The Perfect Wife

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By PHYLLIS BOTTOME

THE DARK TOWER
THE SECOND FIDDLE
THE SERVANT OF REALITY
THE DERELICT AND OTHER STORIES
ROSE AND HELEN
THE CRYSTAL HEART
THE KINGFISHER
THE VICTIM AND THE WORM

THE PERFECT WIFE

BY

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THE PERFECT WIFE
—△—
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The Perfect Wife

CHAPTER I

Anne's trained, supple mind went over the house carefully, but there was nothing wrong with it; malleable things had never failed her. Her uneasiness couldn't discover so much as the Princess's pea under nine mattresses. The blue and green chintzes kept their look of mysterious, perpetual spring. The high delphiniums in opalescent vases reared azure spires in unfaded splendour. The well-swept, blue carpet showed no specks of dust; and Anne knew that all the unseen rooms above and below her were in the same, fresh, clean, ordered state.

Nobody in London had better or more permanent maids. Anne was always serene with her servants, definite and firm. She expressed her wishes without harshness or flurry, and with the clarity of an expert who could at any moment carry out her own intentions.

She was without suspicion, and was the harder to deceive; her mind was uninfluenced except by facts. It had taken Anne a long while to become uneasy about Norman. Ten years of very happy married life had made her consciousness stiff against surprises, she could have accepted them from any other quarter, but she was perfectly sure of Norman. He was there in her life, the centre of it, like a God in a temple. You do not move gods except by prayer, and even then you are not supposed to move them away.

There had always been something of the poet about Norman, and at first he had loved Anne with inspiration and passion. He had asked everything of her, he had wanted to break his way into her heart and force her into all his thoughts, importunately to tune and mould her into his sharpened personal image; he had even resented her preoccupation with his own comforts. Anne had taken his love conscientiously and accustomed herself carefully to all his habits and desires; but she had kept somehow her own image intact.

After a time, however, Norman had asked less of her and she had felt happier, and as if their marriage had taken the final mould of success. There was no longer any strain about it, Norman had absences and absorptions which were sometimes a relief to her. She liked to be a good deal alone, it ministered to her unshakable poise and gave her time to do with finish all the myriad household duties which she set herself.

Her tenderness for Norman deepened with every year. She learned that she was stronger than he was, his more sensitive and excitable spirit had to be spared the burden of practical life; and Anne loved to spare him burdens. His career, which was that of a young and promising barrister, took up all his strength. It would never have done to pull at him with daily needs; so that Norman thought that households have no difficulties. He had no idea that you cannot have perfect smoothness without hard struggle going on somewhere out of sight. He took his servants, his ease, his clever little dinners, his wife's carefully studied appearance for granted; he even took for granted that while he lived better than men of his age and income usually lived, it cost him less. He would have said that Anne was a good manager, but he wouldn't in the least have realized what being a good manager meant. He had thought of nothing but Anne when he first married her, and now he thought about her hardly at all. That was the trouble, because he was an ardent thinker, and ardent thinkers have to think about something.

Anne's eyes strayed to the little French china clock. She was at last prepared to admit to herself that there was trouble. Norman was later even than usual, and for the last few weeks he had been always late. When he came in he seemed to have left his personality behind him. He would sit irritable and silent through the dinner hour, smoke a rapid succession of cigarettes, skimming books and throwing them aside, and telling her briefly if she spoke to him that he was too tired to talk.

Sometimes he went straight out again after dinner, as if their home was strange to him—almost as if he was angry with it. Anne felt this deeply because she loved their home, and had made it for him to love. His room was exactly the kind of room he liked. The delicate, fine, French prints which she had bought him birthday by birthday were his delight. Every book on the shelves was the outcome of his private taste. It hurt Anne very much to see his eyes wandering over everything about him as if he was irritated by what he saw.

When he spoke to her, it was as if she had done him some grave wrong, and he was trying to control himself in order not to overwhelm her with his sense of it. He did not meet her eyes, and though he still kissed her when he

came and went, it was a dropped, inconclusive kiss. He no longer turned to her to fulfill his needs, and when she gave him anything unasked, it seemed to add to the great wrong he felt that she had done him.

When things—little, harmless, household things—went astray, Anne's first instinct was to get to the bottom of them, she never let dissatisfactions fester, and now she saw that something in the centre of her life was wrong, and knew that she must go to the bottom of it—even though as it sometimes happened—the process might knock the bottom out.

She heard the click of Norman's key in the latch, there was a moment's pause in the hall, and then his step on the stairs, not light and eager as it used to be, but dragging and reluctant.

She lifted her rather short-sighted grey eyes to the doorway and met Norman's. He stood there looking at her curiously, like a creature at bay. Her heart contracted with pity for him. She could not bear that he should look pursued, least of all pursued by her, as if she were an unfamiliar, menacing fellow-creature and not the wife of his heart.

"Norman," she said very gently, "will you come here and tell me what is the matter with you?"

He winced sharply and said, "Matter? I don't know what you mean. It's time to dress for dinner."

But Anne waved this function aside.

"No, darling," she said, "tell me first, dinner can wait." She rang as she spoke and gave a quiet order to the maid. When they were alone again, he said bitterly,

"You always arrange everything beautifully, but you can't arrange this!"

"I am so sorry," she said patiently, "to have had to speak to Jane first, but one has to let them know. Now we have more than half an hour undisturbed, sit down and have a cigarette. Whatever has happened, Norman, we can bear it together."

What Anne really meant was "I can bear most of it for you," but not even to herself did she admit how much of what Norman had to bear she took from him.

He gave a short, queer laugh.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said roughly, "but I suppose I've got to tell you. We can't go on living like this. Well! I'm in

love, damnably, wretchedly in love—with a girl. She's not one of the sort that don't give a rap for convention either, but a girl as good as you—but not so quiet about it! Poor child, it's struck her all of a heap. She didn't know I was married before to-day. I've been a beastly cad to you both. I never thought she'd care, and I couldn't talk of you, Anne. I tried, but I couldn't get it out—it stuck in my throat."

He put his head in his hands and she watched his slight shoulders heave. He was thirty-five and so was Anne, but Norman looked ten years younger; and he was in love with a girl.

Anne sat up very straight in a high backed chair. She was slim and young looking too, but she had reached the age when women look as young as they feel, and when they are unhappy the youth in their faces goes, never to return again.

In nine cases out of ten, people not only act as they are accustomed to act, but they feel as they are accustomed to feel. Anne was accustomed to feel first for Norman, and it was for Norman that she felt first now.

"Dearest," she whispered, "dearest—my poor boy!"

He stumbled across the room to her and laid his head on her lap. She was quite happy stroking it and murmuring to him. All her heart was his, it had never been anyone else's; and it would be his always.

"Don't grieve, my darling," she whispered, "it will all come right. It *must* all come right. You shall have what you want!"

"But I can't," he sobbed, "I can't! And I don't even know what I want!" His arms tightened round her. "I'm a beast and I mind that most!"

She saw that he did, and set herself to remedy it. Norman had always been extraordinarily chivalrous and generous to women—he was of the type that never breaks anything except hearts.

"But you needn't feel like that," she urged, "you see I understand perfectly. You can't help love, nobody can help love. All I want to know, all I *must* know, my darling, is how certain it is? How sure, I mean, you are that the very deepest thing in you loves her, and will always love her?"

"Yes, that's it," he agreed, "I do—it *is* the deepest thing in me. I want so awfully to take care of her. Anne, I did—I *did* want to love you like that—but it seemed as if you wouldn't let me. She's not like that, you know; she wants me terribly—the way I want her. We're not as good as you are."

Norman Elliot was an intellectual man, but he spoke as simply as a child explaining its hunger to its mother, and Anne listened as mothers listen to a child's importunate need; but she wished he had explained his needs before.

"My dear," she said, "of course I see how it is! She's young and you're really young. You're half a poet, you know, I've always told you that you were like a poet, and they never quite grow up. I haven't kept young enough for you."

She didn't try to explain her own love, nor that it was quite as "terrible" as any that this young strange girl might feel for him. She could deal with her terror later. She foresaw that she would have plenty of time for it—all the rest of her life.

"Tell me about her," she said gently. Norman got up and walked about the room. He told her, in a confused and eager way, all the charm—the headstrong, violent charm—of the young creature. How he had come across her quite by accident in a friend's office. The friend didn't turn up, but Nina Dean sat with flaming red bobbed hair on an office stool, and told him what she thought of London. That was the beginning. They met afterwards again and again, for lunch in the City—queer old Soho places—she lit them from end to end with magic. She had magic; she was very vehement, they quarreled often, he gave her books to read and they fought about them. He didn't suppose she had been very well brought up. There was a large family somewhere in Ireland. She had the sweetest accent, a very short upper lip, and the skin of a pale pink rose. Her eyebrows were dark and arched, they made her look as if she was always being surprised. Had he said her eyes were brown—very dark brown and immensely sad—her whole face was tragic, small and tragic? You wanted awfully to be good to her, and now he'd made her sick with crying. It was too beastly, too terrible; after he had told her he was married, she had rushed away from him out into the Strand. He saw her jump on to a fast moving 'bus. She lived somewhere off in Maida Vale with an aunt. The whole thing had been innocent. That was the worst of it. Innocence hurt, and innocence lasted. You couldn't get over innocence, not if you were like Norman and never wanted to hurt beautiful things.

"I daresay you'd give me a divorce," he added, "in fact I never doubted you would, but God knows if she'd take it, and besides if I smash my career how can I keep her? I daresay literary chaps can afford this kind of thing, but not a man in my position, especially as almost all my backing has come from your people."

"My family doesn't matter now," said Anne. "You'll get on all right without them. But of course I see what you mean. Isn't there any other way? A way in which we could shield the girl and yet you could be free without having to ruin your career?"

Norman hesitated. "The whole thing's impossible," he groaned, "I must get away for a bit or I shall cut my throat."

A silvery gong sounded from the hall.

"We will talk about it again after dinner," Anne said getting up, "I think a way must be found, don't be afraid, darling."

He turned to her with a passion of remorseful tenderness. "Anne! Anne!" he said, "how could I leave you? I don't want to leave you!"

Anne tried to overcome a shuddering feeling as she felt his arm across her shoulder. She wished he would not touch her, but she submitted even to his reactions; knowing that they were reactions. She wanted him to come down quietly and eat his dinner, and in the end he did what she wanted. He was able to talk now, about politics and personalities. Anne was very well read and though she talked less than he did, she could hold her own. She wondered if the red haired girl who cried herself sick in the Strand could talk intelligently too. Probably she could, modern children were very clever, but Anne doubted if she could keep her wits while her heart was being broken. The old-fashioned training is best for those who desire to suppress emotion. Anne had always been modern in her ideas, but rigidly old-fashioned in the government of her feelings. She ate her dinner without appetite, but she ate as much as usual. When they had finished she went with Norman into his smoking room.

"I've thought of something," Anne said slowly, "instead of trying to get a tiresome ordinary divorce, which you've not only got no grounds for, but which if you had good grounds for, would upset your career, couldn't you get one for nullity? You see we have never had a child." Anne was glad that he turned away from her, because even when they were happy she hadn't liked saying that particular sentence; it had always seemed to her as if she had failed Norman more than Nature had failed her, and she could bear to say it very much less now that he did not want her love, which had never failed him. She couldn't see his face, but she knew his silences. This was what he had wanted her to say, but he would never have said it himself. He would have been cut in pieces first. Still he had hoped that perhaps she wouldn't let him be cut in pieces. Anne went on casually, point by point, "I could go away for a time, to Italy perhaps. I have never been since the War.

It would be a wonderful change for me to go abroad again, and then when it was all arranged, I could come back when I liked. It seems to me a very good plan. My people will object, but they would object to any divorce; and nobody can stop us—nobody knows anything that could stop us. Of course I don't know if there are any legal difficulties?"

"None," said Norman without turning round. "If you can bring yourself to swear that you were never really my wife?"

"I have always thought the divorce laws very wrong," said Anne steadily. "If you can prove that both husband and wife want a divorce they can't have it. If only one of them wants it, it's comparatively easy to get it—by doing wrong for it. I have always believed in divorce by mutual consent after a three years' probation. Love is sacred—and marriage is sacred—as long as there is love in it—but marriage by itself is merely legal. I don't see why I should mind swearing a lie when the whole situation is a lie, if it's the only way out of it for you, Norman?"

"Only you happen not to like telling lies," he reminded her.

"I don't think that matters," said Anne.

"My dear, I feel such a beast," Norman said again, and again (only more easily now, because his heart was uplifted by a surge of hope). Anne took his remorse away from him. "But Anne," he said at last, "I don't want to leave you. That's what's been hurting me so dreadfully all these weeks. You see I adore her, all the time she's in me pulling me to pieces. I can't tell you what it's like. You're such an angel but you couldn't understand—and yet there's you, and there's no one in the world like you. Whatever happens I want you to remember I think you *perfect*."

This tribute hurt Anne more than anything he had yet said. For a moment she could not even comfort him any more. "You don't seem to see I've got to *lose* you!" he finished almost resentfully. She pulled herself together to meet this difficulty. "But Norman," she said, "I shan't change. I can't be your wife if you love this other girl, but I shall love you always, and I shall love her because of you. I want, as soon as all the tiresome legal things are cleared away, to be your friend and hers for the rest of my life." He looked at her with eyes in which worship and astonishment mingled. Anne had really succeeded in surprising him. He had always thought of her as immaculate and safer than the safest institution, but he hadn't believed anyone who was safe and immaculate could be so kind; nor had he believed that women love without jealousy. He did not quite believe it now, but he was shaken by her eyes. "Oh, if you could only make her see," Norman

breathed. “She’ll be like all the devils let loose when I tell her I’ve told you. I had to swear I wouldn’t. She’s full of rage with me now—cursed me out of the room, not because I’d let her down, but because I’d let you down. She’s a feminist, you know, and she’s awfully frank. You’ll have to let her pitch into me frightfully. But it would be the best thing in the world if you’d see her yourself. Then you could make her see that you don’t awfully mind.”

Anne said nothing at all. It took her breath away that he couldn’t see how much she minded. It would not have surprised her if she had died of it where she stood, not simply and softly fainted (she was far too conscious for that), but died hard, in ugliness and agony, as men die hard from wounds on noisy battlefields. Her life in Norman had been intact, and had gone far deeper than her physical life, and now it had been broken, ruthlessly, in a moment—from its fine full strength—into fragments. But this life—the life of the hidden senses and intricate attachments of the heart—can die without a sign, and it died now in Anne, very quietly while she was still thinking what she should say to this girl who was going—for her sake—to pitch into Norman. “Of course I will go and see her,” she said at last, “to-morrow.”

He gave a sigh of relief. “Oh, Anne,” he said, “what a fool I was not to tell you about it weeks ago! You see I thought you’d mind so awfully.” He looked at her a little doubtfully, and she saw that he was going to ask her more about her feelings; but she had come to the end of her tether, she could not stand any more explanations, she felt that she had reached the last even of her reassurances. “It makes a great difference,” she said gently. “It changes one’s life. I must go now and think about it, but don’t worry any more, Norman—I feel quite sure it will come all right for all of us.” He made a step towards her, but Anne reached the door first in safety, and fled across the little familiar hall. It felt curiously large and empty to her, as if she might lose her way in it before she reached the stairs. Norman was still speaking, but she couldn’t take in what he said. His words went on like mosquitoes outside an impenetrable netting. She heard the sound of them, but they couldn’t get into her brain.

Fortunately they had always had different rooms—they usually had the door between them open, but to-night Anne shut her door so that he should not come in and try to comfort her. She would have liked to lock it, but there was no real need. If Norman saw that it was shut it would be enough. He was so quick to understand everything, and so gentle when he understood. And all of it, his gentleness, his understanding, and the ardour that she hadn’t quite wanted, were going to be given to a young woman called Nina Dean who cried and cursed and jumped on to swiftly moving ’buses.

CHAPTER II

Anne was never very grand, but she was always grand enough. She was one of the best dressed women in London. Nobody ever saw her wearing anything unsuitable, and she was not an extravagant dresser, for whatever she bought was good, and never at all extreme. Anne dressed very carefully before she went to see Nina. She hoped it was not unfair to try to look her best, but she came to the conclusion that it wasn't, because after all she was thirteen years older than Nina and nothing could be unfairer than that. She tried to plan out everything she was going to say in her mind. Anne generally acted with common-sense and judgment, but she was a slow thinker and often while she was carrying out one plan of action, the things that the action was to determine, had changed to something quite different. She wanted to give Norman up to the girl, but she wanted to explain exactly what Norman was like first. She was very anxious that Nina shouldn't imagine that she felt any sense of possession about Norman (her going there to see the girl was greatly to prove that she hadn't any claims) but on the other hand, she didn't believe the girl could possibly understand Norman without her help. Anne kept trying to put herself into the girl's mind, which would have been useful if she had known what the girl's mind was like.

It was a long way to Maida Vale and she had gone on a 'bus because she had thought that arriving in a taxi would look as if she felt superior. Anne had not a great deal of imagination, but she used what she had to save the feelings of other people whether it made her uncomfortable or not. She had never been to Maida Vale before. The Edgware Road had always seemed to her the end of everything, and it was puzzling to find that it was only the beginning. Nothing that streamed away from it looked familiar. The houses, some of them very large, sprawled dismally on and on, getting further and further away from the thickset secluded centre which Anne always thought of as London. At last the conductor told her she was near the street she had asked for, and she got down, put her hat and veil a little straighter, and fought a dusty wind that drove at her with sudden vehemence, down a short broad alley. It was hardly a street, the houses shuffled together, with large dingy, shabby fronts; there was no sense of completion or privacy about them; they were cut up into apartments and business offices, with wastes of passages and empty halls in between. The house in which Nina's aunt lived looked rather more uninhabitable than the rest. Anne rang a bell and waited

for a long time before anyone came. Mrs. Dean herself answered the door at last. She had been cleaning, she explained, but all that had adhered to her from this process was dirt. Nina was upstairs in her room. Her aunt thought she had had a "turn" yesterday. She hadn't gone to work to-day and refused to eat her dinner. No doubt a visitor would do her good. Would Anne mind going up three flights of stairs and knocking? Nina's room was just opposite the stairs.

Anne took the stairs slowly and thoughtfully. She had not been prepared for Nina's aunt. Nina's aunt was without doubt a very nice, good woman, and apologetic; but she was not a lady. She was apologetic because she was not; but that didn't make it any better. Anne knocked at the door and gave her name before she entered. She thought as she did so that perhaps it wasn't going to be her name very much longer, and that it would then belong to the girl on the other side of the door.

Nina was sitting crouched on the bed under an open window. She had been crying so much that her beauty was drenched and spoilt. You could not have told what she looked like, except that her smooth short hair was very bright and that she wore (probably always) sport jerseys and a short blue serge skirt. The room was untidy, but it was quite clean, and above Nina's flaming head was a bookcase full of modern literature. On her dressing table there was a photograph of Norman in a shining silver frame.

Anne guessed that the girl was educated, a little spoilt, and ashamed of living with her less educated and less spoilt relations.

Nina opened wide terrified eyes as her visitor entered. She looked like a bird that has flown through an open window and forgotten its way back to the sky. "Oh," she said in a choking voice, "you're—you're Norman's wife!" She looked so pitifully frightened, and at a loss, that Anne forgot all her plans. Instead she held out her arms and said, "My poor dear child!" and when Nina flew into them, something warm came with her, into Anne's heart. "I didn't know! I didn't know!" Nina murmured, "he *did* tell you I didn't know? It was awful of him never to tell me—how could I dream that there was you? And yesterday I was so dreadfully happy—because it was the first time we'd really *said* it! And it made everything wonderful. Up till then I had been happy, but I'd been afraid—I thought perhaps he didn't mean anything except fun. I couldn't believe it afterwards, when he told me about you. I thought he was laughing at me—he often does, you know—so I laughed too—and then I saw his eyes!—I flew out at him—I couldn't help it—I always wanted to be decent to other girls—girls don't have an easy time working in London with strange men; we often get taken in, but we can be

decent to each other, and not take other people's men—can't we? And I thought Norman had been just pretending, and didn't really care, and had *made* me be unfair to you! I could have scratched his eyes out! I'd always been on my guard with other men, but Norman's so different, isn't he? You couldn't think you needed to be on your guard with him. He never tried to catch me out or take advantage of me. He could have kissed me before, but he hadn't. Only he knew he could. That's what hurt me so when I thought he was pretending."

