatched his caddie to bid her send the doctor up to the club-house. Often since that incessant strain of his illness, scares like this, which her reasonable mind knew to be ungrounded, went halloaing through her brain, and no repeated falsification of her presentiments robbed them of their terror.

"Is that for me, Parish?" she asked.

Parish handed the note to her. It was from Walter who, instead of being ill, was enjoying himself immensely.

"It's heavenly up here," he wrote, "and my opponent wants me to play again this afternoon, and I knew you wouldn't mind. So don't wait lunch for me, but come up here afterwards and walk round with us."

Elizabeth read it at a glance, and it gave her a stab of childish disappointment of which instantly her pride was ashamed. Walter must not know that, for he certainly had not intended to disappoint her, and this prickly spirit of her pride insisted that he should think it was a matter of complete indifference to her whether he spent his day on the links or kept his engagement with her. She scribbled a cordial word on the blank half-sheet of his note commending him for his wisdom in having another game, but giving no promise that she would be a spectator of it. She knew that as far as inclination went, she wanted to; but some internal stiffness or stubbornness revolted from any acquiescence in his suggestion. She would do something else, or do nothing; in any case, she would not accommodate herself to his whim. He might have had her companionship all the afternoon, if he had not preferred his golf; and she might have his, if she did not prefer her pride.

There it was; and she sat down to her solitary meal, quite determined to enjoy herself and to uncouple her mind from Walter and his impromptu rearrangements. She would be breezily unconscious not only to him (the cordiality of her reply had already done that), but to herself of his having thrown her over. So much more sensible of him to have another round.

Somehow the trivial incident starched and stiffened her from that limp mood of the morning when she had let herself be prey to misgivings and fluttering indecisions. She would take example from Walter's friendly

casualness. He treated her like a genial comrade, who would never dream of being hurt (hurt, indeed!), because he took it for granted that she would wish him to have another round, if he felt disposed. She must adopt the same sensible, robust attitude herself; surely after ten years of married life a man and woman should have learned (as he had) something of the frankness and independence of comrades who delighted in each other's company, but necessarily had interests and pursuits of their own. They were not Siamese twins; she had been imagining intolerable conditions if neither of them could move without the other, or, if one did, the other sighed over the moon that had waned so far from its full. It was turning the liberty of love into a slavery even to desire so sentimental a dependence. She would have liked a long walk with him, but she could occupy herself just as happily in other ways.

There was Tony; up till this moment she had forgotten about Tony, who was to have come out with them. She would take Tony to the picture palace in the town instead; he would like that ever so much better than a walk, and afterwards, for it would be late before that was over, they would have tea at a confectioner's, which was always a delicious experience, unhampered by bread and butter. Walter would be down early from his golf, for it was dark now soon after four, and he would look after himself. She would leave a message with Parish that they would be late; no, on second thoughts she would leave no message at all, for that was the more casual and sensible course.

The afternoon was a great success. There were wild adventures in motor-cars and aeroplanes incidental to a most complicated love-affair, and subsequently there were chocolate éclairs and pastry and a drive up home again long after dark, with sensational memories still so vivid that every vehicle they met on the road could be pleasingly conjectured to contain a masked villain or two and a gagged heroine. Indeed, it was quite an anti-climax to arrive safe home again and find that the door was opened by Parish and not by the captain of the robber-band who told them to hold their hands up while he searched them for that very magnificent diamond necklace. Elizabeth felt that her imagination had been employed to much better purpose in framing these alluring possibilities than in conjecturing illness and disaster from Walter's sending her a note by his caddie, and assuredly they were not a whit more unreal.

Tony pranced into the drawing-room to tell his father what an exciting time the lovers had been through, and how nobly the villain's aeroplane had crashed; but Walter had had tea, and presumably had gone to his own room.

“But we won’t disturb him now, darling,” said Elizabeth to Tony; “perhaps he’s reading, or perhaps he’s sleepy after all that golf. He’ll come in here, if he wants us.”

Tony considered this.

“But I want him,” he said. “I want to tell him about it all.”

“You shall tell him presently when he comes in. Now go upstairs and take your boots off, and then come back and have a game of draughts.”

Elizabeth laid herself out to make draughts so absorbing to Tony that he did not ask for the usual Happy Families that preceded his supper and bed-time. She knew that in the ordinary routine they would have looked in on Walter when they returned, and have demanded his co-operation; but it was far more sensible to let him come in when he felt inclined, and not seek him. She had got into the way of hovering and buzzing about him, and she had never guessed how strong that habit had become till now, when, having determined to hover and buzz no more, she found how impossible it was to concentrate her mind on this game with Tony, for it clamoured to know what Walter was doing, and why he had not joined them. Perhaps he had not heard them come in, in which case (without hoverings) it would be natural just to let him know. Yet he must have heard them, for they had passed his door. So that would not do, and she really must attend to her game; it was childish to get huffed like this. But again he would think it very odd of them not to have looked in.

She heard his step in the hall outside, the door opened, and she became violently engrossed in her game.

“Oh, Tony, I hadn’t taken my finger off,” she said. “I really hadn’t. Hallo, Walter; there you are. I’m having a terrible time. Your move, Tony.”

(Yes; that was the better wisdom.)

“And how right you were, dear,” she said, “to stop up and have another round. It must have been delicious up there. We’ve been enjoying ourselves, too.”

Tony took her two remaining pieces.

“Oh, you are stupid this evening, mummie,” he said. “That’s three games to me.”

“And it’s supper and bed-time for you,” she said. “What a lot of things for you.”

“Oh, not yet,” said Tony. “I must tell daddy about the movies. Daddy _____”

“Well, five minutes, Tony; not more.”

Tony launched into a welter of diamond necklaces and aeroplanes, and his mother took up the book she had been reading that morning. But it was difficult to attend—for was Walter rather silent and grave? Of course, it was impossible to say much while Tony’s narrative was in progress.

“And then his aeroplane crashed, so they got the diamond necklace, and went off to be married,” was the triumphant conclusion.

“Ripping, old man,” said Walter. “That was a sell for the Italian count. Now, off you go.”

Elizabeth read on after Tony’s exit, and saw from below her lowered eyelids that Walter strolled across to the fireplace and stood there.

“You’ve given Tony a lovely afternoon, Lizzie,” he said.

Cordiality was the proper key; always cordiality.

“I had a lovely one myself,” she said. “So did you, I hope. Win?”

“Just. You didn’t mind my stopping up there?”

“Not in the least,” said she. “So glad you did. And the sky was quite clear when we came in. We shall have another day like this to-morrow. You’d better take your lunch up with you.”

“But we must have our walk to-morrow,” he said.

“Not a bit of it. I have a host of things to do to-morrow. I shall drive you up again on to the hill-tops. You must get just as much air and sun as you can before you go back to work.”

Walter looked at her for a moment as if he had caught some unusual inflexion in her voice. He had noticed, but so dimly that it made no impression, that she had not come to his room when she returned with Tony, and with the same dimness he had wondered if, possibly, she was the least bit annoyed with him by his change of plans to-day. But that would have been very unlike her, and now the cordiality with which she denied it, banished all further thought on the subject. With that, then, all clear, he approached the subject about which he wanted to talk to her. He had heard to-day from the senior partner in the stock-broking firm in which, before the war, he had been a junior, and now he drew the letter from his pocket. He

wanted to have the assurance that she had no speck of “rubbed-up” surface, no spot of irritation in her mind, before he spoke of it.

“And talking of that,” he said, “I heard from Ellingham to-day.”

Elizabeth had slid back into her book again as she spoke. But at this she closed it. She remembered that Walter had proposed to write to him, asking if they could find a place for him in the firm again; that, however, had been abandoned when they had settled to spend the winter here. And the suspicion crossed her mind that, after all, he had written.

“Did you write to him?” she asked. The question flickered out of its own accord.

“Of course I didn’t. I was meaning to, if you remember; but then we settled I should not go back to work just yet. He wrote to me of his own initiative.”

“And what does he say?” she asked.

“It’s a very kind letter. He had heard that I was well again, and hopes that I am thinking of rejoining them.”

“And what are you going to say to him?” she asked.

The toneless impersonality of her voice struck him. He remembered with what touching eagerness she had spoken of her scheme that they should spend the winter here, as her day-dream. He had agreed to that at once; but now, with Ellingham writing like this, reconsideration was necessary.

“Why, that’s what I want to consult you about,” he said. “Of course, I must go back, as Ellingham is willing to take me. We settled that I should do that eventually. But now that he’s told me that they’ll have me, I must, when I answer him, give some sort of date. Naturally, as I am perfectly fit and well again, I can’t expect him to keep my place for me indefinitely, or indeed for very long.”

Still objectively, still not allowing herself to think, Elizabeth visualized the future. She saw herself and Margaret and Tony here all the week, and Walter rejoining them on Friday, staying at his club while he was looking about for a flat. And would that search be a prolonged one, she wondered? Would he like being free and unhampered, though quite glad to get back into domesticity at the close of every week?

“You mean you think you ought to take advantage of his offer very soon,” she said. “I quite see that you cannot expect him to wait indefinitely, since there is no reason why you should not begin work again.”

This was more toneless than ever; she might have been asking him what time he wanted breakfast.

He left the question at issue, and concerned himself with her.

“Anything the matter, Lizzie?” he asked.

She still felt she was right in wishing him to come to a perfectly independent decision. She knew now that her day-dream of a winter was not, and could not be, what she had anticipated; and even if it was being so, she had no right to put her own happiness before the obvious precedence of a man’s need of work. Even if he had been acutely content with the joint fireside and companionship, she ought to drive him from it. But he needed no driving; he was ready to be on the move.

She pulled herself together, and her assent became less superficial and more sincere.

“Of course nothing is the matter,” she said. “You know I love being here with you; but if you’ve got to go back to your work, you must. No woman can be a man’s life, Walter. So you will write to Mr. Ellingham to say you’ll join up again next week or the week after? That sort of time?”

“There’s no need for such immediate hurry,” he said. “The thing is just to fix a reasonable date. I was thinking of suggesting that I should join up again, as you call it, directly after Christmas. We shall be in December in a few days now.”

Elizabeth got up. She suddenly and overwhelmingly felt that she could not discuss this any more until she had adjusted herself to it. It was not so much the actual abandonment of her winter’s day-dream that had to be faced, as Walter’s apparent ease and unconcern in abandoning it. He was right, she knew that, in seeing that his holiday must come to an end before long, but it was no struggle to him, no giving up of anything intimately and deliciously dear. Very likely, on balance, he was pleased to do so.

“Yes; how the days slide by,” she said. “And Margaret will be here in a fortnight now. My dear, look at the time! I must fly upstairs and dress, or I shall keep you waiting for dinner, and I know what that means when you have had a day on the links.”

CHAPTER V

Elizabeth was waiting for the arrival of her niece who might be expected any moment. Walter and Tony had gone clattering out with their skates in their hands an hour ago, for the weather during the last week had been of pinching cold, and at lunch the glad news had come that the ice in the flooded meadow by the river was bearing. She would have gone with them, but it seemed inhospitable to let Margaret find an empty house, and she had stayed at home to welcome her. Walter had urged her to join them; it was not as if Margaret was coming for a short afternoon's call. But she had remained hospitable, and had bundled them out, telling them to have a good time and break no bones.

She had watched them run across the hard-frozen lawn; the frost of the night before still lay white under the shadow of the walls where the low sun had not reached it, and with their exit she had told herself that her scheme for the winter was in all essentials over, and the curtain rung down on it. Before Walter came back this afternoon Margaret would have arrived, and before she left them, he would be at work again in London. For the last few days she had longed for the end of their solitary companionship to come, for the project had been a failure, quiet and comfortable and complete, from the point of view which had been hers when she projected it, and since that was so, the sooner it was over the better. What she had expected of it she believed now to have been impossible, and she desired nothing more than that the daily demonstration of its failure should cease. It had been proved in so many ways, each of which was convincing; Walter's whole bearing proved it, not alone by the eagerness with which he threw himself into any occupation, but more surely than that by his quiet enjoyment of her companionship. She felt sure that he preferred her to all other companions, and that if he had the world to choose from, he would have chosen her. He found her presence thoroughly congenial, and that was all.

Experience, like a great bland schoolmaster, had covered his blackboard with signs that were perfectly intelligible to her, and had written a capital Q.E.D. at the foot of his exposition. She did not contest this lucid demonstration, for he had been wonderfully logical and convincing, and ready to go over any doubtful point as often as was necessary, and all she wanted now was that the proof should be expunged, and the blackboard made ready again to receive the record of more encouraging calculations. It was her business to rub the wet sponge over it, for she badly wanted a clean

surface and an obliteration of those incontestable figures, but before doing that, she glanced at the inexorable reckoning once more, not to convince herself that there was a flaw in it, but that there was none. And then, away with the whole business.

Walter had been in the most cheerful and equable spirits all these days, easily amused, thoughtful for her comfort, eagerly adopting any trivial plan she suggested, and for himself happy and occupied, lamenting sometimes the swift passage of the days that was bringing nearer Margaret's arrival which would put an end to their solitary companionship. Only last night he had said it was a bore that their jolly quiet evenings were finished; tomorrow Margaret would be here. And this very expression of his feeling was a nail in the coffin of the dead days which, for Elizabeth, had never lived. To him they had been pleasant days, they had been full of quiet enjoyment, and that he should feel like that about them showed her, more convincingly than anything could have done, how completely they had lacked all that she had hoped of them. He had found her a delightful companion, and he himself had been one, but never for a single moment had he guessed at the hunger and thirst of her heart. Her pride, which had refused to let him see that, without some sort of signal from him, had presented to him an impenetrable front; it was not going to knock, unless the door was open. And it was not as if he, in like manner, concealed anything; he had truly enjoyed their comfortable companionship, and it had satisfied all his needs. She had given him all he wanted, and he had given her all he had for her.

There was the crunch of wheels on the gravel outside the front door, and with one swift motion of her mind, Elizabeth expunged the figures she had been studying. They were correct, and she had done with them.

She went out quickly into the hall. The door had just been opened, and the girl stood on the threshold. Elizabeth hurried towards her with the welcome of her outstretched hands.

"Ah, my dear, this is capital," she said. "How delighted I am to see you! Come in at once out of the cold, and get warm. Parish will see to everything."

Elizabeth bustled her into range of the fire. The room seemed utterly to have changed since she was here a moment before, when the past clung to it, and the figures on the blackboard, giving their faultless deductions from her experience of the last months, grimly faced her. Now, with Margaret's arrival, she had washed all that off; the board was empty, and when any

further demonstration was worked out on it, it would contain a new factor, which had not appeared in any previous calculation.

Elizabeth's heart warmed towards the future; she wanted to be busy at once with combinations that concerned the new factor. There was something to do, somebody to make happy and at home. Through the cloak that still enveloped the girl she could conjecture the shapely lines of her young slimness; above it, with a fur cap coming low over her forehead, was that small, eager face, with its rather big features strongly marked and in no way beautiful. But there was character in them, there was good sense and good nature there, a friendliness in that large-lipped mouth. It was the face of a nice pleasant boy, with a twinkle in the eye for humour and a frank attraction about it.

With a sudden pang of yearning and heart-hunger Elizabeth thought that, as far as years were concerned, she might have had a daughter of such an age, who would renew life for her with the developing extension of her own personality. Anyhow, she was for the present in the place of both father and mother to the girl, and she put all her eager sincerity into her greeting.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "I do hope we shall give you a happy time with us. You're ever so welcome. Why, it must be a year since I saw you last. Take your cloak off and let the fire get at you. Tea? Shall we have tea up at once? It will warm you after your journey and the scratch lunch you probably had in the train. Walter and Tony have gone skating. They won't be in, I expect, till it's too dark to fall down any more."

Margaret's mouth responded to the sparkle in her eye, as she unbuttoned her cloak without taking it off.

"Dear Aunt Elizabeth," she said, "you are sweet to give me such a nice welcome. I was rather frightened, do you know, at the thought of coming here. But you're delicious to me; I'm not frightened any more. And is there skating? How lovely! I skated half the morning at Cambridge after I had packed, and put my skates on the very top of my things."

Elizabeth felt a moment's chill. She had already impetuously pictured herself and Margaret sitting cosily over the fire and establishing a relationship, which, making short work of all preliminaries, dived down at once into intimacy. They would have a good talk, and when Walter came home he would find them already knit into companionship and confidence. But instantly she sprang to the girl's obvious thought: how perfectly natural that she should want to go out skating at once!

“Why, that’s the very thing!” she said. “But are you sure you’re not tired with your journey and the skating you’ve had already? No? Quick then; let’s go and get your skates out before they take your luggage upstairs. You’ll have time for an hour on the ice before it gets dark. The meadows are not more than half a mile off. We’ll start at once.”

The girl hesitated a moment.

“But I won’t drag you out,” she said. “As my train crossed the valley I saw where they were skating; I can easily find my way.”

“You’re not dragging me out,” she said. “At least, I want to be dragged. A bit of a walk would be delightful. I’ll certainly take you down there, though no skating for me. I leave that to those whose bones are positively benefited by severe falls.”

They soon found Walter among the skaters, and Elizabeth gave Margaret into his charge, and stood watching them from the bank. The girl was evidently an adept, she curved this way and that, she proceeded backwards or forwards with equal ease, turning on her skate with a noiseless little flick of her foot; it was a joy to watch her pace and dexterity. And though Elizabeth had just asserted that such a pastime was too perilous for her antiquity, she wished she had brought down her long-unused blades. She would rummage them out, she determined, when she got home, and join them to-morrow. Walter and Margaret would support her tottering steps, and it would be great fun to see what she could do, for there were plenty of middle-aged folk like herself perilously adventuring themselves with nervous smiles and obvious enjoyment. That was the way to keep young (especially if at heart you felt young), namely, not to give in and acquiesce in limitations which probably did not exist.

But it was cold watching, and presently Elizabeth turned homewards again, taking the footpath that struck up the hillside.

The hoar-frost still lay in hollows and shady places, the sky was pale winter blue, and just above, where the sun had slipped behind the ridge of the high downs, a few wisps of cloud hung like fleeces of gold. Before she got home they vanished, and the young moon, thin as the paring of a fingernail, was just visible. Elizabeth noted the beauty of the hills and the radiant frosty sky, and wondered why she did not care for them.

She got in just as the light began to fade; the others were sure to be following soon, and she waited for them before she ordered tea. Presently Parish came in to draw curtains and light up, and she filled in the time at the

piano. She had been lazy of late, and had often to chase out of her mind the question as to whether it was worth while to keep her fingers nimble. She enjoyed playing, but what, at her time of life, was the use of practising in the hopes of attaining excellence? Yet occupation was always good; occupation, even if it led to nothing, kept at bay the sense of its own uselessness, it kept at bay also thoughts that were worse than useless. But all that belonged to these expunged demonstrations of the blackboard, which now was made clean to receive a more cheerful record. Or was it best, for one of her age, to take no heed for the morrow, to enjoy what she could, and just shrug her shoulders at what she couldn't, to make no particular efforts, and not to be disappointed if things shaped themselves awkwardly?

Suddenly her whole instincts rose in revolt at such a conclusion. To acquiesce like that was one of the most dangerous symptoms of age, which feebly tried this, and weakly tried that, and told itself that it had been expecting too much. Now, more than ever, if she was to make anything of the years that remained, she must be eager to do her best, and severe to mark where she had gone wrong, and undefeately try to realize all that was within her power. More than ever, too, must she be indulgent, letting others have complete freedom of action, and loving what they did and how they disposed themselves, because it was they who did and disposed. The critical eye was a very useful organ, but its best office was not to scrutinize others, but oneself.

There was the sound of arrival, the banging of the front door, and the irruption of the skaters, rosy with exercise. Tony ran to her, bursting with gratifying information.

“Oh, mummy, I fell down twelve times after I began counting,” he said. “And I went on one foot when Margaret held me. It was lovely.”

Elizabeth hastened to put her conclusion into practise.

“That was splendid, darling,” she said. “And you’ve all enjoyed yourselves, I’m sure. Walter, ring for tea.”

He did so, and stood in front of the fire with his arm in Margaret’s. The intimacy which Elizabeth had meant to establish with the girl was as yet unaccomplished, but another intimacy, it was clear, had been established on the ice.

“This creature here is a howling swell on skates,” he said. “We all stood round and watched her.”

“Oh, Walter, what nonsense,” said the girl.

“ ’Tisn’t nonsense. We’re all going to take lessons from her at a penny an hour. She doesn’t fall down; she goes in the direction she intends; she——”

“She’s getting rather self-conscious,” said Margaret, “and wishes you’d stop.”

“Oh, I must come down and skate to-morrow morning,” said Elizabeth. “Will you take me at a penny an hour, Margaret?”

“Rather, Aunt Elizabeth. Any amount of hours.”

Elizabeth could not help noticing that she was “Aunt,” while Walter was no longer “Uncle.” But how natural that was! She and Walter were evidently great friends already; the affinities of youth had established themselves and furnished the most promising augury for the girl’s visit. Elizabeth had hoped that she would find herself at home at once, and though the route by which she had arrived at that was not the one which she had originally mapped out, it was good to see that Margaret had reached a familiar footing and no longer felt herself in any way a stranger. There was Tony, too, who usually was slightly aloof with new people; Tony had clearly accepted her as a desirable addition to his circle, and was perched on the arm of her chair demanding that the moment tea was over they should have a chestnut-fight. Margaret might choose any half-dozen of his most seasoned warriors, whereas, when he played with his mother, Elizabeth was always given the softest and worst-armoured of his hosts, which flew into fragments at any serious impact.

“Oh, but we won’t kill them all, Tony,” Margaret was saying. “We’ll plant some in vases filled with water; then they’ll begin to grow. Haven’t you ever done that?”

“No,” said Tony. “Mummie, we want vases with water, and do they become trees?”

“Of course, and when you and I are old, we’ll sit under them and have tea.”

Tony jumped up.

“Oh, come on; let’s plant them now,” he said.

Elizabeth felt it was her turn to begin establishing a relationship. She was being left behind.

“By and by, Tony,” she said. “Margaret hasn’t seen her room yet.”

“I’ll show it her,” said Tony. “I know which it is.”

Margaret put Tony quietly aside.

“Yes; do show me my room, Aunt Elizabeth,” she said. “I’m dreadfully untidy and dirty.”

“Come along, then,” said Elizabeth. “And you’ll like to rest perhaps for a bit.”

Margaret laughed.

“I’m not so sure about resting,” she said.

“Elizabeth’s got a passion for people resting,” said Walter. “She always wants everybody to rest. Resting tires me out. I’m good for nothing when I get up in the morning. But it wears off.”

The two went upstairs together. Elizabeth had given time and trouble to making Margaret’s room comfortable; there was a writing-table in a convenient light, a sofa fronting the fire, the bed with a lamp exactly where it should be.

“But it’s enchanting,” said the girl, “and so intelligent. Furniture doesn’t dispose itself so well by accident. There’s thought, your thought. I shall never get up in the morning, but lie looking at my beautiful room. Sit down, Aunt Elizabeth, on your own sofa, while I tidy myself just a little bit. Am I going to enjoy all this month, do you think, as much as I’ve enjoyed the first hours of it?”

Elizabeth moved up to the end of the sofa, conveying a clear invitation to the girl to sit beside her. But Margaret did not avail herself of it; she stood in front of her, like some shy animal that does not yet quite trust the hand that beckons it. General friendliness, founded on skating or fighting with chestnuts, was simple enough; but she guessed that a talk such as this fireside setting suggested, was likely to be of a more distinctly personal kind, and she did not feel so sure that she was ready for it. The talk would certainly concern more intimate things: the position in which she was placed by her mother’s divorce, and her father’s solitary departure, which had the air of desertion about it. Moreover, the woman who beckoned was her father’s sister; it was probable that her sympathies were entirely with him.

“But, of course, you’re going to enjoy it much more,” said Elizabeth lightly. “You haven’t begun to know us yet, dear; and you can’t imagine how delightful we are.”

The girl shook her head.

“Ah, but you’ve got to find me delightful, too,” she said, “and that’s far more doubtful. It’s so possible that you mayn’t like me at all when you know me.”

Elizabeth laughed.

“Well, dear Margaret, give me a chance,” she said. “Naturally, I don’t ask for your confidence. I’m only here to receive just what you feel inclined to give me. Or perhaps you don’t feel inclined to give me anything yet. I shall quite understand if you don’t.”

Elizabeth’s voice was full of friendliness, but the girl hesitated before she sat down.

“Well, you’ll certainly soon begin to find out about me,” she said, “and you’ll receive a series of small shocks. So, perhaps, it’s better to give you a big shock and have done with it. Then, possibly, you’ll recover from it, and begin to like other bits of me; whereas, if you were always getting little shocks, you might only grow to dislike me.”

“Let’s have it, then,” said Elizabeth. “I’ll brace myself.”

“Here goes, then. I adore my mother, who has been branded with infamy, and I detest my father. I always disliked him; now I detest him. I know he’s your brother, Aunt Elizabeth; but that’s not my fault nor yours. You can’t imagine what a relief it was (though I was frightened) when I got his letter saying that I was to come here for the vacation. I thought I should have to go back to that dreary house and look after him, or go abroad with him. How I should have hated it.”

The large, pleasant mouth widened.

“So would he, you know,” she said. “You mustn’t forget that. I expect he would have hated it quite as much as I. He doesn’t like me, you know. I’m ugly, and he hates that; he thinks all girls ought to be dewy and curly and rosebuddish. And then, of course, there’s the crowning offence that I adore my mother. Now you know the worst, Aunt Elizabeth. You can look at me with pained horror, and hope I’ll be comfortable here, and glide away.”

Elizabeth adopted none of these suggestions. She put a friendly arm round the girl’s neck and kissed her.

“I prefer to stop here,” she said.

“That’s nice of you; I prefer it, too. But there it is about my father and me. I suppose it’s sad, but I’ve got used to it. As for my mother, that’s sad, too; she’s a darling, and I wish she hadn’t behaved like that. But, after all,

what was she to do? The wonderful thing was that she put up with my father for so long. You can't guess what it was like at home, Aunt Elizabeth. He was a beautiful planet in the middle, and my mother and I and the household were moons, little dead moons, whose only duty was to revolve round him. He's like that, you know."

It was idle to deny that Dickie was "like that." But the extraordinary outspokenness of the young generation! It made Elizabeth feel wonderfully old, just when she wanted to feel young.

"My dear, you've had a horrid time," she said without comment. "You've got to enjoy yourself and forget about it."

"But forgetting about it doesn't change it, Aunt Elizabeth," said the girl.

"No; but when you have to remember it again, you will bring a fresh, a rested eye to look at it. And, oh, dear me, extremely selfish people, as poor Dickie undoubtedly is, are so pathetic."

Margaret shook her head with the cheerful hardness of youth.

"Oh, no; he's not pathetic," she said. "He's like an ironclad or a tortoise. And then there's another thing. He writes to me to say that he forbids me to see my mother or hold any communication with her."

"He told me that," said Elizabeth. "He would have liked me to be responsible for your not doing so."

The girl laughed outright.

"Oh, that's so like father," she said. "He signifies his wishes, and expects everybody to trample on each other in their zeal for carrying them out. And did you accept the responsibility, Aunt Elizabeth?"

"No, dear; I refused it."

"I'm glad. I should have listened, I hope, with respect to what you said, and then I should have gone to see her. She's coming to stay at a house not very far from here early next week. Garth. Do you know it? Lord Ambleside's."

Elizabeth's mind hovered indecisively for a moment. The simplest answer was to say that she did not know Garth, which was perfectly true. But a completer answer might possibly be a simplification of that, for it was likely that Margaret would sometime hear of past histories. She might even hear of them from Walter himself, and instantly Elizabeth made up her mind to forestall that possibility. Margaret should hear, then, from her.

“No; I’ve never been there,” she said. “Neither Walter nor I have ever been. Ages ago, dear, before Walter and I met at all, Lady Ambleside was engaged to him. You may imagine how long ago. Then her present husband proposed to her, and she jilted Walter.”

“What a damned fool,” said Margaret. “I beg your pardon, Aunt Elizabeth; but wasn’t it silly of her?”

For a moment Elizabeth felt the girl had forgotten about age and relationship, and had spoken as she would have spoken to a friend. She wished that Margaret had not corrected that lapse so quickly. She laughed.

“I agree,” she said. “I think it was wonderfully silly of her. I wasn’t as silly as that when he proposed to me.”

For a moment Margaret’s face was inscrutable. Then it cleared.

“He’s a darling,” she said. “But then you are, too, Aunt Elizabeth.”

On the whole, then, this had been a satisfactory talk; Elizabeth felt encouraged to attempt that most difficult piece of psychical engineering, namely, the construction of a bridge that shall connect the older generation with the younger, so that either can hurry across to the other without the hazard of a blind leap that may project the jumper into a fathomless void.

Some strenuous but superficial days followed; the frost held, and the family hurried off after breakfast next morning to make the most of it. Elizabeth, whose last experience of frozen surfaces was inconceivably dim, questioned the wisdom of her joining the party, but the lure of the brisk air made youth insurgent within her. Though muscles might have lost their old elasticity, and joints have stiffened for these athletic feats, it would be great fun to try, and if the process was too arduous she could sit and watch the others, and immerse herself in the youth of those who laughed when they fell down and proceeded to do so again. To be in all ways sympathetic with youth, and to repudiate age was the root of her desire, and whether she could skate or not mattered so little compared with that.

The less hazardous course, it very soon appeared, was to take firm hold of a chair, and pushing it in front of her, let it control and support her diverging feet, and at short intervals afford her rest. Sometimes she was bolder, and clasping Margaret’s hand, as if in last impassioned farewells, which she was most unwilling to terminate, she let herself be propelled in small precarious circles. But that would not do for long, since Margaret, though compassionately willing, could not be allowed to waste her time like

this, and Elizabeth went back to her chair. But it was good to watch Margaret's swift undeviating course, and applaud and encourage Walter's comparative awkwardness. He was old, after all, compared to Margaret. But he had vigour and determination, he recovered himself from perilous poisonings, and if he did not, a shout of laughter greeted his own collapse. He came and sat by her after one of these falls.

"Give me a corner of your chair, darling," he said. "No one was ever in such pain as I, but I will learn to go backwards, like that chit of a girl. What a pity not to have brought sandwiches down with us. We ought to have done that, and then we needn't have gone back for lunch."

Elizabeth was grateful for her opportunity.

"I'm going back in any case," she said. "So I can send down something for all of you."

"Oh, that will be ripping," he said. "I'm certain Margaret would sooner stop down here. But I'll ask her."

He slid off on to the ice again, returning after Elizabeth had taken off her skates.

"Yes; she'll stop," he said. "Lots of sandwiches, Lizzie. And drink. Everything you can think of. Thanks ever so much."

He paused a moment.

"And you'll come down again afterwards, won't you?" he asked.

"I won't swear to it," she said. "But I'll swear you shall get your lunch."

Elizabeth thought she would not go down again, because she did not really enjoy pushing a chair in front of her, while her shins ached, but then, again, a flattering vision of herself discarding the unnecessary chair and gliding easily about the ice beset her. She knew it did not matter to anybody else whether she went back or not, or whether, having gone back, some miracle of unaccustomed locomotion was vouchsafed to her, so that to the admiration of all beholders she glided about in careless statuesque attitudes. And yet it all mattered immensely, for these nimblenesses and unfatigues were symbols not so much of what she wanted to do but of what she longed to be. But her indecision over so trumpery a choice was more symbolic than the choice itself, for she knew that if Margaret, or, for that matter, if Walter had felt tired, as she undoubtedly felt, they would have swiftly settled with themselves whether they preferred to get more tired or to trudge back to sofas and arm-chairs, and would have had no sub-current of thought as to

how others would regard their choice; if Walter, worn out by frequent falls, lay on his sofa and went to sleep, he would not fear that Elizabeth thought him sadly aged. With her there was a strong sub-current; would she be younger in her own and others' eyes by a renewal of her pushings of a chair, and her pretence of enjoying herself? Oh, how it mattered, and how supremely silly it was of her to let it!

Any decision on these lines was obviated for her by the thick flutter of snowflakes against the window. Clearly it was no use setting forth to skate again in a snowstorm, and she hailed the forced decision. Before long the clatter of skates and voices in the hall indicated that the same decision had been forced on the others, and in they tempestuously came with the packets of sandwiches still untouched, for with the snow beginning to fall thickly it would have been criminal to waste the few precious minutes, while skating was still possible, on food. Ravenous, they sat on the floor by the fire, and when the pangs were assuaged, Walter went stiffly to the sofa and fell asleep. He made no self-debate about it, but said frankly that he was dog-tired and ached. His youth was no impediment to the confession and relief of fatigue, whereas Elizabeth. . . . Margaret went to her room with the same intention, and subsequently, refreshed by slumber, they partook largely of tea, and played hide-and-seek all over the house with Tony.

A day or two of tobogganing on the steep sides of the downs followed the snowfall; then came a thaw with volleying rain from the south-west, which put all forms of outdoor athleticism out of the question. Elizabeth woke one morning to streaming panes and rattling window-sashes, and for her own part listened with glee to the tattoo of the rain and the squealing blasts. Presently Walter came in from his bath and sat on the edge of her bed in his dressing-gown while he drank his tea.

“Oh, isn't it wretched, Lizzie?” he said. “All that beautiful snow spoiled! What are we to do with ourselves?”

He mournfully gazed at the wet blur of the window, his head a little turned away from her, so that she saw no more of his face than the lean lines of his shaven jaw and the firm, unwrinkled skin at the outer corner of his eye. His dressing-gown had fallen off his shoulder, and round his neck was the sharp line where the ruddy brown of exposure ended and the whiteness of his shoulder began. There he sat, smelling of soap and thinking nothing about her, but solely absorbed in the dismal prospect of the day; and there she lay refreshed by her night of unbroken sleep, thinking of nothing but him. . . . A sudden wave of physical passion reared itself from the calm sea of her mind, and had she yielded to the yearning of her arms, she would

have pulled him down across her, and smothered his face in hers. After all, why not? Without further thought she caught him round the neck and dragged him sideways down.

“Good morning, dear,” she said. “You haven’t deigned to say good morning to me yet.”

He kissed her.

“Oh, let go, Elizabeth,” he said. “I shall tip up. ’Tisn’t dignified.”

The impulse that had made her pull him down to her entirely subsided. It had been quite overwhelming, but his entire unconsciousness of it made it disappear as suddenly as it had arisen. She let go of him and he righted himself.

“No, let’s be dignified,” she said; “and it is a wretched morning. I’m sorry.”

He got up: a slipper had fallen off, and he thrust his toes into it again.

“Time to get up, Lizzie,” he said. “I shall go and turn on your bath for you, and leave it running, so that you’ll have to go to it.”

“Yes, do,” she said. “Run along.”

He paddled away down the passage, leaving her door open, and she heard the rattle of a handle, and a scream.

“Sorry, Margaret,” he called out. “But why don’t you lock your bathroom door? That’s the way murders happen.”

Elizabeth, as she dressed, banished from her mind her silly impulse, but reconsidered her gleeful welcome of the gale, which put an end to any need for getting smothered in snow, for she remembered one or two of those tragic days in the autumn, when Walter, unable to amuse himself out-of-doors, became merely a depressed and objectless boy. She wondered whether Margaret was another of those mercurial folk whose spirits sank out of sight in house-bound weather. If so, she would have her hands full to-day in maintaining a decent level of corporate living. Or was it wise to leave them alone in their grumpiness? . . .

Margaret, however, expressed herself as charmed with the hopelessness of the morning.

“There’s nothing I like better than an absolutely putrid day,” she said. “I shut doors and windows, and draw up close to the fire, and smoke all the time I’m not eating chocolates. I love to think how comfortable I am, and

how wretched everybody must be who is obliged to go out. Why morose, Walter?"

"Because I wanted to toboggan."

"Never mind! You shall sit on my knee, and I'll show you pictures. Or shall we dress up? Or may we cook, Aunt Elizabeth?"

Walter was putting large quantities of marmalade on very small bits of toasts. He didn't seem morose, and he spoke genially.

"But about four in the afternoon I feel I shall suffocate if I don't go out," he said, "or, at any rate, not want dinner. And Lizzie always gives us particularly good dinners on wet days."

"Well, we'll go out about four then," said Margaret, "and get thoroughly soaked, so that it's bliss to come indoors again. That's quite a good plan."

Elizabeth betook herself to her household duties, and returning from these, heard shouts and laughter from Walter's room. That was pleasant; it over-scored the drumming of the rain and the bellowing wind, and with a smile to herself she crossed the hall, meaning to enter and be made a partaker in this hilarious business. Then, even as her fingers were on the handle of his door, she withdrew again, putting it to herself that, as they were occupied and amused, this was a good opportunity for amending her neglect of her piano. But as she settled down to her practising, she knew that when she turned back from Walter's door there had been another thought lying very still in her mind, but very alert, like a hare in its form.

There it crouched, and she did not want to disturb it and make it bolt. Perhaps it hadn't been there at all, and she had no intention of looking for it. Either there was nothing there, or something she did not wish to arouse into activity. . . . Then, after a strenuous practice, there was Tony to look after, and the morning sped by without her having set eyes either on Walter or his companion.

The bell for lunch failed to produce them, and now she went in. Whatever had been amusing them a couple of hours ago, they were deep in their books now, sitting in two chairs drawn close to the fire, with four feet resting on the fender.

"Lunch, you studious people," said Elizabeth.

Walter jumped up.

"Is it really?" he said. "Not possible. I believe you're lying, Lizzie."

Margaret rose from her immersion, fathoms deep in her book.

“Oh, what a nice morning I’ve had,” she said. “And what have you been doing, Aunt Elizabeth? I heard you playing.”

“And I heard you laughing,” said she. “What was it about?”

“I’ve forgotten. Something silly. Oh, look at the cigarette ends in the fender. That’s you, Walter. May I leave my book here open in my chair? I must go on with it immediately afterwards.”

Margaret soon drifted back to his room, where presently he joined her, and once again Elizabeth was left alone. There was laughter again, and periods of silence, and again laughter. How lightly and enjoyably Walter was getting through just such a day as had reduced him to limp despair when he was alone with her! Then, after an hour or so, she heard the door of his room open; there was a colloquy in the hall outside, and soon they both came to where she sat alone.

“Walter’s begun to suffocate, Aunt Elizabeth,” said Margaret. “So we’re going out, and we came to see if you wouldn’t join us. You’ve no idea how delicious it is getting home again, when you’ve been wetted and blown on.”

Elizabeth knew that if Walter had asked her to go she would have said it was the very thing she wanted to do. But he hadn’t asked her, and now he did not add his voice to Margaret’s. It never entered her head that Walter would prefer her not to come with them. But he didn’t want her, he didn’t need her.

“My dear, nothing would induce me to set foot outside the door,” she said with robust geniality. “If the house was on fire I wouldn’t stir. You’re both crazy to go out, so I, with better sense, will make sure that the bath-water will be properly hot by the time you get back. Go away and be drowned, bless you both!”

She saw them off, the door flying wide before a great gust of rain-soaked wind, and, left alone once more, retraced her mental way to where she had seen, or imagined she had seen, that crouching figure of her thought that kept so still and was so alert. Now she shooed it from its hiding; it must come into the open and be looked at.

It might have been worse, she thought, as she watched it; it wasn’t a monster. She found she had no touch of personal feeling, no speck of jealousy against Margaret herself, who, without effort, was making this tempest-ridden day pass so pleasantly for Walter. She was merely delighted at her success, and, if they had a bedroom colloquy that night, she would

congratulate the girl with all sincerity on this valuable feat. She would tell her, humorously she hoped, how she herself had often in the autumn laid herself out to amuse him, and how poor a job she made of it. Of personal feeling against Margaret, then, there was none.

But how passionately jealous she was of that for which Margaret stood. She stood for youth, for the quality which she herself lacked. It was idle to tell herself that her mind and spirit were instinct with it, and that this was enough. She had not got the quality itself. Yet the quality was not physical either. Margaret might have been crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, and yet she would have had it. It was simply a question of years; the young always had the genuine thing, the old never, for all their caperings and all their elasticity of mind. And the young always gravitated towards it with all the undirected purposelessness of wandering soap-bubbles. The imperceptible draught of its atmosphere drew them together, and they sailed happily along in their native iridescence, taking added colour from each other, reflecting and refracting it. Youth could be wise or it could be foolish, it could be serious or futile; but all these were minor decorations or disfigurements that nobody noticed. It was to that quality that Walter, ever so properly, ever so inevitably had gravitated to-day; it was that (how trivial and yet how significant) which had made him perfectly happy and content. Just such other days had there been in the autumn, when he was alone with her, whom, she knew so well, he loved and leaned on; but all his leaning and his love had not prevailed to make him anything but bored and yawnful. Now, when a girl was here, whom he neither loved nor leaned on, she, without effort, and most assuredly without purpose, gave him that which all the devotion in the world could not bring him. Margaret had spent the morning with him, chiefly reading her book, and he his, and he had been incredulous that lunch-time had arrived. But if it had been she herself who had sat with him, in chairs drawn close together and feet on the fender, he would have yawned and cursed this God-forsaken morning. It was youth which he had missed all the autumn, and all her devotion to him and his to her could not evolve a grain of it. It was an element in the psychical world, not to be compounded out of any other ingredients.

Years ago he and she had almost lyrically proclaimed that love needed no preservative, and she did not doubt that now. But youth (such as was his now) had been hers when they married, and had formed part of love, and though in its evaporation not one particle of love itself had been vaporized with it, that which remained, in itself unaltered, could not but be modified by this evaporation. And they had not grown old together; age had not touched him at all yet.

She had told herself, and her whole consciousness affirmed it, that she had no touch of personal jealousy towards Margaret. But she was passionately jealous of the quality which she adored and fruitlessly desired. She must get rid of that somehow; jealousy of whatever sort was septic and poisonous. She must adjust herself, ever so deep down in her nature, to the absence of that which would never return to her.

