Helena

Mrs. Humphry Ward

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HELENA

BY MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

AUTHOR OF LADY ROSE'S DAUGHTER, MISSING, ELIZABETH'S CAMPAIGN, ETC.

1919

CHAPTER I

"I don't care a hang about the Middle Classes!" said Lord Buntingford, resting his head on his hand, and slowly drawing a pen over a printed sheet that lay before him. The sheet was headed "Middle Class Defence League," and was an appeal to whom it might concern to join the founders of the League in an attempt to curb the growing rapacity of the working-classes. "Why should we be snuffed out without a struggle?" said the circular. "We are fewer, no doubt, but we are better educated. Our home traditions are infinitely superior. It is on the Middle Classes that the greatness of England depends."

"Does it?" thought Lord Buntingford irritably. "I wonder."

He rose and began to pace his library, a shabby comfortable room which he loved. The room however had distinction like its master. The distinction came, perhaps, from its few pictures, of no great value, but witnessing to a certain taste and knowledge on the part of the persons, long since dead, who hung them there; from one or two cases of old Nankin; from its old books; and from a faded but enchanting piece of tapestry behind the cases of china, which seemed to represent a forest. The tapestry, which covered the whole of the end wall of the room, was faded and out of repair, but Lord Buntingford, who was a person of artistic sensibilities, was very fond of it, and had never been able to make up his mind to spare it long enough to have it sent to the School of Art Needlework for mending. His cousin, Lady Cynthia Welwyn, scolded him periodically for his negligence in the matter. But after all it was he, and not Cynthia, who had to live in the room. She had something to do with the School, and of course wanted jobs for her workers.

"I hope that good woman's train will be punctual," he thought to himself, presently, as he went to a window and drew up a blind. "Otherwise I shall have no time to look at her before Helena arrives."

He stood awhile absently surveying the prospect outside. There was first of all a garden with some pleasant terraces, and flights of stone steps, planned originally in the grand style, but now rather dilapidated and ill-kept, suggesting either a general shortage of pelf on the part of the owner—or perhaps mere neglect and indifference.

Beyond the garden stretched a green rim of park, with a gleam of water in the middle distance which seemed to mean either a river or a pond, many fine scattered trees, and, girdling the whole, a line of wooded hill. Just such a view as any county—almost—in this beautiful England can produce. It was one of the first warm days of a belated spring. A fortnight before, park and hills and garden had been deep in snow. Now Nature, eager, and one might think ashamed, was rushing at her neglected work, determined to set the full spring going in a minimum of hours. The grass seemed to be growing, and the trees leafing under the spectator's eyes. There was already a din of cuckoos in the park, and the nesting birds were busy.

The scene was both familiar and unfamiliar to Lord Buntingford. He had been brought up in it as a child. But he had only inherited the Beechmark property from his uncle just before the war, and during almost the whole of the war he had been so hard at work, as a volunteer in the Admiralty, that he had never been able to do more than run down once or twice a year to see his agent, go over his home farm, and settle what timber was to be cut before the Government commandeered it. He was not yet demobilized, as his naval uniform showed. There was a good deal of work still to do in his particular office, and he was more than willing to do it. But in a few months' time at any rate—he was just now taking a fortnight's leave—he would be once more at a loose end. That condition of things must be altered as soon as possible. When he looked back over the years of driving work through which he had just passed to the years of semi-occupation before them, he shrank from those old conditions in disgust. Something must be found to which he could enslave himself again. Liberty was the great delusion—at least for him.

Politics?—Well, there was the House of Lords, and the possibility of some minor office, when his Admiralty work was done. And the whole post-war situation was only too breathless. But for a man who, as soon as he had said Yes, was immediately seized with an insensate desire to look once more at all the reasons which might have induced him to say No, there was no great temptation in politics. Work was what the nation wanted—not talk.

Agriculture and the Simple Life?—Hardly! Five years of life in London, four of them under war conditions, had spoilt any taste for the country he had ever possessed. He meant to do his duty by his estate, and by the miscellaneous crowd of people, returned soldiers and others, who seemed to wish to settle upon it. But to take the plunge seriously, to go in heart and soul for intensive culture or scientific dairy-farming, to spend lonely winters in the country with his bailiffs and tenants for company—it was no good talking about it—he knew it could not be done.

And—finally—what was the good of making plans at all?—with these new responsibilities which friendship and pity and weakness of will had lately led him to take upon himself?—For two years at least he would not be able to plan his life in complete freedom.

His thoughts went dismally off in the new direction. As he turned away from the window, a long Venetian mirror close by reflected the image of a tall man in naval uniform, with a head and face that were striking rather than handsome—black curly hair just dusted with grey, a slight chronic frown, remarkable blue eyes and a short silky beard. His legs were slender in proportion to the breadth of his shoulders, and inadequate in relation to the dignity of the head. One of them also was slightly—very slightly—lame.

He wandered restlessly round the room again, stopping every now and then with his hands in his pockets, to look at the books on the shelves. Generally, he did not take in what he was looking at, but in a moment less absent-minded than others, he happened to notice the name of a stately octavo volume just opposite his eyes—

"Davison, on Prophecy."

"Damn Davison!"—he said to himself, with sudden temper. The outburst seemed to clear his mind. He went to the bell and rang it. A thin woman in a black dress appeared, a woman with a depressed and deprecating expression which was often annoying to Lord Buntingford. It represented somehow an appeal to the sentiment of the spectator for which there was really no sufficient ground. Mrs. Mawson was not a widow, in spite of the Mrs. She was a well-paid and perfectly healthy person; and there was no reason, in Lord Buntingford's view, why she should not enjoy life. All the same, she was very efficient and made him comfortable. He would have raised her wages to preposterous heights to keep

her.

"Is everything ready for the two ladies, Mrs. Mawson?"

"Everything, my Lord. We are expecting the pony-cart directly."

"And the car has been ordered for Miss Pitstone?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord, long ago."

"Gracious! Isn't that the cart!"

There was certainly a sound of wheels outside. Lord Buntingford hurried to a window which commanded the drive.

"That's her! I must go and meet her."

He went into the hall, reaching the front door just as the pony-cart drew up with a lady in black sitting beside the driver. Mrs. Mawson looked after him. She wondered why his lordship was in such a flurry. "It's this living alone. He isn't used to have women about. And it's a pity he didn't stay on as he was."

Meanwhile the lady in the pony-cart, as she alighted, saw a tall man, of somewhat remarkable appearance, standing on the steps of the porch. Her expectations had been modest; and that she would be welcomed by her employer in person on the doorstep of Beechmark had not been among them. Her face flushed, and a pair of timid eyes met those of Lord Buntingford as they shook hands.

"The train was very late," she explained in a voice of apology.

"They always are," said Lord Buntingford. "Never mind. You are in quite good time. Miss Pitstone hasn't arrived. Norris, take Mrs. Friend's luggage upstairs."

An ancient man-servant appeared. The small and delicately built lady on the step looked at him appealingly.

"I am afraid there is a box besides," she said, like one confessing a crime. "Not a big one—" she added hurriedly. "We had to leave it at the station. The groom left word for it to be brought later."

"Of course. The car will bring it," said Lord Buntingford. "Only one box and those bags?" he asked, smiling. "Why, that's most moderate. Please come in."

And he led the way to the drawing-room. Reassured by his kind voice and manner, Mrs. Friend tripped after him. "What a charming man!" she thought.

It was a common generalization about Lord Buntingford. Mrs. Friend had still—like others—to discover that it did not take one very far.

In the drawing-room, which was hung with French engravings mostly after Watteau, and boasted a faded Aubusson carpet, a tea-table was set out. Lord Buntingford, having pushed forward a seat for his guest, went towards the tea-table, and then thought better of it.

"Perhaps you'll pour out tea—" he said pleasantly. "It'll be your function, I think—and I always forget something."

Mrs. Friend took her seat obediently in front of the tea-table and the Georgian silver upon it, which had a look of age and frailty as though generations of butlers had rubbed it to the bone, and did her best not to show the nervousness she felt. She was very anxious to please her new employer.

"I suppose Miss Pitstone will be here before long?" she ventured, when she had supplied both the master of the house and herself.

"Twenty minutes—" said Lord Buntingford, looking at his watch. "Time enough for me to tell you a little more about her than I expect you know."

And again his smile put her at ease.

She bent forward, clasping her small hands.

"Please do! It would be a great help."

He noticed the delicacy of the hands, and of her slender body. The face attracted him—its small neat features, and brown eyes. Clearly a lady—that was something.

"Well, I shouldn't wonder—if you found her a handful," he said deliberately.

Mrs. Friend laughed—a little nervous laugh.

"Is she—is she very advanced?"

"Uncommonly—I believe. I may as well tell you candidly she didn't want to come here at all. She wanted to go to college. But her mother, who was a favourite cousin of mine, wished it. She died last autumn; and Helena promised her that she would allow me to house her and look after her for two years. But she regards it as a dreadful waste of time."

"I think—in your letter—you said I was to help her—in modern languages—" murmured Mrs. Friend.

Lord Buntingford shrugged his shoulders—

"I have no doubt you could help her in a great many things. Young people, who know her better than I do, say she's very clever. But her mother and she were always wandering about—before the war—for her mother's health. I don't believe she's been properly educated in anything. Of course one can't expect a girl of nineteen to behave like a schoolgirl. If you can induce her to take up some serious reading—Oh, I don't mean anything tremendous!—and to keep up her music—-I expect that's all her poor mother would have wanted. When we go up to town you must take her to concerts—the opera—that kind of thing. I dare say it will go all right!" But the tone was one of resignation, rather than certainty.

"I'll do my best—" began Mrs. Friend.

"I'm sure you will. But—well, we'd better be frank with each other. Helena's very handsome—very self-willed—and a good bit of an heiress. The difficulty will be—quite candidly—*lovers*!"

They both laughed. Lord Buntingford took out his cigarette case.

"You don't mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

"Won't you have one yourself?" He held out the case. Mrs. Friend did not smoke. But she inwardly compared the gesture and the man with the forbidding figure of the old woman in Lancaster Gate with whom she had just completed two years

of solitary imprisonment, and some much-baffled vitality in her began to revive.

Lord Buntingford threw himself back in his arm-chair, and watched the curls of smoke for a short space—apparently in meditation.

"Of course it's no good trying the old kind of thing—strict chaperonage and that sort of business," he said at last. "The modern girl won't stand it."

"No, indeed she won't!" said Mrs. Friend fervently. "I should like to tell you—I've just come from ——" She named a university. "I went to see a cousin of mine, who's in one of the colleges there. She's going to teach. She went up just before the war. Then she left to do some war work, and now she's back again. She says nobody knows what to do with the girls. All the old rules have just —*gone*!" The gesture of the small hand was expressive. "Authority—means nothing. The girls are entering for the sports—just like the men. They want to run the colleges—as they please—and make all the rules themselves."

"Oh, I know—" broke in her companion. "They'll just allow the wretched teachers and professors to teach—what their majesties choose to learn. Otherwise—they run the show."

"Of course, they're awfully *nice* girls—most of them," said Mrs. Friend, with a little, puzzled wrinkling of the brow.

"Ripping! Done splendid war work and all that. But the older generation, now that things have begun again, are jolly well up a tree—how to fit the new to the old. I have some elderly relations at Oxbridge—a nice old professor and his wife. Not stick-in-the-muds at all. But they tell me the world there—where the young women are concerned—seems to be standing on its head. Well!—as far as I can gather—I really know her very slightly—my little cousin Helena's in just the same sort of stage. All we people over forty might as well make our wills and have done with it. They'll soon discover some kind device for putting us out of the way. They've no use for us. And yet at the same time"—he flung his cigarette into the wood-fire beside him—"the fathers and mothers who brought them into the world will insist on clucking after them, or if they can't cluck themselves, making other people cluck. I shall have to try and cluck after Helena. It's absurd, and I shan't succeed, of course—how could I? But as I told you, her mother was a dear woman—and—"

His sentence stopped abruptly. Mrs. Friend thought—"he was in love with her."

However, she got no further light on the matter. Lord Buntingford rose, and lit another cigarette.

"I must go and write a letter before post. Well, you see, you and I have got to do our best. Of course, you mustn't try and run her on a tight rein—you'd be thrown before you were out of the first field—" His blue eyes smiled down upon the little stranger lady. "And you mustn't spy upon her. But if you're really in difficulties, come to me. We'll make out, somehow. And now, she'll be here in a few minutes. Would you like to stay here—or shall I ring for the housemaid to show you your room?"

"Thank you—I—think I'll stay here. Can I find a book?"

She looked round shyly.

"Scores. There are some new books"—he pointed to a side-table where the obvious contents of a Mudie box, with some magazines, were laid out—"and if you want old ones, that door"—he waved towards one at the far end of the room—"will take you into the library. My great-grandfather's collection—not mine! And then one has ridiculous scruples about burning them! However, you'll find a few nice ones. Please make yourself at home!" And with a slight bow to her, the first sign in him of those manners of the *grand seigneur* she had vaguely expected, he was moving away, when she said hurriedly, pursuing her own thought:

"You said Miss Pitstone was very good-looking?"

"Oh, very!" He laughed. "She's exactly like Romney's Lady Hamilton. You know the type?"

"Ye-es," said Mrs. Friend. "I think I remember—before the war—at Agnew's? My husband took me there once." The tone was hesitating. The little lady was clearly not learned in English art. But Lord Buntingford liked her the better for not pretending.

"Of course. There's always an Emma, when Old Masters are on show. Romney painted her forty or fifty times. We've got one ourselves—a sketch my grandfather bought. If you'll come into the hall I'll show it you."

She followed obediently and, in a rather dark corner of the hall, Lord

Buntingford pointed out an unfinished sketch of Lady Hamilton—one of the many Bacchante variants—the brown head bent a little under the ivy leaves in the hair, the glorious laughing eyes challenging the spectator.

"Is she like that?" asked Mrs. Friend, wondering.

"Who?—my ward?" laughed Lord Buntingford. "Well, you'll see."

He walked away, and Mrs. Friend stayed a few minutes more in front of the picture—thinking—and with half an ear listening for the sound of a motor. She was full of tremors and depression. "I was a fool to come—a fool to accept!" she thought. The astonishing force of the sketch—of the creature sketched—intimidated her. If Helena Pitstone were really like that—"How can she ever put up with me? She'll just despise me. It will be only natural. And then if things go wrong, Lord Buntingford will find out I'm no good—and I shall have to go!"

She gave a long sigh, lifting her eyes a little—against her will—to the reflection of herself in an old mirror hanging beside the Romney. What a poor little insignificant figure—beside the other! No, she had no confidence in herself—none at all—she never had had. The people she had lived with had indeed generally been fond of her. It was because she made herself useful to them. Old Mrs. Browne had professed affection for her,—till she gave notice. She turned with a shiver from the recollection of an odious scene.

She went bade to the drawing-room and thence to the library, looking wistfully, as she passed through it, at the pleasant hall, with its old furniture, and its mellowed comfort. She would like to find a home here, if only they would put up with her. For she was very homeless.

As compared with the drawing-room, the library had been evidently lived in. Its books and shabby chairs seemed to welcome her, and the old tapestry delighted her. She stood some minutes before it in a quiet pleasure, dreaming herself into the forest, and discovering an old castle in its depths. Then she noticed a portrait of an old man, labelled as by "Frank Holl, R. A.," hanging over the mantelpiece. She supposed it was the grandfather who had collected the books. The face and hair of the old man had blanched indeed to a singular whiteness; but the eyes, blue under strong eyebrows, with their concentrated look, were the eyes of the Lord Buntingford with whom she had just been talking.

The hoot of a motor startled her, and she ran to a window which commanded the

drive. An open car was rapidly approaching. A girl was driving it, with a man in chauffeur's uniform sitting behind her. She brought the car smartly up to the door, then instantly jumped out, lifted the bonnet, and stood with the chauffeur at her side, eagerly talking to him and pointing to something in the chassis. Mrs. Friend saw Lord Buntingford run down the steps to greet his ward. She gave him a smile and a left hand, and went on talking. Lord Buntingford stood by, twisting his moustache, till she had finished. Then the chauffeur, looking flushed and sulky, got into the car, and the girl with Lord Buntingford ascended the steps. Mrs. Friend left the window, and hurriedly went back to the drawing-room, where tea was still spread. Through the drawing-room door she heard a voice from the hall full of indignant energy.

"You ought to sack that man, Cousin Philip. He's spoiling that beautiful car of yours."

"Is he? He suits me. Have you been scolding him all the way?"

"Well, I told him a few things—in your interest." Lord Buntingford laughed. A few words followed in lowered tones.

"He is telling her about me," thought Mrs. Friend, and presently caught a chuckle, very merry and musical, which brought an involuntary smile to her own eyes. Then the door was thrown back, and Lord Buntingford ushered in his ward.

"This is Mrs. Friend, Helena. She arrived just before you did."

The girl advanced with sudden gravity and offered her hand. Mrs. Friend was conscious that the eyes behind the hand were looking her all over.

Certainly a dazzling creature!—with the ripe red and white, the astonishing eyes, and brown hair, touched with auburn, of the Romney sketch. The beautiful head was set off by a khaki close cap, carrying a badge, and the khaki uniform, tunic, short skirt, and leggings, might have been specially designed to show the health and symmetry of the girl's young form. She seemed to walk on air, and her presence transformed the quiet old room.

"I want some tea badly," said Miss Pitstone, throwing herself into a chair, "and so would you, Cousin Philip, if you had been battling with four grubby children and an idiot mother all the way from London. They made me play 'beasts' with them. I didn't mind that, because my roaring frightened them. But then they

turned me into a fish, and fished for me with the family umbrellas. I had distinctly the worst of it." And she took off her cap, turning it round on her hand, and looking at the dints in it with amusement.

"Oh, no, you never get the worst of it!" said Lord Buntingford, laughing, as he handed her the cake. "You couldn't if you tried."

She looked up sharply. Then she turned to Mrs. Friend.

"That's the way my guardian treats me, Mrs. Friend. How can I take him seriously?"

"I think Lord Buntingford meant it as a compliment—didn't he?" said Mrs. Friend shyly. She knew, alack, that she had no gift for repartee.

"Oh, no, he never pays compliments—least of all to me. He has a most critical, fault-finding mind. Haven't you, Cousin Philip?"

"What a charge!" said Lord Buntingford, lighting another cigarette. "It won't take Mrs. Friend long to find out its absurdity."

"It will take her just twenty-four hours," said the girl stoutly. "He used to terrify me, Mrs. Friend, when I was a little thing … May I have some tea, please? When he came to see us, I always knew before he had been ten minutes in the room that my hair was coming down, or my shoes were untied, or something dreadful was the matter with me. I can't imagine how we shall get on, now that he is my guardian. I shall put him in a temper twenty times a day."

"Ah, but the satisfactory thing now is that you will have to put up with my remarks. I have a legal right now to say what I like."

"H'm," said Helena, demurring, "if there are legal rights nowadays."

"There, Mrs. Friend—you hear?" said Lord Buntingford, toying with his cigarette, in the depths of a big chair, and watching his ward with eyes of evident enjoyment. "You've got a Bolshevist to look after—a real anarchist. I'm sorry for you."

"That's another of his peculiarities!" said the girl coolly, "queering the pitch before one begins. You know you *might* like me!—some people do—but he'll

never let you." And, bending forward, with her cup in both hands, and her radiant eyes peering over the edge of it, she threw a most seductive look at her new chaperon. The look seemed to say, "I've been taking stock of you, and—well!—I think I shan't mind you."

Anyway, Mrs. Friend took it as a feeler and a friendly one. She stammered something in reply, and then sat silent while guardian and ward plunged into a war of chaff in which first the ward, but ultimately the guardian, got the better. Lord Buntingford had more resource and could hold out longer, so that at last Helena rose impatiently:

"I don't feel that I have been at all prettily welcomed—have I, Mrs. Friend? Lord Buntingford never allows one a single good mark. He says I have been idle all the winter since the Armistice. I haven't. I've worked like a nigger!"

"How many dances a week, Helena?—and how many boys?" Helena first made a face, and then laughed out.

"As many dances—of course—as one could stuff in—without taxis. I could walk down most of the boys. But Hampstead, Chelsea, and Curzon Street, all in one night, and only one bus between them—that did sometimes do for me."

"When did you set up this craze?"

"Just about Christmas—I hadn't been to a dance for a year. I had been slaving at canteen work all day"—she turned to Mrs. Friend—"and doing chauffeur by night—you know—fetching wounded soldiers from railway stations. And then somebody asked me to a dance, and I went. And next morning I just made up my mind that everything else in the world was rot, and I would go to a dance every night. So I chucked the canteen and I chucked a good deal of the driving—except by day—and I just dance—and dance!"

Suddenly she began to whistle a popular waltz—and the next minute the two elder people found themselves watching open-mouthed the whirling figure of Miss Helena Pitstone, as, singing to herself, and absorbed apparently in some new and complicated steps, she danced down the whole length of the drawing-room and back again. Then out of breath, with a curtsey and a laugh, she laid a sudden hand on Mrs. Friend's arm.

"Will you come and talk to me—before dinner? I can't talk—before *him*.

Guardians are impossible people!" And with another mock curtsey to Lord Buntingford, she hurried Mrs. Friend to the door, and then disappeared.

Her guardian, with a shrug of the shoulders, walked to his writing-table, and wrote a hurried note.

"My dear Geoffrey—I will send to meet you at Dansworth to-morrow by the train you name. Helena is here—very mad and very beautiful. I hope you will stay over Sunday. Yours ever, Buntingford."

"He shall have his chance anyway," he thought, "with the others. A fair field, and no pulling."

CHAPTER II

"There is only one bathroom in this house, and it is a day's journey to find it," said Helena, re-entering her own bedroom, where she had left Mrs. Friend in a dimity-covered arm-chair by the window, while she reconnoitred. "Also, the water is only a point or two above freezing—and as I like boiling—"

She threw herself down on the floor by Mrs. Friend's side. All her movements had a curious certainty and grace like those of a beautiful animal, but the whole impression of her was still formidable to the gentle creature who was about to undertake what already seemed to her the absurd task of chaperoning anything so independent and self-confident. But the girl clearly wished to make friends with her new companion, and began eagerly to ask questions.

"How did you hear of me? Do you mind telling me?"

"Just through an agency," said Mrs. Friend, flushing a little. "I wanted to leave the situation I was in, and the agency told me Lord Buntingford was looking for a companion for his ward, and I was to go and see Lady Mary Chance—"

The girl's merry laugh broke out:

"Oh, I know Mary Chance—twenty pokers up her backbone! I should have thought—"

Then she stopped, looking intently at Mrs. Friend, her brows drawn together over her brilliant eyes.

"What would you have thought?" Mrs. Friend enquired, as the silence continued.

"Well—that if she was going to recommend somebody to Cousin Philip—to look after me, she would never have been content with anything short of a Prussian

grenadier in petticoats. She thinks me a demon. She won't let her daughters go about with me. I can't imagine how she ever fixed upon anyone so—"

"So what?" said Mrs. Friend, after a moment, nervously. Lost in the big white arm-chair, her small hand propping her small face and head, she looked even frailer than she had looked in the library.

"Well, nobody would ever take you for my jailer, would they?" said Helena, surveying her.

Mrs. Friend laughed—a ghost of a laugh, which yet seemed to have some fun in it, far away.

"Does this seem to you like prison?"

"This house? Oh, no. Of course I shall do just as I like in it. I have only come because—well, my poor Mummy made a great point of it when she was ill, and I couldn't be a brute to her, so I promised. But I wonder whether I ought to have promised. It is a great tyranny, you know—the tyranny of sick people. I wonder whether one ought to give in to her?"

The girl looked up coolly. Mrs. Friend felt as though she had been struck.

"But your *mother*!" she said involuntarily.

"Oh, I know, that's what most people would say. But the question is, what's reasonable. Well, I wasn't reasonable, and here I am. But I make my conditions. We are not to be more than four months in the year in this old hole"—she looked round her in not unkindly amusement at the bare old-fashioned room; "we are to have four or five months in London, *at least*; and when travelling abroad gets decent again, we are to go abroad—Rome, perhaps, next winter. And I am jolly well to ask my friends here, or in town—male and female—and Cousin Philip promised to be nice to them. He said, of course, 'Within limits.' But that we shall see. I'm not a pauper, you know. My trustees pay Lord Buntingford whatever I cost him, and I shall have a good deal to spend. I shall have a horse—and perhaps a little motor. The chauffeur here is a fractious idiot. He has done that Rolls-Royce car of Cousin Philip's balmy, and cut up quite rough when I spoke to him about it."

"Done it what?" said Mrs. Friend faintly.

"Balmy. Don't you know that expression?" Helena, on the floor with her hands under her knees, watched her companion's looks with a grin. "It's *our* language now, you know—English—the language of us young people. The old ones have got to learn it, as *we* speak it! Well, what do you think of Cousin Philip?"

Mrs. Friend roused herself.

"I've only seen him for half an hour. But he was very kind."

"And isn't he good-looking?" said the girl before her, with enthusiasm. "I just adore that combination of black hair and blue eyes—don't you? But he isn't by any means as innocent as he looks."

"I never said—"

"No. I know you didn't," said Helena serenely; "but you might have—and he isn't innocent a bit. He's as complex as you make 'em. Most women are in love with him, except me!" The brown eyes stared meditatively out of window. "I suppose I could be if I tried. But he doesn't attract me. He's too old."

"Old?" repeated Mrs. Friend, with astonishment.

"Well, I don't mean he's decrepit! But he's forty-four if he's a day—more than double my age. Did you notice that he's a little lame?"

"No!"

"He is. It's very slight—an accident, I believe—somewhere abroad. But they wouldn't have him for the Army, and he was awfully cut up. He used to come and sit with Mummy every day and pour out his woes. I suppose she was the only person to whom he ever talked about his private affairs—he knew she was safe. Of course you know he is a widower?"

Mrs. Friend knew nothing. But she was vaguely surprised.