"But my dear, he didn't pretend," Anne interrupted, "he does really care for you."

"But why! Why! Why!" Nina cried desperately. "Couldn't he have let me alone when he had you?"

This was a difficult question for Anne to answer. She could discuss Norman, and she could discuss the girl before her, but she had not been prepared to discuss herself or Norman's relation to herself. "Men are not quite like us," she hazarded. "We have been married ten years, and Nina, I am really older than Norman. We are actually the same age—but I feel and look much older. I think it was not strange he should turn to someone young. He may not have found all that he wanted in our marriage. I am sure I often failed him. And then you know we have no children. That makes a difference to a man that perhaps we hardly understand."

"But you're not old!" Nina said impatiently, "and if you're not exactly beautiful, you're most awfully graceful and nice-looking."

Anne flushed under her rival's praise. She knew exactly how nice-looking she was. She took great pains with her appearance, and from the day of her marriage she had taken even greater pains; but she knew that though she had beautiful thick glossy hair, and a good pale skin, her face was flat and large, her grey eyes small and too near together, and her nose a little heavy and without distinction. The girl before her made the worst of herself and was lovely, Anne made the very best of herself and just escaped being plain. "I don't think looks," Anne said a little coldly, "have a great deal to do with it."

"Oh don't you?" exclaimed the girl. "But I think you're wrong. They must. Look at chorus girls and pretty actresses. They'll catch on to any man if they want to!"

"Norman," said Anne, "isn't just like ordinary men." Then she bit her lips and looked at the face before her. Could she say that Norman had not been influenced by that face?

"No—of course he's different," Nina agreed doubtfully, "and we've always had heaps of fun together. It may have been the fun he liked. But I don't believe, do you, that he was right not to tell me? I think he just funked it. He wanted to go on having heaps of fun and not having to pay for it."

Anne's flush deepened. "He is paying for it now," she said in a low voice, "he's very unhappy—perhaps at first neither of you realised how seriously you were going to care, but I don't see that people are to be blamed because the depth of their feeling takes them by surprise, do you?"

"Well—it's not quite the same thing, is it—he and me?" Nina suggested. "I hadn't *got* a husband—let alone a nice one—up my sleeve. It didn't really matter if I was taken by surprise or not. But people like Norman oughtn't to let themselves get surprised! They should keep out of things, or tell. That's the way I look at it. Lots of girls don't mind playing about with married men—but some do, and they ought to be *told* anyhow. I don't judge others and I don't say if he'd hated you—or you'd been nasty—that I should have kicked up such a row. But he had to own he liked you awfully, and anyone can see you're a perfect dear—so I don't think he had *any* excuse, and I'm *furious* with him. I can't pretend not to be!"

"I certainly think he should have told you for your own sake," Anne answered thoughtfully. "But he is not a conceited man, and it never occurred to him that there was any danger for you. But I don't want you to trouble about me. That is where I think you make a mistake. From the moment you and Norman really care for each other, the question is perfectly simple. I came here to-day to tell you that as I am convinced he *does* really care for you in the best and most permanent way, I am going to arrange for you to be free, to be together. It may take some time, but Norman thinks it can be legally and properly done."

Nina knitted her soft surprised eyebrows. She was silent for a moment, then she said, "It's not as simple as you think. It isn't only a question of whether Norman cares enough. He's let you down, and he's let me down. You may be willing to give him up, and nobody would blame you, but I'm not at all sure that I'm willing to take him on. A man that'll act like Norman has acted isn't the kind of man I want."

This view of the question was so foreign to Anne that for a moment it completely silenced her. She had been prepared for anger and tears, she had steeled herself to listen to reproaches, and to deflect them as much as possible from their rightful object; but she had never supposed any repudiation of Norman conceivable. A sentimental renunciation, the sacrifice

of the girl's heart for hers, she could have understood without taking the slightest advantage of it; but that this girl could calmly sit there and say that under the circumstances she wasn't sure she wanted Norman swept the ground (almost any ground) from under Anne's feet. "But—but—" she stammered, "I thought you loved him?"

"So I do," said Nina composedly, "in reason. But I'm not going to make a fool of myself for any man—would you?"

Anne looked doubtfully at this problem. To be strictly honest, she felt that she would. She had been brought up in a different school to the girl, a school in which making a fool of yourself (if it outraged no convention) was usually advised, and invariably admired. It was not called making a fool of yourself; it was called acting for the good of others. You did not take the others into your confidence, nor the probable cost of what you were going to do. You just saw that it would be a beautiful thing to do, and did it. The girl before her had been brought up in a harder school, in which there is no margin for irrelevant sacrifices, and where you must always know what things cost, because you have got so little to pay for them with. Anne saw the contrast for a moment, and then thrust it away from her. "You couldn't," she said, "make a fool of yourself by loving Norman. Nor—if we can arrange the legal part of it satisfactorily—by sharing his life. I don't take the view that you do about him, dear child. Norman is a poet, he doesn't see practical things clearly. It would have been impossible for him to believe that you loved him—his friendship for you was just like a wonderful fairy tale to him."

"But," said Nina, "it didn't stay like a wonderful fairy tale, did it? Things don't. That's just what I mean. *Then* what happens?"

Anne was annoyed at the precociousness of the girl. Nina was insistent and uncivilised—she would try to hit nails on the head. At her age Anne would never have asked these awkward questions. As far as that went, she would not have asked them now; but she saw that she had got to answer them. "I think," she said gently, "if we are patient and quiet about it, things will grow into an even more beautiful reality."

"Well, they may," the girl conceded, "but who's going to do the dirty work of getting them to grow into it? You—or Norman? And what's going to happen to you when it's all over? Do you suppose I'm going to walk right into your life and take everything you've got away from you and not even *ask* what's to happen to you afterwards?"

"Nothing will happen to me," said Anne, "I have a great many friends and plenty of occupation. And it doesn't matter—I mean I don't mind—" Suddenly without warning, the agony Anne had had so quietly by herself all night, seized her and shook her into a violent burst of tears. She felt the girl's arms round her, strong and tense, in a passionate protectiveness. "There, you see! You see!" said the girl in a tone fierce with tenderness, "as if I didn't know! Poor darling—as if I didn't know!"

Anne wrenched herself away from Nina and spoke more savagely than any girl could speak. For the first time she went down into the depths of her own heart and forgot to try to behave beautifully. "You can't!" she said, "you can't possibly know! You're not his wife! But you ought to be. You *must* be if you have any heart in you! He's being pulled to pieces by his love for you. Do you suppose I like that? Do you think I want to see the man I love broken by wanting what he can't have? He's different from what you think! Infinitely finer and dearer and more true! If he's made a blunder it's only because he's innocent as other men seldom are—because he respects women and wouldn't for the world do you any harm. What can I do for him if you won't have him? He'll never come back to me again. I'm not the sort of woman he wants. Oh yes! I daresay he'll go on being my husband. Do you suppose that's going to make either of us any happier? If he's not my lover any more, I want at any rate to know that he's got what I can't give him! You're not to blame for what has happened—perhaps he is—I don't know and I don't care. I'm too old for all this nonsense about blame. Make him happy—that's all I ask of you—make him happy—then perhaps I'll forgive you both—but I'll never forgive either of you if you don't!"

Anne rose to her feet. She put her hands on the girl's shoulders and felt suddenly sure of her own will and her own power. Later on she would feel overwhelmed with shame at her self-exposure; but she would have got what she wanted. The girl looked up and met her eyes unflinchingly, adoringly. "Oh, if you feel like that," she said, "I'll do it! I'll do anything you like."

CHAPTER III

The most difficult part of a tragedy is the deference that has to be paid to the onlookers. If murder only consisted of the person you murdered and the process (however painful) of having it out afterwards with the judge, fewer people would be debarred from it; and there is an even greater degree of frightfulness in the subsidiary personages of a divorce.

Anne felt that she could easily manage her relations with Norman and Nina. There was nothing in her worst moments with either of them that she had not allowed for. Her courage rose to meet their primary claims without faltering. But she felt that it was asking too much of her to have to bear the startled watchfulness of the cook, who had been with them since their marriage. Then there was Norman's mother. She was a gentle, implacable old lady from a country vicarage. The word divorce had never crossed her lips during the sixty years of her strict and uneventful life. Anne's own relations were simply very angry—at first they tried to hush everything up and were full of good ideas, but when they found Anne's quiet will barred all evasions, they stormed and abused, threatened and repudiated and could not be kept out of the house. But they knew what divorce meant, and Mrs. Elliot didn't. She could not distinguish between husband and wife. She looked upon them both as upon those who have been smitten with leprosy. It was obvious that she prayed before she spoke to either of them, and when her prayers became a little confused with her arguments, she trembled and shed tears. To Norman she only spoke indirectly. She said, "My boy—my poor boy, do not do this wicked thing!" And the odd part of it was that her just saying this and crying shook Norman as if it had been an argument. For days afterwards he would not see Nina, nor speak to Anne. His mother urged that he should give up everything (except his marriage) and go to Madeira for the winter. She spoke as if some form of transportation and a colonial life afterwards would be most fitted to meet their case. Finally Norman saw Nina by accident and when he came back he told Anne that his mother must go home. Anne had to tell her this, and Mrs. Elliot spoke a great deal more directly to Anne. She said that she knew her boy and his devoted, tender heart, and that the state of sin into which he had fallen could only have been brought about by terrible neglect on Anne's part. She was ruthless with Anne. She struck again and again at Anne's childlessness. She accused her of being too worldly, and in the same breath of not being entertaining

enough. She pointed out to Anne that she looked old and ought to be more lively, and then she asked her why she didn't go to church oftener and give Norman the example of a deeply religious life? That, she said, was what Norman had missed. Anne couldn't be a really good woman because good women never dreamed of divorcing their husbands.

"I am not divorcing my husband," Anne explained in exasperation, "Norman is divorcing me." Then the whole thing had to come out. It was frightful; and the explanations involved made Anne understand why people walk out of their houses and are never heard of again. If she had known what happened afterwards to these incredibly inspired persons, she would have instantly followed their example. As it was, she found herself floundering in a sea of prevarications, ineptitudes and downright lies, and none of them saved her. They didn't even save Norman very much. She kept the girl out of it somehow, though her mother-in-law always suspected the girl. She probed searchingly for Nina, whom she envisaged in the form of a housemaid. Men could do awful things suddenly, she explained to Anne, if they were pushed to it, and it was no use Anne's saying that Norman wasn't that kind of man, because (if wrongly handled) men were all the same, except of course Norman's father who was a clergyman; the person to blame was the person who had handled him wrongly. Anne said she was perfectly aware of that, and perfectly willing to be blamed, but she wasn't going to stop the divorce. Her mother-in-law very gently and with a further resort to silent prayer, cast her permanently off. "Very well, then, Anne," she said, "if you persist in carrying out this very wicked act neither his father nor I, nor any of his sisters, can see or speak to you again. Whatever happens to my poor boy, remember that you are responsible for it in the eyes of God and of his mother. You could have saved him, and you are deliberately forcing him instead into a deadly sin."

"Why do you think I could have saved him?" Anne asked despairingly, "you have said yourself that I have no attractions; and women without attractions don't save men."

"You could have had the attraction of a godly life," said Mrs. Elliot coldly, "and not given Sunday luncheons. Nevertheless even as it is, Norman's fate is in your hands. He told me himself that he would never have dreamed of pursuing this reckless course but for your support. At a word from you now, he would give it up."

Anne lowered her eyes. He had given her away then, so that she had no defence. She reminded herself (to stop the sudden bitterness that rose up in her heart) that you cannot be a defender and expect defence. "Very well

then," she said quietly, "I suppose I must accept your casting me off. I had hoped you wouldn't quite—that you would realise I meant well by Norman, and was relieving him of an unhappiness; and I had hoped that perhaps you would write to me while I was away and have told me how he was. You see, after all, I love Norman; it is Norman who does not love me."

"I cannot understand your point of view," her mother-in-law said gravely, "you seem to have an interest in his temporal welfare and yet you have destroyed his eternal welfare. You cannot expect me to consider your feelings in so slight a matter when you are disregarding all of ours in so vital a one." Anne bowed her head. At that moment she did not believe in anybody's eternal welfare.

Then her mother-in-law asked her if she had told Toby, and Anne had to admit that she hadn't.

Toby was her own oldest and dearest friend, but he was also Norman's. Indeed it was Timothy Wainwright who had introduced Norman to Anne. He had brought him down one Sunday to Anne's home, and when the two young men left a week later Timothy already knew that he had lost the first place in both their hearts; but it was only Timothy who knew that this transference was a painful one. The others went on loving him and relying upon him with the unconscious selfishness of happy lovers; and they had done so ever since. If he had wanted more of Anne than to run her errands, and be consulted about Dutch bulbs, he never let her see it. He acted as Norman's best man, and if any difficulties had arisen in their married life he would certainly have shared them; as they had had no difficulties, they merely gave him the odds and ends of their free time.

It was their idea that he liked Norman better than Anne; he was sometimes a little critical of Anne, though they knew that he would have died for her. Still, they thought he would have died for Norman first. This was their mistake. There were times when Timothy had been within a measurable distance of wanting to kill Norman.

"Toby," said Mrs. Elliot, "must be spoken to. He is of your generation and understands the world, and yet we know that he is a good man and can be perfectly trusted. Either you or Norman must go to him with this shocking story at once. Perhaps he will be able to see some way out of it."

Anne submitted. It was part of her strength that she always gave way to the wishes of others unless they interfered with her rare decisions. Since Toby must know sooner or later there was no use in making a difficulty about telling him, although Anne did not want to tell him. She had a

momentary hope that she might persuade Norman to do it, but Norman refused. He spoke with a kind of horror of it. "I don't a bit mind his talking to me about it afterwards," Norman explained to Anne. "We shall have to talk sooner or later, but somehow I can't tell him. You see he's always believed I worshipped you." Norman occasionally said unfortunate things when he was very overwrought. As a rule he was intensely careful of other people's feelings, but he sometimes forgot Anne's, because she was so much less sensitive than he was.

So Anne had to tell Toby herself.

She noticed as she put on her things to go out that she was looking plain and old. She was not conscious of feeling unhappiness, but she saw that her face was different. There used to be something shining and blooming about her. She had never looked like a wild flower, but she had looked like a fine strong hothouse blossom with firm leaves. Her happiness had given her an exquisite inner assurance, she had felt Norman's love like a magic armour shielding her against the world. Now she felt defenceless and raw; she thought that everyone who looked at her must know that she was no longer loved. She was too old and tired and plain ever to be loved again. She must learn to observe life, because she hadn't really anything else to do with it.

Anne wondered for the first time what Timothy felt like, living alone. Timothy was forty and Anne had always thought that it must be very nice for him to be a bachelor with such charming rooms and good servants; now she was not quite so sure. She had telephoned Toby that she was coming to tea with him, so that he had everything she liked ready for her. A great bowl full of love-in-the-mist and a special Buszard's cake on his gate-legged table.

Toby was a very busy man whose work in the City was not without importance; but Anne always found that he had plenty of time and could do little things for her more easily than most hurried people.

Toby had grey eyes not very much larger than Anne's but very much quicker. They shot into you when you first saw him, and afterwards he seemed to sheathe them and look as if he hadn't noticed anything. He had a very kind smile and when he wasn't smiling he looked extraordinarily grave. Everybody wanted Toby to be their trustee and to go to their relations' funerals. He was never emotional, but there was a solid unexpressed sympathy in him, which mourners found consoling.

"Well, Anne," Toby said, "it's a long time since I've seen you. When do you and the Boy go off on your summer holidays?"

Anne took off her gloves slowly and made the tea. She talked for a while about their summer holiday, though she knew that she wasn't going to have it. They discussed the rival merits of Scotland and the Channel Islands, or a caravan in Cornwall. Toby usually spent a week with them in September, and he was very much against a caravan.

"If I were ten years younger now," he said, "perhaps; but middle-aged men don't look nice when they are breakfastless and unshaved; and I no longer take pleasure in rain down the back of my neck, or insects in my coffee. I do not care to wash up tea-things, or to persuade cart-horses to change their minds. I prefer night 'with its train of stars and its great gift of sleep' in a bedroom; and I am more than wedded to a morning bath."

"As a matter of fact," said Anne, riveting her attention upon the shining teapot, "I don't think we can do a caravan this summer in any case. I had thought of going by myself abroad somewhere, with a girl I know."

"Indeed," said Toby, "and what am I to do with Norman in your absence? Has the Foreign Office refused him a passport?"

"I want you," said Anne, "to take quite particularly good care of him."

"The best care I could take," said Timothy gravely, "would be nothing compared to yours at your worst. If he's in need of care, why the devil are you going away from him?"

"Because," said Anne steadily, "he doesn't want my care any more. He has been perfectly beautiful about it, Toby dear, and if I understand and believe in this new plan, and think it all right for all of us, I don't see why anybody else shouldn't! Dear, dear Toby, please believe in it with me! Lots of people won't, and can't, and I suppose I shall have to bear it—but I don't want to have to bear disagreeing with you!"

"I have seldom heard a more unscrupulously unfair or obscure statement," said Toby pretending to eat his cake. "My dear girl, what is this new plan which is to dislocate all our lives, and which I am to welcome with enthusiasm?"

Then Anne told him about Nina. She had hoped at first that it would be enough to tell him about the divorce, but it wasn't enough. He didn't believe in it. He only believed in Nina. He didn't look at Anne while she was telling him, but he stopped pretending to eat his cake. He sat quite still. Anne managed beautifully, but she got a little short of breath towards the end.

"You really think," he said when she had finished, "that Norman loves this—this young woman seriously? It's not just a flash in the pan, is it? You

know such things do happen even in awfully happy marriages. A man takes a wild header into a momentary fancy, generally some haunting pretty face, some delicious little dream he'd be sick to death of, if he were shut up with her for a fortnight in a fog. You're sure it's nothing of that kind with Norman?"

"I don't think so," said Anne thoughtfully, "I know the girl very well now. Of course she's different from anyone I've known before, but she's very clever and full of character. I think she will learn the little things he might like her to know, quite easily from me, things about her clothes and the house and the servants. She wants to learn them. She's been most extraordinarily sweet to me."

Timothy's boots creaked as if he had leaned too hard on something but he made no comment. He waited for Anne to go on.

"My idea was," Anne continued, "to take her abroad with me. She's been very much upset with all she's been through lately. You see nobody knows about her and Norman at all. My people think there's some woman, because they would naturally think so. They want somebody to blame. But Norman has been extraordinarily careful. He never goes to see her now without me. Poor dears! I manage the best I can for them. Sometimes we go into the country, where they can be alone comfortably; but it is wiser to wait till everything is settled up. If I take her to Italy, we can stay away till everything is arranged and then Norman can come out and marry her."

"What do you propose to do then?" Toby asked a little dryly.

"I thought," said Anne, "they'd like to go to Venice for their honeymoon. Norman loves it so and Nina has never seen it, and I might go to Rome. It will take quite six months, Norman says, before they're free. You know I love Rome. I rather thought of studying the excavations in the Forum."

"Very suitable indeed," Toby said. "I can't imagine anything so thoroughly *à propos*, and when the honeymooners return may I ask if you've planned anything beyond the Forum? Oh Anne! Anne!"

"No, Toby don't!" Anne said very quickly, "you mustn't mind! You know you're *not* going to! Why then, you see, when they come home, it'll be all right, won't it? It'll be all right for all of us. I want you to like Nina nearly as much as you like me."