There came the slam of the front door and the sound of the familiar voices, and she went out to welcome their return. There they stood, dripping and flushed, and bubbling with all that she lacked. It flowed in streams from them, and not one drop could she catch to assuage her thirst.

“Oh, enormous success!” cried Margaret, “and quite too beastly for words. You ought to have come out, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“Lizzie’s not such a fool,” said he. “Are you, darling?”

CHAPTER VI

No definite date, as far as Elizabeth knew, had been fixed for Walter's resumption of work in the City. She had understood that he was to join up again directly after the Christmas holidays, but now the New Year had come in, and he was here still, and up to the present had not alluded to his approaching departure. Often Elizabeth had been on the point of asking him when that disconsolate day was coming, but though no inquiry could have been more proper and pertinent, she had refrained from making it. There were a host of reasons why she should not ask him; to begin with, she hated to have a term put to his lingering here, for she still, in spite of herself, expected so much. Perhaps he was putting it off because he was contented and happy, perhaps he was beginning to want her more—in any case, it was more natural that he should tell her than she should ask. With the date fixed they would have to bestir themselves; they would have to take a small furnished flat until they could find some permanent habitation.

The two were alone to-day; after breakfast Lady Ambleside's motor had come for Margaret from Garth, where she was to spend the day with her mother, who was staying there, and, as soon as she was gone, Walter strolled into the drawing-room.

"Got a minute, Lizzie?" he asked. "I should like to have a word with you."

She wheeled round from her writing-table.

"Many minutes," she said. "Now sit down and be comfortable. What is it?"

"Plans generally," said he. "There's London looming in front of me now and we haven't settled anything yet."

"I know. I was waiting for you to talk about it. When are you going?"

"I propose to go about the tenth of this month. In a week's time, that is. I shall write to Ellingham to-day and suggest that date. I ought to have written before."

The tenth of January was associated in Elizabeth's mind with some other event. She groped about for it; but it evaded her.

“That will be a black day, dear,” she said. “But it’s better than I expected. I didn’t think you would be able to stop as long as that. So now we must be stirring ourselves. We must go up to London some day very soon and find a furnished flat, just temporary, till we get our own.”

“Oh, we needn’t bother about that,” said he. “I can get a bedroom at my club for the present till we find a permanent flat which suits us.”

In some dim recess of her mind Elizabeth felt the blankness and suspense which accompanies the breaking of bad news. He was proposing to leave her here while he went up for the work of the week.

“You mean that you’ll go up on Monday and stay at your club till Friday?” she asked.

“Yes; just for a week or two till we find something that suits us,” he said. “It would be absurd to take a furnished flat for a few weeks and then move on again.”

“Yes, I see that,” she said. “But it will be wretched for you with just a bedroom at your club. Let’s make that period as short as possible, and go up to London to-morrow or the next day and find something as quickly as we can.”

He laughed.

“Oh, you impetuous person!” he said. “We shall have to look round; we shall have to see lots of flats if we’re to make a good choice. There’s no hurry.”

She was suppressing now all that she was afraid of feeling.

“I’m not in a hurry,” she said. “But it’s only sensible that we should begin without delay to look out for a place that suits us.”

He paused before he answered. She could see that he was reluctant to adopt her suggestion and begin hunting at once. And not by a word or a look had he conveyed the notion that he would hate being away from her all the week for ever so short a tale of weeks.

“Yes; we’ll begin flat-hunting at once if you wish,” he said. “But I think it would be rather a waste of time to do it from here. It would be tiresome to go up for a few hours, find nothing, and have to go up again.”

Elizabeth knew that this was reasonable. But she was not in want of reasonable things.

“You could come up for a few days as soon as I begin work,” he went on, “and we could hunt till we found something, and then start in with the furnishing.”

She turned over the leaves of the calendar on her desk as he spoke. Opposite the tenth of January was her scribbled note: “Margaret goes.” She recognized that this was the association with the date which she had tried to remember.

She paused. Looked at one way (which, no doubt, was the sensible one), this constituted an argument in favour of the flat-hunting being postponed, for they would not then absent themselves while Margaret was still with them. But it was impossible not to couple Walter’s choice of this date for the beginning of his work with the fact that it coincided with Margaret’s departure.

“I see the tenth is the day that Margaret goes,” she said.

“Is it?” he said.

He got up as he spoke, and turned to light a cigarette, and flicked the match into the fireplace.

“I suppose, as a matter of fact, that I knew that,” he added.

Elizabeth refused to let her mind draw conclusions.

“Well, that makes the tenth a very sensible day for your beginning your work,” she said genially. “And we’ll hunt for a flat after she’s gone, and not leave her alone for one of the last days of her stay. What a nice guest she has been! That’s settled then. Now, what are you going to do to-day?”

It was their last day alone together; he must be as aware of that as she. Surely he would propose that they should do something together, would insist on it.

“Anything you like, Lizzie,” he said. “Margaret won’t be back till the evening. Ripping day, too.”

In his perfect willingness—willingness was the exact word for his attitude—to fall in with any plan of hers, she missed precisely all she had yearningly hoped to find in his answer. He would do what she liked, that was all.

She looked out of the window on to the pale sunshine of January that flooded the lawn. So mellow was it that there were some foolish little black

gnats dancing in it, summer-like. A wave of hopeless disappointment curled over her. She waited till it had passed, and turned briskly to him.

“Yes, you mustn’t waste it,” she said. “My plan is that you go and play golf all day. Start at once; it gets dark soon, but you’ll get two rounds if you don’t dawdle. I? Oh, I’ve got dismal arrears of bills and letters.”

He went off whistling, without another thought except that there was a pleasant day in front of him, and presently she heard the tinkle of his bicycle-bell as he turned into the main road. She got out the dismal arrears—there was not any really formidable packet of them—and as she set to work on what required only a superficial attention, there formed, like a condensing mist in her brain, her suppressed comments on their talk. Walter had brought her his plans cut and dried; they were quite settled and definite before he consulted her about them. She had no doubt whatever that he had put off the resumption of his work deliberately till the date on which Margaret was to leave them. Probably this few days’ postponement was a matter of no importance, but she felt sure that if Margaret had not been here he would have gone more punctually at the close of the Christmas holidays, as originally settled. It was delightful to have him for a week more yet, but the cause of the postponement was clear; he enjoyed these days when Margaret was here, and would not give them up. But as soon as she went, he was going too, and would stay at his club till they found a flat. That was very sensible, but his consequent absence from home and her for the greater part of every week had seemed to present no disadvantage in the plan. It was incidental; he had not even alluded to it, or said it was a “bore, an awful bore.” He did not feel it would be a bore. . . .

She finished with the last of the dismal arrears. They had not been so laborious a task; a half-hour had disposed of them. But in the quiet office, so to speak, of her soul there was a greater accumulation, and more came dropping in. She wondered what they all amounted to; she must glance through them. . . .

For most women, sooner or later, a certain hour was bound to strike. Those only escaped it who had never known with any intensity what a man could mean to them, and those to whom a succession of different men signified about the same. Elizabeth could form no conception as to what either of those types felt like. She could no more imagine what she herself would be now if she had not found her own fulfilment in him, than she could imagine any other man filling Walter’s place with regard to her. At present

that hour had not struck for her, but she had heard the warning whir which showed the hour was near. He no longer needed her with the thirst with which she needed him. . . . Soon, because she was old and he still young, and because his mind and senses were active and alive, he would need somebody else. That would be the striking of the hour.

It hardly seemed to matter what a woman *did* when that happened. She might do as Dickie had done and get rid of her partner and regain her freedom, but what, if she was like herself and not like Dickie at all, and did not want freedom? Or she might, with far better sense, accept a situation which was common enough, and make the best of what remained, beat passion, still hot, into the mould of indulgent friendship, and become a sort of honoured and esteemed housekeeper, who sat at the head of the table, handsome and pleasant and indifferent. But if you looked at her position from another point of view, she was nothing else than a discarded mistress, who by some legal freak was the mother of her late but living husband's legitimate children. The years would go ticking on, and habit, no doubt, would smooth off the rough edges, and in process of time she would settle down into the mild apathy of age. In some respects she was herself not so badly off as other women, who, when their hour struck, were childless. There was Tony, to whom both his father and herself were devoted. But when she thought of Tony she perceived what, in the main, Tony meant to her. He meant himself, of course, his dear precious self, but how intensely he meant Walter. . . .

And then, with a flash of withering contempt at herself, she swept back all these imagined arrears into the cupboard in the office of her soul, out of which she should never have taken them. She did not truly believe in them, and even if she had done, it would have been her business to believe in them no more. She refused to contemplate them, or visualize the adjustment of herself to their realization. But, though she might slam the door and turn the key on them, they were still in her mind, lying in the dark.

Walter's talk with Elizabeth that morning had left him with the impression that she had something stewing in her mind on which she kept the lid tightly shut; but when he came back from his golf at dusk that afternoon all trace of that seemed to have vanished. He did not therefore allude to his plans again, for she had signified her approval of them, and if there was anything in her mind concerning them, which she chose to leave unspoken, it was not his business to urge her to give voice to it. Perhaps he would have stayed longer in the drawing-room after tea, but she went to the

piano, and he back to his own room, where he wrote to the secretary of his club, engaging a room on the tenth of the month, and to the senior partner of his firm, saying that he would be back at work the next day after that.

He was glad that he was to be occupied again; these idle months, especially the last of them, had been pleasant enough, but there had been an aimlessness about them; he had tired of their comfortable monotony. Neither he nor Elizabeth, until his illness had caused them to rusticate, had been country-dwellers, and it would be a relief to be back in the bustle and stir of town again. She had, it is true, got attached to the place in a way that he had not, and certainly Tony, who had been rather a delicate child, had amazingly thrived here. Probably Elizabeth would be down here more than he in the future; she loved pottering in her garden, she liked waking in the morning to country air.

The noise of the motor which, no doubt, brought Margaret back, crackled on the gravel outside the windows, and he wondered if she would look in. It was odd that just when Margaret was with them, her mother should be staying with Lady Ambleside; odd, too, that when, except for that brief and accidental meeting at the station, he had not set eyes on Evie for years, nor, indeed, had given her half-a-dozen direct thoughts, he should now be wondering with some acuteness what Margaret would have to say about her. He knew that Elizabeth had told the girl the very ancient history that concerned them both, out of which so long ago the sting had been withdrawn. The years of his very happy marriage had done that; Evie had become to his mind like some photograph so faded that it had lost all individuality.

He lay back in his chair, pleasantly fatigued by his day, with that idea of a faded photograph in his mind. Somewhere, in an old album of obsolete records, there was one of Evie. Just within reach of his hand there stood, in the lowest shelf of a bookcase, four or five of those old morocco-backed volumes, and, with only a very indolent intention, he picked one out and began turning its leaves over. But it illustrated an epoch even more antique than the Evie-age, for he opened on pages of photographs of school-friends, some in Eton collars. Probably he had been on intimate terms with all these queer little boys, for otherwise he would not have acquired their photographs; but it puzzled him now to remember who they were. He replaced that volume and took out another. The intention of finding Evie's photograph had become less vague.

Margaret had not looked in on him; she had gone straight to the drawing-room, where she found Elizabeth, and poured out her joy at having seen her

mother again.

“She was quite a darling,” she said; “just the same as ever; and I think she was as glad to see me as I to see her. Oh, and all love to you and Walter; she thinks it’s delightful of you to have given me an ark. So it is; I told her what dears you both were.”

“Did she speak of your father?” asked Elizabeth.

“Not a word; nor did I. Why introduce a disagreeable subject when all that mattered was our delight in being together again? And Mr. Hylton was there, too—you know Mr. Hylton—and they’re to be married next month. I always liked him; of course, I saw him often at home. When they’re married, he’s going to be promoted to be my uncle.”

Something in this speech grated like a file across Elizabeth’s teeth. Her sympathy was really with her sister-in-law rather than with her brother; but still. . . .

“Oh, my dear!” she said.

The girl’s unthinking spontaneity dried up. She had forgotten for the moment that she was talking to Aunt Elizabeth.

“I’m sorry,” she said; “but there it is. I love my mother, and I long for her to be happy, and whoever makes her happy has my blessing. Oh, by the way, I’ve brought a note for you from Lady Ambleside. I quite forgot about it.”

Elizabeth stared in amazement.

“A note from Lady Ambleside? For me?” she asked.

“Yes; I’ll fetch it. It’s about the ball she’s giving next week.”

The note was formal but friendly. Evie Ambleside (hers very truly) hoped that she and Walter, whom she had not seen for so long, would bring her niece over to dine and dance on Tuesday next. She added—was that marvellous tact or mere impertinence?—that Helen Pershing would not be there, for she was leaving them the day before.

Elizabeth read it through; once with mere astonishment, the second time with more thought.

“Yes; it’s to bid us all to her ball,” she said. “Tuesday: that’s your last night here. You’d like to go? My dear, of course you would. A ball’s a ball, isn’t it. But you know——”

The girl nodded.

“Of course I know,” she said. “You and Walter may not have the slightest intention of going. I should quite understand.”

Elizabeth did not find fault with the interruption which made it impossible to discuss this. Walter came in.

“Hallo, Margaret!” he said. “I heard your arrival. Nice day?”

Elizabeth held out to him the note she had just received.

“Lady Ambleside wants us all to go to her dance next Tuesday,” she said.

“The deuce she does! Well, I call that very friendly. Shows nerve, too; but she always had that.”

But it was evident that he did not at once reject the idea. Elizabeth laughed.

“Shall I write and tell her so, and leave it at that?” she asked.

He looked from one to the other.

“Well, let’s find out whether we want to go first,” he said. “If we don’t want to go, you might say something of the kind. What does Margaret want?”

“She wants to go,” said Elizabeth.

“Well, then, why shouldn’t she? And you, Lizzie?”

Elizabeth suddenly saw a vision of herself appearing there with Walter, and seeing the woman she had never seen, yet whose ambition and heartlessness had indirectly procured for herself these ten years of exceeding happiness. She was handsome still, she knew she could present a striking and even magnificent figure, and the idea appealed to some instinct in her, wholly feminine. Again, if she decided not to go, it was probable that Walter and Margaret would go without her, and she could not picture herself seeing them go off without her, or asking next day how they had fared. They would neither of them be able to tell her what she wanted to know, nor would she be able to ask it.

“I think I’ll go,” she said. “And you, Walter?”

“If you’re both going, I don’t see why I should,” he said. “Why should I? I hate going out when I’m in the country.”

Instantly Elizabeth saw that her vision would be incomplete without his presence. It was not herself alone whom she wanted Evie Ambleside to see, but herself with Walter, a prosperous and happy and magnificent couple.

Margaret made herself her advocate.

“Oh, Walter, you must come,” she said. “It’s our last evening; we must all be together. I shouldn’t enjoy it a bit if you didn’t come.”

He turned on her solemnly.

“Margaret, are you one of those unselfish souls,” he asked, “whose happiness is wrapped up in others, or of the other species who are always ready to sacrifice others to their own happiness?”

“I don’t know. You may have it which way you like as long as you’ll come.”

“Oh, we’ll all go, then,” he said.

“He only wanted to be pressed,” said Elizabeth.

“That’s more than you did, darling,” he said; and that seemed a fair retort.

Walter strolled back to his room while Elizabeth wrote her note of acceptance. He had found the photograph he had been looking for, considerably faded, oddly old-fashioned in costume, but wonderfully like a glimpse he had had of her in the autumn. He looked at it again, and then, tearing it in half, threw the pieces into the glowing core of the fire. What use was it, anyhow, to keep old photographs, especially if they recalled obsolete emotions?

He heard Margaret’s step in the hall, and called to her. He would like a little chat with her about her day.

“And what sort of a time has the unselfish Margaret had?” he asked, when she had entered.

“Quite a selfish one, thanks,” she said; “but very pleasant. Walter, do you really want to go to this dance?”

“Certainly, my dear, or else I shouldn’t. And what form did your selfishness take?”

“Oh, I just enjoyed myself. It was lovely to have a great talk with my mother again. But I feel I somehow grated on Aunt Elizabeth when I told

her about it. I can't help it; I don't really care two straws what my mother has done. I just want her to be happy. And father is such a pig."

"I can't bear your father," remarked Walter. "Go on."

"About my day? Well, after we had talked a long time Mr. Hylton came in. I've always liked him, so he's going to be 'Uncle.' Then it was lunch-time."

"Many people?" asked Walter, still shunning the direct question.

"Yes; I don't know who they all were, but they were all Christian names. I sat next Lord Ambleside, and found I believed in gnomes. He's frightfully alive though, and has bitter, little eyes. Nobody attended to him."

"You ought to have."

"I tried to, but was frightened of him. Oh, there was one woman, who sat on his other side, and looked like a barmaid, who attended to him very much."

"Ho! Go on."

"Well, Lady Ambleside sat the far end of the table; isn't she beautiful? I could hardly take my eyes off her. She told some story, something about what her maid had said, which made everybody laugh. When they had finished, Lord Ambleside said very distinctly: 'All a pack of lies; you made that up, Evie.'"

"Sounds rather rude. What did she do?"

"Well, for one second she looked perfectly hideous, which was clever of her. Then she became absolutely lovely again, and laughed and said: 'Yes, dear; I made it up to amuse you. But it only seems to annoy you,' and went on as if nothing had happened."

Out of some white heap of ashes in Walter's mind, which he had long thought was quite cold, there leaped a momentary flame, not of love, nor of regret, but of exasperated resentment.

"That was very like her," he observed.

"How?"

"She always went on as if nothing had happened," he said. "Her asking Elizabeth and me to her dance is a good instance of it."

The girl paused.

“Walter, I don’t care two farthings whether I go to her dance or not,” she said. “Why should you come, or Aunt Elizabeth? Let’s all stop at home.”

“But I want to go,” he said. “And so does she. We’re not being unselfish. Go on about Evie.”

He had said it at last.

“She made herself charming to me,” said Margaret. “And she wanted me to stop the night, and said she would send the motor back to fetch my things. But I didn’t want to do that. I don’t know what she talked about; she was just nice. And then she went off with three men to play tennis.”

“What happened to their wives?” asked Walter viciously.

Margaret laughed.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Perhaps they hadn’t got any.”

There was certain common ground in the idea which made both Elizabeth and Walter want to go to this ball. He, as much as she, wanted to show himself to Evie as partner in a very happy marriage and husband to this splendid creature. Evie could not fail to reflect that her action, though not exactly responsible for it, had made it possible, and he liked the notion of showing her how excellently she had contrived for him. So far Elizabeth and he pulled together; but there was a trace-horse of his own, for he wanted to see Evie with the gnome, as Margaret had called him, and observe how she had contrived for herself. Finally, he wanted to see her with Elizabeth, the woman to whom he was truly devoted, and to congratulate himself on what he had escaped. He could not believe that Evie and he could have been so happy as he and Elizabeth had been: Elizabeth all loving-kindness and generosity; Evie, as she had so patently shown herself, heartless and greedy and unscrupulous. But what brilliance of charm she used to have—would he wonder not only what he had escaped, but what he had missed?

They were a little late in arriving; the party for dinner was already fully assembled in the long gallery-room. From the door Elizabeth was sure that she recognized Lord Ambleside, for Margaret’s ticket of “the gnome” proclaimed him. But not until she had well advanced into the room did the figure of her hostess detach itself from the group by the fireplace. She came forward, gleaming and gorgeous, with both hands stretched out in welcome.

“Ah, this is too delightful of you, Mrs. Langdon,” she said. “It is really kind to come ten miles on a winter’s evening. Charmed to see you! And your husband and your niece. How nice that is! Ambleside, Mr. and Mrs. Langdon.”

She turned to Elizabeth again.

“I have so much wanted to meet you,” she said, “and so at last the wonderful expedient of asking you to come occurred to me. Walter’s long illness; a terrible time for you. But, thanks to your nursing, who would have thought he had ever had a day’s illness in his life?”

Elizabeth was carrying herself splendidly; she was as tall as most of the men there, and claimed every inch of her height. This exquisite dazzling woman, who looked like a girl still, though she must be Walter’s age within a year or two, was slim and of only moderate stature. She had beautiful colouring; but Elizabeth saw (and was rather pleased to see) a touch of rouge on her cheeks, and of scarlet on her lips. Dazzling she was, and perfect her features, and of boyish grace was her slim body. The eyes of men would always follow her; but there were more types than one of women at whom men looked long and looked often, and at this first moment of encounter Elizabeth had the inward sense of holding her own in the sight of the group to whom their entrance had given a moment’s silence. There were great Junos among the immortal goddesses as well as Aphrodites, of large splendours and noble presences, full-lipped and deep-bosomed, through whose cheeks the blood beat close to the clear, wholesome skin. She knew she looked splendid to-night, her gown admirably became her, and Margaret had given a little gasp of wonder as she came downstairs before they started. “Why, you’re superb, Aunt Elizabeth!” she had cried, and utter candour rang through her voice.

So there Elizabeth stood, and, without looking at anybody but her hostess, knew that she was receiving the homage which every handsome woman loves to evoke, and which she knows is rendered or withheld without an eyelid’s lifted scrutiny. The mention of Walter by his Christian name added a shade to her dignity, and, despite herself, to her friendliness.

“Yes; Walter’s wonderfully well again,” she said. “And your invitation was a treat to us, Lady Ambleside; an excitement. He and I have been terrible stay-at-homes all the autumn.”

Elizabeth enjoyed saying that; so happy were they at home that—Lady Ambleside could certainly complete the picture for herself. Whether she did so or not was uncertain, for she instantly became hostess again.

“Now, who is taking you in to dinner?” she said. “Ah, yes; I know. Let me introduce him, may I? Jim, where is Jim? There you are; this is Mrs. Langdon. Now for Walter and your niece. Tell Mrs. Langdon who you are, Jim.”

Jim gave the information, and Evie took Walter in hand. Elizabeth saw her lay her fingers on his arm.

“Walter, I’ve provided you with the prettiest girl in the room,” Elizabeth heard her say. “Point her out to me, and we’ll see what your taste is worth. Yes; quite right. How quick of you! And you sit on one of my sides. Left or right is it? I never can remember which is which.”

Elizabeth found herself again, for the first time since the beginning of Walter’s illness, in the pleasant world which talks and laughs and amuses itself with such excellent success. It did not seem to her at all hollow or superficial; it reeked of the sincerity of the moment. There were a few grave, solid people here of her own age or older; but for the most part youth had its undisputed way, and took its neighbours for granted and laughed a great deal, and was silent if so disposed, and did not listen quite so much as it talked. It was from Evie’s end of the table that the mirth was loudest and the laughter most frequent. She was no adherent, it appeared, of the conversational duet, so common in England, for she talked right and left, with a jest here and a flippancy there, thawing such ice as there was by her own beam, and Elizabeth saw how Walter, inclined evidently at first to be quite agreeable, but slightly aloof, melted under this spontaneous warmth. It was not that Evie seemed to set herself to accomplish this uncongealment, for she did not talk much to him directly, but only created a gay atmosphere. The prettiest girl in the room, indeed, had the greatest share of his attention, and the man on her other side joined in, and Evie leaned across the two of them with a word for him, and then wheeled again; obviously she enjoyed it immensely, which is the supreme gift of a hostess. And the food was good, and the wine was good, and Jim had a taste for gardens, and her other neighbour, one of the more solid sort, had been a traveller in the Caucasus, and over them all poured the froth and the bubble of youth.

She felt the intoxication of it, not knowing that it intoxicated her. It seemed to her that not only Walter (about him there was no doubt) but she herself expanded in this atmosphere. Some authentic spring of youth in her broke the surface and came pouring out; she felt young, instead of longing to be young. Once, during dinner, she saw that Evie, looking at her, said something to Walter for himself alone, and not for the general ear, and knew in her bones that it was of her that Evie spoke. Endorsement of that

impression came at once, for he smiled at her across and along the table as he replied. "That was about me," she thought to herself, "and Walter's pleased;" and she hugged to herself the notion that she would not ask him what Evie had said, but that he would tell her without that.

Oh, how right they had been to come, and how right they both were in that they agreed on his going back to London and on their re-entry from their sequestered nest of the autumn, into the stir of a more populous environment! It was not in solitude that he and she would recapture the exhilaration of living. They would bathe themselves in the stimulus of the external world, and whet their appetites there for their return to the peerless possession of each other. She had never felt more securely knit to him than in that glance over the shining silver-decked table before his eyes wheeled again and he replied to whatever it was that Evie had said.

Dinner came to an end, and with the separation of the sexes Elizabeth experienced a certain reaction. She found herself in a group of girls, all pleasant to her, but all with some sort of secret code current among them which made her feel as if she was in a foreign country. They smiled and talked to her, they clearly admired her, but with the admiration of polite foreigners who somehow spoke her language with careful fluency, but did not talk in it. But they were bilingual; they had the advantage of her there, and talked—really talked—another language, unknown to her, when they spoke to each other. She recognized that it was the language in which Margaret talked to Walter. Even Margaret translated when she spoke to Aunt Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had had no intention of dancing; she had not knowledge of the saunterings and slidings and shufflings that in her antiquated view constituted modern corybantics; but in view of this ball of Evie's being a country dance, concession was made to the antique mode, and there were a few old-fashioned waltzes and polkas which set the rhythm twirling in her blood, and when Walter sidled round the crowded room to where she sat she required no persuasion. She was still active and supple in limb, and they slid off together on to the shining floor.

"It's a hazardous experiment for you," she said, "for I may have forgotten all about it, and they'll laugh to see an old crone like me skipping about. I shall do you discredit, Walter. But take me once round."

The music and the movement wove their spell. She had always danced well, and memory needed no spur beyond her inclination. She had never imagined herself dancing again, but now it seemed perfectly natural. There

was no apprehension that she was doing what an “old crone” would be wiser not to attempt. She needed neither pull nor propulsion from him; he but steered the course for them, and unbidden and uninvoked by her the sunshine and breeze of youth played round her again. Those gloomy comments of hers on Walter’s plans and movements had all been gratuitous self-torture, and he, wiser than she, had seen that her nature no less than his needed more than they could give each other. The hour of Darby and Joan was not yet shedding its mild and doddering sunset upon them.

“But you dance divinely, Lizzie,” said Walter. It was a surprise to him. “Why haven’t we always danced after dinner to the gramophone? We will to-morrow.”

“At your club?” she asked. “Am I to come up with you?”

“What a bore! I quite forgot. Not tired, are you? Don’t let us stop till the band stops.”

Elizabeth, as they circled, had been conscious more than once that Evie was aware of their waltzing together as they passed the door, where she was still posted with her husband, welcoming the late-comers among her guests. Next time they came round she had moved away from the door, and Lord Ambleside had also gone: the duties of a hostess were over. A sudden thought occurred to Elizabeth, a glad gesture of the self-confidence that was warm in her.

“Look, Walter,” she said, “there’s Lady Ambleside doing nothing. Drop me here and ask her for a turn. I should really like to rest.”

“Sure?” he said.

“Yes; please do.”

The long drive home was a silent affair. For two or three minutes they had all talked vigorously, and then Margaret had dropped out, and then Walter, and Elizabeth was sure they were dozing. She would have liked to follow their example, for the surface of her was very sleepy; but it was as if there was some festive illumination bright in her brain, which kept her widely awake. She was waltzing again with Walter; she was seeing him and Evie moving in and out of the shifting crowd; whenever they came near her, one or other had a little smile for her. Then he was dancing with Margaret, and once more, when she herself had refused, with Evie.

Bright and endless as the pattern of a kaleidoscope were the pictures, all gay and shadowless and signifying nothing. And here already was the end of their drive.

“Wake up, you sleepers,” she said, herself hearing some exultant ring in her voice. “Wake up, we’re at home.”

“Wake up, indeed!” said Walter. “I’ve been awake the whole time. I like that from you, Lizzie, when you’ve been asleep yourself ever since we left Garth.”

“Oh, what a liar! Not a wink!” she said. “But there seems to be no doubt about Margaret. Margaret!”

The girl raised herself with a little tired exclamation. “I’ve not——” she began. “Well, perhaps I have. In fact, I think I am still.”

The two women went straight upstairs, Margaret heavy with sleep, Elizabeth brisk and bright-eyed, while Walter turned into his room for a drink and a final cigarette, and it was not till Elizabeth was in bed that she heard the door of his dressing-room open and shut. He whistled as he undressed, and presently he tapped at her door and entered, barefooted, and ready for bed.

“Just to say good night,” he said. “Enjoyed yourself, Lizzie? Not too tired?”

“Enjoyed myself enormously,” she answered. “And not one atom tired. I should like to have it all over again.”

He sat down on the edge of her bed.

“You’re a perfect wonder,” he said. “There’s Margaret fathoms deep. You are a wonder, you know, and it isn’t only I who think so.”

He was going to tell her then, exactly as she had hoped.

“Who else?” she asked.

“Evie. She admired you tremendously. I said I quite agreed with her.”

Elizabeth knew that the colour sprang to her face.

“My dear, what pretty speeches for three in the morning!” she said.

“Are they? Well, why not?”

His eye met hers, and reaching out his hand he switched off the electric light.

CHAPTER VII

The finding of a flat had taken longer than either Elizabeth or Walter had anticipated, the decoration of it longer yet, and it was not till the middle of March that it was ready for habitation. Till then he had lived at his club throughout the week, returning to Maychester on Friday evening for Saturday and Sunday. But the Monday morning train, which must be caught if he was to get back to his office in proper time, started at so unseemly an hour that, after a week or two, he had always left on Sunday evening instead. Business was booming after the long stagnation which had succeeded the war. There was always a big accumulation of week-end orders to be executed, and ten o'clock on Monday morning was the latest moment at which he should be in his place. It was a bore; but the bore had not merely a silver lining, but one of gold. During the week, while the furnishing and decoration were in progress, Elizabeth often spent a couple of nights in town hurrying things on; Walter and she would dine together and go to a play, and he took her back to her hotel.

The weeks had been very pleasant to Elizabeth in spite of Walter's absences. He was well, he was always delighted to get home again for his two nights in the country, and though he maintained that stock-broking was a melancholy profession, it was certainly a point in its favour that he was making a good deal of money at it. The flat, in consequence, of which the rent and upkeep were his contribution to the expenses of domestic life, was of a size and situation which seemed to Elizabeth unnecessarily sumptuous. It was in a big block at the north end of Park Lane, with a Tube station immediately opposite. Walter's optimistic arithmetic was ready to prove, when Elizabeth counselled not quite so expensive a lodging, that this convenience would save an untold sum every year, sufficient to pay the rent of the flat over and over again. For, otherwise, he would have had to take a taxi morning and evening for his journeys to the City; there would have been an endless effusion of half-crowns instead of a dribbling of tuppences. And then there was the Park for Tony just across the road: the benefit of that could not be estimated in mere terms of pounds and shillings at all; and finally, "Was the flat his show, or was it not?" He rather fancied it was, and if he said he could afford it, he might be supposed to know. A rising financier must be permitted to have an acquaintance with his own finances. Besides, he had had very little expense with regard to the furnishing, for Elizabeth had a warehouse full of things from her mother's house, which

had never been sold, but kept in storage all these years, and now at last she was justified in having kept them. Walter, in fact, had been like a child with a new toy about the flat. The week-ends in the country had been a bubble of plans; she could hardly get him to go out and play his beloved golf. The flat was all he cared about, and he was going to make it the most amiable of dwellings.

They had been over to Garth on one of these Sundays of sandwiched existence, and on another Garth had come over to them, Lord Ambleside and his wife lunching with them on their way up to town, where they were now going to settle till Easter. He had been amazingly gnome-like, had sat in a skull-cap throughout lunch, and with the encouraging exclamation: "A damned draughty house, this!" had sent for his coat. So perfectly natural was his behaviour, so untrammelled by any of the restraints usually imposed by politeness, that Elizabeth found herself rather liking him. She didn't know that she would want much of him; what effect would it have on a woman, she wondered, to live always with a man like that? None, to all appearance, for there sat the wonderful creature who had made the experiment, young still, oh, so young, with her gem-like brilliance quite undimmed and untarnished.

"Yes, my dear; put on your coat by all means," she said, when he made this tactful observation. "May they fetch my husband's coat? So kind. As I was saying, Walter, there was I in this remote field, with a pugnacious-looking bull. But then, luckily, he saw a pensive cow whom he liked, and preferring love to war, went a-courting."

"Sensible!" said Walter.

"From my point of view," said she. "But if I had been the bull, I think I should have gored me first, and then gone to my cow with the glamour of victory upon me. If he'd been a little more of a man, he would have done that."

"Oh, I don't agree," said Walter. "If he had been a little more of a woman he might have."

"My dear, what do you mean?" she asked.

Walter gave that little sideways jerk of the head that was common with him. His hair grew like a boy's still, with a plume that drooped over his forehead.

"Why of course, that's the real difference between men and women," he said. "Women always say 'Business first, pleasure afterwards.' Whereas

men, like your bull, say ‘Pleasure first, and then possibly we’ll attend to business.’ ”

These were the lightest of conversational squibs; but a spark from them seemed to have caught Lord Ambleside, producing a venomous little explosion. He gave a little cackle of a laugh.

“Very true,” he said. “Trust a woman for fixing herself advantageously first, and then amusing herself. There wouldn’t be any divorce courts if she did it the other way about.”

Walter understood at that moment what Margaret meant when she said that for a moment Evie had looked hideous. It was a feat, and she accomplished it now.

“For devoted couples like us, my dear,” she said, “there aren’t any as it is. Eat your pudding.”

The thing passed as quickly as a flash of far-off lightning; before the eye could look at it, it had gone. But Elizabeth, as she blinked, felt that she had seen something by that momentary illumination.

Their visitors had left soon after lunch; Walter declined the offer of being motored up to London, saying that he wanted his afternoon in the country, but when they had gone, no allusion to that little conjugal encounter was made either by Elizabeth or him. It had been like a glimpse through a door ajar that should have been closed, and whatever was the significance of it, neither of them wished to discuss the relations of Lord Ambleside and his wife. It was not in itself dangerous ground, but ground that had once been dangerous adjoined it. There was no use in trespassing on such neighbourhoods. The matter was trivial enough, but in it was the germ of reticences between the two about Evie.

Before going up to London that evening Walter told her that he thought he would not come down here for the next week-end; instead, he would camp in the flat that was now so nearly ready for their occupation. There was nothing which so quickly pulled a new house together and made it habitable as squatting in it. You couldn’t tell where you wanted a table until you had made yourself comfortable with regard to fire and light, nor where you wanted your washstand until you had used the room for dressing in. If he came down here next week-end all would be chaos and disorder still when she arrived; if he stopped up and picnicked there, she would find that everything had fallen into place.

Her last days, therefore, in the country were spent without him; they were busy days, for they would not be down here again till the late Easter, and there were sortings and packings and clearings-up to be done. These made a sadness for her; she had got very fond of the place; but from now onwards it would be more of a holiday-house than a home, for the bulk of the year would be spent where Walter's work was. Owing to that she had not bought it, as she had once thought of doing before she realized that it was impossible that Walter should live idly here, but had taken a fresh lease of it, so that they would still come down here for week-ends and holidays. And it had been a kindly place to them; it had wrought Walter's recovery, and now its work was done. There were packing-cases in the hall for certain things they would want in London, the litter of torn-up papers was in the grate, objects of daily use that made the house habitable were put away, the furniture in Walter's room was already covered with dust-sheets, and, as she moved about, the spirit of the house seemed to be following her from room to room with the mute reproaches of a dog that knows its family is flitting. In a couple of days more blinds would be down, shutters closed and doors locked, and a caretaker in possession. A very happy chapter was finished, and the page must be turned. All promised well for the next chapter, but she did not want a new chapter.

"I'm growing like an old cat lying by the fire," she thought to herself with some impatience. "I want to doze, and find my saucer of milk in its old place, and drink it and doze again, with Walter near, as sleepy as myself."

And what did this desire for purring and dozing signify but the acceptance and acknowledgment of age, which was precisely what she refused to accept and acknowledge for herself, and intensely more for him? She had made trial of the sheltered and withdrawn life in the autumn, crazily hoping to recapture some sort of renewed honeymoon with him, and she had learned, bitterly then, but with full agreement now, what a childish mistake that had been. The bitterness was gone, because she had learned wisdom from that failure, and she could see now that she had clutched at the impossible. Of course, such a life had not suited him: the tranquil solitude bored his recovered energy, and it would have argued a great want of vitality in him if he had been content with it. It was not time for him to be happy with games and idle dozings, and she was determined to prove that the time had not come for her either. Margaret had brought the stimulus of youth into the backwater, and how Walter had responded to it!

Then had come the night of the ball, and how they both had been rejuvenated by that; and now was coming in due sequence their re-entry into

the bustling life of London again with its enlarged circles of friends and interests. They would be far less dependent on each other than they had been for years past; he would have his work, his club, his own friends, of all which he had been starved down here. She had thought that love would burn the brighter from this withholding of the very oil of life, and even now, though she saw her mistake, she was permitting herself to sentimentalize over sheeted furniture and cold hearths. It was all sentimentality, a barren and enervating emotion.

Tony's excitement next day at the unparalleled adventure of going to live in London, where Zoological Gardens and underground tubes and picture palaces were as common as chestnuts, was sufficient to infect her also, and a triumphal entry into the new home was made in a magnificent London fog, which added much to the general magic. Walter's squatting had produced an admirable result; the rooms already seemed surprisingly inhabited, and the drawing-room in particular looked as though she herself had long inhabited it, so justly were screens and small tables and flowers and knick-knacks disposed. He really had an amazingly correct conception as to how a woman arranges her nest. He was not yet back from the City, but his coats and golf-clubs in the passage gave a sort of personal welcome.

Tony trotted off to explore this bright, enchanted cavern set in the city of tawny night, and to unpack his box of very particular treasures. The flat was high up on the fifth floor of the building, and the traffic in the street below, slowed down and muffled by the fog, scarcely audible, so that the ringing of the telephone-bell just outside the room where Elizabeth sat tingled sharply in the stillness. She went to it, anticipating a word of welcome from Walter, who knew the hour of their arrival. Perhaps he had some plan for the evening of an entertaining kind, but she rather hoped not; it would be pleasant to spend the first evening at home alone with him. But it was not Walter's voice that spoke.

"Is that Mr. Langdon's flat?" it asked. "Is Mr. Langdon in?"

It was a woman's voice, clearly; Elizabeth felt that she knew it, but could not identify it.

"No; Mr. Langdon's out," she said.

"Oh! Then kindly give him a message from Lady Ambleside. She has a box for the new play to-night, and hopes he will dine with her quietly and go to it. Would he ring up as soon as he gets back?"

Elizabeth had one moment's reflection. Would it be better to say who she was? Yet why? There was no reason for so doing.

"Yes; I'll give him the message," she said, and waited, expecting to hear the click of the replaced receiver. But none came, and the voice spoke again.

"Whom am I speaking to?" it asked.

Elizabeth laughed.

"You're speaking to Walter's wife, Lady Ambleside," she said. "I've just this moment arrived from the country."

"Ah, how stupid of me! Walter told me you were coming up to-day, but it went clean out of my head, or, of course, I should have asked you too. I thought I was taking pity on Walter's solitariness. Now do come too. Forgive me for my stupidity, and bring Walter to dine, and we'll go to the play. We shall be"—she broke off for a moment—"we shall be a jolly party of four."

Elizabeth hesitated for only a moment. It would be a very poor beginning to her admirable schemes for expansion and sociability, if she declined for herself, on some trumpery excuse of fatigue, or, on his return, if she attempted for the sake of a domestic evening to persuade him to stop at home. That was the kind of conduct she had vowed to have done with.

"It's most kind of you," she said. "I shall be delighted to come. And I feel sure Walter will. I'll tell him as soon as he comes in."

"That's charming of you. But if he's in the City, I'll ring him up now and tell him our plans. Half-past seven? Very sharply half-past seven."

"And where?" asked Elizabeth.

"At my house, forty-six Park Lane. Exactly one minute's walk from you, or a quarter of an hour in a taxi with this fog."

Elizabeth went to the kitchen, and calmed a slightly distracted cook by telling her that she would have all the evening to get her domain in order, for there would be no dinner to provide; and then continued her explorations to her bedroom, with injunctions to her maid that she would want something smartish this evening. She stopped to choose it herself, and presently she heard the front-door open and Walter's voice calling her.

"All safe and prosperous?" he asked. "Oh, Lizzie, haven't we got a beautiful shining house? And about to-night: Evie rang me up. You'll enjoy

going out? Naturally, I wouldn't have accepted without consulting you; but she told me she had already done so."

"Delighted, my dear," said she. "You know I love the play."

"That's good. And how does everything strike you? Nobody ever pulled so much furniture about."

"It's all charming," said she. "And you've got a *flair* I never suspected you of. You've arranged the drawing-room exactly as a woman would have arranged it. How *did* you know?"

He followed her there.

"I mustn't take all the credit for that," he said. "Evie was here, as a matter of fact, yesterday evening. She howled with laughter at my ideas, said you would have a fit if you found it like that, and made me alter a lot."

Elizabeth was conscious of a slight waning in her enthusiastic approval. It was very absurd, but the knowledge that Lady Ambleside was responsible for these admirable dispositions was less pleasing than the thought that Walter had so well interpreted her tastes. But that was rubbish, and she threw it out.

"I make her my compliments, then," she said. "She's got wonderful taste, which means she's got mine. And your squatting hasn't been too uncomfortable?"

"Not a bit. I tugged at wardrobes all day on Saturday and yesterday, and dined, and tugged again before going to bed. Slept like a top in consequence."

It was on the tip of Elizabeth's tongue to ask where he had dined, but she let the query get no farther. If he felt disposed to tell her where he had dined, he would do so.

Jim Cresswell, who had taken Elizabeth in to dinner on the night of the ball at Garth, was the fourth of their party. He arrived a little after them.