"Oh, well, a good many people know that—though Mummy always said she never came across anybody who had ever seen his wife. He married her when he was quite a boy—-abroad somewhere—when there seemed no chance of his ever being Lord Buntingford—he had two elder brothers who died—and she was an art student on her own. An old uncle of Mummy's once told me that when

Cousin Philip came back from abroad—she died abroad—after her death, he seemed altogether changed somehow. But he never, *never* speaks of her"—the girl swayed her slim body backwards and forwards for emphasis—"and I wouldn't advise you or anybody else to try. Most people think he's just a bachelor. I never talk about it to people—Mummy said I wasn't to—and as he was very nice to Mummy—well, I don't. But I thought you'd better know. And now I think we'd better dress."

But instead of moving, she looked down affectionately at her uniform and her neat brown leggings.

"What a bore! I suppose I've no right to them any more."

"What is your uniform?"

"Women Ambulance Drivers. Don't you know the hostel in Ruby Square? I bargained with Cousin Philip after Mummy's death I should stay out my time, till I was demobbed. Awfully jolly time I had—on the whole—though the girls were a mixed lot. Well—let's get a move on." She sprang up. "Your room's next door."

Mrs. Friend was departing when Helena enquired:

"By the way—have you ever heard of Cynthia Welwyn?"

Mrs. Friend turned at the door, and shook her head.

"Oh, well, I can tot her up very quickly—just to give you an idea—as she's coming to dinner. She's fair and forty—just about Buntingford's age—quite good-looking—quite clever—lives by herself, reads a great deal—runs the parish—you know the kind of thing. They swarm! I think she would like to marry Cousin Philip, if he would let her."

Mrs. Friend hurriedly shut the door at her back, which had been slightly ajar. Helena laughed—the merry but very soft laugh Mrs. Friend had first heard in the hall—a laugh which seemed somehow out of keeping with the rest of its owner's personality.

"Don't be alarmed. I doubt whether that would be news to anybody in this house! But Buntingford's quite her match. Well, ta-ta. Shall I come and help you dress?"

"The idea!" cried Mrs. Friend. "Shall I help you?" She looked round the room and at Helena vigorously tackling the boxes. "I thought you had a maid?"

"Not at all. I couldn't be bored with one."

"Do let me help you!"

"Then you'd be my maid, and I should bully you and detest you. You must go and dress."

And Mrs. Friend found herself gently pushed out of the room. She went to her own in some bewilderment. After having been immured for some three years in close attendance on an invalided woman shut up in two rooms, she was like a person walking along a dark road and suddenly caught in the glare of motor lamps. Brought into contact with such a personality as Helena Pitstone promised to be, she felt helpless and half blind. A survival, too; for this world into which she had now stepped was one quite new to her. Yet when she had first shut herself up in Lancaster Gate she had never been conscious of any great difference between herself and other women or girls. She had lived a very quiet life in a quiet home before the war. Her father, a hard-working Civil Servant on a small income, and her mother, the daughter of a Wesleyan Minister, had brought her up strictly, yet with affection. The ways of the house were old-fashioned, dictated by an instinctive dislike of persons who went often to theatres and dances, of women who smoked, or played bridge, or indulged in loud, slangy talk. Dictated, too, by a pervading "worship of ancestors," of a preceding generation of plain evangelical men and women, whose books survived in the little house, and whose portraits hung upon its walls.

Then, in the first year of the war, she had married a young soldier, the son of family friends, like-minded with her own people, a modest, inarticulate fellow, who had been killed at Festubert. She had loved him—oh, yes, she had loved him. But sometimes, looking back, she was troubled to feel how shadowy he had become to her. Not in the region of emotion. She had pined for his fondness all these years; she pined for it still. But intellectually. If he had lived, how would he have felt towards all these strange things that the war had brought about—the revolutionary spirit everywhere, the changes come and coming? She did not know; she could not imagine. And it troubled her that she could not find any guidance for herself in her memories of him.

And as to the changes in her own sex, they seemed to have all come about while she was sitting in a twilight room reading aloud to an old woman. Only a few months after her husband's death her parents had both died, and she found herself alone in the world, and almost penniless. She was not strong enough for war work, the doctor said, and so she had let the doors of Lancaster Gate close upon her, only looking for something quiet and settled—even if it were a settled slavery.

After which, suddenly, just about the time of the Armistice, she had become aware that nothing was the same; that the women and the girls—so many of them in uniform!—that she met in the streets when she took her daily walk—were new creatures; not attractive to her as a whole, but surprising and formidable, because of the sheer life there was in them. And she herself began to get restive; to realize that she was not herself so very old, and to want to know—a hundred things! It had taken her five months, however, to make up her mind; and then at last she had gone to an agency—the only way she knew—and had braved the cold and purely selfish wrath of the household she was leaving. And now here she was in Lord Buntingford's house—Miss Helena Pitstone's chaperon. As she stood before her looking-glass, fastening her little black dress with shaking fingers, the first impression of Helena's personality was upon her, running through her, like wine to the unaccustomed. She supposed that now girls were all like this—all such free, wild, uncurbed creatures, a law to themselves. One moment she repeated that she was a fool to have come; and the next, she would not have found herself back in Lancaster Gate for the world.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Helena was putting on a tea-gown, a white and silver "confection," with a little tail like a fish, and a short skirt tapering down to a pair of slim legs and shapely feet. After all her protestations, she had allowed the housemaid to help her unpack, and when the dress was on she had sent Mary flying down to the drawing-room to bring up some carnations she had noticed there. When these had been tucked into her belt, and the waves of her brown hair had been somehow pinned and coiled into a kind of order, and she had discovered and put on her mother's pearls, she was pleased with herself, or rather with as much of herself as she could see in the inadequate looking-glass on the toilet-table. A pier-glass from somewhere was of course the prime necessity, and must be got immediately. Meanwhile she had to be content with seeing herself in the eyes of the housemaid, who was clearly dazzled by her

appearance.

Then there were a few minutes before dinner, and she ran along the passage to Mrs. Friend's room.

"May I come in? Oh, let me tie that for you?" And before Mrs. Friend could interpose, the girl's nimble fingers had tied the narrow velvet carrying a round locket which was her chaperon's only ornament. Drawing back a little, she looked critically at the general effect. Mrs. Friend flushed, and presently started in alarm, when Helena took up the comb lying on the dressing-table.

"What are you going to do?"

"Only just to alter your hair a little. Do you mind? Do let me. You look so nice in black. But your hair is too tight."

Mrs. Friend stood paralysed, while with a few soft touches Helena applied the comb.

"Now, isn't that nice! I declare it's charming! Now look at yourself. Why should you make yourself look dowdy? It's all very well—but you can't be much older than I am!"

And dancing round her victim, Helena effected first one slight improvement and then another in Mrs. Friend's toilette, till the little woman, standing in uneasy astonishment before the glass to which Helena had dragged her, plucked up courage at last to put an end to the proceedings.

"No, please don't!" she said, with decision, warding off the girl's meddling hand, and putting back some of the quiet bands of hair. "You mustn't make me look so unlike myself. And besides—I couldn't live up to it!" Her shy smile broke out.

"Oh, yes, you could. You're quite nice-looking. I wonder if you'd mind telling me how old you are? And must I always call you 'Mrs. Friend'? It is so odd—when everybody calls each other by their Christian names."

"I don't mind—I don't mind at all. But don't you think—for both our sakes—you'd better leave me all the dignity you can?" Laughter was playing round the speaker's small pale lips, and Helena answered it with interest.

"Does that mean that you'll have to manage me? Did Cousin Philip tell you you must? But that—I may as well tell you at once—is a vain delusion. Nobody ever managed me! Oh, yes, my superior officer in the Women's Corps—she was master. But that was because I chose to make her so. Now I'm on my own—and all I can offer—I'm afraid!—is an alliance—offensive and defensive."

Mrs. Friend looked at the radiant vision opposite to her with its hands on its sides, and slowly shook her head.

"Offensive—against whom?"

"Cousin Philip—if necessary."

Mrs. Friend again shook her head.

"Oh, you're in his pocket already!" cried Helena with a grimace. "But never mind. I'm sure I shall like you. You'll come over to my side soon."

"Why should I take any side?" asked Mrs. Friend, drawing on a pair of black gloves.

"Well, because"—said Helena slowly—"Cousin Philip doesn't like some of my pals—some of the men, I mean—I go about with—and we *may* quarrel about it. The question is which of them I'm going to marry—if I marry any of them. And some of them are married. Don't look shocked! Oh, heavens, there's the gong! But we'll sit up to-night, if you're not sleepy, and I'll give you a complete catalogue of some of their qualifications—physical, intellectual, financial. Then you'll have the *carte du pays*. Two of them are coming to-morrow for the Sunday. There's nobody coming to-night of the least interest. Cynthia Welwyn, Captain Vivian Lodge, Buntingford's cousin—rather a prig—but good-looking. A girl or two, no doubt—probably the parson—probably the agent. Now you know. Shall we go down?"

* * * * *

The library was already full when the two ladies entered. Mrs. Friend was aware of a tall fair woman, beautifully dressed in black, standing by Lord Buntingford; of an officer in uniform, resplendent in red tabs and decorations, talking to a spare grey-haired man, who might be supposed to be the agent; of a man in a round collar and clerical coat, standing awkward and silent by the tall lady in

black; and of various other girls and young men.

All eyes were turned to Helena as she entered, and she was soon surrounded, while Lord Buntingford took special care of Helena's companion. Mrs. Friend found herself introduced to Lady Cynthia Welwyn, the tall lady in black; to Mr. Parish, the grey-haired man, and to the clergyman. Lady Cynthia bestowed on her a glance from a pair of prominent eyes, and a few civil remarks, Mr. Parish made her an old-fashioned bow, and hoped she had not found the journey too dusty, while the clergyman, whose name she caught as Mr. Alcott, showed a sudden animation as they shook hands, and had soon put her at her ease by a manner in which she at once divined a special sympathy for the stranger within the gates.

"You have just come, I gather?"

"I only arrived this afternoon."

"And you are to look after Miss Helena?" he smiled.

Mrs. Friend smiled too.

"I hope so. If she will let me!"

"She is a radiant creature!" And for a moment he stood watching the girl, as she stood, goddess-like, amid her group of admirers. His eyes were deep-set and tired; his scanty grizzled hair fell untidily over a furrowed brow; and his clothes were neither fresh nor well-brushed. But there was something about him which attracted the lonely; and Mrs. Friend was glad when she found herself assigned to him.

But though her neighbour was not difficult to talk to, her surroundings were so absorbing to her that she talked very little at dinner. It was enough to listen and look—at Lady Cynthia on Lord Buntingford's right hand, and Helena Pitstone on his left; or at the handsome officer with whom Helena seemed to be happily flirting through a great part of dinner. Lady Cynthia was extremely good-looking, and evidently agreeable, though it seemed to Mrs. Friend that Lord Buntingford only gave her divided attention. Meanwhile it was very evident that he himself was the centre of his own table, the person of whom everyone at it was fundamentally aware, however apparently busy with other people. She herself observed him much more closely than before, the mingling in his face of

a kind of concealed impatience, an eagerness held in chains and expressed by his slight perpetual frown, with a courtesy and urbanity generally gay or bantering, but at times, and by flashes—or so it seemed to her—dipped in a sudden, profound melancholy, like a quenched light. He held himself sharply erect, and in his plain naval uniform, with the three Commander's stripes on the sleeve, made, in her eyes, an even more distinguished figure than the gallant and decorated hero on his left, with whom Helena seemed to be so particularly engaged, "prig" though she had dubbed him.

As to Lady Cynthia's effect upon her host, Mrs. Friend could not make up her mind. He seemed attentive or amused while she chatted to him; but towards the end their conversation languished a good deal, and Lady Cynthia must needs fall back on the stubby-haired boy to her right, who was learning agency business with Mr. Parish. She smiled at him also, for it was her business, Mrs. Friend thought, to smile at everybody, but it was an absent-minded smile.

"You don't know Lord Buntingford?" said Mr. Alcott's rather muffled voice beside her.

Mrs. Friend turned hastily.

"No—I never saw him till this afternoon."

"He isn't easy to know. I know him very little, though he gave me this living, and I have business with him, of course, occasionally. But this I do know, the world is uncommonly full of people—don't you find it so?—who say 'I go, Sir'—and don't go. Well, if Lord Buntingford says 'I go, Sir'—he does go!"

"Does he often say it?" asked Mrs. Friend. And the man beside her noticed the sudden gleam in her quiet little face, that rare or evanescent sprite of laughter or satire that even the dwellers in Lancaster Gate had occasionally noticed.

Mr. Alcott considered.

"Well, no," he said at last. "I admit he's difficult to catch. He likes his own ways a great deal better than other people's. But if you do catch him—if you do persuade him—well, then you can stake your bottom dollar on him. At least, that's my experience. He's been awfully generous about land here—put a lot in my hands to distribute long before the war ended. Some of the neighbours about—other landlords—were very sick—thought he'd given them away because of

the terms. They sent him a round robin. I doubt if he read it. In a thing like that he's adamant. And he's adamant, too, when he's once taken a real dislike to anybody. There's no moving him."

"You make me afraid!" said Mrs. Friend.

"Oh, no, you needn't be—" Mr. Alcott turned almost eagerly to look at her. "I hope you won't be. He's the kindest of men. It's extraordinarily kind of him—don't you think?"—the speaker smilingly lowered his voice—"taking on Miss Pitstone like this? It's a great responsibility."

Mrs. Friend made the slightest timid gesture of assent.

"Ah, well, it's just like him. He was devoted to her mother—and for his friends he'll do anything. But I don't want to make a saint of him. He can be a dour man when he likes—and he and I fight about a good many things. I don't think he has much faith in the new England we're all talking about—though he tries to go with it. Have you?" He turned upon her suddenly.

Mrs. Friend felt a pang.

"I don't know anything," she said, and he was conscious of the agitation in her tone. "Since my husband died, I've been so out of everything."

And encouraged by the kind eyes in the plain face, she told her story, very simply and briefly. In the general clatter and hubbub of the table no one overheard or noticed.

"H'm—you're stepping out into the world again as one might step out of a nunnery—after five years. I rather envy you. You'll see things fresh. Whereas we—who have been through the ferment and the horror—" He broke off—"I was at the front, you see, for nearly two years—then I got invalided. So you've hardly realized the war—hardly known there was a war—not since—since Festubert?"

"It's dreadful!" she said humbly—"I'm afraid I know just nothing about it."

He looked at her with a friendly wonder, and she, flushing deeper, was glad to see him claimed by a lively girl on his left, while she fell back on Mr. Parish, the agent, who, however, seemed to be absorbed in the amazing—and agreeable—fact that Lord Buntingford, though he drank no wine himself, had yet some

Moet-et-Charidon of 1904 left to give to his guests. Mr. Parish, as he sipped it, realized that the war was indeed over.

But, all the time, he gave a certain amount of scrutiny to the little lady beside him. So she was to be "companion" to Miss Helena Pitstone—to prevent her getting into scrapes—if she could. Lord Buntingford had told him that his cousin, Lady Mary Chance, had chosen her. Lady Mary had reported that "companions" were almost as difficult to find as kitchenmaids, and that she had done her best for him in finding a person of gentle manners and quiet antecedents. "Such people will soon be as rare as snakes in Ireland"—had been the concluding sentence in Lady Mary's letter, according to Lord Buntingford's laughing account of it. Ah, well, Lady Mary was old-fashioned. He hoped the young widow might be useful; but he had his doubts. She looked a weak vessel to be matching herself with anything so handsome and so pronounced as the young lady opposite.

Why, the young lady was already quarrelling with her guardian! For the whole table had suddenly become aware of a gust in the neighbourhood of Lord Buntingford—a gust of heated talk—although the only heated person seemed to be Miss Pitstone. Lord Buntingford was saying very little; but whatever he did say was having a remarkable effect on his neighbour. Then, before the table knew what it was all about, it was over. Lord Buntingford had turned resolutely away, and was devoting himself to conversation with Lady Cynthia, while his ward was waging a fresh war of repartee with the distinguished soldier beside her, in which her sharpened tones and quick breathing suggested the swell after a storm.

Mrs. Friend too had noticed. She had been struck with the sudden tightening of the guardian's lip, the sudden stiffening of his hand lying on the table. She wondered anxiously what was the matter.

In the library afterwards, Lady Cynthia, Mrs. Friend, and the two girls—his daughter and his guest—who had come with Mr. Parish, settled into a little circle near the wood-fire which the chilliness of the May evening made pleasant.

Helena Pitstone meanwhile walked away by herself to a distant part of the room and turned over photographs, with what seemed to Mrs. Friend a stormy hand. And as she did so, everyone in the room was aware of her, of the brilliance and power of the girl's beauty, and of the energy that like an aura seemed to envelop

her personality. Lady Cynthia made several attempts to capture her, but in vain. Helena would only answer in monosyllables, and if approached, retreated further into the dim room, ostensibly in search of a book on a distant shelf, really in flight. Lady Cynthia, with a shrug, gave it up.

Mrs. Friend felt too strange to the whole situation to make any move. She could only watch for the entry of the gentlemen. Lord Buntingford, who came in last, evidently looked round for his ward. But Helena had already flitted back to the rest of the company, and admirably set off by a deep red chair into which she had thrown herself, was soon flirting unashamedly with the two young men, with Mr. Parish and the Rector, taking them all on in turn, and suiting the bait to the fish with the instinctive art of her kind. Lord Buntingford got not a word with her, and when the guests departed she had vanished upstairs before anyone knew that she had gone.

"Have a cigar in the garden, Vivian, before you turn in? There is a moon, and it is warmer outside than in," said Lord Buntingford to his cousin, when they were left alone.

"By all means."

So presently they found themselves pacing a flagged path outside a long conservatory which covered one side of the house. The moon was cloudy, and the temperature low. But the scents of summer were already in the air—of grass and young leaf, and the first lilac. The old grey house with its haphazard outline and ugly detail acquired a certain dignity from the night, and round it stretched dim slopes of pasture, with oaks rising here and there from bands of white mist.

"Is that tale true you told me before dinner about Jim Donald?" said Lord Buntingford abruptly. "You're sure it's true—honour bright?"

The other laughed.

"Why, I had it from Jim himself!" He laughed. "He just made a joke of it. But he is a mean skunk! I've found out since that he wanted to buy Preston out for the part Preston had taken in another affair. There's a pretty case coming on directly, with Jim for hero. You have heard of it."

"No," said Buntingford curtly; "but in any case nothing would have induced me to have him here. Preston's a friend of mine. So when Helena told me at dinner

she had asked him for Saturday, I had to tell her I should telegraph to him to-morrow morning not to come. She was angry, of course."

Captain Lodge gave a low whistle. "Of course she doesn't know. But I think you would be wise to stop it. And I remember now she danced all night with him at the Arts Ball!"

CHAPTER III

There was a light tap on Mrs. Friend's door. She said "Come in" rather unwillingly. Some time had elapsed since she had seen Helena's fluttering white disappear into the corridor beyond her room; and she had nourished a secret hope that the appointment had been forgotten. But the door opened slightly. Mrs. Friend saw first a smiling face, finger on lip. Then the girl slipped in, and closed the door with caution.

"I don't want that 'very magnificent three-tailed Bashaw' to know we are discussing him. He's somewhere still."

"What did you say?" asked Mrs. Friend, puzzled.

"Oh, it's only a line of an old poem—I don't know by whom—my father used to quote it. Well, now—did you see what happened at dinner?"

Helena had established herself comfortably in a capacious arm-chair opposite Mrs. Friend, tucking her feet under her. She was in a white dressing-gown, and she had hastily tied a white scarf round her loosened hair. In the dim light of a couple of candles her beauty made an even more exciting impression on the woman watching her than it had done in the lamp-lit drawing-room.

"It's war!" she said firmly, "war between Buntingford and me. I'm sorry it's come so soon—the very first evening!—and I know it'll be beastly for you—but I can't help it. I *won't* be dictated to. If I'm not twenty-one, I'm old enough to choose my own friends; and if Buntingford chooses to boycott them, he must take the consequences." And throwing her white arms above her head, her eyes looked out from the frame of them—eyes sparkling with pride and will.

Mrs. Friend begged for an explanation.

"Well, I happened to tell him that I had invited Lord Donald for Sunday. I'll tell you about Lord Donald presently—and he simply—behaved like a brute! He said he was sorry I hadn't told him, that he couldn't have Donald here, and would telegraph to him to-morrow—not to come. Just think of that! So then I said—why? And he said he didn't approve of Donald—or some nonsense of that sort. I was quite calm. I reminded him he had promised to let me invite my friends—that was part of the bargain. Yes—he said—but within limits—and Donald was the limit. That made me savage—so I upped and said, very well, if I couldn't see Donald here, I should see him somewhere else—and he wouldn't prevent me. I wasn't going to desert my friends for a lot of silly tales. So then he said I didn't know what I was talking about, and turned his back on me. He kept his temper provokingly—and I lost mine—which was idiotic of me. But I mean to be even with him—somehow. And as for Donald, I shall go up to town and lunch with him at the Ritz next week!"

"Oh, no, no, you can't!" cried Mrs. Friend in distress. "You can't treat your guardian like that! Do tell me what it's all about!" And bending forward, she laid her two small hands entreatingly on the girl's knee. She looked so frail and pitiful as she did so, in her plain black, that Helena was momentarily touched. For the first time her new chaperon appeared to her as something else than a mere receiver into which, or at which, it suited her to talk. She laid her own hand soothingly on Mrs. Friend's.

"Of course I'll tell you. I really don't mean to be nasty to you. But all the same I warn you that it's no good trying to stop me, when I've made up my mind. Well, now, for Donald. I know, of course, what Cousin Philip means. Donald ran away with the wife of a friend of his—of Buntingford's, I mean—three or four weeks ago."

Mrs. Friend gasped. The modern young woman was becoming altogether too much for her. She could only repeat foolishly—"ran away?"

"Yes, ran away. There was no harm done. Sir Luke Preston—that's the husband—followed them and caught them—and made her go back with him. But Donald didn't mean any mischief. She'd quarrelled with Sir Luke—she's an empty-headed little fluffy thing. I know her a little—and she dared Donald to run away with her—for a lark. So he took her on. He didn't mean anything horrid. I don't believe he's that sort. They were going down to his yacht at Southampton—there were several other friends of his on the yacht—and they meant to give Sir Luke

a fright—just show him that he couldn't bully her as he had been doing—being sticky and stupid about her friends, just as Cousin Philip wants to be about mine—and quarrelling about her dress-bills—and a lot of things. Well, that's all! What's there in that?"

And the girl sat up straight, dropping her slim, white feet, while her great eyes challenged her companion to say a word in defence of her guardian. Mrs. Friend's head was turning.

"But it was surely wrong and foolish—" she began. Helena interrupted her.

"I daresay it was," she said impatiently, "but that's not my affair. It's Lord Donald's. I'm not responsible for him. But he's done nothing that I know of to make *me* cut him—and I won't! He told me all about it quite frankly. I said I'd stick by him—and I will."

"And Sir Luke Preston is a friend of Lord Buntingford's?"

"Yes—" said Helena unwillingly—"I suppose he is. I didn't know. Perhaps I wouldn't have asked Donald if I'd known. But I did ask him, and he accepted. And now Buntingford's going to insult him publicly. And that I won't stand—I vow I won't! It's insulting me too!"

And springing up, she began a stormy pacing of the room, her white gown falling back from her neck and throat, and her hair floating behind her. Mrs. Friend had begun to collect herself. In the few hours she had passed under Lord Buntingford's roof she seemed to herself to have been passing through a forcing house. Qualities she had never dreamed of possessing or claiming she must somehow show, or give up the game. Unless she could understand and get hold of this wholly unexpected situation, as Helena presented it, she might as well re-pack her box, and order the village fly for departure.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" she said presently, as the white skirts swept past her.

"Mind! Not a bit. What do you want to know?"

"Are you in love with Lord Donald?"

Helena laughed.

"If I were, do you think I'd let him run away with Lady Preston or anybody else? Not at all! Lord Donald's just one of the men I like talking to. He amuses me. He's very smart. He knows everybody. He's no worse than anybody else. He did all sorts of plucky things in the war. I don't ask Buntingford to like him, of course. He isn't his sort. But he really might let me alone!"

"But you asked him to stay in Lord Buntingford's house—and without consulting—"

"Well—and it's going to be *my* house, too, for two years—if I can possibly bear it. When Mummy begged me, I told Buntingford my conditions. And he's broken them!"

And standing still, the tempestuous creature drew herself to her full height, her arms rigid by her side—a tragic-comic figure in the dim illumination of the two guttering candles.

Mrs. Friend attempted a diversion.

"Who else is coming for the week-end?"

Instantly Helena's mood dissolved in laughter. She came to perch herself on the arm of Mrs. Friend's chair.

"There—now let's forget my tiresome guardian. I promised to tell you about my 'boys.' Well, there are two of them coming—and Geoffrey French, besides a nephew of Buntingford's, who'll have this property and most of the money some day, always supposing this tyrant of mine doesn't marry, which of course any reasonable man would. Well—there's Peter Dale—the dearest, prettiest little fellow you ever saw. He was aide-de-camp to Lord Brent in the war—*very* smart—up to everything. He's demobbed, and has gone into the City. Horribly rich already, and will now, of course, make another pile. He dreadfully wants to marry me—but—" she shook her head with emphasis—"No!—it wouldn't do. He tries to kiss me sometimes. I didn't mind it at first. But I've told him not to do it again. Then there's Julian—Julian Horne—Balliol—awfully clever"—she checked off the various items on her fingers—"as poor as a rat—a Socialist, of course—they all are, that kind—but a real one—not like Geoffrey French, who's a sham, though he is in the House, and has joined the Labour party. You see"—her tone grew suddenly serious—"I don't reckon Geoffrey French among my boys."

"He's too old?"