"Good God!" said Toby, "slow up somewhere! I decline to be treated as if I were a cockatrice roused from his den to play with an innocent child!"

"She is a very innocent child," said Anne softly. Toby said nothing more for a long time. He stirred his lukewarm tea and looked searchingly at the carpet. Anne got up and wandered about his immense quiet room. He had several very beautiful things and Anne had always appreciated and understood them better than anybody else. She fingered them carefully now and wondered whether the lacquer on his great Chinese cabinet oughtn't to be cleaned again soon. She hadn't expected Toby to like her plan, but he was very nice about it. He hadn't expressed surprise or horror, or any of that dreadful sympathy which seemed to slam a door in Anne's heart, shutting her away forever from the incompleteness of human understanding. At last he said without turning round, "Anne, are you going to let them live in your house?"

"It isn't mine, it's Norman's," said Anne defensively. "Besides, I shan't want a house. I thought of taking a service flat in Westminster. I've always wanted to live in Westminster."

"I see," said Toby. He cleared his throat as if he hadn't quite reached the end of what he wanted to say, but had got to the end of his courage in saying it. Then he forced himself to go on.

"If it isn't impertinent, Anne, may I suggest that Westminster isn't very far away from Knightsbridge? Must you live in London at all?"

"Oh Toby!" Anne cried, "all my friends are in London! You're in London! Mayn't I even have——" then she stopped suddenly, feeling that she was going to be silly and start pitying herself, a thing she had steadfastly made up her mind never to do.

"Mayn't you even have London?" Toby finished for her. "Well, you see, Anne, it isn't really a case of what you *can* have. It is a case of what you have lost; making the best of things generally implies letting them go as if they were red hot coals. That's the safest plan. If you feel, and Norman feels, that this is the only course to take, why take it; but step straight off the course when it's finished! Don't see them again after the marriage, d'you see my point?"

But Anne wouldn't see it. "They don't want that!" she pleaded; "they honestly need me—and Toby, think—Norman's all my life! He isn't just a part of it—just the husband part I mean. I can let that go, but I must know how he is, I must look after them and help them—not too much of course—but when they *want* me—they must have me!"

"Take my advice, Anne," said Toby, "in some ways I am particularly well placed to offer it. Don't you do it! You won't be wanted—not very

much; not, I mean, as much as the enquiry office at the Army & Navy Stores. And it'll break you to pieces if you go on with them. You think it won't, I know. You think cutting the painter will do that! But you're wrong—cutting the painter is a relief. It's only the idea of doing it that hurts. What you're holding on to—that's the very devil! Of course he's all your life—that's why you've got to make it over again and make it different. You're a brave woman, Anne. Stay in Rome and go on with the excavations. I'll come out to you. Everybody'll come out to you. But for God's sake, don't come back and hover!"

"Oh don't!" said Anne. She put her hands over her face as if he had struck her. She felt a violent and miserable feeling in her heart. She had never been angry with Norman, nor even with Nina, but she was very angry with Toby. He was crass; he had said just what he shouldn't—just what he mustn't! He wasn't helping her at all. Toby saw that he wasn't helping Anne. If Anne had not been so miserable she would have seen that Toby was miserable too. His face was quite white with patches of red on it, and his mouth had a twisted look as if he was laughing at himself with a cruel laughter.

"You don't know what you are talking about," she said sternly, "nor how I feel. It was stupid of me to talk to you like this. Nobody can understand who hasn't loved as I love—hopelessly and in a sense quite happily, with all their heart. My happiness—and I am quite happy still—is in giving anything they want to either of them."

"You call it happiness," said Toby, "but you won't find it is happiness, and some day you'll see that you're just in the way."

"It is very natural that you should think so," said Anne resentfully, "I suppose I must seem intrusive and tiresome to you. Fortunately for me they don't feel as you do. They love—and need me. Good-bye, Toby! Thank you for not being horrid about Norman. I shall count on you to look after him while I'm away, and to let me know how he is. His mother won't write to me—but you will, won't you?"

"Oh yes, I will," said Toby, "you may count on me for that."

He didn't offer to shake hands with Anne. He simply stood by the door and held it open for her. Anne felt and looked very unforgiving. Toby had always been nicer to Norman than to her; probably he thought, like Norman's mother, that she was altogether to blame, and that Norman was lucky to get rid of her. She had thought he was her friend too as well as Norman's, but apparently he wasn't.

“Anne,” said Toby in a queer choked voice, as she passed him with her head held high, “Anne, I told you that, you know, because it was the truth, not because I wanted to be nasty. You see I—I happen to know it is the truth.”

It was so like Toby to suppose that his ideas were infallible; and so different from Norman who was too intelligent not to be diffident about his knowledge! Still Anne could hear by Toby’s voice that he was upset for her, more upset than she had thought, and she turned round and shook hands with him kindly. He hurt her hand, he held it so hard, but he didn’t retract what he’d said.

“I suppose,” said Anne, with restored gentleness, “that we must each of us do what we feel is the best, mustn’t we? Even if our friends don’t agree with us?”

“I suppose we must,” said Toby, “but Anne—sometimes it’s damned hard!”

CHAPTER IV

Norman knew that he would have to agree to whatever she asked, but he wished that she had asked him anything else. What Anne had asked him was very simple, and very like Anne, because she did not see what its simplicity involved. She asked him to spend his last evening quietly at home with her.

Everything had been packed. Anne always arranged journeys as she arranged tea-parties, flawlessly and without flurry. In the morning at eight o'clock the cab would come and she would call for Nina and start for the Continent from Victoria. Their luggage was registered in advance. The house was in perfect order. Each of the servants knew exactly what to do, and how to look after their master, until their mistress returned. The cook, who knew the truth and could not put up with it, was going to leave, but not until a new cook could be found.

There was nothing left for Anne and Norman to discuss—nothing, that is to say, which they could discuss. They would simply have to sit for three hours looking at each other, with ten years of unruffled unity stretched out behind them, and ahead of them that paltry and ineffectual word, good-bye.

Norman was unable to imagine what Anne expected to gain from this duration of discomfort; it seemed to him that a hasty word on the mat in the hall with a merciful cab standing at the door ready to break up the last of their difficulties would have been far the happiest plan for both of them. He was painfully aware that for the last few weeks he had been behaving very badly to Anne. He was so overwhelmed with the knowledge of what she was doing for him that he couldn't even be civil to her. His pride was a raw and irritable wound, the very sight of her filled him with a cold antagonism. She ought not to have done so much. She ought not to have made things so easy—nor to have confronted his passion for another woman with such indomitable cheerfulness. He wouldn't have minded if she had really been happy, but he knew his Anne. Martyrs—the best martyrs—take their stakes as Anne took hers; before the Celestial Vision has had time to let them off the worst of their pangs. Anne was as cheerful as possible, but she was growing old under his eyes.

Toby had once said of her, "Anne has all the dignity in the world, but she hasn't an ounce of assurance. She'll never fight back. She'll be a girl to the end of her life, with none of the weapons of a woman."

It was Anne's being so wonderful about Nina that Norman couldn't stand. He had not been able to catch her out even in a momentary unfairness. She could so easily have made the girl look like a fool; but she had done just the opposite; she had covered all of the girl's little follies with her careful tenderness. It is hard for any man to love one woman to distraction and to find it necessary to be grateful to another. It is hardest of all on a man whose pride is the height of his consciousness, so that a thousand times a day a hated generosity flicks it on the raw. The only moments in which Norman had been able to speak to Anne without cruelty were in the presence of the girl herself. Nina felt so reprieved from disaster, so full of the return of happiness and alive with a hundred companionable ardours, that she broke down without an effort the constraint of her older companions. They were able to laugh and be glad with her, and to exchange glances full of sympathy over her possible and impossible plans. But this last evening there wasn't to be any Nina, they were to carry the weight of their years alone.

The dinner was a success; it was short and perfect. Anne had dressed herself beautifully for it in a vague, shadowy green dress, extraordinarily becoming to her delicate colouring and the golden brown of her hair. The servants were in the room and they talked quite easily about Rome, airing their common memories with friendliness and laughter. Norman could see that Anne was a little nervous; she had a colour, which she rarely had, and her laughter was readier than her wit.

"You really want to do nothing?" he asked her when the parlour maid had left them upstairs again, in the twilight, with the coffee tray between them. "You wouldn't care to come out with me and see a show?"

Anne shook her head. That was the last thing she wanted. Her hand trembled as she put the sugar in his coffee.

"If you wouldn't mind," she said, "what I should like is to stay quietly here."

Norman minded more even than he had supposed he would mind. He was as sensitive as an æolian harp to emotion, and what he wanted to avoid was being anywhere near an emotion which could impress him uncomfortably. Already he began to see Anne not as the person who spoilt (temporarily) the delight of his love making, but as the person whose life he had ruined. He had not wanted to see her like this, but he had always known that some day he would have to realise what he had done to her.

Anne wasn't thinking of anything of the kind herself. She was thinking with a grave satisfaction of all the carefully chosen and beautiful pieces of

furniture in the room. They had very beautiful things. A Chinese screen, a lacquered chest, a fine old Davenport. Toby had given them the Davenport as a wedding present, but most of the other things Anne had picked up for herself; the charming Sheraton chairs, light as bubbles and strong as steel, the delicate chintzes and hangings, a fine square of Gobelin tapestry, the tiny picture in the alcove which wasn't a Van Dyck but might very easily pass for one—the little clear French water-colour of a fountain at Versailles—they were all her slow and careful selection. They counted for some of the happiest hours of her married life. She let her eyes linger on them one by one. This was what she had wanted the evening for—to see them all there together perfectly, with the centre of them in the midst—the point towards which they had all been drawn.

She wanted to remember Norman, not savage and antagonistic, as he had been all these dreadful weeks (she had so well understood why!) but gentle as she thought he must be this last evening—as she saw (in spite of his embarrassed silence) that he was.

"All these things, Anne," he said at last, following the movement of her eyes, "we haven't talked over yet what we're to do with them, have we?"

"We haven't needed to," Anne replied peacefully, "because I knew that you'd let me have them, and you knew that I'd let you have them, so it wasn't necessary to bother. Besides, I thought I'd explain what I felt about them to-night."

"They're all yours, there isn't any question about their all being yours," Norman said firmly, "they're as much your own as if you'd set to work and made them!"

"If they're mine," said Anne eagerly, "I can do what I like with them, can't I? What I want is to have them always just where they are. You see I got each of them *for* that. It would hurt me horribly to sort and choose, to remember that your father gave you the gate-legged table, and my mother the big Viennese dressing table upstairs; but to keep them where I wanted them—*all* of them—just like this—with you and Nina to enjoy them—that wouldn't hurt me at all! It's just the way I want them to be."

"But my dear girl," said Norman, "half of them are your wedding presents. How can you face the people who gave them to you? And how could we stand everyone knowing we'd swallowed them all down?"

"They weren't given to me conditionally," Anne replied, "they're my very own, and as to what people think—what do people matter? We aren't going by what anybody thinks. Please let me have my way about it, Norman,

because it means so very much to me—more than anyone else can understand. If I can have made your home beautiful and leave it—just like this—with you, I shan't feel as if I had altogether failed—there'll be, you see, something to show for it. Of course you and Nina can change it as much as you like—but the beautiful things will be *here*—that's all I want, just to have collected and arranged for you—a few beautiful things."

She hadn't meant to touch him, but she had touched him to the quick. He remembered with a painful vividness how she had looked the night he brought her home from their wedding journey. She had been very quiet and he had wondered a little remorsefully if he had tired or bored her on their long journey from the sea. And then she had one of her rare moments of expression, she had flung her arms round his neck and pressed her lips to his, and to his astonishment and alarm he had found that she was crying. When he implored her to tell him why, she had murmured, "Because I'm too happy." They were the only tears he had ever seen Anne shed.

The light was growing dim, but it still shone a little on Anne's beautiful hair. Her hair was her one great beauty, and when it was undone it fell to her knees. The colour changed from brown to dusky gold, but even when her hair looked its darkest, it always had a shining quality.

Anne sat very still in the lingering light, with her head bent, waiting for his answer.

"You've never failed me," Norman said at last in a low moved voice, "you don't need to leave anything to show me that—but you love beautiful things, Anne, and I can't bear to think of you without them."

"That's the only way I shan't be without them," Anne explained. "I should hate to think of this house with great ugly gaps."

"But you'll have another house," Norman urged with his foolish wisdom, "and another life, Anne—and perhaps——" but the words failed him. They seemed to drop away from him in her utter silence as if they had fallen over the edge of space.

"Oh no," she said after a long pause, "no, Norman, I think I should always like this house to be as it is."

He couldn't say any more. She was not only going to leave him but she had refused all that he offered her, not angrily or with contempt, but with an unalterable steadiness. He hadn't, she explained, got more than he and Nina would want. Fortunately Anne had two hundred a year of her own. It was exactly the kind of income that she liked. For the journey abroad with Nina

she would have to spend more, of course; but she had saved quite a lot of money, so that didn't matter at all. All her people were well off, and she could do as she wished without robbing anybody. It was all very easy to manage and there was nothing disagreeable about it.

All these burning, desperate, exasperating weeks Norman had mercifully failed to see Anne at all. She had stood to him for a lock upon a door that divided him from his heart's desire; and now the lock was broken and the door about to open, and Nina (that intense and vivid figure so fixed upon his heart that it seemed only to beat because of her image) withdrew herself suddenly, and left him alone with Anne.

He saw Anne as she had been when he first wooed her—mysterious, remote, and yet infinitely desirable, with her startled grey eyes meeting and evading his, like some shy creature of the primeval woods who fears man only because he is unknown. He saw her again later, his young wife, in all his first pride in her, stately and quiet, taking his love in silence, her only response her unvarying, deepening gentleness. He saw her the young mistress of his home, a hostess on whom he could rely without a qualm; and clearer still than that and more plainly he saw Anne, his friend, to whom he had brought all his problems and his difficulties, knowing that they would be met by her quiet wisdom and undeviating tenderness.

As he sat there thinking of her and feeling her, as he had not thought of her for years—he heard a sound outside in the street. It was an incredible, silly accident—but someone had started singing the very song he had sung to Anne with all his heart behind the words—the night he had asked her to be his wife. The ravaged desultory voice of the street singer filled the little darkening room with an unendurable pathos.

Norman heard Anne draw a quick shaken breath.

"I need no stars in heaven to guide me," the voice proclaimed, "I need no sun, no moon to shine, While I have thee, Sweetheart, beside me, While I know that thou art mine."

Norman would have given anything in the world for a motor 'bus to have run over the street singer, but motor 'buses do not come *à propos*. It made it worse that the voice had once been a very good one. After the first few notes Anne sat quite still, so still that she was like a creature frozen by its own icy will. She had meant this to be a quiet comfortable evening, and she determined to keep it at least quiet to the end.

"For the kingdom of my heart, love," finished the hidden voice, "Lies within thy loving arms."

It was almost funny because of course it didn't. Anne found herself suddenly threatened with a worse thing than tears—that dire laughter—which undermines the senses and sends them scattering into fragments.

But it was Norman who broke, not Anne. He sprang to his feet and crossed the room to her.

"Anne!" he cried, "honestly it's no good—it's all a mistake. I can't go through with it! It's too late—you've been too much to me—we've both been too much to each other. Everything has got to go but that!"

His words startled him, and even as he said them, he was aware that they were only what he wanted to say at the moment. They changed nothing, but they gave Anne a chance to change everything.

For a moment she hesitated, and then all her years of being his wife rose up and warned her not to take advantage of anything but his instinct. This was not Norman's way of making love. He had never said things to her—they came out—the most beautiful, the most touchingly expressed things, at other times. When he wanted her he had not told her that she was anything to him—he had just held out his hands. What he was saying now was from his spirit—from his heart too perhaps, if you mean by a person's heart the troubled emotions of the moment—but it wasn't instinct; and no woman can count upon a man's love unless it is instinctive.

Norman was seeing how much Anne loved him. He wasn't loving Anne. He was just dreadfully upset and grateful.

"My dear, my dear," she said tenderly, "it's quite all right, and I'm glad you've said it—felt how much, I mean—we are to each other! But it isn't what you think. That's Nina's, and we couldn't ever—even for a moment, take it away from her! What I wanted, what I hoped we might have, after all these years, was for us just to feel *glad* we'd had it, and to part without any bitterness. I don't want you to be upset, but if we had to be upset first, perhaps that's better than if it hadn't come at all. We do feel like that now, don't we—glad we've had it, and without bitterness?"

Norman kneeled beside her and took both her hands and kissed them. He had thought before that it would be easier to get away angrily, but now he knew that it wouldn't have been easier. All his anger, his exasperation, and his remorse fell away from him and left his heart at peace. He had believed his anger had been against Anne, but he knew now that it had been anger with himself, and even (in queer, unfair, baffled moments) anger against Nina. Now that it was gone he felt curiously light and clear, as if a wind had blown through his heart and carried off all its rubbish and its clouds.

“I am glad,” he whispered, “without bitterness, Anne.”

He was not sure, but he thought that her lips brushed his forehead in the dark.

CHAPTER V

It was all over now, and her first sensation was intense relief. She wasn't glad to get rid of Nina, but she was thankful beyond expression that she had not failed her first. There had been moments when she had nearly failed her —dreadful, jangled moments, when the mere tones of Nina's voice, the turn of her head, the perpetual small restlessness and quick movements of her body, contrived to exasperate Anne to the verge of desperation. She had longed to say, "For Heaven's sake, keep still," or "Don't talk like that—your voice is as sharp as a knife," or "Don't you see how conspicuous you are making yourself!" But she had never said any of these things. She had never taken Nina up sharply or snubbed her brusque little social sallies. There hadn't been an ardour of Nina's which she had thrown cold water on, or an effort that she had nipped in the bud; and yet she hadn't left the girl alone in her mistakes.

Anne couldn't make her behave properly because the essence of propriety is self-consciousness, and Nina had no self-consciousness; but she had taught her to clean her nails, to fasten her clothes, and not to behave in public as if life was a race for the last seat in a 'bus. Nina was not naturally rude, but from a very early age she had had to fend for herself. Her manners were frankly predatory. She had extravagant good nature for the real needs of her fellows and an economy of grace when it came to the smaller services of life. She didn't see why she should wait for older women to go first through doors. Anne's way of bringing these matters home to her was a slight elaboration of her own manners. It was only when Nina directly questioned her that Anne gave her, straight from the shoulder, and with an impersonal emphasis, her standard of behaviour. Nina thought it was a funny standard, but as her pride was never put on its defensive, she had learned from it readily, even when she didn't see that it had any sense. The great thing for Nina was that Anne was perfect, so that even when what she did seemed to her silly, it was probably all right. It had been a great help to Anne that Nina believed in her perfection. She felt herself as hollow as an empty shell and as wicked as one of the Borgias, but she was glad that she gave the appearance of solidity and moral worth.

Nina never dreamed that there were moments, as they stood together by the dingy yellow Tiber and Anne explained to her so beautifully about St.

Angelo and the escapes of Popes, when her companion would have liked to push her under the heavy muddy coils of the river and hold her there till she drowned. But these were not Anne's worst temptations. She knew that these were only the last flickers of a dying barbarism in her heart—she wouldn't ever touch a hair of the girl's head with violence. It was less easy to deal with the spirit of condemnation in which there was more vitality and for which there was more excuse.

When Nina sat at Anne's feet on the roof of their little hotel watching the sunset catch the Pincian Hill—and all the umbrella pines pass into it like spirits into flame—while she told Anne the crude sordid little stories of her working life—it was much harder for Anne to hide her sick distaste. She didn't want to hear about the trivial girls Nina alternately went with and quarrelled with, or the doubtful young men, some of whose attentions weren't doubtful at all, who made up the "adventures" of Nina's daily life. If they had been told poignantly by some great artist, with the refinement of selection, they might have interested Anne, but Nina wasn't a great artist, and she was only telling Anne because she wanted her to know all about her life. But if Nina was no companion for Anne, Anne was apparently exactly the companion for Nina.