"You're a perfect providence, Evie," he said in his rather elaborate manner. "I tried to get a ticket for the play and couldn't, and thought I was sentenced to a solitary evening, for, out of all the teeming millions of London, nobody had asked me to dinner. And then, within an hour or two of the execution of the sentence, you ring me up with this delightful reprieve."

Some slight shade of annoyance crossed Evie's face, and she seemed to try to break in upon his carefully worked-out period. That was no use, however, and she had to wait till he had finished.

"You mustn't thank me," she said. "My fourth threw me over an hour ago, and it was you who were a perfect providence, Jim. At least, not quite perfect, for punctuality is the politeness of providence, and you're rather late."

She wheeled to Elizabeth.

"And it was too delightful of you to come," she said. "Dinner? Let's go in. Fancy arriving at a new flat in a London fog during the afternoon, and coming out again at once like this! I usually go straight to bed when I get to London, with a sore throat. And you're pleased with your flat?"

Walter broke in.

"Especially the drawing-room," he said. "I told her whom she had to thank."

"Ah! Walter's given me away," said she. "I looked in yesterday, and I assure you that you'd have expired if you had seen how he'd arranged it. Proud of it, too! Everything was plastered quite squarely against the wall. So I had to tilt things a little. I hope you don't think it was very impertinent of me."

During the very festive little meal which followed, Elizabeth found herself continuing to fight down an impression which kept assailing her mind; it did not matter, but its presence was like that of a buzzing mosquito, which must not settle on her and bite her. She found herself, in fact, not believing that a fourth guest had thrown over her hostess an hour or two ago, in consequence of whose defection she had acted perfect providence to Jim Cresswell. It would not fit in, for her own inclusion in the party had only occurred an hour or two ago, and that by accident, for Evie, when she rang up, had not remembered that she was in London. It seemed almost certain that Evie's original intention had been to dine and go to the play with Walter, and that the unexpected addition of herself to the party had led to the inclusion of yet another. Evie had imagined, when she telephoned to him, that he was still solitary in his flat; it was friendly of her to relieve him of a possibly lonely evening. Why, then, these mystifications, this myth of the guest who had thrown her over? As if it mattered.

"My poor husband," Evie was saying. "What a bad temper he was in when we lunched with you and Walter on our way up to town. He asked for

his coat, do you remember, because it was such a damned draughty house. He has gone off to the Riviera for a month, till the draughts of England get less searching. He will be at the Casino all day, and lose a great deal of money, and make eyes at every pretty woman he comes across. With my parting words I enjoined him to do that. 'Have a pretty woman to dine with you every night,' I shouted after him, 'and don't tell me anything about it.' Large, billowy women; they have the effects of sunshine on him. Isn't it sad for him that he married a stick of asparagus like me? Dear me, I wish somebody else would talk, and stop my saying such outrageous things. I'm shocking everybody, and yet all the time I'm trying to make a good impression. But I am a good wife, aren't I, Mrs. Langdon? I want my husband to do exactly what he likes and not let me know. *Aimer c'est tout comprendre*; therefore I shall completely understand his silence."

"Don't imitate his silence," said Jim. "Don't be silent for a single moment."

"So that you may give a sigh of relief when the curtain goes up, and whisper in Mrs. Langdon's ear 'At last! Now, perhaps, that infernal clatter will cease.' Do you know we must start in five minutes, or we shall miss the beginning of the play, and I've always a terror of not understanding a single word of what it's about through having missed the beginning. Let's leave the two men, Mrs. Langdon, so that they can talk about us and we about them. Five minutes, Jim; make the most of it; it ought to be enough for a complete mutual scarification."

She followed Elizabeth out into the small sitting-room by the front-door, chattered on for a moment, was silent, and began again more seriously, with a boyish frankness.

"I do like you so much," she said, "and I hope we shall be friends. How odd that just the chance of your niece's staying with you while her mother was staying with me should at last have brought us into contact! How immensely we have affected each other's lives, and that without ever having met!"

She paused a moment; she saw that Elizabeth still held herself a little aloof, and when she went on there was an appealing softness in her voice and her eyes.

"I know that in your mind there must be a big black mark scored up against me for the way in which I treated Walter," she said. "Of course it is so. But what, after all, were the consequences? You must take those into consideration. You and he have been wonderfully happy owing to what I

did. You wouldn't be the blissful couple you are except for me. Won't you try to rub out just a little bit of that black mark?"

Elizabeth knew that she still withheld herself, and blamed herself for so doing. But she loved friendliness, and was always eager to respond to it; she acknowledged also the frankness and humility with which it was offered her. She met it with a smile and an outstretched hand. But even while she smiled there was gravity in reserve; she could not feign lightness over such topics as these.

"Yes, indeed, I owe you much," she said, "for we have had great happiness, Walter and I."

The smile and the hand finished the speech for her. To all of these Evie responded with a further humility that touched the elder woman.

"That's sweet of you," she said. "And how much happier you've made Walter than I ever should. Probably he has told you that already, but I volunteer it. Was it bad taste of me to talk about it at all? I don't think so. It had to be mentioned between us if we are to be friends, Elizabeth."

She slid into the name with absolute naturalness, and without the *banalité* of asking that she should be called "Evie," dismissed the whole grave subject as lightly as she had introduced it.

"And how good of you to come to-night," she said. "It seemed to me a happy omen when you said you would, and I was right. Now we must tear those men away from their port and their dissection of us. Why, we've never mentioned them in our five minutes together. But, after all, we haven't wasted our time."

They arrived quite early enough to find the play easily intelligible. It chiefly concerned a woman who, for no other motive than the sheer desire to grab, detached a friend's irregular admirer and annexed him herself. She did not care about him; merely it hurt her to let two other people be happy if she could possibly prevent it. These pleasant ethics of the monkey-house were deftly unravelled, and just on the fall of the second curtain, when Elizabeth had finally decided that she couldn't be called a woman at all, Evie gave a little crow of delight.

"Oh, how intensely human!" she said. "I suppose it's good for us to be shown what we are really like."

Walter laughed.

“Elizabeth, darling, I hope you recognize yourself,” he said. “The moment that woman came in, I said to myself ‘Here’s Lizzie.’”

“I said ‘Here’s me,’” Evie went on. “Oh, we’ve all got something of the brutal, selfish, inhuman beast in us.”

“‘How intensely human!’ is what you said,” remarked Walter.

“Oh, Walter, allow me to get in a word edgeways! I’m quite consistent. That fundamental inhumanity is intensely human. We’ve all got it; we suppress it and chain it up, and starve it and scrag it, but we never succeed in killing it.”

“My dear, what a low opinion you’ve got of us all,” said Jim in his elaborate voice, “For my part, I totally deny that I’ve got any fundamental inhumanity about me. The better you know me, the kinder and feebler you find me to be; and if you got to the very centre of my nature, you would find a sort of little canary there, who would sit on your finger and eat out of your hand.”

Evie still seemed desirous to explain, or possibly explain away, that *cri du cœur* that had burst from her, and it was Elizabeth, apparently, whom she wished to understand it.

“They’re all against me,” she said, “they’re all proud and pleased with themselves; Jim with his canary at the core of his nature, and Walter, no doubt, with a pound of the best honey. I’m the only humble and candid one among you. There is something in me which is akin to that monstrous caricature of a woman with her rope of tow-like hair and a profile like the head on a postage-stamp. She hasn’t got a face; she’s got two profiles gummed together. That’s like me, too.”

Evie thought she had explained enough, and this digression to the physical instead of the moral characteristics of the actress changed the ground. The two men strolled out for a cigarette during the *entr’acte*, and she slipped into the chair next Elizabeth.

“I should like to be an actress,” she said. “It must be such a relief to cease being one’s tedious old self for an hour or two every day, and become somebody quite different. I shouldn’t mind who I became if only I could stop being Me. Don’t you get sick of yourself? No, I don’t suppose you do, for why should you? But if you were me, you would long to slip out of the back door of your soul and become nobody or anybody. Oh, weary work! But it’s a consolation to be quite convinced that there is no future life; we

shall get rid of ourselves Before very long. The idea of being oneself to all eternity would be a terrible prospect.”

This was a new side to the new friend. Was it sincere? Did she experience what she said? Elizabeth thought she did; if this was no more than a mood, it was real to her.

“I can’t imagine ceasing to be myself,” she said. “Even less can I imagine ceasing altogether.”

“Then there’s something I don’t envy you for,” said Evie. “I’m envious about everything else that I’ve seen of you yet. Though I dare say all these little envies are summed up in one comprising envy, namely, the envy of your evident happiness. I wonder if it’s envy, though. Perhaps it’s admiration. Let’s call it admiration.”

Elizabeth did not feel she was capable of talking personal and intimate metaphysics to a woman with whom she had yet to get on terms of friendship. Friendship, to her mind, did not spring from personal revelations, but they from it. She was, too, naturally reserved and reticent; there were many things about which she could scarcely imagine herself talking to anybody, and certainly not to a woman whom she knew that, at present, she did not trust. And yet there was an appeal in this disarming frankness to which it was callous to be deaf. It was rather to her relief than that now the door of the box opened for the return of the two men. She was ashamed of her welcome of this interruption to their talk; but this type of the modern woman, who began by showing you everything that was most private, was new to her. She could not in a moment become like that herself. But now the house darkened, and they drew up their chairs for the last act, which culminated in a lamentable coruscation of incubated epigrams.

Evie got up with a little shrug of her shoulders.

“Fireworks,” she observed. “Weren’t they pretty? But why didn’t they tell us that there were to be fireworks? Now I can take you all home.”

“But I don’t want to go home,” said Jim.

“Then you can go abroad,” said Evie. “That’s the sort of thing we’ve been listening to for the last half-hour. Come and see me to-morrow, Jim. Lunch if you like, or dine; just ring me up and tell me. Get in, Elizabeth, and I’ll drop you and Walter, and then I’ll drop myself, like an undesirable acquaintance. Walter, put up both windows, and let us quickly suffocate. ‘Three corpses will lie out in the shining Sandys.’ My motor is a Sandys; don’t you admire my quickness of wit?”

In a few days Elizabeth, despite her sentimental regrets at leaving the beloved house in the country, began to feel that she had come home; it was always home to her where Walter was. And how much more than in the quiet house on the hill was he at home in this warren of flats, where outside the buses roared and the stir of the town foamed by. A lift, in which presently Tony was permitted by favour of the attendant to touch the magic word "Fifth," flew upwards, and you emerged out of the roar below into this high tranquillity, and from the windows the traffic crawled like faintly murmuring insects, and the direct view was of tree-tops. She picked up the threads of life which in this long absence in the country she thought had been snapped, and they had not been snapped at all, but were lying there ready for her to resume her weaving with them. There was no question any more of devising employment for herself and specially for Walter; it was a question of choosing between the diversity of pleasant beckonings. She loved music, and the town rang with concerts, and she would hurry home to be back for Walter's return from the City, and perhaps he came, or perhaps he rang her up from his club saying that he was having a rubber of bridge. Beside the telephone there would be a pencilled record of engagements proposed during her absence, and she must see what evenings were disengaged. Then Tony would burst in on his return from the day-school, which he now attended in preparation for the boarding-school which was to receive him after Easter, and again the front-door bell rang, and a friend looked in on the chance of finding her at home. They often dined out, often a guest or two came to dinner; occasionally she was bidden to some little gathering without Walter, and he went to his club, or he was bidden without her, and she spent a pleasant solitary evening, or raked in a friend in similar plight to share it with her.

Her sister-in-law, now Helen Hylton, was her companion on one such occasion a few weeks after her arrival in town. Elizabeth had not seen her since her divorce, but before that they had been great friends, and she had considerable sympathy with a woman who had married Dickie. It had ended in disaster, and perhaps the more conventional course would have been not to have taken up with her again, but Helen had asked if she would see her, and that was enough. Elizabeth, therefore, had proposed this quiet evening together. At the back of her mind she knew that she wanted Helen's views of a particular person, but did not intend to ask for them.

Helen's large and vital presence always infused her surroundings with her own enjoyment. Socially she was rather like a barmaid whose occupation it is to serve out liberal and refreshing drinks in so encouraging a

manner that her customers always wanted more. Physically she was of the large, billowy type which Evie had said was so popular with her husband; not Juno precisely, but a livelier Hebe.

“Now, I call this delicious of you, Elizabeth,” she said, as she made her ample entrance. “I heard you were in town. Evie Ambleside told me, and I felt I must make an attempt to see you. If you had said ‘No, thank you,’ I should have quite understood. I am very intelligent, you know, though I look like a fool. But after all you let my beloved Margaret come over to see me at Garth; I took courage from that.”

“Courage, my dear?” asked Elizabeth, kissing her.

“Well, it required some. But you know I had the hell of a life with our poor Dickie. He’s much happier without me, and I’m much happier without him. Something had to be done, for why should we waste our lives in wretchedness? But now we’ve got it over, so don’t let us talk about it any more. You allowed me to come and see you, and here we are.”

Elizabeth quite concurred in this.

“Here indeed we are,” she said, “and I’m very glad of it. Come in to dinner, and tell me about yourself.”

“We’re only just back. A month in Venice, and a month at Monte Carlo to pay for Venice . . . and I suppose a month in the workhouse now to pay for Monte Carlo.”

“As bad as that?” asked Elizabeth.

“Worse, if anything, but great fun. Ambleside was there, very much *en garçon*, and between ourselves, Lizzie, he would have liked me to have been *en fille*. There he was with one foot in the grave, and the other—well, the other seemed to be everywhere. I saw it in all sorts of places. He told me you had taken Margaret over to their ball. I was astonished.”

“But why? Why on earth—why?” asked Elizabeth.

“Well, for a moment I thought it wasn’t clever of you, but then on reflection I thought it was wise of you, which is ever so much better. Your wisdom justified itself, for you’ve made a conquest. Evie adores you. Naturally, I am not surprised at anyone adoring you, but otherwise I should be.”

Elizabeth laughed.

“That’s rather Irish,” she said, “but it’s interesting. Why would you be surprised if you could be?”

“Because Evie doesn’t as a rule adore anybody. She loves being adored, but she has never cared for anyone. She never cared even for your adorable Walter. You see, Evie doesn’t like people, just as my Pekinese doesn’t like dogs. What Chuchu loves and what Evie loves is to have a circle of palpitating swains sitting round her. That’s what makes Chuchu really happy. She looks at them with swimming eyes, and then walks very slowly away and rests. That’s terribly attractive, you know.”

“It sounds a little lonely,” said Elizabeth. “Is she lonely?”

“Chuchu? Oh, you mean Evie. No, she’s never lonely, if by loneliness you mean the dislike of being alone.”

Elizabeth was silent for a moment.

“I think I’ve behaved rather badly to her,” she said. “She was touching; she alluded to past history, and said she hoped we should be friends. That was the first step, you see, and it was my business to take another. But I haven’t. I must do something. I must ask her here. I should like to be friends with her.”

“That means that you don’t feel that you are. Or more probably, that you don’t really want to be. It would be nice, but you don’t want it.”

Elizabeth waited to reply to this piece of criticism till they had settled themselves in the drawing-room.

“I think I’m rather slow to make friends,” she said. “I’m like a coral insect that has to work up from the bottom of the sea. Some people begin at the top; they find something that looks attractive floating about and settle on it. If it sinks under their weight, they fly away and settle on something else.”

She looked round the room.

“Now, Evie did what I never could do,” she said. “She came here with Walter before I got up to town, and arranged the furniture. As you can see, she did it beautifully. That’s what I mean by beginning from the top. She did something intimate before she knew me. In consequence, I want to alter the position of everything. I want to pull the sofa a foot this way, and the table a foot that way. Oh, what nonsense it all is! I’m small, Helen. That’s what’s the matter with me. Now, tell me another thing. About Jim Cresswell. Is he what you call a palpitating swain?”

“Palpitating, certainly. She doesn’t care about him.”

“But she lets him palpitate. That’s rather a cruel trait. Why doesn’t she send him about his business?”

“She probably does, and that’s why he comes back,” said Helen. “But, Lizzie, why all this excitement about Evie? I can’t think why you want to be friends with her. Especially considering the way she treated——”

“But that’s Walter’s affair, not mine,” interrupted Elizabeth. “And she seems to me pathetic, somehow. Besides, Walter is great friends with her again, and I must accept that. I think it’s wonderful of him, and it’s shabby of me to be—well, to be less wonderful.”

She laughed.

“And as Evie pointed out,” she said, “her atrocious conduct to him was the origin of great happiness for me. I liked her saying that. There was a charming frankness about it.”

Helen’s face assumed as shrewd an expression as it was capable of.

“Yes; but that wasn’t why she did it,” she said. “When she opened her fingers and dropped Walter like that, she wasn’t thinking ‘Now this will make Elizabeth happy.’ Her frankness didn’t go so far as to point that out. But she’s a sorceress for charm, and, if you want to be friends with her, why look farther than that?”

Helen settled herself very comfortably on the sofa.

“I can’t think why you appreciate frankness so much,” she said, “especially when it isn’t frankness. I don’t think much of it. It isn’t our business to be frank; it’s other people’s business to find us out if we aren’t. But you can’t find anything out about charm. It’s one of the beautiful things, and the attempt to pick beauty to bits is a really wanton occupation. If you find her charming, accept her, not as you want her to be, if that’s your line, but as she is.”

Elizabeth sat silent for a space. The current of her thought went back into its familiar channel, and concerned itself no longer with Evie but with Walter.

“Ah, yes; that’s wise, that’s wise,” she said. “One must accept people—the more so the better one loves them—as they are. And you mustn’t put them into cotton-wool and shut them in a box to open when you’re alone. They want air and freedom, of course they do! And to think that I’ve only just begun to learn that. At my age! It’s disgraceful.”

Helen began by looking puzzled at this evident shifting of the grounds of their talk, and ended by looking perfectly calm and effortless.

“I don’t understand a single word, dear,” she said. “What are you talking about?”

Elizabeth’s eyes shone; the youth of love encompassed her.

“I’ve been trying to keep Walter in cotton-wool,” she said. “I’ve been trying to keep him to myself down at Maychester. I’ve been saying to myself that we were wrapped up in each other; whereas, what I was trying to do was to wrap him up in me. Such a mistake; how I see it now! People want life; they want air; they want youth about them. He supplied me with it, but how was this aged crone to supply him? That’s where your Margaret was such a godsend, bless her. I thought of her coming as an interruption to our precious solitude, but I resigned myself to it. And it was the best thing that could possibly have happened. It pulled up the blinds for my poor Walter and let in the air. I began to learn that he must need more than me——”

She paused.

“I haven’t learnt it fully yet,” she said. “I’ve had set-backs and morbidities, telling myself that in so short a time—well, you understand, I expect. But that’s all wrong: Walter will always love me; he’ll always need me.”

Helen whirled her feet off the sofa and sat up.

“My dear, you’re in love with him still,” she said. “You’re like a girl; you’re on your honeymoon.”

“Yes; isn’t it awful!” said Elizabeth.

CHAPTER VIII

Easter fell late; there preceded it a burst of summer weather, and Elizabeth, on her first morning at home in the country, came down to find her borders redolent with wallflower, and the rough grass below the chestnut-tree nodding with daffodils. Walter had remained in London, but would join her in a few days, for, with business still booming, he was wanted till the eve of the Easter holidays, and would have to get back as soon as they were over. But Tony had not been very well; the prevalent coughs and colds had clawed at him, and at the beginning of the week Elizabeth, who would otherwise have waited for Walter, had snatched Tony up and carried him forth to this recuperative air. To-morrow Margaret arrived after spending a few days with her mother in town, for a week of her Easter vacation, after which she would go back to keep house for Walter, since Elizabeth was to remain here with Tony till his departure for school. To-morrow, also, Evie was coming over from Garth to spend an hour or two with her; but to-day Elizabeth would be alone.

She was not sorry for a day of solitude in which, while employed over her garden, she could quietly ruminate. London, lately, had been a whirl of affairs, with no time for anything but the employment of the hour, and she welcomed a disengaged day with the chance of thinking. It was as if during the last few weeks she had scribbled a quantity of hasty memoranda, and popped them into a drawer for future examination. There was a whole pile of them to be scrutinized; some she expected to tear up and dismiss, others would have to be considered and dealt with.

First, there was the problem about Tony. Entrancing though London was to him, it certainly did not suit him, and her opinion had been confirmed by the doctor to whom she had taken him a few days ago. There was nothing definitely wrong; but it would be far wiser, if it could be managed, that he should spend his holidays in the country and not in town. Naturally, then, that had to be managed, and there followed on that necessary arrangement the no less necessary one that she should be with him, for this fortnight now before he went to school, and for ensuing holidays till he became more robust. Walter, no doubt, would get down for week-ends; but, apart from that, he must be solidly in London, and she in the country while Tony was at home. To keep two households going was an un contemplated expense, but the only alternative was to shut the flat up while she and Tony were here, and for Walter to live at his club again.

They had spent rather a grim evening over domestic finance; the bills for the furnishing and decoration of the flat had come in, and with those of rent and living expenses made a formidable total. But Walter was making a good deal of money, and, having got rid of his own long face over the addition sum, laughed at hers. Just for the moment, however, he was short of cash, for, as a member of a syndicate for the exploitation of certain patents, he had put up a considerable sum of money for tests and preliminary expenses. But experts had reported very well on them, and when, before long, the company would be floated, he expected that his share in the promoting syndicate would bring him in a very handsome profit.

“It’s no use my going into it all,” he said, with a touch of impatience at her questions, “because it’s business, and you wouldn’t understand it, Lizzie. But those—I am one—who have put up money will get shares and cash allotted to them when the company is formed; and if it pays half as well as there’s every reason to anticipate, there won’t be any bother about the expense of two establishments.”

“How long will that be?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you exactly. Six months, perhaps. But you may take it from me that we’re all right.”

“But supposing by any chance it doesn’t come off, Walter?” she asked.

“You needn’t bother about that, I tell you; it will,” said he. “Besides, I’m making quite a good income. If you can keep the wolf from the Maychester door, I can keep it from this. But it’s an awful bore about Tony, though you say they tell you that there’s nothing to be anxious about.”

He looked up, and found her eyes on him.

“And it’s an awful bore that you’ll have to be down in the country such a lot,” he added.

“I wondered when you’d think of that,” she said.

Elizabeth pulled her chair into the shade of the young-leaved chestnut-tree, for the April sun was like June, as she thought over this, the first of the memoranda that had to be considered. She wished she had not made that last remark. It had popped out involuntarily, without intention. Of course, it had been only chaff, or very nearly only chaff. . . . Otherwise she had no more to think over on this topic. Tony’s health was all that really mattered, and they were doing their best about that.

The question of Margaret came next. Dickie had written to say that his beautiful brain had begun to work again, and that he would certainly stop out in Italy till July. He relied on Elizabeth, therefore, as previously arranged, to give the girl a home at Easter, and for the summer if he settled to stay on in this exquisite Rome which suited him so well. It would never do to have Margaret out here, for she would disturb his tranquillity, and besides she would want to play hockey (wasn't it?), and he could not hear that there was any hockey to be had in Italy. Margaret was probably with them now, so he sent her his fond love. He would also like a report from Elizabeth as to whether, contrary to his express wishes, she had seen her mother, who, he understood, had married again. The Catholic Church, which he was thinking of joining (he spoke of it as if it was a club), did not, as Elizabeth probably knew, recognize divorce. Had Margaret realized that her mother, therefore, was living in open sin? . . . Dickie was very dreadful.

Here what had to be considered was whether she herself was under the slightest obligation to tell Dickie that at the present moment, when he supposed Margaret to be in her aunt's care, she was in fact in her mother's, or to advise Margaret to do so. But she could, on scrutiny, discover no such obligation on herself, nor indeed on Margaret. Margaret had been assigned to her father at the divorce proceedings, and Dickie's mode of embracing his parental responsibilities was to go off abroad, refusing to take her, and leaving her to the care of others for an indefinite period. He had washed his hands of Margaret, and yet wished to control her. She and her mother were devoted to each other, and it was no more than reasonable that Margaret, rendered fatherless by her father, should refuse to render herself motherless. Elizabeth settled to write to Dickie when Margaret came, saying that Margaret was with her, but refused to constitute herself either policeman or informer.

There was one more point to be considered about Margaret. Elizabeth felt sure that it was not only her mother whom Margaret wanted to see; there was a man as well, and the more she thought of Jim Cresswell as a possible husband for the girl, the less she liked it. It was clear that the two were attracted by each other; since Margaret's arrival in town he had been to her mother's house every day. Helen favoured the idea; he was well off, and he was what she called "decent," but Elizabeth knew that if Margaret had been her own daughter she would have discouraged the match. Their very unlikeness perhaps was the cause of the attraction; she with her breezy outdoor ways, he with his polished tea-party air. Besides, not so long ago, he had certainly been enslaved by Evie; he was, as Helen had said, one of the most palpitating swains who sat round Chuchu, and the notion could not but

suggest itself that he wanted to snap one chain by the very hazardous expedient of forging another. She had said something of the sort to Helen, and Helen rather unexpectedly and most uncomfortably had replied, "That doesn't always turn out so badly, dear. After all, you and Walter."

Finally, there was the puzzling subject of Evie herself. Elizabeth found that a quantity of these scribbled memoranda referred to her. She had whipped up all her capacity for affection in response to Evie's desire for her friendship. She had made herself alert to perceive and appreciate qualities in her which would warm the heart; she had let her eyes be enchained by her beauty and her mind by her charm, but her heart had wholly failed, though constantly called upon, to surrender. The sensitive tentacles of friendship had shrunk back from her instead of seeking her; she had never as yet attained that complete ease with her that is the prelude to a closer approach. Evie's charm, which she fully recognized, was to her like a bush of roses growing out of a bed of nettles; if you bent down to inhale their fragrance, or look more closely at the dewy damask of their folded petals, you got stung about the ankles. She resented her own sensitiveness; other people, Walter in especial, whom once, far more treacherously, a spine of the rose itself had pierced, went to and fro in the nettle-bed without hurt, handling and enjoying the roses, while Elizabeth was always walking warily and taking care.

What it all came to was that Elizabeth did not trust her. Yet if she examined the causes of her mistrust they dwindled into the most insignificant specks. But these specks remained as hard and as uncomfortable as some minute piece of grit that had lodged itself in her eye as she leaned out of her window and tried to appreciate some charming landscape. How small such specks were, and how destructive of all comfort! There was her little *cri du cœur* at the play of "Ah, how intensely human!" there was the conviction that her original scheme for that same evening was to dine alone with Walter; there was the stubborn feeling that Evie's warmth towards herself was not kindled by simple affection. And yet what motive could have prompted it except that?

Elizabeth tried to focus that point and examine it, but, as often as she looked at it direct, it seemed to break up and disappear. It was true that Walter liked their being friends; he enjoyed Evie's growing intimacy with them both, but there was nothing sinister about that, nor indeed was Evie responsible for it . . . And why—her mind swooped abroad again—why should not Jim Cresswell have been devoted to Evie? And why. . . Elizabeth gave it up; it was no use prodding and peering about like this, for

she got no nearer to any definite realization of why she distrusted Evie, or why friendship was not sprouting in herself. But she knew that if friendship was not flourishing there, fascination was. She was interested in her, attracted to her, and charmed by her.

Evie made an early appearance next day; it was scarcely the middle of the morning instead of lunch-time when she arrived and was told that Elizabeth was in the garden, where she was busy in no lily-handed manner, but with spade and fork was digging manure into her rose-beds. Her back was turned, and Evie stood watching her wholesome vigour for a minute without making her presence known. It seemed odd for an intelligent woman—was Elizabeth intelligent?—to make herself hot and messy like that. She was working like a navvy. Then some small movement of her own caught the corner of Elizabeth's eye, and she turned.

“My dear!” she said. “Welcome, Evie. But lunch-time? Is it really lunch-time?”

“Nowhere near. I apologize for coming so early. No; then I won't apologize. But I wish I hadn't disturbed you, but gone on watching you. I've been learning——”

Elizabeth stepped out of the rose-bed, and shook the clinging mould from her sensible boots.

“Learning what?” she asked with a laugh. “Learning into what a perspiring blackamoor gardening turns a civilized woman?”

“No; learning what a wholesome person you are. Adoring the sight! Oh, give me a spade and let me be wholesome. When you spoke of gardening, I always thought it meant going out in a shady hat with a pair of scissors and cutting flowers.”

Elizabeth laughed again; her gardening had done her good; it had made her feel simpler.

“No; it means savage toil,” she said. “Now, give me ten minutes, and I'll come back looking rather more presentable.”

Evie was no less conscious than Elizabeth that as yet no intimate relation had been formed between them. She did not, so she reflected as she waited for her now, actually want Elizabeth's affection; but she wanted a certain footing in Elizabeth's house of easy intimacy, and the confidence which intimacy gives. Moreover, it piqued her vanity to know that hitherto her

efforts to get Elizabeth into the adoring circle had not really brought her in. Elizabeth must join the circle, and Walter must come a little closer; in fact, a good deal closer. And here was Tony, who caught sight of her, and ran to her. Tony had joined the circle at once, and sat admiringly close. That had not been part of her intention, for she disliked children; but it had its points, it might be made useful. How extraordinarily like the boy was to Walter!

Tony, on Elizabeth's return, was allowed to go out all by himself for a spin in Evie's motor, and he might sit where he pleased—inside by himself, or next to the chauffeur. He scampered off to the grandeur of personally ordering the car to come round. Evie followed him with her eyes till he disappeared.

"But he *is* Walter," she said. "I can remember Walter when he was hardly older than that. And he's got over his coughs and colds? I think you were a little anxious about him, weren't you?"

"I was rather, and in fact I still am rather, which is silly of me, as they say there's nothing wrong. No more London for him, though, at present. I shall be down here with him till he goes to school, and again in his summer holidays."

Evie was quick to see what that implied.

"My dear, that will be sad for you," she said. "It will mean, won't it, that Walter will be up in town and you here? He will hate that, too. But is it wise to send Tony to school now?"

"They think so. The school is near Brighton. The bracing air ought to make him robust."

"Let's hope so. Walter adores him. When Tony's there, he never pays the least attention to anybody else. I wonder what it's like to have a child. I suppose it implies a new sort of emotion altogether, of which a childless woman like myself can have no idea."

She gave a little shudder.

"I think I should hate it," she said. "It seems a terrifying extension of one's own personality and of somebody else's. But I suppose it depends on who that somebody else is. In my case—ah, let's talk about something else."

Evie had meant that speech to evoke sympathy and the expression of it. No woman, she thought, could leave that bitter, careful little cry uncomforted. But she had reckoned without taking into account that shy reticence of Elizabeth's, or her genuineness, which did not suffer her, in

serious matters like this, to give expression to what she did not feel. Elizabeth sat now, wrestling with her instinctive distrust, in a silence that disconcerted Evie. It did not repel her, but it was not to be provoked into insincerity.

Evie had the ghost of a smile for her own failure; Elizabeth ought to have abounded in pitying and affectionate interrogation. But she intended to get where she wanted, if not by this route, then by another.

“Elizabeth, I wonder if you are a little hard,” she said quietly. “You’re so safe, so secure yourself, and I think you don’t allow for people who are not. Happiness, such as you enjoy, does not come round every morning with the milkman.”

She got a true glimpse of her companion at that. Elizabeth’s soul leaped to her eyes and her mouth. Evie had made the appeal which could not fail.

“Ah, my dear,” she said, “I know it doesn’t. I wish to Heaven it did. But hard? I don’t feel that I am. How could I ask you anything more? I thought you wanted to get off the subject. I’ve been racking my dull brain for something, but I was thinking about you and hoping—now, do tell me more; tell me all you feel that you can. Why, aren’t we having this day all to ourselves in order to get to know each other?”

She leaned forward in her low chair, pulling it a little closer to Evie’s.

“What you said just now is such a terribly sad thing for a woman to say,” she went on, “that you are glad, I mean, that you are childless. To have a child is the greatest happiness that her nature permits of, just because the child is an extension of her personality and its father’s. Tony isn’t only Tony to me; sometimes I wonder if he is even mainly Tony. He’s Walter.”

This gave a clue to Evie’s quickness; she guessed that pity was a road to Elizabeth’s heart.

“Then you know why I should hate to have a child,” she said. “A further incarnation of my husband—one is sufficient for me.”

The icy bitterness in her voice was sincere enough; it served her purpose also.

“Why did you marry him, then?” asked Elizabeth.

“Because I wanted what he could give me,” said Evie. “I wanted his wealth and the position I should get as his wife, and I thought they would outweigh the disadvantages of my bargain. After all, there was only one

disadvantage, and that was himself; and I thought I should get indifferent to him, used to him, if you like. Shocking, isn't it?"

She guessed that she was rousing pity.

"But there's no indifference possible between man and wife," she went on, "and I soon learnt that. If there's not love there's loathing. And soon it was very clear why he had wanted to marry me. He wanted a very pretty doll—I was very pretty—which he could dress up if he wished, or undress if he wished. A mistress would be too human a word for what he wanted me to be; he wanted a doll."

She saw the pity which she had intended to melt grow soft in Elizabeth's eyes. She was making headway at last. And then immediately the thought of being pitied by Elizabeth lit in her mind a sudden flame of dislike for her, and though she had not anticipated this effect, she found she welcomed it. There was this middle-aged woman, plain by the standard of her own beauty, poor by the standard of her own wealth, stupid by the standard of her own quick wits, who was happy at a time of life when all happiness must surely be cooling and contracting under the crinkling ash of years. She envied her happiness; she began definitely to desire to spoil it. What above all made Elizabeth happy was her possession of the man, who, all these years, might have been her own. She had not cared for him enough, when he was adoringly willing to be hers, to hesitate to brush him off when a more brilliant future presented itself; but he had immensely attracted her, or she would never have engaged herself to him. He attracted her still, and therein was another reason for intimate relations with his wife.

None of this was new to her at that moment with the surprise of discovery; it had been in her mind, though veiled and indistinct, since first she had seen them together at her house. Now the dawning of Elizabeth's pity for her had pierced these mists, dissolving them with the warmth of its clearing ray, and she saw definitely what lay behind them.

She made no pause; that pity which she had unsealed must flow with a livelier stream: at present it only oozed.

"Having committed that awful mistake," she said, "I made the best I could of it. But, oh, the relief when he got tired of one doll and wanted another. You may be sure I made no fuss over that, for when once he had got tired of me—like that, the great disadvantage of my marriage was removed. I appeared to shut my eyes to it all, and be quite unconscious of it. A great cow of a woman she was, and, avenging all other cows, how she milked him! And then there was another and another. I was really grateful to them,

for he left me alone. There is a very voluptuous French lady at Garth now. Killingly funny! She doesn't talk English, and Ambleside's French—— In consequence, I act as interpreter. We have very pleasant conversations."

"But he brings her to Garth?" asked Elizabeth.

"Oh, yes. He hates hotels; and, of course, Garth is much more comfortable. And he likes me to be there. I fancy when men get old these little refinements of indecency amuse them a good deal."

Evie wondered for a moment whether she had gone too far in saying that; whether the cold cynicism of the impression she was giving of herself would cauterize pity. That outline required a little shading and stippling.

"But the best of it is that one gets hard," she said, "and ceases to care. There's nothing like suffering for making you callous. Don't you ever believe that suffering purifies and ennobles. It does nothing of the kind. It scars you; and then, thank God, the hard callous skin forms over the scar, and you don't suffer any more, except for the dull ache of outrage. My dear, you look divinely sympathetic and pitiful, but you can spare your pity. There's nothing to pity. Nothing hurts, really hurts, any longer, and it's most amusing to hear Ambleside trying to talk French."

That was beautifully done, and luck, as ever, favoured the skilful. She had not realized that the assertion that she cared no more was precisely that which raised Elizabeth's compassion to the highest pitch.

Elizabeth gave a little wordless ejaculation, half-sigh, half-moan, before she answered.

"Oh, but that's the saddest of all, Evie," she said, "that you don't care. . . . I'm all at sea at present; all you have told me is so new to me. I never guessed. How could I? You always seemed so gay, so supreme. I thought perhaps you weren't on very good terms with your husband, but it was only the vaguest surmise, which I dismissed. I suppose I ought to have guessed, for one night you talked to me about the joy of ceasing to be. But you were so full of moods that night; one succeeded another. You were tragic and touching, and cynical and irresistibly funny and high-spirited. I didn't know which was you; I thought perhaps that all of them were. And now I see that what lay behind them all was this. . . . I don't see how you can bear it; it must be intolerable. And you aren't callous, however much you say you are. You do care; it hurts and wounds you. And, my dear, your courage, to put a brave face on it, and carry your head high! How I adore

courage! . . . But ought you to bear it? Is it right that you should let it go on, and not make an end of it? You would marry again, and find happiness.”

Evie wondered for a moment whether Elizabeth was really so amazing as to be counselling her to try to get a divorce. . . . Her lip quivered with amusement at the notion, and she had a sudden spasm of impatience at the thought that Elizabeth so utterly misunderstood the situation. To be sure that was exactly what she had been wanting Elizabeth to do, in order to arouse her pity and through that her affection, but what fools these good women so often were!

Elizabeth went on speaking in that soft eager voice.

“Oh, it’s awfully hard to know,” she said. “For me marriage has been such a splendour, such a fulfilment not of myself only but of Walter. Twelve years ago I couldn’t have imagined that life held anything so exquisite. But if it isn’t that, it is not even a tolerable companionship but an insult and an infamy. Wouldn’t you be right to seek the happiness or the chance of it to which we’re all entitled?”

Evie’s rôle required a little readjusting; she had to be bitter at the core, but superficially calm and uncomplaining, not cursing God, not cursing anybody. . . . How very amusing it would be to tell Helen about this lofty conversation. Helen was devoted to Elizabeth, but she would giggle at this delicious ignorance.

“No, it’s too late,” she said. “When the iron has eaten into your soul it’s wise to stay still. If you struggle it only hurts. I’m used to it. I just lie there.”

“Ah, you poor darling!” said Elizabeth.

Evie shook her head.

“No, I mustn’t give you the impression that my life is spoiled,” she said. “I don’t say that what I have been through has spoiled my capacity for enjoyment. I can still enjoy myself very much. But if I got rid of Ambleside, what should I do next? I couldn’t marry again. The idea of belonging to a man with that deadly familiarity has become more than repugnant to me; it has the quality of nightmare. And what would my future be if I didn’t marry? I can’t make a new life for myself now. To start a fresh life needs energy and freshness, and I haven’t got them. I can go on laughing and talking and entertaining, because I’m Lady Ambleside and have the money and the houses, which are the apparatus. But I’ve got no place in the world except as his wife.”

She dropped her eyes a moment, and then looked up again at Elizabeth with the pathetic astonishment of a child who has been hurt, and wants comfort.

“If he were young,” she said, “I don’t suppose I could face it. But he’s old; I can’t help remembering that, and for all his pirouettings he’s frail. Is it horrible of me to mention that? I suppose so. But you see I am horrible. He has made me like that; he has squeezed every drop of womanliness out of me.”

Elizabeth’s heart was wrung. She knew she had never liked this woman who had told her this festering tragedy of her life, but now her tenderness was awakened. Whatever were Evie’s faults, she had suffered horribly for them; it was little wonder that, as Helen had said, she had no love to give anybody, or that there remained to her only that barren ice of just caring to attract others. Why Evie had confided in her seemed inexplicable, except on the supposition that she liked and trusted her, and that, to Elizabeth, was an irresistible appeal. She had utterly failed to understand her hitherto, and that lack of comprehension seemed now to have been the cause of her mistrust. Evie’s moods were explained now; they were the piteous efforts at escape from the haunting tragedy of her circumstances.

Elizabeth held out both hands; her heart was in them.

“Whatever Walter and I can do to help you is yours,” she said. “Don’t refuse us the privilege.”

Their talk slid off into other regions of common interest. If London did not suit Tony, it certainly suited Walter; he had never been better nor had a greater zest for life. Margaret—did Evie remember her niece who came over to Garth?—Margaret was to keep house for him when he returned to his work after the short Easter holiday, while Elizabeth remained here with Tony.

Evie paused a moment. Perhaps Elizabeth, ignorant though she was of certain other matters, might be able to tell her something she really wanted to know. Helen had not been quite satisfactory as an informant.

“Of course I remember her,” she said. “A nice, great, breezy girl. Isn’t it odd how completely opposite types attract each other? You know what I mean, of course.”

“Jim Cresswell?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yes. Is it so?”

“I know nothing for certain,” said Elizabeth.

“That means you think it likely. I’m delighted. Jim’s an old friend of mine, and perhaps the very fact that he has told me nothing points in the same direction. Or has he only been flirting? He has been known to flirt.”

She laughed.

“Dear me, what a mystery I’m making about nothing at all,” she said. “I hope it’s true, and that he will marry her, for not so very long ago Jim was very much at my feet. I shall be thoroughly pleased if he has got up, because kneeling there only made him miserable, and—is it very ill-natured?—I always felt that he knew that he was getting his trouser-knees covered with dust. But I think he might have told me about Margaret; he ought to have come to say good-bye, or if he didn’t feel up to that, to have left his card with P.P.C. on it. But men never do that; when a fresh adoration dawns on them, the last is put out like a quenched star. It entirely vanishes from their minds, and if anyone inconveniently recalls it to them, they pass a puzzled hand over their brows and say, ‘Now you mention that name, I believe I do remember her.’ ”

There was the acid touch in this; it was all very well for her to say that she was glad that Jim had got over what she implied was a hopeless adoration of herself, but a certain resentment smouldered behind the light words.

Evie curled herself round in her chair, like some lithe creature sunning itself, and glanced at Elizabeth with a gay eye.

“Such a wise plan to take experiences lightly,” she said. “Your beloved Walter did the same, didn’t he? He completely rooted me out of his life and his memory. There wasn’t, as you, darling, know better than anybody, the vestige of a scar. And then, when years and years afterwards, we meet again, he has treated me delightfully, with the greatest friendliness, and yet a complete detachment, rather as if I was the old friend of some cherished aunt of his.”