"Oh, he's not so very old. But—I don't think he likes me very much—and I'm not sure whether I like him. He's good fun, however—and he rags Julian Horne splendidly. That's one of his chief functions—and another is, to take a hand in my education—when I allow him—and when Julian isn't about. They both tell me what to read. Julian tells me to read history, and gives me lists of books. Geoffrey talks economics—and philosophy—and I adore it—he talks so well. He gave me Bergson the other day. Have you ever read any of him?"

"Never," said Mrs. Friend, bewildered. "Who is he?"

Helena's laugh woke the echoes of the room. But she checked it at once.

"I don't want *him* to think we're plotting," she said in a stage-whisper, looking round her. "If I do anything I want to spring it on him!"

"Dear Miss Pitstone—please understand!—I can't help you to plot against Lord Buntingford. You must see I can't. He's my employer and your guardian. If I helped you to do what he disapproves I should simply be doing a dishonourable thing."

"Yes," said Helena reflectively. "Of course I see that. It's awkward. I suppose you promised and vowed a great many things—like one's godmothers and godfathers?"

"No, I didn't promise anything—except that I would go out with you, make myself useful to you, if I could—and help you with foreign languages."

"Goody," said Helena. "Do you *really* know French—and German?" The tone was incredulous. "I wish I did."

"Well, I was two years in France, and a year and a half in Germany when I was a girl. My parents wanted me to be a governess."

"And then you married?"

"Yes—just the year before the war."

"And your husband was killed?" The tone was low and soft. Mrs. Friend gave a

mute assent. Suddenly Helena laid an arm round the little woman's neck.

"I want you to be friends with me—will you? I hated the thought of a chaperon—I may as well tell you frankly. I thought I should probably quarrel with you in a week. That was before I arrived. Then when I saw you, I suddenly felt—'I shall like her! I'm glad she's here—I shan't mind telling her my affairs.' I suppose it was because you looked so—well, so meek and mild—so different from me—as though a puff would blow you away. One can't account for those things, can one? Do tell me your Christian name! I won't call you by it—if you don't like it."

"My name is Lucy," said Mrs. Friend faintly. There was something so seductive in the neighbourhood of the girl's warm youth and in the new sweetness of her voice that she could not make any further defence of her "dignity."

"I might have guessed Lucy. It's just like you," said the girl triumphantly. "Wordsworth's Lucy—do you remember her?—'A violet by a mossy stone'—That's you exactly. I *adore* Wordsworth. Do you care about poetry?"

The eager eyes looked peremptorily into hers.

"Yes," said Mrs. Friend shyly—"I'm very fond of some things. But you'd think them old-fashioned!"

"What—Byron?—Shelley? They're never old-fashioned!"

"I never read much of them. But—I love Tennyson—and Mrs. Browning."

Helena made a face—

"Oh, I don't care a hang for her. She's so dreadfully pious and sentimental. I laughed till I cried over 'Aurora Leigh.' But now—French things! If you lived all that time in France, you must have read French poetry. Alfred de Musset?—Madame de Noailles?"

Mrs. Friend shook her head.

"We went to lectures. I learnt a great deal of Racine—a little Victor Hugo—and Rostand—because the people I boarded with took me to 'Cyrano'!"

"Ah, Rostand—" cried Helena, springing up. "Well, of course he's *vieux jeu* now. The best people make mock of him. Julian does. I don't care—he gives me thrills down my back, and I love him. But then *panache* means a good deal to me. And Julian doesn't care a bit. He despises people who talk about glory and honour—and that kind of thing. Well—Lucy—"

She stopped mischievously, her head on one side.

"Sorry!—but it slipped out. Lucy—good-night."

Mrs. Friend hurriedly caught hold of her.

"And you won't do anything hasty—about Lord Donald?"

"Oh, I can't promise anything. One must stand by one's friends. One simply must. But I'll take care Cousin Philip doesn't blame you."

"If I'm no use, you know—I can't stay."

"No use to Cousin Philip, you mean, in policing me?" said Helena, with a good-humoured laugh. "Well, we'll talk about it again to-morrow. Good-night—Lucy!"

The sly gaiety of the voice was most disarming.

"Good-night, Miss Pitstone."

"No, that won't do. It's absurd! I never ask people to call me Helena, unless I like them. I certainly never expected—there, I'll be frank!—that I should want to ask you—the very first night too. But I do want you to. Please, Lucy, call me Helena. *Please*!"

Mrs. Friend did as she was told.

"Sleep well," said Helena from the door. "I hope the housemaid's put enough on your bed, and given you a hot water-bottle? If anything scares you in the night, wake me—that is, if you can!" She disappeared.

Outside Mrs. Friend's door the old house was in darkness, save for a single light in the hall, which burnt all night. The hall was the feature of the house. A gallery ran round it supported by columns from below, and spaced by answering columns which carried the roof. The bedrooms ran round the hall, and opened into the gallery. The columns were of yellow marble brought from Italy, and faded blue curtains hung between them. Helena went cautiously to the balustrade, drew one of the blue curtains round her, and looked down into the hall. Was everybody gone to bed? No. There were movements in a distant room. Somebody coughed, and seemed to be walking about. But she couldn't hear any talking. If Cousin Philip were still up, he was alone.

Her anger came back upon her, and then curiosity. What was he thinking about, as he paced his room like a caged squirrel? About the trouble she was likely to

give him—and what a fool he had been to take the job? She would like to go and reason with him. The excess of vitality that was in her, sighing for fresh worlds to conquer, urged her to vehement and self-confident action,—action for its own sake, for the mere joy of the heat and movement that go with it. Part of the impulse depended on the new light in which the gentleman walking about downstairs had begun to appear to her. She had known him hitherto as "Mummy's friend," always to be counted upon when any practical difficulty arose, and ready on occasion to put in a sharp word in defence of an invalid's peace, when a girl's unruliness threatened it. Remembering one or two such collisions, Helena felt her cheeks burn, as she hung over the hall, in the darkness. But those had been such passing matters. Now, as she recalled the expression of his eyes, during their clash at the dinner-table, she realized, with an excitement which was not disagreeable, that something much more prolonged and serious might lie before her. Accomplished modern, as she knew him to be in most things, he was going to be "stuffy" and "stupid" in some. Lord Donald's proceedings in the matter of Lady Preston evidently seemed to him—she had been made to feel it—frankly abominable. And he was not going to ask the man capable of them within his own doors. Well and good. "But as I don't agree with him—Donald was only larking!—I shall take my own way. A telegram goes anyway to Donald to-morrow morning—and we shall see. So good-night, Cousin Philip!" And blowing a kiss towards the empty hall, she gathered her white skirts round her, and fled laughing towards her own room.

But just as she neared it, a door in front of her, leading to a staircase, opened, and a man in khaki appeared, carrying a candle. It was Captain Lodge, her neighbour at the dinner-table. The young man stared with amazement at the apparition rushing along the gallery towards him,—the girl's floating hair, and flushed loveliness as his candle revealed it. Helena evidently enjoyed his astonishment, and his sudden look of admiration. But before he could speak, she had vanished within her own door, just holding it open long enough to give him a laughing nod before it shut, and darkness closed with it on the gallery.

"A man would need to keep his head with that girl!" thought Captain Lodge, with tantalized amusement. "But, my hat, what a beauty!"

Meanwhile in the library downstairs a good deal of thinking was going on. Lord Buntingford was taking more serious stock of his new duties than he had done yet. As he walked, smoking, up and down, his thoughts were full of his poor little cousin Rachel Pitstone. She had always been a favourite of his; and she had

always known him better than any other person among his kinsfolk. He had found it easy to tell her secrets, when nobody else could have dragged a word from him; and as a matter of fact she had known before she died practically all that there was to know about him. And she had been so kind, and simple and wise. Had she perhaps once had a *tendresse* for him—before she met Ned Pitstone?—and if things had gone—differently—might he not, perhaps, have married her? Quite possibly. In any case the bond between them had always been one of peculiar intimacy; and in looking back on it he had nothing to reproach himself with. He had done what he could to ease her suffering life. Struck down in her prime by a mortal disease, a widow at thirty, with her one beautiful child, her chief misfortune had been the melancholy and sensitive temperament, which filled the rooms in which she lived as full of phantoms as the palace of Odysseus in the vision of Theoclymenus.

She was afraid for her child; afraid for her friend; afraid for the world. The only hope of happiness for a woman, she believed, lay in an honest lover, if such a lover could be found. Herself an intellectual, and a freed spirit, she had no trust in any of the new professional and technical careers into which she saw women crowding. Sex seemed to her now as always the dominating fact of life. Votes did not matter, or degrees, or the astonishing but quite irrelevant fact, as the papers announced it, that women should now be able not only to fit but to plan a battleship. Love, and a child's clinging mouth, and the sweetness of a Darby and Joan old age, for these all but the perverted women had always lived, and would always live.

She saw in her Helena the strong beginnings of sex. But she also realized the promise of intelligence, of remarkable brain development, and it seemed to her of supreme importance that sex should have the first innings in her child's life.

"If she goes to college at once, as soon as I am gone, and her brain and her ambition are appealed to, before she has time to fall in love, she will develop on that side, prematurely—marvellously—and the rest will atrophy. And then when the moment for falling in love is over—and with her it mayn't be a long one—she will be a lecturer, a member of Parliament perhaps—a Socialist agitator—a woman preacher,—who knows?—there are all kinds of possibilities in Helena. But she will have missed her chance of being a woman, and a happy one; and thirty years hence she will realize it, when it is too late, and think bitterly of us both. Believe me, dear Philip, the moment for love won't last long in Helena's life. I have seen it come and go so rapidly, in the case of some of the most

charming women. For after all, the world is now so much richer for women; and many women don't know their own minds in time, or get lost among the new landmarks. And of course all women can't marry; and thank God, there are a thousand new chances of happiness for those who don't. But there are some—and Helena, I am certain, will be one—who will be miserable, and probably wicked, unless they fall in love, and are happy. And it is a strait gate they will have to pass through. For their own natures and the new voices in the world will tempt them to this side and that. And before they know where they are—the moment will have gone—the wish—and the power.

"So, dear Philip, lend yourself to my plan; though you may seem to yourself the wrong person, and though it imposes—as I know it will—a rather heavy responsibility on you. But once or twice you have told me that I have helped you—through difficult places. That makes me dare to ask you this thing. There is no one else I can ask. And it won't be bad for you, Philip,—it is good for us all, to have to think intimately—seriously—for some other human being or beings; and owing to circumstances, not your own fault, you have missed just this in life—except for your thoughts and care for me—bless you always, my dear friend.

"Am I preaching? Well, in my case the time for make-believe is over. I am too near the end. The simple and austere soul of things seems to shine out—

"And yet what I ask you is neither simple, nor austere! Take care of Helena for two years. Give her fun, and society,—a good time, and every chance to marry. Then, after two years, if she hasn't married—if she hasn't fallen in love—-she must choose her course.

"You may well feel you are too young—indeed I wish, for this business, you were older!—but you will find some nice woman to be hostess and chaperon; the experiment will interest and amuse you, and the time will soon go. You know I *could* not ask you—unless some things were—as they are. But that being so, I feel as if I were putting into your hands the chance of a good deed, a kind deed,—blessing, possibly, him that gives, and her that takes. And I am just now in the mood to feel that kindness is all that matters, in this mysterious life of ours. Oh, I wish I had been kinder—to so many people!—I wish—I wish! The hands stretched out to me in the dark that I have passed by—the voices that have piped to me, and I have not danced—

"I mustn't cry. It is hard that in one of the few cases when I had the chance to be

kind, and did not wholly miss it, I should be making in the end a selfish bargain of it—claiming so much more than I ever gave!

"Forgive me, my best of friends—

"You shall come and see me once about this letter, and then we won't discuss it again—ever. I have talked over the business side of it with my lawyer, and asked him to tell you anything you don't yet know about my affairs and Helena's. We needn't go into them."

"One of the few cases where I had the chance to be kind." Why, Rachel Pitstone's life had been one continuous selfless offering to God and man, from her childhood to her last hour! He knew very well what he had owed her—what others had owed—to her genius for sympathy, for understanding, for a compassion which was also a stimulus. He missed her sorely. At that very moment, he was in great practical need of her help, her guidance.

Whereas it was *he*—worse luck!—who must be the stumbling and unwelcomed guide of Rachel's child! How, in the name of mystery, had the child grown up so different from the mother? Well, impatience wouldn't help him—he must set his mind to it. That scoundrel, Jim Donald!

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Friend passed a somewhat wakeful night after the scene in which Helena Pitstone had bestowed her first confidences on her new companion. For Lucy Friend the experience had been unprecedented and agitating. She had lived in a world where men and women do not talk much about themselves, and as a rule instinctively avoid thinking much about themselves, as a habit tending to something they call "morbid." This at least had been the tone in her parents' house. The old woman in Lancaster Gate had not been capable either of talking or thinking about herself, except as a fretful animal with certain simple bodily wants. In Helena, Lucy Friend had for the first time come cross the type of which the world is now full—men and women, but especially women, who have no use any longer for the reticence of the past, who desire to know all they possibly can about themselves, their own thoughts and sensations, their own peculiarities and powers, all of which are endlessly interesting to them; and especially to the intellectual *élite* among them. Already, before the war, the younger generation, which was to meet the brunt of it, was an introspective, a psychological generation. And the great war has made it doubly introspective, and doubly absorbed in itself. The mere perpetual strain on the individual consciousness, under the rush of strange events, has developed men and women abnormally.

Only now it is not an introspection, or a psychology, which writes journals or autobiography. It is an introspection which *talks*; a psychology which chatters, of all things small and great; asking its Socratic way through all the questions of the moment, the most trivial, and the most tremendous.

Coolness, an absence of the old tremors and misgivings that used especially to haunt the female breast in the days of Miss Austen, is a leading mark of the new type. So that Mrs. Friend need not have been astonished to find Helena meeting her guardian next morning at breakfast as though nothing had happened. He, like a man of the world, took his cue immediately from her, and the conversation—

whether it ran on the return of Karsavina to the Russian Ballet, or the success of "Abraham Lincoln"; or the prospects of the Peace, or merely the weddings and buryings of certain common acquaintances which appeared in the morning's *Times*—was so free and merry, that Mrs. Friend began soon to feel her anxieties of the night dropping away, to enjoy the little luxuries of the breakfast table, and the pleasant outlook on the park, of the high, faded, and yet stately room.

"What a charming view!" she said to Lord Buntingford, when they rose from breakfast, and she made her way to the open window, while Helena was still deep in the papers.

"You think so?" he said indifferently, standing beside her. "I'm afraid I prefer London. But now on another matter—Do you mind taking up your duties instanter?"

"Please—please let me!" she said, turning eagerly to him.

"Well—there is a cook-housekeeper somewhere—who, I believe, expects orders. Do you mind giving them? Please do not look so alarmed! It is the simplest matter in the world. You will appear to give orders. In reality Mrs. Mawson will have everything cut and dried, and you will not dare to alter a thing. But she expects you or me to pretend. And I should be greatly relieved if you would do the pretending?"

"Certainly," murmured Mrs. Friend.

Lord Buntingford, looking at the terrace outside, made a sudden gesture—half despair, half impatience.

"Oh, and there's old Fenn,—my head gardener. He's been here forty years, and he sits on me like an old man of the sea. I know what he wants. He's coming up to ask me about something he calls a herbaceous border. You see that border there?"—he pointed—"Well, I barely know a peony from a cabbage. Perhaps you do?" He turned towards her hopefully; and Mrs. Friend felt the charm, as many other women had felt it before her, of the meditative blue eyes, under the black and heavy brow. She shook her head smiling.

He smiled in return.

"But, if you don't—would you mind—again—pretending? Would you see the

old fellow, some time this morning—and tell him to do exactly what he damn pleases—I beg your pardon!—it slipped out. If not, he'll come into my study, and talk a jargon of which I don't understand a word, for half an hour. And as he's stone deaf, he doesn't understand a word I say. Moreover when he's once there I can't get him out. And I've got a bit of rather tough county business this morning. Would you mind? It's a great deal to ask. But if you only let him talk—and look intelligent—"

"Of course I will," said Mrs. Friend, bewildered, adding rather desperately, "But I don't know anything at all about it."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. Perhaps Helena does! By the way, she hasn't seen her sitting-room."

He turned towards his ward, who was still reading at the table.

"I have arranged a special sitting-room for you, Helena. Would you like to come and look at it?"

"What fun!" said Helena, jumping up. "And may I do what I like in it?"

Buntingford's mouth twisted a little.

"Naturally! The house is at your disposal. Turn anything out you like—and bring anything else in. There is some nice old stuff about, if you look for it. If you send for the odd man he'll move anything. Well, I'd better show you what I arranged. But you can have any other room you prefer."

He led the way to the first floor, and opened a door in a corner of the pillared gallery.

"Oh, jolly!" cried Helena.

For they entered a lofty room, with white Georgian panelling, a few pretty old cabinets and chairs, a chintz-covered sofa, a stand of stuffed humming-birds, a picture or two, a blue Persian carpet, and a large book-case full of books.

"My books!" cried Helena in amazement. "I was just going to ask if the cases had come. How ever did you get them unpacked, and put here so quickly?"

"Nothing easier. They arrived three days ago. I telephoned to a man I know in Leicester Square. He sent some one down, and they were all finished before you came down. Perhaps you won't like the arrangement? Well, it will amuse you to undo it!"

If there was the slightest touch of sarcasm in the eyes that travelled from her to the books, Helena took it meekly. She went to the bookshelves. Poets, novelists, plays, philosophers, economists, some French and Italian books, they were all in their proper places. The books were partly her own, partly her mother's. Helena eyed them thoughtfully.

"You must have taken a lot of trouble."

"Not at all. The man took all the trouble. There wasn't much."

As he spoke, her eye caught a piano standing between the windows.

"Mummy's piano! Why, I thought we agreed it should be stored?"

"It seemed to me you might as well have it down here. We can easily hire one for London."

"Awfully nice of you," murmured Helena. She opened it and stood with her hand on the keys, looking out into the park, as though she pursued some thought or memory of her own. It was a brilliant May morning, and the windows were open. Helena's slim figure in a white dress, the reddish touch in her brown hair, the lovely rounding of her cheek and neck, were thrown sharply against a background of new leaf made by a giant beech tree just outside. Mrs. Friend looked at Lord Buntingford. The thought leaped into her mind—"How can he help making love to her himself?"—only to be immediately chidden. Buntingford was not looking at Helena but at his watch.

"Well, I must go and do some drivelling work before lunch. I have given Mrs. Friend *carte blanche*, Helena. Order what you like, and if Mrs. Mawson bothers you, send her to me. Geoffrey comes to-night, and we shall be seven to-morrow."

He made for the door. Helena had turned suddenly at his last words, eye and cheek kindling.

"Hm—" she said, under her breath—"So he has sent the telegram."

She left the window, and began to walk restlessly about the room, looking now at the books, now at the piano. Her face hardened, and she paid no attention to Mrs. Friend's little comments of pleasure on the room and its contents. Presently indeed she cut brusquely across.

"I am just going down to the stables to see whether my horse has arrived. A friend of mine bought her for me in town—and she was to be here early this morning. I want, too, to see where they're going to put her."

"Mayn't I come too?" said Mrs. Friend, puzzled by the sudden clouding of the girl's beautiful looks.

"Oh, no—please don't. You've got to see the housekeeper! I'll get my hat and run down. I found out last night where the stables are. I shan't be more than ten minutes or so."

She hurried away, leaving Mrs. Friend once more a prey to anxieties. She recalled the threat of the night before. But no, *impossible*! After all the kindness and the forethought! She dismissed it from her mind.

The interview with the housekeeper was an ordeal to the gentle inexperienced woman. But her entire lack of any sort of pretension was in itself ingratiating; and her manner had the timid charm of her character. Mrs. Mawson, who might have bristled or sulked in stronger hands, in order to mark her distaste for the advent of a mistress in the house she had been long accustomed to rule, was soon melted by the docility of the little lady, and graciously consented to see her own plans approved *en bloc*, by one so frankly ignorant of how a country house party should be conducted. Then it was the turn of old Fenn; a more difficult matter, since he did genuinely want instructions, and Mrs. Friend had none to give him. But kind looks, and sympathetic murmurs, mingled with honest delight in the show of azaleas in the conservatory carried her through. Old Fenn too, instead of resenting her, adopted her. She went back to the house flushed with a little modest triumph.

Housewifely instincts revived in her. Her hands wanted to be doing. She had ventured to ask Fenn for some flowers, and would dare to arrange them herself if Mrs. Mawson would let her.

Then, as she re-entered the house, she came back at a bound to reality. "If I can't keep Miss Pitstone out of mischief, I shan't be here a month!" she thought pitifully; and how was it to be done?

She found Helena sitting demurely in the sitting-room, pretending to read a magazine, but really, or so it seemed to Mrs. Friend, keeping both eyes and ears open for events.

"I'm trying to get ready for Julian—" she said impatiently, throwing away her book. "He sent me his article in the *Market Place*, but it's so stiff that I can't make head or tail of it. I like to hear him talk—but he doesn't write English."

Mrs. Friend took up the magazine, and perceived a marked item in the table of contents—"A New Theory of Value."

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"Oh, I wish I knew!" said Helena, with a little yawn. "And then he changes so. Last year he made me read Meredith—the novels, I mean. *One of Our Conquerors*, he vowed, was the finest thing ever written. He scoffed at me for liking *Diana* and *Richard Feverel* better, because they were easier. And *now*, nothing's bad enough for Meredith's 'stilted nonsense'—'characters without a spark of life in them'—'horrible mannerisms'—you should hear him. Except the poems—ah, except the poems! He daren't touch them. I say—do you know the 'Hymn to Colour'?" The girl's eager eyes questioned her companion. Her face in a moment was all softness and passion.

Mrs. Friend shook her head. The nature and deficiencies of her own education were becoming terribly plain to her with every hour in Helena's company.

Helena sprang up, fetched the book, put Mrs. Friend forcibly into an arm-chair, and read aloud. Mrs. Friend listened with all her ears, and was at the end, like Faust, no wiser than before. What did it all mean? She groped, dazzled, among the Meredithian mists and splendours. But Helena read with a growing excitement, as though the flashing mysterious verse were part of her very being. When the last stanza was done, she flung herself fiercely down on a stool at Mrs. Friend's feet, breathing fast:

"Glorious!—oh, glorious!—

"Look now where Colour, the soul's bridegroom, makes
The House of Heaven splendid for the Bride."

She turned to look up at the little figure in the chair, half laughing, half passionate: "You do understand, don't you?" Mrs. Friend again shook her head despairingly.

"It sounds wonderful—but I haven't a notion what it means!" Helena laughed again, but without a touch of mockery.

"One has to be taught—coached—regularly coached. Julian coached me."

"What is meant by Colour?" asked Mrs. Friend faintly.

"Colour is Passion, Beauty, Freedom!" said Helena, her cheek glowing. "It is just the opposite of dulness—and routine—and make-believe. It's what makes life worth while. And it is the young who feel it—the young who hear it calling—the young who obey it! And then when they are old, they have it to remember. Now, do you understand?"

Lucy Friend did not answer. But involuntarily, two shining tears stood in her eyes. There was something extraordinarily moving in the girl's ardour. She could hardly bear it. There came back to her momentary visions from her own quiet past—a country lane at evening where a man had put his arm round her and kissed her—her wedding-evening by the sea, when the sun went down, and all the ways were darkened, and the stars came out—and that telegram which put an end to everything, which she had scarcely had time to feel, because her mother was so ill, and wanted her every moment. Had she—even she—in her poor, drab, little life—had her moments of living Poetry, of transforming Colour, like others —without knowing it?

Helena watched her, as though in a quick, unspoken sympathy, her own storm of feeling subsiding.

"Do you know, Lucy, you look very nice indeed in that little black dress!" she said, in her soft, low voice, like the voice of an incantation, that she had used the night before. "You are the neatest, daintiest person!—not prim—but you make everything you wear refined. When I compare you with Cynthia Welwyn!"

She raised her shoulders scornfully. Lucy Friend, aghast at the outrageousness of

the comparison, tried to silence her—but quite in vain. Helena ran on.

"Did you watch Cynthia last night? She was playing for Cousin Philip with all her might. Why doesn't he marry her? She would suit his autocratic ideas very well. He is forty-four. She must be thirty-eight if she is a day. They have both got money—which Cynthia can't do without, for she is horribly extravagant. But I wouldn't give much for her chances. Cousin Philip is a tough proposition, as the American says. There is no getting at his real mind. All one knows is that it is a tyrannical mind!"

All softness had died from the girl's face and sparkling eyes. She sat on the floor, her hands round her knees, defiance in every tense feature. Mrs. Friend was conscious of renewed alarm and astonishment, and at last found the nerve to express them.

"How can you call it tyrannical when he spends all this time and thought upon you!"

"The gilding of the cage," said Helena stubbornly. "That is the way women have always been taken in. Men fling them scraps to keep them quiet. But as to the *real* feast—liberty to discover the world for themselves, make their own experiments—choose and test their own friends—no, thank you! And what is life worth if it is only to be lived at somebody's else's dictation?"

"But you have only been here twenty-four hours—not so much! And you don't know Lord Buntingford's reasons—"

"Oh, yes, I do know!" said Helena, undisturbed—"more or less. I told you last night. They don't matter to me. It's the principle involved that matters. Am I free, or am I not free? Anyway, I've just sent that telegram."

"To whom?" cried Mrs. Friend.

"To Lord Donald, of course, asking him to meet me at the Ritz next Wednesday. If you will be so good"—the brown head made her a ceremonial bow—"as to go up with me to town—we can go to my dressmaker's together—I have got heaps to do there—then I can leave you somewhere for lunch—and pick you up again afterwards!"

"Of course, Miss Pitstone—Helena!—I can't do anything of the sort, unless your

guardian agrees."

"Well, we shall see," said Helena coolly, jumping up. "I mean to tell him after lunch. Don't please worry. And good-bye till lunch. This time I am really going to look after my horse!"