"Don't bother about me," Anne often said to her. "Find anyone you like to go about with. I'm perfectly happy poking about among my old ruins alone."

But Nina never found anyone she liked to go about with more than Anne, and she did not realise how much this put an end to Anne's "poking."

They took days together on the Campagna, lonely, lovely days, by the old aqueducts and under the shade of solitary towers. The air blew over them, fresh and clean, the mountains in the distance were made of light and azure, at their feet were quantities of small sweet flowers, and in the evenings Anne sometimes took Nina to a Roman cinema, which she liked even more.

But now that it was all over what pleased Anne most to think about was how she had loved Nina, in spite of the clashes, the astonishments, the blank momentary repulsions; and that inevitable, irritable comparison which never wholly ceased. She had admired the girl's ready pluck—her way of taking difficulties as a spirited horse starts towards its fences. She had been touched by her unvarying honesty which accepted so simply her disabilities without any attempt to hide them, and above all Anne had surrendered eagerly to Nina's vitality. If Nina's critical faculties were raw, they were at any rate

alive. She saw everything with an intensity which left Anne panting in the rear. She took Italy in her stride, but she really took it; for all her ignorances, she would go away with more of it in her consciousness than Anne could assimilate in a lifetime; and that was the way Nina took Norman. Anne had to prepare her for her marriage, so that she learned, without any trace of concealment, exactly what the girl felt. Nina, for all her crude experiences, her open, hand-to-hand scuffles with reality, knew very little about life. Half her knowledge was bravado and the other half founded on comic papers. She had read, but her mind had only formulated like a parrot, it had never pierced into the signification of what she read. Anne had once been as innocent as the girl before her, but never as ignorant, and she never would be so knowing. After this deepening of their intimacy they spent most of their hours together talking about Norman. St. Peter's, where they had spent a long wet morning, walking to and fro in its clear unchangeable climate, was full of a prolonged discussion. They began on him as they stood by the Pietà, that small statue of the Madonna, soft as milk, holding her great dead Christ in her weak arms. Nina said, "That's like you, Anne—the Madonna, I mean. I don't want to be awful, but I'm not like that—I wouldn't go on holding anyone I loved who was as heavy as that—I'm sure you've been too good to Norman, Anne—" That gave Anne her chance. She told Nina how sensitive Norman was, and how delicate—how much his work exhausted him, and how he ought always to be spared. By the time they had reached the small stubborn bronze of St. Peter with his time-worn toe, she thought she had convinced Nina how necessary it was to be careful with Norman; but Nina was all the time seeing another Norman—young, striving, ardent, who didn't need to be spared anything. Nina was kind about Anne's Norman, but he wasn't her own, and she hadn't the least intention of ever letting him become so. Even St. Peter's wasn't large enough for them to get to the bottom of their subject, but perhaps it was better for them to stop half way.

They were to be married at the Consulate and go straight to Venice. Anne was simply to dress Nina and not to go with them to the ceremony. She would have gone as well, if it had seemed wisest, but she was afraid people would find out afterwards and laugh at Norman if she went, so she had decided to let them go alone.

It was October and their wedding day was dear and sweet, like the heart of a ripe apple. Nina came to Anne early in the morning, and sat on her bed while they had breakfast. Then Anne dressed her. She had chosen a pale grey dress for the girl with a soft grey hat and veil, and when she had finished dressing her, she was astonished at her beauty and a little proud of it.

Nina felt nervous because she hadn't seen Norman for four months, and she thought perhaps everything might be different. But Anne said, "When he comes nothing will be different."

When it was nearly time for Norman to come, Anne asked, "Have you any money, darling?" and Nina flushed and confessed that she had only a shilling which she hadn't had changed at Cook's. Anne gave her ten pounds, five of it in Lire, and a five pound note, to wear round her neck. "You must take this, dear child," she said, "because it's always so nice to have something of one's own. You'll find no one in the world as generous as Norman, but it's only right you should have something to be generous with as well!"

"If I had everything in the world I couldn't be as generous as you!" said Nina suddenly, "Oh, Anne!" She clung to Anne speechlessly, and Anne held her long and close. Nina had been able to say afterwards, "Anne, will he be as good to me as you have been? Can any man?"

"Oh, my dear—you'll know—you'll know soon!" Anne whispered. "There isn't anything he won't do for you—only perhaps—let him—that's what he'll like best!"

Then Norman had come. Anne heard him first, she stood alone in the little salon, and when she heard his step she put her hand on the table so that she could steady herself if she felt it was necessary. Before Norman came in, the door behind her opened and shut; she knew without turning round that the girl was there. Then Anne said, "Come in," quite clearly, and moved aside so that Norman's eyes might fall on the girl. It hadn't been necessary to steady herself. As he came in the girl hesitated for an instant and then flew into his arms. Anne turned her eyes away, but she had seen Norman's face first, helpless with tenderness. Norman had not loved Anne in just this way, because he had not been old enough when they met; he was giving to Nina all the best love of his heart, including his frustrated fatherhood. They were only a few shaken moments together before Anne managed to get them safely and comfortably off. They left her with their happiness intact, there was no bruise of anger on it, or shadow of her pain. They were understood and blessed and loved. That was what she had meant to accomplish, and the relief was in knowing that it was accomplished.

After they had gone Anne put on her things and went out. She thought that she would like to go up the Aventine Hill. The roads are grass grown and very quiet on the Aventine, and there is a cool old church called St. Sabina, where St. Dominic once blessed an orange tree. The orange tree is

still there in the cloisters, and Anne knew the monks would leave her alone and not even try to tell her about the miracle again, if she told them she wanted to be quiet. The sun was hot overhead, but the air had a light tonic feeling as if it came from the sea. The tall black cypresses in the Aventine gardens were full of little birds singing broken songs. Rain had fallen in the night and the Palatine Hill dipping down low towards the Arch of Constantine was covered by thick purple shadows. St. Sabina was cool and full of light. There was nobody in the silent sunny building.

Anne was not a religious person. She had been brought up in the Church of England which she had never cared for very much, and Norman had frankly hated it, so that after her marriage she gave up going to church. She said her prayers vaguely, half from habit and half because she believed that perhaps if you prayed regularly for people you loved, the desire to help them might effect something. She was not good because she thought she ought to be good, but because on the whole she liked goodness; she might have been said to have believed in goodness. She sat quite still between the long coloured Hymetian columns, with her eyes shut, expecting nothing, thinking of nothing. She felt like someone who has had a very painful operation and is for the first time definitely out of pain; the great thing was to keep quite still so that it shouldn't begin again.

Suddenly, from somewhere deep within her being, a feeling of love, of triumph, of intense joy welled up with such force that it seemed as if her heart would break. It was unlike anything she had ever known. Her identity vanished like a cloud before it. She knew nothing but the inrush of joy. Wave after wave of it flooded through her, as if a door had opened and let in the infinite sea. She was utterly drowned in this undreamed-of splendour; her ordinary, intricate, outside life was gone. Nothing was left but love, to which she had sacrificed all she had; and which had accepted her sacrifice. It might have been an hour, it might have been three or four, when Anne realised the silent sunny space around her again, and knew that the door was once more shut. The shadows began to creep across the light, and the Brother in charge of the church was standing beside her, looking at her anxiously.

"Va bene," he said as she met his eyes, "the Signora has had her quiet time. I do not wish to hurry her, but the church closes—the Signora perhaps would wish to see in the cloisters St. Dominic's miraculous orange tree?"

Anne shook her head smiling (when she stood up she found that her knees trembled under her) and she asked that she might be allowed to see the orange tree another day. She had to walk to the foot of the Aventine

before she found a little carriage. Her head ached stubbornly as if it would never stop.

Norman and Nina must be in Venice by now, but though she dragged her mind to think of them, it did not want to think of them any more. Everything in the streets looked strange to her as if it had grown smaller and duller, and as if she had no particular part in it. When she reached the hotel she was still more shaken by her own insignificance. She didn't want to bother the waiter to bring her tea, or the lift boy to take her up to her room in the lift. She felt like a shadow without a claim upon anyone on earth, and then somebody said, "Hullo, Anne!" and took hold of her, as if she wasn't a shadow, and she knew it was Toby, though her headache was so bad by this time she could hardly see. A great many things happened quickly after that; the lift boy sprang to the lift with a surprising velocity, and Anne found herself lying down on the sofa in the little salon with the blinds down and Toby giving her tea and aspirin, and putting cool bandages on her head. She managed to explain to him that she was so sorry he was just too late for the wedding, and he said he hadn't come for the wedding; but he didn't say why he had come, and Anne was too tired to ask him. She was too tired even to care whether he was there or not.

CHAPTER VI

Anne felt that she was going to be very ill. She hardly dared to hope for the simplification of death, but when she thought of the interminable business life was going to be, filled up by her conscientious will with objects and tasks about which she had neither instinct nor inspiration, she hoped that the illness might be rather a long one. The doctor called it a touch of fever; and it lasted forty-eight hours. At the end of it Anne was aware that Toby had been indispensable to her, and that she wished he would go away. She looked back on her hours of exaltation at St. Sabina as an incredible oasis. Like the uplifted disciples before her, she had come down from the Mount of Transfiguration, to find an epileptic rolling on the ground. It was perhaps a little hard to compare Toby's shrewd and familiar presence to that of an epileptic, but the contrast between her lonely spiritual ecstasy and Toby's companionship undermined Anne's sense of justice. She had never had to take Toby before with the seriousness which a single companionship involves. He was easy to amuse, and he asked very little of Anne, but he interrupted a process that was going on in her mind. Anne didn't know what the process was. She had never been analytical, and the last thing that would have occurred to her—since everything had gone off so well—was that the process which she wished to be alone for was the breaking of her heart. She knew that she wasn't just the same as usual, she had lost her mastery of material things. She no longer arranged life faultlessly. She shrank from giving orders or making efforts. She caught herself reading a sentence in a book over and over again without the slightest idea of what it was about, and often when she began to sew on a button, or alter the ribbon on a dress, she would forget what she was doing, and sit idle with her hands in her lap. Sometimes even while she was crossing the room to fetch something, she would stop bewildered, as if someone had cut short the purpose in her brain. She said once to Toby that the effects of Roman fever lasted a long time. She did not consciously think of Norman, only she was surprised when she thought of anything else, surprised and interrupted; and sometimes when Toby interrupted her, she got a little cross. Toby was very patient with Anne's moments of irritation. He knew what it was like to be presented with the person he didn't want instead of the person he did. Constantly in the early years of Anne's married life she had urged upon Toby agreeable feminine substitutes for herself. She thought it would be so nice for Toby to

marry one of her friends, and Toby had known moments when he was glad that bachelors are allowed a reputation for crustiness.

Of course Anne wasn't nearly as cross as she felt, but then neither had Toby been, when Toby had said, "Oh, damn it, Anne, I *won't* take that girl out in the punt!" He hadn't meant any more than Anne did when she said, "Don't you think it's too hot to do any sight-seeing to-day?" Anne wouldn't have called it sight-seeing if she hadn't been cross.

Toby stayed at a large expensive hotel nearly opposite Anne's, and brought a noiseless easy car to her door regularly every morning at ten o'clock. She had only to get into it and say what she wanted to see, or where she wanted to go. He never let her get tired. He punctuated everything they did with carefully prepared meals. Toby shared Anne's fondness for poking about catacombs and was willing to spend even longer hours over excavations in the Forum. He preferred Pagan Rome to Early Christian because he said it wasn't so mopped up by the Popes. But as Anne had a tenderness for cloisters—covered with creepers and lizards—where you could hear at noon-day cracked bells wandering—and watch the solid shadows slip over the sharp sunshine, Toby made a point of producing cloisters. He even accompanied Anne to the Daily Benediction of the Blue Nuns. Toby was frankly Protestant. The only religion he had was a repudiation of superstition and an emphatic desire to keep Anne from getting mixed up with it. Nothing would have induced Anne to join the Blue Nuns; quite apart from the fact that she was nearly as Protestant as Toby, she had all the tastes and deep-seated habits of a mondaine. She was a spiritual and unselfish mondaine, but not to change her stockings every evening and wash her hands in hot water several times a day would have shocked her very much. Anne had no desire to be a siren, but she wanted to look nice, and have her hair shining and her hands well manicured. Religion is a passion, and it was a passion that Anne hadn't got; but Toby was in love with her, so that all her whims were as serious to him as passions, and though Anne saw how nervous he was about her, she very unfairly said nothing to relieve his mind. He would kneel by her side in the dim lit chapel, while two by two the Blue Nuns swept in from their hidden cloisters, bowed low before the Altar, separated and vanished behind the screen which divided them from the rest of the church. His heart beat with an indignant protest, as their thin soft voices, so empty of vitality, quavered out their meek petitions. He wanted to put a stop to their antiquated existence, to their dignified azure garments that were like a glimpse of Roman skies, to the treachery of their delicate ritual, which hid from other women the iron rule of their defrauded lives. But if he

felt indignant with the Nuns, it was as nothing compared to the indignation he felt with Norman for exposing Anne to their influence.

There were moments in the hush of sacred buildings when he saw Anne's hands, very white and thin, pressed together, as if she was crushing between them her broken, fluttering heart, when Toby's curses had all the intensity of prayer.

It was their custom to stroll out after Benediction to watch the sun set over Rome. These were the times when Anne wished most that Toby wasn't there. She didn't mind a companion for excavations, and it helped her now that she was so curiously unfit to manage her life, to have her days arranged for her, but she wanted beauty alone. She had to be very careful how she took it. When she sat by the Fountain and looked over the low wall beneath which Rome is spread, she wanted neither to move nor speak, but to bring the shattered edges of her life together in a silent self-absorption.

One evening they found the sky after a thunderstorm divided equally between purple and orange clouds. In front of the splendid fields of colour the air hung like a golden curtain. The swallows dipped and circled in and out of the light, darting like small black arrows from the shadows of the garden into the golden air. Anne was conscious that Toby was challenging her silence, watching her with his kind eyes half sheathed, and trying to take away from her the burden that she wanted to bear alone.

"You have never told me," she said suddenly, "why you came here, Toby. Surely the end of May isn't a month for a busy man like you to be out of town?"

Toby lit a cigarette and leaned back in his green armchair as if the world held nothing faster or less comfortable than the slow pacings of a Roman nurse, holding—on a pink satin cushion in front of her—the sleeping heir of an immemorial Roman name. He watched the nurse and her flowing ribbons pass out of sight before he answered Anne, then he said, "But I told you that I hadn't come for the wedding, didn't I? I remember your asking me the night I arrived. I felt sure you were ill because otherwise you would have known that it wasn't particularly likely I should have come for the wedding."

Anne frowned. "The wedding might have been a reason for making a sacrifice," she said, "Norman would have liked it."

"Is the inference, then, that you don't like having me?" Toby asked. "You rap one over the knuckles rather hard sometimes, Anne!"

"You shouldn't draw unfair conclusions," said Anne impatiently; "I only meant that it would have been a perfectly natural thing for you to do. Your coming here without a purpose isn't!"

"It's very nice here," said Toby pensively; "of course it's rowdy and over-built and shockingly modern, and I don't like the Monument smashing the Capitol out of the sky. Still it's Rome—a man might do worse than sit here in the sunset—with you, Anne."

"If you came here for me," said Anne, then she stopped; she wanted to be ungracious, but not as ungracious as that.

"Rome and you," Toby amended.

"I don't feel as if I were a good companion just now," Anne persisted. "You see my life needs a—a kind of re-adjustment. I feel as if I were a ruined Temple out for repairs—the scaffoldings are up, and spoil all the shape I had. I daresay when the work is finished I shall get quite a nice shape again, but the process is very ugly, Toby, it seems to me a pity you should be here for it."

"Do you mean a pity for you or for me?" he asked after a moment's pause. It was the first time that Anne had admitted any conceivable drawback in her situation, and he was anxious to make her say more about what she felt.

"Well, I don't know," Anne said slowly. "I think perhaps—for both of us."

"I am willing to take the risk for myself," Toby said. "I don't mind scaffoldings. You can put up as many as you like—they wouldn't hide what you were from me—but I think I shall be sorry if you send me away altogether. I daresay you feel I'm in the way, but you might miss me if I went."

"I've got to get used to missing—people," said Anne sternly.

"Not everybody all at once," Toby urged very gently, "that's a beastly notion! Keep what you can. I suppose that's what I came out for really—to show you that I'm a part of what you can always keep." "That's very dear of you, Toby," said Anne, touched in spite of herself. "I think I knew I could count on you, but not perhaps quite so much as I see now that I can. I always thought it was Norman you cared for most." "Did you, Anne?" said Toby very softly, "that was rather funny. I didn't care most for Norman."

"Never?" asked Anne incredulously.

"Never," said Toby.

"But," Anne protested, "Norman, I am sure, thought you did."

"Did he?" Toby murmured. "I can't help it if he did, he was mistaken too."

"But you'll never fail him; you'll be good to him always?" she urged, her voice a little unsteady. "It would be too dreadful if he thought you judged him or blamed him. I want to talk to you about them both, but somehow I felt I couldn't begin before, but your saying you came specially for me makes it easier. You know, Toby, Nina isn't exactly what you'd call suitable for Norman."

"I don't think I know very much about Nina," said Toby cautiously, "but I gather you mean she isn't a lady?"

"In a sense she is," said Anne, "but not in the accepted sense. She's much better than a lady. She's a great dear, and she's full of life. I don't think the other matters really, but it makes me very anxious that Norman shouldn't think it matters."

"You mean," said Toby, "his love wouldn't stand it?"

Anne felt this sentence over very carefully. She was glad of the view before her—it gave her an excuse to look away and answer slowly, while she watched the playing swallows and noticed how closely the distant silver cap of St. Peter's fitted into the golden air. "Love," she said consideringly, "can stand anything. You mustn't underestimate what Norman feels for Nina because of what he once felt for me. What he feels now is better than that. He won't get tired of Nina, if that's what you mean, or want anybody else—or even—regret me, but he may feel (in spite of his love for her) very cut off and lonely."

"Life is a lonely business, Anne," said Toby, "but people who succeed in winning the woman they want aren't, I think, the most lonely people in it."

"People," said Anne sharply, "what do people matter to me? It is Norman that I want to save—all the pain I can!"

"You have got the maternal instinct very badly, Anne," said Toby reflectively, "you wouldn't mind cutting up the universe to make Norman a hors d'œuvre."

"I know I have," Anne admitted recklessly, "that's why he got tired of me, but that isn't any reason why I shouldn't help him if I can. In fact it's my fault if he's in need of help. I made him over-sensitive with my perpetual

precautions. Nina won't try to save him shocks, partly because she won't know what will shock him, and partly because she won't care; but he'll suffer less, much less, if we're there—in his life, I mean, and behave as if there was nothing to be shocked at."

"You know what I think about your remaining in Norman's life," said Toby, "because I've put my foot in it once already on that subject! As to myself, I suppose I am willing to meet them. I tell you frankly I'd much rather not. But you've done your best to make it a decent affair and I won't fail you about it. I'll try to keep my end up—a man isn't worth much socially as a backer, but I'll do what I can."

"You might do more than that," said Anne ungratefully, "you might behave as if there was nothing to back up! I don't know what you mean by 'a decent affair.' There was never any question about 'decency.' Both of them behaved perfectly. People can't help what they feel!"

"I'm not so sure of that, Anne," said Toby steadily, "if you're not strong enough to swim you can keep out of the water."

She turned upon him with her face flushed and her eyes full of tears. "How I hate your being so self-righteous!" she cried. "How can you judge? It's not your place to judge. It's your place, if you have a place, to stand by your friends!"

Toby threw away his cigarette and got up. He looked unexpectedly tall to Anne, and she saw that he was very angry. "I don't quite see," he said, looking down at her with narrowed eyes, "why I should be forced to accept without judging the principal actions of my friends—especially since I am expected (and indeed have every intention) of backing them after I have judged them."