For all her chattering carelessness of speech, she was alert, and saw on the moment that what she had said somehow grated on her companion. Instantly her tone changed, though the lightness of her delivery was unaltered.

“But the bond between Walter and me will be closer now,” she said, “for he will see that I am the friend of the woman who is absolutely all the world

to him. My dear, when I see Walter and you together, all my beastly hardness melts, and I believe in the beauty of human relationships. I've learned their horror from experiences of my own. You must let me learn the other side of them from you."

Evie lingered on throughout the afternoon, and it was not till the shadows were long that she set off home again. Then, for one moment, as she kissed Elizabeth she was grave.

"You've been an angel to me," she said, "and all I can do to thank you is to love you. I came here all on edge and *agacée*, and you've soothed me and comforted me just by what you are. Think of me, darling, this evening as the demure interpreter of French conversation. So good for one; foreign languages widen the mind. Bring Walter over one day when he's down here, and, best of all, come yourself."

Elizabeth never made a half-hearted choice in matters of the heart, nor when she made an emotional gift, played Sapphira with it and was accomplice to a reservation of part of it. Evie's story had gone to her heart; she accepted it as being true (which, as far as it went, it certainly was), and had nothing but sympathy with a woman in whom such havoc of the heart had been wrought. In the equal scales of Justice, perhaps, she had been her own undoing, for, when the steady beam of love had shone on her, she had let herself follow the marsh-lamp of ambition; but Justice, to Elizabeth's mind, was a grim guide; if you followed where Justice took you, you soon found yourself flintily aloof from all that made life lovely, and dealt inhumanly with what was human.

There were qualities in Evie which she regretted: a cynicism, a hardness, an inclination to small deceptions; above all, she had once, in Walter's case, committed a heartless cruelty, and ruinously had she paid for it. As for the cynicism and hardness, who, in her place, would not have learned to be callous, out of the mere instinct of self-preservation?

Evie had made an appeal, asking for her friendship, and she had answered it, promising that all that Walter and she could do was hers. For him, she knew she could give that promise; in that wonderful way of his he had, without analysis or struggle, found himself, after this lapse of happy years, immensely liking Evie, and oblivious to the past; and Elizabeth found herself smiling over Evie's definition of his feeling towards her, as that of a

man towards the friend of his cherished aunt. She liked that; Evie, who had known the quality of his love, was probably right in her estimate of his liking, in comparison with that. Above all, Elizabeth loved Walter's simplicity; if he liked, he did not concern himself with his friends' faults or failures; they might be there, but they were no concern of his. That was the wise, the only way of dealing with people where the question of friendship was concerned. You had to accept them in their entirety or reject them. There was no place in friendship for moral eclecticism; you could not be friends with half a personality; you had to take or leave the whole. And, partly out of sympathetic pity, partly out of genuine admiration, she took, and bound herself to loyalty.

PART II

CHAPTER I

Elizabeth had gone down to Brighton with Tony to deposit him at his school there for the Michaelmas term. Certainly these summer holidays, passed partly at Maychester, partly on the Norfolk coast, had made him more robust; and, indeed, it was a very sturdy urchin whom she had left after a joyful afternoon on the pier and an amazing expenditure of pennies in automatic machines. The afternoon, in fact, had been wonderfully fatiguing, though fatigue had earned its reward in the sight of Tony's indefatigableness, and she was glad to settle herself in her comfortable corner seat for the return journey with the prospect of an hour's complete relaxation of the muscles that were responsible for standing and strolling.

"The flesh is weak," she thought as they slid out of the station; "but it was great fun."

She had left Maychester early that morning, and for the present it was farewell to her garden blazing in its September beauty, and to the high breezy down and the pleasant tranquillity of the lengthening evenings, for Walter had been already settled in London for a fortnight after his August holiday, and now she was joining him there. He had been down home—she still thought of it as home—for Tony's last Sunday before he went to school, rather silent, rather preoccupied, and impatient at her inquiry if anything was the matter. "It's neither the one thing nor the other, when you're in the country and I'm up in town," was all the reason that he could assign for his mood, and she had left it at that, without further catechism as to what precisely he meant by "the one thing" and "the other thing," for the phrase clearly expressed an unsettled state of mind rather than of circumstances. But this would cease now, she hoped, for she was to be solidly with him in London till the middle of December. It was just about a year ago that she had planned their solitary winter in the country, and that time seemed as far away from her now as the idea itself. What a Utopian dream that had been; she could not now imagine how she could have been so childish as to suppose that the laws which govern nature could ever have sanctioned its success.

She had not been more than a few minutes at the flat when he returned from the City. She heard the rattle of his stick in the stand and his staccato step on the parquet; no one ever moved quite so definitely and briskly.

“Ah, that is good,” he said. “Tony all right? I am glad you’ve come, Lizzy.”

She got up and kissed him,

“Then we’re both happy,” she said. “And Tony’s very much all right. An afternoon on the pier, and an immense tea. Now tell me how everything has been going with you?”

“Dull as ditchwater,” he said. “Business in the City is absolutely stagnant. Not an order coming in; I might as well have been in the country for the last week. But it will get moving again in October.”

He strayed up and down the room, lighting a cigarette and strumming a couple of bars on the piano. Finally he came to anchor on the sofa by her.

“And the affairs of the syndicate?” she asked.

“They take the colour of their surroundings, confound them,” he said. “I hoped that long before this time we should have been making substantial sales of one or two of the patents. Enough, anyhow, to cover office expenses and the outlay on further experimental work. But that hasn’t happened.”

This probably then was the cause of his unsettled mind. It was a relief to her that it was so, for to her woman’s sense any trouble about money was a very trivial worry.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Has it been making you anxious, Walter?”

“Naturally one wishes it were otherwise. But as for being anxious, you know better than anybody that I always take an exaggerated view of bothers and pleasures alike. If I hole a long putt, as you’ve told me before, I think the millennium is just a-going to begin, and if there’s a wet day in the country I’m in the first stage of melancholia.”

He moved a little closer, leaning his shoulder against hers.

“But it’s an enormous comfort that you’ve arrived,” he said. “You’re the best exorciser of devils that exists. Other people just chaperone them and keep them in decent order, but you drive them out!”

That sort of testimonial from him never failed to give her an unreasonable pleasure; she never got used to the delight of being able to help him in any way.

“Ah, that’s a good hearing,” she said. “And if I’m to perform my office properly, you must describe the devils exactly, so that I may know with what set of beasts I have to deal.”

He gave her a quick glance.

“I’ve told you,” he said. “I’ve put the deuce of a lot of money into the syndicate, and I can’t afford to lose it. At least, it would be most damnably inconvenient to lose it. Last spring, you see, business was booming—I made a considerable lot, and I put all that I didn’t need for running this flat into the scheme. About four thousand pounds. And now, or presently, some more money must be found to meet current expenses. I believe in the concern; I always have, and if I was as flush of cash now as I was six months ago, I would go on backing it. But things are very slack in the City, and I’m not making a half of what I did. I haven’t got any money to spare for further financing of the syndicate. We can still hold on a bit, and that’s about all.”

He jumped up again, and began walking softly and quickly about the room.

“And then?” she asked.

He made some little clicked impatient exclamation. “I’ve told you once,” he said. “Unless the sale of these patents increases, or unless we succeed in selling foreign rights of them, the work can’t go on, and the money I’ve already spent will be lost. We shall soon have to shut up shop. The only other possibility is that we may be able to get some big capitalist in, who will see it through. It’s rather complicated; I can’t explain it all in two minutes.”

Elizabeth was perfectly aware of her inability to understand it all in two minutes, and since, apparently, it was an irritation rather than a relief to him to explain, she did not press for further enlightenment.

“Oh, my dear, what an awful nuisance,” she said. “Can’t I do anything? I’ve got a little money lying idle—two or three hundred pounds.”

He came back again to her side.

“That’s sweet of you,” he said, “and just like you. But I won’t take it, Lizzie. Further small advances would probably be only throwing good money away after bad. We didn’t allow enough margin for the coming of a slack time like this, and though it’s a fearful bore to lose a biggish sum, I wouldn’t borrow money to keep the thing going, and so I can’t borrow from you. Possibly some wealthy man may take the thing up, and see it through till a company is floated; there are negotiations going on now. In that case the original members of the syndicate, Ellingham and I and another, would do quite well, though not so well as we hoped, since he would come in on at least equal terms with us. But I couldn’t explain all that to you, and I don’t

know that we shall find the rescuing capitalist. In fact, I'm regarding the money I have put into the concern as probably lost."

It was clear to Elizabeth that this was not all that was worrying him. It was nasty, of course, for him to lose all that he had saved from those months of booming business in the spring and summer, but his buoyancy and resilience she felt sure would not have collapsed under that.

He fidgeted and smoked in silence.

"And there's something more which may have to be faced," he said at length. "I hope it won't; I hope things will get better, but if they continue as drooping as this, I shan't be able to run this flat. With the expense of Tony at school, living here like this is costing me more than I'm at present earning. There's nothing immediate about it; I can go on for the present, but the time may come when I shall have to let it, if I can, or shut it up if I can't, and go back to live at the club. The only alternative that I can see—given that business continues like this—would be to let the house at Maychester, or shut it up, and for you to come and live here and share with me in it."

"But what about Tony in the holidays," she asked, "if they still say he had better not live in London?"

"I know. That's a difficulty. And besides, there's you. You love Maychester, and would hate to let it. For me to live at the club is the only way out."

He turned on her a face full of anxiety and unspoken trouble; more, she felt, than could be accounted for by this further complication. But it was the office of the exorciser to deal with what he had told her.

She laid her hand on his shoulder, gently shaking it.

"Oh, my dear, when will you get to know me?" she asked. "Aren't you ashamed of your ignorance? As if you didn't know that I'm far happier anywhere with you than anywhere else without you! As for Tony's holidays, of course we can arrange something for them. He and I will take furnished lodgings somewhere, or go to an hotel for them; anything. And we're counting troubles long before they're hatched. They won't hatch; they'll get addled, and we'll throw them away. Only, if they do hatch, you must instantly tell me that the expense of this flat is beyond your means, and if it's beyond mine to arrange that, and keep the other house open, why, we'll shut it up at once, or try to let it. Good heavens, darling, what a tragic face you pull over a contingency that hasn't arrived, and wouldn't have the smallest

effect on our happiness if it did! Besides, it won't; business will buck up again soon, and you must buck up again at once."

His forehead uncreased itself.

"Well, it's good that you've come," he said. "I've hated being without you, and now I've got you for the next three months, anyhow."

"You've got me for always, Walter," she said.

In spite of his words, his hand lay but listlessly in hers, and rising, she kissed him, and shook his shoulders as she held them.

"Now put all those money-worries away," she said. "Money never made anybody happy, and its absence never made anybody unhappy. It's a bore, a horrid bore about the syndicate, and it will be a horrid bore if we have to shut up the house at Maychester. But as for its spoiling our happiness, what a notion! And the moment you tell me it must be done it shall be, and with ever such smiling faces. Why, it's only a toy that pleases and amuses us! What can that count when there's you and me?"

They dined alone; it was delightful, he said, to have a solitary evening together again. It had grown chilly, and he put a match to the laid fuel in the grate; the drawn curtains and the height of the flat above the street cut off the noise of the London traffic. It was as quiet as the house in the country.

"Like one of our evenings last autumn down at Maychester," he said. "What a jolly peaceful time that was, Lizzie! I was thinking about it only today, and trying to recollect a single disturbing or uncomfortable thing that happened, and I'm blown if I could remember one. I suppose it was lazy, but it was awfully pleasant. We were alone right up into December, when Margaret came."

He stopped.

"What about Margaret, by the way?" he said.

"She's with her mother, isn't she?" said Elizabeth. "She wrote to me a month ago saying that she was engaged to Jim Cresswell. But I've heard nothing since."

"Well, it's broken off. I saw Margaret three days ago, and she told me. I supposed you knew."

"No. Margaret didn't tell me," said Elizabeth. "Did she say why it was broken off? And who broke it off?"

"She did. She wouldn't tell me why she had done so."

Elizabeth pondered over this a moment. Somewhere at the back of her brain was the faintest speck of a preposterous idea, which must instantly be extinguished.

“But she was in love with him, wasn’t she?” she asked.

“I thought so. But perhaps, so it struck me when she told me it was broken off, I was wrong, for she spoke as if she had lost a tram-ticket rather than a lover.”

Walter paused.

“But I never felt certain that he was in love with her,” he added.

The idea that had lit itself in Elizabeth’s mind still smouldered.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “It isn’t more than a year ago that he was wildly in love with Evie. But surely that was done with. Why should he want to marry Margaret unless that was all over?”

“It sounds unlikely,” said he. “Perhaps the simplest explanation is the most probable. Perhaps Margaret found she wasn’t in love with him.”

“Then the breaking off of the engagement is much the best thing that could have happened,” said Elizabeth. “I never liked it myself. But Evie will be sorry.”

He looked at her blankly.

“Why should Evie be sorry?” he asked.

“Because she wished him well, and wanted him to be happy,” said she. “She talked to me about it one day in the spring. I remember she said that Jim’s attachment to her only made him miserable, and she welcomed the probability, as it was then, of his engagement.”

Her own words seemed to quench the smouldering notion at the back of her mind.

“Evie was amusing about it,” she said, “and quite amazingly frank in her own style. She said that she felt when Jim was kneeling, so to speak, to her, that he was always conscious that his knees were getting dusty.”

She laughed.

“And then she went on to speak about you, darling,” she said. “She told me that nowadays you always treated her like an old friend of your aunt’s. I saw what she meant when I thought about it.”

Walter had got up to help himself to a drink from the side-table.

“That was about the time you began to be friends with Evie,” he said. “You held aloof from her for a considerable time.”

“I know I did. And then that day—she came over from Garth while you were in town—she told me some of her story, and I couldn’t hold aloof any more, or even want to. Oh, Walter, how can people who have had such years of happiness as we have had, conceive what it means to have been maimed and outraged like that? I think it’s wonderful of her not to have been utterly embittered.”

Walter had no reply to that.

“Have you seen her lately?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yes; she was in London for a few days on her way from Scotland to Garth. I dined with her one night; another night she dined with me. But I think she went down to Garth a couple of days ago.”

“We’ll propose ourselves, shall we, for a Sunday soon?” said Elizabeth. “I promised we would.”

“Yes, we might do that sometime,” said he. “But we’ll settle down here for a bit first. What a gadabout you are, Lizzie!”

She laughed.

“I like that!” she said. “Who was it, I should like to know, who made the plan a year ago that we should shut ourselves up at Maychester for a whole winter, and never stir? I’m just the same now. I love stopping where I am.”

She got up.

“I must see a quantity of people here, too,” she said. “There’s Margaret; I feel worried about Margaret. I hope she’s done right. And then when I’ve gadded about all day, I shall come home and we’ll have more such evenings as this.”

He had taken a rather heavy post from the table where the tray of drinks stood, and looking over it, saw that there was an envelope addressed in a familiar hand.

“Walter, what a post!” she said. “Are you going to sit up and read it all to-night?”

“Just glance through it,” he said. “But I shan’t be late.”

He bent his head back to her as she leaned over him. The letter in the familiar handwriting he had shuffled away among the others.

“Oh, Lizzie, it’s good that you’re here,” he said; and his voice was as sincere as hunger.

As soon as she had gone, he opened the letter from Evie. It contained the news that her husband’s business-man had gone into the affairs of the syndicate, which seemed to him a very sound property and likely to be profitable, and he was intending to advise Lord Ambleside to back it to the extent necessary to see it through. If Walter would make an appointment with Mr. Rogers, who was returning to London to-morrow, they could go into the terms which Mr. Rogers thought fair, and adjust, and bargain, and generally score off each other.

“Walter, my dear, I’m so glad about it,” the letter concluded. “It was a good thought of yours to tell me about it. Of course, Ambleside doesn’t know that I had anything to do with it, which is lucky, or he would turn it down sooner than please me. You’ll have to come here for a week-end and thank me for my kind offices. I’m not sure that I shan’t charge a commission. Best love to Elizabeth.”

He jumped up from the sofa where he sat; the impulse in his limbs was the desire to tell Elizabeth at once that the hope of capital being found to finance the syndicate and enable them to finish the preliminary work necessary before the flotation of a company was vastly more probable than it had been when, only an hour or two ago, he had said that he faced the loss of all that he had put into the concern. But half-way to the door he hesitated, and finally came back. It was wiser to wait until the thing had been settled. It was still possible that the negotiations might come to nothing, for up till now nothing more had happened than that Lord Ambleside’s business-man had formed a favourable impression of the syndicate’s property, and even if that was confirmed on further investigation, Lord Ambleside might refuse to act in accordance with his advice. If he took it, Walter felt no doubt that he would see the matter through; he was a very rich man, and it was not worth his while to guarantee a sum that might prove to be insufficient. If he took the matter up, it would be substantial and efficient support that he would give.

But all this was yet uncertain; he must encourage neither himself nor Elizabeth with hopes which might turn out to be illusive. She would think it odd, too, that when he mentioned that a man of capital was being looked for,

he had not said to whom application was being made. It was better to treat the whole negotiations as confidential until they were completed. And even while he debated with himself and decided thus, he knew that these considerations, though sound in themselves, were not the real reason for his silence to her. He knew he could not go to her now and say "I told Evie all about my anxieties, and she sent the papers to Ambleside's adviser."

A sudden reaction quite unexpected followed on the heels of his relief. He did not now really doubt that the syndicate would become a remunerative venture, and that the money which he had forced himself to reckon as lost would be a paying speculation, but in this reaction he regretted that he had confided in Evie at all. And yet why not? And again, why not tell Elizabeth? She and Evie were close friends, and he was charged with the message, "Best love to Elizabeth."

Walter gave but a cursory attention to the rest of his post, and when it was all opened, he sat looking at the dying embers of the fire. Elizabeth was here, thank God; she and her sweetness and her devotion, all his always, as she had said. He needed her, he wanted her; he must always need and want her alone.

The town was still empty as far as their own socialities were concerned, but Elizabeth in the hot September days that followed did not find herself desirous of the hustle of June and July, when all the time during which Walter was in the City she was full of engagements, and most evenings were prolonged into the small hours. Though she could imagine herself brisk and busy enough in her garden, here the glare and the sultry heat and the noise were fatiguing, and it was enough to stroll and sit in the Park of an afternoon, with the prospect of no strenuous evening, but of a quiet dinner alone with Walter, and an early bed-time.

But sometimes she wondered whether she was not more quickly fatigued than she used to be. She had looked forward to the filling up of town in October, because Walter and she would be plied with the engagements and diversions that seemed only to minister to his vigour, but for herself the zest of dinings-out and theatres had lost a little of its edge.

And even when she thought of herself as being in her garden, she could not quite recapture the feeling of keenness for what she had described to Evie as "savage toil." She stayed at home in the morning, and when in the afternoon she strolled along the Serpentine, where the water was beginning to be populous again with the gulls and the wild duck returned from their

breeding-places to their well-fed winter-quarters in London, she had no inclination to make a long walk of her outing in Kensington Gardens, but sat beneath the trees till it was time to get home for Walter's return. Wet days did not come amiss; there was her piano to occupy her indoors, and the picture she had formed of herself, brisk and mackintoshed, taking the exercise she used to delight in, did not often materialize. After all, women of her age did not go pounding along in the wet; the country was the place for that, and youth was the time for that. But nothing dimmed her content with those quiet evenings alone with Walter.

He had not again alluded to the affair of the syndicate, nor to the slackness of business, but it was easy to see that, as the days went on, his habitual cheerfulness and vivacity increased, and scarcely an evening passed on which he did not say something heart-warming and dear to her about her companionship. He seemed to want her in a way he had not done since he was ill and she his nurse. Though he was extremely well now, that image persisted; she felt that she was taking care of him again, and in constant attendance on his needs.

One afternoon, about a fortnight after she had joined him in London, Margaret came to see her. Elizabeth had proposed a meeting before, but the girl had been on a visit with her mother to Garth, and she was now but a passer-through on her way back to Cambridge, where she was to spend another year.

"I wanted to see you, Aunt Elizabeth," she said. "There are several things——"

She stood in front of the fireplace after their greetings, with face turned away. Then she wheeled round, and spoke in a hard business-like voice.

"Family affairs first," she said. "My father evidently doesn't want to have anything more to do with me. No, it's not a bit sad; I don't pretend to be sorry. As you know, when he decided to stop in Italy all the summer, and said it was too hot for me there, I told him that I should go and live with my mother. I said it was delightful being with you and Walter, but that I wanted a home. As he would not give me one, I had to take the natural one."

Elizabeth knew that she was wearing a tragic face; the girl looked so young and so ruthless and so inaccessible. At that moment the elder woman felt intensely old; she longed to be young for a few minutes in order to be able to read the heart that lay behind this precise narration. Margaret was not

confiding in her; she could have given the same statement of “family affairs” not a whit more icily to a journalistic interviewer for publication. If she had been talking to some contemporary, or to Walter, she might have betrayed some inkling, by comment or intonation, of what she felt. As it was, she only stated what had happened. There was a gulf fixed, and Elizabeth, on the far side, felt horribly lonely. Margaret looked up at her with level, unmeaning eyes.

“Father didn’t answer that letter,” she said, “so naturally I didn’t write again——”

Elizabeth interrupted.

“But, my dear, something may have happened to your letter,” she said. “He may not have got it.”

“Oh, yes, he did,” said Margaret. “For then, later on, when I was engaged, I wrote again, and he answered that, and said he was glad to hear that I shouldn’t be under my mother’s roof any longer. So he knew I was there. And he sent me a copy of the proof-sheets of the new book, beautifully bound, for a wedding present. Do you know what it’s about? It’s about his life with my mother. How he must have enjoyed writing that! He is the yearning, tender-hearted genius, you know, the adoring husband.”

“Ah, the wickedness of him,” exclaimed Elizabeth.

Margaret’s face was still perfectly expressionless.

“Yes, he’s a devil,” she said. “I just thought I would like to tell you what he had done, and that’s all about him I think. And then we come to my own affairs. About three weeks ago I broke off my engagement to Jim Cresswell.”

“Walter told me that you had,” said Elizabeth.

The girl looked at her.

“Does that imply a reproach that I didn’t?” she asked.

“No, my dear, no reproach at all,” said Elizabeth. “I couldn’t help wishing you had, but it was entirely your own business.”

The girl’s eyes softened for a moment.

“You have been awfully kind to me, Aunt Elizabeth,” she said. “I think I owe it to you to tell you why I didn’t. It was because I knew you didn’t like my engagement, and would be glad that it was broken off. I couldn’t stand the idea of that. But I tell you now, because I want to ask you something. . . .

That will come later. My reason for breaking it off was the best possible. I saw that he wasn't in love with me, but with somebody else. We were both staying with Lady Ambleside up in Scotland when it happened. Yes; it was she. When I saw them together it was quite obvious."

Her voice was still perfectly even and unmoved, and not a quiver of mouth or eyelid betrayed that she was speaking of anything that hurt her. Elizabeth remembered that she had told Walter the fact that her engagement was at an end with the same detachment, so that he thought that she had never really cared for Jim, but instantly she distrusted his conclusion. Reticent herself, she understood that this unnatural impassivity might arise not from lack of feeling, but from feeling so intense that it could not be spoken of.

"I didn't tell Jim what I meant to do while we were both there together," the girl went on, "but I wrote to him after I had left, for he remained on there. I told my mother what I was going to do, and why, and she thought I was a great fool, and begged me to reconsider it. She said that we should be very happy together. But I couldn't help it; I couldn't do otherwise."

Elizabeth knew now that she was right about the girl's apparent insensitiveness. Her heart was lying choked in its own bleeding. If she and Walter had been in some similar case she would have been exactly like Margaret. The knowledge of that quivered in her voice.

"I understand that, my dear," she said. "How well I understand that."

The girl looked up at her quickly.

"Do you?" she said. "My mother didn't."

"If you loved him you couldn't have done anything else," said Elizabeth. "If you hadn't really cared for him it would have been different."

"Yes, I loved him," said Margaret.

Just for that moment the fire kindled; the next, that lid of ice shut down over her again, and over Elizabeth the frozen sense of her age. In such a situation she could not have thrown her heart open to a girl, because she would have felt that a girl could not understand. She saw that in precisely the same way a girl could not open her heart to her, for she felt that an elderly woman could not understand what a girl's love meant.

It was no use pressing Margaret to unlock herself; Elizabeth had flown her signal of sympathy, and if there was no answer, no surrendering desire to

confide, there was nothing for her to do but to look on. . . . Yet she had to make one more flutter with her flag.

She opened her arms, and her heart was in her voice.

“Margaret,” she said, and again, “Oh, Margaret,” but no answer came. The girl did not want her.

Margaret turned round with a glance at the clock.

“I must be going in a few minutes,” she said. “I’ve got some luggage to pick up at home. But there’s one thing more I want to say. You’re a great friend of Lady Ambleside’s, I know, and what I want you to tell me, if you can, is that you’re sure that . . . that she didn’t intend what has happened to happen. I know Jim used to be in love with her, and I want to feel sure that she didn’t mean to get him back. When I went to Garth with my mother the other day, Lady Ambleside knew that my engagement was broken off, and she was charming and sympathetic about it. She said neither too little nor too much, and she never asked why I had broken it off. She seemed just to be very kind and sorry. Now, you know her, was she sincere?”

This suggestion, to Elizabeth’s loyalty, seemed a monstrous one. She was incapable of believing any shred or shadow of it.

“Why, of course she was sincere!” she said. “What faintest reason have you for thinking otherwise?”

The girl hesitated a moment.

“I don’t think I know any,” she said. “Thanks, Aunt Elizabeth.”

It was natural enough, Elizabeth thought, after Margaret had gone, that this girl, in spite of the affection which existed between them, had sealed herself up like that. There was the sundering of age, first of all, and also, more potently, she was in a pit of misery, where she wanted to be alone; sympathy just now would make the blackness more intense. Naturally, Margaret would get over it (but it was no use telling her that now) for it was the prerogative of youth to be recuperative and resilient; it was when you grew old that the divine elasticity perished. She felt that she herself would be helpless under such a stroke, whereas younger fibres would erect themselves again. She had no doubt, either, that Margaret was incontestably right in breaking the engagement off when she saw that he was not in love with her, but was still in love with Evie. The very fact that he had stayed on with Evie after Margaret had gone proved that. It proved also that he had no desire to break the chain. But Evie surely, monstrous though Margaret’s suggestion had been, ought never to have allowed him to stop on; his very

willingness to do so ought to have made her bundle him off. Or was she utterly unaware that he was still in love with her?

She pulled herself sharply up; thoughts came into one's mind sometimes for which the devil was clearly responsible.

Walter came in from his work soon after the girl had gone. She heard the rattle of the latch, the brisk banging of the door, and her name cheerfully called. That was good; all the last week his spirits had been improving, and now he made a jubilant entry.

"Well, Lizzie, how goes it?" he said. "Any news?"

She looked at his beaming face.

"It's for me to ask you that," she said, "And I ask it with the conviction there is news. What has happened, Walter? Don't say nothing has happened, for I shan't believe you."

He kissed her.

"Good Lord, it is a relief," he said. "All this week I've been anticipating it, but I haven't allowed myself to throw my hat in the air till it was a certainty. We've found the capitalist who believes in the syndicate's property, and he's going to see it through. He signed the agreement to-day, and is responsible for all further preliminary expenses till the company's formed and we go to allotment. It's bound to be a success then; I have absolutely no doubts about that."

"Oh, my dear, how splendid," she said. "Why didn't you tell me what was going on?"

"Because I didn't want to raise your hopes as long as there was the slightest chance of their being dashed again," he said. "There may always be a hitch up to the last moment."

"And who is he?" she asked.

"Lord Ambleside; there's a surprise for you. It's Evie's doing, bless her. She gave the papers connected with our concern to his adviser, who took a favourable view of them."

"My dear, she is a good friend! You told me that it was I who exorcised devils for you, but I think it's she. You've not worn such a face since I came up."

He laughed.

“You should have seen it before you came,” he said.

She told him presently about her talk with Margaret. “Poor darling, she did care for him,” she said. “It was just that which made her break it off. But I’m puzzled, somehow, Walter. Why did he propose to her at all, if he still cared for Evie?”

“Perhaps he didn’t when he proposed to Margaret,” said Walter.

“And fell in love with her again afterwards?” asked Elizabeth.

“Why not? Why shouldn’t it have been recurrent like that malaria of mine?”

He got up, moving on springs. Margaret’s affairs clearly meant little to him just now.

“Or perhaps, if that doesn’t seem likely to you,” he said, “Jim when he proposed to Margaret was in love with both of them. A man can be in love with two women at the same time. A woman can’t do that, but a man can. Clever of him, but it’s a fact.”

“My dear, what nonsense,” she said. “He can’t be in love with either of them if he’s in love with both.”

He laughed again.

“And that can only happen in Ireland,” he said. “Or if you don’t like that, take the recurrent theory. Take anything you please, darling. The syndicate is off my mind, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

“Walter, do be serious a moment,” she said.

“I would if I could, but I can’t. Try me again after dinner. I shall have a bath, and wash off all my stains of anxiety. Don’t be surprised if you hear me singing in it.”

That did not surprise her; he was always like that, mercurial in his ups and downs. He told her more about the syndicate, the news about which flooded his whole horizon, and the fact that business was still as slack as ever in the City no longer affected his content and exhilaration. He was like a boy still in that; like a child even, whose whole nature is overcast with gloom if a visit to the dentist is in prospect, and who is one wash of sunshine if something pleasant is at hand. It was not in years alone, compared to herself, that he was so young . . .

And then for no reason that she could conjecture, his lamp went out, and when she left him to go to bed, he was absent-minded again, and silently

glowering at the dying fire.

CHAPTER II

It was Elizabeth who insisted on their proposing themselves for a week-end at Garth during November. Evie had written to her, saying that she and Walter had dropped her, and that she didn't deserve to be dropped. They really must come down to clear themselves of that foul aspersion; any week-end in November would do, and there would be shooting every Saturday. Let them, then, come on Friday; Walter could get away in the afternoon.

His unwillingness to go rather puzzled her. It wasn't that he disliked week-ends in the country, for he had himself proposed another one. But she felt right to insist about this, for it always did him good to be stirred up and made to see people, and for the last two or three weeks in town they had really been too hermetical. They had dined at home almost every night; he seemed to want to see nobody but her. But it would be very good for him to go; besides, Evie wanted them, and she would think it queer of them not to come, when the choice of four week-ends was given them. And she really had done him a very good turn over the matter of the syndicate; common gratitude, apart from the fact that she was so close a friend to both of them, made it incumbent on them to go. Eventually he had to yield, but he insisted that their stay should be limited to two nights, and that they should return to town on Sunday evening, so that he need not make that very early start on Monday. . . . It was odd, this reluctance of his to go to Garth, and his desire, when it was really forced on him, to make the visit as short as possible; Elizabeth could make nothing of it.

Garth was a couple of stations beyond Maychester; there they had to get out of the express and wait a quarter of an hour for a stopping train. The air of the late autumn afternoon was chilly, and instead of tramping the platform to keep warm, they walked away out of the station. The town, lying in its cup-shaped hollow, was already drowned in frosty shadow, but to the east the hillside above it, crowned with the level sweep of the high downs, still basked in the sunshine, and there aloft, minute but very distinct, cutting the sky-line, stood their house. The reflected sun blazed in its windows, as if some great illumination was lit within; there was a patch of bright colour from the flower-bed below the wall, and the big chestnut-tree, with its yellow foliage still clinging to it, gleamed with a golden flame.

“Oh, look, Elizabeth,” said he, pointing to it. “Why aren't we going home up the hill instead? Let's miss the train; I want to go home. There's a

caretaker there, and we'll buy some chops, and she shall cook them, and we'll have a cosy evening!"

It was a piece of nonsense, of course, on his part, but his words gave her a sudden pang of home-sickness. That twinkling-windowed house stood for so much; she had not expected to see it, and it was like some remote and vivid memory suddenly flashed into her mind.

"It does look nice and welcoming," she said. "We'll go there next weekend, shall we?"

"But I want to go now," said Walter.

"So do I, the blessed place. But we must get back to the station or we shall miss our train."

There were but half-a-dozen of them at Garth. Lord Ambleside, Evie lucidly explained, had felt obliged to go to Paris a couple of days ago, and very likely he would go on from there to the Riviera. The others were Helen Hylton and her husband, and Jim Cresswell.

"He proposed himself," Evie told Elizabeth, when, after tea, the others had made up a bridge table, "and of course I said 'Yes.' Poor Jim, I want to be nice to him."

She held out her hands to the blaze of the wood-fire, and settled herself in a chair.

"I haven't seen you," she said, "since Margaret jilted him. Yes, dear, jilted him, neither more nor less, and I should like to know what you think about it. Personally,—I'll tell you what I think first, for I think a good deal—personally I was very sorry; I like Jim, and I wish him well, and Margaret was cruel to him. Why did she do it? Did she find out, when it began to come near, that she couldn't face marriage as such? I think it must have been that. These athletic girls nowadays always remind me of that virgin pagan goddess who used to go hunting with her maidens. They are natural celibates; they don't want to be bothered with men at all. How I agree with them!"

She laughed.

"Diana, that was her name," she went on. "She was rather cruel too, for she turned into a stag that poor young man who saw her bathing, and then set her hounds on him. I expect that was revenge, not maidenly modesty. Probably she saw him coming, and took off her clothes in order to be looked

at, and since he didn't look at her at all, or with insufficient admiration, she was furious. There may be a parallel between her and Margaret, you know. Of course, Margaret didn't actually take off her clothes, but in the intimacy of their engagement she showed herself to him, and found he didn't adore enough. And then she wondered whether she was in love with him, and found she wasn't, and the prospect became terribly embarrassing. She preferred Cambridge, and making cocoa in her friends' rooms, and golf and hockey and sleeping by herself. So she chucked him, just as Diana set her dogs on the other offender. She wasn't in love with him."

There was something in this brilliant little sketch which jarred on Elizabeth. And, apart from that, it wasn't a true sketch.

"Oh, I think you're wrong about Margaret," she said. "In fact, I'm sure you're wrong. She was in love with him."

Evie stretched out her hand with fingers wide, and then drew them together again, as if softly grasping something.

"She can't have been," she said. "What woman has ever, of her own accord, given up a man when she was in love with him? We don't do it; it isn't done."

She paused a moment.

"I know what's in the mind of both of us," she said, "so let's be indelicate or sensible, the two are precisely the same, and say it straight out, for it may bear on what we're discussing. Margaret knew that Jim had been in love with me; I fancy he told her so himself. But surely that, to any well-constituted and vicious female (we're all vicious except you, Elizabeth), surely that was a reason the more for taking him, just to score off me. He was willing to marry her; he had proposed to her."

"No, it wasn't quite that," said Elizabeth. "Margaret thought he was still in love with you. So she couldn't help herself, she couldn't marry him. How could she, if she believed, rightly or wrongly, that the woman he really cared for was you?"

In the shifting firelight, Evie's face wore a hundred expressions. She was radiant, she glowed with some intense inward vitality, and again the blaze died down, and shadows outlined themselves at the corners of her mouth, and the lips seemed to muse. Then the flame leaped again from some new place on the hearth, and gave her face a malevolent and sinister aspect. These expressions chased each other over her face, like clouds on a spring day, and which was real, which showed her truly, the sunlight or the cloud?

Or were they all chance effects of firelight, superficial and external illuminations of her features?

The sinister aspect was on her face now.

“Ah, you’re too idealistic altogether,” she said. “We aren’t all angels; we marry and are given in marriage to begin with, which we are assured is never done among the heavenly hosts. . . . And our marriages are imperfect to suit us imperfect creatures. If a girl is in love with a man, she grabs him if she possibly can, and it adds spice to her dish of possession that he wants somebody else. No two people ever loved equally; it isn’t in nature. An equality of perfect indifference is the only compassible ideal. That’s why my marriage has been such a brilliant success.”

Evie had been dancing in the darkness like a will-o’-the-wisp. She appeared now here, now there, and to Elizabeth, slower in processes of thought, and steadfast in the general principles that evoked them, was feeling bewildered. Had Evie a quantity of masks which she rapidly adjusted? . . . But at this conclusion, unexpected though it was, Elizabeth felt herself orientated again; she knew where she was, she could discern through these flashing moods an image of Evie that was already familiar to her. She recalled the day when they had sat in her garden at Maychester, and Evie had told her about her marriage and its outrageous sequels. She had felt then, and felt now, when this sudden allusion to it leaped out (though it leaped out like a serpent’s tongue) that all mockery and derision must be forgiven to one whose heart had been seared as Evie’s had been. She was like a sick child, tormented by blind pain; you could not blame it for feeling wicked, the weariness of ache made it so. You could not help yearning towards it and trying to comfort it.

“Ah, you poor darling,” she said quietly.

The flame leaped high on the hearth and vanished again. That brightness had illuminated Evie’s face, but with some queer distortion. It seemed that her mouth was set into hard lines of hostility. But was that an illusion?

“I don’t know why you pity me,” she said. “I hate pity; there’s always some element of condescension in it.”

She paused a moment.

“Ah, what nonsense I’m talking,” she said. “I’m a darling, you’re a darling, and we’re all darlings. And you’ve got that delicious gift of idealizing the people you like. I’m exactly the opposite; whenever I find myself liking anybody I say to myself ‘Steady on; be cautious. You’ll find

something damnable about her soon.' But let's put on more lights; firelight always makes me feel old and wicked."

Evie rose and switched on a couple of lamps and some concealed illumination that shone on the pictures. From the dark wall opposite Elizabeth there suddenly leaped out a portrait of Evie's husband. He sat hunched up in his chair, very small, very much alive, with eyes a-glitter, and thin-lipped mouth a little open; old, ever so old, and very much amused. Whether Evie had intended or not to bring him so vividly into the room, she stood looking at him now.

"A shocking likeness, isn't it?" she said. "Literally speaking, doesn't the likeness shock you? That man paints souls, doesn't he? You ought to get him to paint Walter."

She switched off the picture-lights again, and, presumably, that which they had illuminated.

"My dear, how well Walter looks," she said, "and how happy. I was so delighted to be able—oh, perhaps he hasn't told you about that."

"Your good offices about the syndicate?" asked Elizabeth. "Indeed he has."

"I thought I had better make sure," said Evie. "Ambleside so often does kind things to other people's wives, which he tells me nothing about. . . . O me! What a beast I am! Well, I was delighted to do it, and of course I knew really that Walter must have told you about it. . . . Why shouldn't he? Poor Walter! when I saw him last in London he was terribly depressed about the syndicate's prospects . . ."

The door into the smoking-room opened as she spoke, and Walter strolled in. She went on without pause.

"Ah, here he is," she said. "Well, Walter, have you been winning? No, don't tell me; I don't want to know, any more than when I say 'How do you do?' I want to know about your health. It was only the opening of conversation with benighted people who have been playing bridge. How I hate cards! They've got such silly faces, and the knaves look like Sunday-school teachers. Sit down and talk. You mustn't sit on my knee, which I should like you to do, because it would shock Elizabeth, and you mustn't sit on hers, or I shall envy you. I've been shocking her already, but she only pities me for it."

That was a harmlessly light summary, but what of the tone, the colour of it? There was something veiled, something hostile.

“And Evie hates being pitied,” said Elizabeth.

“I do. Surely pity is most distantly akin to love, for the people who pity don’t even like the objects of their pity. We all dislike the unfortunate. ‘The lame and the blind that are hated of David’s soul!’ How wonderfully human of David! And how, most particularly, we dislike the people we have injured. And the converse holds. I’ve liked Walter ever so much more since I did him a good turn about the syndicate. . . . And how you all chatter except me. We must go and dress, or we shall keep Mr. Hylton waiting for his dinner. My dear, he is so greedy. I adore greedy people, because they enjoy themselves so hugely, and make no effort to conceal it. If some particularly pleasant dish is coming, Mr. Hylton’s like a girl who has just been married; a little nervous, but full of rapture.”

The brilliance of the sunset that Elizabeth and Walter had seen from outside Maychester station proved forsworn, and a streaming gale from the south-west put all idea of shooting out of the question. But the party was a small and intimate one, and its members chattered or read, or knocked balls about the billiard-table with no sense of the corporate duty of amusing each other, but only the individual advantage of amusing themselves. The general group kept splitting up, and reforming itself in a different crystallization; there were duets and trios, and occasional hermits. And yet below the surface of the trivialities and tranquillities there were currents moving; some straw, idly floating, seemed to be caught in an unseen eddy and whirled away, while another, its neighbour, felt no touch of that subaqueous force, but continued idly twirling.

There had been queer little happenings, things so insignificant in themselves, that, except for the consciousness of moving currents, Elizabeth would never have noticed them. On the plea of a letter or two to write, she had made a hermitage of the library, and now sat before her blank paper, puzzling and pushing the items of the declining day about, as if to find where they fitted. And now meaningless, perhaps, they all were. . . . After lunch, for instance, Walter had said that, whatever the weather, he must go out for a sanitary buffeting, and Evie, applauding the English insanity of the idea, had said she would go with him. The others had pronounced themselves sane. Then when Evie suggested that the maniacs should make a start, he looked at the streaming panes, and said. “Really, I don’t think it is possible; the rain is so much heavier.” So Jim had offered his escort to Evie, and now she agreed with Walter. Then she had asked Walter to play billiards,

and he had made some lame excuse. It was rather rude; Elizabeth could not make out what was wrong with him. He seemed to be avoiding his hostess.