A laugh, and a wave of the hand—she had disappeared. Mrs. Friend was left to reflect on the New Woman. Was it in truth the war that had produced her?—and if so, how and why? All that seemed probable was that in two or three weeks' time, perhaps, she would be again appealing to the same agency that had sent her to Beechmark. She believed she was entitled to a month's notice.

Poor Lord Buntingford! Her sympathies were hotly on his side, so far as she had any understanding of the situation into which she had been plunged with so little warning. Yet when Helena was actually there at her feet, she was hypnotized. The most inscrutable thing of all was, how she could ever have supposed herself capable of undertaking such a charge!

The two ladies were already lunching when Lord Buntingford appeared, bringing with him another neighbouring squire, come to consult him on certain local affairs. Sir Henry Bostock, one of those solid, grey-haired pillars of Church and State in which rural England abounds, was first dazzled by Miss Pitstone's beauty, and then clearly scandalized by some of her conversation, and perhaps—or so Mrs. Friend imagined—by the rather astonishing "make-up" which disfigured lips and cheeks Nature had already done her best with.

He departed immediately after lunch. Lord Buntingford accompanied him to the front door, saw him mount his horse, and was returning to the library, when a white figure crossed his path.

"Cousin Philip, I want to speak to you."

He looked up at once.

"All right, Helena. Will you come into the library?"

He ushered her in, shut the door behind her, and pushed forward an arm-chair.

"You'll find that comfortable, I think?"

"Thank you, I'd rather stand. Cousin Philip, did you send that telegram this morning?"

"Certainly. I told you I should."

"Then you won't be surprised that I too sent mine."

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"When this morning you said there would be seven for dinner to-night, I of course realized that you meant to stick to what you had said about Lord Donald yesterday; and as I particularly want to see Lord Donald, I sent the new groom to the village this morning with a wire to him to say that I should be glad if he would arrange to give me luncheon at the Ritz next Wednesday. I have to go up to try a dress on."

Lord Buntingford paused a moment, looking apparently at the cigarette with which his fingers were playing.

"You proposed, I imagine, that Mrs. Friend should go with you?"

"Oh, yes, to my dressmaker's. Then I would arrange for her to go somewhere to lunch—Debenham's, perhaps."

"And it was your idea then to go alone—to meet Lord Donald?" He looked up.

"He would wait for me in the lounge at the Ritz. It's quite simple!"

Philip Buntingford laughed—good-humouredly.

"Well, it is very kind of you to have told me so frankly, Helena—because now I shall prevent it. It is the last thing in the world that your mother would have wished, that you should be seen at the Ritz alone with Lord Donald. I therefore have her authority with me in asking you either to write or telegraph to him again to-night, giving up the plan. Better still if you would depute me to do it. It is really a very foolish plan—if I may say so."

"Why?"

"Because—well, there are certain things a girl of nineteen can't do without

spoiling her chances in life—and one of them is to be seen about alone with a man like Lord Donald."

"And again I ask—why?"

"I really can't discuss his misdoings with you, Helena. Won't you trust me in the matter? I thought I had made it plain that having been devoted to your mother, I was prepared to be equally devoted to you, and wished you to be as happy and free as possible."

"That's an appeal to sentiment," said Helena, resolutely. "Of course I know it all sounds horrid. You've been as nice as possible; and anybody who didn't sympathize with my views would think me a nasty, ungrateful toad. But I'm not going to be coaxed into giving them up, any more than I'm going to be bullied."

Lord Buntingford surveyed her. The habitual slight pucker—as though of anxiety or doubt—in his brow was much in evidence. It might have meant the chronic effort of a short-sighted man to see. But the fine candid eyes were not short-sighted. The pucker meant something deeper.

"Of course I should like to understand what your views are," he said at last, throwing away one cigarette, and lighting another.

Helena's look kindled. She looked handsomer and more maenad-like than ever, as she stood leaning against Buntingford's writing-table, her arms folded, one slim foot crossed over the other.

"The gist of them is," she said eagerly, "that *we*—the women of the present day—are not going to accept our principles—moral—or political—or economic—on anybody's authority. You seem, Cousin Philip, in my case at any rate, to divide the world into two sets of people, moral and immoral, good and bad—desirable and undesirable—that kind of thing! And you expect me to know the one set, and ignore the other set. Well, we don't see it that way at all. We think that everybody is a pretty mixed lot. I know I am myself. At any rate I'm not going to begin my life by laying down a heap of rules about things I don't understand—or by accepting them from you, or anybody. If Lord Donald's a bad man, I want to know why he is a bad man—and then I'll decide. If he revolts my moral sense, of course I'll cut him. But I won't take anybody else's moral sense for judge. We've got to overhaul that sort of thing from top to bottom."

Buntingford looked thoughtfully at the passionate speaker. Should he—could he argue with her? Could he show her, for instance, a letter, or parts of it, which he had received that very morning from poor Luke Preston, his old Eton and Oxford friend? No!—it would be useless. In her present mood she might treat it so as to rouse his own temper—let alone the unseemliness of the discussion it must raise between them. Or should he give her a fairly full biography of Jim Donald, as he happened to know it? He revolted against the notion, astonished to find how strong certain old-fashioned instincts still were in his composition. And, after all, he had said a good deal the night before, at dinner, when Helena's invitation to a man he despised as a coward and a libertine had been first sprung upon him. There really was only one way out. He took it.

"Well, Helena, I'm very sorry," he said slowly. "Your views are very interesting. I should like some day to discuss them with you. But the immediate business is to stop this Ritz plan. You really won't stop it yourself?"

"Certainly not!" said Helena, her breath fluttering.

"Well, then, I must write to Donald myself. I happen to possess the means of making it impossible for him to meet you at the Ritz next Wednesday, Helena; and I shall use them. You must make some other arrangement."

"What means?" she demanded. She had turned very pale.

"Ah, no!—that you must leave to me. Look here, Helena"—his tone softened—"can't we shake hands on it, and make up? I do hate quarrelling with your mother's daughter."

Involuntarily, through all her rage, Helena was struck by the extreme sensitiveness of the face opposite her—a sensitiveness often disguised by the powerful general effect of the man's head and eyes. In a calmer mood she might have said to herself that only some past suffering could have produced it. At the moment, however, she was incapable of anything but passionate resentment.

All the same there was present in her own mind an ideal of what the action and bearing of a girl in her position should be, which, with the help of pride, would not allow her to drift into mere temper. She put her hands firmly behind her; so that Buntingford was forced to withdraw his; but she kept her self-possession.

"I don't see what there is but quarrelling before us, Cousin Philip, if you are to

proceed on these lines. Are you really going to keep me to my promise?"

"To let me take care of you—for these two years? It was not a promise to me, Helena."

The girl's calm a little broke down.

"Mummy would never have made me give it," she said fiercely, "if she had known—"

"Well, you can't ask her now," he said gently. "Hadn't we better make the best of it?"

She scorned to reply. He opened the door for her, and she swept through it.

Left to himself, Buntingford gave a great stretch.

"That was strenuous!"—he said to himself—"uncommonly strenuous. How many times a week shall I have to do it? Can't Cynthia Welwyn do anything? I'll go and see Cynthia this afternoon."

With which very natural, but quite foolish resolution, he at last succeeded in quieting his own irritation, and turning his mind to a political speech he had to make next week in his own village.

CHAPTER V

Cynthia Welwyn was giving an account of her evening at Beechmark to her elder sister, Lady Georgina. They had just met in the little drawing-room of Beechmark Cottage, and tea was coming in. It would be difficult to imagine a greater contrast than the two sisters presented. They were the daughters of a peer belonging to what a well-known frequenter of great houses and great families before the war used to call "the inferior aristocracy"—with an inflection of voice caught no doubt from the great families themselves. Yet their father had been an Earl, the second of his name, and was himself the son of a meteoric personage of mid-Victorian days—parliamentary lawyer, peer, and Governor of an Indian Presidency, who had earned his final step in the peerage by the skilful management of a little war, and had then incontinently died, leaving his family his reputation, which was considerable, and his savings, which were disappointingly small. Lady Cynthia and Lady Georgina were his only surviving children, and the earldom was extinct.

The sisters possessed a tiny house in Brompton Square, and rented Beechmark Cottage from Lord Buntingford, of whom their mother, long since dead, had been a cousin. The cottage stood within the enclosure of the park, and to their connection with the big house the sisters owed a number of amenities,—game in winter, flowers and vegetables in summer—which were of importance to their small income. Cynthia Welwyn, however, could never have passed as anybody's dependent. She thanked her cousin occasionally for the kindnesses of which his head gardener and his game-keeper knew much more than he did; and when he said impatiently—"Please never thank for that sort of thing!" she dropped the subject as lightly as she had raised it. Secretly she felt that such things, and much more, were her due. She had not got from life all she should have got; and it was only natural that people should make it up to her a little.

For Cynthia, though she had wished to marry, was unmarried, and a secret and melancholy conviction now sometimes possessed her that she would remain

Cynthia Welwyn to the end. She knew very well that in the opinion of her friends she had fallen between two stools. Her neighbour, Sir Richard Watson, had proposed to her twice,—on the last occasion some two years before the war. She had not been able to make up her mind to accept him, because on the whole she was more in love with her cousin, Philip Buntingford, and still hoped that his old friendship for her might turn to something deeper. But the war had intervened, and during its four years she and Buntingford had very much lost sight of each other. She had taken her full share in the county war work; while he was absorbed body and soul by the Admiralty.

And now that they were meeting again as of old, she was very conscious, in some undefined way, that she had lost ground with him. Uneasily she felt that her talk sometimes bored him; yet she could not help talking. In the pre-war days, when they met in a drawing-room full of people, he had generally ended his evening beside her. Now his manner, for all its courtesy, seemed to tell her that those times were done; that she was four years older; that she had lost the first brilliance of her looks; and that he himself had grown out of her ken. Helena's young unfriendly eyes had read her rightly. She did wish fervently to recapture Philip Buntingford; and saw no means of doing so. Meanwhile Sir Richard, now demobilized, had come back from the war bringing great glory with him, as one of the business men whom the Army had roped in to help in its vast labour and transport organization behind the lines. He too had reappeared at Beechmark Cottage. But he too was four years older—and dreadfully preoccupied, it seemed to her, with a thousand interests which had mattered nothing to him in the old easy days.

Yet Cynthia Welwyn was still an extremely attractive and desirable woman, and was quite aware of it, as was her elder sister, Lady Georgina, who spent her silent life in alternately admiring and despising the younger. Lady Georgina was short, thin, and nearly white-haired. She had a deep voice, which she used with a harsh abruptness, startling to the newcomer. But she used it very little. Cynthia's friends, were used to see her sitting absolutely silent behind the tea-urn at breakfast or tea, filling the cups while Cynthia handed them and Cynthia talked; and they had learned that it was no use at all to show compassion and try to bring her into the conversation. A quiet rather stony stare, a muttered "Ah" or "Oh," were all that such efforts produced. Some of the frequenters of the cottage drawing-room were convinced that Lady Georgina was "not quite all there." Others had the impression of something watchful and sinister; and were accustomed to pity "dear Cynthia" for having to live with so strange a being.

But in truth the sisters suited each other very fairly, and Lady Georgina found a good deal more tongue when she was alone with Cynthia than at other times.

To the lively account that Cynthia had been giving her of the evening at Beechmark, and the behaviour of Helena Pitstone, Lady Georgina had listened in a sardonic silence; and at the end of it she said—

"What ever made the man such a fool?"

"Who?—Buntingford? My dear, what could he do? Rachel Pitstone was his greatest friend in the world, and when she asked him just the week before she died, how could he say No?" Lady Georgina murmured that in that case Rachel Pitstone also had been a fool—

"Unless, of course, she wanted the girl to marry Buntingford. Why, Philip's only forty-four now. A nice age for a guardian! Of course it's not proper. The neighbours will talk."

"Oh, no,—not with a chaperon. Besides nobody minds anything odd nowadays."

Cynthia meanwhile as she lay stretched in a deep arm-chair, playing with the tea-spoon in her shapely fingers, was a pleasant vision. Since coming in from the village, she had changed her tweed coat and skirt for a tea-frock of some soft silky stuff, hyacinth blue in colour; and Georgina, for whom tea-frocks were a silly abomination, and who was herself sitting bolt upright in a shabby blue serge some five springs old, could not deny the delicate beauty of her sister's still fresh complexion and pale gold hair, nor the effectiveness of the blue dress in combination with them. She did not really want Cynthia to look older, nor to see her ill-dressed; but all the same there were many days when Cynthia's mature perfections roused a secret irritation in her sister—a kind of secret triumph also in the thought that, in the end, Time would be the master even of Cynthia. Perhaps after all she would marry. It did look as though Sir Richard Watson, if properly encouraged, and indemnified for earlier rebuffs, might still mean business. As for Philip Buntingford, it was only Cynthia's vanity that had ever made her imagine him in love with her. Lady Georgina scoffed at the notion.

These fragmentary reflections, and others like them were passing rapidly and disconnectedly through the mind of the elder sister, when her ear caught the sound of footsteps in the drive. Drawing aside a corner of the muslin curtain beside her, which draped one of the French windows of the low room, she

perceived the tall figure and scarcely perceptible limp of Lord Buntingford. Cynthia too saw him, and ceased to lounge. She quietly re-lit the tea-kettle, and took a roll of knitting from a table near her. Then as the front bell rang through the small house, she threw a scarcely perceptible look at her sister. Would Georgie "show tact," and leave her and Philip alone, or would she insist on her rights and spoil his visit? Georgina made no sign.

Buntingford entered, flushed with his walk, and carrying a bunch of blue-bells which he presented to Lady Georgina.

"I gathered them in Cricket Wood. The whole wood is a sea of blue. You and Cynthia must really go and see them."

He settled himself in a chair, and plunged into tea and small talk as though to the manner born. But all the time Cynthia, while approving his naval uniform, and his general picturesqueness, was secretly wondering what he had come about. For although he was enjoying a well-earned leave, the first for two years, and had every right to idle, the ordinary afternoon call of country life, rarely, as she knew, came into the scheme of his day. The weather was beautiful and she had made sure that he would be golfing on a well-known links some three miles off.

Presently the small talk flagged, and Buntingford began to fidget. Slowly Lady Georgina rose from her seat, and again extinguished the flame under the silver kettle. Would she go, or would she not go? Cynthia dropped some stitches in the tension of the moment. Then Buntingford got up to open the door for Georgina, who, without deigning to make any conventional excuse for her departure, nevertheless departed.

Buntingford returned to his seat, picked up Cynthia's ball of wool, and sat holding it, his eyes on the down-dropped head of his cousin, and on the beautiful hands holding the knitting-needles. Yes, she was still very good-looking, and had been sensible enough not to spoil herself by paint and powder, unlike that silly child, Helena, who was yet so much younger—twenty-two years younger, almost. It seemed incredible. But he could reckon Cynthia's age to a day; for they had known each other very well as children, and he had often given her a birthday present, till the moment when, in her third season, Cynthia had peremptorily put an end to the custom. Then he had gone abroad, and there had been a wide gap of years when they had never seen each other at all. And now, it was true, she did often bore him, intellectually. But at this moment, he was not

bored—quite the contrary. The sunny cottage room, with its flowers and books and needlework, and a charming woman as its centre, evidently very glad to see him, and ready to welcome any confidences he might give her, produced a sudden sharp effect upon him. That hunger for something denied him—the "It" which he was always holding at bay—sprang upon him, and shook his self-control.

"We've known each other a long time, haven't we, Cynthia?" he said, smiling, and holding out her ball of wool.

Cynthia hardly concealed her start of pleasure. She looked up, shaking her hair from her white brow and temples with a graceful gesture, half responsive, half melancholy.

"So long!" she said—"it doesn't bear thinking of."

"Not at all. You haven't aged a bit. I want you to help me in something, Cynthia. You remember how you helped me out of one or two scrapes in the old days?"

They both laughed. Cynthia remembered very well. That scrape, for instance, with the seductive little granddaughter of the retired village school-master—a veritable Ancient of Days, who had been the witness of an unlucky kiss behind a hedge, and had marched up instanter, in his wrath, to complain to Lord Buntingford *grand-père.* Or that much worse scrape, when a lad of nineteen, with not enough to do in his Oxford vacation, had imagined himself in love with a married lady of the neighbourhood, twenty years older than himself, and had had to be packed off in disgrace to Switzerland with a coach:—an angry grandfather breathing fire and slaughter. Certainly in those days Philip had been unusually—remarkably susceptible. Cynthia remembered him as always in or out of a love-affair, while she to whom he never made love was alternately champion and mentor. In those days, he had no expectation of the estates or the title. He was plain Philip Bliss, with an artistic and literary turn, great personal charm, and a temperament that invited catastrophes. That was before he went to Paris and Rome for serious work at painting. Seven years he had been away from England, and she had never seen him. He had announced his marriage to her in a short note containing hardly any particulars—except that his wife was a student like himself, and that he intended to live abroad and work. Some four years later, the *Times* contained the bare news, in the obituary column, of his wife's death, and about a year afterwards he returned to England, an enormously

changed man, with that slight lameness, which seemed somehow to draw a sharp, dividing line between the splendid, impulsive youth who had gone abroad, and the reserved, and self-contained man of thirty-two—pessimist and dilettante—who had returned. His lameness he ascribed to an accident in the Alps, but would never say anything more about it; and his friends presently learned to avoid the subject, and to forget the slight signs of something unexplained which had made them curious at first.

In the intervening years before the war, Cynthia felt tolerably sure that she had been his only intimate woman friend. His former susceptibility seemed to have vanished. On the whole he avoided women's society. Some years after his return he had inherited the title and the estates, and might have been one of the most invited men in London had he wished to be; while Cynthia could remember at least three women, all desirable, who would have liked to marry him. The war had swept him more decidedly than ever out of the ordinary current of society. He had made it both an excuse and a shield. His work was paramount; and even his old friends had lost sight of him. He lived and breathed for an important Committee of the Admiralty, on which as time went on he took a more and more important place. In the four years Cynthia had scarcely seen him more than half a dozen times.

And now the war was over. It was May again, and glorious May with the world all colour and song, the garden a wealth of blossom, and the nights clear and fragrant under moon or stars. And here was Philip again—much more like the old Philip than he had been for years—looking at her with those enchanting blue eyes of his, and asking her to do something for him. No wonder Cynthia's pulses were stirred. The night before, she had come home depressed—very conscious that she had had no particular success with him at dinner, or afterwards. This unexpected *tête-à-tête*, with its sudden touch of intimacy, made up for it all.

What could she do but assure him—trying hard not to be too forthcoming—that she would be delighted to help him, if she could? What was wrong?

"Nothing but my own idiocy," he said, smiling. "I find myself guardian to an extremely headstrong young woman, and I don't know how to manage her. I want your advice."

Cynthia lay back in her chair, and prepared to give him all her mind. But her eyes showed a certain mockery.

"I wonder why you undertook it!"

"So do I. But—well, I couldn't help it. We won't discuss that. But what I had very little idea of—was the modern girl!" Cynthia laughed out.

"And now you have discovered her—in one day?" He laughed too, but rather dismally.

"Oh, I am only on the first step. What I shall come to presently, I don't know. But the immediate problem is that Helena bombed me last night by the unexpected announcement that she had asked Donald—Lord Donald—for the week-end. Do you know him?" Cynthia's eyebrows had gone up.

"Very slightly."

"You know his reputation?"

"I begin to remember a good deal about him. Go on."

"Well, Helena had asked that man, without consulting me, to stay at my house, and she sprang the announcement on me, on Thursday, the invitation being for Saturday. I had to tell her then and there—that he couldn't come."

"Naturally. How did she take it?"

"Very ill. You see, in a rash moment, I had told her to invite her friends for week-ends as she pleased. So she holds that I have broken faith, and this morning she told me she had arranged to go up and lunch with Donald at the Ritz next week—alone! So again I had to stop it. But I don't play the jailer even decently. I feel the greatest fool in creation." Cynthia smiled.

"I quite believe you! And this all happened in the first twenty-four hours? Poor Philip!"

"And I have also been informed that Helena's 'views' will not allow her—in the future—to take my advice on any such questions—that she prefers her liberty to her reputation—and 'wants to understand a bad man.' She said so. It's all very well to laugh, Cynthia! But what am I to do?"

Cynthia, however, continued to laugh unrestrainedly. And he joined in.

"And now you want advice?" she said at last, checking her mirth. "I'm awfully sorry for you, Philip. What about the little chaperon?"

"As nice a woman as ever was—but I don't see her preventing Helena from doing anything she wants to do. Helena will jolly well take care of that. Besides she is too new to the job."

"She may get on better with Helena, perhaps, than a stronger woman," mused Cynthia. "But I am afraid you have got your work cut out. Wasn't it very rash of you?"

"I couldn't help it," he repeated briefly. "And I must just do my best. But I'd be awfully grateful if you'd take a hand, Cynthia. Won't you come up and really make friends with her? She might take things from you that she wouldn't from me."

Cynthia looked extremely doubtful.

"I am sure last night she detested me."

"How could you tell? And why should she?"

"I'm twenty years older. That's quite enough."

"You scarcely look a day older, Cynthia."

She sighed, and lightly touched his hand, with a caressing gesture he remembered of old.

"Very nice of you to say it—but of course it isn't true. Well, Philip, I'll do what I can. I'll wander up some time—on Sunday perhaps. With your coaching, I could at least give her a biography of Jim Donald. One needn't be afraid of shocking her?"

His eyebrows lifted.

"Who's shocked at anything nowadays? Look at the things girls read and discuss! I'm old-fashioned, I suppose. But I really couldn't talk about Donald to her this morning. The fellow is such a worm! It would come better from you."

"Tell me a few more facts, then, about him, than I know at present."

He gave her rapidly a sketch of the life and antecedents of Lord Donald of Dunoon—gambler, wastrel, *divorcé*, et cetera, speaking quite frankly, almost as he would have spoken to a man. For there was nothing at all distasteful to him in Cynthia's knowledge of life. In a woman of forty it was natural and even attractive. The notion of a discussion of Donald's love-affairs with Helena had revolted him. It was on the contrary something of a relief—especially with a practical object in view—to discuss them with Cynthia.

They sat chatting till the shadows lengthened, then wandered into the garden, still talking. Lady Georgina, watching from her window upstairs, had to admit that Buntingford seemed to like her sister's society. But if she had been within earshot at the last five minutes of their conversation, she would perhaps have seen no reason, finally, to change her opinion. Very agreeable that discursive talk had been to both participants. Buntingford had talked with great frankness of his own plans. In three months or so, his Admiralty work would be over. He thought very likely that the Government would then give him a modest place in the Administration. He might begin by representing the Admiralty in the Lords, and as soon as he got a foot on the political ladder prospects would open. On the whole, he thought, politics would be his line. He had no personal axes to grind; was afraid of nothing; wouldn't care if the Lords were done away with to-morrow, and could live on a fraction of his income if the Socialists insisted on grabbing the rest. But the new world which the war had opened was a desperately interesting one. He hadn't enough at stake in it to spoil his nerve. Whatever happened, he implied, he was steeled—politically and intellectually. Nothing could deprive him either of the joy of the fight, or the amusement of the spectacle.

And Cynthia, her honey-gold hair blown back from her white temples by the summer wind, her blue parasol throwing a summer shade about her, showed herself, as they strolled backwards and forwards over the shady lawn of the cottage, a mistress of the listening art; and there is no art more winning, either to men or women.

Then, in a moment, what broke the spell? Some hint or question from her, of a more intimate kind?—something that touched a secret place, wholly unsuspected by her? She racked her brains afterwards to think what it could have been; but in vain. All she knew was that the man beside her had suddenly stiffened. His easy

talk had ceased to flow; while still walking beside her, he seemed to be miles away. So that by a quick common impulse both stood still.

"I must go back to the village," said Cynthia. She smiled, but her face had grown a little tired and faded.

He looked at his watch.

"And I told the car to fetch me half an hour ago. You'll be up some time perhaps—luncheon to-morrow?—or Sunday?"

"If I can. I'll do my best."

"Kind Cynthia!" But his tone was perfunctory, and his eyes avoided her. When he had gone, she could only wonder what she had done to offend him; and a certain dreariness crept into the evening light. She was not the least in love with Philip—that she assured herself. But his sudden changes of mood were very trying to one who would like to be his friend.

Buntingford walked rapidly home. His way lay through an oak wood, that was now a revel of spring; overhead, a shimmering roof of golden leaf and wild cherry-blossom, and underfoot a sea of blue-bells. A winding path led through it, and through the lovely open and grassy spaces which from time to time broke up the density of the wood—like so many green floors cleared for the wood nymphs' dancing. From the west a level sun struck through the trees, breaking through storm-clouds which had been rapidly filling the horizon, and kindling the tall trees, with their ribbed grey bark, till they shone for a brief moment like the polished pillars in the house of Odysseus. Then a nightingale sang. Nightingales were rare at Beechmark; and Buntingford would normally have hailed the enchanted flute-notes with a boyish delight. But this evening they fell on deaf ears, and when the garish sunlight gave place to gloom, and drops of rain began to patter on the new leaf, the gathering storm, and the dark silence of the wood, after the nightingale had given her last trill, were welcome to a man struggling with a recurrent and desperate oppression.

Must he always tamely submit to the fetters which bound him? Could he do nothing to free himself? Could the law do nothing? Enquiry—violent action of some sort—rebellion against the conditions which had grown so rigid about him:—for the hundredth time, he canvassed all ways of escape, and for the hundredth time, found none.

He knew very well what was wrong with him. It was simply the imperious need for a woman's companionship in his life—for *love*. Physically and morally, the longing which had lately taken possession of him, was becoming a gnawing and perpetual distress. There was the plain fact. This hour with Cynthia Welwyn had stirred in him the depths of old pain. But he was not really in love with Cynthia. During the war, amid the absorption of his work, and the fierce pressure of the national need, he had been quite content to forget her. His work—and England's strait—had filled his mind and his time. Except for certain dull resentments and regrets, present at all times in the background of consciousness, the four years of the war had been to him a period of relief, almost of deliverance. He had been able to lose himself; and in that inner history of the soul which is the real history of each one of us, that had been for long years impossible.