"Because we don't know—we can't understand—people's principal actions!" cried Anne. "We haven't got any standard of comparison, we've only got our own hearts—and what use are they as guides to other people's, since we're all hopelessly different?"

"The world has a definite standard, nevertheless," said Toby dryly, "which we have all accepted, and by which I think we should be judged when we violate it."

"Let the world judge us then—the stupid world," said Anne, "but not our friends; they should have a separate judgment—we ought to be safer with them—and not pitilessly dealt with!"

"But you've just said I mustn't judge at all," Toby reminded her.

“You haven’t any mercy!” said Anne bitterly, and if she hadn’t been on the Pincian Hill she would have burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” said Toby in a queer voice, “very sorry you think I have no mercy, Anne. You said just now ‘my place—if I have a place.’ Was that very merciful?”

Anne refused to answer. She had been shocked by her own speech, and yet there was something exhilarating in having been so shocking. She was still trembling with emotion when, after waiting a moment for her answer, Toby turned and walked away.

She was alone now with the dying light. The purple and the orange clouds had become absorbed, and left the sky clear. The air sparkled like a dewdrop. There was no colour anywhere, only the vivid glory of the light. She watched the umbrella pines above the Vatican garden dip into it one by one. The distant dazzling hills grew suddenly dark. The sky became a still, pure azure, and the air grew cold.

Anne nursed her indignation as long as she could. There was not very much of it, and it needed nursing. When she got up to go home, she felt a vigour in her limbs and a new ability to cope with life. Being angry with Toby had done her a great deal of good.

CHAPTER VII

As Anne's temper cooled her conscience woke; an officious and persistent instinct drove her towards an apology. The unfortunate part of leading a self-controlled existence is the small amount of margin left for outbreaks. Anne found that she had used hers up; she was forced to sit down after dinner and in her neat, formal handwriting tell Toby how sorry she was. She hoped that Toby would accept her apology (which was ample) by return, and she could then forget the incident. She was sorry, of course, or she wouldn't have said so, but she still felt that she had more to forgive Toby than Toby had to forgive her. Toby acted very unexpectedly. He sent an answer back by the porter, but it merely thanked Anne for her letter and informed her that he was going off for a few days' motoring and would let her know when he returned. So that she was left with the incident on her hands. It was just what Anne had wanted, complete loneliness and silence. She knew no one in Rome and she could do what she liked; but she couldn't do it now with a clear conscience. She had done a wrong to an old friend, a friend who had thrown up all his interests to seek her out in Rome and offer her the consolation of his enduring affection.

The absence of Norman was, as she had known it would be, the absence of everything. Before her marriage Anne had had many interests, but she had not kept them up. In the first instance Norman hadn't wanted her to keep them; he had wanted to absorb her into himself, and he had succeeded. Later, when his hold on her inner life relaxed, Anne had not had the singleness of purpose to detach herself from his interests. She read his subjects, entertained his friends, studied his tastes as if they were her religion. All the people she knew, except her own relations, she knew to suit Norman. She no more thought of having a special friend than it occurred to her to have a separate banking account. She took what Norman took, and it wasn't very easy for her now to make a life for herself out of what Norman had left. This was partly why she hungered so to minister to him still. She felt it was all she was fit for.

When she looked back on her marriage she saw that the main point of difference between herself and Norman had been that Norman wanted her most when he was most her lover—then and then only he had given her all he had; but the less Anne wanted him as a lover, the more her love involved

and encircled his whole being, until there was no hidden place in Anne's heart without its response to his needs. She loved him more and more, so that in the course of time his happiness had really become hers. Even the feeling he had for Nina reacted upon Anne until she had found for the girl a living tenderness. Instead of being a perpetual torture to her to see them happy together, it was the reward of her sacrifice. To ask her, as Toby did, to cut herself off from them, was to ask her to block up the only channel to her nature which led to the open sea. She wouldn't see too much of them; no young married people like a perpetual third. When she got back to London she would find an occupation. Research work (she had done a good deal of looking up references for Norman and she was an accurate observer) would interest her still. Her relations would help her to find something to do. They were political and important people and though they were very angry with her now, their anger was merely the sign of a perturbed affection which didn't know what other course to take.

Then Anne would have Toby. She would have him far more really and solidly than she used to have him, even (she had to admit it to herself) than she quite wanted to have him, but she owed it to his friendship to make him a generous return.

The great thing was not to let yourself think you were a peculiar sufferer. Sufferings are not peculiar and very few people can honestly say that there is no one in their acquaintance worse off than themselves. Anne told herself that she was neither old, ill, nor penniless, and extremely fortunate to be in Rome. This reminder sent her forth to the Vatican, which she hadn't seen nearly enough. On her way through the hall the porter handed her two letters. She was so afraid when she saw them that she could hardly return his friendly greeting. They were from Norman and Nina. Up till now they had satisfied themselves with a rain of friendly post cards. Now they would tell Anne what they really felt. She wanted to know this more than anything in the world, but it frightened her to have to find out. She took a shrieking tram at the door, which creaked and fumbled its clamorous way through the heart of Rome. It was towards sunset, but the golden air still shone relentlessly like the flashing of a lifted sword. Anne walked the length of the Piazza San Pietro between the fountains and obelisks, as if it was eternity. Time and space hardened for her into the fixity of an endless procession. On and on she went, with the huge façade confronting her, swallowing up the light and measureless dome. The swallows had already begun their sunset game above the square. They tossed their velvety black bodies into the shining air like practised tumblers certain of applause. Their infallible, swift wings weaved fantastic patterns to and fro across the leaping fountains. Anne sat on the

steps of St. Peter's and watched them for half an hour. They made no mistakes and never stayed longer than they meant; she could not find courage to open her letters in their company. She turned away from them at last, climbed the hill behind St. Peter's, and entered the Vatican doors. The courtyard was cool and shady, there was hardly anyone there beyond the goldfish and a custodian or two. Anne hesitated a moment and then passed the Belvedere room into the alcove of the Laocoön. It is a very terrible statue and requires on the part of the beholder a certain courage. The struggle is hopeless as far as the main figure is concerned. He is very strong and in agony, and he will never get out of the deadly grip; but by his enormous efforts he may in time release his entrapped children. He *may* release them, but in his expression there is only determination, not hope. After Anne had watched the statue for a few moments she read her letters.

Nina's was far the longest, and she read it first. It was a beautiful, honest, happy letter. The colour came into Anne's face as she read it, and the warmth back into her heart. "Why, Anne, you ought to have told me," Nina wrote, "what it was like! If I'd known—my dear—I could *never* have taken him from you! My only excuse is that I didn't know—how could I? But I see now what you are—only how could you ever do it? And how can you bear to see or think of me again? I keep telling myself what you were like to me in Rome and I have your letter—dear, dear Anne—I do want you again if you are quite sure you *can* want us? I can't say 'me' any more because I'm not 'me' now." So she knew that too—she knew everything! Anne, who had also given up being "me" and must now (if she was to live at all) re-assume that fictitious creature—winced as she read this particular passage. It was an odd sensation, like the return of the dead, to find their places filled. Only the dead escape the mockery of these returns.

Norman's letter was very different. He could not tell Anne what he felt. She could bear it perhaps, but he couldn't. He wrote of bathing on the Lido and spoke of their hotel, but it ended with a marvellous suggestion. "I'm so glad," he wrote, "to hear that old Toby's turned up. Won't you and he join us the end of the month at a little place above Garda called Madonna di Campiglio? It's one of those flowery Dolomite valleys you've always loved. It would be fun to see old Toby again, and he and Nina could really get to know each other. It would be awfully jolly to have you both." He hadn't been able to go on. Anne wasn't afraid any more after she had read Norman's letter. She was happy. As she turned her eyes back to the Laocoön again she felt almost certain that one of the sons—the weakest and furthest away from that strangling hold—was going to escape. A custodian came up to her and told her apologetically that the doors were going to shut. He

hadn't liked to disturb the Signora, but it was practically closing time when she entered; it was unfortunate since she had paid a lire. Anne shook her head and smiled. She said she didn't mind paying the lire. She had seen what she wanted to see. The custodian, emboldened by her graciousness, observed that he would never choose to look at the Laocoön himself, it was in his opinion not at all gay. He recommended the Apollo in the next alcove, to take, as it were, the taste out of the Signora's mouth. Anne consented to the Apollo a little doubtfully. The shadows were growing dark about him, and he stood out against them startlingly white and beautiful. Anne shivered as she looked at him. Apollo was so formidably young and splendid that his beauty was a cruel thing. It was more difficult to get away from it than from the grip of the Laocoön.

CHAPTER VIII

"I shall be with you at seven o'clock to take you out to dinner. Toby."

Anne read this note with conflicting feelings. She was very pleased Toby had come back. She was ashamed of their last meeting, and she was above all anxious to have her own way in their present one. Anne was preeminently a feminine woman, that is to say, she had the endurance of an angel, the patience of a saint, the mingled tenderness and flint of a Mother Superior, the unpractical helplessness of a child, the common-sense of a genius, and the unscrupulousness of a rake. She didn't understand men, she merely knew how to please them. She hadn't understood Norman, but Norman was not openly masculine, and he had ways of disguising his manliness which made him (for Anne) much easier to deal with. Toby's masculinity was without disguises. Anne couldn't imagine what he would feel about going to Madonna di Campiglio. She was afraid of his saying "No" at once, and she was quite sure he would be angry. It was strange how anxious she was to have him go, it wasn't only to please Norman and Nina; she was surprised to find that she wanted it for herself. She felt that if Toby was there, ostensibly as her friend, it would make her loneliness only an inner thing. She wouldn't have to feel that Norman and Nina were bothering about her. They could go off without a pang for days together and not have her on their minds. Anne hadn't wanted, when she first went back to them, to look too poor. But would Toby consent to act as a feather in her cap? She dressed more carefully for Toby that evening than she had ever dressed for him before, and she was relieved to see that her clothes looked as good as new. They were already a year old, and they would have to last a long time because she couldn't afford new ones. She probably couldn't afford Norman and Nina's hotel, though she would go there first for a night, and then pretend to fall in love with something picturesque and cheap the next day. If Toby decided to come with her, there would be a minor awkwardness because Anne intended to travel third class. Up till now Toby hadn't taken in about her money. She had allowed him to pay for all their excursions together, because she knew that he would have hated not to pay for her, and she was always more anxious to spare other people's pride than she was to save her own; but the moment would come when she would have to pay for something, and when she would have to choose the cheaper rather than the more expensive thing to pay for, this would shock Toby very much. Anne

had always been a person of few, and what she had supposed, were simple tastes; she either took the best of what she wanted, or she went without. She was beginning to realise now that this standard is probably the most expensive one that exists. Even now she could have travelled first class if she could have brought herself to tip less generously, but this was out of the question. If Anne had not been able to pay, and to pay rather extravagantly, for good service, she would have refused to accept it.

She dressed slowly but without hesitation. This was what she knew how to do, but while she was doing it she reflected on her coming interview with Toby much as an inexperienced lion tamer reviews his impending turn with his formidable fellow artist. Anne wished that she had the reckless audacity of Nina. Nina was not feminine. She was impatient of pain and rushed to meet danger. Anne took pain without flinching, but she had danger always on her mind. At seven o'clock Anne gave the last touch to her black lace hat and went down into the hall.

"My dear Toby," she said, "this is delightful! I am so glad to see you back again, and I think it specially delightful of you to come back." Her greeting was at once a confession and an apology, and she made it with a warmth that went straight to Toby's heart. He was very proud of Anne's appearance, but he wasn't on this occasion going to show her off. He took her instead to a little restaurant he had been told about in Trastevere. Motors seldom crossed that side of the Tiber, but Toby explained to Anne as they sought out his well-hidden resort that it was the best place in Rome. "It's not at all swagger," he explained. "You eat under a trellis and walk through the kitchen—as spotless as a Dutch one—where you pick out your vegetable and point at your cutlet, and have it out with the cook. He's a splendid person, and if he sees you are worthy of his efforts he won't let you go far wrong."

Toby found her a table under thick green leaves. The place was not crowded, it was quiet, leisurely and discriminating. An old man came in and sat in a corner slowly tuning a zither which he put on the table and began to thumb dreamily, as if for his own amusement. The zither is not a highly finished instrument but the old man played on it with surprising tenderness little, silly, quavering tunes, which crept in and out among the leaves, wanderingly, like cow bells over an Alpine pasture. Toby had never enjoyed himself so much in his life. If Anne was still nervous she did not show it. She was a quiet woman without any of the restlessness which makes vivacity fatiguing to the onlooker; and she had at all times that perfect self-possession which comes only to those women who have never been exposed

to anything which could ruffle their self-respect. She asked Toby with interest where he had been and what he had done. Toby felt as if he had been away a long time, and had a great deal to tell Anne. He had been to Cori, to Palestrina and to Subiaco. Toby had no sentiments about what he had seen, but he had acquired a good many facts. Anne lulled him with her intimate, impersonal interest, into a perfect serenity. She had a feeling that if she only made him comfortable enough first, he wouldn't resent being made uncomfortable afterwards; he would hardly know, in fact, that he was being made uncomfortable. The process had often answered excellently with Norman. "What a mercy," Toby thought to himself, "that Anne isn't clever, but just quietly and comfortably Anne—the simplest and least calculating woman in the world!"

"And while you've been away," said this uncalculating woman, "I've been missing you so much, Toby, and finding out all the kind and helpful things you did for me (which I'm afraid I had rather taken for granted) while you were here."

"Nonsense!" said Toby, "there was nothing to find out, but I'm glad you missed me. I always find myself that these foreign places are the better for companionship—of the right kind, of course."

"Oh, you're superlatively the right kind," said Anne smiling. "Look at the meals you order and the places you find! I thought the Trastevere was only a place for beggars, fleas and 13th century mosaics—and see what you've found in it!"

"Well, see what I've brought to it!" Toby nearly said, but he had nearly said things like this for twenty years, and not said them. It was unfortunate that he was beginning to find it harder than ever to keep such things unsaid.

"Something else has happened while you've been away," Anne went on serenely, "something that has been a great surprise and a great pleasure to me, Toby—only it depends on you a little, how perfect the pleasure can be." Toby began to peel a pear for her. He peeled it with care and precision, and Anne saw that the peel was all going to come off in one piece.

"Yes," he said without looking up, "and what is this pleasing surprise? At my age I always expect pleasure and surprise to arrive separately. Pleasure I plan for, surprise generally lays me by the heels."

Anne hesitated. Her heart beat with a curious instability. She wished that Toby had Norman's intuitive way of easing off difficult moments, but she knew by experience that Toby left such moments to shift for themselves.

"They've invited us," she said a little breathlessly, "Norman and Nina—both of us—to go to them, at Madonna di Campiglio."

Toby did not look at all concerned. He finished peeling the pear without a break, laid it carefully down, and extracted its core before handing it to her on a plate. Then he said, "And when do you want us to go?"

Now that it was all going to be so easy, an incredible feeling swept over Anne. She suddenly knew that she didn't want to go at all! It was a thought so contradictory and absurd that she banished it in silence, and with barely a pause, before she answered Toby. "They leave Venice to-morrow. I thought we might join them in a week?"

"Our best way," said Toby reflectively, "is to go by train to Belluno, and motor through the Dolomites. It's a good road." Anne leaned back in her chair. Now that it was safely over she realised what an effort she had made, because she found she was still trembling. The old man with the zither started up a plaintive little dance tune that had no beginning and no end. Toby took another pear, peeled it and began to eat it. "I hope yours was all right," he said disgustedly. "It's a peculiar thing, but I've never yet peeled two consecutively good pears. They seem to obey the law of life. You pay for your good moment with your bad."

"Mine was perfect," said Anne regretfully, "I wish I'd kept some of it for you." Then she said a little defensively (for after all their going to Madonna di Campiglio was more important than the flavour of pears), "It will be such a good opportunity for you to get to know Nina."

"Excellent," said Toby without enthusiasm, "if one does ever get to know a woman on her honeymoon with another man."

"It isn't really their honeymoon," Anne explained, "they've had five weeks."

"Personally," said Toby, "if I ever get mine, I doubt if you'd see me human again for a year."

Anne looked at him sympathetically. "I feel, Toby," she said, "as if it was very stupid and unkind of me never to have guessed that you wanted one."

"Not at all," said Toby gruffly, "why should you have known what you weren't told?"

"I think one ought to feel things, whether one is told them or not," said Anne gently; "that's one of the great advantages of not being so shut up in

happiness, one does perhaps see and feel things more. Are you quite sure, Toby, that you've got, always, to be unhappy?"

"I'm not unhappy now," said Toby, "but I don't suppose, taking it by and large, that I shall ever be much happier."

Anne dismissed this trifling substitution for happiness. That was the way to take sorrow—it was her own way—but it was not the way people express their joy. She thought that Toby, like herself, would probably rather leave the subject alone, so that she went on after a slight pause to deal with the smaller practical difficulty which still remained on her mind. How was she going to manage the railway journey third class? She wasn't going to travel over Italy at Toby's expense. She would go with him, unchaperoned, without a murmur, because she would never have dreamed of making a fuss about propriety with a man she trusted, or of going out of her way for half an inch with a man whom she didn't trust. To have hesitated to go with Toby alone would have seemed to Anne a discourtesy as grave and even as vulgar as a breach of faith.

"I believe it's a beautiful journey," she said after a pause; "I think you must miss not speaking Italian when it comes to travelling. My great delight is to travel third class with the peasants themselves." Toby gave her one of his queer sharp glances, then he ordered coffee. "It's not only," Anne went on with increasing skill, "their charming manners, the way they produce garlic out of carpet bags, and drink wine with their heads tilted like Apollos—but they make such friends with one and give one such valuable information. I often pity the ordinary English traveller who will go by himself in a stuffy first." "Do you, Anne?" asked Toby. "Sweltering in the heat in a third class carriage in Italy hardly seems to me a position to envy. Have you made many lasting and valuable friendships by this practice?" Anne felt herself colouring under Toby's mocking eyes. He needn't have looked at her as if he was paying her out for something. "I hope," he added, "that you won't mind deferring your search for friendship for another occasion, as I intend to take two first class tickets to Belluno, where we shall pick up the car, unless you have a more feasible objection to this method of travelling, or dislike cleanliness in a travelling companion? I may not have the charm of an Italian peasant, but I can procure you plenty of information."

"Of course," said Anne quietly, "I much prefer travelling with you, but I see you are going to make me say what I don't want to have to say. I simply can't afford to travel very grandly, and I'm not going to let you pay for my

travels. After all, Toby, I've been good about money, haven't I? I've let you pay for everything else."

Anne had no idea that this would make Toby furious. He gave the hovering waiter a look that drove him into the kitchen like a scourge, and even checked the plaintive tones of the old man with the zither. "May I ask you to tell me," he asked Anne in icy tones, "as an old friend of your parents and of Norman's, what your present income is?"

"Oh, Toby!" she cried, "as if I wouldn't tell you because you are mine!"

"Your friend!" he said bitterly, "when you fence me off from your concerns as if I were a stranger! A man can stand a good deal, Anne, if he has to, but I'm damned if I'm going to stand your penury!"

"It's exactly the kind of income," said Anne reassuringly, "that I like. Before the war people were rich on half of it. They——"

"Look here, Anne," interrupted Toby, "I'll shake you if you don't tell me at once how little it is!"

"Two hundred a year," Anne admitted desperately. There was a long silence. Anne believed that Toby's odd and sudden fury had dropped. She did not know that he was taking it in slowly and permanently, with every breath he drew. "I wouldn't take any more from Norman," she explained timidly, "because he only makes fifteen hundred a year and Nina is very delicate. I want them, you see, most awfully, to have children, and it's difficult to bring up even two children on much less than that nowadays. I can manage beautifully by myself. Ordinarily, of course, I shan't travel, but I had savings for this time abroad. There isn't really anything to make a fuss about."