What was wrong with Jim, however, was clear enough. If ever a man was in love, he was; he was aware of her, whatever his occupation, with that subtle consciousness which a man has for one woman alone, and which, though he tries to hide it, he continually betrays. Evie must know that, no woman is ever ignorant of it, and yet she professed to think it a mistake that Margaret had not married him. In spite of herself, Elizabeth could not help wondering whether Evie really thought that, or whether she was not better pleased that Margaret had made the other decision. . . . And why, while the engagement was still valid, had she asked him to stay with her, and let him stop on after the girl had left? Whether Evie and Jim, in that attachment which was still recent, had ever been lovers, Elizabeth could not tell. If they had she could understand Evie's wanting him to marry, supposing she no longer cared for him, or wanting to prevent his marriage if she did. But somehow she could not believe that Evie ever had cared for him with surrender, or that she cared for him now.

The room was already getting dark with the fading of the day, and Elizabeth walked across to the door to turn on the light for the writing of those letters which she had not yet begun. She could not account for this sense that there were stealthy movements going on and hidden currents flowing; perhaps the whole impression was subjective like the sense of psychical tension before a merely physical storm. Little wonder that she felt the atmospheric disturbance, for the gale was thundering by, driving sheets of rain against the windows, and looking out she saw the volleying white squalls, and the struggle of the writhing trees. Then out of the dusk and the veils of rain there emerged two figures, man and woman, leaning against the wind. Once the gale stopped them altogether, and he put his arm in hers to help her along. So Walter and Evie had made up their minds to go out for their buffeting after all.

She heard the front-door bang, and went out to meet them. There they stood, dripping and flushed. . . . And surely all this had happened before in some shadowy and prefiguring manner. Then she recollected just such a return of Walter and Margaret from a walk on just such a day of winter gale, while she had sat at home and looked on the face of her dead youth. And, just as then, there was the bright-eyed gleam about the two dripping figures, which she lacked.

"A lovely walk," said Evie, "and quite too beastly for words. You ought to have come out, Elizabeth."

She knew what Walter's answer would be before he made it. "Lizzie's not such a fool," he said. "Are you, darling?"

Though Walter had intended to leave Garth on Sunday night, so as to avoid the early start on Monday, it was easily that Evie persuaded him next morning to put off his departure. It was churlish and unsociable, she told him, to prefer a solitary evening in town to spending it here. She could send them into Maychester; they would have no change and no wait there.

They had strayed after breakfast into her sitting-room. Walter had not seen it yet, and it reminded him, in its general arrangement, of some room he knew; the search for identification stirred idly in his head.

"Yes; I should like to stop," he said, "if Elizabeth doesn't want to get back."

Evie gave a little bubble of laughter; the idea of Elizabeth leaving him amused her.

"Oh, Elizabeth won't desert her lamb," she said.

She saw Walter's eyebrows pull themselves together, as if he did not quite like that, and without pause she corrected the impression she had made.

"You are her lamb," she said, "and she's the most delicious shepherdess. I love seeing you and her together; she's your lamb, too. There's a tenderness and guardianship about you both. What embarrassing conversation for you! But that's settled, then; the lambs will go up to the London market on Monday. How do you like my room?"

The identification established itself.

"Why, it's arranged just like our drawing-room at the flat," he said. "Piano by the window, sofa opposite the fire, bookcase by the door, chairs just so. And you arranged that."

"Did I?" she asked. "Oh, yes, I do remember pulling things about for you. It is rather like. So you can sit down and think you're there, which is what you really want. Or are you going to church? No, don't let us go; let's talk very animatedly and forget the time. Elizabeth and Mr. Hylton are going, that's a creditable percentage out of six. He always goes to church; he says it gives him an appetite."

"I should have thought he had got one already," remarked Walter.

“Well, he has two then on Sundays. . . . Yes, this is like your room. So sit in your usual chair, and I’ll sit in Elizabeth’s, till she comes back from church. I haven’t had a word with you yet. Oh, I know we went for a walk yesterday, but the gale made one shout, and even then one could hear nothing. Tell me what you are going to do these next weeks.”

“Oh, London. I’m there till Christmas. Then a few days with Lizzie and Tony at Maychester.”

“You shouldn’t call her Lizzie. Small, bustling people are Lizzie. She’s so immensely Elizabeth. Large calm people with hearts are Elizabeth. Walter, I do admire her so much. How lucky you are! And people like her never grow old! I suppose it’s happiness that keeps them young.”

She felt that his silence which succeeded her words was not giving assent to what she said. When he spoke, this impression was confirmed.

“Of course she’s wonderful,” he said. “Who could guess that she was nearly fifty?”

Evie knew she had got on the track which she had long suspected ran through his mind. It was overgrown with flowering vegetation; bushes gay with bird-song and butterflies overhung it, but it was there, and at intervals it appeared. She meant to explore it alone, so to speak, at present, but some day he would go with her and show her more of it, pushing aside the growths that concealed it. He hardly knew it was there himself as yet.

“What have years got to do with it?” she said. “When she’s sixty she’ll be just the same. You and I are much older than her in some ways, Walter. Actually you are ten years younger, or twelve is it? But physical age has so little to do with real age.”

She could not have spoken more subtly; to prophesy perpetual youth for Elizabeth was just the way to make him realize how much older she was than he. Had he not said himself that she was a wonder? That showed the track of the hidden path in his mind.

“Yes, but physical age does exist,” he said. “There is such a thing. I don’t now want to play Rugby football any more, and in ten years from now I shan’t go out in a howling blizzard as we did yesterday. I should catch cold or get rheumatics if I did.”

He was at ease with her, that was something. She shifted the ground a little.

“I hate the idea of age,” she said, “and youth is so short. We’re getting on, you know, Walter. At forty one is on the edge of the shadow, the physical shadow, I mean. At least women are; men, lucky dogs, remain young so much longer. I’ve got five years more, that’s all, and then I shall consider myself an old woman. So will everybody else.”

She let him assimilate that and draw any inference he chose. Probably he would not know he had drawn any, but one day he would find it neatly docketed in his mind, and know that while she was speaking of herself, he had been applying what she said to Elizabeth.

“I shall surrender at once when my time comes,” she went on. “I shan’t expect any man to look at me with that particular glance; at least, if he does I shall know he is only being polite. And yet we women are such asses! You see old hags painted and eyebrowed and rouged; probably they think they still look seductive, but the wish is father to the thought, or grandmother to the thought. They don’t really look any younger than the others who let wrinkles gather and hair grow white. When I’m forty, Walter, I shall look to you to tell me if there’s any sign of optimistic sprightliness about me. Men never desire anything but youth, which is inimitable. Why should they?”

He laughed.

“I’ll promise,” he said. “You’ll receive a post-card from me one morning with ‘No ogling’ written on it.”

“That will be friendly of you. I count on you to do that. And what a relief it will be not to expect anything more from life, but just drift along as a quiet, harmless old frump till they send the polished oak box with brass handles, and screw the lid on.”

She intentionally spoke more as if she was talking to herself than to him, and that gave sincerity to her words. He looked up surprisedly.

“That’s not like you,” he said.

She was silent a moment, then laughed.

“Isn’t it, indeed?” she said. “I wish it wasn’t. Anyhow it’s not like you. I wonder if you realize what an essentially happy mind you’ve got. Of course you don’t; none of us know what we’ve got, only what we want. But you don’t want anything you haven’t got; you’re married to the woman you adore, you’ve got health, you’ve got a son. If you and Elizabeth weren’t such darlings, I should be wildly envious of you. As it is, I only stand and wave my handkerchief, as when the King and Queen go by.”

She saw the shadow of an unspoken thought cross his face.

“Yes, we’re awfully happy,” he said.

“Of course you are. But I wish Elizabeth liked me.”

That was a surprise, to him; Evie always had plenty of surprises, he remembered.

“Like you?” he said. “Why you’re the greatest friends.”

“But there’s something in me she can’t bear. I feel it every now and then like a draught, even when she’s being most angelic to me. And there’s something about her I can’t understand, and that’s her almost inhuman goodness. Her letting me be friends with you, for instance.”

She got up, and turned on him that beautiful radiant face, that was still so marvellously young. It seemed quite unchanged from the days when he had adored it with all the fire of first love. No line had marred it, no shadow had crept into the corners of those heavy-lidded eyes, which now so gaily and softly met his.

“It’s lovely of her,” she said, “and it’s no less lovely of you. I believe you have really forgiven me for my atrocity, and have not only forgotten it in the happiness which has been yours ever since. . . . There, that’s said. I just wanted you to know how I treasure that.”

She slipped down on to the hearth-rug, and suddenly he remembered how she always used to sit on the hearth-rug whenever possible.

“How frightened I was after I had asked you to that dance of mine last Christmas,” she said. “I expected to get an answer that would freeze me to the marrow. I can’t help wondering why Elizabeth came. I suspect her of a touch of femininity. She wanted to show herself and you, handsome and happy and triumphant to the ancient jilt. That’s just what I should have done in her place, bless her, but she should have danced with you the entire evening, looking slightly over my head when we came near each other.”

Walter gave a shout of laughter.

“I confess that’s partly why I came,” he said, “and how ludicrous that seems now. I wonder if that was Elizabeth’s reason, too. Do ask her.”

“Never, a thousand nevers,” said Evie. “It’s so unwise to ask why a pleasant thing has happened. It happened; that’s enough. Grab it, my dear, and suck the utmost sweetness out of it. But never ask why; the reason may turn it sour.”

She had shifted her seat on the rug, and now leaned back against the arm of the sofa on which he sat. The heat of the fire drew some faint fragrance from her hair, and that was familiar to him.

She stretched out her hands to the blaze.

“Oh, that’s the wise thing,” she said. “If the cup has in it the wine you desire, ask nothing. Take it ever so carefully, and put your lips to it cautiously, and then drain every drop of it. Really I think people are afraid of pleasure; they can’t believe in it, and they distrust it. As if what you wanted wasn’t sure to be good for you! We’ve all got a drop of that horrible Puritan blood in us, which sees—does blood see?—which sees a snare in beauty and a temptation in happiness. How rarely the spirit of delight comes! And when it does flutter near us, we most of us say, ‘Shoo! you nasty bird! Go away!’ And it invariably goes.”

Every moment and in every word and gesture she was reminding him of the bewildering variety of her, which long ago he had known. Yet it was not so much memory of what she had been that occupied him, as realization of what she was. She had talked of her coffin, and had canonized Elizabeth; she had envisaged old age, and now she was lyrical about the spirit of delight. And in them all she manifested herself; these were genuine epiphanies, and gloomy pensiveness was as much she as the froth of her nonsense and the glitter of her high spirits. She was a perpetual surprise.

“Go on,” he said, “don’t stop for a moment.”

There was the crackle of wheels on the gravel outside, and she looked round.

“But they’re back from church already,” she said, “there can’t have been a sermon. Dear me, how quickly I find time passes, when I talk without the slightest cessation. Others find it longer, I’m told. Ah, and I promised to have a chat with Jim. You shouldn’t have made yourself so fascinating, Walter. I wish you’d tell me what to do with Jim. He is so devoted, and he is such a bore. The two often go together. Does devotion entail a duty towards the devotee?”

They had both risen as the motor passed the window, and now she stood close, facing him.

“Yes, the duty of dismissal,” he said.

“But that’s so unkind. Besides—my dear, what is it that makes me so frank with you?—besides, though he is a bore, I love the smell of incense.”

He looked at her quite gravely.

“Isn’t Elizabeth’s incense and mine enough?” he asked.

She held the lapels of his coat a moment, then put his tie straight.

“You’re dears,” she said.

Business in the City showed no sign of being more business-like, and a week of fogs seemed to symbolize its stagnation. Walter came home every afternoon, grimy and dispirited, and conscious, after the flat, unprofitable day, of a growing distaste for the quiet evenings in the flat, to which, on Elizabeth’s return from the country last September, he had looked forward, almost with craving, as an antidote to that which, like recurring fever, had begun to ferment in his blood. He had refused to face it then, saying that there was nothing wrong with him which the presence of Elizabeth would not cure; now he had to face the fact that her efficacy had not proved itself. She was exactly what she had always been, quite irreplaceable and part of himself, but she failed to touch a hunger that gnawed him. His devotion to her was in no way changed, but its existence did not spread beyond itself, it affected nothing outside it.

But in other cells of his brain there was a theatre of thought, lit and ready, and there continually was rehearsed, like some sort of introductory scene to a drama that would follow, the talk, scarcely ever intimate, which had taken place between him and Evie at church-time on that Sunday morning down at Garth. She had abounded in eulogies on Elizabeth, and now to him their truth, which he eagerly recognized, had the staleness of truism; not only did he grant it, but he took it for granted. He could hear Evie utter them still, in that inimitable husky voice, the timbre of which rang in his ears, but now, even while he subscribed to them, he knew that they had evoked in him replies that he had left unspoken, and thoughts which he tried to leave unthought.

She had applauded Elizabeth’s youth, which sprang from happiness. So, too, did he, but that youth was not the youth of the young, with whom body and spirit were in harmony, and no one knew that better than Elizabeth herself. She, too, would have concurred in the principle of his unspoken rejoinders; often had she told him that he wanted, so rightly, the stimulus of youth about him; witness the arrival of Margaret at their hermitage last year. But Margaret, he knew now, would not bring to him that stimulus, nor be an antidote to the secret fever.

Presently, in those quiet evenings with Elizabeth at their flat, the scene of the talk he had had with Evie was no longer set at Garth, but in this very room which she had arranged for Elizabeth's advent. That gave the remembrance of it an extraordinary vividness. Just there Evie sat, where Elizabeth sat now, on the corner of the sofa in front of the fire, and often Elizabeth would get up and seat herself on the hearth-rug as Evie had done, and lean against the arm of it. She was taking Evie's place in this bright theatre of thought, she was Evie's understudy, and he would let his knee rest against her shoulder, with a mute instinctive familiarity. She put her arm underneath it, and encircled his leg, and he figured to himself that it was Evie who did that, and at the thought his heart beat a little faster. That was a treachery, and he knew it, and often he shook it from him. Sometimes he permitted and parleyed with it, and his hand went round her shoulder, and she looked up from her reading with a smile. "Bed-time, is it?" she would say.

So the clock ticked the hours of the evening away, and made an end of another of these November days. They had gone down, according to their plan, for a picnic Sunday at their house above Maychester, but whereas, a week before, the sight of the windows blazing in the sunset had given him the sense that here was the old-desired serenity, now he was eager to get there because Garth was within reach, and it might easily be a natural employment for Sunday afternoon to drive over there. He did not mean to propose it, and as a conscientious token of that he had taken his golf-clubs with him, and projected a day on the links. But Sunday dawned in heavy rain, and after a house-bound morning, it was Elizabeth who suggested that they should go over to Garth. The alternative was to continue to keep to the house; there was no plausible reason for not falling in with her plan. So they went, to find a big party assembled, and Evie absorbed in hospitable duties. He hardly got a word with her until they were on the point of departure again, and then she told him that she would be up in London for a night or two during the week, and would ring him up and propose some diversion. "That will be lovely," she said, as he rose to go. "And I took your advice, Walter. The duty of dismissal, do you remember?"

They returned that night to town, and every evening when he came in he went to the telephone to see if some message from her had come during the day. Elizabeth suggested the very obvious course of ringing her up, to see if she had come up to London, but some cross-purposed impulse led him to say, "Oh, she'll ring us up, if she wants to see us." Finally, at the end of the week, he made the inquiry himself, and learned from her house that she had been up, but had gone back into the country again. And the hunger he was

struggling to repress grew towards famine. The quiet evenings became intolerable; not for a moment did Elizabeth cease to be herself; he could not picture himself without her dearness and her devotion, but if he let his imagination have its way with him, she became a mere symbol, a mere impersonation . . .

It was far better to be diverted and occupied than idly to acquiesce in the stealthy invasion that was beginning to beleaguer him. In that Elizabeth enthusiastically concurred; she had learned a year ago that solitude with her could not supply his natural needs, and now they began to entertain and be entertained again, and to fill up vacant evenings with the theatre. Physically, she was often tired, but he wanted amusement, so rightly, after his day in the City, where, she conjectured, there was still not much comfort. She must be always with him; he would not go out without her. It was as if she was his mascot, a charm to keep off the ghostly enemies of desire.

So, out of the hunger of his heart for another, there came for her at a time when she had told herself that winter was at hand, this brief Indian summer, that breathed of June. He needed her again, his arms were round her, and his heart beat on hers, and from his lips came the whispers that had long been mute. And yet strange and dim misgivings were mingled with her rapture; she felt sometimes as if his whispered love was not addressed to *her*. She swept such ludicrous and phantasmal notions from her, and they dwindled to a mote in the sunshine of her passion, to the hoot of a distant owl in the silence of the summer night. Was it not enough for her that his was the tousled crisp-haired head on which the dying firelight gleamed, and hers the bosom that pillowed it?

With mid-December came her departure for Maychester. Tony had come up from school in the morning, and Walter took a half-day's holiday for the purpose of family jubilation. There was a visit to the Zoo, a sumptuous tea, and he went to the station with them to see them off. There was still another week for him in town before he joined them for his Christmas holiday.

He lingered by the door of their carriage, elbows on the sill, till the train started.

“Why can't I come, too?” he said. “I don't like being a bachelor. Or is it a widower?”

“It's neither,” said Elizabeth. “I refuse to be either a spinster or a corpse.”

The whistle blew and he stood back.

“Take care of your mother, Tony,” he called, “and meet me at the station this day week.”

Elizabeth stood at the window and watched his face fade into the blur of the dim air.

CHAPTER III

He could not determine whether her departure was a regret or a relief. He cared for her tenderly and devotedly, he felt lonely and unorientated without her, drifting rudderless. The knowledge of her dearness to him was not enough, she had to be there if she was to be real to him, and if the vividness of her presence was even to make believe to supply what he now knew she could no longer give him. All this autumn he had been passionately trying to find it, and, not finding it, he as passionately assured himself that he was searching for what was carnally transient and unessential. She minted gold for him, and he asked her for the half-pence which she had not got. But without her his rudder was broken, and he drifted towards a dangerous coast.

There was relief as well. Though he believed that she knew nothing of the hunger that gnawed him, her love and her presence had become a reproach to him, and he was tired of that reproach. Where she had seen herself sitting secure and contented with him in the room of Evie's devising, he had seen it occupied with Evie and himself, and he wished her away. Sometimes he had let that fancy have its way with him, figuring her as an impersonation of Evie, and with increasing difficulty he had tried to cling to her presence because it was her own, to force himself to need her, to quench his hunger with her wholesome bread, only to find he was thirsty for the wine that was not hers. For the present there was a remission of these phantom substitutions, but when the remission was over, what welcome would he be able to force himself to give to their renewal when he joined her in the country at Christmas? And what was to happen (not now, not this week nor the next), in the continuance and certain aggravation of these conditions? For the desire that was alight in him was no wayward sudden attraction such as all men knew, which, whether starved or gratified, would certainly cool down again. If it had been that, his loyalty to Elizabeth would certainly have tried to put it from him, but even if it had come to fruition, that sort of thing was not wreckingly serious. He would have been sorry, probably he would have confessed himself to Elizabeth, and gone back to her with the forgiveness he knew she would accord him.

But this reawakened passion for Evie was something utterly different; his heart had returned to the ardent allegiance of his youth. She had treated him atrociously then, she had dropped the devotion which she had already accepted, like a tedious note, which required no answer, into the waste-paper

basket, and now, so to speak, he had found it there as fresh and unfaded as on the day when she had tossed it away. So this was no passing fancy of his; it was the old splendour itself which had blossomed again. It was not likely to fade, for it had survived, uninjured and vital, the cruellest blow that could have been dealt it. It was in vain that he had tried to arm himself against its invasion, by telling himself that he loved a woman who had betrayed and flouted him; that defence was like a paper lance against the terrible army with banners. What she had done mattered no more than the hat she wore. . . . And he knew she was fond of him, she encouraged and welcomed him.

He had just come back from his office; for all the business he had done, he might as well have stopped at home. There were but two days more left of his solitary week; then he would join Elizabeth at Maychester for the holiday. The future, as far as the daily circumstances of life went, stretched out in front of him with the clear precision of a landscape before a threatening storm, hard and detailed and exact. There would be four days down in the country; then he would be alone, as he was now, till the end of Tony's holidays, when Elizabeth would join him again. They would be here till Easter, and the arrangements of the Christmas holidays would repeat themselves. All was clear and quiet and sunny, but all the time the black cloud would have been overspreading the sky. . . .

There was a postman's knock at the door; postman it must be, for no ring at the bell followed it, and he went out to see if anything requiring attention had come for him. There was a letter from a house-agent, asking if he would entertain the idea of letting his flat to a very "superior" tenant, from the middle of January to the middle or end of February. The only other communication was from the business-manager of the syndicate, to tell him that certain details with regard to one of their patents were still unsatisfactory, and that these must be perfected before it was advisable to float the public company. The inventor was confident of solving his difficulties, but he expected that at least three months' work would be necessary.

That was disappointing; there had been one postponement already, and this second one would make it the middle of March before Walter could hope for any money from that quarter. When once the company was launched, he would draw a salary as director of the company and, as member of the syndicate, receive a considerable payment in cash as well as in shares. But he foresaw that in the meantime he would certainly be short of money; there was the quarter's rent to pay at Christmas, with, he was afraid,

a fine garniture of bills to be discharged, and after that there would be current household expenses up to March. . . . It was odd that by the same post there should arrive an inquiry about letting. But he would have to consult Elizabeth about that, for this contingency had been discussed before between them, and she had proposed to let the house at Maychester instead. It was doubtful, however, if they could get a tenant there, whereas here, at any rate, was a nibble from a “superior” one. That would certainly be lost unless he moved in the matter at once, for the intending lessee would suit himself elsewhere. If he let the flat, he, of course, would stay at his club again, and she remain in the country. And he definitely wondered whether Evie would be in town from the middle of January onwards.

He knew he ought to consult Elizabeth, but there was no time to consult her, if he was to take advantage of this nibble, and his mind fluttered this way and that. He picked up from the fireplace the house-agent’s letter that he had thrown there, and even as he uncreased it there came a tinkle from the telephone just outside, and he went to it.

The transmitted voice had the timbre of the speaker’s.

“Is that Mr. Langdon’s?” she said. “Is Mr. Langdon in? I am——”

Walter felt his heart leap.

“You needn’t say who you are,” he said.

“Ah, Walter,” said she. “How nice to hear your voice. Look here, will you and Elizabeth take pity on me, and give me dinner? I was up for the day, but I’ve got more things to do than I can get through, and I have to stop till to-morrow. But say quite firmly if it isn’t convenient.”

“Elizabeth can’t take pity on you,” he said, “because she’s at Maychester, and I’m alone. In fact, it will be you who’ll take pity if you’ll come and dine. There’s a pheasant; you sent it yourself.”

“Ah, that’s lovely of you. We’ll have a good talk. Eight? Don’t make it later, because I’m hungry. All well, Walter?”

“Splendid,” he said.

“That’s more than I am. You’ll have to cheer me up.”

“See if I don’t,” he answered.

He must not allow himself to think; if he reflected on what he had done, he would realize the madness of it. If he looked at it at all, he must look at it superficially, and tell himself how perfectly natural it was that when Evie

proposed herself, he should welcome her. Besides, the thing was done; he could not call her up again, and say that after all he was unable to have her to dinner, for the ordinary rules of social behaviour forbade that. But a more potent inhibitive reason was his moral incapability. Like many well-meaning people who have an upright intention in the conduct of their lives, and who do not look on adultery as an innocent amusement, and faithlessness as a fad, and who would not go out to search for temptation, he made no step to avoid it when it came winging towards him.

It was a mere waste of joy then to let any scruple cast a shadow on the brightness of her coming. His welcome must be materially expressed, and he saw his cook, who guaranteed a very proper little dinner. Then the drawing-room must be groomed and tidied up, for it wore the casual appearance of bachelor occupation. There must be flowers, and he went out himself to procure them from a neighbouring shop, mimosa in feathery branches and a bunch of hot-house roses for the dining-room table. She loved violets, and there must be violets, but none were to be had here, and he tried another shop, where he obtained them. When he returned it was time to dress, and he was scarcely ready before he heard the door-bell.

“But this is fun,” she said. “My dear, what delicious flowers! Bachelors, such as you temporarily are, always have the best of everything. Walter, the moment I knew I could come and dine with you, I began to cheer up. It was nice of you.”

She looked round the room.

“Yes, it certainly is like my room at Garth,” she said. “That gives rather a depressing idea of my inventiveness; it looks as if I could only arrange a room in one way. After dinner I shall sit on the hearth-rug and you on the sofa, and there’ll be nobody coming back from church to interrupt us. Dinner? Hurrah! I told you I was hungry.”

She had brought into the room not only all that it had lacked during his solitary occupancy, but all that Elizabeth had never given it. It seemed to him that while they were dining, the ferment of her presence continued to bubble there, so that when they returned to it, it was to an atmosphere impregnated with her. All dinner through she had been at her lightest, with stories of Christmas shopping, and the inimitable stupidity of dressmakers, and now, when they were back again, it was not Elizabeth’s place on the hearth-rug that she occupied but her own.

“Ah, this is cosy and happy,” she said. “Often, I suppose, you and Elizabeth spend your evenings here, not caring to go out. Why, indeed,

should you? One only goes out to find distraction, and here you get all that you would hate to be distracted from. I'm a wretched substitute for her, I know, but you'll have her again, won't you, in two days?"

"Yes, I'm going down the day after to-morrow," said he.

"And I to-morrow. There's a houseful coming for Christmas, thank Heaven for that. It makes me ache sometimes to think that there are people—you and Elizabeth, for instance—who are completely happy alone, whereas to make my life even tolerable, I have to fill it with people I don't care two straws about. Fancy being alone with Ambleside! I'm bound to say that he would hate it fully as much as I."

She drew up her knees and clasped her hands round them.

"It frightens me to think what I should feel if he died," she said. "I don't let myself wish him dead; I don't wish anybody dead, except myself now and then, but if I'm off my guard, how my heart leaps at the thought that I should never see him again. But we won't think of it; I came here to pass a couple of cheerful, forgetful hours, and it would be a terrible waste of our evening to let any thought of him disturb it. I made my bed, and I must lie on it; it serves me right. Say you're sorry for me, Walter, and then we'll have done with it."

He leaned a little forward.

"You know I'm sorry that there should be anything in the world to hurt you," he said. "But then, you don't like pity."

She turned and looked up at him.

"Who told you that?" she said. "Ah, let me think; it must have been Elizabeth. I remember telling her that I didn't like it. But what I didn't tell her—is it horrid of me to tell you?—was that I don't like the pity of a saint. It's cold; it doesn't understand."

"I'm a sinner, then?" asked Walter.

"You're human. I could confess my sins to you because you would understand. But never could I confess them to that dear Elizabeth of yours. I don't believe you do either. Or probably you've got no sins to confess. You're good because you're happy. Life wafts you along ever so smoothly, but for me it's a succession of tugs and jolts. Oh, I wonder—there's no harm in wondering, is there?—I wonder what would have happened to us by now if years ago I hadn't behaved like a brute beast to you. Should we be such friends as we are at this moment, an old married couple, purring and

peaceful? Or should we be spitting and scratching at each other? No one will ever know.”

Walter felt something give way in his control; an instinctive inhibition relaxed suddenly.

“Oh, my God, what made you do it?” he cried.

There was silence. He did not realize what his words implied till they were spoken. Now the implication was clear enough to her as well as to him, and in silence they regarded it.

It was what Evie had expected; there was nothing surprising to her in it; but it pleased her. What she considered now, as she sat there perfectly still, with him as still as her, was whether she wanted it. She was not sure; certainly she cared for him, even as she had cared for him eleven years ago, or she would never have contemplated taking him, and now his value was enhanced by the knowledge that she would be taking him from a woman who loved him. His snapped ejaculation was to her like a flag of surrender waved from the very citadel, and she made no doubt that if she marched forward the gates would be opened for her entry. Or were the garrison inside still not of one mind? Had they better be left to fight it out among themselves till the inevitable end came? Above all, did she want him?

She knew that on a smile or a word from her his arms would be round her. But it was very pleasant as it was. She was going back to Garth tomorrow, and he the day after to Elizabeth, and to him both her absence and Elizabeth’s presence would only make him the hungrier for her. She was sure she risked nothing by delay.

She reached out her hand for a cigarette, steadying it on his knee as he gave her a light.

“Why did I do it?” she said. “I suppose it was because I didn’t love you. But I’ve paid for that, haven’t I?”

She could not have spoken more skilfully. There was a challenge in her words, which, if he was entirely hers, he could not help taking up.

“And haven’t I?” he said.

“No, Walter,” she said. “You’ve been paid. You have been exceedingly happy. Don’t be ungrateful for that.”

She turned towards him as she spoke, astonished to see the intense emotion in his face. Certainly he adored her, but something struggled with his adoration. How different, how vastly more attractive than the helpless

jelly-like surrender of Jim, and the senile twitterings of her husband when she had become his doll! Walter was like a fresh-run salmon with the vigour of the sea about him, compared with those muddy little minnows. Indeed, she almost doubted if she could land him yet. . . . And she thought of Elizabeth, Saint Elizabeth, poor devil!

She rose from her seat on the hearth-rug. It was better to wait; she would want him more than she did now.

“Walter,” she said, “we’ve got to do one of those difficult things that have to be done sometimes, and cut out, cut clean out as with a knife, the last few minutes. There haven’t been any last few minutes. Your clock is a few minutes fast; it is really half-past nine instead of twenty-five minutes to ten. I have been chattering all dinner-time, and now I want to learn a little about you and your plans, and then I shall go home. Come, that’s the sensible thing to do. We’ve both got to make an effort and play up, till we get natural again. I choose that we shall behave like that. So you go off to Maychester in two days, and then come back here alone—is that it?—till Elizabeth joins you at the end of Tony’s holidays?”

His eyes were fire; it was doubtful for a moment whether he had the control to make himself obey. She met them full, with the complete assurance of her power over him.

“Yes, that’s the kind of thing,” he said at length. “But I’m not quite sure about Elizabeth’s joining me then. I got an inquiry to-day as to whether I would let this flat for a month or six weeks from the middle of January. I’m thinking of doing so, and then I shall go and live at the club for those few weeks. A fat little rent wouldn’t come amiss.”

“Oh, is the City behaving like a pig still?” she asked. “What a bore for you! But the syndicate?”

“The City’s being a pig and the syndicate is being a snail,” he said. “There have been more delays. We shan’t get the company out for several months yet.”

She took a bunch of violets from a vase on the table and pinned them into her gown.

“Delicious things!” she said. “The smell of violets has pleasant associations for me, somehow. I’ve forgotten what they are, but that is no matter. After this, they’ll have the association of this evening for me. And I shall like that. . . . Now, my dear, when shall I see you again? I shall be up in town, too, I expect, by the middle of January. Ambleside will be off to the

Riviera by that time, and the early months of the year in the country are my idea of hell. It will always be February in hell, I think. An eternal February, instead of being the shortest month in the year. So you think you'll let the flat and be at your club?"

She stood with one hand resting on the arm of the sofa where he sat; the scent of the violets crept along the air to him.

"It seems the most sensible thing to do," he said.

"Perhaps it does, though horrid for Elizabeth and for you. I shall score, because you'll be homeless, and so out of desolation you'll spend many evenings with me. . . . My dear, I must go. Yes, do come and see me to my door!"

He got up and followed her into the hall, where she put on her long fur coat. Her face nestled down into the tall collar, and they went down in the lift to walk the hundred yards to her house. The night was cold and rather thick, promising fog before morning, and the streets were full of the outflow from theatres and music-halls. Crowds streamed across the road to the Tube station, and stood in groups by the halt of the omnibuses.

She had put her hand into his arm, and though they had to thread their way along a populous pavement, the contact seemed to him to isolate them from all the hustle of their surroundings. She paused on her doorstep to find her latchkey, and, standing in the open doorway on the step above him, laid her hand on his shoulder.

"You do deserve to be happy," she said. "Happiness is meant for people like you. Good night, my dear. Perhaps you and Elizabeth will pop over to Garth one day."

Before he went to bed he scribbled a message to be telephoned to the house-agent next morning, saying that he was willing to let the flat for the period mentioned, and that the intending lessee might come and see it at any time. He himself was leaving for the country almost immediately; it would be a convenience if the matter could be settled at once.

He left London on Christmas Eve. Elizabeth was a childlike lover of the commemorative festival, and the hall gleamed with holly and evergreens. A big sheet had been spread on the floor there, which had been piled high with yew and laurel, but by the time he arrived the decorative zeal of her and Tony had converted the green plumes into wreaths for doors and arches, and the debris was crackling on the hearth, filling the place with the aromatic

scent of its combustion. Smell—how right Evie was!—had magical associative powers, and just as surely as the scent of violets would always now bring back to him that evening forty-eight hours ago, so, when he came in from the frosty dusk into this warm, bright, aromatic atmosphere, it was not only of to-day and to-day's joyless return that the popping of the shrivelled twigs spoke, but of all the Christmases (and how they were adding up!) when all the world that really mattered to him was comprised in the two who now greeted him. For the moment, if a wish could have restored to him that sense of them and himself unchanged, it would have streamed from his heart, and the enchanting nightmare have vanished in the daylight of Elizabeth's eyes. But the next moment he knew that even if the miracle had been within his working, he no longer had the will to wish it accomplished. Across the aromatic scent of the burning evergreens there had drifted another sweeter than that.

He had made up his mind to tell Elizabeth at once that he had let the flat for six weeks from the middle of January, and that evening, as soon as Tony had gone to bed, he screwed himself up to it. He knew she would be hurt, for the plan between them had been that if funds were low with him, and the letting of it advisable, he should first tell her, and that then, if she could not supplement the deficit, the house here was to be shut up. She would be hurt; she would be unable to understand why he had acted like this without previously consulting her, and the determining reason was one that he understood himself only too well.

But he need not have braced himself to make the voluntary disclosure; it was forced on him.

"I've got good news for you, Walter," she said, as she seated herself beside him. "But first one question: how are your business affairs?"

"Bad," he said. "Everything is as slack in the City as ever, and now there's delay about the flotation of the company that takes over the syndicate. I can stand some good news, Lizzie. Out with it!"

She put her hand through his crooked arm, and her fingers stole down to his wrist, and stroked the skin there. How often when he was ill had that touch almost magically soothed him!

"I guessed something of the sort," she said. "I knew you were worried about something you didn't speak of. And now it is going to be lifted right off you."

"That's good," he said. "I can get on without it."

“Well, listen then; I believe I shall enjoy telling you even more than you will enjoy hearing it. If money matters haven’t been going well for you, they have for me, and that’s precisely the same thing. There’s a divine and blessed company in which I’ve got shares—yes, go on smoking, every cigarette you smoke makes me richer——”

“Tobacco company?” he asked.

“How quick of you! Well, this obliging company has given us all a quantity of bonus shares. Under good advice, not yours, for I thought you might suspect something, I’ve sold mine, and I shall be able to run the flat entirely by myself till Easter. Then you can begin to look worried again if you like, but not till then. Till then you must be like the lilies of the field. So that’s my Christmas present to you. It’s close on midnight. I’ll give it you now.”

She slipped the cheque she had already written into his waistcoat pocket.

“I thought of making a Santa Claus stocking for you and putting it in,” she said, “but I couldn’t wait. You told me once what the rent and the quarter’s expenses came to, and my brilliant financial brain remembered it. Oh, my dear, how I enjoy doing it! There never was such fun.”

For one second he wondered whether, if she had given him this before he let the flat, he would have taken it from her. Probably he would have been obliged to, and with what difficulty he would have simulated gratitude. His longing to be in London without her for those weeks when Evie would be there was suddenly revealed to him; he had not known till now how strong it was.

There was no way of making a gradual disclosure.

“Lizzie, you’re too good to me,” he said. “But it’s too late. I let the flat this morning for six weeks. I was going to tell you the minute we were alone, but you forestalled me.”

He looked up at her, fumbling in his pocket for the cheque she had given him. She took it from him, and, rising, walked across to the fireplace and laid it on the mantelshelf. For the moment she was too deeply hurt to speak.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Walter,” she said at length. “You ought to have told me first, as you promised to do. Now about this let. From when have you let it?”

“From the middle of January for six weeks.”

The bitterness of her disappointment mastered her.

“From about the end of Tony’s holidays,” she said.

There was no mistaking the implication that lurked in her words, and he resented it just because fundamentally it was true; that date in point of fact was the very one he would have chosen. But practically the implication was untrue, and he answered it.

“You speak as if I had settled a date when, in the natural course of things, you would be coming up to live there,” he said. “But I didn’t settle the date at all. The offer was made for that date. How could I have had anything to do with it?”

She was silent; sick at heart, not only for what he had done, but for what she had said.

“You must forgive me for saying that, Walter,” she said at length.

The profound duplicity of his position irritated him. Naturally, he must say he forgave her, but though that date had been none of his contriving, he knew that for him it was the ideal date, for it coincided with Evie’s arrival in London. And he had to forgive her . . .

“Of course; it’s unsaid, you meant nothing,” he said. But she knew she had meant it; the notion of his purposely letting the flat just at the end of Tony’s holidays, so that he might secure her maximum absence from him had been definitely and devilishly in her mind. Looking at it straight now, she no longer believed it, but when she spoke she had. She turned her mind away from that; it was not a thing to be contemplated.

“You ought never to have let it without consulting me first,” she said. “Why did you do it?”

He could be glib over this; he had rehearsed his arguments, and they were plausible, sensible, strictly truthful, and morally a pack of lies. He could give her excellent reasons why he had done it, but none had any relation to the fundamental reason.

“I had to,” he said. “During the last three months I have not made enough in the City to pay the rent, let alone living expenses. I hoped that the syndicate would have been formed into a company by the end of this year, but the very post which brought me an inquiry about the flat, brought me also the news that three months at least must elapse before the company could be floated——”

Elizabeth tried in vain to crush down her resentment at what he had done. His promise to tell her if that proved necessary had been disregarded,

her present to him tossed back to her. But far more bitter than these was the sense that their severance from each other which this entailed meant but little to him. Otherwise he must have consulted her, for he would have longed at all costs to prevent that.

She interrupted him.

“But that has nothing to do with it,” she said. “I told you that I would much sooner let this house than that you should let the flat. We agreed on that. I told you also that I could help towards your expenses there.”

He felt his irritation with her rising. It sprang chiefly from the knowledge that he had done wrong, and that his reason for letting the flat was not what he was so sensibly alleging.

“You asked me why I let it,” he said, “and if you want me to tell you, you must allow me to do so without interrupting me. I had to make up my mind about the offer at once. If I had said I would not let it, there would have been the end of it. There wasn’t time to consult you; if you had been in town, of course, I should have done so. I knew you would prefer to let this house, but what chance was there of doing so, compared to this definite offer I had received? How often can you let a house in the country for the month of February? It would have to be done at once, too. Put it up to-morrow, if you like, and if you get an offer for it we’ll take another flat in town.”

There was a good deal of sense, she admitted, in what he said, but no argument of his could touch her conviction that it was no regret to him that they should live apart for these weeks. But the implication she had made, in noting the coincidence between the end of Tony’s holidays and the period of the let, was a dreadful thing to have said, and she tried to put herself in his place, and realize what she would have felt if he had said that to her.

“I see the sense of what you tell me,” she said. “But, my dear, it cut me to the heart to hear what you had done. And it had been such a joy to think that I could relieve you of your anxieties.”

A sudden idea struck her, suggested by his words. She picked up the cheque from the mantelpiece, and held it out to him.

“That is yours,” she said. “Do as you propose; take another flat for the period of your let.”

The tenseness of the thought which lay below that made her face look old and anxious, for this would test him. The sense of her age as compared with his, the knowledge that in the inevitable nature of man and woman she would become old and undesirable in his eyes, even if she had not already

become so—all that for the last year or more had slept and stirred within her, now crept out of its dusk and came into the light. She guessed that even if the hour which she knew must strike for her had not already struck, the warning whir of the clock had announced its advent. And looking at him she thought she saw in his eyes the reflection of that, and she waited for his answer as for some mortal verdict.

But he was not judging her, he was judging himself. His choice was still, as far as the face-value of words went, wholly open to him; he could accept Elizabeth's offer, and she would then join him in London about the time that Evie came there. But more essentially, his choice was already made, and he had not the will to break the plan that was already in existence, namely, that when she came he should be living at his club without Elizabeth. Even while he looked at the woman for whom he felt strong affection and devotion, the thought of that made his heart beat. There she stood with her soul in her eyes, all love and strained anxiety, and by him stood desire. He had tried to master it; since first it had begun to obsess him he had clung to Elizabeth, welcoming her autumn return to London, seeking in her love a medicament for his passion, but he had sought it in vain. Faithful to her as yet in deed, he had made his surrender to the woman to whom his first vows of love had been spoken. She had told him that she had not loved him then; perhaps she did not love him now, perhaps she did not know what love meant. That mattered nothing; all that he was certain of was that the passion of his youth held him again to-day with soft hands of fire, and youth imperiously beckoned.

Meantime Elizabeth, for whom sincerely in himself he felt tenderness and affection, awaited his answer.

“I think it would be very unwise of you to spend money over that,” he said, “whether it is yours or, as you so generously say, it is mine. The flat in London is my responsibility; we settled it so. A six-weeks let—I have got very good terms—will put me on my feet again.”

He heard his voice, prudent and steady, giving utterance to what was certainly sound sense and sober truth, and as certainly a huge lie. Suddenly the repulsive ugliness of what he was doing violently presented itself to him. No fierce heat of passion beat on him now; it was Elizabeth, not Evie, who looked at him, and under her very eyes he was coldly and wisely providing for its realization. With careful deliberation he was deceiving her whose love burned for him through some fog of tragic anxiety.

He stopped, he tried to force himself to go on with his trumpery argument, and could not.

“Lizzie, dear. I’ll do whatever you like,” he said. “I’m sorry I let the flat without consulting you, but it appeared to me urgent. As soon as I go back next week, I’ll see about getting one for the time that we are out of ours. And I recognize and bless you for your unwearied goodness to me; I don’t deserve it, but it’s like you not to mind that.”