But now all that protection and help was gone; the floodgates were loosened again. His work still went on; but it was no longer absorbing; it no longer mattered enough to hold in check the vague impulses and passions that were beating against his will.

And meanwhile the years were running on. He was forty-four, Helena Pitstone's guardian, and clearly relegated already by that unmanageable child to the ranks of the middle-aged. He had read her thought in her great scornful eyes. "What has your generation to do with mine? Your day is over!"

And all the while the ugly truth was that he had never had his "day"—and was likely now to miss it for good. Or at least such "day" as had shone upon him had been so short, so chequered, so tragically wiped out, it might as well never have dawned. Yet the one dear woman friend to whom in these latter years he had spoken freely, who knew him through and through—Helena Pitstone's mother—had taken for granted, in her quiet ascetic way, that he had indeed had his chance, and must accept for good and all what had come of it. It was because she thought of him as set apart, as debarred by what had happened to him, from honest love-making, and protected by his own nature from anything less, that she had asked him to take charge of Helena. He realized it now. It had been the notion of a fanciful idealist, springing from certain sickroom ideas of sacrifice—renunciation—submission to the will of God—and so forth.

It was *not* the will of God!—that he should live forsaken and die forlorn! He hurled defiance, even at Rachel, his dear dead friend, who had been so full of pity for him, and for whom he had felt the purest and most unselfish affection he

had ever known—since his mother's death.

And now the presence of her child in his house seemed to represent a verdict, a sentence—of hers upon him, which he simply refused to accept as just or final. If Rachel had only lived a little longer he would have had it out with her. But in those last terrible days, how could he either argue—or refuse?

All the same, he would utterly do his duty by Helena. If she chose to regard him as an old fogy, well and good—it was perhaps better so. Not that—if circumstances had been other than they were—-he would have been the least inclined to make love to her. Her beauty was astonishing. But the wonderful energy and vitality of her crude youth rather repelled than attracted him.

The thought of the wrestles ahead of him was a weariness to an already tired man. Debate with her, on all the huge insoluble questions she seemed to be determined to raise, was of all things in the world most distasteful to him. He would certainly cut a sorry figure in it; nothing was more probable.

The rain began to plash down upon his face and bared head, cooling an inner fever. The damp wood, the soft continuous dripping of the cherry-blossoms, the scent of the blue-bells,—there was in them a certain shelter and healing. He would have liked to linger there. But already, at Beechmark, guests must have arrived; he was being missed.

The trees thinned, and the broad lawns of Beechmark came in sight. Ah!—there was Geoffrey, walking up and down with Helena. *Suppose* that really came off? What a comfortable way out! He and Cynthia must back it all they could.

CHAPTER VI

"Buntingford looks twice as old as he need!" said Geoffrey French, lighting a cigarette as he and Helena stepped out of the drawing-room window after dinner into the May world outside—a world which lay steeped in an after-glow of magical beauty. "What's wrong, I wonder! Have you been plaguing him, Helena?" The laughing shot was fired purely at random. But the slight start and flush it produced in Helena struck him.

"I see nothing wrong with him," said Helena, a touch of defiance in her voice. "But of course it's extraordinarily difficult to get on with him."

"With Philip!—the jolliest, kindest chap going! What do you mean?"

"All right. It's no good talking to anybody with a *parti pris*!"

"No—but seriously, Helena—what's the matter? Why, you told me you only began the new arrangement two days ago."

"Exactly. And there's been time already for a first-class quarrel. Time also for me to see that I shall never, never get on with him. I don't know how we are to get through the two years!"

"*Well*!" ejaculated her companion. "In Heaven's name, what has he been doing?"

Helena shrugged her shoulders. She was striding beside him like a young Artemis—in white, with a silver star in her hair, and her short skirts beaten back from her slender legs and feet by the evening wind. Geoffrey French, who had had a classical education, almost looked for the quiver and the bow. He was dazzled at once, and provoked. A magnificent creature, certainly—"very mad and very handsome!"—he recalled Buntingford's letter.

"Do tell me, Helena!" he urged.

"What's the good? You'll only side with him—and *preach*. You've done that several times already."

The young man frowned a little.

"I don't preach!" he said shortly. "I say what I think—*when* you ask me. Twice, if I remember right, you told me of some proceeding of yours, and asked me for my opinion. Well, I gave it, and it didn't happen to be yours. But that isn't preaching."

"You gave so many reasons—it *was* preaching."

"Great Scott!—wasn't it more polite to give one's reasons?"

"Perhaps. But one shouldn't *burst* with them. One should be sorry to disagree."

"Hm. Well—now kindly lay down for me, how I am to disagree with you about Philip. For I do disagree with you, profoundly."

"There it is. Profoundly—that shows how you enjoy disagreeing. Why can't you put yourself at my point of view?"

"Well, I'll try. But at least—explain it to me."

Helena threw herself into a garden chair, under a wild cherry which rose a pyramid of silver against an orange sky. Other figures were scattered about the lawns, three or four young men, and three or four girls in light dresses. The air seemed to be full of laughter and young voices. Only Mrs. Friend sat shyly by herself just within the drawing-room window, a book on her knee. A lamp behind her brought out the lines of her bent head and slight figure.

"I wonder if I like you well enough," said Helena coolly, biting at a stalk of grass—"well enough, I mean, to explain things. I haven't made you my father confessor yet, Geoffrey."

"Suppose you begin—and see how it answers," said French lazily, rolling over on the grass in front of her, his chin in his hands.

"Well, I don't mind—for fun. Only if you preach I shall stop. But, first of all, let's get some common ground. You admit, I suppose, that the war has changed the whole position of women?"

"Yes—with reservations."

"Don't state them!" said Helena hastily. "That would be preaching.
Yes, or No?"

"Yes, then,—you tyrant!"

"And that means—doesn't it—at the very least—that girls of my own age have done with all the old stupid chaperonage business—at least nearly all—that we are to choose our own friends, and make our own arrangements?—doesn't it?" she repeated peremptorily.

"I don't know. My information is—that the mothers are stiffening."

A laughing face looked up at her from the grass.

"Stiffening!" The tone was contemptuous. "Well, that may be so—for babes of seventeen—like that one—" her gesture indicated a slight figure in white at the edge of the lawn—"who have never been out of the school-room—but—"

"You think nineteen makes all the difference? I doubt," said Geoffrey French coolly, as he sat up tailor-fashion, and surveyed her. "Well, my view is that for the babes, as you call them, chaperonage is certainly reviving. I have just been sitting next Lady Maud, this babe's mother, and she told me an invitation came for the babe from some great house last week, addressed to 'Miss Luton and partner'—whereon Lady Maud wrote back—'My daughter has no partner and I shall be very happy to bring her.' Rather a poke in the eye! Then there are the women of five or six and twenty who have been through the war, and are not likely to give up the freedom of it—ever again. That's all right. They'll take their own risks. Many of them will prefer not to live at home again. They'll live with a friend—and visit their people perhaps every day! But, then there's *you*, Helena—the betwixt and between!—"

"Well—what about me?"

"You're neither a babe—nor a veteran."

"I'm nineteen and a half—and I've done a year and a half of war work—"

"Canteen—and driving? All right. Am I to give an opinion?"

"You will give it, whatever I say. And it's you all over—to give it, before you've allowed me to explain anything."

"Oh, I know your point of view—" said Geoffrey, unperturbed—"know it by heart. Haven't you dinned it into me at half a dozen dances lately? No!—I'm entitled to my say—and here it is. Claim all the freedom you like—but as you're *not* twenty-five, but nineteen—let a good fellow like Buntingford give you advice—and be thankful!"

"Prig!" said Helena, pelting him with a spray of wild cherry, which he caught and put in his button-hole. "If that isn't preaching, I should like to know what is!"

"Not at all. Unbiased opinion—civilly expressed. If you really were an emancipated young woman, Helena, you'd take it so! But now—" his tone changed—"let's come to business. What have you and Philip been quarrelling about?"

Helena straightened her shoulders, as though to meet certain disapproval.

"Because—I asked Lord Donald to spend the week-end here—"

"You didn't!"

"I did; and Cousin Philip wired to him and forbade him the house. Offence No. 1. Then as I intended all the same to see Jim, I told him I would go up and lunch with him at the Ritz. Cousin Philip vows I shan't, and he seems to have some underhand means of stopping it—I—I don't know what—"

"Underhand! Philip! I say, Helena, I wonder whether you have any idea how people who really know him think about Buntingford!"

"Oh, of course men back up men!"

"Stuff! It's really silly—abominable too—the way you talk of him—I can't help saying it."

And this time it was Geoffrey's turn to look indignant. His long face with its deeply set grey eyes, a rather large nose, and a fine brow under curly hair, had flushed suddenly.

"If you can't help it, I suppose you must say it. But I don't know why I should stay and listen," said Helena provokingly, making a movement as though to rise. But he laid a hand on her dress:

"No, no, Helena, don't go—look here—do you ever happen to notice Buntingford—when he's sitting quiet—and other people are talking round him?"

"Not particularly." The tone was cold, but she no longer threatened departure.

"Well, I just ask you—some time—to *watch*. An old friend of his said to me the other day—'I often feel that Buntingford is the saddest man I know.'"

"Why should he be?" asked Helena imperiously.

"I can't tell you. No one can. It's just what those people think who know him best. Well, that's one fact about him—that his *men* friends feel they could no more torment a wounded soldier, than worry Buntingford—if they could help it. Then there are other facts that no one knows unless they've worked in Philip's office, where all the men clerks and all the women typists just adore him! I happen to know a good deal about it. I could tell you things—"

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" cried Helena impatiently. "What does it matter? He may be a saint—with seven haloes—for those that don't cross him. But *I* want my freedom!"—a white foot beat the ground impatiently—"and he stands in the way."

"Freedom to compromise yourself with a scoundrel like Donald! What *can* you know about such a man—compared with what Philip knows?"

"That's just it—I *want* to know—" said Helena in her most stubborn voice. "This is a world, now, in which we've all got to know,—both the bad and the good of it. No more taking it on trust from other people! Let us learn it for ourselves."

"Helena!—you're quite mad!" said the young man, exasperated.

"Perhaps I am. But it's a madness you can't cure." And springing to her feet, she

sent a call across the lawn—"Peter!" A slim boy who was walking beside the "babe" of seventeen, some distance away, turned sharply at the sound, and running across the grass pulled up in front of Helena.

"Well?—here I am."

"Shall we go and look at the lake? You might pull me about a little."

"Ripping!" said the youth joyously. "Won't you want a cloak?"

"No—it's so hot. Shall we ask Miss Luton?"

Peter made a face.

"Why should we?"

Helena laughed, and they went off together in the direction of a strip of silver under distant trees on which the moon was shining.

French walked away towards the girlish figure now deserted.

Helena watched him out of the corner of her eyes, saw the girl's eager greeting, and the disappearance of the two in the woody walk that bordered the lawn. Then she noticed a man sitting by himself not far away, with a newspaper on his knee.

"Suppose we take Mr. Horne, Peter?"

"Don't let's take anybody!" said the boy. "And anyway Horne's a nuisance just now. He talks you dead with strikes—and nationalization—and labour men—and all that rot. Can't we ever let it alone? I want to talk to *you*, Helena. I say, you are ripping in that dress! You're just *divine*, Helena!" The girl laughed, her sweetest, most rippling laugh.

"Go on like that, Peter. You can't think how nice it sounds—especially after Geoffrey's been lecturing for all he's worth."

"Lecturing? Oh well, if it comes to that, I've got my grievance too, Helena. We'll have it out, when I've found the boat."

"Forewarned!" said Helena, still laughing. "Perhaps I won't come."

"Oh, yes, you will," said the boy confidently. "I believe you know perfectly well what it's about. You've got a guilty conscience, Miss Helena!"

Helena said nothing, till they had pushed the boat out from the reeds and the water-lilies, and she was sitting with the steering ropes in her hands opposite a boy in his shirt sleeves, with the head and face of a cherub, and the spare frame of an athlete, who was devouring her with his eyes.

"Are you quite done with the Army, Peter?"

"Quite. Got out a month ago. You come to me, Helena, if you want any advice about foreign loans—eh? I can tell you a thing or two."

"Are you going to be very rich?"

"Well, I'm pretty rich already," said the boy candidly. "It seems beastly to be wanting more. But my uncles would shove me into the Bank. I couldn't help it."

"You'll never look so nice as you did in your khaki, Peter. What have you done with all your ribbons?"

"What, the decorations? Oh, they're kicking about somewhere."

"You're not to let your Victoria Cross kick about, as you call it," said Helena severely. "By the way, Peter, you've never told me yet—Oh, I saw the bit in the *Times*. But I want *you* to tell me about it. Won't you?"

She bent forward, all softness, her beautiful eyes on her companion.

"No!" said Peter with energy—"*never*!"

She considered him.

"Was it so awful?" she asked under her breath.

"For God's sake, don't ask questions!" said the boy angrily. "You know I want to forget it. I shall never be quite right till I do forget it."

She was silent. It was his twin brother he had tried to save—staggering back

through a British barrage with the wounded man on his shoulders—only to find, as he stumbled into the trench, that he had been carrying the dead. He himself had spent six months in hospital from the effects of wounds and shock. He had emerged to find himself a V. V. and A. D. C. to his Army Commander; and apparently as gay and full of fun as before. But his adoring mother and sisters knew very well that there were sore spots in Peter.

Helena realized that she had touched one. She bent forward presently, and laid her own hand on one of the hands that were handling the sculls.

"Dear Peter!"

He bent impetuously, and kissed the hand before she could withdraw it.

"Don't you play with me, Helena," he said passionately. "I'm not a child, though I look it … Now, then, let's have it out."

They had reached the middle of the pond, and were drifting across a moonlit pathway, on either side of which lay the shadow of deep woods, now impenetrably dark. The star in Helena's hair glittered in the light, and the face beneath it, robbed of its daylight colour, had become a study in black and white, subtler and more lovely than the real Helena.

"Why did you do it, Helena?" said Peter suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Why did you behave to me as you did, at the Arts Ball? Why did you cut me, not once—but twice—three times—for that *beast* Donald?"

Helena laughed.

"Now *you're* beginning!" she said, as she lazily trailed her hand in the water. "It's really comic!"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I've already quarrelled with Cousin Philip—and Geoffrey—about Lord Donald—so if you insist on quarrelling too, I shall have no friends left."

"Damn Donald! It's like his impudence to ask you to dance at all. It made me sick to see you with him. He's the limit. Well, but—I'm not going to quarrel about Donald, Helena—I'm not going to quarrel about anything. I'm going to have my own say—and you can't escape this time—you witch!"

Helena looked round the pond.

"I can swim," she said tranquilly.

"I should jump in after you—and we'd both go down together. No, but—listen to me, dear Helena! Why won't you marry me? You say sometimes—that you care for me a little."

The boy's tone faltered.

"Why won't I marry you? Perhaps because you ask me so often," said Helena, laughing. "Neglect me—be rude to me—cut me at a dance, and then see."

"I couldn't—it matters too much."

"Dear Peter! But can't you understand that I don't want to commit myself just yet? I want to have my life to myself a bit. I'm like the miners and the railway men. I'm full of unrest! I can't and won't settle down just yet. I want to look at things—the world's like a great cinema show just now—everything passing so quick you can hardly take breath. I want to sample it where I please. I want to dance—and talk—and make experiments."

"Well—marrying me would be an experiment," said Peter stoutly. "I vow you'd never regret it, Helena!"

"But I can't vow that you wouldn't! Let me alone, Peter. I suppose some time I shall quiet down. It doesn't matter if I break my own heart. But I won't take the responsibility of anybody else's heart just yet."

"Well, of course, that means you're not in love with anybody. You'd soon chuck all that nonsense if you were."

The young, despairing voice thrilled her. It was all experience—life—drama—this floating over summer water—with a beautiful youth, whose heart seemed to be fluttering in her very hands. But she was only thrilled intellectually—as a

spectator. Peter would soon get over it. She would be very kind to him, and let him down easily. They drifted silently a little. Then Peter said abruptly:

"Well, at least, Helena, you might promise me not to dance with Jim Donald again!"

"Peter—my promises of that kind—are worth nothing! … I think it's getting late—we ought to be going home!" And she gave the rudder a turn for the shore.

He unwillingly complied, and after rowing through the shadow of the woods, they emerged on a moonlit slope of lawn, where was the usual landing-place. Two persons who had been strolling along the edge of the water approached them.

"Who is that with Buntingford?" asked Dale.

"My new chaperon. Aren't you sorry for her?"

"I jolly well am!" cried Peter. "She'll have a dog's life!"

"That's very rude of you, Peter. You may perhaps be surprised to hear that I like her very much. She's a little dear—and I'm going to be awfully good to her."

"Which means, of course, that she'll never dare to cross you!"

"Peter, don't be unkind! Dear Peter—make it up! I do want to be friends. There's just time for you to say something nice!"

For his vigorous strokes were bringing them rapidly to the bank.

"Oh, what's the good of talking!" said the boy impatiently. "I shall be friends, of course—take what you fling me. I can't do anything else."

Helena blew him a kiss, to which he made no response.

"All right!—I'll bring you in!" said Lord Buntingford from the shore.

He dragged the boat up on the sandy edge, and offered a hand to Helena. She stumbled out, and would have fallen into the shallow water but for his sudden grip upon her.

"That was stupid of me!" she said, vexed with herself.

He made no reply. It was left to Mrs. Friend to express a hope that she had not sprained her foot.

"Oh, dear no," said Helena. "But I'm cold. Peter, will you race me to the house? Give me a fair start!"

Peter eagerly placed her, and then—a maiden flying and a young god pursuing—they had soon drawn the eyes and laughter of all the other guests, who cheered as the panting Helena, winner by a foot, dashed through the drawing-room window into the house.

Helena and Mrs. Friend had been discussing the evening,—Helena on the floor, in a white dressing-gown, with her hair down her back. She had amused herself with a very shrewd analysis—not too favourable—of Geoffrey French's character and prospects, and had rushed through an eloquent account of Peter's performances in the war; she had mocked at Lady Maud's conventionalities, and mimicked the "babe's" simpering manner with young men; she had enquired pityingly how Mrs. Friend had got on with the old Canon who had taken her in to dinner, and had launched into rather caustic and, to Mrs. Friend's ear, astonishing criticisms of "Cousin Philip's wine"—which Mrs. Friend had never even dreamt of tasting. But of Cousin Philip himself there was not a word. Mrs. Friend knew there had been an interview between them; but she dared not ask questions. How to steer her way in the moral hurricane she foresaw, was what preoccupied her; so as both to do her duty to Lord B. and yet keep a hold on this strange being in whose good graces she still found herself—much to her astonishment.

Then with midnight Helena departed. But long after she was herself in bed, Mrs. Friend heard movements in the adjoining room, and was aware of a scent of tobacco stealing in through her own open window.

Helena, indeed, when she found herself alone was, for a time, too excited to sleep, and cigarettes were her only resource. She was conscious of an exaltation of will, a passionate self-assertion, beating through all her veins, which made sleep impossible. Cousin Philip had scarcely addressed a word to her during the evening, and had bade her a chilly good-night. Of course, if that was to be his attitude it was impossible she could go on living under his roof. Her mother

could not for a moment have expected her to keep her word, under such conditions … And yet—why retreat? Why not fight it out, temperately, but resolutely? "I lost my temper again like an idiot, this morning—I mustn't—mustn't—lose it. He had jolly well the best of it."

"Self-determination"—that was what she was bent on. If it was good for nations, it was good also for individuals. Liberty to make one's own mistakes, to face one's own risks—that was the minimum. And for one adult human being to accept the dictation of another human being was the only sin worth talking about. The test might come on some trivial thing, like this matter of Lord Donald. Well,—she must be content to "find quarrel in a straw, where honour is at stake." Yet, of course, her guardian was bound to resist. The fight between her will and his was natural and necessary. It was the clash of two generations, two views of life. She was not merely the wilful and insubordinate girl she would have been before the war; she saw herself, at any rate, as something much more interesting. All over the world there was the same breaking of bonds; and the same instinct towards *violence*. "The violent taketh by force." Was it the instinct that war leaves, and must leave, behind it—its most sinister, or its most pregnant, legacy? She was passionately conscious of it, and of a strange thirst to carry it into reckless action. The unrest in her was the same unrest that was driving men everywhere—and women, too—into industrial disturbance and moral revolt. The old is done with; and the Tree of Life needs to be well shaken before the new fruit will drop.

Wild thoughts like these ran through her mind. Then she scoffed at herself for such large notions, about so small a thing. And suddenly something checked her—the physical recollection, as it were, left tingling in her hand, of the grasp by which Buntingford had upheld her, as she was leaving the boat. With it went a vision of his face, his dark, furrowed face, in the moonlight.

"The saddest man I know." Why and wherefore? Long after she was in bed, she lay awake, absorbed in a dreamy yet intense gathering together of all that she could recollect of Cousin Philip, from her childhood up, through her school years, and down to her mother's death. Till now he had been part of the more or less pleasant furniture of life. She seemed to be on the way to realize him as a man—perhaps a force. It was unsuspected—and rather interesting.

CHAPTER VII

The drought continued; and under the hot sun the lilacs were already pyramids of purple, the oaks were nearly in full leaf, and the hawthorns in the park and along the hedges would soon replace with another white splendour the fading blossom of the wild cherries.

It was Sunday morning, and none of the Beechmark party except Mrs. Friend, Lady Luton and her seventeen-year-old daughter had shown any inclination to go to church. Geoffrey French and Helena had escorted the churchgoers the short way across the park, taking a laughing leave of them at the last stile, whence the old church was but a stone's throw. There was a circle of chairs on the lawn intermittently filled by talkers. Lord Buntingford was indoors and was reported to have had some ugly news that morning of a discharged soldiers' riot in a neighbouring town where he owned a good deal of property. The disturbance had been for the time being suppressed, but its renewal was expected, and Buntingford, according to Julian Horne, who had been in close consultation with him, was ready to go over at any moment, on a telephone call from the town authorities, and take what other "specials" he could gather with him.

"It's not at all a nice business," said Horne, looking up from his long chair, as Geoffrey French and Helena reappeared. "And if Philip is rung up, he'll sweep us all in. So don't be out of the way, Geoffrey."

"What's the matter? Somebody has been bungling as usual, I suppose," said Helena in her most confident and peremptory tone.

"The discharged men say that nobody pays any attention to them—and they mean to burn down something."

"On the principle of the Chinaman, and 'roast pig,'" said French, stretching himself at full length on the grass, where Helena was already sitting. "What an

extraordinary state of mind we're all in! We all want to burn something. I want to burn the doctors, because some of the medical boards have been beasts to some of my friends; the soldiers over at Dansworth want to burn the town, because they haven't been made enough of; the Triple Alliance want to burn up the country to cook their roast pig—and as for you, Helena—"

He turned a laughing face upon her—but before she could reply, a telephone was heard ringing, through the open windows of the house.

"For me, I expect," exclaimed Helena, springing up. She disappeared within the drawing-room, returning presently, with flushed cheeks, and a bearing of which Geoffrey French at once guessed the meaning.

"Donald has thrown her over?" he said to himself. "Of course Philip had the trump card!"

Helena, however, said nothing. She took up a book she had left on the grass, and withdrew with it to the solitary shelter of a cedar some yards away. Quiet descended on the lawns. The men smoked or buried themselves in a sleepy study of the Sunday papers. The old house lay steeped in sunshine. Occasional bursts of talk arose and died away; a loud cuckoo in a neighbouring plantation seemed determined to silence all its bird rivals; while once or twice the hum of an aeroplane overhead awoke even in the drowsiest listener dim memories of the war.

Helena was only pretending to read. The telephone message which had reached her had been from Lord Donald's butler—not even from Lord Donald himself!—and had been to the effect that "his lordship" asked him to say that he had been obliged to go to Scotland for a fortnight, and was very sorry he had not been able to answer Miss Pitstone's telegram before starting. Helena's cheeks were positively smarting under the humiliation of it. Donald *daring* to send her a message through a servant, when she had telegraphed to him! For of course it was all a lie as to his having left town—one could tell that from the butler's voice. He had been somehow frightened by Cousin Philip, and was revenging himself by rudeness to *her*. She seemed to hear "Jim" and his intimates discussing the situation. Of course it would only amuse them!—everything amused them!—that Buntingford should have put his foot down. How she had boasted, both to Jim and to some of his friends, of the attitude she meant to take up with her guardian during her "imprisonment on parole." And this was the end

of the first bout. Cousin Philip had been easily master, and instead of making common cause with her against a ridiculous piece of tyranny, Lord Donald had backed out. He might at least have been sympathetic and polite—might have come himself to speak to her at the telephone, instead—

Her blood boiled. How was she going to put up with this life? The irony of the whole position was insufferable. Geoffrey's ejaculation for instance when she had invited him to her sitting-room after breakfast that he might look for a book he had lent her—"My word, Helena, what a jolly place!—Why, this was the old school-room—I remember it perfectly—the piggiest, shabbiest old den. And Philip has had it all done up for you? Didn't know he had so much taste!" And then, Geoffrey's roguish look at her, expressing the "chaff" he restrained for fear of offending her. Lucy Friend, too, Captain Lodge, Peter—everybody—no one had any sympathy with her. And lastly, Donald himself—coward!—had refused to play up. Not that she cared one straw about him personally. She knew very well that he was a poor creature. It was the *principle* involved:—that a girl of nineteen is to be treated as a free and responsible being, and not as though she were still a child in the nursery. "Cousin Philip may have had the right to say he wouldn't have Jim Donald in his house, if he felt that way—but he had no right whatever to prevent my meeting him in town, if I chose to meet him—that's *my* affair!—that's the point! All these men here are in league. It's *not* Jim's character that's in question—I throw Jim's character to the wolves—it's the freedom of women!"