"No, of course not," said Toby drily. "How much did that black filmy thing you've got on cost, and the lace hat and those shoes? D'you suppose because a man isn't married he doesn't know what a woman spends on her clothes? You are a good manager, Anne, but if you tell me that you spent less than two hundred a year on yours, I shan't believe you!"

"Oh yes, I did *then*," agreed Anne impatiently, "one dresses for one's position. But don't you see I haven't got a position now, so that I shan't need to dress for it?"

Toby said "Waiter," and the Maitre d'Hôtel appeared as if shot from a catapult. "The account," said Toby grimly, then he turned with a touch of the same restrained violence to Anne. "You'll go first class with me to Belluno anyhow," he said. "What on earth do your people say?"

“It doesn’t matter what they say,” Anne replied wearily. “If one began to care about that, where would one be? You shall pay for my ticket this time if you like—but it’s silly to make such a fuss about what one minds, for oneself, least.”

“I’m sorry, Anne,” said Toby in a gentler voice. “You see, I only make a fuss about what I can help. It isn’t any use making a fuss about what I can’t help, is it?”

Anne gave him her eyes again. They had the steady cheerfulness, which perhaps of all her expressions cut him sharpest and closest to the heart. “But after all,” she said, “there really isn’t anything at all to make a fuss about, is there? I am particularly lucky in many ways. I can’t tell you how glad I am you are coming to Madonna di Campiglio. It just makes all the difference.”

CHAPTER IX

It seemed to Anne as if they would never reach Madonna di Campiglio. Rome clung to them in its little hollow at every turn of the long winding road, a soft golden blur under a high and silvery cap; and when at last the Campagna, wave after wave, had rolled over it, and defied even St. Peter's to raise itself again above the last blue fold, the heat and dust of the plains swallowed them, train and all. It was a comfort to exchange (after a night's heat and bells) into the smooth swift gliding car, to stop at a wayside inn and rest in the heat of the day, and to catch glimpses of the lake of Garda, a charmed turquoise, with olives hanging like smoke, down the mountains to the water's edge. They passed Riva and Arco, Riva broken and crumpled like a roughly used toy by the ravages of war; and Arco lifting its sharp rock hill, covered with cypress, into the wide spaces of the blue air. The valley climbed and wound behind Arco, the road shifting to and fro by the banks of a fast flowing river. Far away over the plain they could see small towered islands resting in it, and castles rising from wooded promontories above its smooth flow. The cypresses and the hills were shaped and pointed, like the small wild tulips which grow in southern meadows; at last Italy sank away altogether.

A flock of mountains drove across their sight. The air changed suddenly into the scent of pines and juniper, and the small herbs which make breathing a strong delight. The day grew dark and clear, the piled gold of the sunset lay far away upon the western hills. The scent of the small Alpine meadows was very cool and sweet. On all sides of them they heard the sound of innumerable hidden streams, rustling and whispering down into the valley; and above their heads the coming and going of the wind in the pines died away, increased to a volume of intense secretive rapture, and murmured on indefinitely among a thousand ruminating trees.

Toby smoked speechlessly. He was conscious of Anne's every movement, and it would have been difficult to say if he found her presence most a torment or a strange delight. Whenever she was jolted against him by the movements of the car, he set his teeth hard on the stem of his pipe. He was burningly aware of her nearness, and not without amusement at the distance of her unsuspecting thoughts. It was doubtful if Anne was any more alive to Toby's presence than she was to the chauffeur's in front of them.

They had spent nearly two days travelling together, and talk beyond discussion of incidents of travel had died down between them. In a sense Anne may have been said to have enjoyed these days more than Toby. She had had no wish to improve upon them, and Toby could have suggested many improvements.

"It's very far away," Anne said at last, "to Madonna di Campiglio."

"Up to the top of the Pass," agreed Toby. "Are you warm enough?" Anne acquiesced in a thick cloak being tucked around her, and nestled down more comfortably into its folds. The valley had sunk into a deep gulf beneath them, and on the other side of it swept range after range of pine covered mountains, with every now and then, at a turn of the road, bare and splendid, a distant Dolomite, a treeless rock as big as half a world. Anne grew stiff and tired and in spite of the extra cloak, a little cold. It seemed to her as if they must long ago have passed the last traces of mankind, and be skimming upwards to some empty star. She could not visualise Norman and Nina awaiting her. It was a year since she had said good-bye to Norman in her little London house, and given up one by one the beauty of her selected treasures. She could remember the blue delphiniums in the tall opalescent vases, and how the motor 'buses had sent up a distant roar, not unlike the torrent they were fast leaving behind. But she couldn't remember what she had felt, or dimly imagine what she was going to feel again. The towering background of the mountains made emotion seem a remote and trivial thing. You could not continue to care about Sheraton chairs or blue Venetian vases in this vast and empty space, where houses and human beings were but frailties of possession. How worse than ridiculous it was—how petty, but at the bottom of her heart she found the fear that they wouldn't be glad enough to see her, to impress Toby! She was conscious that Toby's doubts were still real, and that her heart was set on seeing them dispersed.

Winter and darkness came down upon them in a stride. Anne had no fear left now, but the fear that they weren't ever going to arrive at all. The road wound up interminably, the mountains seemed to turn like a vast silent top, whipped by an invisible demon. It came with a shock when they found themselves at last upon an open space.

"Well, here we are," said Toby stepping out into the darkness. This pine-scented dusk was Madonna di Campiglio. Norman and Nina were on the roadside in front of the hotel to greet them. As Anne moved stiffly down, she found herself folded in Nina's arms, and then suddenly, surprisingly, for a brief moment, in Norman's.

They were glad to see her—gladder than she had dared to expect. Their eyes and voices were all greeting, excitement and pleasure. They even flowed over Toby who took their enthusiasm with a stoical cordiality. It was so perfect a meeting that Anne was afraid of the warmth and light; they might make her silly. But she was drinking Gluwein, and having hot water bottles produced like magic, in a room on the bed of which a pink satin coverlet gleamed, before she had time to let the silliness come over her. There was no fear of it after that. Fortified and invigorated she could let all her pleasures come—Nina's joy first, and then her beauty. Nina was really beautiful now. All her prettiness was set free and flowing, her eyes were so full of laughter, all the storms of life could not have quenched their light, while they left the source of it untouched. At dinner Anne had time to notice the change (beautiful too, she instantly allowed) in Norman. He was older as well as handsomer, something had filled him out and made him at once more responsible and less highly strung. There was no hint of antagonism in his eyes as they met hers, nor even of embarrassment. They looked at her in a kind of warm, companionable tenderness, as if they only had in common the happy secret of how to take care of Nina. Anne shrank from no participation in their joy. Her feelings were unalloyed by the slightest touch of resentment. She was even careful not to crow too openly over Toby, who must be looking a little silly at the absence of any situation to face. But fortunately for Toby, he had in general very little change of expression. Anne was relieved to see that he was going to get on perfectly well with Nina. He treated her from the first with the kind of indulgent chaff which Nina herself best liked to display. As for Toby's behaviour to Norman, it could hardly be called behaviour at all, so perfectly had it sunk into the casual ease of their old relationship. Norman was too happy to be embarrassed, but he was a little too excited. He couldn't quite contain the overflowings of his joy. He made too many jokes and he couldn't for two minutes together leave Nina's name out of the conversation.

The season was still young, and there were not too many people yet in the hotel. The ones there were looked at them with considerable envy, for they were easily the merriest party in the room. When it was decided that Anne must be too tired for anything but the pink satin coverlet Nina went with her to help her to unpack her things.

"This," said Nina, "is quite the most beautiful thing of all—just to have you here with us." She seemed to hesitate a little, though her eyes, full of their relentless laughter, ran before her speech. "You and Toby! And anyone can see, you know, you beautiful, absurd, and splendid Anne, how happy you could make him!"

Anne was a little disturbed by this incredible blunder, but she wasn't angry. She saw that Nina couldn't help wishing to find partners for every solitary soul. "It doesn't matter that you're wrong," she said smilingly, "more wrong than you can possibly imagine—Toby's tragedy, fortunately for me, lies somewhere else, so I haven't that on my conscience, nor any unhappiness of my own. My dear, to see you and Norman——!"

Nina appeared for a moment a trifle crestfallen. She had a strong will and disliked her plans, however recent, to miss fire. But she didn't long believe that they could. "Oughtn't I to have said that," she asked, "so soon? Norman scolds me awfully about my tongue. He says I always say first all the things I oughtn't, and then all the things the other person oughtn't. But seriously, Anne, Norman has set his heart too——"

Anne interrupted her by a light kiss. "I know where his heart is set, and where for that matter it rises," she said good-humouredly. "It will get on quite well, my dear, without making mistakes about poor Toby." She didn't say anything about herself. That Norman should have had such a thought for her made her want to get the door shut and Nina well on the other side of it, but she couldn't be said, even when that happened, to feel much better off. Her window had a balcony and she went out on it and leaned into the cold fine darkness. She reminded herself that she must be prepared for sinkings of the heart. She wasn't there to let herself mind trivial mishaps, but to build up a sane and tranquil relationship. They would make many mistakes and no doubt she would make them as well, and find her own rather more difficult to face than theirs. Mistakes didn't matter, providing she could bear the brunt of them herself. What she mustn't do was to be resentful when she was hurt, or to allow herself to sink into disastrous self-pity. As to their absurd romance about Toby, if it saved them from all compunction to weave it, why shouldn't she let it alone? Dear, quiet, undemonstrative Toby, with his comfortably buried secret about some quite impossible person, was probably the safest peg to hang their fancies on.

"Anne," said a voice below her window, "is your room all right?"

It wasn't Toby's fault that for a brief, breathless moment she had thought it was Norman's voice.

CHAPTER X

Toby thought that Anne was supernatural, and that human nature was of a more temperate stuff than he had ever supposed. Forty years of experience had given him no parallel to their successful quartette. There was no indication that they were four sophisticated people playing skilfully with fire; they were, instead, four friends enjoying an intercourse as free from irritations and self-consciousness as that of congenial children. Anne improved daily. She no longer came methodically out of distant speculations with a cheerfulness that chilled the heart; her eyes were full of light and she carried her head as if she were crowned.

Their plans for the day fell into a natural order. Norman and Nina started out first by themselves and Anne, who was a more reluctant riser, breakfasted an hour or two later with Toby on the terrace above the waterfall. Toby, with a map and a developed instinct for mountains, usually managed to find an easier and quicker route by which they joined their companions for a midday meal. Anne and Nina rested afterwards, or collected flowers, while the two men explored further, rejoining them at sunset. Sometimes they returned as they had come, sometimes the two women continued their apparently insatiable *tête-à-tête* and sometimes (but this was the rarest of their combinations) Toby would find himself with Nina, watching with an unappeased curiosity the figures of Anne and Norman disappearing along a mountain path. What they found to talk about when they were alone together was a perpetual problem; but Toby came to the conclusion that they remained comfortably poised upon the subject of Nina. Norman was in that stage of the affections when a blind absorption in one subject reduces the intellect to a moth-like hovering. What he liked best, if he wasn't with Nina, was to discuss her, and above all what she ought to wear, and to this discussion Anne brought a skilled and untiring response. It was obvious that Anne seriously enjoyed anything which was to the girl's advantage. She drew out all Nina's best qualities and most attractive moments, and her only difficulties were when Nina herself threw these opportunities away. Nina was a bad reasoner and an inaccurate talker. She rushed full tilt upon subjects about which the little she knew had been presented to her misleadingly, and she wouldn't let her mistakes go when Norman pointed them out to her. Nobody else pointed them out to her. Toby

refrained because he was afraid of Anne, and Anne because she wanted to bluff Norman into thinking Nina hadn't made any mistakes.

Anne watched Nina carefully, fencing her off from the most fatal of her dangers, lying in wait to prevent her mis-statements, and when they had occurred, head over heels, affording them covert by a quick diversion. Nina herself knew that her best ally was Anne. When she got into difficulties she turned to her as instinctively as a climber stretches his hand out for his rope. Norman was too critical. So complete was Nina's triumph over him in every other direction that he resented the slightest sign of fallibility in her which could be apparent to others. He ran her fallibilities down, exposed them, and waited for her to translate them into miracles of good sense. She couldn't have done it alone, but with Anne's help she very often did.

As time went on, Toby realised that their brilliant ease had a background of effort. Norman made none at all, and Nina's was so slight as to be merely the clever acceptance of invisible supports held out by Anne. The lovers had the best conscience in the world; they contributed to the welfare of the party a perfect good will and the spectacle of their bliss. All they asked in return was for everyone to be happy and, a good deal of the time, happy somewhere else. This part of Anne's task was easy. She required very little of their companionship, and was never insistent, even when she was present. The protection of Nina from the occasional criticism which flickered in the very intelligent eyes of her lover was a harder task, but practicable. It was some time before even the watchful Toby discovered what was Anne's hardest task of all. Anne had whole-heartedly accepted their love, and spent herself with satisfaction in brushing away from it the last crumb of friction, but she stuck at a point which to Toby appeared frictionless and obscure. What she found it so hard to bear was that Nina wasn't anxious about Norman. After all, what had Anne's life been for the last ten years but the masterly handling of Norman's well-being, and now she had to see it jeopardised by no handling at all. Anne might have taken a subtle pleasure in this absence of rivalry in her favourite rôle, but she had no feeling of rivalry in her heart; she had instead an even more formidable instinct—an instinct which blocks out all rivalries, and makes for the most incongruous relationships or the bitterest emotions—the instinct of protection. It was her greatest quality and the direst of her defects. She protected Nina, and Norman loved her the better for it, and so, reluctantly, did Toby (for he was not in need of incitements to his affection). But when it come to protecting Norman, Anne had valiantly determined to keep her hands off.

Toby was first aware of the danger on a peculiarly hot day, when they had decided to walk to the foot of the Col di Brenta. Anne looked at the sky apprehensively and then went back into the hall of the hotel. When she rejoined Toby her face was very grave. "Nina," she said, "has let Norman go without his panama!" Anne did not wish to protect Nina on this occasion, her voice was penal. When Toby attempted a cowardly vindication of the absent Nina, Anne replied in a tragic voice, "I told her two days ago that he had had a slight sunstroke when he was a boy."

"Still," began Toby, "that was such a long time ago."

"No matter how long ago it was," Anne answered stiffly, "sunstrokes recur very easily, and when they do recur they are most serious."

"I don't think," said Toby consideringly, "that Nina bothers herself much about risks."

"I don't think she does," said Anne, "but as far as I know, that has never prevented effects from following causes." Toby was quite crushed by this retort, and they walked on in silence. Anne did not upbraid Nina when they reached the meadow, which was their meeting place. She looked at Norman, glanced from his hatless head towards the sun, and put up her own parasol with a decided click. Nina did not notice this tacit reproof, but she noticed others that followed, or else were deliberately checked from following by Anne's desperate determination to keep her head. Perhaps by the time determination becomes desperate, some of the head is already lost. Toby saw that Nina had begun to notice, because when any trivial question arose which affected Norman's well-being, she instantly became perverse. It was as if she wished him to run risks on purpose to annoy Anne. Toby became very angry with Nina and a little ashamed of Anne. What did it matter if Norman climbed down a slippery bit of rock to get an orchid, or ate what sometimes disagreed with him, or forgot to change his shoes after a shower? Norman wasn't Samson, but neither was he an invalid. Why should Anne jeopardise her splendid success by stepping out of her place about a risk which, if it existed at all, was infinitesimal? Toby foresaw that something disagreeable would happen, but he literally hadn't the nerve to warn Anne of her danger. She was at the best of moments walking on a tightrope, and to call to her to look out might precipitate an accident. After all, she was a miraculous person, and miraculous people ought to be able to count on the assistance of angels when the natural law stops functioning.

It was a curiously still clear day. The sky was like a blue inverted bowl, the flowers were shining with a sharp metallic lustre, as if they had been

turned into precious stones overnight. The gentians burned deep, and in thick cushions over the rocky ground, daphne and rhododendron, honeysuckle and wild thyme sent up their scents like flame. The meadows were a sea of sulphur-coloured anemones, pale lemon ranunculus, forget-me-nots, wild pansies and a host of rainbow hued vetches and violets. By every soft and mossy spot soldanellas grew in colonies, under their grave white and purple hoods. The stillness of the scented sunny valleys was as definite as sound.

Toby and Anne walked slowly and without speech. The sun beat down through the pines, bringing out a hot fierce scent. They paused at the corner of a path which turned precipitately upward. In front of them was a small meadow where a group of cowboys were perched on a rock. Their cows, white and cream coloured, moved peacefully to and fro below them, shaking out the broken music of their bells. On the other side of the meadow was a group of Dolomites. They rose out of the flowered pasture, their bare rocks like magic steeples thrust into the sky. Still further behind them was a giant peak, shoulder deep in snow. Each pinnacle and crag was different. Some had the heads and sides of antediluvian monsters, others were slender like tall towers, a wreath of white cloud folded itself against their implacable surface. The air was so clear that there seemed no distance but height, and over the bare and lonely spaces of the rocks a blur of passing shadows came and went. Suddenly between the peaks a great bird shot into the air. It was so large that it frightened Anne, and all the light of the day seemed caught between its monstrous length of wings. "It's only an eagle," Toby reassured her in a low voice, "a golden eagle—that's something to have seen together, Anne." He felt her hand on his arm with a sudden pressure, and then she dropped it and turned hastily away as if she wanted the shelter of the woods. She had seen enough of beauty.

"It's a queer day," Anne said evasively to Toby when he joined her, "I think there's going to be a storm." They reached the hut after another hour's steep climbing. Norman and Nina were already there, full of their own adventures and experiences. Neither Toby nor Anne mentioned the golden eagle, but there could be no doubt now about the storm. They watched the clouds coming up from every direction as if they had been summoned; huge white and golden clouds, like ruffled swansdown, or shaped in gigantic spirals as if they were strange shells, or bending upward like the breaking of a wave. As they came nearer the mountains, their rising whiteness changed into heavy grey, with purple edges. The sunlight still played under them and caught at a valley here and there, or rested on a distant lake, sparkling like burnished silver. The meadow at their feet was the last to let the sunlight go.

One by one the mountains opposite began to disappear, swallowed up in a black rift of cloud; for a moment or two the peaks peered out muffled and dim like ghosts, and then as suddenly vanished into impenetrable blackness. A cold quick wind blew in front of the storm.

All four of them sat on the steps of the hut in the open doorway, watching it. Anne said nothing, but she did not enjoy the storm as much as the others did. She shrank back a little when (before the first clap of thunder) the lightning, dry and forked, ran across the tops of the flowers. When the thunder came it was an enormous shattering sound, as if some inconceivable accident had precipitated the breaking of a world. Nina sprang to her feet and clapped her hands with joy. "Better come in now," said Toby, "we shall get the rain in a minute." But for five minutes not a drop fell, only the lightning fleered and leapt about the hills, the sky opened and shut with the giddy effect of the rise and fall of waves, and every second the thunder roared and rolled, crashed and reverberated, knocking its way about the corrugated sky.

Anne went into the hut and covered her eyes with her hands. There was a sudden shriek of wind and then the rain came solidly in a blinding sheet. Norman picked Nina off her feet and flung her, laughing and half drenched, into the hut. Toby drew the door to sharply after them. He wished they were not there; they were too happy to be very companionable at close quarters. But Anne had finished with all signs of her distress by now, and was busy getting lunch ready. They had a merry meal, with the rain falling on the hut sharp as castanets and the wind shrieking all around them like an awakened fury. By the time it was over the black pall opposite to them was fringed and ragged at the edges, the mountains began to peer in and out of the clouds, and far away, as if it had always been there, they saw a distant valley full of sunshine.

"Do you still want to go to Tuckett's hut?" Toby asked Norman a little doubtfully. "It will be rather rough going after the storm."

"Much too rough," said Anne suddenly, "and dangerous. Norman, please don't go." There was a moment's pause. Even Norman realised Anne had made a great mistake. Her determination had broken suddenly in her hands. She had not only appealed to Norman, she had made her appeal very nearly a command. To agree to it or to refuse it would be equally awkward.