Her face came out from its eclipse, its tragic shadow slipped from it. It was not just the fact that for those weeks she would not be here alone while he was in town, it was for what that stood, dimly descried by her and promptly repudiated, which had made that shadow not the dimness of a temporary eclipse, but rather the dusk of the imminent Arctic night. And even while the light and the warmth returned, she hesitated to give them unreserved welcome. It was strange that one moment he should be tutorially demonstrating the good sense of his scheme as opposed to hers, and then scarcely with pause and wholly without effort from her should have abandoned it and accepted her offer. Was it a sudden impulse of human need for her that wrought that change? Had he leaped to her, or with a shrug of pity, maybe, turned on his heel and loitered back towards her?

The days of his holiday were soon over, and with his departure she could look back more detachedly on certain disquietudes. Her plan and her present, it was not difficult to see, had been no joy to him, they did not remove the cloud on his face. By an effort, it seemed to her, he had been able to disperse it, and romp with Tony and chatter at ease with her; but when he relaxed that effort, he sank back into an absent, brooding mood, wholly unlike him. If he read, his eyes wandered from the page and frowned at the fire, his spirits were broken-winged and could make none of their normally exuberant flights; they came to earth, and he sat silent, till, rousing himself again, he said how pleasant it was to be away from London in this still crystalline weather, which in town was probably represented by a fog, or, as with a sense of duty, he told her what a relief it was to know that now he would not be sitting pelican-like in the wilderness of his club while the flat was let. Often he alluded to that, but whereas, when she had returned to live with him in London last September, he had clung to her presence as if it rescued him from some secret fear connected with his solitude, now this welcome was perfunctory, as if he no longer believed in the remedy he had hoped it would bring him. He had sought in her (was that it?) something that he could no longer find in her . . . and once again to her ear the inexorable

clock ticked on. The warning whir had already sounded, and now that quiet ticking would continue till the crash of the striking hour shattered it. They would look at each other, she supposed, while the stroke resounded, and after that the ticking would go on exactly as before.

All this was theory; but now her mind began to give it a practical application, to connect what must happen with what actually would happen. Long ago she had seen in the distance what was now so close, the advent of the time when he, young still in the physical measure of years, would find that she was old, and would gravitate towards some wholly natural attraction. She had never supposed that she would fail to retain his affection, but, even as last year he had expanded and quickened to Margaret's presence, not personally so much as generically, because she brought youth to the house, so one day he would definitely turn to the woman who held for him what she herself lacked. It was this, long ago realized by herself as true in the abstract, which she now believed was translating itself into experience.

It was on the last day of his holiday that this had taken shape. They had gone over, again at her suggestion, to Garth, but now his unwillingness to go seemed to be accounted for, not by that odd disinclination to go there which had shown itself before, but by his unwillingness to go there with her. For Evie had dined alone with him in town, so he had told her, a few evenings ago, and they had had a jolly time. . . . The rest of the party were out; some were shooting, some motoring, some playing golf, and they were alone with her. Elizabeth, like one telling beads, fingered the recollections of the day.

Evie had given them the informal welcome of a friend. She also told Elizabeth about her evening with Walter. "Mimosa, my dear, and roses, and pheasant—oh, I sent that—and violets. I felt you ought to know about it, Elizabeth. That's the way he does himself when you're away. It is nice to see you; I wondered if you were going to take any notice of me."

She rattled on in friendly fashion, making much of Elizabeth, but somehow taking Walter for granted. While they waited for lunch, just the three of them, she took her away to her bedroom to consult her about some new curtains. Walter was not allowed to come; he could look at the illustrated papers, as if waiting for an appointment with the dentist, till their return. She did not so much as mention his name while this visit was in progress; there were the patterns for the curtain, and the wide sparkling view, and rather unkind thumb-nail sketches of guests; there were a host of topics, all natural and all deftly made amusing, but not a word of Walter. Then, on their return, there was pity and praise for him; pity because he had

been left alone; praise for his having been found with a picture-paper, according to instructions.

“So good for men to be alone sometimes,” she said. “We spoil them, don’t we, by making them think that they have only to whistle to us, and we sit up and beg, and wag our tails because they’ve taken notice of us. And you’re going to be very good for Walter, too, so he told me, and you’ve been looking at his pass-book, darling, I believe, and you’ve been shaking your finger at him, and telling him that he has been so extravagant that he must let your flat and go to live at his club. That’s to punish him; quite right. Then after six weeks’ penance—wasn’t it six weeks, Walter?—you’ll forgive him again and join him. Poor Walter! I must tell you that he didn’t give you away, I conjectured all that for myself. He only said he was going to let the flat, owing to financial fluctuations. What wonder, considering the roses and mimosa!”

Elizabeth remembered all this with extreme vividness, for during this speech of Evie’s she had begun violently to attend. It wasn’t mere rattle . . . it meant something. She had let her eyes wander here and there, and they had wandered to Walter’s face, and dwelt there, flitted off, and soon dwelt there again. But all the time she found his eyes steady on Evie; now they were amused, now they darkened, and now—what was it that smouldered in them? When she ceased speaking he answered at once with a laugh.

“Evie, for a clever woman,” he said, “you’re most astoundingly at sea. I’ve let the flat, and that’s about the only true thing you’ve said. For Elizabeth’s punishment of my extravagance is to give me the most delicious Christmas present. She’s not banished me to the club at all, but has given me a whacking cheque to pay for another flat, where she’ll come the moment Tony’s Christmas holidays are over. There’s a punishment for you!”

Evie stared at him; that was certainly a surprise to her, and the surprise caused a frown. But that cleared immediately.

“You’re a spoiled child, Walter,” she said. “Everyone combines to make you happy. There was I coming up to London in the middle of January, to make an oasis for you in your desert—not that that would make you bound with joy—and then the moment Elizabeth hears of your being in the desert she turns it into your usual rose-garden. But it’s rather fun spoiling you; we can’t help adoring you, can we, Elizabeth?”

From the moment of that disclosure Evie’s manner towards Elizabeth entirely changed, in a way hard at first to define, but which cumulatively declared itself. She treated her no longer with chattering ease, but with the

polite deference due to a woman very much older than herself. She suspected a draught, and caused a screen to be placed; she asked her opinion on the current topic, and deferred to it; she wanted to be told about affairs she was too young to remember. It was all deft, and delicate, and unmistakable. She chattered on to Walter, then interrupted herself to speak to Elizabeth, and when they left the dining-room she let Elizabeth pass out first, and then went back to speak to Walter. Whatever she had to say was said in a whisper, and he replied in the same tone, and she laughed.

They left soon after. All the way home Elizabeth had to make an effort with herself not to ask him what the private communication was. She despised her own littleness in wanting to know, and despised it just enough not to ask.

It was not Evie, however, of whom throughout the visit she had been most conscious, but Walter. He had been rather silent, but every now and then some sudden gleam shone through. He had been like that for the last few days—quiet, but occasionally bubbling out into his usual spirits. And yet there was a world of difference: at home with her the gleam came with an effort; but with Evie it was the gleam which he suppressed, but which broke out in spite of him. . . .

There was food for thought—bitter food.

CHAPTER IV

Walter had spent this grim January afternoon, early dark and closing with a drive of sleet upon the window-panes, in the new flat. It was Saturday, and he had not been down to the office, but had devoted the day to trying to make the place wear some aspect of home before the arrival of Elizabeth, who should be here soon. This temporary abode was in the same big block as the flat they had vacated for these few weeks, but two floors nearer the street; he had seen it and hastily engaged it as soon as he came up from Maychester after Christmas, without making further exploration. He was busy, he had not time to go extensively flat-hunting, and it would do. It was also quite close to Park Street, where Evie returned to-day.

When all was done it looked comfortable enough; there was tea spread on a small table near the fire, he had bought some flowers to make a brightness in the room. To-day the shop just round the corner had plenty of violets, but to-day he did not want violets. Then suddenly it occurred to him that very possibly Elizabeth might travel up from Maychester with Evie, and that made it possible that she might bring Evie here to tea. He would get some violets therefore, and put a bunch of them on the tea-table where they would certainly be seen. The room looked inhabited now with books on the table and the evening paper, and he rang the bell for another cup and saucer in case Evie came.

He heard Elizabeth's arrival, and she entered.

"My dear, this is nice," she said; "and, oh, Walter, how pleasant and inhabited you have made the room. Flowers, papers, tea. I think it's charming. You slept here last night, didn't you?"

She had gone to the tea-table.

"Three cups?" she said. "Are you expecting somebody?"

"No. . . . Perhaps they thought you might be bringing Tony. He came up with you?"

"Yes, but he had to go straight off to Victoria to catch his train down to Brighton. I should have seen him off there, but he wanted to go alone. I think the idea was that it was more manly to cross London by himself."

Walter longed to ask if Evie had come up with them. He knew she was coming to-day, but he wanted to mention her name, just the syllables and

sound of it. Precisely for that reason he did not do so.

“Good journey?” he said.

“Quite. A little late.”

She paused a moment. She wanted not to mention Evie’s name, and for precisely that reason did so.

“Evie came up in the same train with me,” she added.

“Travelled together?” he asked. It was something to be talking about her.

“No. Tony and I had just taken our places when she came on to the platform. Tony shrieked at her to join us—we were alone in our carriage—but she just waved and kissed her hand, and got into another.”

Again he felt that childish desire just to mention her name.

“Evie’s like me,” he said. “She’s a solitary traveller. I shun the faces of my best friends when I’m going by train. They might want to talk, and talking in the train is my idea of hell.”

“Perhaps that was her reason,” said Elizabeth.

Walter knew that she did not think so, and longed to say, “Out with it, then! What do you suppose her reason was?” But how unwise that would be! It would seem as if he cared what Evie trivially did or abstained from doing. A little silence followed, short in duration, but somehow significant, for they both realized that the other had nothing more to say about Evie.

In the days that followed, this little silence, small as a mustard seed, made surprising growth. It would have been natural for either of them, for instance, to have suggested asking Evie to dine with them, but each waited for the other to do so. There she was, as they both knew, not a hundred yards away, and yet to each other they were unconscious of her existence; and by degrees their silence, casual in its origin, gathered solidity from its continuance. It began to mean something. Elizabeth wondered what was Walter’s reason for not suggesting a friendly meeting: she would certainly have acceded to it. For herself, she had already formed the conclusion that Evie, on this journey, pointedly avoided her, and this was confirmed by the fact that Evie on her side made no sign to them, though she, as well as they, knew that they were living within a stone’s throw of each other, and hitherto had been on a footing of the easiest intimacy. And then, coming from nowhere, but as if it had been inconjecturably dropped into her mind from arid space, there grew out of this silence the idea that Walter was seeing her, daily perhaps, and said nothing about it. She had no particle of evidence for

the supposition except his silence. But it was in vain that she told herself that if he was not seeing her he could not talk about these supposed meetings which had no existence. She realized that the notion was exactly one which a woman in her situation and of her age would be liable to conceive, but that brought her no nearer to getting rid of it.

He dined, for instance, at his club one night. She had always encouraged him to do this now and then—men liked to be rid of women occasionally and talk their own talk—but to-night, when he went out for an evening there, this notion closed in upon her like a nightmare. It was unfounded, it was a gratuitous supposition of her own, but instantly it began to forge evidence in its own support. Usually, when he went to his club like this, he went straight from the City, and had a rubber of bridge before dinner, not changing into evening clothes. But to-night he had come home and dressed, and stayed talking with her. She was to spend the evening alone, and he had suggested stopping at home with her and not going to his club at all. But now she saw clearly that he had said that in the knowledge that she could not reasonably fall in with it. It had been a blind; he knew she could not concur. What would have happened, she now asked herself, if she had taken him at his word? Probably he would have said that he must telephone to the friend he was dining with and say that he was prevented from coming, and then out of mere self-respect she would have been obliged to tell him not to cancel his engagement.

Then there was the inexplicable fact that they had been in London nearly a week and that no recognition of Evie's existence had come from Evie. No recognition of Evie's existence, it is true, had come from herself, but there was good reason for that. Probably Walter would come home very late to-night with a glib story that they had played bridge and the last rubber had gone on for ever, and in his face there would be that look, like the "clear shining after rain," which showed that some craving in him—oh, so natural for youth—had been satisfied with the food she could no longer give him. . . . For a moment she tugged at the reins of the galloping thought that had run away with her, and asked herself what precisely she meant by "satisfied." The presence of Margaret when she stayed with them a year ago had satisfied him. But she knew that she had meant more than that, and now that she had challenged herself to state what she did mean, she shied off from the admission. . . . Was she so old, then, already?

Torturing herself, she approached it from another quarter: wherever she turned her thoughts some current of the mind swept her back to it. Walter had not wanted her to take this flat; she had felt that the moment she

proposed it. He had made his plan, which he preferred, that for those weeks he should live at his club and she down in the country, and he had known, when he arranged that, that Evie would be in London then. If that scheme had been carried out it was ridiculous to suppose that they would not have seen each other at all during this week; the bar to their meeting now was her own presence. Of course, then, they were meeting; it was incredible that they should not be doing so. Why, indeed, should they not meet? But why should he not have told her so, unless there was a reason against her knowing it? Evie's name had not crossed his lips since the day when he had asked if they had travelled up together.

Dry-mouthed she turned away from that, and was instantly swept back to it on another current; and now a new aspect, more personal, presented itself. Years ago, when first she met him, she had come to a parting in the ways of life that were open to her. The safe one for a woman of her years was to accept spinsterhood rather than take the more perilous path of marrying a man so much younger than herself. And yet that path was so intoxicatingly sunny then, and led upwards through Alpine meadows bright with flowers she never expected to pluck. She had come upon it suddenly and had been unable to resist taking it, though she knew its perils, and that having taken it she must pursue it to the end. She had known, too, how quickly it would steepen; that presently the sunny meadow would be left behind, and that she would climb into the region of ice. A snowfield lay above it, below which she had to pass; and she would see one day, as she plodded on, that it was beginning to slip. First of all little runnels of snow, mere insignificant discharges, would trickle down on to her path, cold to the feet but traversible. Then larger slippings would take place, and she would struggle knee-deep in them; and finally, with a whisper that grew into a roar, the whole slope would pour down, smothering and overwhelming her. It would not kill her; she would be frozen and helpless, and yet live. The cold imprisonment would close round her, wrapping her up in its soft dead weight, and she would hear the voices of life outside and see faintly through it the shrouded glimmer of the day's sun. Some day perhaps she would crawl out of it. . . . And already that prelude whisper of the avalanche had begun; she figured herself as standing still in the track of it, hardly thinking, just waiting for the inevitable.

Reaction, sudden and violent, came over her. It was not in the power of flesh and blood to stand there waiting. All evening she had been imagining the onrush of the avalanche, now suspecting that Walter had not gone to his

club at all, but was even then with Evie, now telling herself that he had not wanted her to come up to town at all. If these surmises were true, and it was indeed the first rustle of the slipping snow that whispered in her ears, it was better to precipitate it and have it over than stare, frozen with apprehension, at the runnels that trickled on to her path.

There was a telephone by her chair. She unhooked it and called up Evie. In a few seconds she was answered in the voice that she recognized.

“Evie, we’ve seen nothing of you—yes, of course I’m Elizabeth, who else?—we’ve seen nothing of you all this while. It’s too bad, and I’m not going to stand it any longer. If you love us at all, either Walter or me, come and dine to-morrow. Just us three.”

Even as she spoke she was wondering whether Walter was with her, whether Evie had turned to him with a face of amusement and whispered her name. The answer came at once, and she read suppressed merriment into its tones.

“My dear, how sweet of you,” said Evie. “I’ve been rather hurt; I thought I was in disgrace. Of course I’ll come. How goes it all? And have I done anything I shouldn’t, so that you’ve only just settled to forgive me?”

As she listened Elizabeth heard the grate of Walter’s latchkey in the door of the flat; before Evie had finished he was in the room.

“Of course you haven’t,” she answered, “except in not taking notice of us. To-morrow, then; that will be lovely. Only us three.”

Walter had paused by the door, and looking up as she spoke she saw his eyes bright and eager.

“I’ll be there,” said Evie. “Give my love to Walter. I suppose I must forgive him for never having indicated his existence. How is he?”

“He has just this moment come into the room, and is listening to all I say, so I can’t talk openly about him. He’s been out, leaving me to spend a remorseful evening alone.”

She let her glance sweep past him as she spoke with the wandering eye of the telephonist. How alert and expectant he looked! Had he guessed with whom she was talking?

She laughed at Evie’s next question.

“What have you been doing to make you remorseful?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you with Walter listening,” she said. “To-morrow evening, then. Good night.”

“Who was that?” said Walter quickly. “Who’s coming to dine to-morrow?”

There was the expectation still in his face, quivering, ready to flame.

“Evie,” she said. “I thought, as she didn’t take any notice of us, we had better begin. Somebody must begin, you know. . . . Nice evening, dear?”

She saw the flame leap, one swift, involuntary leap, before it hid itself again.

“Quite,” he said. “Cheerful dinner, cheerful bridge. But what have you been remorseful about?”

“Ah! didn’t you hear me say that I couldn’t tell her with you listening?” she asked. “You’re listening now.”

He poured himself out something to drink. There was the brightness on his face still, such as had not shone there for days. But as he looked up at her she knew there was tenderness and affection as well, and that she claimed for herself.

“You mustn’t be bothered,” he said. “You mustn’t be remorseful, and I won’t have it. Remorseful—what for, indeed?”

She laughed.

“Just feminine foolishness,” she said. “I’m going to be wiser now, and be off to bed.”

“Oh, sit up and talk to me for ten minutes,” said he. “I haven’t seen you all day.”

She waited, of course; that was more feminine foolishness, she told herself. Of late they had spent several evenings alone together, with a game of piquet to pass the time, and a stifled yawning over books and evening papers on his part. He had been silent and preoccupied, and well she knew what caused that. To-night his preoccupation was gone and the silence was gone, and it needed no ingenuity to guess the reason. She had asked Evie to dine, and Evie was coming.

Elizabeth lay long awake before she heard the click of the extinguished light in the passage and the closing of the door of his room; they were familiar sounds for which she often waited. She was not sorry for having asked Evie; it was as if, having been to a doctor to be examined about some

pain that frightened her, she had insisted on his telling her what was the matter. It was no use dragging on in this uncertainty. To-morrow she would see Walter with Evie, and without doubt the verdict would be plain. Either her imaginings were false or real; it was far better to know than to sicken herself with conjecture, as she had been doing. And if they were real. . . .

There occurred to her, with almost the vividness of hallucination, the vision of the flaming autumn flower-beds in her garden at Maychester. Dahlias, salvias, sunflowers were in bloom there, the violent gorgeous flowers. In the spring there were shyer blossomings, such as Perdita gathered, maidenly and tremulous; these were succeeded by the maturer profusion of the summer; but in September, before the first frosts came, there was this outburst of red splendour, as if the plants knew that their time was short and put into their petals every ounce of coloured energy, making the most of the few hours that remained before winter congealed their sap. Just so was it with women in the ways of love. They came to their days of autumn, and soon now the frost of age would lay its chill on them and the physical flowerings of love would droop and wither and be blackened so that none desired them. But just before that, their instinct warning them that the warm nights and days were nearly spent, they yearned to realize in blossom every drop of the sap which still bubbled in them.

It was so with her now as it was with them all. The physical rapture of love was more enchanting than it had ever been, because presently desire would fail; and just now, when her need was the sorest, his use for her was that she should sit up for ten minutes and talk because he had not seen her all day. Even his pleasure in her companionship she owed to the fact that Evie was coming next day. He was sitting up over the fire now thinking of her.

For a while, when she had joined him in London after Tony's summer holidays, it had seemed to her that the miraculous had happened, for never since the early years of their marriage had he seemed to need her so much. He had wanted to see nobody but her; it was with difficulty that she had induced him to spend a couple of days at Garth; he used to refer to their solitary months at Maychester as a time of halcyon happiness. She had felt, it is true, occasional misgivings; it had seemed to her sometimes that though he clung to her, she was but a simulacrum, an image for his need, but he had been hers. . . . Now how clearly she saw the true interpretation! He had been trying to convince himself that she fulfilled all he asked, he had been trying to keep himself in thought and deed faithful to her, attempting by association to conjure back the days when she had been all in all to him, when, wounded

and betrayed in his first love, she had comforted him and made herself, even as during this last autumn, a substitute for the desire of his soul. Grimly the same situation had repeated itself. And now his desire had stirred and awakened to the knowledge of its authentic self, and she must stand by and burn and shiver. And with the overwhelming pity for herself there came to her just the same pity for him. If it was not her fault that she satisfied him no longer, it was not his that he was not satisfied. If she hungered, he hungered too.

What was to be done? How was life to be made tolerable for either him or herself? She had no idea whether Evie cared for him, but, whatever happened, Elizabeth knew Walter and his affection for herself too well to suppose that he would be happy. Theirs would be a life of subterfuge and evasions and falsities, while, if out of Evie's indifference or his own loyalty he remained faithful to her, the days of their life together would drip, drip away like the showers of autumn that brought down the faded leaves.

For her there was no other man except him who was still sitting up in the room where she had left him, dreaming and longing. . . . For the moment, sick with desire, she seemed to care nothing for what his relations with another woman might be, if only now and then he came to her because he wanted her.

She heard the click of the extinguished light, and the rattle of the handle of the door that led from the passage into his room. Then came the muffled, scarcely audible noise of his footsteps as he moved about his room. Sometimes he trod on the spaces between the rugs that carpeted it, and there was the sharper noise of his heel on the bare boards. Possibly he would look in to see if she was asleep. Or should she call to him, or just cough to show she was awake? He was always quick with his undressing, and now there came the sound of a tooth-brush, and the tap of shoes dropped on the floor, and the squeak of an opened window. He was ready for bed, then. . . . What did it matter about Evie? Only let him want her to-night. And she listened for the turning of the handle of the door into her room.

“Walter!” she said aloud. She knew that the sound of her voice would not reach him, but her thought might reach him. Yet she must not call again, for he must come to her of his own accord. Perhaps if she lay very still, and let the very spirit of herself go out of her quiescent body, it would find its way into his soul, and his thoughts would turn from Evie to her.

The room was dark, but when his door opened there would steal across the blackness a broadening oblong of light framing him, and then he would

call to her softly to see if she was awake. She set herself to visualize that, to make an image in thought which would translate itself into the material world. That was exactly how it would happen; he would be a dark silhouette against the light in his room behind him. And he would whisper “Lizzie!” and she would whisper “Walter!” . . . And she would be very sensible about Evie; she would make herself understand that he was young and that she was old.

Whether many minutes or few had passed since the muffled noises, from next door had ceased, she did not know; the quality of her waiting took away all sense of time. At last she got out of bed, and felt her way across to the door. She turned the handle of it very gently and looked in. The room was dark, and, standing very still, she could hear his slow regular breathing.

Evie came to dine the next night. Though Elizabeth had said they would be alone, she wore an amazing sleeveless dress of silver scales, that fitted her like the skin of a snake, and moulded itself to every curve and movement of her body as if it was part of her. It was cut low and square; two narrow bands fastened it over her shoulders.

“I know, darling, I’m a figure of fun,” she said, as she kissed Elizabeth, “but what was I to do? There’s a party at the French Embassy, and I said I would go, and I knew I should stop on here till the last possible minute, and shouldn’t have time to go home and make a general Jezebel of myself. My pearls, rather nice ones, are in a small wash-leather bag in the hall; I suppose they’re safe there. If they are missing when I want to put them on, and you see Parish wearing them, please prevail on her to give them up. Where’s Walter? Or am I to have an evening alone with you? That would be delicious also.”

Elizabeth looked at the splendid vision.

“No,” she said. “Walter’s only late as usual. As for the figure of fun _____”

“Ah, don’t laugh at me. But I like showing the French that some of us can dress too. And so this is the new flat, your lovely present to Walter for being extravagant! How you spoil him! And here he is. You’re both of you complete strangers; I think I ought to be introduced to you. I had been wondering what I had done that made you both so deadly tired of me. Oh, I know what you’ll say; you’ll ask me why I didn’t ring you up and arrange a

meeting. But I didn't want to intrude, as they say in polite circles. I looked upon you as having a sort of honeymoon in your nest."

In a flash Elizabeth saw why Evie had kept away from them, and the reason was not precisely the one she had stated. It needed only a glance at Walter to confirm that. He had hungered for her, and now with more intolerable need he was thirsting for her. She had calculated well; anyone could see the correctness of her tactics. And she aimed at more than the bare demonstration of them, there must be an audience. Just that audience of one, which was all that mattered, to see the thing proved. The audience must be convinced.

It was growing clear enough. There was some argument going on between him and Evie at the dinner-table, something about success and the real meaning of success. Walter was saying that success meant just to get what you wanted; she, that such success was a very pale affair—true success was to let the world see that you had got what you wanted. More than that, as long as the world thought you wanted something, and saw that you got it, that was success, even if you did not want it.

"Besides, nobody cares for a thing when it is theirs," she said. "The *chasse*, the acquisition of it is the point, and that only when you are seen getting it. When it's yours, the only real pleasure about it is that nobody else can have it, and that everybody who wants it knows it's yours. One is only rich because other people are poor, and young because other people are old, and successful because other people fail."

Walter, with elbow on the table and chin in his hollowed hand, was looking at her as if nothing else in the world had any real existence. Then suddenly he realized Elizabeth's presence, and jerked himself in her direction.

"Take my side, Lizzie," he said. "You've made no contribution."

Evie paused a moment, just perceptibly. She nodded at Walter, just perceptibly, as if in approval, and followed his lead.

"My dear, which of us has been talking the greatest nonsense," she said to Elizabeth, "Walter or I? Do say it's Walter. And then show us what superficial chatterers we both are. Walter, we're idiots! I've got a new definition of success. It's to be like Elizabeth, happy and kind and serene. Perhaps really the only success is happiness. But then how does one know if one is happy?"

Elizabeth saw Walter's eyes travelling from Evie's hand as it lay on the table up that soft round arm to her shoulder, and on to her face. Then once more he jerked himself to her.

"Yes, how does one know one is happy, Lizzie?" he asked. "Is it——"

Evie turned to him again. She had seen that the audience was following her demonstration.

"Oh no, it's not that," she said. "I don't know what you were going to say, but I'm sure you're wrong. Happiness, which is success really, is another name for desiring. Otherwise content would be happiness, content and torpor, and they are very different things. You would have a happy tortoise at that rate, and a happy tortoise is clearly inconceivable. And happiness has a cutting edge; it slashes at those who interfere with it and stand in its way, and I think it always enjoys doing so. But certainly it is the same thing as desiring, and it is quite pitiless. Isn't that so, Elizabeth? I told you that you were wrong, Walter."

To Elizabeth all this was a dispersing of mists and a disclosure of what they had been hiding. Every moment Evie was emerging more. She had hidden herself before in these mists of moods—moods bitter, or affectionate, or appealing. Though glimpses had come through, Elizabeth had refused to accept them as real; she had said that they were only dark shadows in the mists. Plainest of all through the tattered vapours was the certainty that Evie had no gleam of love for him, perhaps she hardly even desired him; but how the cutting-edge of her happiness glittered, and how it slashed at Elizabeth herself! Perhaps, if it had not been for her, Evie would have just let him dangle about after her, as she had allowed Jim Cresswell to do until Margaret had wanted him sufficiently to make him worth keeping. But she was taking more trouble over Walter; no doubt she felt that he had put up a resistance.

As they rose to go back into the other room, Evie's eye caught Walter's, and with a smile she drew his attention to the vase of violets which stood in the centre of the table, showing that she noticed them. He had gone out to get them after his return to-day from the City, and now he picked out one of the little bunches, and dried the stalks on his napkin and gave it to her.

"Ah, the delicious things!" she said. "Violets dim—how good that is!—and their dimness is like memories, half-forgotten, perhaps, but still fragrant. Thanks, my dear, how did you guess I had been coveting a bunch of them all

dinner-time? Was it thought-transference? What an awkward thing it would be if we could all read each other's thoughts! Nobody would ever speak to anybody else again. We should find out that we were all human, and so we could not idealize each other any more, and the whole fabric of polite society would come clattering to the ground."

She dropped down into a chair, tucking the violets into the rim of the silver mail between her breasts.

"I suppose we ought to be getting used to the clatter of the social fabric," she said. "There are always tiles coming off the roof, and cisterns leaking. What a crash there was yesterday over the Napier divorce suit! Nine correspondents, my dear! Did Mrs. Napier think that there was safety in numbers? The extreme unattractiveness of Mr. Napier's photograph in the daily papers makes it easy to understand how Mrs. Napier preferred no fewer than nine other men to him. How busy she must have been! What will happen now, do you suppose? Where are the nine, as the parable says? But I've no sympathy whatever for Mr. Napier, quite apart from his photograph. How can you sympathize with a man who can't keep the home-fires burning? Nor have I any sympathy with a woman in the same case; I have none with myself, for instance. If a woman can't keep her man, of course she deserves to lose him. And then she makes a fuss if some other woman picks him up and says 'Hallo, what's this? I think it must be one of mine.' Of course, it is if she finds it; it's treasure-trove."

"Rubbish-trove, very likely," said Walter.

"Oh, we're all rubbish, my dear," said she. "But if people go picking about in a rubbish-heap, and find something that takes their fancy, let them have it. Bits of broken glass, perhaps, that reflect the stars. So they grab it, and cut their fingers over it. . . . And then they suck their fingers over it. . . ."

And yet this glib nonsense was not nonsense at all, or Elizabeth would have laughed at the mere sparkle of it, as Walter laughed, as he made his interjected comments. But below the froth there was a steady, relentless stream. Evie had no pity for the man who could not keep his wife—that was froth; and she had no pity for the woman who could not keep her husband—that applied to them both; and she wanted no pity for herself, and granted none to Elizabeth. . . .

Evie had come here, after whetting his appetite by her absence, to see for herself how matters stood, and she was seeing. There he sat with eyes alight, and perhaps if now she said she must be going on to her party he would urge her to stop and talk for ten minutes, as he had urged Elizabeth last night,

because he hadn't seen her not "all day" only, but for a month of days since that afternoon at Garth during his Christmas holiday.

Presently, of course, she would be obliged to go, and Elizabeth knew that Walter would not follow her alone into the hall to see her off, and clasp the pearls round her neck, and help her into that sable coat, for she herself would be unable not to go with them on the pretext of seeing the pearls. And how impotent that would be, for Walter would go down in the lift with her to see her into her motor, and Elizabeth could not do that, for women did not see their guests off at the street door. Instead, she would be kissed, and urged to repeat this pleasant evening at Evie's house; and she would come back here, and imagine their talking together for a minute after she had got into her car, and imagine his coming up again in the lift, and find that when she had timed all that he still did not appear. They had loitered therefore, and they had talked longer than she had allowed for. Perhaps she would have told him that she would be at home to-morrow afternoon, and to-morrow afternoon he would come back from the City long after his wonted hour. She must ask no questions if he did that. She must just ring for fresh tea to be brought, and he would stop her, saying that he didn't want any tea. He would sit quiet, glowing like a hill that faced the sunset, and gradually that would fade as he realized that his visit to Evie was over, and that he was back in the flat to which her own ill-inspired generosity had treated him, and that a domestic evening, serenely calm, was closing in around him. They would play piquet and talk intermittently over their books, about the weather and the City, and perhaps about Evie. If it was cold, she would very likely put her feet in the fur muffler which he had given her. . . .

They were chattering together now, leaning on the chimney-piece with elbows that nearly touched, one bare, one black-coated, and Elizabeth felt that if either Walter or Evie advanced their leaning arms by an inch and brought them together, she would be forced to get up and stand between them. She heard her own voice contributing now and then, ever so naturally, to their talk; they were having a gay normal evening, just such an evening as she had anticipated when that impulse the night before had prompted her to ring up Evie and ask her to dine. She did not even now regret it, for waiting and suspense were worse than any knowledge, and she had begun to know. She had learned something, she had seen not with the evidence of her eyes alone, but of some subtler and more incontestable perception that Walter was in love with Evie. But what next? What next?

The clock on the mantelpiece beat out some hour; Elizabeth did not count the strokes. But Evie, looking at it, gave a little scream of dismay.

“But it’s twelve!” she cried. “What has happened? Have the clocks suddenly been put on to summer-time in February? It can’t be twelve; it’s eleven, and I must ring up for my car and go to my party.”

“It isn’t eleven,” said Walter, “it’s ten. You needn’t go for an hour yet.”

“My dear, I wish it was! But isn’t it awful? What’s the use of my going to the Embassy now, for I shall find everybody else just coming away? Elizabeth, you’re an enchantress, and you make the hours put on felt slippers and pass by unperceived. But it’s midnight; I must go, though not to my party. Oh, how much more I have been enjoying myself than I should have if I had noticed the time! And I’ve been a figure of fun all for nothing.”

Elizabeth got up. She wondered whether Evie had meant to go to her party at all. . . .

“You can’t pay us a greater compliment than by thinking that it was an hour earlier than it is,” she said. “About your car. Shall Walter ring up for it?”

“My dear, it’s not worth while. I’ll walk; it’s not more than a hundred yards. Yes, I’ll walk, carrying my pearls modestly beneath my cloak.”

“I shall walk round to your house with you,” said Walter. “You look too expensive in your cloak. Everyone will suspect pearls.”

“My dear, it’s quite unnecessary. Don’t bother.”

Elizabeth again heard herself speaking.

“But of course he will,” she said. “Walter will carry the pearls in the breast-pocket of his oldest coat. No one will imagine the hidden treasure.”

They all stood talking a minute more, while Evie put on her coat, and the two went downstairs. They would not ring for the lift, and she stood at the open door of the flat, hearing their voices get fainter as they descended.

She went straight to her bedroom. Walter would be back in a few minutes, but she felt she could not see him and talk to him in the casual, desultory manner of bed-time words. He or she was bound to mention Evie, and whatever was said by either of them must be an unnatural utterance, for neither could speak of her simply as they felt. Or perhaps avoiding that they would avoid mention of her altogether, and their silence would be a farce too extravagant for any stage. It was better to cut out that ludicrous scene.

She looked long at herself in the glass to-night, but that scrutiny was made more in justification of Walter than for any encouragement it would

give herself. She was handsome still, it was absurd not to see that, and the growing greyness of her hair gave softness to her face, and made more brilliant her rich and wholesome colouring. A man's eyes might still brighten with admiration as he looked at her. But it was autumn with her, mellow, gold-foliaged October, though not yet touched by frost, and no conjuring imagination could find the youth of spring or summer there.

Subconsciously all the time she was listening for the click of his latchkey in the door of the flat, and now as the minutes ticked by she began consciously to listen for it. It was reasonable that Walter should have a word with Evie on her doorstep, it was reasonable also that she in those wonderful little silver shoes should not walk fast. But supposing half an hour went by and he did not return, and after that another half-hour? They would meet at breakfast next morning, and would she say something, ask him why he was so late? Probably not; probably they would talk as usual, casually, with pauses in the manner of breakfast-time, and then there would be something else put into their joint box of silence. . . . And then she heard the click of the latch, and presently the closing of his bedroom door, and his muffled movements about the room. They lasted only a few minutes.

Sometimes in the days that followed Elizabeth felt that anything would be better than this silence, which like a tawny hard-edged thundercloud spread its menace over the sky and expunged all sunlight of intercourse and companionship. They might speak of Evie, yet they did not break the real silence about her. The situation had declared itself, but that was all. Walter was in love with her, and Elizabeth was sure that he was aware that she knew it. Life on its surface went on unchanged; he was in the City all day, and sometimes, exactly as before, they spent an evening alone, sometimes they dined out, and all the while they were like clockwork toys, mechanical devices that performed the routine of their ticking movements without cessation. He had the moods and variations of spirits with which she was familiar; he was cheerful, he was depressed, he was talkative, he was quiet; they differed neither in degree nor quality from what they had always been. But she guessed now what governed them: if he was cheerful, it meant that he had seen Evie; if he was depressed, it meant that they had not met. Often she felt that she must speak, that she must put an end to this. "Walter, I know you're in love with her," she pictured herself saying. "Now let us talk sensibly about it. What are we to do. . .?" But that never came; it was pride partly that tied her tongue, partly fear of some solution more intolerable yet.

It was towards the end of their stay in this temporary flat. In a few days more they would be back in their own, for the six weeks were nearly over. In her mind she had put a term to their silence, and when they got back there she would break it.

She would tell him, though she believed that to be unnecessary, that she knew how they were placed; she would ask him what his actual relations with Evie were. She would tell him that he must state his case and suggest some solution. Should they live apart? Should they? . . . And even while the questions formed themselves, she could not realize herself asking them. Perhaps, even if she did, he would only say that he didn't know what she meant. Perhaps, best of all, he would tell her of his own accord, and if he did that she felt that she would be able to forgive everything, and be melted in tenderness and comprehension for him. And yet how could he speak? It was more difficult for him to do so than for her.

And all the time she knew that somewhere below the chilled ashes of his physical desire for herself he wanted her. He might be all aflame for another woman, as oil burned on quiet waters without mingling with them. A woman could not be like that; if her surface flamed, it was because her whole nature was fuel. She at any rate was like that, of whom alone she had absolute knowledge. But Walter was otherwise; there were depths below the burning surface in which she herself was still enshrined. That flowing oil on the surface did not come from there; it was spread by some boat that had drifted by . . . Images! Images! But it was only by images that she could make the forms of her thought visible.

She had come down on one of these last mornings later than he; he was half through breakfast when she arrived. Just as she sat down the telephone bell outside rang, and on the instant they both started up to go to it.

Their eyes met, and they were nearer to speech than ever before. She felt she knew it was Evie telephoning to him, and some forcible spasm of jealousy imperiously commanded her to verify that. It would do no good; Evie's voice would say something affectionate, and then she would ask for Walter. She could only say, "Yes, wait a moment; I'll send him." But she would know it was Evie. . . . Soon he would come back and casually he would tell her that Evie wanted him to go to the play with her. Or else he would say nothing at all, and presently he would go off to the City.

There for a moment they stood, and suddenly hostility, for the first time, flared between them.

"I'll go," he said. "I've finished breakfast."

“No, don’t bother,” she said, “I expect it’s for me.”

She saw that he had expected a call; she knew from whom he expected it.

“Look here, Lizzie, this is ridiculous,” he said.

They were both standing now close to the door. While they had been speaking, Parish had answered the call, and entered.

“A trunk-call for you, ma’am,” she said.

Walter let her pass, shutting the door behind her. He saw that Elizabeth suspected something; he had long thought that she did. She must state her suspicions, then. . . .

He heard her voice outside saying, “Yes . . . yes. . . . Thank you. I see. Yes, at once.” And then he heard the click of the receiver, and the door opened again.

Pity and love shone in her face. She came up to him, and laid her hands on his shoulders.

“Walter, my darling,” she said. “Bad news,” and her hands tightened in that loving grip.

“My darling, it’s from Brighton,” she said. “Tony—taken suddenly ill. No, he’s alive, but it’s very grave; it could not be graver. That illness which children have. Cerebro . . . what is it? Meningitis. . . . Look out the trains, dear. If there’s none quite soon, we’ll send for a motor . . . Walter—oh, Walter!”

CHAPTER V

Elizabeth had been going through the little properties in Tony's bedroom down at Maychester. They were chiefly clothes, a couple of ordinary suits, a suit of knickerbockers, a dress-suit, very new, for he had only lately been promoted to dining downstairs, some flannels, shirts, vests, boots and shoes, all the things that had been sent back from his school.

They must all be given away; they would be useful in other homes, and Mrs. Gosson had undertaken the judicious disposition of them. There were some school-books, among them the primer which contained the words of the plain-song chant, "Nominative, mensa, a table; Vocative, mensa, O table"; she put these into the bookcase by his bed. There was a cricket-bat and pads; they would be no use here, but they might be kept with his golf-clubs in the cupboard of gaming implements.

She looked round the room; the clothes to be sent down to Mrs. Gosson were on the bed; there were a few pictures on the walls which she would leave as they were; and now it was finished. There was just one drawer in his washstand which she had not looked into. As she pulled it out, something rattled inside it. Half-a-dozen dried and withered chestnuts, one of which was pierced and knotted on the end of a piece of string. . . .

Mrs. Gosson had been to see her. There was no question of so practical a woman being imbecile, but she seemed to understand nothing. She smiled and showed all her teeth, she wiped her eyes, she spoke about Heaven and little lambs. She knew of fifty homes where Tony's clothes would be useful, and said how pleased sweet Tony would be to know that his dear little jackets were keeping poor little boys warm. There could not be anything more uncharacteristic of Tony than that. He wasn't like that; he had never had the least desire to keep poor little boys warm, and if he was like that now, he must have changed enormously. Elizabeth remembered how Mrs. Gosson had asked him if he didn't want to go to "up there," and he had been quite certain that he didn't. And she didn't want him to go "up there," she wanted him down here. She wanted him to play chestnuts.

Walter had been here with her for a week; he had gone back to London yesterday, and she was joining him there this evening. Life had to be taken up again; perhaps it was a mistake to have put it down at all. Certainly she

had been glad when he went back to his work, and just as certainly had he. For a day or two after Tony's death they had clung together, with no thought dividing them, for to be together was the only way of bearing what had happened. But that did not last; to be alone together ceased to mean anything. At first they had talked about Tony spontaneously, recalling little everyday memories of him, but they soon began to search about for similar recollections, and the spontaneity ceased. There was no longer any comfort in that, nor the sense that they drew nearer to each other through him. Indeed, his death was a gulf that severed them, and not a grief that united them.