So the tumult in her surged to and fro, mingled all through with a certain unwilling preoccupation. That semi-circular bow-window on the south side of the house, which she commanded from her seat under the cedar, was one of the windows of the library. Hidden from her by the old bureau at which he was writing, sat Buntingford at work. She could see his feet under the bureau, and sometimes the top of his head. Oh, of course, he had a way with him—a certain magnetism—for the people who liked him, and whom he liked. Lady Maud, for instance—how well they had got on at breakfast? Naturally, she thought him adorable. And Lady Maud's girl. To see Buntingford showing her the butterfly collections in the library—devoting himself to her—and the little thing blushing and smiling—it was simply idyllic! And then to contrast the scene with that other scene, in the same room, the day before!

"Well, now, what am I going to do here—or in town?" she asked herself in exasperation. "If Cousin Philip and I liked each other it would be pleasant

enough to ride together, to talk and read and argue—his brain's all right!—with Lucy Friend to fall back upon between whiles—for just these few weeks, at any rate, before we go to town—and with the week-ends to help one out. But if we are to be at daggers-drawn—he determined to boss me—and I equally determined not to be bossed—why, the thing will be *intolerable*! Hullo!—is that Cynthia Welwyn? She seems to be making for me."

It was Lady Cynthia, very fresh and brilliant in airy black and white, with a purple sunshade. She came straight over the grass to Helena's shady corner.

"You look so cool! May I share?"

Helena rather ungraciously pushed forward a chair as they shook hands.

"The rest of your party seem to be asleep," said Cynthia, glancing at various prostrate forms belonging to the male sex that were visible on a distant slope of the lawn. "But you've heard of the Dansworth disturbances?—and that everybody here may have to go?"

"Yes. It's probably exaggerated—isn't it?"

"I don't know. Everybody coming out of church was talking of it. There was bad rioting last night—and a factory burnt down. They say it's begun again. Buntingford will probably have to go. Where is he?"

Helena pointed to the library and to the feet under the bureau.

"He's waiting indoors, no doubt, in case there's a summons."

"No doubt," said Helena.

Cynthia found her task difficult. She had come determined to make friends with this thorny young woman, and to smooth Philip's path for him if she could. But now face to face with Helena she was conscious that neither was Philip's ward at all in a forthcoming mood, nor was her own effort spontaneous or congenial. They were both Buntingford's kinswomen, Helena on his father's side, Cynthia on his mother's, and had been more or less acquainted with each other since Helena left the nursery. But there was nearly twenty years between them, and a critical spirit on both sides.

Conversation very soon languished. An instinctive antagonism that neither could have explained intelligibly would have been evident to any shrewd listener. Helena was not long in suspecting that Lady Cynthia was in some way Buntingford's envoy, and had been sent to make friends, with an ulterior object; while Cynthia was repelled by the girl's ungracious manner, and by the gulf which it implied between the outlook of forty, and that of nineteen. "She means to make me feel that I might have been her mother—and that we have nothing in common!"

The result was that Cynthia was driven into an intimate and possessive tone with regard to Buntingford, which was more than the facts warranted, and soon reduced Helena to monosyllables, and a sarcastic lip.

"You can't think," said Cynthia effusively—"how good he is to us two. It is so like him. He never forgets us. But indeed he never forgets anybody."

Helena raised her eyebrows, as though the news astonished her, but she was too polite to contradict.

"He sends you flowers, doesn't he?" she said carelessly.

"He sends us all kinds of things. But that's not what makes him so charming. He's always so considerate for everybody! The day you were coming, for instance, he thought of nothing but how to get your room finished and your books in order. I hope you liked it?"

"Very much." The tone was noncommittal.

"I don't suppose he told you how he worked," said Cynthia, smiling. "Oh, he's a great dear, Philip! Only he takes a good deal of knowing."

"Did you ever see his wife?" said Helena abruptly.

Cynthia's movement showed her unpleasantly startled. She looked instinctively towards the library window, where Buntingford was now standing with his back to them. No, he couldn't have heard.

"No, never," she said hurriedly, in a low voice. "Nobody ever speaks to him about her. She was of course not his equal socially."

"Is that the reason why nobody speaks of her?"

Cynthia flushed indignantly.

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"I thought you put the two things together," said Helena in her most detached tone. "And she was an artist?"

"A very good one, I believe. A man who had seen her in Paris before her marriage told me long ago—oh, years ago—that she was extraordinarily clever, and very ambitious."

"And beautiful?" said Helena eagerly.

"I don't know. I never saw a picture of her."

"I'll bet anything she was beautiful!"

"Most likely. Philip's very fastidious."

Helena meditated.

"I wonder if she had a good time?" she said at last.

"If she didn't, it couldn't have been Philip's fault!" said Cynthia, with some vigour.

"No, really?"

The girl's note of interrogation was curiously provoking, and Cynthia could have shaken her.

Suddenly through the open French windows of the library, a shrill telephone call rang out. It came from the instrument on Buntingford's desk, and the two outside could see him take up the receiver.

"Hullo!"

"It's a message from Dansworth," said Cynthia, springing to her feet.
"They've sent for him."

"Yes—yes—" came to them in Buntingford's deep assenting voice, as he stood with the receiver to his ear. "All right—In an hour?—That's it. Less, if possible? Well, I think we can do it in less. Good-bye."

Helena had also risen. Buntingford emerged.

"Geoffrey!—Peter!—Horne!—all of you!"

From different parts of the lawn, men appeared running. Geoffrey French, Captain Lodge, Peter, and Julian Horne, were in a few instants grouped round their host, with Helena and Cynthia just behind.

"The Dansworth mob's out of hand," said Buntingford briefly. "They've set fire to another building, and the police are hard pressed. They want specials at once. Who'll come? I've just had a most annoying message from my chauffeur. His wife's been in to say that he's got a temperature—since eight o'clock this morning—and has gone to bed. She won't hear of his coming."

"Funk?" said French quietly,—"or Bolshevism?"

Buntingford shrugged his shoulders. "We'll enquire into that later. There are two cars—a Vauxhall and a small Renault—a two-seater. Who can drive?"

"I think I can drive the Renault," said Dale. "I'll go and get it at once. Hope I shan't kill anybody."

He ran off. The other men looked at each other in perplexity. None of them knew enough about the business to drive a high-powered car without serious risk to their own lives and the car's.

"I'll go and telephone to a man I know near here," said Buntingford, turning towards the house. "He'll lend us his chauffeur."

"Why not let me drive?" said a girl's half-sarcastic voice. "I've driven a Vauxhall most of the winter."

Buntingford turned, smiling but uncertain.

"Of course! I had forgotten! But I don't like taking you into danger, Helena. It sounds like an ugly affair!"

"Lodge and I will go with her," said French, eagerly. "We can stop the car outside the town. Horne can go with Dale."

The eyes of the men were on the girl in white—men half humiliated, half admiring. Helena, radiant, was looking at Buntingford, and at his reluctant word of assent, she began joyously taking the hat-pins out of her white lace hat.

"Give me five minutes to change. Lucky I've got my uniform here! Then I'll go for the car."

Within the five minutes she was in the garage in full uniform, looking over and tuning up the car, without an unnecessary word. She was the professional, alert, cheerful, efficient—and handsomer than ever, thought French, in her close-fitting khaki.

"One word, Helena," said Buntingford, laying a hand on her arm, when all was ready, and she was about to climb into her seat. "Remember I am in command of the expedition—and for all our sakes there must be no divided authority. You agree?"

She looked up quietly.

"I agree."

He made way for her, and she took her seat with him beside her. French, Lodge, Jones the butler, and Tomline the odd man, got in behind her. Mrs. Friend appeared with a food hamper that she and Mrs. Mawson had been rapidly packing. Her delicate little face was very pale, and Buntingford stooped to reassure her.

"We'll take every care of her. Don't be alarmed. It's always a woman comes to the rescue, isn't it? We're all ashamed. I shall take some lessons next week!"

Helena, with her hand on the steering wheel, nodded and smiled to her, and in another minute the splendid car was gliding out of the garage yard, and flying through the park.

Cynthia, with Mrs. Friend, Lady Maud Luton, and Mrs. Mawson, were left looking after them. Cynthia's expression was hard to read; she seemed to be rushing on with the car, watching the face beside Buntingford, the young hands

on the wheel, the keen eyes looking ahead, the play of talk between them.

"What a splendid creature!" said Lady Maud half-unwillingly, as she and Cynthia walked back to the lawn. "I'm afraid I don't at all approve of her in ordinary life. But just now—she was in her element."

"Mother, you must let me learn motoring!" cried the girl of seventeen, hanging on her mother's arm. She was flushed with innocent envy. Helena driving Lord Buntingford seemed to her at the top of creation.

"Goose! It wouldn't suit you at all," said the mother, smiling. "Please take my prayer-book indoors."

The babe went obediently.

The miles ran past. Helena, on her mettle, was driving her best, and Buntingford had already paid her one or two brief compliments, which she had taken in silence. Presently they topped a ridge, and there lay Dansworth in a hollow, a column of smoke gashed with occasional flame rising above the town.

"A big blaze," said Buntingford, examining it through a field-glass. "It's the large brewery in the market-place. Hullo, you there!" He hailed a country cart, full of excited occupants, which was being driven rapidly towards them. The driver pulled up with difficulty.

Buntingford jumped out and went to make enquiries.

"It's a bad business, Sir," said the man in charge of the cart, a small farmer whom Buntingford recognized. "The men in it are just mad—they don't know what they've done, nor why they've done it. But the soldiers will be there directly. There's far too few police, and I'm afraid there's some people hurt. I wouldn't take ladies into the town if I was you, Sir." He glanced at Helena.

Buntingford nodded, and returned to the car.

"You see that farm-house down there on the right?" he said to Helena as they started again. "We'll stop there."

They ran down the long slope to the town, the smoke carried towards them by a westerly wind beginning to beat in their faces,—the roar of the great bonfire in

their ears.

Helena drew up at the entrance of a short lane leading to a farm on the outskirts of the small country town—the centre of an active furniture-making industry, for which the material lay handy in the large beechwoods which covered the districts round it. The people of the farm were all standing outside the house-door, watching the fire and talking.

"You're going to leave me here?" said Helena wistfully, looking at Buntingford.

"Please. You've brought us splendidly! I'll send Geoffrey back to you as soon as possible, with instructions."

She drove the car up to the farm. An elderly man came forward with whom Buntingford made arrangements. The car was to be locked up. "And you'll take care of the lady, till I send?"

"Aye, aye, Sir."

"I'll come back to you, as soon as I can," said French to Helena. "Don't be anxious about us. We shall get into the market-hall by a back way and find out what's going on. They've probably got the hose on by now. Nothing like a hose-pipe for this kind of thing! Congratters on a splendid bit of driving!"

"Hear, hear," said Buntingford.

They went off, and Helena was left alone with the farm people, who made much of her, and poured into her ears more or less coherent accounts of the rioting and its causes. A few discontented soldiers, an unpopular factory manager, and a badly-handled strike:—the tale was a common one throughout England at the moment, and behind and beneath the surface events lay the heaving of that "tide in the affairs of men," a tide of change, of restlessness, of revolt, set in motion by the great war. Helena paced up and down the orchard slope behind the house, watching the conflagration which was beginning to die down, startled every now and then by what seemed to be the sound of shots, and once by the rush past of a squadron of mounted police coming evidently from the big country town some ten miles away. Hunger asserted itself, and she made a raid on the hamper in the car, sharing some of its contents with the black-eyed children of the farm. Every now and then news came from persons passing along the road, and for a time

things seemed to be mending. The police were getting the upper hand; the Mayor had made a plucky speech to the crowd in the market-place, with good results; the rioters were wavering; and the soldiers had been stopped by telephone. Then following hard on the last rumour came a sudden rush of worse news. A policeman had been killed—two injured—the rioters had gained a footing in the market-hall, and driven out both the police and the specials—and after all, the soldiers had been sent for.

Helena wandered down to the gate of the farm lane opening on the main road, consumed with restlessness and anxiety. If only they had let her go with them! Buntingford's last look as he raised his hat to her before departing, haunted her memory—the appeal in it, the unspoken message. Might they not, after all, be friends? There seemed to be an exquisite relaxation in the thought.

Another hour passed. Geoffrey French at last! He came on a motor bicycle, and threw himself off beside her, breathless.

"Please get the car, Helena, and I'll go on with you. The town's safe. The troops have arrived, and the rioters are scattering. The police have made some arrests, and Philip believes the thing is over—or I shouldn't have been allowed to come for you!"

"Why not?" said Helena half-indignantly, as they hurried towards the barn in which the car had been driven. "Perhaps I might have been of some use!"

"No—you helped us best by staying here. The last hour's been pretty bad. And now Philip wants you to take two wounded police to the Smeaton Hospital—five miles. He'll go with you. They're badly hurt, I'm afraid—there was some vicious stone-throwing."

"All right! Perhaps you don't know that's my job!"

French helped her get out the car.

"We shall want mattresses and stretcher boards," said Helena, surveying it thoughtfully. "A doctor too and a nurse."

"Right you are. They've thought of all that. You'll find everything at the market-hall,—where the two men are."

They drove away together, and into the outer streets of the town, where now scarcely a soul was to be seen, though as the car passed, the windows were crowded with heads. Police were everywhere, and the market-place—a sorry sight of smoky wreck and ruin—was held by a cordon of soldiers, behind which a crowd still looked on. French, sitting beside her, watched the erect girl-driver, the excellence of her driving, the brain and skill she was bringing to bear upon her "job." Here was the "new woman" indeed, in her best aspect. He could not but compare the Helena of this adventure—this competent and admirable Helena—with the girl of the night before. Had the war produced the same dual personality in thousands of English men and English women?—in the English nation itself?

They drew up at the steps of the market-hall, where a group of persons were standing, including a nurse in uniform. Buntingford came forward, and bending over the side of the car, said to Helena:

"Do you want to be relieved? There are several people here who could drive the car."

She flushed.

"I want to take these men to hospital."

He smiled at her.

"You shall."

He turned back to speak to the doctor who was to accompany the car. Helena jumped out, and went to consult with the nurse. In a very short time, the car had been turned as far as possible into an ambulance, and the wounded men were brought out.

"As gently as you can," said the doctor to Helena. "Are your springs good?"

"The car's first-rate, and I'll do my best. I've been driving for nearly a year, up to the other day." She pointed to her badge. The doctor nodded approval, and he and the nurse took their places. Then Buntingford jumped into the car, beside Helena.

"I'll show you the way. It won't take long."

In a few minutes, the car was in country lanes, and all the smoking tumult of the town had vanished from sight and hearing. It had become already indeed almost incredible, in the glow of the May afternoon, and amid the hawthorn white of the hedges, the chattering birds that fled before them, the marvellous green of the fields. Helena drove with the deftness of a practised hand, avoiding ruts, going softly over rough places.

"Good!" said Buntingford to her more than once—"that was excellent!"

But the suffering of the men behind overshadowed everything else, and it was with a big breath of relief that Buntingford at last perceived the walls of the county hospital rising out of a group of trees in front of them. Helena brought the car gently to a standstill, and, jumping out, was ready to help as a V. A. D. in the moving of the men. The hospital had been warned by telephone, and all preparations had been made. When the two unconscious men were safely in bed, the Dansworth doctor turned warmly to Helena:

"I don't know what we should have done without you, Miss Pitstone! But you look awfully tired. I hope you'll go home at once, and rest."

"I'm going to take her home—at once," said Buntingford. "We can't do anything more, can we?"

"Nothing. And here's the matron with a message."

The message was from the mayor of Dansworth. "Situation well in hand. No more trouble feared. Best thanks."

"All right!" said Buntingford. He turned smiling to Helena. "Now we'll go home and get some dinner!"

The Dansworth doctor and nurse remained behind. Once more Buntingford got into the car beside his ward.

"What an ass I am!" he said, in disgust—"not to be able to drive the car. But I should probably kill you and myself."

Helena laughed at him, a new sweetness in the sound, and they started.

Presently Buntingford said gently:

"I want to thank you,—for one thing especially—for having waited so patiently—while we got the thing under."

"I wasn't patient at all! I wanted desperately to be in it!"

"All the more credit! It would have been a terrible anxiety if you had been there. A policeman was killed just beside us. There was a man with a revolver running amuck. He just missed French by a hair-breadth."

Helena exclaimed in horror.

"You see—one puts the best face on it—but it might have been a terrible business. But what I shall always remember most—is your part in it"

Their eyes met, hers half shy, half repentant, his full of a kindness she had never yet seen there.

CHAPTER VIII

"Oh, what a jolly day! We've had a glorious ride," said Helena, throwing herself down on the grass beside Mrs. Friend. "And how are you? Have you been resting—or slaving—as you were *expressly* forbidden to do?"

For Mrs. Friend had been enjoying a particularly bad cold and had not long emerged from her bedroom, looking such a pitiful little wreck, that both Lord Buntingford and Helena had been greatly concerned. In the five weeks that had now elapsed since her arrival at Beechmark she had stolen her quiet way into the liking of everybody in the house to such an extent that, during the days she had been in bed with a high temperature, she had been seriously missed in the daily life of the place, and the whole household had actively combined to get her well again. Mrs. Mawson had fed her; and Lucy Friend was aghast to think how much her convalescence must be costing her employer in milk, eggs, butter, cream and chickens, when all such foods were still so frightfully, abominably dear. But they were forced down her throat by Helena and the housekeeper; while Lord Buntingford enquired after her every morning, and sent her a reckless supply of illustrated papers and novels. To see her now in the library or on the lawn again, with her white shawl round her, and the usual needlework on her knee, was a pleasant sight to everybody in the house.

The little lady had not only won this place for herself by the sweet and selfless gift which was her natural endowment; she was becoming the practical helper of everybody, of Mrs. Mawson in the house, of old Fenn in the garden, even of Buntingford himself, who was gradually falling into the habit of letting her copy important letters for him, and keep some order in the library. She was not in the least clever or accomplished; but her small fingers seemed to have magic in them; and her good will was inexhaustible.

Helena had grown amazingly fond of her. She appealed to something maternal and protecting in the girl's strong nature. Since her mother's death, there had

been a big streak of loneliness in Helena's heart, though she would have suffered tortures rather than confess it; and little Lucy Friend's companionship filled a void. She must needs respect Lucy's conscience, Lucy's instincts had more than once shamed her own.

"What are you going to wear to-night?" said Mrs. Friend, softly smoothing back the brown hair from the girl's hot brow.

"Pale green and apple-blossom."

Lucy Friend smiled, as though already she had a vision of the full-dress result.

"That'll be delicious," she said, with enthusiasm.

"Lucy!—am I good-looking?"

The girl spoke half wistfully, half defiantly, her eyes fixed on Lucy.

Mrs. Friend laughed.

"I asked that question before I had seen you."

"Of whom?" said Helena eagerly. "You didn't see anybody but Cousin Philip before I arrived. Tell me, Lucy—tell me at once."

Mrs. Friend kept a smiling silence for a minute. At last she said—"Lord Buntingford showed me a portrait of you before you arrived."

"A portrait of me? There isn't one in the house! Lucy, you deceiver, what do you mean?"

"I was taken to see one in the hall."

A sudden light dawned on Helena.

"The Romney? No! And I've been showing it to everybody as the loveliest thing going!"

"There—you see!"

Helena's face composed itself.

"I don't know why I should be flattered. She was a horrid minx. That no doubt was what the likeness consisted in!"

Mrs. Friend laughed, but said nothing. Helena rose from the grass, pausing to say as she turned towards the house:

"We're going to dance in the drawing-room, Mawson says. They've cleared it."

"Doesn't it look nice?"

Helena assented. "Let me see—" she added slowly—"this is the third dance, isn't it, since I came?"

"Yes—the third."

"I don't think we need have another"—the tone was decided, almost impatient—"at least when this party's over."

Mrs. Friend opened her eyes.

"I thought you liked to dance every week-end?"

"Well—ye-es—amongst ourselves. I didn't mean to turn the house upside-down every week."

"Well, you see—the house-parties have been so large. And besides there have been neighbours."

"I didn't ask *them*," said Helena. "But—we won't have another—till we go to Town."

"Very well. It might be wise. The servants are rather tired, and if they give warning, we shall never get any more!"

Mrs. Friend watched the retreating figure of Helena. There had indeed been a dizzy succession of week-end parties, and it seemed to her that Lord Buntingford's patience under the infliction had been simply miraculous. For they rarely contained friends of his own; his lameness cut him off from dancing; and it had been clear to Lucy Friend that in many cases Helena's friends had been sharply distasteful to him. He was, in Mrs. Friend's eyes, a strange mixture as far

as social standards were concerned. A boundless leniency in some cases; the sternest judgment in others.

For instance, a woman he had known from childhood had lately left her husband, carried off her children, and joined her lover. Lord Buntingford was standing, stoutly by her, helping her in her divorce proceedings, paying for the education of the children, and defending her whenever he heard her attacked. On the other hand, his will had been iron in the matter of Lord Donald, whose exposure as co-respondent in the particularly disreputable case had been lately filling the newspapers. Mrs. Friend had seen Helena take up the *Times* on one of the days on which the evidence in this case had appeared, and fling it down again with a flush and a look of disgust. But since the day of the Dansworth riot, she had never mentioned Lord Donald's name.

Certainly the relations between her and her guardian had curiously changed. In the first place, since her Dansworth adventure, Helena had found something to do to think about other than quarrelling with "Cousin Philip." Her curiosity as to how the two wounded police, whom she had driven to the County Hospital that day, might be faring had led to her going over there two or three times a week, either to relieve an overworked staff, or to drive convalescent soldiers, still under treatment in the wards.

The occupation had been a godsend to her, and everybody else. She still talked revolution, and she was always ready to spar with Lord Buntingford, or other people. But all the same Lucy Friend was often aware of a much more tractable temper, a kind of hesitancy—and appeasement—which, even if it passed away, made her beauty, for the moment, doubly attractive.

Was it, after all, the influence of Lord Buntingford—and was the event justifying her mother's strange provision for her? He had certainly treated her with a wonderful kindness and indulgence. Of late he had returned to his work at the Admiralty, only coming down to Beechmark for long week-ends from Friday to Monday. But in these later week-ends he had gradually abandoned the detached and half-sarcastic attitude which he had originally assumed towards Helena, and it seemed to Lucy Friend that he was taking his function towards her with a new seriousness. If so, it had affected himself at least as much as the proud and difficult girl whose guidance had been so hurriedly thrust upon him. His new role had brought out in him unexpected resources, or revived old habits. For instance he had not ridden for years; though, as a young man, and before his

accident, he had been a fine horseman. But he now rode whenever he was at Beechmark, to show Helena the country; and they both looked so well on horseback that it was a pleasure of which Lucy Friend never tired to watch them go and to welcome them home.

Then the fact that he was a trained artist, which most of his friends had forgotten, became significant again for Helena's benefit. She had some aptitude, and more ambition—would indeed, but for the war, have been a South Kensington student, and had long cherished yearnings for the Slade. He set her work to do during the week, and corrected it with professional sharpness when he reappeared.

And more important perhaps than either the riding or the drawing, was the partial relaxation for her benefit of the reserve and taciturnity which had for years veiled the real man from those who liked and respected him most. He never indeed talked of himself or his past; but he would discuss affairs, opinions, books—especially on their long rides together—with a frankness, and a tone of gay and equal comradeship, which, or so Mrs. Friend imagined, had had a disarming and rather bewildering effect on Helena. The girl indeed seemed often surprised and excited. It was evident that they had never got on during her mother's lifetime, and that his habitual bantering or sarcastic tone towards her while she was still in the school-room had roused an answering resentment in her. Hence the aggressive mood in which, after two or three months of that half-mad whirl of gaiety into which London had plunged after the Armistice, she had come down to Beechmark.

They still jarred, sometimes seriously; Helena was often provocative and aggressive; and Buntingford could make a remark sting without intending it. But on the whole Lucy Friend felt that she was watching something which had in it possibilities of beauty; indeed of a rather touching and rare development. But not at all as the preliminary to a love-affair. In Buntingford's whole relation to his ward, Lucy Friend, at least, had never yet detected the smallest sign of male susceptibility. It suggested something quite different. Julian Horne, who had taken a great fancy to Helena's chaperon, was now recommending books to her instead of to Helena, who always forgot or disobeyed his instructions. With a little preliminary lecture, he had put the "Greville Memoirs" in her hands by way of improving her mind; and she had been struck by a passage in which Greville describes Lord Melbourne's training of the young Queen Victoria, whose Prime Minister he was. The man of middle-age, accomplished, cynical and witty, suddenly confronted with a responsibility which challenged both his heart and

his conscience—and that a responsibility towards an attractive young girl whom he could neither court nor command, towards whom his only instrument was the honesty and delicacy of his own purpose:—there was something in this famous, historical situation which seemed to throw a light on the humbler situation at Beechmark.

Four o'clock! In another hour the Whitsuntide party for which the house stood ready would have arrived. Helena's particular "pals" were all coming, and various friends and kinsfolk of Lord Buntingford's; including Lady Mary Chance, a general or two, some Admiralty officials, and one or two distinguished sailors with the halo of Zeebrugge about them. The gathering was to last nearly a week. Mrs. Mawson had engaged two extra servants, and the master of the house had resigned himself. But he had laid it down that the fare was to be simple—and "no champagne." And though of course there would be plenty of bridge, he had given a hint to Vivian Lodge, who, as his heir-apparent, was his natural aide-de-camp in the management of the party, that anything like high play would be unwelcome. Some of Helena's friends during the latter week-ends of May had carried things to extremes.

Meanwhile the social and political sky was darkening in the June England. Peace was on the point of being signed in Paris; but the industrial war at home weighed on every thinking mind. London was dancing night after night; money was being spent like water; and yet every man and woman of sense knew that the only hope for Britain lay in work and saving. Buntingford's habitual frown—the frown not of temper but of oppression—had grown deeper; and on their long rides together he had shown a great deal of his mind to Helena—the mind of a patriot full of fear for his country.