Norman glanced uncertainly at Nina. "Nonsense," she said sharply, "he'll be a muff if he doesn't go. What earthly difference can it make now the storm is over?"

"It isn't the least dangerous," said Toby quickly, "but it's rough going, and it's bound to be slippery after the rain. I hardly think it's worth it."

Anne, having broken her word to herself and seen the effect of it, became reckless. She repeated to Norman, "Please don't go."

Nina was sitting on a bench swinging her legs. She got off it abruptly and went outside the hut. "My dear Anne, don't be a goose," she said over her shoulder, "I shall be ashamed of him if he doesn't go."

Norman turned with visible distress to Anne. "It's really quite all right," he said, "please don't worry." Anne turned away with shaking lips. It was a dreadful episode.

Toby said again more urgently, "Oh, what does it matter anyhow? Let's give it up!" Then he saw Nina look at Norman. There was derision in her look. Norman couldn't give up going now. He really wanted to give it up. He hated to hurt Anne, he had no desire to climb that particular mountain, but he saw that he would have to do it. Anne also saw it and said no more. But she wasn't, after they'd gone, in the mood for saying anything to Nina.

No trace was left of the storm except the raindrops on the flowers and a few lazily moving, dazzling plumes of cloud. "It's quite all right," said Nina defensively, but Anne made her no answer. Nina went off to the plateau edge. She was ashamed and defiant, her happiness for the first time knew a definite check. Anne disapproved of her. That was bad enough; so did that tiresome Toby who always thought Anne was right. But also, so did Norman! He must have thought Anne was right or he would have turned to wave to Nina before he disappeared. She could see the white storm crags far off, against which, remote and plain, stood Tuckett's hut. Of the two men there was no trace at all. They had vanished as suddenly as if they had been wiped off the world. The intervening space looked as flat as a plain, but it had innumerable hills and knolls which had hidden them in a moment. Nina wished she had left Anne alone and gone with them. Her shoes were not suitable for real climbing, but she would rather have walked her feet bare than find herself alone in a kind of disgrace, surrounded by mountain scenery.

Anne had not moved from the steps of the hut and it is extremely difficult to begin a conversation with an angry person who keeps quite still. Nina curled herself up on a fallen log with her back to Anne, closed her eyes and slept. When she woke she was conscious first of all of the silence, and then of a quite peculiar sound. It was like someone knocking. "Anne," she called, "Anne, what is that sound?"

Anne did not turn her head to answer her, but she had been listening to the knocking for some time. “I think,” she said slowly, “it is stones falling from the mountains.” They heard it again a long way off, but as distinct as if it had been a hand against the door of their hut.

“Oh,” said Nina in a shaking voice, “I didn’t know stones fell like that out of mountains.” They said nothing for a long time. The knocking became almost continuous. In between, the silence had a startled air. Nina got up slowly and came and knelt down close to Anne. “Do you think,” she asked in a strained voice, “they know about the stones?”

“Toby must,” said Anne, “he used to climb mountains.”

“He said it wasn’t dangerous,” Nina pleaded.

Anne hesitated; she was torn between her instinct to protect Nina and her outraged feelings at not having been allowed to protect Norman. “Toby did not want to go,” she said at last, in a low, flint-like voice. “He tried twice to stop Norman.”

Nina flushed from her chin to her forehead. “I would never in the world have said a thing like that to you,” she said. Anne trembled but she retracted nothing.

The air was torn suddenly by a frightful sound. Close to where they were sitting the gorse and flowers bent towards them and simultaneously there came a crash as if half the world had fallen. Anne sprang to her feet and Nina clung to her blindly. There was no visible sign of the disturbance. The flowers were still again, the mountains in front of them unchanged. They strained their eyes all around them but the serene and splendid day hung on their vision like a curtain. “Was that—was that thunder?” Nina whispered.

Anne moved her dry lips to answer, and held Nina close. “I think perhaps it was,” she said mercifully.

“But there are no clouds,” protested Nina.

“No,” agreed Anne dejectedly, “there aren’t any clouds.”

“Can’t we *do* something?” Nina cried desperately, “can’t we go and look for them, Anne?”

“I think we had better wait here,” Anne said gently; “they might come here tired out and have to search for us. We are more likely, you see, to get into difficulties than they are. We can go later, if they don’t come at the time they said.”

“Oh Anne, tell me, tell me,” Nina urged passionately, “do you think they’re safe, and that it was all my fault?”

“Toby,” Anne answered quietly, “knows all about mountains. I don’t think he’d let anything dangerous happen.” Nina hung her head. Anne wasn’t going to say anything easier. It was somehow a comfort that she had said so much as that. Nina sat close to her again and put her head on Anne’s lap. Anne made her comfortable with a tender movement and then looked across at the impenetrable hills. Time did not pass—it stood above them knocking at invisible doors.

Anne saw the two men first, and for one long cruel moment she took in their security alone. “They are quite safe,” she said at last, “I can see them both.” Her punishment was in the wild swift movement Nina made as she flew across the meadow into Norman’s arms. Norman had no eyes for anyone but her. She might have killed him and he would still, with his last strength, have sought her. Anne rose slowly to meet Toby. “That was a rock stream, wasn’t it?” she asked in her quiet careful voice, “were you anywhere near it?”

“I am afraid you’ve been frightened,” said Toby, as if he had allowed the rock stream to happen on purpose to annoy Anne. “It was just our confounded luck. We came back as quickly as we could. Yes, I haven’t seen such a thing for years—a great piece of rock as big as a church, and half a hundred smaller ones. We were quite near enough. But of course, after that storm, we’d given the fellows a wide berth.”

Anne looked at him approvingly. “I thought you would,” she said, “but of course, however careful people are, accidents sometimes happen.”

CHAPTER XI

Anne made no more mistakes, but the irreparable had happened. She had put Nina in the wrong. She was guilty of no such intention, but she had turned upon Nina the devastating force of contrast. In the full torrent of his honeymoon ardour, no other woman, no other standard had existed for Norman. Nina overshadowed the world and blotted out her entire sex. But from this universal flood Anne's figure slowly emerged. There was another standard after all, and by this other standard Norman began to judge Nina. While Nina had been alone with Anne, she had seen for herself points to remedy in her own immature code. She had readily believed that Anne's ways were better than hers and, with a humility which did credit to them both, Nina had tried to behave more like Anne. But after her marriage the need for care and effort abruptly faded. Norman prized her most for her differences from Anne. He found her short swift ways perfection. Little by little she slipped out of the small considerations, the muffled approaches and evasions she had learned instinctively from Anne. Small swear words once more decorated her vocabulary, and audacity, innocent but a little roughshod, reassumed command of her manners. King Cophetua may have made the same mistake with his beggar maid, until he became aware of what the Court thought of her. Norman had become aware. Sensitive men are apt to take small breaches of conventionality with undue seriousness. Toby would have laughed at some of the mistakes which tortured Norman; unfortunately, Norman was not used to being tortured. What he could not take lightly he took very hardly, and without patience.

From the moment he saw that a change in Nina was desirable, he set to work to effect it without stopping to think of the painfulness of the process involved. It seemed bad enough to Norman to have to find fault with her, without having Nina make any objection to his faultfinding. Nina could perhaps have changed herself to please Norman if she had been given more time, and if she had not been obliged to see how much he thought it was necessary. As it was she was cut to the heart by her fall from perfection. If Norman had ceased to think her perfect, surely it must be because he no longer loved her? This is the logic of love, and all young lovers are at the mercy of their own logic.

When people are on the lookout to improve each other, opportunities occur with fatal ease and frequency. The very day that Norman had decided that Nina must speak in a lower voice, refrain from laughing out loud in public places, and that she must make her requests to servants with rather more politeness than to her equals, she did something so flagrant that it caused a catastrophe.

Among the visitors in the hotel was a small party of Germans. They were not aggressive Germans, and they were sensitive as to what the attitude of the only English people in the hotel would be towards them. Nina believed that Germans were gargoyles—monsters once dangerous and now merely laughable. None of the people with whom she was accustomed to associate had any other idea. She did not know that to her companions Germans were human beings precisely like themselves, to whom English people in particular owed all the more courtesy because they had been obliged to put them (after a struggle so terrible as to have nearly worn out antagonism) at a disadvantage. Nina thought there was something smart in being rude to what you disliked, and something vaguely meritorious in disliking Germans. It was some time before she took in that the party at the table next to them suffered from this defect. Austrians, she knew, were different. No English people needed to dislike Austrians, though unfortunately they spoke the same language, so that one might by mistake have been polite to a German without knowing it. A chance word undeceived Nina and showed her plainly where her duty lay.

Encouraged by the friendly curiosity to which the English party had accustomed them, Herr Schmidt presented to the younger of the two English ladies, whose complexion was an international asset, a basket of wild strawberries. Nina gave him a long and hostile stare, and then said slowly in a language which she had taken the trouble to acquire, "I don't take presents from Germans." She glanced at her three stunned companions for applause, tossed her flaming head and marched out of the room. Anne instantly begged that she might be allowed to accept the strawberries, thanked Herr Schmidt with effusion, and apologising with "Our friend is so young she does not know the war is over," helped to muffle the sharpness of the encounter. Norman, crimson to the roots of his hair, made a formal apology for his wife and hurried after Nina. He found her on their balcony smoking a cigarette and triumphantly awaiting his approval. "I turned them down that time all right, didn't I?" she said as he approached. "Damn cheek of theirs to speak to us at all, isn't it?"

"Nina," said Norman in a low tense voice, "you have done a dreadful thing, and I doubt if we can stay in this hotel after it. How could you insult that perfectly harmless family anxious to do you a little kindness? I have never in my life been so ashamed."

"Ashamed? Ashamed of me?" gasped Nina. For a moment her consternation checked her anger. It is confusing to an idol to be accused of a peccadillo by a worshipper. The laws of the universe appear to have slipped out of place. "Why on earth—" Her cigarette dropped from her nervous fingers. "Why on earth should you be ashamed?"

"Surely you must see for yourself," said Norman with that controlled exasperation which is so much harder to bear than an outbreak of temper, "how appallingly vulgar such behaviour is? People are not to blame for their nationality. If you expose Germans to insult, why should you be surprised if in return they insult you? These people did the exact opposite; they offered you a courtesy and you not only reject it, but you make it quite plain that you reject it in order to insult them. Of course the result of your behaviour is that Anne and Toby will probably have to spend the rest of the evening with them to try to make up for your conduct. I couldn't face that. I simply apologised for you and came away."

"Apologised? Apologised for me?" cried Nina, "to a German?"

"My dear, don't be ridiculous," said Norman. "To a gentleman, because I was responsible for my wife's having behaved not at all like a lady." Nina leaned forward and struck him in the face.

Never in her life had she felt such a horrible sensation. It was like a rebellion of her own flesh and blood. For Norman to think her in the wrong was bad enough but that he should actually admit it to a fallen enemy, and on such a plea—that she hadn't behaved like a lady—was beyond the limits of self-control. Norman had used an irreparable phrase. He could have used it to Anne, and beyond the pain of its being the mark of his displeasure, he would have roused no overwhelming sensation in Anne's heart. But the point had escaped his imagination. Anne knew that she was a lady, and Nina was not always sure.

Norman drew back after her blow in utter silence. It was far worse for Nina than if he had struck her in return. His silence and his withdrawal brought home to her the torment of their difference. She gave a cry like a wounded animal and dashed past him into her room. Norman ought to have followed her but he was too angry with her to understand, and far too hurt himself to have any pity for the greater hurt he had inflicted upon Nina. He

walked out into the pine woods and wondered what he was going to do with the rest of his life. He bitterly regretted that he had left Anne but not for a moment did it occur to him to return to her.

Toby and Anne disposed at length of the appeased Germans and looked for the others on the terrace. They found no trace of them. "They're together then," said Anne with a little sigh of relief. "That's something."

"One can't tell whether they're together or not," objected Toby; "I'm afraid that was a serious business."

"It's all my fault," said Anne miserably. "I ought of course to have told her about the Germans before. You see she hasn't been brought up to understand——"

"Telling doesn't do any good," interrupted Toby gloomily. "You oughtn't to have been here, so that Norman could see the difference between you—that's where you've made your mistake."

"But surely, Toby, it would have happened whether I was here or not?" Anne pleaded.

"Possibly," said Toby, "but we shouldn't have been here to see it happen. Half of the tragedies of life are made by onlookers. Norman wouldn't have been so angry with her, and she wouldn't be so sick at his being angry with her—if we hadn't had to see it happen."

"If I thought she was alone, I'd go to her," said Anne after a pause.

"What good would that do?" asked Toby. "If you take her part it would be silly; if you take Norman's it will be worse."

"Couldn't I just be nice to her?" Anne pleaded. "You know she does love me, Toby?"

"She did, before Norman took to telling her to behave like you," said Toby drily.

"Oh I know! I know!" moaned Anne. "He's so stupid! so very stupid. Couldn't you *tell* him, Toby? I can't—but surely you could explain, he *mustn't* treat her like that! It's so foolish, because she's so ready to learn if only he'll admire her enough!"

"I don't know that a man can admire a woman and teach her how to behave at the same time," objected Toby. "He can adore her, of course, and teach her, but that isn't quite the same thing. It doesn't seem to answer as well."

"It doesn't answer at all," said Anne with conviction. "Nobody likes being adored and not admired. It's almost as bad as being venerated instead of loved—but perhaps not quite."

"There's something worse than either of those," said Toby in a low voice, "being treated like a placid friend when you want to be an ardent lover."

"But there isn't any question of that," said Anne. "Fortunately we haven't got that contingency to bother about."

"No," agreed Toby, slowly puffing at his cigar in the friendly darkness, "I don't suppose we need bother about it. What is it you suggest I should say to Norman, Anne? Personally I'm all against giving advice to lovers. The only advice I believe in is that of passive resistance. I should leave them entirely alone if I were you. No doubt they'll scratch each other's eyes out, but they'll probably scratch them in again afterwards."

Anne thought that Toby's theories of love were a little coarse, but she respected his judgment. He mightn't see the necessity of doing what she wanted, but he would do it quite well, when he had made up his mind to it. "If you would take Norman for a walk to-morrow, Toby," she explained, "and just point out that Nina must be much more considered in her feelings than anyone else, because if it's hard for him to have to correct her—and Norman will find it very hard—it is even worse for her to have to be corrected. And whatever happens, he's not to drag in my name. It would be cruel to her and to me. He's so naturally kind that if he'd any idea of the pain it must be to her, he'd not mind being hurt himself to save her."

"I'm to tell Norman that—from you?" asked Toby.

"Not particularly from me—from both of us," said Anne, "it's the same thing."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me," said Toby, "but please don't stop to think what it means, for fear you should take it back."

Anne looked startled for a moment; there was a dangerous gentleness in Toby's voice, mixed with a hint of laughter. She wasn't quite sure what he meant, and it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she ought to find out. Then the seriousness of Norman's problem submerged her. "I do hope they *are* together!" she murmured, turning towards the house.

CHAPTER XII

Toby did not sleep well that night. He was convinced that things were not going satisfactorily, and, like the Prince of Denmark, he resented extremely being expected to set them right. In the first place he did not believe they could be set right, and in the second he dreaded an intimate conversation with Norman, which would have to be included in the process. Toby had a great deal at the back of his mind about Norman, the accumulated resentments of many years, and he wanted to keep it there. He felt certain that people who have grudges at the back of their minds do not make good intermediaries. The obvious solution of the affair was the one Toby could not press. Anne ought to go away, and she would not see the necessity. She believed that good feeling alone can carry any situation through safely, and Toby believed that in certain situations no possible feeling is as safe as not being on the spot.

He paced up and down his room half the night, and early in the morning leaned out of his balcony window to watch the dawn. It had rained heavily in the night and in the early morning light the mountains were vivid green and blue like the colours of a peacock's breast. The white road shone hard between banks of fresh washed flowers. The sky was a young pale blue with a single star in it, the pines lay a long dark shadow against the clearness of the day.

A small figure stole out upon the white road, with flame-coloured hair. She had a stick in her hand and a knapsack on her back. Toby watched her for a few moments, wondering at her loneliness, for by her clothes he took her for a tourist, and tourists are seldom lonely. Then, with a start of surprise, he realised that he was watching Nina, and that she had set off by herself, upon the road to Italy. She too had been thinking over the problem in the night, and being younger and more daring than the others, she had put her thoughts into solution.

Toby flung himself hastily into his clothes and hurried out of the house. He cut up into the woods, taking a path which would bring him out upon the Pensolo road about two miles farther down. He rather wanted Nina to walk a few miles before he caught up with her. He had got to interfere now, but he had ceased to mind interfering. Nina's impulsive action had given him the right handle. It was the wrong thing to do. She was the one person in the

group who should have remained passive, but by doing it she had released the dreadful tension of good feeling which was gradually strangling them all. Toby whistled cheerfully to himself as he hurried through the thick wet woods. He was not a man who had many illusions, and the solution that he foresaw was not wholly a pleasant one, least of all for the one person in the world he most desired to please. Still in the end it would be of service to her, and pleasant prospects were not the ones upon which Toby was most accustomed to rely. His way through the woods was a trifle longer than he had supposed, and by the time he had negotiated half a dozen unexpected waterfalls and come down upon the road again, he was half afraid he should find Nina had passed the point at which he proposed to intercept her.

But Nina had come to a standstill. She was sitting on a low white rock by the roadside, her head lifted with an air of tension. Nina had never been alone before in a great silent space. Nature, which is the friendliest and calmest of companions to those who dwell with her habitually, is a terrifying spectacle to the chance visitant. The worst crossing in the Strand at midday would have been soothing to Nina; but the occult and curious peaks, the clear distance of the sky, the infinite remoteness of the silent heights, laid on her spirit a terrific pressure. There was nothing human for her to stand up against. Her personality, which had always depended upon an audience, dwindled into a bundle of fears. She gave a quick cry of relief as she recognised Toby, followed by a frown of suspicion.

"What on earth has brought you here," she asked, "at this hour of the morning, just where I happen to be?"

"The simplest thing in the world," said Toby, dusting his trousers carefully and sitting down on a rock opposite hers. "I saw you leave the hotel and I followed you."

"That was a bit of cheek," said Nina easily, recovering all her native jauntiness, "and if you think you can persuade me to go back, you'll have your journey for your pains. Wild horses wouldn't move me!"

"I'm not the kind of wild horse," replied Toby, "that wants to move you. On the contrary, I am delighted to hear that you are running away. It's the most sensible thing I've heard of for a long time."

"I don't know if it's sensible or not," said Nina guardedly, "but it's what I'm doing."

"You weren't running very fast when I first caught sight of you," suggested Toby tentatively. Nina's lips trembled. She hadn't known where to go, she had never in her life been out of the reach of railway stations or

motor 'buses. She knew this was the road she had come up with Norman, and it had been her idea to walk till she reached a town, and then to find someone who spoke English and could help her to get to a railway station. Perhaps at the back of her mind she had hoped that before she reached a town, Norman would have found her, but she hadn't expected Toby, nor to have her audacity poked to death by reasons. Her boots were not very strong, she had very little money, and she had forgotten to bring any food. Toby drew two breakfast rolls from his pocket and presented her with one. "I snatched them up in passing," he explained. "Never mind your plans at present, we can go into them later. Plans are always less complicated after one has had something to eat. There's a choice of about seven waterfalls to drink from. I will point one of them out to you, into which I didn't fall on my way down to the road." Nina was grateful for his discursiveness, but she was deeply suspicious of his motives. She had never felt sure of Toby Wainwright, and she ate her bread staring at him with hostile eyes across its stubborn surface.

When she had finished eating, she said slowly and distinctly, "I don't know what you are up to, Mr. Wainwright, but my plans aren't going to have anything to do with yours. Do you see what I mean?"