It was not grief, she thought, but always happiness that brought people together, and melted the edges of their individuality, so that they got fused in each other. In this sorrow she felt that she and Walter had got hard and shrivelled; they rattled when they touched each other. . . . Nor was the quality of their grief the same; there, too, they were out of harmony. Walter ached and rebelled against the non-fulfilment of Tony's boyhood in manhood, she at this inscrutable removal of him just as he was. It must be so, she supposed, for children when they were young were more akin to the mother who had borne them than the father who had begotten them. No man could care for a child as a woman could not help caring. It severed them too, to know that which was never out of her mind, namely, that if she had been a younger woman they might have had other children. But now that could not be, and she as long as she lived would be the cause of his being a childless man. Once she had attempted to speak of that, to let him know she felt it, and with all her powers of sympathy sorrowed for him. But he had shied away from it. "We won't speak of that," he had said, and she knew that he had been thinking of that too with a bitterness that made it impossible for him to speak of it. She was old, and here was a disability the more that came with age. While Tony lived, they had neither of them reckoned with it, for there was a child growing up in the home. Now, like the writing on the wall, it faced her; the Tekel of her wifehood was inscribed there.

But the pause was over; Walter had already gone back to his work, after this week of fruitless companionship with her, and now she was to follow. Life would begin to move on again after its temporary arrest; its enigmas and emergencies would present themselves for solution once more, and they would not be easier than they had been. Some things would be simplified; there was no need now for her being in the country for school-holidays, while Walter remained in town, and they could certainly keep both the house

here and the flat always in commission, for there would be no heavy school-bills to be paid . . . the heartache of these facilities! And before long, no doubt, the situation round which his life and hers was grouped would begin to stir and develop.

Doubtless the forces that lay behind it, pushing it irresistibly forwards on its course had stored their energies during this pause. This week of idle mourning, out of which nothing had come, had certainly bored him; he would react from that. Now, too, there was less to hold him; the fact of Tony, his child and hers, had been like some natural retaining barrier, a ridge of rock rooted in the earth. That was gone; Walter had no longer a wife and a child, but a childless wife, who by the measure of years was already old compared with him, and who now felt suddenly and swiftly grown older yet. The shock of Tony's death had seemed just at first to flood her with pity for Walter; she had loved what was left the more, because part of Walter himself had been taken from her. But now, finding she could do nothing for him, she felt herself utterly devoid of vital force.

It would not be so with him; the resilience of his youth would consolidate him again; instinctively he would beat down his sense of loss, and build life up again to its full and reasonable measure. But the time came when you could no longer contemplate reconstruction; the shattered fabric must just lie there, and you must creep into what shelter you could find beneath the gaping roof among the broken walls, against the wind that blew out of the void. There she would sit, watching with dimmed eyes whatever took place. Patient, perhaps, but powerless to resist or to defend herself. The wind must blow till it had chilled her to the marrow of her bones; then numb and insensitive she would sit quiet through the growing dusk until night fell.

It was nearly time for her to start to catch her train, and she went upstairs to put on her hat and cloak. It was about the hour of sunset, but this evening the house would not shine with flashing windows, as when she and Walter saw it, waiting for their train to take them on to Garth, for the mist which had lain all day over the town in the hollow had risen, and now enveloped the higher land. The garden was muffled under that dripping greyness; she could only just see the gaunt branches of the chestnut-tree across the lawn. Then at the sharp curve by the highway below she heard the hoot of the motor that was coming to fetch her, and saw the woolly shafts from its lamps. She went through into Walter's bedroom, and out on to the landing at the top of the stairs. Tony's room, once his nursery, was down the passage, and once more she went there and looked in. The clothes she had put out had been sent for, and the bed was sheeted; the room was cold and very empty,

deserted like a wrecked nest. There was nothing of his left there, except the school-books on the shelf above his bed, and in the drawer of his washstand a few dried chestnuts, which had never gone forth to battle.

They were back again in their own flat on the fifth floor. Walter was home from the City when she arrived, and she saw at once that his more youthful vitality had already begun to assert itself. That was splendid; that was exactly as it should be, and she spurred herself to respond to it. . . .

There was an amusing Stock Exchange riddle, and better than that, there were signs of re-awakening business in the House; there had been more orders to execute to-day than in a whole week of that dreary stagnation during the autumn.

“And there’s good news,” he said, “from the workshops where they’re making the syndicate’s goods. Patent A—I think I told you about it—is exciting a good deal of interest. There are big orders for it, and a good chance of selling the French rights. We’re going to roll in riches, darling. Ambleside will roll most, because he put up most money, but we shall roll a good deal.”

“That’s nice,” she said. “All that worry is over then, Walter?”

“I really think it is. Now, I’ve got a plan. Let’s go abroad for a couple of weeks at Easter. I can take half my holiday then, I find, and the rest in the summer. Wouldn’t you like a little real change then? Something to take one completely away?”

She tried to put eagerness into her voice. It was not easy, for it did not in the least seem to matter where they went or what they did. Only one thing mattered.

“Yes, let us do that,” she said. “It will be very good for you to get away.”

He came and sat on the sofa by her.

“For you, too,” he said. “Lizzie, we’ve got to start again, you know. We mustn’t be beaten; we must catch hold.”

“I know,” she said. “Of course, you’re right. You’ve got to make me feel that. I know it without feeling it at present.”

“I’m going to make you feel it. It’s true. And we must go out and see people——”

“Oh, my dear, not just yet,” she said. “I don’t think that I could. But I want you to do exactly all you feel inclined to.”

She saw that slight perpendicular frown crease itself between his eyebrows, that sign of restrained impatience. His voice did not betray it, nor his words or manner, but it was there.

“But you’ve got to make an effort, Lizzie,” he said. “I know how you feel; you feel that you can’t. But you must try.”

She had the impression then of a doctor talking to his patient. He wanted her to get well; he was telling her how to get well, by making an effort. It was her business to get well. He would talk to other patients in precisely the same manner out of the wisdom of his brain, but not with the love of his heart.

She got up, and though he was sitting close to her, with his hand on hers, he was not really near her. His hand did not melt into hers, it lay upon it warm and firm and separate. Was it her weariness, her sense of age and of things irremediable that made her insensitive, or was there lacking in him and his real eagerness to help her, some quality that warmed and penetrated?

It was this sense of numbness, of the absence of any true contact with the world that gave these days a dream-like unreality. It would doubtless pass away, and sensation would be restored, and perhaps with that a more vivid pain, but she knew she would welcome that as a sign of renewed vitality; anything was better than this indifference. Through it she was aware that Walter was thoughtful and kind and considerate, but she was aware that the trouble he took with her was an effort to him. He was always with her in the evening, refusing to go out unless she came with him, but it was not difficult to see how these quiet hours bored him. They played their piquet, they read and talked, and he dozed in his chair till she went to bed. It was clear, too, that it was a relief to him when she went, and she understood that very well, for he was doing all that kindness and sympathy could suggest, but it was to him a duty unswervingly performed, without the vivifying current which would have made him long to do it. Then, when she wished him good night, he would jump up with affectionate alacrity, as with a burden removed, and often he came with her to her room to see that her fire prospered. Sometimes he would go to bed when she did, and once or twice, still dutiful, still kind, he looked in on her. But she sent him away, for he came out of kindness, out of pity, not out of need, and in the dark after he had gone, she lay and hungered for him. This was no voluntary self-torture, but just the tragic and bitter consciousness that he was only kind, only sorry

for her, and then the numbness grew to an ache of emptiness. She wondered sometimes whether it was just this which age was to signify for her.

And then in the central dusk of this numb and acquiescent resignation, she caught a glimpse of the unwisdom and ingratitude of it. It was a morning of March, one of those rare and liquid hours, when winter seems definitely to have dropped like a dead leaf, and the earth, as so often Elizabeth had figured it to herself, refreshed and revived by its sleep, smiles and stretches itself like a girl beginning to awake in the hour before dawn, when night still lingers on the face of the earth, but above the sky is flushed with day, and the birds pipe in the bushes. She had gone softly to sleep in the autumn, and gathered her forces into herself, and now was waking and the eternal youth of her reaching out in tingling currents into her limbs and rosy finger-tips.

Even here in London the stir of awakening force had penetrated, and Elizabeth setting out that morning for various small businesses, found that stray spells of spring-time were whispering in her brain. She hardly said them herself; something from outside said to her, "The winter is over and past, the time of the singing bird has come." And she remembered the snow of the flowering thorns in Parsifal, and again the voice whispered "*Auf! der Winter floh, und Lenz ist da,*" and again it said:

"And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils."

Those were of the flowers of Perdita which "take the winds of March with beauty," and to-day they would be dancing in the grass beyond the lawn at Maychester where the chestnut-tree stood. She saw the reflection of her thoughts all round her in the briskened step of passers-by, and in bright-eyed faces ready to break out in smiles, and she felt herself a sullen creature, one who had no business in the sunlight.

Her small shoppings were done, and she stood for a moment at the street door of their flat, and then instead of going in crossed the road into the Park. Not once since she returned to London had she been there, and leaving the path she walked across the grass to the Serpentine. The green of the young blades was beginning to stain the grey tufts, there was a smell of wet earth, for it had rained during the night, and again she thought of the "tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain" of which David sang. David who, when his child was sick, fasted and lay upon the earth, but when the child died arose and anointed himself and came into the house of the Lord and worshipped. . . . Here was the house of the Lord, with its floor of springing grass and its columns of trees, and ahead the gleam of the sun on

the water. The air was alive with light, the clear blue of the sky was stretched overhead, and the shadows of the clouds that bowled across it dappled the grass.

She sat down on a seat facing the water. The unwisdom of her, the ingratitude of her! She had darkened her days with a grief that was natural and inevitable, but it had not been for Tony alone that she mourned, but for the seal that his death had set on her own grey childless years, and for her unsatisfied hunger. What could be more ungrateful? She had had her beautiful years, and Walter had given her them. In return for that gift when trouble came she had succumbed to it and sat in gloom and apathy. His patience had done its best with her, but she would not respond. And what could be more unwise? Was not this the royal road to make him weary of her? No man could stand such limp companionship; it was a miracle of sympathy on his part that he was not sick of her.

And then the warm wind, the sights and smells of the earth pregnant with spring, which just now had braced her slack vitality, turned and mocked her. Though the youth of the world was perennially renewed, the outworn vessels that had once held it were not revitalized. What had flowered last year was dead now, or lingered on like that tortoiseshell butterfly that fluttered by with faded plumes and battered wings. That was she, cheered and warmed for a moment by the sun, but shorn of her brightness. It settled on the gravel walk, spreading its worn wings and folding them again, but the sun and the spring would not restore its beauty and airy flight. It would have done better to remain in the crevice where it had hibernated and doze away to death, than to have flaunted its decrepitude among the young things of the spring.

Reaction followed again. Whatever mood possessed her, whatever resolve for the future presented itself, some instinct fought against it. If she acquiesced in age the whole of her vitality was up in arms against the surrender, if she called upon the youth and force that was still hers to assert themselves the grey-haired image of herself grimaced at her, and she pictured Walter's young eyes regarding her with a shrinking and pitiful dismay. If only just while the acid alchemy of age was working in her she could capture again his physical love, if only she could take a potion which, while the change was operating in her, would give her the allure of youth, she would gladly have consented after that to find herself withered and infirm and let him go where he would. Almost would she have renounced love altogether in order to obtain peace without this agony of transition.

She got up. The past, however much she searched it, seemed to give no clue that led into the future. But surely somewhere there was an ideal which she could look towards and grope towards, a light that, though remotely, shone into these bewildering places. She would stumble often in trying to draw near to it, but she must fix her eyes on it, and if she could not run towards it she must trudge, and when she could not trudge she must crawl, and when she could not crawl she must still look at it. She had to frame the ideal for herself, to set before her some standard which seemed a little better than the best of what she thought herself capable. It must not exceed it too much, else in such times as these, when wherever she looked she saw only past failure and present impotence, she might despair altogether. It had to be just a little better than her best. . . .

She must begin at once with certain obvious resolves. However high above her seemed the place where she would be, she had to climb there on her own feet. The path was rocky, each step was uphill, and each demanded an effort. But she must get there, for there shone the serenity which she coveted not only because it was comfortable, but because she could discern in it the veritable lineaments of love. She must be shod with humility, and thus tread unscorched on the hot ashes of desire that smouldered round her. Soon, if she was quiet and steadfast, they would cool. . . . There must be no grand gestures, but little tasks quietly performed; no sense of heroism, but the effort to do little dull things decently.

Walter left the City that afternoon tired and dispirited. He had had a hard day's work, and there was before him an evening which would probably prove no less taxing. Elizabeth, from the very quality of his devotion to her, had the power of uniquely depressing him. He hated, out of his affection for her, to see her in this apathy of gloom, from which he seemed powerless to raise her, and the fruitlessness of his consistent efforts reacted on his weariness. He was tired of suggesting this and that, and, when she had negatived his small schemes, of attempting to introduce any zest into the solitary evening. He read, too, into her irresponsiveness some mute reproach against himself.

He had turned into his club on the way home. That hour or two before dinner was the hardest to get through. If he got home only just in time to dress the evening was easier. He could make the details of the day last out dinner-time, and after that they played their piquet and read, but that fireside session before dinner pumped all vitality out of him. Companionship with her had become an effort; rambling talk which should be the fragrance of

companionship, instead of being automatically evoked by her presence, had to be mined and quarried for. And then there was that atmosphere of reproach. . . . He wondered whether it would do any good to ask her if she blamed him for some unknown omission or commission of his. . . . But supposing in answer she said, "What about Evie?"

Did she know or not how he ached to see Evie? She had written him a line on Tony's death, and she had done the same to Elizabeth, but since then they had neither of them heard from her or set eyes on her; he did not even know if she was in town.

The thought of that roused in him a sudden restlessness; it would be a relief to know that she was not here, was out of reach. And if she were here? . . . He had done his best with Elizabeth, and would continue to do his best, but how much easier that would be if now and then, just for an hour at the end of his work, he could get the stimulus which would carry him through the evening. As with a knife, on that morning when the trunk-call from Brighton told them of Tony's illness, all sight and news of Evie had been severed. That was a month ago now.

He got up. The room seemed airless and stuffy, and it was full of those strange respectable relics of humanity who, resentful of intrusions, simmer and doze over the evening paper till it is time to dine, and after dinner doze and simmer till it is time to puff away to bed. Walter thought it must be pleasant to be like that when you were like that, but to-night he did not feel at all like that. It was not yet six o'clock, but he might as well go home and try again, for Elizabeth was making herself lonely and wretched, and he hated her to be either.

He let himself out into the warm spring evening, meaning to take a taxi; instead, he walked for a little. Dusk was falling and the street lights were lit, and the pavements populous with homeward workers, waiting for buses, or crowding into the portals of the tubes, with an evening of amusement or domesticity in front of them. There was an air of smiles and briskness; that girl no doubt was waiting for her young man; that young man had caught sight of his girl, and he kissed her, and put his arm through hers, and they walked off in the direction of Piccadilly Circus. How he envied them! They had done their day's work, and what a jolly evening stretched in front of them! And again he wondered where Evie was.

It was just as direct a route home to go by her house as any other way, and he turned up Park Street. A light showed above her front door, the hall was lit, and it was probable that she was there. As he hesitated a moment,

not yet really knowing whether he was going to ask if she was in, a motor slid up to her door and she got out. She did not see him at once, for as soon as her foot was on the pavement she turned to speak to her chauffeur. The order was quickly given, and, wheeling, she faced him.

“Walter, my dear!” she said. “Ah, it is nice to see you. You were looking me up? Come in!”

The lamplight fell full on her face, and the enchantment of her wove itself round him like a spell of magic; his pulses rioted at the sight of her. Just round the corner was the flat where Elizabeth sat alone.

“I can’t,” he said. “I was only passing casually on my way home. I’m rather late.”

“But what nonsense!” she said. “Late? What are you late for? I haven’t seen you for a month, and I won’t be treated like this. Only just now I was wondering whether I should not invade you myself. Come in!”

She went up the steps and into the house, not even looking behind, so certain was she that he was following her. She turned into the little sitting-room by the door, and he closed it behind him.

“You deserve to be scolded for making no sign to me for so long,” she said. “How are things going? Not very well? Sit down and tell me a little. Elizabeth, now?”

“She’s awfully wretched,” he said, “and I don’t seem to be able to do anything for her. I can’t reach her; I——”

He paused.

“Go on, Walter,” she said. “You’re worried and downcast and ever so tired. Little wonder! And you’ve had nobody to talk to about it. Well, you’ve got me now.”

“It’s just that,” he said. “I do what I can, and it’s no use. She doesn’t want to see anybody, and we’re alone always in the evening. We read and play a little and she goes to bed, and I yawn for a little and then I go to bed.”

“Oh, dear, what a dismal little history,” said she. “No wonder you look tired. Poor dear Elizabeth! But does she insist that you——”

He interrupted her.

“No, she wants me to go out whenever I feel inclined,” he said. “But I can’t leave her to herself when she’s like that.”

Evie laid her hand on his arm.

“I know, of course you can’t,” she said. “I love your devotion to her. But you’ll pull each other down and down if this goes on, and where’s the use of that? She’s a little on your nerves, you know—you needn’t deny it—and I shouldn’t wonder if you were a little on hers. No one admires Elizabeth more than I, but that absurdity of nursing grief is just one of the mistakes that tender-hearted and admirable people make. I’m ever so sorry for you, Walter.”

She leaned towards him in the soft light, and looking at him saw there the boy whom twelve years before she had thrown over when a more brilliant prospect presented itself. He had forgiven her that. It did not exist any more for him, and to-day he was as much in love with her as he had ever been. How attractive he was, too, still rather sombre, but expanding every moment, as a flower cannot help expanding in sunshine.

“But it’s hard to live up to admirable people,” she said, “and devotion doesn’t really help. What you want is relaxation and enjoyment, and you know it; so for that matter does she, only she doesn’t know it. She thinks she wants to continue grieving, but she doesn’t really. Only it’s the easiest thing to do, and she does it because her vitality is low. She’s vampirizing you, too, with it, all out of love. You ought to go to Paris for a week, *en garçon*, and forget you’ve got a wife, and she ought to go to a night club every evening with some attractive middle-aged man and be obliged to dance for three hours and forget she’s got a husband.”

She saw Walter’s mouth uncurl into a smile, and felt that the farcical note she had introduced had been deftly sounded. He wanted to be amused, poor thing! . . . But it would not do just now frankly to show him that she was ready for him to make love to her. That in his present mood of determined loyalty to Elizabeth would be worse than useless. A lighter touch was needed first, a little soaking in the warmth of her presence and her gaiety must first begin to detach him. Six weeks ago he was longing to be her lover; now, pity and affection, she easily divined, had bound him to Elizabeth. He must soak a little, and come back and soak again until those fibres were softened.

His smile expanded into a laugh.

“You’re priceless,” he said. “It would do her and me no end of good. But your schemes aren’t manageable, I’m afraid. I must go, Evie; but it’s been heavenly just to have seen you for a minute.”

She got up, making no attempt to detain him.

“Yes, my dear,” she said, “get back to your duties. But pop round again. Come round this evening when Elizabeth goes to bed instead of yawning all by yourself. There are one or two people dining here, I believe. If you look in about half-past ten you’ll find a welcome and a cigarette and a rubber of bridge probably. Just come if you can. Leave it like that.”

That was well done, too. If she had said she would be alone he would probably not come at all. She laid her hand on his shoulder with a gesture of frank comradeship.

“You’re a good boy, Walter,” she said. “Your devotion to Elizabeth is beyond praise, and she’ll get better soon. I won’t expect you then to-night, and I won’t not expect you. *À bientôt*—Ambleside learned that in French, and used it with great impropriety.”

Evie wondered with an interest that astonished her whether he would come in, and if he did, in what mood. Perhaps she had been a little over-cautious just now, but it didn’t matter. He would find her alone if he came, for she had told the two or three guests who were dining with her that she was going to a party at half-past ten, but if Walter came that would be party enough for her. He attracted her in a way that no other man had ever done yet; this evening, after his long absence, she could fancy she was in love with him. With others it had been enough for her to excite their admiration till it blazed into passion, and then she would warm her hands at the blaze and feel comfortable, and when she was warm enough she would move away from the fire. But Walter was different. She could imagine drawing nearer and nearer to the fire till it scorched her. She was not with him desiring merely that pleasant warmth that the sight of a man’s passion gave her.

And Elizabeth all these years had possessed the man who, by his own choice, was hers, and now Elizabeth was boring him stiff. Did she know, Evie wondered, that he was only being kind to her, and that every evening he had to remind himself of his affection towards her? That must be bitter to a woman who still was in love with him. She could imagine what it must be like to hold in your arms a beloved image that had grown cold and try to bring the warmth back to it. Elizabeth was doing that already; perhaps already she was feeling that the more she strove to impart warmth the colder it became. Evie dwelt on that thought; she felt no pity, she had once told them both, for the man or woman who could not keep their lover. It was

right that Elizabeth should lose him, and she would observe with interest how Elizabeth behaved. Perhaps she knew already that he was lost to her, and like large statuesque people was proud and silent. . . . For herself, hitherto she had not really known whether she wanted him or not; now she knew that to-night she would be waiting rather tensely to hear the bell ring. The house would be quiet by then, the tingle of it in the basement would be audible, and there would come the sound of the shutting of the front door, the pause as he put down his hat and coat, and he would come in. . . .

Elizabeth's resolutions of that morning to climb out of her despondent self and make things less difficult for Walter had been warm in her all day, and the sense of the quickened vitality which the spring gave her was brisk when Walter entered. At once she felt that his face reflected it. He looked tired and patient no longer, but was infused with an exhilaration that had long been strange to him. He leaned over the back of her chair, bending his face down towards her.

"Well, Lizzie," he said, "what have you been doing? I've been making money. Quite a lot of it. The last wolf ran howling from our door as I came in."

"That's good. I've done nothing so useful," said she. "No, I'm not sure that I haven't done something quite as useful."

The stimulus which the sight of Evie had given him bubbled in his veins; he felt as if he could get through this evening with great cheerfulness, and with a warm sympathy for her unresponsive numbness. Besides, at half-past ten or thereabouts. . . .

"And what's this useful employment been?" he asked.

"Looking at the spring in the park," she said. "I sat and soaked in it; it was like a bath of life."

"Excellent!" he said. "Why, you look better, too."

She paused a moment. She would have liked to tell him all that she had thought of, things bitter and put behind her, things more courageous and held in front of her. But men did not care to listen to analysis and self-revelation, the better way was to show practically the fruits of it.

"It was adorable," she said. "And you look as if you had felt a touch of it, too. Let's have a Sunday in the country soon. Daffodils, you know, and sticky buds on the chestnut."

He moved round the end of the sofa, lighting a cigarette. He had half-meant to tell her that he had seen Evie, but as she had remarked on the touch of spring in his face this was hardly the moment.

“We’ll go whenever you like,” he said, “though we mustn’t talk about it. If Providence heard he would send a special snowstorm for us. But, Lord, it is spring to-day. I feel as if I had come out of a dark tunnel into the sunshine.”

The impulse of just hinting at what she meant to put into practice was irresistible.

“And I blame myself so for that tunnel,” she said. “I’ve been keeping you there, Walter. Rotten of me.”

“What nonsense, Lizzie!” said he.

“But I have. I’ve been dreadfully feeble and depressing. You’ve had horrid boring evenings, and that’s all about it. Let’s do something gay to-night to celebrate the spring. There’s the play that came out last week which the papers are full of. I’ll treat you; I should love to see it.”

She took up the evening paper.

“Yes, here it is,” she said. “It doesn’t begin till the sensible hour of nine. We shall be able to dine quite comfortably.”

He knew that he sat there with a fallen face, out of which the sap of the spring was oozing. They would not be back till after eleven; probably it would be midnight before she went to bed. And what possible excuse was there for staying at home? Harder than that to find would be an excuse for himself if, just when Elizabeth was thawing into life again, he checked the genial return of warmth.

She put down the paper, saw his fallen face, and felt some frozen quality in his silence. Then quickly she told herself that she was slipping back into those dark imaginings which she had resolved to escape from.

“Or is there anything else you would rather do, dear?” she asked. “Or are you tired and would sooner stay at home?”

He could not choose that. After this glimpse of Elizabeth striving to take part in life again, and blaming herself for her weeks of depressing companionship, he could not imagine himself waiting for her to go to bed, chafing at the ill-luck of her tarrying, and then slipping out. But he must telephone to Evie, making another appointment, and Elizabeth must not know that.

“No, it would be delightful to see the play,” he said, “and it’s even more delightful that you want to. I hope we shall get seats. I’ll telephone for them, shall I?”

“No, it’s my treat,” she said.

He laughed as he went to the door.

“You may pay for them, Lizzie,” he said.

He did not know till he found himself engaging two seats, which he was lucky to obtain, how achingly he had longed for that which he was making impossible. The seats would be reserved, and as quickly as he could he rang up Evie, explaining that Elizabeth wanted to go to the theatre, but might he look in again to-morrow afternoon. All the time, with a sense of intolerable meanness, his eye was on the drawing-room door, and before Evie had consulted her engagement-book to see if she was free Elizabeth came out. Just then the voice began again.

“Yes, my dear, to-morrow afternoon by all means,” she said. “And so wise of you with regard to to-night. I understand. You’re wise, Walter. And what time to-morrow?”

Elizabeth paused just outside the drawing-room door, keeping still so as not to interrupt.

“Five or a little after,” he said.

He clapped back the receiver into its place.

“Capital—they’ve just got two seats,” he said, “and they’ll keep them for us. I was just arranging an appointment for to-morrow.”

Elizabeth soon found that the upward road that led to serenity, which shaped itself so well in the abstract, consisted of an endless series of small efforts which she was disinclined to make, and which seemed to contribute nothing to the cause of progress. It was no use in real life to conceive a picture of unharassed calm and content and sit down for it to paint itself. The picture had to be painted by her, and it required a million minute touches, all truthful, all sincere. The hill had to be climbed with an infinite number of small uphill steps, and her eyes must be kept to the ground in order to avoid stumbles, and not refreshingly allowed to dwell on the remote serenity. In these woeful and melancholy evenings which she repudiated she had bored Walter, she had made him weary in well-doing, and it was only gradually that she could hope to efface that disagreeable impression. He was

quick enough to respond to her changed demeanour, the patient sombre face of him soon lit up again, but as the days went on she wondered whether it was her restoration alone that illuminated it. To whatever she suggested he acceded, but never once among the friends with whom, after this period of mourning, they began to associate again was Evie numbered. Once, just before Tony's death, she had asked Evie to dine with them in order to relieve the intolerable tension of uncertainty, and she had seen with her own eyes that night that Walter was in love with her, and no less surely that he meant nothing particular to Evie. But now it began to exceed her powers of resolution not to ask herself whether that situation arrested then had not renewed itself. Sometimes she was on the point of casually wondering if Evie was in town, whether he would not like to see her, but she could not bring herself up to the pitch of indifference which such a query demanded. It mattered too much to her. Perhaps he had broken, or was determined to break, the fetters Evie had forged for him; if so, she realized that he could not speak to her about it. But all the time his silence might bear a precisely opposite explanation, and all the time he might be deluding her with this serene unfailing kindness. She could not determine whether she wanted to know the truth or not. Sometimes anything seemed better than uncertainty, sometimes any uncertainty, provided only that he was so serenely nice to her, seemed preferable to the risk of being enlightened.

Easter fell late, and was still three weeks off, when Walter one evening brought back some slips and pamphlets from a travel agency with a view to discussing their proposed little tour. There was an attractive journey through Bruges and Brussels and other Netherland cities, or they might have a fortnight in Paris, or dash to the real South and bask on the Riviera.

All day Elizabeth had felt some queer veiled sense of unreality, her head had ached savagely at times, and waves of heat and cold (so that now she threw open a window, and now, closing it, drew close up to the fire), had been passing over her. But the headache had ceased; she who never ailed scouted the notion of illness, and indeed she felt herself again except for this queer sensation of being a little out of touch with the external world. There Walter sat under the electric light, with a strong illumination beating on his face, and she loved looking at him. The light shone on his thick crop of hair, where not a single thread of silver had yet appeared, nor any fading from its young and brilliant yellowness, and on the unwrinkled corners of his eyes. His forehead was as smooth as a boy's, and on the temple some soft artery throbbed with slow pulsation through the skin, and he read from the very

small print, which had baffled Elizabeth's new tortoiseshell spectacles, with no strain of constricted eyelids. At the sight of him her sense of unreality rose to a crest. She knew who it was, but he had nothing to do with her; he, too, was phantasmal and remote. But if he had only put that pamphlet down, and ceased to talk about Brussels and Bruges, and said to her, "Lizzie; Lizzie, you darling," she felt that the external world might decline into chaos, and that the only reality it contained would still be there, enfolding and encompassing her.

She did not give any answer about her preference among these sumptuous places, and still without looking up he said:

"But you must help, Lizzie. You must tell me which you like best. Or what about Biarritz?"

He raised his eyes now, and that soft, upright wrinkle delved itself between them.

"Are you all right?" he said. "Is anything the matter?"

She got up, and then, suddenly dizzy, steadied herself against the mantelpiece.

"I do feel rather queer," she said. "I've not been very fit all day."

"My dear, why didn't you tell me?" he said. "Have you caught a chill, do you think? Hadn't you better go to bed?"

She glanced at the clock. It was barely half-past nine, and she found herself wondering what he would do if she went off to bed now. There was a couple of hours yet before he would want to go to bed; perhaps, after she had gone she would hear him speaking at the telephone. The thought sprang into her mind involuntarily; it seemed as if it was permanently there, and might pop out at any moment. But it mustn't be allowed to do that. . . .

"I believe that is the most sensible thing I could do," she said, "though I don't see why I shouldn't sit up a little longer. What will you find to do with yourself, Walter?"

She knew she should not have asked that. She could tell herself that it was a perfectly natural and neutral question, but there was something behind it.

He jumped up.

"What I shall do with myself, darling," he said, "if you don't go to bed at once, is to send for the doctor. But very likely a good night will put you to

rights, so we'll see how you are in the morning before I do that.”

She nodded.

“It’s probably nothing,” she said. “But I will go to bed, though I hate leaving you to a solitary evening. No, dear, don’t kiss me, it’s just possible that I’ve got the influenza which is everywhere, and there’s no use in running risks.”

She lay feverish and tossing when she got to bed, listening for his voice at the telephone, and when it grew late, thinking that she had perhaps missed that, and listening for the shutting of the door of the flat on his return.

CHAPTER VI

Elizabeth was making a very slow recovery from this attack of influenza. She had been sharply, but not at all seriously, ill for a few days, and after that had come this long sequel of weakness and depression that seemed to undermine not her body alone, but the very spirit of her. She had been forced back into just that cloistered retirement from which, with the stimulus of spring, she had striven to free herself. Now over again, though not from her own choosing, these long domestic evenings were resumed, for she was not yet well enough to go out or entertain people here, and Walter returned from the City every afternoon to find her languid and fatigued. He quite refused to go out himself and leave her, and soon after dinner she went to bed.

The proposed little scamper on the Continent had been abandoned. She was clearly not up to any scampering, and instead they were going down to Maychester for Easter. He would have to come back to London immediately afterwards, but if the country seemed to be doing her good she would get some friend to join her and stay there for a while. Her doctor, who had paid his final visit to her to-day, wanted her to get out of London at once, but there were only ten days more before Walter would be free, and she had made up her mind to wait till he could come with her. That would do no harm; she would take drives and sit in the Park; she did not want to leave him here alone.

She heard the rattle of his latchkey in the door. That to her was the chief event of the day, the thing she most looked forward to, and the thing which in some vague manner she most dreaded. Any evening he might tell her that he was not going to be at home for dinner, and then, wherever he might say he was dining, she would know where he was really going. This illness and the weakness that followed it seemed to have sapped all her power of resistance to such imaginings; she could not keep them out of her head, or oppose an effective defence to them.

He came in, bringing a breeze of vitality with him. How well she knew the manner of his return! Sometimes he would look tired with his day's work, and then unfailingly he would set himself to create a cheerfulness, talking to her about the small events of the day, and when they were sucked dry spinning some kind of chatter out of nothing, and when he could no longer keep that up offering to read to her. All that sprang from his kindness and affection and pity for her, and it choked her. . . . But to-day he brought

natural brightness in with him, and instantly she found herself wondering and surmising. . . .

“Lizzie, you look better, bless you!” he said. “I’m sure you’re better. Been out, dear?”

Surely, she thought, some devil was in her, making her, as by a spell, uncordial, ungenial.

“Just for half an hour,” she said. “But there was a cold wind, and I couldn’t sit down, and I felt too feeble to walk.”

“What a bore! But you were quite right. It’s no use tiring yourself or running any risk of catching cold. Have you had tea?”

She let her eyes dwell on the clock. It was after six; he was later than usual.

“Oh, yes, more than an hour ago!” she said. “But ring if you want some.”

“I don’t think I do. I’ll wait for dinner. Anyone been in to see you?”

“Only the doctor,” she said.

“Ah, of course! I quite forgot that he was coming to-day. I bet you he gave you a good report. Didn’t he now? And what was his advice?”

“He suggested that I should go down into the country at once,” she said.

“That’s splendid! That shows how you have got on. It’s only a week since you left your room for the first time. Have you written to Mrs. Game to say you’re coming? You’ll go to-morrow, I suppose. I wish I could come, too. Can’t you get Margaret to come with you? Let’s ring her up.”

The smoke from his cigarette blew across her face. She waved it away with the air of a patient martyr.

“Sorry, Lizzie,” he said, “I’m making a kipper of you.”

“It’s nothing. But about my going to Maychester. I think I shall wait till you can come with me. It’s only ten days.”

She looked narrowly at him. She told herself that he looked disappointed. He wanted her to go into the country now and leave him here.

“But you mustn’t do anything of the sort,” he said. “You must just pack up and go if the doctor tells you to.”

“I think I’ll wait till you come,” she said. “One doesn’t feel much inclined to picnic after the influenza.”

“My dear, who wants you to picnic? Take the servants down with you. I can get a woman in to do for me, and dine at the club or elsewhere.”

The peevish exasperation of a woman physically weak and nervously overwrought possessed her.

“You seem very anxious that I should go,” she said.

“Of course I’m anxious that you should go,” he said. “The doctor tells you to, and you must do what’s best for you.”

She could barely check herself from saying, “That’s not why you’re anxious for me to go, and you know it.” And then he would ask her what she meant, and she would tell him and get it over and out. . . . It was all she could do not to say that, and so she was silent, for if she spoke at all it would be that she said.

He threw away the cigarette which she had pretended annoyed her, and sat himself on the edge of her sofa. She knew how patient and good he was being, and she told herself that it was because he wanted to coax her away.

“You’re very naughty,” he said. “Supposing it was I who had been told to go, you would give me no peace until I went. So I shall give you none. Please be sensible, Lizzie. You know you’d pack me off to-morrow if I was the patient.”

“Yes, but then I should go with you,” she said. “If you’ll come with me I’ll go.”

She knew she was making an unreasonable demand. She wanted him to refuse it so that she could put her own construction on it.

“I can’t do that,” he said. “I’ve told you I wished I could come with you _____”

He stopped. It was true that he had said that, but how much had he meant it? It went against the grain to repeat that or enlarge upon it, for he did not want to go at all. He wanted with passionate eagerness to be left alone here.

She noted his pause, interpreted it, and waited.

“I’ve got my work to do,” he said. “There’s no adequate reason for my coming with you. I’ll come down for next Sunday if you like, and join you again on the Thursday before Easter. But I can’t do more than that.”

She picked up the evening paper which he had brought in with him.

“I don’t want to talk about it any more, Walter,” she said. “I shan’t go till you come with me.”

He was silent, and she made some blind feint of reading the first page, then turned rustling over to the next. The situation had spread like some huge background, in front of which they were no more than performing pigmies. Neither of them could speak of it just because it concerned them both so vitally. Instead she stared at the paper which hid her face from him, and presently he got up from the sofa and laid out afresh the patience cards with which, before he came home, she had been occupying herself.

So this was how the tragedy was staging itself; she had often wondered how it would be. They would go on playing their pigmy parts, one busy with patience, one reading the paper. They would remain quite polite to each other, and one would bleed to death internally in all that really mattered, while the surface mechanism of life went ticking tidily on, and the other would go his way in all that mattered, and pass the marmalade at breakfast and open the door for her when she went out, and thank God she was gone and be kind to her when she came back.

She knew she was in a losing position in such antagonism over these trumpery arrangements as had declared itself. Walter was quite right in wanting her to go into the country without delay, he was right also in saying that his work kept him here, and she was wrong throughout. But in all that was undeclared the position was reversed. His work was not a reason but an excuse, and though he had said he would like to go with her, he could not seriously re-affirm that. But she could not use her moral superiority; those arguments were like interned troops—unusable. She could not say, “You want Evie instead of me, that is why you are so solicitous about my health.” As it was, there he sat playing patience, and she aimlessly glancing up and down unread columns. Would they go on like this, sitting silent for all eternity, while the click of the shuffled cards and the rustle of her pages marked the passage of time?

It was he who brought the close to this dismal suspension. He had been considering the situation as he piled red on black and black on red, and it seemed to his very cool, sensible brain that far the wisest course was to leave Elizabeth to go or stay, as she chose, and insist no more on medical recommendations being carried out. There was evidently some reason beyond the inconvenience of a picnic existence—a poor excuse that—or the possible lack of a companion that made her unwilling to leave London

without him, and it was not difficult to guess it. It was wiser therefore to drop the subject altogether and let her do as she pleased without any further comment. He therefore played his third game of patience to a successful close, and began gathering the cards together.

“Not much in the paper is there?” he asked.

He spoke precisely as he would to a casual, colourless acquaintance, and like that she answered him.

“No, I can find nothing,” she said. “And did your patience come out?”

“Yes, twice out of three times. Pretty good for Zero. Why, it’s time to dress.”

Elizabeth went to bed soon after half-past nine, but to the fatigued disorder of her nerves it seemed as if midnight must long ago have sounded. With remembrance of days long past and now so remote that they must have belonged to some previous cycle of existence, she thought of those evenings when she and Walter used to sit just as they had done to-night, with fitful conversation followed by long silences, and she would see with amazement that it was indeed midnight and find him as incredulous of that as herself. Could these crawling minutes be really of the same measure as those old bright-winged birds of time? And all the while she had been growing more conscious that she was being infinitely unwise. If, as she had chosen to assume, Walter wanted to get rid of her so that he might be with Evie, her remaining here would not stop him. She might make it more difficult for him, and drive him to subterfuges and deceptions, but was she thereby any the better off? How could that grey, tired face that looked at her from her glass wake in a man the passion that was the prerogative of youth? It was not age only that lined it, it was rebellion and suspicion and loss of the inward serenity which at heart she longed for. She believed, when she forced herself to drop the bitter and hostile attitude which she had been adopting all the evening, that she held the affection and devotion of his soul, but, as if that was a gift without worth, she was doing her best to lose it. It was not his fault that his physical desire for her was dead, any more than it was hers that she was old in comparison with his youth. But it was her fault that she was being obstinate and ungracious, telling herself that his kindness and consideration were insincere and designed to delude her. The best of her knew that they were not, but that they were the sincere expression of his love for her, which, though it lacked the sparkle of passion, was as truly hers as it had ever been. She was acting and thinking as if she despised that, and

in this moment of humiliated misery, as she looked at her own worn face, she knew the blackness of such contempt.

She was, if she allowed herself to be sane instead of maddened with jealousy, as sure of Walter's love for her as of his passion for Evie. She would not quench the latter by wrecking the former, nor by unreasonably stopping here could she do anything but harm. Perhaps his passion would cool; it might, on the other hand, flower into an over-mastering love. She was convinced it was not that yet. What Evie meant to do with it she had no idea. Throw it aside perhaps, as she had done before when she had played with it for a little. . . . But to her profound surprise she found that Evie, what she did or what she did not do, did not seem to matter; she could not fix her mind on her at all. Her own love for Walter mattered so infinitely more than anything else.

She could think no more. But she must see Walter before he went down to the City to-morrow and say good-bye, for she would have gone to Manchester before he got home.

Walter had let himself quietly out of the flat. He had seen Evie that afternoon, and knew that she would be in until ten; if he had not come by that time she was going out. It was after that now, but he had not thought it wise to start before, and perhaps she would have given him up as not able to come. Or would she have allowed him a little law? There was her motor drawn up opposite her house when he turned the corner into Park Street, and even as he mounted the steps the door opened. She was standing under the light in the hall just putting on her cloak, something shot with a rainbow and lined with scarlet.

"My dear, I had just given you up," she said. "I didn't want to, but if you were not coming I didn't want to yawn my head off alone. What am I to do now? I have got myself into a party frame of mind. How difficult to decide!"

She loved that eager suspense in his face as she stood holding the buckle of her cloak, not clasping it, but not letting go of it. That was how she loved men to feel about her, while she herself was exempt from any such agitating emotion. But to-night she was not sure of her exemption. She let her cloak slip back off her shoulder.

"Come in," she said. "My party would have been very boring probably; you must promise to amuse me more than it would have."

She turned to the footman.

“The motor can go back,” she said. “I shan’t want it. And nobody need sit up. I’ll let Mr. Langdon out.”

She led the way into the little sitting-room.

“It seems to me I’m always dressing up for a party,” she said, “and then finding your society or Elizabeth’s more attractive. Do you remember how I came to your house with all my pearls in a bag? How is Elizabeth, by the way?”

She paused a moment, but Walter did not answer.

“I have news of Ambleside,” she went on. “He’s coming back early next week. Won’t that be nice?”

“Are you being just a shade devilish,” he asked.

“I don’t think so. I made inquiries after Elizabeth which you didn’t answer, and so I gave you my news.”

He jerked his head back.

“Elizabeth’s better,” he said. “Her doctor advised her to-day to go down to the country, but she means to wait till I come with her.”

They neither of them sat down, but stood in front of the fire. She moved a step nearer him.

“There we are, then!” she said. “Ambleside’s coming home and Elizabeth’s stopping here. My dear, don’t make such a sombre face or I shall laugh. It’s always a good plan to laugh.”

“I know you think that,” said he. “You laugh at everybody.”