A man came across the lawn. Lucy Friend was glad to recognize Geoffrey French, who was a great favourite with her.

"You are early!" she said, as they greeted.

"I came down by motor-bike. London is hateful, and I was in a hurry to get out of it. Where is Helena?"

"Gone to change her dress. She has been riding."

Frank mopped his brow in silence for a little. Then he said with the half-mischievous smile which in Lucy Friend's eyes was one of his chief physical

"points."

"How you and Philip have toned her down!"

"Oh, not I!" said Lucy, her modesty distressed. "I've always admired her so! Of course—I was sometimes surprised—"

Geoffrey laughed.

"I daresay we shall all be surprised a good many times yet?" Then he moved a little closer to the small person, who was becoming everybody's confidante. "Do you mind telling me something—if you know it?" he said, lowering his voice.

"Ask me—but I can't promise!"

"Do you think Helena has quite made up her mind not to marry Dale?"

Mrs. Friend hesitated.

"I don't know—"

"But what do you think?"

She lifted her gentle face, under his compulsion, and slowly, pitifully shook her head.

Geoffrey drew a long breath.

"Then she oughtn't to ask him here! The poor little fellow is going through the tortures of the damned!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Isn't there anything we can do?" cried Mrs. Friend.

"Nothing—but keep him away. After all he's only the first victim."

Startled by the note in her companion's voice, Mrs. Friend turned to look at him. He forced a smile, as their eyes met.

"Oh, we must all take our chance! But Peter's not the boy he was—before the war. Things bowl him over easily."

"She likes him so much," murmured Lucy. "I'm sure she never means to be unkind."

"She isn't unkind!" said Geoffrey with energy. "It's the natural fated thing. We are all the slaves of her car and she knows it. When she was in the stage of quarrelling with us all, it was just fun. But if Helena grows as delicious—as she promised to be last week—" He shrugged his shoulders, with a deep breath—"Well,—she'll have to marry somebody some day—and the rest of us may drown! Only, if you're to be umpire—and she likes you so much that I expect you will be—play fair!"

He held out his hand, and she put hers into it, astonished to realize that her own eyes were full of tears.

"I'm a mass of dust—I must go and change before tea," he said abruptly.

He went into the house, and she was left to some agitated thinking.

An hour later, the broad lawns of Beechmark, burnt yellow by the May drought, were alive with guests, men in khaki and red tabs, fresh from their War Office work; two naval Commanders, and a resplendent Flag-Lieutenant; a youth in tennis flannels, just released from a city office, who seven months earlier had been fighting in the last advance of the war, and a couple of cadets who had not been old enough to fight at all; girls who had been "out" before the war, and two others, Helena's juniors, who were just leaving the school-room and seemed to be all aglow with the excitement and wonder of this peace-world; a formidable grey-haired woman, who was Lady Mary Chance; Cynthia and Georgina Welwyn, and the ill-dressed, arresting figure of Mr. Alcott. Not all were Buntingford's guests; some were staying at the Cottage, some in another neighbouring house; but Beechmark represented the headquarters of a gathering of which Helena Pitstone and her guardian were in truth the central figures.

Helena in white, playing tennis; Helena with a cigarette, resting between her sets, and chaffing with a ring of dazzled young men; Helena talking wild nonsense with Geoffrey French, for the express purpose of shocking Lady Mary Chance; and the next minute listening with a deference graceful enough to turn even the seasoned head of a warrior to a grey-haired general describing the taking of the Vimy Ridge; and finally, Helena, holding a dancing class under the cedars on the yellow smoothness of the lawn, after tea, for such young men as panted to conquer the mysteries of "hesitation" or jazzing, and were ardently courting instruction in the desperate hope of capturing their teacher for a dance that night:—it was on these various avatars of Helena that the whole party turned; and Lady Mary indignantly felt that there was no escaping the young woman.

"Why do you let her smoke—and paint—and *swear*—I declare I heard her swear!" she said in Buntingford's ear, as the dressing-bell rang, and he was escorting her to the house. "And mark my words, Philip—men may be amused by that kind of girl, but they won't marry her."

Buntingford laughed.

"As Helena's guardian I'm not particularly anxious about that!"

"Ah, no doubt, she tells you people propose to her—but is it true?" snapped Lady Mary.

"You imagine that Helena tells me of her proposals?" said Buntingford, wondering.

"My dear Philip, don't pose! Isn't that the special function of a guardian?"

"It may be. But, if so, Helena has never given me the chance of performing it."

"I told you so! Men will flirt with her, but they *don't* propose to her!" said Lady Mary triumphantly.

Buntingford, smiling, let her have the last word, as he asked Mrs. Friend to show her to her room.

Meanwhile the gardens were deserted, save for a couple of gardeners and an electrician, who were laying some wires for the illumination of the rose-garden in front of the drawing-room, and Geoffrey French, who was in a boat, lazily drifting across the pond, and reading a volume of poems by a friend which he had brought down with him. The evening was fast declining; and from the shadow of the deep wood which bordered the western edge of the pond he looked out on the sunset glow as it climbed the eastern hill, transfiguring the ridge, and leaving a rich twilight in the valley below. The tranquillity of the water, the silence of the woods, the gentle swaying of the boat, finally wooed him from his book, which after all he had only taken up as a protection from tormenting thoughts. Had he—had he—any chance with Helena? A month before he would have scornfully denied that he was in love with her. And now—he had actually confessed his plight to Mrs. Friend!

As he lay floating between the green vault above, and the green weedy depths below, his thoughts searched the five weeks that lay between him and that first week-end when he had scolded Helena for her offences. It seemed to him that his love for her had first begun that day of the Dansworth riot. She had provoked and interested him before that—but rather as a raw self-willed child—a "flapper" whose extraordinary beauty gave her a distinction she had done nothing to earn.

But every moment in that Dansworth day was clear in memory:—the grave young face behind the steering-wheel, the perfect lips compressed, the eyes intent upon their task, the girl's courage and self-command. Still more the patient Helena who waited for him at the farm—the grateful exultant look when he said "Come"—and every detail of the scene in Dansworth:—Helena with her most professional air, driving through soldiers and police, Helena helping to carry and place the two wounded men, and that smiling "good-bye" she had thrown him as she drove away with Buntingford beside her.

The young man moved restlessly; and the light boat was set rocking. It was curious how he too, like Lucy Friend, only from another point of view, was beginning to reflect on the new intimacy that seemed to be developing between Buntingford and his ward. Philip of course was an awfully good fellow, and Helena was just finding it out; what else was there in it? But the jealous pang roused by the thought of Buntingford, once felt, persisted. Not for a moment did French doubt the honour or the integrity of a man, who had done him personally many a kindness, and had moreover given him some reason to think—-(he recalled the odd little note he had received from Buntingford before Helena's first week-end)—that if he were to fall in love with Helena, his suit would be favourably watched by Helena's guardian. He could recall moreover one or two quite recent indications on Buntingford's part—very slight and guarded—which seemed to point in the same direction.

All very well: Buntingford himself might be quite heart-whole and might remain so. French, who knew him well, though there was fourteen years between them, was tolerably certain—without being able to give any very clear reason for the conviction—that Buntingford would never have undertaken the guardianship of Helena, had the merest possibility of marrying her crossed his mind. French did not believe that it had ever yet crossed his mind. There was nothing in his manner towards her to suggest anything more than friendship, deepening interest, affectionate responsibility—all feelings which would have shown themselves plainly from the beginning had she allowed it.

But Helena herself? It was clear that however much they might still disagree, Buntingford had conquered her original dislike of him, and was in process of becoming the guide, philosopher, and friend her mother had meant him to be. And Buntingford had charm and character, and imagination. He could force a girl like Helena to respect him intellectually; with such a nature that was half the battle. He would be her master in time. Besides, there were all Philip's endless

opportunities of making life agreeable and delightful to her. When they went to London, for instance, he would come out of the shell he had lived in so long, and Helena would see him as his few intimate friends had always seen him:—as one of the most accomplished and attractive of mortals, with just that touch of something ironic and mysterious in his personality and history, which appeals specially to a girl's fancy.

And what would be the end of it? Tragedy for Helena?—as well as bitter disappointment and heartache for himself, Geoffrey French? He was confident that Helena had in her the capacity for passion; that the flowering-time of such a nature would be one of no ordinary intensity. She would love, and be miserable —and beat herself to pieces—poor, brilliant Helena!—against her own pain.

What could he do? Might there not be some chance for himself—*now*—while the situation was still so uncertain and undeveloped? Helena was still unconscious, unpledged. Why not cut in at once? "She likes me—she has been a perfect dear to me these last few times of meeting! Philip backs me. He would take my part. Perhaps, after all, my fears are nonsense, and she would no more dream of marrying Philip, than he would dream, under cover of his guardianship, of making love to her."

He raised himself in the boat, filled with a new inrush of will and hope, and took up the drifting oars. Across the water, on the white slopes of lawn, and in some of the windows of the house, lights were appearing. The electricians were testing the red and blue lamps they had been stringing among the rose-beds, and from the gabled boathouse on the further side, a bright shaft from a small searchlight which had been fixed there, was striking across the water. Geoffrey watched it wandering over the dark wood on his right, lighting up the tall stems of the beeches, and sending a tricky gleam or two among the tangled underwood. It seemed to him a symbol of the sudden illumination of mind and purpose which had come to him, there, on the shadowed water—and he turned to look at a window which he knew was Helena's. There were lights within it, and he pictured Helena at her glass, about to slip into some bright dress or other, which would make her doubly fair. Meanwhile from the rose of the sunset, rosy lights were stealing over the water and faintly glorifying the old house and its spreading gardens. An overpowering sense of youth—of the beauty of the world —of the mystery of the future, beat through his pulses. The coming dance became a rite of Aphrodite, towards which all his being strained.

Suddenly, there was a loud snapping noise, as of breaking branches in the wood beside him. It was so startling that his hands paused on the oars, as he looked quickly round to see what could have produced it. And at the same moment the searchlight on the boathouse reached the spot to which his eyes were drawn, and he saw for an instant—sharply distinct and ghostly white—a woman's face and hands—amid the blackness of the wood. He had only a moment in which to see them, in which to catch a glimpse of a figure among the trees, before the light was gone, leaving a double gloom behind it.

Mysterious! Who could it be? Was it some one who wanted to be put across the pond? He shouted. "Who is that?"

Then he rowed in to the shore, straining his eyes to see. It occurred to him that it might be a lady's maid brought by a guest, who had been out for a walk, and missed her way home in a strange park. "Do you want to get to the house? I can put you across to it if you wish," he said in a loud voice, addressing the unknown—"otherwise you'll have to go a long way round."

No answer—only an intensity of silence, through which he heard from a great distance a church clock striking. The wood and all its detail had vanished in profound shadow.

Conscious of a curious excitement he rowed still further in to the bank, and again spoke to the invisible woman. In vain. He began then to doubt his own eyes. Had it been a mere illusion produced by some caprice of the searchlight opposite? But the face!—the features of it were stamped on his memory, the gaunt bitterness of them, the brooding misery.

How could he have imagined such a thing?

Much perplexed and rather shaken in nerve, he rowed back across the pond—to hear the band tuning in the flower-filled drawing-room, as he approached the house.

CHAPTER IX

About ten o'clock on the night of the ball at Beechmark, a labourer was crossing the park on his way home from his allotment. Thanks to summertime and shortened hours of labour he had been able to get his winter greens in, and to earth up his potatoes, all in two strenuous evenings; and he was sauntering home dead-tired. But he had doubled his wages since the outbreak of war and his fighting son had come back to him safe, so that on the whole he was inclined to think that the old country was worth living in! The park he was traversing was mostly open pasture studded with trees, except where at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Lord Buntingford of the day had planted a wood of oak and beech about the small lake which he had made by the diversion of two streamlets that had once found a sluggish course through the grassland. The trees in it were among the finest in the country, but like so much of English woodland before the war, they had been badly neglected for many years. The trees blown down by winter storms had lain year after year where they fell; the dead undergrowth was choking the young saplings; and some of the paths through the wood had practically disappeared.

The path from the allotments to the village passed at the back of the wood. Branching off from it, an old path leading through the trees and round the edge of the lake had once been frequently used as a short cut from the village to the house, but was now badly grown up and indeed superseded by the new drive from the western lodge, made some twenty years before this date.

The labourer, Richard Stimson, was therefore vaguely surprised when he turned the corner of the wood and reached the fork of the path, to see a figure of a woman, on the old right-of-way, between him and the wood, for which she seemed to be making.

It was not the figure of anyone he knew. It was a lady, apparently, in a dark gown, and a small hat with a veil. The light was still good, and he saw her

clearly. He stopped indeed to watch her, puzzled to know what a stranger could be doing in the park, and on that path at ten o'clock at night. He was aware indeed that there were gay doings at Beechmark. He had seen the illuminated garden and house from the upper park, and had caught occasional gusts of music from the band to which no doubt the quality were dancing. But the fact didn't seem to have much to do with the person he was staring at.

And while he stared at her, she turned, and instantly perceived—he thought—that she was observed. She paused a moment, and then made an abrupt change of direction; running round the corner of the wood, she reached the path along which he himself had just come and disappeared from view.

The whole occurrence filliped the rustic mind; but before he reached his own cottage, Stimson had hit on an explanation which satisfied him. It was of course a stranger who had lost her way across the park, mistaking the two paths. On seeing him, she had realized that she was wrong and had quickly set herself right. He told his wife the tale before he went to sleep, with this commentary; and they neither of them troubled to think about it any more.

Perhaps the matter would not have appeared so simple to either of them had they known that Stimson had no sooner passed completely out of sight, leaving the wide stretches of the park empty and untenanted under a sky already alive with stars, than the same figure reappeared, and after pausing a moment, apparently to reconnoitre, disappeared within the wood.

"A year ago to-day, where were you?" said one Brigadier to another, as the two Generals stood against the wall in the Beechmark drawing-room to watch the dancing.

"Near Albert," said the man addressed. "The brigade was licking its wounds and training drafts."

The other smiled.

"Mine was doing the same thing—near Armentières. We didn't think then, did we, that it would be all over in five months?"

"It isn't all over!" said the first speaker, a man with a refined and sharply cut face, still young under a shock of grey hair. "We are in the ground swell of the war. The ship may go down yet."

"While the boys and girls dance? I hope not!" The soldier's eyes ran smiling over the dancing throng. Then he dropped his voice:

"Listen!"

For a very young boy and girl had come to stand in front of them. The boy had just parted from a girl a good deal older than himself, who had nodded to him a rather patronizing farewell, as she glided back into the dance with a much decorated Major.

"These pre-war girls are rather dusty, aren't they?" said the boy angrily to his partner.

"You mean they give themselves airs? Well, what does it matter? It's *we* who have the good time now!" said the little creature beside him, a fairy in filmy white, dancing about him as she spoke, hardly able to keep her feet still for a moment, life and pleasure in every limb.

The two soldiers—both fathers—smiled at each other. Then Helena came down the room, a vision of spring, with pale green floating about her, and apple-blossoms in her brown hair. She was dancing with Geoffrey French, and both were dancing with remarkable stateliness and grace to some Czech music, imposed upon the band by Helena, who had given her particular friends instruction on the lawn that afternoon in some of the steps that fitted it. They passed with the admiring or envious eyes of the room upon them, and disappeared through the window leading to the lawn. For on the smooth-shaven turf of the lawn there was supplementary dancing, while the band in the conservatory, with all barriers removed, was playing both for the inside and outside revellers.

Peter Dale was sitting out on the terrace over-looking the principal lawn with the daughter of Lady Mary Chance, a rather pretty but stupid girl, with a genius for social blunders. Buntingford had committed him to a dance with her, and he was not grateful.

"She is pretty, of course, but horribly fast!" said his partner contemptuously, as Helena passed. "Everybody thinks her such bad style!"

"Then everybody is an ass!" said Peter violently, turning upon her. "But it doesn't matter to Helena."

The girl flushed in surprise and anger.

"I didn't know you were such great friends. I only repeat what I hear," she said stiffly.

"It depends on where you hear it," said Peter. "There isn't a man in this ball that isn't pining to dance with her."

"Has she given you a dance?" said the girl, with a touch of malice in her voice.

"Oh, I've come off as well as other people!" said Peter evasively.

Then, of a sudden, his chubby face lit up. For Helena, just as the music was slackening to the close of the dance, and a crowd of aspirants for supper dances were converging on the spot where she stood, had turned and beckoned to Peter.

"Do you mind?—I'll come back!" he said to his partner, and rushed off.

"Second supper dance!" "All right!"

He returned radiant, and in his recovered good humour proceeded to make himself delightful even to Miss Chance, whom, five minutes before, he had detested.

But when he had returned her to her mother, Peter wandered off alone. He did not want to dance with anybody, to talk to anybody. He wanted just to remember Helena's smile, her eager—"I've kept it for you, Peter, all the evening!"—and to hug the thought of his coming joy. Oh, he hadn't a dog's chance, he knew, but as long as she was not actually married to somebody else, he was not going to give up hope.

In a shrubbery walk, where a rising moon was just beginning to chequer the path with light and shade, he ran into Julian Horne, who was strolling tranquilly up and down, book in hand.

"Hullo, what are you doing here?" said the invaded one.

"Getting cool. And you?"

Julian showed his book—*The Coming Revolution*, a Bolshevist pamphlet, then

enjoying great vogue in manufacturing England.

"What are you reading such rot for?" said Peter, wondering.

"It gives a piquancy to this kind of thing!" was Horne's smiling reply, as they reached an open space in the walk, and he waved his hand towards the charming scene before them, the house with its lights, on its rising ground above the lake, the dancing groups on the lawn, the illuminated rose-garden; and below, the lake, under its screen of wood, with boats on the smooth water, touched every now and then by the creeping fingers of the searchlight from the boathouse, so that one group after another of young men and maidens stood out in a white glare against the darkness of the trees.

"It will last our time," said Peter recklessly. "Have you seen Buntingford?"

"A little while ago, he was sitting out with Lady Cynthia. But when he passed me just now, he told me he was going down to look after the lake and the boats—in case of accidents. There is a current at one end apparently, and a weir; and the keeper who understands all about it is in a Canada regiment on the Rhine."

"Do you think Buntingford's going to marry Lady Cynthia?" asked Peter suddenly.

Horne laughed. "That's not my guess, at present," he said after a moment.

As he spoke, a boat on the lake came into the track of the searchlight, and the two persons in it were clearly visible—Buntingford rowing, and Helena, in the stern. The vision passed in a flash; and Horne turned a pair of eyes alive with satirical meaning on his companion.

"Well!" said Peter, troubled, he scarcely knew why—"what do you mean?"

Horne seemed to hesitate. His loose-limbed ease of bearing in his shabby clothes, his rugged head, and pile of reddish hair, above a thinker's brow, made him an impressive figure in the half light—gave him a kind of seer's significance.

"Isn't it one of the stock situations?" he said at last—"this situation of guardian and ward?—romantic situations, I mean? Of course the note of romance must be

applicable. But it certainly is applicable, in this case."

Peter stared. Julian Horne caught the change in the boy's delicate face and repented him—too late.

"What rubbish you talk, Julian! In the first place it would be dishonourable!"

"Why?"

"It would, I tell you,—damned dishonourable! And in the next, why, a few weeks ago—Helena hated him!"

"Yes—she began with 'a little aversion'! One of the stock openings," laughed Horne.

"Well, ta-ta. I'm not going to stay to listen to you talking bosh any more," said Peter roughly. "There's the next dance beginning."

He flung away. Horne resumed his pacing. He was very sorry for Peter, whose plight was plain to all the world. But it was better he should be warned. As for himself, he too had been under the spell. But he had soon emerged. A philosopher and economist, holding on to Helena's skirts in her rush through the world, would cut too sorry a figure. Besides, could she ever have married him—which was of course impossible, in spite of the courses in Meredith and Modern Literature through which he had taken her—she would have tired of him in a year, by which time both their fortunes would have been spent. For he knew himself to be a spendthrift on a small income, and suspected a similar propensity in Helena, on the grand scale. He returned, therefore, more or less contentedly, to his musings upon an article he was to contribute to *The Market Place*, on "The Influence of Temperament in Economics." The sounds of dance music in the distance made an agreeable accompaniment.

Meanwhile a scene—indisputably sentimental—was passing on the lake. Helena and Geoffrey French going down to the water's edge to find a boat, had met halfway with Cynthia Welwyn, in some distress. She had just heard that Lady Georgina had been taken suddenly ill, and must go home. She understood that Mawson was looking after her sister, who was liable to slight fainting attacks at inconvenient moments. But how to find their carriage! She had looked for a servant in vain, and Buntingford was nowhere to be seen. French could do no less than offer to assist; and Helena, biting her lip, despatched him. "I will wait

for you at the boathouse."

He rushed off, with Cynthia toiling after him, and Helena descended to the lake. As she neared the little landing stage, a boat approached it, containing Buntingford, and two or three of his guests.

"Hullo, Helena, what have you done with Geoffrey?"

She explained. "We were just coming down for a row."

"All right. I'll take you on till he comes. Jump in!"

She obeyed, and they were soon halfway towards the further side. But about the middle of the lake Buntingford was seized with belated compunction that he had not done his host's duty to his queer, inarticulate cousin, Lady Georgina. "I suppose I ought to have gone to look after her?"

"Not at all," said Helena coolly. "I believe she does it often. She can't want more than Lady Cynthia—*and* Geoffrey—*and* Mawson. People shouldn't be pampered!"

Her impertinence was so alluring as she sat opposite to him, trailing both hands in the water, that Buntingford submitted. There was a momentary silence. Then Helena said:

"Lady Cynthia came to see me the other day. Did you send her?"

"Of course. I wanted you to make friends."

"That we should never do! We were simply born to dislike each other."

"I never heard anything so unreasonable!" said Buntingford warmly. "Cynthia is a very good creature, and can be excellent company."

Helena gave a shrug.

"What does all that matter?" she said slowly—"when one has instincts—and intuitions. No!—don't let's talk any more about Lady Cynthia. But—there's something—please, Cousin Philip—I want to say—I may as well say it now."

He looked at her rather astonished, and, dimly as he saw her in the shadow they had just entered, it seemed to him that her aspect had changed.

"What is it? I hope nothing serious."

"Yes—it is serious, to me. I hate apologizing!—I always have."

"My dear Helena!—why should you apologize? For goodness' sake, don't! Think better of it."

"I've got to do it," she said firmly, "Cousin Philip, you were quite right about that man, Jim Donald, and I was quite wrong. He's a beast, and I loathe the thought of having danced with him—there!—I'm sorry!" She held out her hand.

Buntingford was supremely touched, and could not for the moment find a jest wherewith to disguise it.

"Thank you!" he said quietly, at last. "Thank you, Helena. That was very nice of you." And with a sudden movement he stooped and kissed the wet and rather quivering hand he held. At the same moment, the searchlight which had been travelling about the pond, lighting up one boat after another to the amusement of the persons in them, and of those watching from the shore, again caught the boat in which sat Buntingford and Helena. Both figures stood sharply out. Then the light had travelled on, and Helena had hastily withdrawn her hand.

She fell back on the cushions of the stern seat, vexed with her own agitation. She had described herself truly. She was proud, and it was hard for her to "climb down." But there was much else in the mixed feeling that possessed her. There seemed, for one thing, to be a curious happiness in it; combined also with a renewed jealousy for an independence she might have seemed to be giving away. She wanted to say—"Don't misunderstand me!—I'm not really giving up anything vital—I mean all the same to manage my life in my own way." But it was difficult to say it in the face of the coatless man opposite, of whose house she had become practically mistress, and who had changed all his personal modes of life to suit hers. Her eyes wandered to the gay scene of the house and its gardens, with its Watteau-ish groups of young men and maidens, under the night sky, its light and music. All that had been done, to give her pleasure, by a man who had for years conspicuously shunned society, and whose life in the old country house, before her advent, had been, as she had come to know, of the quietest. She bent forward again, impulsively:

"Cousin Philip!—I'm enjoying this party enormously—it's awfully, awfully good of you—but I don't want you to do it any more—"

"Do what, Helena?"

"Please, I can get along without any more week-ends, or parties. You—you spoil me!"

"Well—we're going up to London, aren't we, soon? But I daresay you're right"—his tone grew suddenly grave. "While we dance, there is a terrible amount of suffering going on in the world."

"You mean—after the war?"

He nodded. "Famine everywhere—women and children dying—half a dozen bloody little wars. And here at home we seem to be on the brink of civil war."

"We oughtn't to be amusing ourselves at all!—that's the real truth of it," said Helena with gloomy decision. "But what are we to do—women, I mean? They told me at the hospital yesterday they get rid of their last convalescents next week. What *is* there for me to do? If I were a factory girl, I should be getting unemployment benefit. My occupation's gone—such as it was—it's not my fault!"

"Marry, my dear child,—and bring up children," said Buntingford bluntly. "That's the chief duty of Englishwomen just now."

Helena flushed and said nothing. They drifted nearer to the bank, and Helena perceived, at the end of a little creek, a magnificent group of yew trees, of which the lower branches were almost in the water. Behind them, and to the side of them, through a gap in the wood, the moonlight found its way, but they themselves stood against the faint light, superbly dark, and impenetrable, black water at their feet. Buntingford pointed to them.

"They're fine, aren't they? This lake of course is artificial, and the park was only made out of arable land a hundred years ago. I always imagine these trees mark some dwelling-house, which has disappeared. They used to be my chief haunt when I was a boy. There are four of them, extraordinarily interwoven. I made a seat in one of them. I could see everything and everybody on the lake, or in the garden; and nobody could see me. I once overheard a proposal!"

"Eavesdropper!" laughed Helena. "Shall we land?—and go and look at them?"

She gave a touch to the rudder. Then a shout rang out from the landing-stage on the other side of the water.

"Ah, that's Geoffrey," said Buntingford. "And I must really get back to the house—to see people off."