Toby glanced at her quizzically for a moment and then laughed. "'Pon my soul," he said, "do you imagine I want to elope with you? I'd forgotten that possible version! Well, it wouldn't be any odder than anything else if I *had* wanted it, but I assure you my motives are as strictly platonic as those of a Jew moneylender. It's your money, not your life, that I'm after."

"I don't know what you mean," said Nina composedly. "I always thought you wanted Anne, but one can't be sure. You might have given that up and thought you'd take me on, to spite them both. But I'm not that sort, I don't want to spite them. At least, I don't want to spite Anne."

"That's a very interesting but misleading discrimination," said Toby slowly, "because I see you don't realise that spiting Anne is exactly what you *are* doing."

"How do you mean?" Nina asked angrily, "I'm just getting out of her way as fast as I can, like she did out of mine. Norman thought he liked me the better of the two, and I think he did a bit, when we were alone together, but when you came up here and he saw Anne again, it all began to be different. I expect he saw then that he'd made a big mistake."

"Not as big a one as you're making now," said Toby. "My dear girl, you and Anne can't hand a man about as if he was a sofa cushion. Norman's in

love with you, and till he tells you he isn't, you can bank on it. You've just been having a row—that's what's the matter with you. Now sit down quietly and tell me all about it."

"I don't see why I should tell you anything," said Nina sulkily, reseating herself nevertheless. "Besides, you said I did right to run away, so what's the odds? I'm off now anyhow."

"Yes, but you may as well tell me why," said Toby persistently, "particularly as I intend to help you in any way I can. It seems to me you ought in common fairness to tell me your whole story. Part of it, of course, I know, and I'm even, to a certain extent, upon your side, and so of course is Anne—we think Norman's been playing the fool."

Nina knitted her surprised eyebrows rather like a puzzled puppy. She couldn't make Toby out. He wasn't going to make love to her. He didn't, she felt, particularly like her. Yet he was going to help her, and had pronounced himself to be more or less upon her side. Her heart was full of a wild storm of hurt, surprised, conflicting feelings, and she wanted nothing better than to pour them all out. She didn't burst into tears, because Toby looked so very unemotional, and because she had been crying half the night. But she began, after a moment's pause, to talk unsteadily, and with short nervous rushes.

"I don't mind telling you some of it," she began, "though it's not much good now. You say he loves me, but he can't! Why should he be always throwing Anne up at me if he did? It isn't as if I didn't like Anne. If I thought she'd done this—come up here, I mean, to get him away—I'd have fought it out; but I know she plays fair. She always has. I haven't any quarrel against Anne, though I wish to God she hadn't come. I nearly went to her room last night to tell her everything I felt, but I knew she would have tried to stop me running away! Besides, I didn't want her standing up for me, with him. I was furious with all of you too, to think of taking the part of a set of dirty Germans against me!"

"We didn't do that quite," said Toby reflectively; "it was a pity the Germans were there, I'll admit, but hasn't it yet occurred to you that we were in the right to treat them courteously since they were there?"

"I don't think you were in the right at all!" said Nina hotly.

"Think a little," urged Toby; "we could only have upheld you by letting them think we agreed with your behaviour, and your behaviour was obviously wrong. It would have given any fair-minded person a very poor opinion of the British race. We pride ourselves on fair play, and not hitting

people when they're down. You gave away our position as decent English people, and I think if anybody had a right to be angry, it was your husband."

Nina took this statement in silence, but it was not an offended silence; she was thinking hard, and trying to think generously. "Well," she said at last, "perhaps it was a bit thick what I said to them, but he needn't have said what he did to me afterwards. I can't repeat it—it was dreadful. If he could say it, he couldn't love me. No man could. Let him go back to Anne. She's a lady enough anyhow!"

"You make two mistakes," said Toby firmly; "one is that men are seldom cruel except to the woman they love, and the other is that Norman will never go back to Anne. It's too late. Now look here, young woman. I don't think you know what you've done. It's never been put to you by Anne, and quite obviously it's never been put to you by Norman, but you're going to get it straight from the shoulder now—from me. The last few months you've been thinking yourself the queen of the world, haven't you? I don't blame you—we're all liable to lose our heads while we're being adored. But what you are, and what you were when Norman picked you up, was rather a wild little girl out of a bun shop! All right—it wasn't out of a bun shop—it was from a solicitor's office off the Strand. But my point is, you came out of it to break up two very cultured and decent people's lives. These two people treated you uncommonly well. Men in Norman's position often fall in love with girls like you, but it seldom occurs to them to leave a happy domestic life in order to marry them, and when they have this intention, they are still more rarely assisted by their wives. What do you suppose they'll feel like, when they wake up this morning, and discover that you've broken up their lives again?"

"But I haven't," stammered Nina, between tears and fury, "I've put them straight this time. I've left them to each other!"

"My poor child," said Toby more gently, "do you suppose lives can be put straight so easily? Norman's in love with you, not with Anne. But if he's driven you away because he's said something tactless (but probably true) about your manners, it isn't going to make him very pleasant to Anne, when he finds out that you've gone because you think he prefers her. And Anne!—I'm not going to do you the injustice to suppose you don't realise (roughly at any rate) that she's made some sacrifices for you? Anne's a proud woman, and she's eaten dust to give you happiness. She'll have to eat more dust now."

"No, oh no!" Nina cried, springing to her feet and seizing Toby by the arm. "Not that! Not that! I'll go back this minute! I'll do anything you tell me—but not that!"

Toby held out his hand.

"Will you shake hands?" he said gravely. "I don't know what Norman may have said to you the other night, but I assure you, you have the feelings of a gentleman, as far, at least, as I've ever been able to ascertain what such feelings are."

Nina looked at him uncertainly, but she shook hands. She would much rather have heard Toby say that she had the behaviour of a lady.

"I don't want you to go back," Toby explained, "I want you to sit here while I go and fetch Norman. I quite agree with you that the present situation doesn't do. You've got a lot to learn, if you're going to be the right kind of wife to suit Norman, but you'll learn it much better by yourselves. Anne can't do anything more for you now, and she's got to see it. Take it all round, this is the best way of showing it to her."

"Fetch Norman!" exclaimed Nina. "Do you mean for us both to go off alone this way together?" Toby nodded. "But perhaps he won't come?" said Nina. "Perhaps he'll still be too angry?" Hope had sprung into her heart with the swiftness of a diving swallow. She voiced her fears and, as she voiced them, they were no longer fears but a troop of dazzling joys.

"Yes," said Toby, "that's exactly what I mean. Norman will come to you fast enough. I'll answer for that!"

"But you don't know what I did to him!" said Nina in an awestruck voice. "Last night I—I struck him!"

"Well, thank God, somebody did," exclaimed Toby hastily. "I mean, I beg your pardon, but I've no doubt he jolly well earned it."

"No he didn't, he didn't!" said Nina indignantly, "and it's horrid of you to say so—I thought you were his friend!"

"So I am, in a sense," agreed Toby sturdily, "but I shouldn't mind some of my precious balms breaking his head once in a while. Besides, after all, Nina, we've both been thinking for several days, Anne and I, that you had a good deal to put up with!"

"Well, as far as that goes," said Nina more graciously, "so have you. I can't think why you don't marry Anne."

“Can’t you?” said Toby. “Well, Anne seems to be able to think of a reason.”

“You don’t understand women,” Nina explained; “you’ve got to make her think about you. She hasn’t yet, she’s still thinking about Norman. Suppose you start saying the kind of things to her that you’ve been saying to me—that’ll make her sit up!”

“I don’t suppose I could,” said Toby thoughtfully, “and I don’t know that I should particularly like to make Anne sit up. It’s rather a painful process, isn’t it?”

“Oh, that’s because you’re in love with her,” said Nina sagely; “you didn’t mind making *me* uncomfortable, for my good! It’s no use being as soft for her as she was for Norman, is it?”

Toby rose from his white stone with an amused and thoughtful air. “We seem to understand each other so well,” he said, “that it’s rather a pity we’ve fixed our inclinations elsewhere. Now I’ll go and send you Norman. Take him away. I offer you no advice as to how to deal with him, for I am sure that you are mistress of the entire subject. But I do beg that you won’t, either of you, under any circumstances, return.”

Nina gave him a long reflective look.

“Send him along as quick as you can,” she said, “and don’t worry about our coming back. These mountains just about give me the hump.”

CHAPTER XIII

Norman spent half the night in the pine woods, and the other half on his bed, stiffly aware of Nina's unconsciousness. He had expected her to be kept awake by alarm at his prolonged absence; fear would have softened her heart and made it easier for him to forgive her. But Nina had not been alarmed for his safety. She did not see what harm was likely to happen to him walking about in a nice, dry pine wood; and although she had cried herself to sleep, there were no traces of her tears. Norman had planned a magnanimous but rather stately reconciliation in the pine woods. There was a good deal he would have to tell Nina while he was forgiving her, which it would help her to take to heart. But you can neither forgive nor improve an unconscious wife. There was nothing for Norman to do (short of waking her up, which he felt would be an appeal beneath his dignity) but to go to sleep himself.

When he woke he found Toby standing over him with a wet sponge in his hands. "So you're awake at last," said Toby grimly. "Well, it's time you got up—your wife's run away."

"What!" shouted Norman, springing into the middle of the room.

Toby took the edge of the bed in silence, and flung the sponge back on to the washstand. He was there to give Norman all the explanations that he needed, but he was not going to make them any easier or shorter than he chose. "What else could you expect?" he replied, after a pause. "You as good as told her she wasn't a suitable wife for you."

"Tell me where she has gone!" cried Norman. "Don't be an ass, Toby, and haul me over the coals, till I know where she is. Why hadn't you the sense to stop her?"

"Why should I stop her?" asked Toby stonily, "how was I to know you didn't want her to go away? Your impulsive taking up and putting down of wives is extremely confusing. Remember, you are under no obligation to go after her unless you wish to. I have promised to see her safe back to her relations if, after due consideration, you decide to remain here with Anne."

"Remain with Anne!" Norman exclaimed in blank astonishment, "you must be mad! What on earth should I want to remain here with Anne for? Do talk sense, old chap!" Toby gave a sound between a groan and a laugh, but

he made no further attempt to enlighten Norman as to why he might wish to remain with Anne. "Of course I want her back," Norman continued, struggling excitedly into his shirt. "I never said she wasn't good enough for me—it's all a mistake. Where in Heaven's name is she?"

"It's no use my telling you where she's gone," Toby answered cautiously, "until you agree to her terms. Otherwise she won't listen to you. She's perfectly safe, so you needn't be in such a towering hurry. You can think the thing out quietly for yourself."

Norman stared at him for a moment, and then asked, "What thing am I to think out? I must see her at once. We had a misunderstanding last night, it's true. I see I was to blame. I wanted her to be more like Anne. She seems to like Anne all right when she's with her, and yet when I point out things she might do, or leave undone, that are like Anne's way of doing things, she flies into a passion. Now take those Germans for instance. I may have been a bit sharp with her about what happened, but she ought to have seen she couldn't behave like that?"

"It was very unfortunate," Toby agreed, "but of course if she'd seen it, she wouldn't have done it. What you've got to make your mind up to, is that there are things Nina doesn't see." Norman coloured painfully and began hunting for a stud. It struck Toby that there was, after all, a good deal to be said for Norman. He was being shown at a disadvantage, but men who are attractive to women have sometimes to pay this penalty with other men. What was hardest for Norman at this moment was that part of his disadvantage was the woman he loved.

"You needn't be afraid I won't agree to her terms," Norman said after a pause; "I'll do anything in the world that she wants. I seem to be always hurting some woman or other, but it isn't altogether my fault." Toby made no answer to this plea for justification. It did not appeal to him, though he was too fair a man not to admit to himself that it was partly true. "Anne doesn't think it was altogether my fault, does she?" Norman asked wistfully.

"Anne doesn't know anything at all about it," said Toby shortly.

An expression of relief passed over Norman's expressive features. He felt as if he would rather have Toby, severe and accusatory, than Anne being kind. It was absurd to blame Anne for his unconscious use of her name, but he was aware that he did blame her. Her name oughtn't to have been there; but although he blamed her, he wanted intensely, as he had always wanted, the reassurance of her approval. It puzzled Toby sometimes to imagine what women could see in Norman. He had a slender, supple body, and an acute

and sympathetic mind, but he was a light weight, and Toby would have expected serious and noble women not to like light men. It did not occur to him that what women really needed, if they had the strength for it, was the opportunity he so craved himself, to support and protect the object of their love.

"Well," he said at last, "I suppose if you are going after Nina, you'd better know her main condition. The rest, no doubt, she'll settle with you herself. She'll only consent to see you if you'll take her straight away, and not come back here again."

"Of course I'll do that," exclaimed Norman with alacrity, "there isn't the faintest reason why we should come back here. As a matter of fact, I'd far rather *not*."

"Exactly," said Toby placidly; "that disposes of us. Quite right too, we ought never to have come."

"I'm afraid it was rather a mistake," Norman admitted apologetically, "we wanted it immensely, Nina perhaps even more than I did. Still we both particularly wanted to be nice to Anne. You mustn't think, you know, I haven't realised—we owe her everything we have—but I can't say that makes a very convenient basis for a visit. I daresay it was hard on Nina too, harder than I realised. Just at first it seemed so jolly easy, and we both had the idea then—I don't know whether you realised it?—that things might come off satisfactorily between you and Anne?"

"Oh yes, I realised it," said Toby; "you thought it an excellent way of disposing once and for all of your conscience, and incidentally of Anne!"

Norman flushed again. "You're rather down on me, Toby," he said, "and what you say isn't quite true. At first I was awfully against it. I hadn't, I know, the faintest right to be—but one doesn't forget being loved by a woman like Anne."

"No—one only wastes it," said Toby under his breath.

"That was our idea, anyhow," Norman went on, too absorbed in his own explanations to listen to his companion's murmur. "And then, after a bit, I saw it wouldn't work, but Nina didn't. She couldn't give it up—we used to argue about it a good deal. I believe now that if I'd given way and agreed that it *was* likely to come off, she wouldn't have got so queer about Anne."

"She probably wouldn't have run away," Toby admitted, "and may I ask what made you think your theory wouldn't work?" Norman shook his head. "I think you owe it to me—perhaps to us both—to tell me," Toby persisted.

Norman turned away and picked up his hat. “It may have been my fancy,” he said shamefacedly, “only she was always rather upset if she thought I was doing too much. But look here, old man, I can’t be bothered about Anne now—I’ve got to find Nina. For Heaven’s sake, tell me where she is, and let me set this thing right anyhow!”

“All right, I’ll tell you,” said Toby slowly. He went to the window and saw that Anne had just taken her place at the little breakfast table which faced the road. He wished that she was not there. His heart ached for her decent orderliness, the charm of her thick light hair, the clever way in which she made any meal she presided over appear a festival. She had to perfection the art of making a home, and it is hard to have an art which is not required of you.

“Walk straight down the road to Pensolo,” Toby said without moving; “you’ll find Nina a couple of miles off, sitting on a rock by the roadside. I’ll send your boxes on after you, whenever you wire your address.”

Norman hesitated a moment. “What will you say to Anne about us?” he asked a little awkwardly.

“I’ll say to Anne that she’s damned well rid of you! And perhaps this time she’ll believe it!” cried Toby with sudden savagery. Norman opened his lips to answer, and then suddenly thought better of it and turned away without speaking. He had no time to waste in self-justification. The little figure awaiting him on the road to Pensolo was justification enough, and Norman knew that even if Toby said what his anger urged him to say to Anne, Anne wouldn’t blame him. That was what made Toby so angry, and it made him angrier still that Norman knew Anne wouldn’t blame him.

A moment later Toby saw Norman dart down the long white road without a glance at Anne. She rose to her feet and looked after his flying figure, but she made no attempt to call him back. She looked very white and grave when Toby joined her, but she had resumed her seat at the table.

“What has happened, Toby?” she asked, looking up at him. “Tell me quickly what has happened?”

“I’ll tell you everything,” said Toby; “it really isn’t dreadful—nobody has been hurt.” He sat down opposite her, while Anne waited quietly for him to go on. “But I’m afraid it’ll seem a little dreadful to you at first,” Toby added apologetically; “you know that poor child was dreadfully upset last night?” Anne nodded. “Norman seems to have told her some pretty stiff things, and she took them to heart.” Anne bowed her head. She could not rid herself of the feeling that she was responsible for all the stiff things Norman

had said. “Of course, there’s some excuse for Norman,” Toby tried to concede; “he isn’t used to anyone who is not broken in, and he isn’t what you’d call fitted for a trainer. She felt what he said so much that she ran away this morning while he was still asleep. She’s quite safe—don’t look so frightened, Anne, everyone’s quite safe.”

“Yes,” whispered Anne, “dear Toby, tell me quickly what has happened.”

Toby cleared his throat. “Norman has gone too, he’s gone to join her,” he said in a voice he tried to make as casual as possible. “When he’s joined her, they aren’t coming back.”

It was over now. The silent morning spread around them serene and blue. The keen light air tasted like frozen wine. The Germans bowed with gratified friendliness as they passed their table, and Anne bowed back, her lips set in a kindly smile. But her eyes remained dark and without expression. Her hand trembled as she poured out Toby’s coffee, but she was very careful not to spill any of it. Then she said, “And Nina—that is all right? She’ll take him back?”

“Yes,” said Toby; “you see, after last night, she couldn’t quite face coming to the hotel again.” He tried to make Anne think it was the Germans whom Nina couldn’t face, but Anne shook her head inexorably. She knew it was not the Germans.

“It was that day,” she said beneath her breath, “when I wanted to take care of him. You don’t think I’ve done them any harm?” she asked after a pause, “by coming here, any permanent harm, I mean?”

“I think you’ve done them good,” said Toby drily. “Norman would have been certain to find out sooner or later that he couldn’t stand her manners, and this flare-up of hers has frightened him. They might have just got slowly on each other’s nerves if they hadn’t had a row. He’ll be more careful now how he sets to work to change her.”

“Yes,” said Anne defensively, “it was really only because he didn’t understand. He’s always very considerate of people’s feelings when he knows what they are. But Toby, that isn’t all the truth—Norman would have been angry with Nina for being tactless about the Germans; but she wouldn’t have run away because of that. Why did she run away?”

“I’ve told you, haven’t I?” asked Toby desperately. “She thought—they’d had this quarrel, you see—that he didn’t really care for her.”

“I see,” said Anne thoughtfully. “She thought, perhaps, he cared again—for me? Poor little Nina! It would have been better for her if I had gone to

her last night—I could so easily have explained to her that she was wrong."

"But it's all right now," Toby urged clumsily.

Anne gave a little helpless smile. "Yes," she agreed, "it's quite all right now. She must know by now just how little he ever cared for me."

"Anne!" said Toby, leaning across the table towards her. "Anne?"

She lifted her steady, unflinching eyes to his. "I made a great mistake," she admitted; "you were right, Toby, but you weren't altogether right. I always feared their being together without me. I thought he'd find her difficult to teach, and not be patient enough, perhaps, to let her teach herself. And I thought if we were with them, helping her, she would have learned quite enough without any teaching. I still think she would have learned like that. Only I couldn't let go of him altogether, and that must have upset her." Anne put her hands on the table. They were well-shaped, powerful hands. She looked down at them with a thoughtful air. "That was where I made my great mistake," she finished tranquilly, "I couldn't let go."

Toby was silent for a moment, then he raised his eyes supplicatingly to hers. "Anne," he asked in a low voice, "is there any chance—will you ever be able to let go?" Anne considered this question carefully. She understood now what Toby wanted, what he had always wanted. Her mind was dazzlingly clear this morning, and curiously at peace; only it was empty. She wondered if anyone in the world had ever had so empty a mind.

"If I could stop feeling that I was his wife," she said gently, "anything might be possible. But I never have stopped feeling it. When he ran down the road just now I didn't try to hold him. You see I didn't need to; I ran down the road with him and I don't know how much of me will ever come back."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Perfect Wife* by Phyllis Bottome]