“I include myself,” she said. “I think I am very ridiculous.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps I’ll tell you before you go; perhaps you’ll find out for yourself. But why are we standing? I can’t bear standing. Oh, my dear, what a comedy life is! How foolish we are to take anything seriously; we oughtn’t to have begun doing that at our age. That belongs to a later time of life, which I pray I may never live to see, when people take things hard. Think of the heart-breaking tragedy life would be if one took it other than lightly. All our lives would be hellish—yours, mine, Elizabeth’s.”

The laughter in her eyes still seemed to mock him, and the thought that she should mock maddened him.

“You’ll always take things lightly,” he said. “You needn’t be afraid of getting serious. Nothing has ever mattered to you yet. Why should it ever begin to do so?”

She had seated herself by him on the sofa; now she softly patted his hand that lay between them.

“Poor old man!” she said. “Have you had a horrid evening? I am sorry. Go on blackguarding me if it makes you feel better. But it would be more sensible to tell me about it.”

“No, I won’t do that,” he said. “Make me forget about it instead.”

She felt his physical attraction every moment more strongly, and shifted a shade nearer him.

“That’s a compliment,” she said, “if you think I can make you forget. Most women like making men thoroughly unhappy by remembering. We’re beasts, you know. I wonder how you can tolerate us. If you’ve ever adored a woman, and ceased to adore her, how she rubs it in if she gets a chance. We’re primitive creatures, you know, Walter, with a very thin veneer of the finest civilization. We loathe each other, we grin and kiss each other, and get near in order to bite. And yet you like us! Well, that’s enough about women.”

She got up with a little shiver, and walked away from where he sat.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“I don’t know. That means of course that I do know, and I say I don’t because I’m like that.”

He rose also.

“Tell me,” he said.

She looked at him with a quickened heart-beat.

“If you want to know,” she said, “it’s because I’m rather afraid of you. You may admire me a little, but I don’t believe that in your inmost heart you’ve ever forgiven me for what I did to you. I don’t see how you could; I don’t blame you for it. But you’ve never wholly forgiven me, Walter.”

“Can you tell me how I can convince you of that?” he said.

She raised her face to his.

“Ah, so easily!” she said. “Give me a kiss, Walter, just for auld lang syne.”

Elizabeth, worn out by her nerve-storm, went to sleep as soon as she got into bed. How long she slept she had no idea, but she woke to alert consciousness as if an expected summons had aroused her, and there was the sharp, faint click of it still in her ears. From outside there came no sound of traffic. It seemed to be that dead hour when the traffic of the evening has rolled home, and the earliest wheels of the day have not begun. . . . She had been sleeping very badly of late, but to-night she must have had a long, uninterrupted spell of slumber. She lay there too quiescent in mind as yet to care to know more. The sound which had aroused her was probably a dream-impression, and she intended to lie still and doze off again. Then from outside came the first faint chirrupings of birds. She was right. It must be very early morning, and close on that came the sound of movement within the house. It came from the room next to hers—first the closing of a door, and then very soft footsteps about the room.

Instantly, before her reasoning mind came into play, the instinct of those years when she had nursed him reasserted itself, and she thought that he had been unable to sleep and was looking for something—his aspirin, maybe. Then her mind caught hold. Walter was well now, and there was no reason for her to go to him.

These various impressions tabulated themselves. The sound that had awakened her was the click of his latchkey. He had been out then, and had just got back at the hour when the traffic was still and the birds were chirruping. Now he was going to bed. . . . Her hand moved towards the switch of her light; her watch ticked close beside her.

And yet what good would it do to know what time it was? In a few hours now she would be telling her maid to send a telegram to the caretaker at Maychester to say that she would be coming down that morning, and asking Walter to look in on her before he left for his work to say good-bye to him, for she would be gone before he got home. It would be lovely to see him again on Friday evening for the week-end. All that she had been determined to do, but would she have been able to if she had known that he would come home like this? What if she got up now, and went into his room and asked him where he had been? That was impossible also.

She lay down again without turning on her light. The muffled movements next door had ceased; he was always quick with his undressing. The chirrupings of birds had stopped; they had tuned up, and were having a final snooze before day. Between the curtains there showed a dim line of

light which had not been there when she awoke, and presently there began the rumble of wheels.

A desire stirred in her mind, and before she could check it it swelled to an over-mastering thirst. She wanted with a yearning sweet and imperative to see him asleep. She would not disturb him, she would only just look at him and go back to bed again.

Very quietly she turned the handle of his door and paused, listening for any sound of movement. But there was none, and she opened it. His curtains were not drawn, and the room was lit with the wan and toneless hue of earliest morning; and there he lay, curled up in bed, with his cheek on his hand, and one arm, bare to the elbow, outside the coverlet. His hair was tumbled over his forehead, his mouth a little open; he looked boyishly young. Then his mouth twitched into a smile; he must be dreaming of happy things.

She had meant but to look at him and go back to bed, but now she longed to kiss him ever so gently, and with God knows what surrender of his comely manhood. She could kiss him without disturbing him, for so often had she done that, and he, not waking, had but let his hand stray towards her. Even if he woke, perhaps he would not be vexed with her. She could say she had heard a noise of movement and had looked in. But perhaps it was better not to kiss him; she would be wiser not to.

She went back to bed again, and suddenly, even as she lay down, wild, stifled sobbing seized her, bitter and jealous and outraged, and after that came the deeper and quieter tears of mere despair and misery. And finally there came to her, when drained and exhausted she began to fall asleep, some remote little light as of the clear shining after rain. There was her love for him which the storm had not quenched, nor could anything quench it, not even her own will, for it was stronger than her will.

Her maid found her sleeping so soundly when she went to call her that she did not disturb her. When she awoke Walter had already gone down to the City. A note from him came in with her breakfast-tray.

“Darling, you’re having a lovely sleep,” he had written, “and you’ll find yourself ever so much better. I’ll come home as early as I can this afternoon. Mind you get out on this heavenly morning.—Love,

“WALTER.”

She read this as her maid put down her breakfast-tray.

“And Lady Ambleside rang up, ma’am,” she said, “and wants to know if she may look in after lunch.”

Elizabeth felt her languid blood leap to her face as if she had been struck. It flashed upon her that they had arranged this. Evie was to pay a friendly little visit, and no doubt encourage her to do as she was told and go off into the country. But the moment she had mentally accused Walter of having a part in that, she knew she had no shadow of reason for thinking so. It was not like him; indeed, it was not like a man at all. It was altogether the device of a woman. A woman’s prudence glimmered here (it would be comfortable to know that Elizabeth was unsuspecting), and a woman’s desire to lick her lips ever so little in her presence. But she answered quietly enough.

“Tell Lady Ambleside I am afraid I shan’t be in after lunch,” she said, “and then I want you to send a telegram to Mrs. Game to say I shall come down to Maychester this afternoon. We can catch the one o’clock train.”

Her maid went to execute these orders. Just as she got to the door Elizabeth called her.

“Don’t tell Lady Ambleside I am leaving town,” she said. “Just tell her I shan’t be at home.”

She got up as soon as she had breakfasted. The thought of Walter’s complicity in Evie’s manœuvre had been a hideous thought, and though she had rejected it as soon as her responsible mind could deal with it, it was corrosive. . . . By this time Walter would be at his office, and she rang him up.

“I’m more sensible this morning than I was yesterday,” she said, “and I’m going down to Maychester at one o’clock. I was still asleep when you left this morning or I should have told you.”

She waited for his answer. She felt as if she was not talking to him at all. . . .

“Oh, that’s so sensible of you!” he said. “I can’t help being glad. I shall come down as I said on Saturday—no, it was Friday, wasn’t it?”

Again she paused.

“Can you hear?” she said. “Yes? Evie rang me up just now and suggested coming to see me after lunch.”

“What?” said he sharply.

But he had heard. She knew that, and she knew just how he looked when he said “What?” It was a surprise to him, that was plain, and he didn’t like it. She gave a little sigh of relief; the corrosive thought had ceased to burn.

“You’ll be gone, of course,” he said.

“Yes. Till Friday, then.”

She rang off quickly, for she could not stay and make hollow chat with him. He would only congratulate her on her good sense and assure her that this was the right thing to do. He might even say that he would miss her, that London would be horrid without her, and she would hate to listen to that. She wanted to spare him these little mean deceptions that did not deceive.

That dawn of agonized sobbing seemed to have deadened her power of feeling. She was emotionally spent, and it was with a strange indifference that she collected from the sitting-room the little things she wanted to take with her. As she recovered her strength life would run on normal lines again; she would take down some music and those last numbers of a horticultural magazine. Probably she would be a month in the country, for it was no use coming back till she was robust again, and there would be plenty of leisure for her garden and piano. . . . Again, something might happen which would make it impossible for her to come back here at all, but more likely nothing would happen. In a month’s time she and Walter would be here together again, and the minutes would tick, and the hours chime, the months wheel.

Evie and Walter dined at his flat that night. She had walked round from her house, carrying her latchkey with her, and as he met her in the little hall she gave it to him.

“I’m sure to forget it,” she said. “I should put it very carefully down somewhere and not remember where I had put it. Somebody else would find it. Complications.”

He followed her into the sitting-room. As he had promised Elizabeth last night, he had come home early, and there was a great bowl of violets on the table. A huge fire blazed on the hearth, for she loved heat like a cat, and the warmth drew out the scent of the flowers, filling his room with memories. He had put aside one bunch of them, and now he fastened it into her dress with fingers that trembled.

“Ah, how clumsy!” she said. “They’ll fall out, and that would be a bad omen. That’s better. . . . Well, Walter! Happy?”

“Absolutely.”

“And content?” she asked.

“No, not content. I hope I shall never be content.”

She had heard a step in the hall outside, and gently pushed him away. He would not have heard any step, except possibly Elizabeth’s.

“And so Elizabeth has gone,” she said, as the door opened for the announcement of dinner. “I suggested myself to come and see her after lunch.”

She saw some shadow move across his face, and wondered at it. She had been pleased with that notion of hers, it combined prudence with a personal satisfaction. But it was easy to see that it had not pleased him.

“I know; she told me,” he said.

“But wasn’t that rather a good thought?” she asked.

“I liked the thought of your coming here to-night better,” he said, as he followed her into the dining-room.

It was not difficult to read his mind. Though his eyes glowed for her, and his fingers trembled, she had not undisputed possession of him. For her full satisfaction she must have that; he must be hers just as he was when first she tossed him away. But she would not get that, as a stupid woman might have tried to do, by any disparagement of the other.

“So did I,” she said. “I cut a very dull engagement for it, and provided a poor grass-widower with some sort of companionship. My dear, what delicious soup! And you join Elizabeth for Easter?”

“Yes. And I go down there on Friday for this week-end.”

“Ah, what a pity,” she said, “but naturally it can’t be helped. I must get somebody else. . . . I dare say Jim will come.”

She saw the effect the name produced.

“Where is Jim coming to?” he asked.

“I have a box that night for *Coq d’Or*. Remind me to ring him up after dinner. And then you’re back here again till Easter; is that it? We shall keep

missing each other, for on Monday Ambleside comes home, and we go down to Garth.”

It pleased her pride during dinner to see how fascinatingly unlike his usual exuberant self, Walter was. He was rather grave, rather silent, and then suddenly he would rouse himself, or something melted inside him, and he talked like torrents of spring pouring down from the heights. She liked his silences, too; they gave her the measure of his absorption in her; he was choked with her, saturated. He had been like that last night, when she had asked for that kiss for auld lang syne. He had clung to her dumb and quivering, and the flame of his longing had kindled her into passion, and into jealousy of Elizabeth, who had taken what she herself had once rejected. She was jealous of Elizabeth still, but now not passionately, only for the fact that the fibres of his affection still clung to her, and as long as they were there they gave that sense of incompleteness Otherwise all was hers.

“I must telephone,” she said, as they got up from dinner. “I must get hold of Jim to come with me on Friday. Poor Jim! I haven’t seen him for ages.”

She felt he was yielding, before he spoke.

“No, let me come with you,” he said. “I’ll go down to Maychester on Saturday morning.”

She looked at him doubtfully, enchantingly.

“Do you promise?” she said. “Are you sure you won’t throw me over at the last minute, and say you must go off to Elizabeth after all?”

“I promise you I won’t,” he said.

She wanted a greater completeness yet, and the irony of pleading for Elizabeth pleased her.

“Walter, perhaps you’d better not come,” she said. “Stick to your plan. Elizabeth will be disappointed if you put her off.”

“No, I’ll go on Saturday,” he said.

She put her hand in his arm.

“That’s dear of you, then,” she said. “Put all the blame on me. Tell Elizabeth I insisted on your coming with me. I shan’t need to telephone at all, then; I hate telephoning. And how are you going to amuse me to-night,

darling? Shall I go out of the room, while you think of a word, and then come in to guess it?"

He closed the door into the sitting-room, and pulled her close to him.

"I can only think of one word," he said. "And that's 'Evie.' "

She let him hold her like that for a moment; he was a wonderful lover. But presently, that pressed contact, which to him drove like a blinding mist between Elizabeth and himself, so that in the dizzy sweetness of it she existed no more for him, brought to her not so much the thought of him as of Elizabeth, and from his lips she drew not the sense of his love alone, but of her triumph. The spell she cast over him was again supreme, but already she had had the best of it. Her blood beat quicker, but not tumultuously; last night she had been intoxicated with him, but now she was only stimulated, and she was charmed with the passion she had inspired, rather than intoxicated with it.

His arms, clasped round her, were trembling, and now she heard his shirt-front creak, and the edge of his collar was uncomfortably sharp against her neck. She wondered how long he would stay like that. It was surely rather ridiculous, and yet she wanted him.

She bent her head back, and her hand crushed against his chest, pressed itself against him instead of lying tranquil.

"Let me go, darling," she said. "Ah, you're wonderfully nice, but you know already, don't you, how fond I am of you. Don't you? Answer me."

He looked at her with eyes soft and bright, blinking a little, as if she was some strong light that dazzled them.

"I don't know anything," he whispered.

"Well, then, be reasonable and learn," she said. "But I can't teach you while you're making a pancake of me."

"One kiss, then," said he.

"Hundreds, my dear," she said, "but not all at once. There! Now I can breathe again. Let's sit down and be quiet. Let's pretend that the last twelve years are all a dream, and that we've grown used to each other. It's all pretence, of course. We haven't grown used to each other at all, but are quite silly. We'll drop pretence again presently, but just now, while we're pretending, you ought to sit over there, and read the paper, and give me little bits of news while I play patience. And I shall be very polite, and though I wish you would not interrupt me, I shall keep on saying, 'Fancy! Just think!'

when you give me bits of news. And then when you've finished the paper, you will yawn a little and then be polite again, and we shall settle to ask two nice old bores to dine with us to-morrow. You see the day after that is Friday, and we're going to *Coq d'Or* together, and we shall get tired of each other if we're always alone in the evening. Ah, how I tease you! What a shame!"

His face had darkened as she spoke; she had been a little too near the truth about himself and Elizabeth to amuse him. The sense of that gave her a fresh impulse of hostility to what lay in his mind.

"Of course, I'm only teasing you," she said, "but there's a grain of truth in it. You and I are both married; we are aware that husband and wife can get fed up with each other!"

"Don't talk about it," he said, "I understand."

For the moment she hesitated as to whether she should press the point, but that wasn't the wise thing to do. She must make herself so all-embracing to him that everyone else ceased to exist, vanished into the limbo of where she was not.

She put forth all the charm and seduction of which she was capable.

"Oh, Walter," she said, "twelve years are lost to us, because I wouldn't trust my own heart, and nothing can give them back to us. Time is always on the wing, we can never stop it for a single second. So soon now you and I will be getting old, and we shall peer at each other, and wonder what we could have seen in each other to make us so exquisitely happy. And if we recapture any faint scent of the old time, and reach out our hands to each other, we shall find them all wrinkled and knuckled and rough. If you are very gallant, you will attempt to kiss my nutcracker face—yes, my chin's growing out already, and my nose is coming down—and will heave a sigh of relief when that's over. And you will have a pendulous jaw and a bald head, and when you have imprinted that one chaste salute, I shall say to myself, 'Poor old thing, he's sadly aged.' But you will have made me feel attractive again for a moment, and I shall drink in my glass when I go upstairs, and construe the rouge on my cheeks into a maidenly flush. While we're still young, we think we shall never grow old or get tired of each other, and when we're old we shan't be able to imagine that we were ever young. But while we're young . . ."

She felt him boiling underneath her touch.

"Yes, what matters is now," he said.

“I know. I can’t be happy for long together. I get dreadful thoughts. But I’ve been happy this evening. And now I must go.”

He jumped up at once.

“I must come with you then,” he said. “I’ve got your latchkey, you know. You can’t get in without me.”

She looked at him without speaking. Would it make him more intensely hers to ask him to give her the key, and forbid him to come home with her? It might be so, but . . . It would be dull, she would be giving up something.

“I’m afraid you’re a bully,” she said. “And I’m in your power, for I told the servants not to sit up for me. Come then, Walter.”

Evie was conscious of relief as well as regret, when waking late on Saturday morning to a room flooded with primrose-coloured April sun, she remembered that Walter had already left for Maychester. She had given orders that she was not to be called until she rang, and now, nestling in the softness and whiteness of her pillows, she lazily ran over the adventure. It had excited and pleased her; last night, indeed, as on the first outbreak of his passion for her, his rapture had almost gilded it with romance, but now she was not sorry that for the present it was over. She knew now the best of what would have been hers if years ago she had married him, and if a wish would have brought him back she would not have breathed it.

And yet there was regret; partly that such frenzy of surrender and possession as was his had not been hers also, partly that even now his surrender was not complete. Last night she had suggested that he should give up this week-end at Maychester altogether; he was going down there in a few days in any case for his Easter holidays, and, if he really cared for her, he would stop in London for the little while that now remained before her husband’s return. But she had been wise enough not to press that, for she saw that on this point he was not going to yield, and to accept defeat after a serious tussle would have been poor policy. So she had said she was only teasing him again; of course, it would never do to put off his departure again, for Elizabeth might begin to wonder. Of course he knew as well as she that poor Elizabeth had long ceased to “wonder,” but these were the things which nobody said. The tap-root of his affection for her, in fact, was still undetached; Evie had easily torn away the outlying fibres, but now she dared not exact her full force in tugging at that main root, for fear it would snap in her hand, and remain there below out of her reach. She had to relax

the grip of her fingers, for he was certainly resolved to go down to Elizabeth for the Sunday.

She rang her bell, and her maid came with her tea, and on the tray was a little bunch of violets which Walter had left for her an hour ago. It was rather foolish of him to do that, for servants chattered, and when she went into her sitting-room next door, she threw them into the fire, so as to be rid of them. They writhed and steamed and crackled, and soon there was nothing left of them but a little speck of ash that lost itself among the glowing coals.

She glanced idly at the paper, but found nothing of interest, and then taking up her engagement-book saw that both to-day and to-morrow were blank. She hated a blank day, and scribbled a list of a dozen names which she gave to her maid, bidding her telephone to them, and get anybody to dine either to-night or to-morrow. She was surprised at herself for having left two days unprovided with entertainment; Walter must have driven all other thoughts out of her head. . . . But her maid came back unsuccessful; the few who were in London were already engaged, and there was nothing to do till the entry on Monday materialized. She had put down just the words "Ambleside Garth," signifying that her husband would have returned then, and that they went down together to Garth, where there was a party for Easter.

Really she might as well leave town to-day and go down there, for nothing kept her here, and at the thought her eyes brightened with a gleam half merely mischievous, half starkly evil. It would be entertaining to run over to Maychester on Sunday afternoon, and see how those two were getting on. She would give them no notice of her intention; if they were both out, she would take the privilege of an old friend, and wait for their return, but she would best like to find Walter out and Elizabeth alone. Then she would see for herself how Elizabeth was taking it, and how much Elizabeth "wondered." She would stay chatting with her till Walter came in; perhaps he would see her car at the door, and know she was there; perhaps he would just come into the room where he expected to find Elizabeth alone. That was what he would get, for leaving her in London, when she asked him to stop.

Her sense of blankness and *ennui* vanished; instead of a dreary time in London she would have an amusing hour in the country. There were but few adjustments to be made; the household would go down to-day instead of on Monday, and she would leave word for her husband, who was to call for her here, that she had already gone.

She became wholly evil. Elizabeth must know by this time, and Evie wanted to see the knowledge in her poor old eyes. And then perhaps she would let Walter go again, for she had had the best of him, and romance never held the stage for a run; it was only good in repertory. Or should she keep him a little while yet, until Elizabeth was merely non-existent for him, and then toss her the empty rind?

CHAPTER VII

Elizabeth was sitting out on the broad gravel-path above the lawn. It was Sunday afternoon, and Walter had gone up to the links for a round of golf. He had not wanted to go; he said he would much rather sit out in the sun with her, but she had packed him off; it wasn't time for him yet to lead the sedentary life.

She had no doubt whatever that Walter and Evie were lovers, and she knew that by leaving them in London she had given them the facilities they wanted. The notion of that had almost been sufficient to drive her crazy, but she was satisfied that she had acted with wisdom. To have stopped there and watched them would have been much more intolerable. On the other hand, she had no notion of acquiescing in his having a mistress, of shutting her eyes to infidelities, and becoming, as women in her position did, an amiable housekeeper. But the nightmare days of her illness were past, and the fevered confusion of thought which followed; now, at any rate, her practical grip on life, which had always been characteristic of her was firm again, and the situation must be dealt with, and he must know she knew. What actually would be the sequel, she had as yet no idea. Much depended on him, but more on herself, and just for that reason alone, she had been right in leaving him behind in London, and nursing herself back into competence to take a line that would be sane and self-respecting, and, not least, loving.

Of those ghastly days one moment remained steadfast and valid, and that was when between dawning and day she looked in on him and saw him sleeping. She had put from her then everything sentimental and self-pitying, and had closed the door between him and her physical desire for him. The strength of her love, which all her life had burned for one man alone, made that which to many other women was only an affair of physical enjoyment, not less than a sacrament. But unless it meant to him all that it meant to her it became an abomination.

Walter, since his arrival yesterday, had been in wonderfully good spirits. She guessed why, she knew why, for he was no longer worn to fiddle-strings with desire. Equally easy of interpretation was his delight at finding her so much better; that was because he was sincerely devoted to her. It would have been absurd to question that; it never occurred to Elizabeth to do so. But he was not her lover any more, nor hungered for her lips or the pillowing of his head on her bosom. She had known when she married him that the frost of

his coolness would come, while still she lay molten to him, and now it had happened.

She had gained something then by coming down here alone, for though as yet she had no clearness about the future, the past had become more lucid. She had tried too (and it was gain even to have tried) to eliminate herself from the situation. She had looked at it from outside, without the bias of personal injury and suffering. There they were, husband and wife, who on the whole meant well, and were fond of each other, and it was up to them jointly to make the best or the worst of the tangle in which they found themselves. It was no use saying that nothing but the worst could be made of it, for situations utterly unmendable did not occur in human experiences, if there was goodwill on the part of those who had to do the disentangling. Some end of a thread could be found and followed, and when a knot occurred in the unravelling, a little patience might loosen it.

And then she remembered that not two alone, but three were entangled here. It was odd, it seemed to her, how little she thought about Evie. Though it was she who was the rock on to which herself and Walter were drifting, and who might still bring them to shipwreck, she was but a chance agent; if it had not been she, it would have been somebody else. The disaster (if it proved to be disaster) was inherent in the choice she had herself made when she married Walter. There must have come a time when age overtook her, and Walter still hungered for what she would no longer be able to give him. She had not been the first love in his life, as he in hers; she had never been to him the inevitable and irreplaceable woman.

Though it was only April, the sun on this sheltered front was hot, and she rose and walked across the lawn. The sticky buds on the chestnut-tree were fast expanding, and the milky five-fingered leaves growing long. In May the stiff white candelabras of blossom would be there, and then the green husks would swell, until in the autumn they dropped from the tree, bursting as they fell, and disclosed the shining mahogany nuts. There they would lie this year, for no one would gather them to make battle. . . . If Tony had been alive, she knew she would have felt a far more personal hostility to Evie. But Tony slept in the graveyard within sound of the sea, and Evie could not hurt him.

The thought of Tony, as she looked at the chestnut, woke in her the ache of his intolerable loss. He and Walter had been the whole world to her; now, perhaps, she would be losing all that was left of life's sweetness. And did Evie really care for him, or was she, in Helen's phrase, being like Chuchu

with her admirers? Would she yawn and drop him and pass on again having taken from herself all that was left her to love?

She began to think of Evie with a greater directness than she had hitherto done. Just here they had sat together, as Evie had told her of the havoc that had come to her own life. She had appealed to her for friendship and affection, and they had been given her. She had become a friend and an intimate of them both; she had been welcomed to a place by the hearth, and had used her security for these ends. Or if that was too harsh a judgment, and she had fallen in love with Walter suddenly and irresistibly, the merest decency should have made her pause before profiting by the intimacy which Elizabeth's friendship gave her. Yet as she focused her mind on this, Elizabeth could not believe that she had ever fallen in love with Walter like that.

Evie's behaviour when Jim Cresswell, her old admirer and lover, was engaged to Margaret, came into her mind. She remembered her own repudiation of the idea that Evie had not been sincere, when, as Margaret said, she had been "kind and sorry" for the breaking off of the engagement. Now she wavered in her repudiation. Had Evie, not caring for Jim, been jealous of his affection for somebody else? And had Evie, not caring for Walter, been jealous of his affection for her?

Elizabeth stood with her back to the house, looking out over the sunlit valley where the town lay. Half-consciously a moment before, she had heard a step on the gravel walk by the house, but had paid no attention, for this question that had just framed itself seemed to grip her by the throat, and held her.

And then from close behind her she heard a voice.

"Elizabeth, my dear," said Evie, "They told me you were out in the garden, so I came to find you."

She turned as Evie spoke. There she stood dazzlingly radiant, and she kissed her, and took a step backwards looking at her.

"It's ages and ages since I've seen you," she said, "and, my dear, what trouble you've had. Poor dear Tony! However, we won't talk of that. How are you now? That's the great point. And your horrid attack of influenza! Walter was miserable about it. But really you look wonderful. You've got that superb vitality which rallies from anything. I got down to Garth yesterday, and I had to run over for a sight of you. You've been down here—let's see, five days, is it?"

For a second or two Elizabeth had been lost in bewilderment as to why Evie had come here. Why did she want to see the one woman in the world she might have been expected to avoid? . . . And then the side-lines of the thought that had occupied her mind just now seemed to run into this fact of her appearance, as the side-line of some railway melts into the main line at a junction. The intimacy which Evie had sought with herself, her dealings with Margaret's engagement, her spell over Walter, and her presence here now all fused into a main-line, namely, her ruthless hatred of the happiness of others. She wanted to wreck it, and to look on the injured and the maimed. Once, long ago, at some play, she had called that "human nature." The perception of that flashed on Elizabeth, and for a moment her very soul shook with a spasm of answering hate. . . . It faded, and close on the heels of it there came to her a pang of infinite pity, as for some diseased and deformed child, on whom, at first, it was horrible to look. But she forced herself to look, and that deformity of soul was overwhelmingly pathetic.

She answered Evie's question—

"I came down here on Wednesday," she said. "I've been living out of doors. I am really quite well again."

"That's good; that's excellent," said Evie. "I rang you up that day, proposing to inflict myself upon you after lunch. But you said you wouldn't be in, and then later Walter told me that you had gone into the country. He and I had a quiet little dinner that night at your flat. How charming it is."

The pang of pity had passed, and, diseased and deformed of soul though she might be, Evie was subtle and dangerous, with the cunning and malice of the spiritual dwarf. As they strolled back, arm in arm, across to the house, Elizabeth was on her guard again, not knowing from what quarter attack might come, or whether it was enough for Evie to have done what she had done already. And then she began to conjecture a further subtlety behind this monstrous visit, for into her mind there came the idea, dripping into it with bitter drops, that Walter had known she was coming. Once before just such a conjecture had assailed her, and she had repulsed it. Now the effort had become more difficult.

It was necessary to say something; her pride prevented the smallest betrayal of herself.

"That was kind of you," she said, "Walter hates being alone in the evening."

Evie stopped with eyes wide, and a sort of wistful surprise in her face.

“Elizabeth, dear,” she said. “How oddly your voice sounded then. Almost, almost as if you didn’t like my dining alone with Walter. But I am wrong, of course. You know, as well as I do, that he did want cheering up, and it was such a joy to be able to do it. He felt your Tony’s death so bitterly. More bitterly than he ever permitted himself to show you.”

“We won’t talk about that,” said Elizabeth. She felt as if a blunt knife was sawing at her heart. “Shall we go indoors and have tea? I expect Walter back every minute.”

Evie wore the surprised expression of a child misunderstood. She adapted herself to the harshness.

“Playing golf, is he?” she asked. “What children men are! They are mere boys until they become old men. They love their games much more than they love us. We just fill in the intervals for them.”

They had hardly sat down when Elizabeth heard his step on the gravel path below the window; he must have come in through the garden. She was sitting just opposite the door through which he would enter; Evie, low on the sofa to her right, would scarcely be visible. Then came the click of the door-handle, and he was with them.

“Hullo, Lizzie!” he said. “Hurrah for tea! Why . . .”

There was blank surprise on his face, authentic and amazed. Then it lit up, as by some irrepressible flame, and, as suddenly as that had risen, it died again.

“Why, Evie!” he said. “Where have you blown in from?”

She laughed.

“From Garth, my dear,” she said, “and you look at me as if I were the serpent in Paradise. I came down yesterday; there was nothing to do in London. Of course, that was after you left; that is the inference to the male mind! But then you were here, you see, and what was more important, Elizabeth was here. Which of you, do you guess, did I want to see most? Anyhow, I’ve got you both. And it’s lovely to see her looking so well and vigorous and happy. You enviable people! You restore each other by your respective—is that right?—your respective presences.”

She had seen the joy spring to Walter’s face, and its collapse, no less instinctive. His heart blazed in his eyes when he saw her, and in a moment they grew cold again, hating to see her here She threw a big stake on the table.

“You kind dear people,” she said, “are you kind enough to have pity on your lonely friend? Won’t you come over and dine? I’ll drive you there and send you back. It would be delightful of you.”

She knew she was making a proposal which Elizabeth would never accept. That was quite safe; but would Elizabeth refuse for him also? And would he urge her to go?

Elizabeth barely glanced at Walter before she answered. Her stake was much higher than Evie’s, and she laid it down without a falter of her voice.

“Oh, that’s too much for me,” she said, “for I’m an early bird in the evening still, though not in the morning. But take Walter; it’s dull for him in the evening, while I’m still a semi-invalid. And I know how you two will chatter and enjoy your talk, so why send him back to-night? Won’t you give him a bed, and let him come back to-morrow morning?”

It was a magnificent audacity. After she had spoken, Elizabeth could have bitten her tongue off for the speech, but that momentary dismay had hardly made itself realized, before her soul endorsed every word of what she had said. She had put the whole situation in Walter’s hands, effacing herself.

The pause of sheer surprise was but short. Evie broke it.

“That would be lovely for me,” she said, “but what does Walter say to your plan? You’re Paris, dear Walter; you have to judge between these goddesses.”

She looked at him with those violet eyes of enchantment, and smiling mouth that just shaped the word “Come.”

Elizabeth, busy with her tea-urn, did not so much as glance in his direction.

All that was sweet to his senses beckoned; all that he knew of decency and of loyalty drove him back.

“I think I won’t come,” he said. “If Elizabeth doesn’t feel up to it, she’ll be here alone.”

Elizabeth raised her eyes from the badly-burning wick of her tea-kettle, not to look at him but at Evie. She saw in that beautiful face the greed of one who takes without giving, and hates when she is not given. Then with the same calculated recklessness she spoke to Walter.

“My dear, I shall be quite happy alone,” she said.

And then she looked at him, making her eyes quiet and neutral without entreaty or appeal. The choice must be entirely his.

“So good of you, Evie,” he said. “But I think I’ll stop with Elizabeth.”

In all these quiet little speeches, there was not a word that might not have been spoken in any public or promiscuous assembly; they would all have passed as idle domestic chatter about insignificant arrangements. And yet every word dropping so quietly smoked like spilled vitriol. . . . Walter seemed much more interested in balancing his spoon on the edge of his teacup, Elizabeth in mopping up a dribble of water that had come from the nozzle of her tea-kettle.

The pause did not grow perceptible, and Evie, as she spoke, rose.

“I quite understand,” she said. “If you won’t come, Elizabeth, naturally your devoted Walter won’t leave you. I shall think of you having the most delicious evening all to yourselves. Walter adores those evenings—don’t you, Walter?—he has often spoken of them. But I must be off. Lovely to have had a peep at you, Elizabeth. And may I have my car?”

Elizabeth rang the bell, and the order was given. A minute afterwards the car was announced, and Walter went with Evie to the door. Half-way across the hall she turned into his sitting-room, beckoned to him, and closed the door.

“Walter,” she said, laying her hands on his shoulders. “Change your mind; come with me. It was Elizabeth’s suggestion, not mine. Take her at her word, she can’t complain.”

She felt him waver under her touch. She wanted him for his sake, as well as for the splendour of carrying him off from Elizabeth.

“You must come, darling,” she said. “Ambleside arrives to-morrow. I shan’t see you for ever so long.”

His mouth twitched with an odd involuntary movement.

“I can’t,” he said. “You ought never to have come here, Evie. Don’t you see that it’s just because Lizzie suggested it that it’s impossible?”

“But I want you, Walter. You know what that means.”

“I can’t. It isn’t decent,” said he. “And I believe she knows.”

Evie gave a little noiseless bubble of laughter.

“But of course she does,” she said. “That’s why I came here. I had to see how she was taking it. She’s taking it quietly; so wise. . . . She gave you permission too; she suggested your coming back with me. That settles it; she accepts it, and that makes it regular. Go back to her and say you’re coming with me, as she doesn’t mind, and then pack your bag. And I must see her when you tell her. I must see her face when she hears that. She’s wonderful, you know. Such sense!”

That secret lust for cruelty, born perhaps of the bitterness of her own life, had crept out of its darkness and stood fully revealed to him. His face whitened as he looked on it.

“So that’s why you’re here, is it?” he said.

He shook her hands off his shoulders.

“You must go,” he said.

He came back when he had seen her off into this room where they had talked alone just now. His flesh yearned for her, his soul abhorred her. Some faint fragrance of her presence lingered there, and while the animal within him purred at it, it sickened him. He did not think, he did not reason, he was conscious only of mad desire and this nausea of repulsion . . . But he would have to think.

So Elizabeth knew; it seemed to Evie at least ludicrous to suppose that she did not, and, knowing, she had suggested that he should go back to Garth alone with Evie. That implied that she acquiesced, that she let him go his way. . . . And then there presented itself to his mind Evie’s face as she drove off, the exquisite profile, the eyes looking straight in front of her, the mouth firm and fine, and for him not a glance nor a word of salutation. Not once had she spoken since he shook her hands off his shoulders. If she had had the smallest speck of love for him, she must have understood why he could not come with her. Indeed, if she had the slightest idea of what love meant, the tenderness and sympathy out of which it sprang must have made her perceive and appreciate that necessity. But what she wanted more than she wanted him was to shatter Elizabeth’s life, and look at the wreck of it.

There came a tap at his door. Elizabeth always tapped before she came in, for she said a man must have a sanctuary where he could be alone if he wished, and say “Go away!” But he replied, and she entered.

They were face to face, looking at each other across the knowledge that, like a quiet reflecting pool, lay between them. If they looked down into it, they saw each other’s image mirrored there.

It was he who spoke first.

“What is it, Lizzie?” he said. “Did you want to talk to me?”

She came a step closer.

“Yes, my dear. I’ve got to,” she said. “Perhaps I ought to have done so when you came down yesterday, and now I can’t put it off any longer. So if you’ve got nothing special you want to do——”

She sat down opposite him, then wheeled her chair round so that she did not face him.

“I’ve thought out what I must say to you,” she said. “It has been in my mind for some time, as you can guess. But I think it is arranged now, and I can’t do any more with it. I don’t want to discuss anything with you, so I will ask you not to interrupt me, and when I have finished, not to answer me now. All that I have to say is based on the fact that you are Evie’s lover. If you deny that, I have nothing to say. I can’t promise to believe you, but I will act as if I did.”

She sat shading her eyes with her hand, and gave him time to answer. He had no reply, and presently she went on.

“And now for what I have to say. Please don’t speak; it will be as much as I can do to get through with it. First of all then, I blame myself for the unhappiness in which you and I find ourselves. I ought never to have married you. But we met when I was very lonely, and you were hurt and bitter and wanted love, and I loved you. But I ought to have known that the years which made me old would leave you young still. Don’t think that for myself I am sorry I married you. I thank God that I did, and I must go on thanking Him even now, because we lived together in love, and there is no greater thing than that. We loved each other, and we have had beautiful years together, you and Tony and I. And there is no sorrow or pain that I can suffer which is to be compared with the joy I have had.”

Her voice choked for a moment, and she sat silent with twitching throat. She held out her hand to him, then quickly withdrew it, for she must make no shadow of appeal to him.

“I shall be all right in a minute,” she said, “and I won’t—I won’t be a fool again. Don’t be sorry for me; I’m not to be pitied. That isn’t the line we must take at all.”

She went on.

“So remember, in what I shall say now, that primarily I blame myself, and it isn’t I alone who pay for my mistake but you. The body as well as the soul must have its share in love, and the body desires youth and beauty. I desire it just as much as you do, and I’m in love with your youth now. But I’m old, and I don’t expect you to be in love with me like that any more. I know I have your affection and devotion still. You showed it unmistakably this afternoon. And I knew you wanted to be faithful to me; all last autumn you were trying hard to be so. But I could not give you what you needed. You tried to find it in me and failed. You must have failed because it was not there.

“And now we have to settle what to do, and I can see but one way out of it. I can’t continue to live with you as your wife while you are Evie’s lover. But if she loves you, and will get her divorce and marry you, I will give you your divorce. I think that is fair. If you want that, tell her what I say, and let me know what you decide.”

She paused again, and turned her chair towards him.

“If you settle that you are not going to marry her, Walter,” she said, “and wish to come back and live with me, you must give her up. If that is your choice, everything on my part shall be exactly as if this had never happened. I have forgiven you already, and I intend to be in every way precisely what I have been to you before. I can’t do more than that, for I have always been yours entirely in affection and devotion and love. I shall make no demands on you. As you know, I have never taken from you one kiss or one touch that you did not want to give me. That I am certain of.”

She looked him in the face then, and saw that his mouth was quivering and his eye dim. She longed to comfort him, and she tightened her grip on the arms of her chair, steadying herself. Once she tried to speak, could not, then mastered her voice again.

“But you must consider well before you decide,” she said. “You loved Evie before you ever met me, and if you love each other now, go to her. I consent with all my heart; my love for you would be a very tawdry sham if I didn’t. My whole heart will wish you well and wish you happy; make no mistake about that, and have no sentimental scruples. Remember this, too, that if you come back to me, we shall not have an easy time. I can’t satisfy your physical needs; if I could, you would never have gone to Evie.

“This is plain talk,” she continued. “But we’ve been husband and wife for twelve years, and it would be very wrong if I didn’t speak plainly. I shall be yours always, whenever you want me, but never otherwise. You’re young

still, and for years yet it will be natural and right that you should long for what only youth can give you. But if you remain with me, you must deny yourself that. Perhaps that is old-fashioned of me, but I can't offer you any other terms but those. While I am your wife you must not have a mistress. . . . And consider this, too, that I shall never give you another child."

Her voice broke again and she paused.

"I want to say this also," she said, "that I am terribly sorry for you, Walter. I know you are fond of me, and you will hate leaving me. Of course, it will hurt me, but it would hurt me much more if I thought you were capable of staying with me falsely.

"Now, I don't want you to say a single word to me, except 'Good night.' I am very tired, and in a few minutes now I shall go up to bed. You meant to stop till to-morrow, but I am sure you had better go away to-night, and not see me again at all before you go. We couldn't talk about anything else but this, and I don't want you to make your decision before you have thought it all over. You can't think it over in an hour or two; you must let it get inside you, and become part of you, before you decide. And if Evie loves you, you must consider her as well as me."

She got up, turning away from him again.

"The choice has to be entirely yours," she said. "If you come back to me on these terms, you will come back for your Easter holidays on Thursday, just as we arranged before. That will give you time to think it over. If you are not coming back, write to me and say so."

Once more she turned, and now she held out her hand to him.

"That's all," she said. "God bless you, my dear, now and always."

Elizabeth, utterly weary and expended, slept late, and once again Walter had gone before she awoke. She had no idea what his decision would be, and there was still the suspense of that. But the infinitely greater suspense of what she herself was going to do was over; she had made her own choice, and could be quiet with the tranquillity that comes from the sense that she had done her best. Feeble and unwise she might be, but such strength and wisdom as she had, she had used faithfully and lovingly. She had not sought her own, she had chosen as far as she could see the only possible way. She awoke then with the sense of a great suspense removed, and all day she went about the small tasks and occupations that normally filled the hours, with

normal interest in them. And in her mind was a peace that she had not experienced since first the frost of age had fallen on her; it hung quiet and unstirred like some curtain, and hid from her the suspense that still remained.

It was drawing on towards sunset on Thursday afternoon. She had stayed in the garden till the shadow of the house began to lengthen across it, and now, just as she came in through the long window in the drawing-room, she turned and saw the train from London crossing the valley beyond the town. Then from the corner of the high-road below the house she heard the hoot of a motor. It came up the hill behind the garden wall and crunched the gravel by the door.

She went out into the hall, and met him as he entered.

PRINTED BY
CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED,
LA BELLE SAUVAGE, LONDON, E.C.4
F100.426

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

A cover was created for this eBook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Mezzanine* by E. F. (Edward Frederic) Benson]