With a little vigorous rowing they were soon across the lake. Helena sat silent. She did not want Geoffrey—she did not want to reach the land—she had been happy on the water—why should things end?

* * * * *

Geoffrey reported that all was well with Lady Georgina, she had gone home, and then stepping into the boat as Buntingford stepped out, he began to push off.

"Isn't it rather late?" began Helena in a hesitating voice, half rising from her seat. "I promised Peter a supper dance."

Geoffrey turned to look at her.

"Nobody's gone in to supper yet. Shall I take you back?"

There was something in his voice which meant that this *tête-à-tête* had been promised him. Helena resigned herself. But that she would rather have landed was very evident to her companion, who had been balked of half his chance already by Lady Georgina. Why did elderly persons liable to faint come to dances?—that was what he fiercely wanted to know as he pulled out into the lake.

Helena was very quiet. She seemed tired, or dreamy. Instinctively Geoffrey lost hold on his own purpose. Something warned him to go warily. By way of starting conversation he began to tell her of his own adventure on the lake—of the dumb woman among the trees, whom he had seen and spoken to, without reply. Helena was only moderately interested. It was some village woman passing through the wood, she supposed. Very likely the searchlight frightened her, and she knew she had no business there in June when there were young pheasants about—

"Nobody's started preserving again yet—" put in Geoffrey.

"Old Fenn told me yesterday that there were lots of wild ones," said Helena languidly. "So there'll be something to eat next winter."

"Are you tired, Helena?"

"Not at all," she said, sitting up suddenly. "What were we talking about?—oh, pheasants. Do you think we really shall starve next winter, Geoffrey, as the Food Controller says?"

"I don't much care!" said French.

Helena bent forward.

"Now, you're cross with me, Geoffrey! Don't be cross! I think I really am tired. I seem to have danced for hours." The tone was childishly plaintive, and French was instantly appeased. The joy of being with her—alone—returned upon him in a flood.

"Well, then, rest a little. Why should you go back just yet? Isn't it jolly out here?"

"Lovely," she said absently—"but I promised Peter."

"That'll be all right. We'll just go across and back."

There was a short silence—long enough to hear the music from the house, and the distant voices of the dancers. A little northwest wind was creeping over the lake, and stirring the scents of the grasses and sedge-plants on its banks. Helena looked round to see in what direction they were going.

"Ah!—you see that black patch, Geoffrey?"

"Yes—it was near there I saw my ghost—or village woman—or lady's maid—whatever you like to call it."

"It was a lady's maid, I think," said Helena decidedly. "They have a way of getting lost. Do you mind going there?"—she pointed—"I want to explore it."

He pulled a stroke which sent the boat towards the yews; while she repeated

Buntingford's story of the seat.

"Perhaps we shall find her there," said Geoffrey with a laugh.

"Your woman? No! That would be rather creepy! To think we had a spy on us all the time! I should hate that!"

She spoke with animation; and a sudden question shot across French's mind. She and Buntingford had been alone there under the darkness of the yews. If a listener had been lurking in that old hiding-place, what would he—or she—have heard? Then he shook the thought from him, and rowed vigorously for the creek.

He tied the boat to a willow-stump, and helped Helena to land.

"I warn you—" he said, laughing. "You'll tear your dress, and wet your shoes."

But with her skirts gathered tight round her she was already halfway through the branches, and Geoffrey heard her voice from the further side—

"Oh I—such a wonderful place!"

He followed her quickly, and was no less astonished than she. They stood in a kind of natural hall, like that "pillared shade" under the yews of Borrowdale, which Wordsworth has made immortal:

beneath whose sable roof
Of boughs, as if for festal purpose, decked
With unrejoicing berries, Ghostly shapes
May meet at noon-tide; Fear and trembling Hope,
Silence and Foresight; Death the Skeleton
And Time the Shadow:—

For three yew trees of great age had grown together, forming a domed tent of close, perennial leaf, beneath which all other vegetation had disappeared. The floor, carpeted with "the pining members" of the yews, was dry and smooth; Helena's light slippers scarcely sank in it. They groped their way; and Helena's hand had slipped unconsciously into Geoffrey's. In the velvety darkness, indeed, they would have seen nothing, but for the fact that the moon stood just above the wood, and through a small gap in the dome, where a rotten branch had fallen, a little light came down.

"I've found the seat!" said Helena joyously, disengaging herself from her companion. And presently a dim ray from overhead showed her to him seated dryad-like in the very centre of the black interwoven trunks. Or, rather, he saw the sparkle of some bright stones on her neck, and the whiteness of her brow; but for the rest, only a suggestion of lovely lines; as it were, a Spirit of the Wood, almost bodiless.

He stood before her, in an ecstasy of pleasure.

"Helena!—you are a vision—a dream: Don't fade away! I wish we could stay here for ever."

"Am I a vision?" She put out a mischievous hand, and pinched him. "But come here, Geoffrey—come up beside me—look! Anybody sitting here could see a good deal of the lake!"

He squeezed in beside her, and true enough, through a natural parting in the branches, which no one could have noticed from outside, the little creek, with their boat in it, was plainly visible, and beyond it the lights on the lawn.

"A jolly good observation post for a sniper!" said Geoffrey, recollections of the Somme returning upon him; so far as he was able to think of anything but Helena's warm loveliness beside him. Mad thoughts began to surge up in him.

But an exclamation from Helena checked them:

"I say!—there's something here—in the seat."

Her hand groped near his. She withdrew it excitedly.

"It's a scarf, or a bag, or something. Let's take it to the light. Your woman, Geoffrey!"

She scrambled down, and he followed her unwillingly, the blood racing through his veins. But he must needs help her again through the close-grown branches, and into the boat.

She peered at the soft thing she held in her hand.

"It's a bag, a little silk bag. And there's something in it! Light a match, Geoffrey."

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and obeyed her. Their two heads stooped together over the bag. Helena drew out a handkerchief—torn, with a lace edging.

"That's not a village woman's handkerchief!" she said, wondering. "And there are initials!"

He struck another match, and they distinguished something like F.M. very finely embroidered in the corner of the handkerchief. The match went out, and Helena put the handkerchief back into the bag, which she examined in the now full moonlight, as they drifted out of the shadow.

"And the bag itself is a most beautiful little thing! It's shabby and old, but it cost a great deal when it was new. What a strange, strange thing! We must tell Cousin Philip. Somebody, perhaps, was watching us all the time!"

She sat with her chin on her hands, gazing thoughtfully at French, the bag on her knees. Now that the little adventure was over, and she was begging him to take her back quickly to the house, Geoffrey was only conscious of disappointment and chagrin. What did the silly mystery in itself matter to him or her? But it had drawn a red herring across his track. Would the opportunity it had spoilt ever return?

CHAPTER X

It was a glorious June morning; and Beechmark, after the ball, was just beginning to wake up. Into the June garden, full of sun but gently beaten by a fresh wind, the dancers of the night before emerged one by one. Peter Dale had come out early, having quarrelled with his bed almost for the first time in his life. He was now, however, fast asleep in a garden-chair under a chestnut-tree. Buntingford, in flannels, and as fresh as though he had slept ten hours instead of three, strolled out through the library window, followed by French and Vivian Lodge.

"I say, what weather," said French, throwing himself down on the grass, his hands under his head. "Why can't Mother Nature provide us with this sort of thing a little more plentifully?"

"How much would any man jack of us do if it were always fine?" said Julian Horne, settling himself luxuriously in a deep and comfortable chair under a red hawthorn in full bloom. "When the weather makes one want to hang oneself, then's the moment for immortal works."

"For goodness' sake, don't prate, Julian!" said French, yawning, and flinging a rose-bud at Horne, which he had just gathered from a garden-bed at his elbow. "You've had so much more sleep than the rest of us, it isn't fair."

"I saw him sup," said Buntingford. "Who saw him afterwards?"

"No one but his Maker," said Lodge, who had drawn his hat over his eyes, and was lying on the grass beside French:—"and *le bon Dieu* alone knows what he was doing; for he wasn't asleep. I heard him tubbing at some unearthly hour in the room next to mine."

"I finished my article about seven a.m.," said Horne tranquilly—"while you

fellows were sleeping off the effects of debauch."

"Brute!" said Geoffrey languidly. Then suddenly, as though he had remembered something, he sat up.

"By the way, Buntingford, I had an adventure yesterday evening—Ah, here comes Helena! Half the story's mine—and half is hers. So we'll wait a moment."

The men sprang to their feet. Helena in the freshest of white gowns, white shoes and a white hat approached, looking preoccupied. Lady Mary Chance, who was sitting at an open drawing-room window, with a newspaper she was far too tired to read on her lap, was annoyed to see the general eagerness with which a girl who occasionally, and horribly said "D—mn!" and habitually smoked, was received by a group of infatuated males. Buntingford found the culprit a chair, and handed her a cigarette. The rest, after greeting her, subsided again on the grass.

"Poor Peter!" said Helena, in a tone of mock pity, turning her eyes to the sleeping form under the chestnut. "Have I won, or haven't I? I bet him I would be down first."

"You've lost—of course," said Horne. "Peter was down an hour ago."

"That's not what I meant by 'down.' I meant 'awake.'"

"No woman ever pays a bet if she can help it," said Horne, "—though I've known exceptions. But now, please, silence. Geoffrey says he has something to tell us—an adventure—which was half his and half yours. Which of you will begin?"

Helena threw a quick glance at Geoffrey, who nodded to her, perceiving at the same moment that she had in her hand the little embroidered bag of the night before.

"Geoffrey begins."

"Well, it'll thrill you," said Geoffrey slowly, "because there was a spy among us last night—'takin' notes.'"

And with the heightening touches that every good story-teller bestows upon a

story, he described the vision of the lake—the strange woman's face, as he had seen it in the twilight beside the yew trees.

Buntingford gradually dropped his cigarette to listen.

"Very curious—very interesting," he said ironically, as French paused, "and has lost nothing in the telling."

"Ah, but wait till you hear the end!" cried Helena. "Now, it's my turn."

And she completed the tale, holding up the bag at the close of it, so that the tarnished gold of its embroidery caught the light.

Buntingford took it from her, and turned it over. Then he opened it, drew out the handkerchief, and looked at the initials, "'F. M.'" He shook his head. "Conveys nothing. But you're quite right. That bag has nothing to do with a village woman—unless she picked it up."

"But the face I saw had nothing to do with a village woman, either," said French, with conviction. "It was subtle—melancholy—intense—more than that!—*fierce*, fiercely miserable. I guess that the woman possessing it would be a torment to her belongings if they happened not to suit her. And, my hat!—if you made her jealous!"

"Was she handsome?" asked Lodge.

Geoffrey shrugged his shoulders.

"Must have been—probably—when she was ten years younger."

"And she possessed this bag?" mused Buntingford—"which she or some one bought at Florence—for I've discovered the address of a shop in it—Fratelli Cortis, Via Tornabuoni, Firenze. You didn't find that out, Helena."

He passed the bag to her, pointing out a little printed silk label which had been sewn into the neck of it. Then Vivian Lodge asked for it and turned it over.

"Lovely work—and beautiful materials. Ah!—do you see what it is?"—he held it up—"the Arms of Florence, embroidered in gold and silver thread. H'm. I suppose, Buntingford, you get some Whitsuntide visitors in the village?"

"Oh, yes, a few. There's a little pub with one or two decent rooms, and several cottagers take lodgers. The lady, whoever she was, was scarcely a person of delicacy."

"She was in that place for an object," said Geoffrey, interrupting him with some decision. "Of that I feel certain. If she had just lost her way, and was trespassing—she must have known, I think, that she was trespassing—why didn't she answer my call and let me put her over the lake? Of course I should never have seen her at all, but for that accident of the searchlight."

"The question is," said Buntingford, "how long did she stay there? She was not under the yews when you saw her?"

"No—just outside."

"Well, then, supposing, to get out of the way of the searchlight, she found her way in and discovered my seat—how long do you guess she was there?—and when the bag dropped?"

"Any time between then—and midnight—when Helena found it," said French. "She may have gone very soon after I saw her, leaving the bag on the seat; or, if she stayed, on my supposition that she was there for the purpose of spying, then she probably vanished when she heard our boat drawn up, and knew that Helena and I were getting out."

"A long sitting!" said Buntingford with a laugh—"four hours. I really can't construct any reasonable explanation on those lines."

"Why not? Some people have a passion for spying and eavesdropping. If I were such a person, dumped in a country village with nothing to do, I think I could have amused myself a good deal last night, in that observation post. Through that hole I told you of, one could see the lights and the dancing on the lawn, and watch the boats on the lake. She could hear the music, and if anyone did happen to be talking secrets just under the yews, she could have heard every word, quite easily."

Involuntarily he looked at Helena, Helena was looking at the grass. Was it mere fancy, or was there a sudden pinkness in her cheeks? Buntingford too seemed to have a slightly conscious air. But he rose to his feet, with a laugh.

"Well, I'll have a stroll to the village, some time to-day, and see what I can discover about your *Incognita*, Helena. If she is a holiday visitor, she'll be still on the spot. Geoffrey had better come with me, as he's the only person who's seen her."

"Right you are. After lunch."

Buntingford nodded assent and went into the house.

* * * * *

The day grew hotter. Lodge and Julian Horne went off for a swim in the cool end of the lake. Peter still slept, looking so innocent and infantine in his sleep that no one had the heart to wake him. French and Helena were left together, and were soon driven by the advancing sun to the deep shade of a lime-avenue, which, starting from the back of the house, ran for half a mile through the park. Here they were absolutely alone. Lady Mary's prying eyes were defeated, and Helena incidentally remarked that Mrs. Friend, being utterly "jacked up," had been bullied into staying in bed till luncheon.

So that in the green sunflecked shadow of the limes, Geoffrey had—if Helena so pleased—a longer *tête-à-tête* before him, and a more generous opportunity, even, than the gods had given him on the lake. His pulses leapt; goaded, however, by alternate hope and fear. But at least he had the chance to probe the situation a little deeper; even if prudence should ultimately forbid him anything more.

Helena had chosen a wooden seat round one of the finest limes. Some books brought out for show rather than use, lay beside her. A piece of knitting—a scarf of a bright greenish yellow—lay on the lap of her white dress. She had taken off her hat, and Geoffrey was passionately conscious of the beauty of the brown head resting, as she talked, against the furrowed trunk of the lime. Her brown-gold hair was dressed in the new way, close to the head and face, and fastened by some sapphire pins behind the ear. From this dark frame, and in the half light of the avenue, the exquisite whiteness of the forehead and neck, the brown eyes, so marvellously large and brilliant, and yet so delicately finished in every detail beneath their perfect brows, and the curve of the lips over the small white teeth, stood out as if they had been painted on ivory by a miniature-painter of the Renaissance. Her white dress, according to the prevailing fashion, was almost low—as children's frocks used to be in the days of our great-grandmothers. It

was made with a childish full bodice, and a childish sash of pale blue held up the rounded breast, that rose and fell with her breathing, beneath the white muslin. Pale blue stockings, and a pair of white shoes, with preposterous heels and pointed toes, completed the picture. The mingling, in the dress, of extreme simplicity with the cunningest artifice, and the greater daring and *joie de vivre* which it expressed, as compared with the dress of pre-war days, made it characteristic and symbolic:—a dress of the New Time.

Geoffrey lay on the grass beside her, feasting his eyes upon her—discreetly. Since when had English women grown so beautiful? At all the weddings and most of the dances he had lately attended, the brides and the *débutantes* had seemed to him of a loveliness out of all proportion to that of their fore-runners in those far-off days before the war. And when a War Office mission, just before the Armistice, had taken him to some munition factories in the north, he had been scarcely less seized by the comeliness of the girl-workers:—the long lines of them in their blue overalls, and the blue caps that could scarcely restrain the beauty and wealth of pale yellow or red-gold hair beneath. Is there something in the rush and flame of war that quickens old powers and dormant virtues in a race? Better feeding and better wages among the working-classes—one may mark them down perhaps as factors in this product of a heightened beauty. But for these exquisite women of the upper class, is it the pace at which they have lived, unconsciously, for these five years, that has brought out this bloom and splendour?—and will it pass as it has come?

Questions of this kind floated through his mind as he lay looking at Helena, melting rapidly into others much more peremptory and personal.

"Are you soon going up to Town?" he asked her presently. His voice seemed to startle her. She returned evidently with difficulty from thoughts of her own. He would have given his head to read them.

"No," she said hesitatingly. "Why should we? It is so jolly down here. Everything's getting lovely."

"I thought you wanted a bit of season! I thought that was part of your bargain with Philip?"

"Yes—but"—she laughed—"I didn't know how nice Beechmark was."

His sore sense winced.

"Doesn't Philip want you to go?"

"Not at all. He says he gets much more work done in Town, without Mrs. Friend and me to bother him—"

"He puts it that way?"

"Politely! And it rests him to come down here for Sundays. He loves the riding."

"I shouldn't have thought the Sundays were much rest?"

"Ah, but they're going to be!" she said eagerly. "We're not going to have another party for a whole month. Cousin Philip has been treating me like a spoiled child—stuffing me with treats—and I've put an end to it!"

And this was the Helena that had stipulated so fiercely for her week-ends and her pals! The smart deepened.

"And you won't be tired of the country?"

"In the winter, perhaps," she said carelessly. "Philip and I have all sorts of plans for the things we want to do in London in the winter. But not now—when every hour's delicious!"

"*Philip and I*!"—a new combination indeed!

She threw her head back again, drinking in the warm light and shade, the golden intensity of the fresh leaf above her.

"And next week there'll be frost, and you'll be shivering over the fire," he threw at her, in a sarcastic voice.

"Well, even that—would be nicer—than London," she said slowly. "I never imagined I should like the country so much. Of course I wish there was more to do. I told Philip so last night."

"And what did he say?"

But she suddenly flushed and evaded the question.

"Oh, well, he hadn't much to say," said Helena, looking a little conscious.

"Anyway, I'm getting a little education. Mrs. Friend's brushing up my French—which is vile. And I do some reading every week for Philip—and some drawing. By the way"—she turned upon her companion—"do you know his drawings?—they're just ripping! He must have been an awfully good artist. But I've only just got him to show me his things. He never talks of them himself."

"I've never seen one. His oldest friends can hardly remember that time in his life. He seems to want to forget it."

"Well, naturally!" said Helena, with an energy that astonished her listener; but before he could probe what she meant, she stooped over him:

"Geoffrey!"

"Yes!"

He saw that she had coloured brightly.

"Do you remember all that nonsense I talked to you a month ago?"

"I can remember it if you want me to. Something about old Philip being a bully and a tyrant, wasn't it?"

"Some rubbish like that. Well—I don't want to be maudlin—but I wish to put it on record that Philip *isn't* a bully and he *isn't* a tyrant. He can be a jolly good friend!"

"With some old-fashioned opinions?" put in Geoffrey mockingly.

"Old-fashioned opinions?—yes, of course. And you needn't imagine that I shall agree with them all. Oh, you may laugh, Geoffrey, but it's quite true. I'm not a bit crushed. That's the delightful part of it. It's because he has a genius—yes, a genius—for friendship. I didn't know him when I came down here—I didn't know him a bit—and I was an idiot. But one could trust him to the very last."

Her hands lay idly on the bright-coloured knitting, and Geoffrey could watch the emotion on her face.

"And one is so glad to be his friend!" she went on softly, "because he has suffered so!"

"You mean in his marriage? What do you know about it?"

"Can't one guess?" she went on in the same low voice. "He never speaks of her! There isn't a picture of her, of any sort, in the house. He used to speak of her sometimes, I believe, to mother—of course she never said a word—but never, never, to anyone else. It's quite clear that he wants to forget it altogether. Well, you don't want to forget what made you happy. And he says such bitter things often. Oh, I'm sure it was a tragedy!"

"Well—why doesn't he marry again?" Geoffrey had turned over on his elbows, and seemed to be examining the performances of an ant who was trying to carry off a dead fly four times his size.

Helena did not answer immediately, and Geoffrey, looking up from the ant, was aware of conflicting expressions passing across her face. At last she said, drawing a deep breath:

"Well, at least, I'm glad he's come to like this dear old place—He never used to care about it in the least."

"That's because you've made it so bright for him," said Geoffrey, finding a seat on a tree-stump near her, and fumbling for a cigarette. The praises of Philip were becoming monotonous and a reckless wish to test his own fate was taking possession of him.

"I haven't!"—said Helena vehemently. "I have asked all sorts of people down he didn't like—and I've made him live in one perpetual racket. I've been an odious little beast. But now—perhaps—I shall know better what he wants."

"Excellent sentiments!" A scoffer looked down upon her through curling rings of smoke. "Shall I tell you what Philip wants?"

"What?"

"He wants a wife."

The attentive eyes fixed on him withdrew themselves.

"Well—suppose he does?"

"Are you going to supply him with one? Lady Cynthia, I think, would accommodate you."

Helena flushed angrily.

"He hasn't the smallest intention of proposing to Cynthia. Nobody with eyes in their head would suggest it."

"No—but if you and he are such great friends—couldn't you pull it off? It would be very suitable," said Geoffrey coolly.

Helena broke out—the quick breath beating against her white bodice:

"Of course I understand you perfectly, Geoffrey—perfectly! You're not very subtle—are you? What you're thinking is that when I call Philip my friend I'm meaning something else—that I'm plotting—intriguing—"

Her words choked her. Geoffrey put out a soothing hand—and touched hers.

"My dear child:—how could I suggest anything of the kind? I'm only a little sorry—for Philip,"

"Philip can take care of himself," she said passionately. "Only a *stupid—conventional*—mind could want to spoil what is really so—so—"

"So charming?" suggested Geoffrey, springing to his feet. "Very well, Helena!—then if Philip is really nothing more to you than your guardian, and your very good friend—why not give some one else a chance?"

He bent over her, his kind, clever face aglow with the feeling he could no longer conceal. Their eyes met—Helena's at first resentful, scornful even—then soft. She too stood up, and put out a pair of protesting hands—"Please—please, Geoffrey,—*don't*."

"Why not—you angel!" He possessed himself of one of the hands and made her move with him along the avenue, looking closely into her eyes. "You must know what I feel! I wanted to speak to you last night, but you tricked me. I just adore you, Helena! I've got quite good prospects—I'm getting on in the House of Commons—and I would work for you day and night!"

"You didn't adore me a month ago!" said Helena, a triumphant little smile playing about her mouth. "How you lectured me!"

"For you highest good," he said, laughing; though his heart beat to suffocation. "Just give me a word of hope, Helena! Don't turn me down, at once."

"Then you mustn't talk nonsense," she said vehemently, withdrawing her hand. "I don't want to be engaged! I don't want to be married! Why can't I be let alone?"

Geoffrey had turned a little pale. In the pause that followed he fell back on a cigarette for consolation. "Why can't you be let alone?" he said at last. "Why?—because—you're Helena!"

"What a stupid answer!" she said contemptuously. Then, with one of her quick changes, she came near to him again. "Geoffrey!—it's no good pressing me—but don't be angry with me, there's a dear. Just be my friend and help me!"

She put a hand on his arm, and the face that looked into his would have bewitched a stone.

"That's a very old game, Helena. 'Marry you? Rather not! but you may join the queue of rejected ones if you like.'"

A mischievous smile danced in Helena's eyes.

"None of them can say I don't treat them nicely!"

"I daresay. But I warn you I shan't accept the position for long. I shall begin again."

"Well, but not yet!—not for a long time," she pleaded. Then she gave a little impatient stamp, as she walked beside him.

"I tell you—I don't want to be bound. I won't be bound! I want to be free."

"So you said—*à propos* of Philip," he retorted drily.

He saw the shaft strike home—the involuntary dropping of the eyelids, the soft catch in the breath. But she rallied quickly.

"That was altogether different! You had no business to say that, Geoffrey."

"Well, then, forgive me—and keep me quiet—just—just one kiss, Helena!"

The last passionate words were hardly audible. They had passed into the deepest shadow of the avenue. No one was visible in all its green length. They stood ensiled by summer; the great trees mounting guard. Helena threw a glance to right and left.

"Well, then—to keep you quiet—*sans préjudice*!"

She demurely offered her cheek. But his lips were scarcely allowed to touch it, she drew away so quickly.

"Now, then, that's quite settled!" she said in her most matter-of-fact voice. "Such a comfort! Let's go back."

They turned back along the avenue, a rather flushed pair, enjoying each other's society, and discussing the dance, and their respective partners.

It happened, however, that this little scene—at its most critical point—had only just escaped a spectator. Philip Buntingford passed across the further end of the avenue on his way to the Horne Farm, at the moment when Helena and Geoffrey turned their backs to him, walking towards the house. They were not aware of him; but he stopped a moment to watch the young figures disappearing under the green shade. A look of pleasure was in his blue eyes. It seemed to him that things were going well in that direction. And he wished them to go well. He had known Geoffrey since he was a little chap in his first breeches; had watched him through Winchester and Oxford, had taken as semi-paternal pride in the young man's distinguished war record, and had helped him with his election expenses. He himself was intimate with very few of the younger generation. His companions in the Admiralty work, and certain senior naval officers with whom that work had made him acquainted:—a certain intimacy, a certain real friendship had indeed grown up between him and some of them. But something old and tired in him made the effort of bridging the gulf between himself and men in their twenties—generally speaking—too difficult. Or he thought so. The truth was, perhaps, as Geoffrey had expressed it to Helena, that many of the younger men who had been brought into close official or business contact with him felt a real affection for him. Buntingford would have thought it strange that

they should do so, and never for one moment assumed it.

After its languid morning, Beechmark revived with the afternoon. Its young men guests, whom the Dansworth rioters would probably have classed as parasites and idlers battening on the toil of the people, had in fact earned their holiday by a good many months of hard work, whether in the winding up of the war, or the re-starting of suspended businesses, or the renewed activities of the bar; and they were taking it whole-heartedly. Golf, tennis, swimming, and sleep had filled the day, and it was a crowd in high spirits that gathered round Mrs. Friend for tea on the lawn, somewhere about five o'clock. Lucy, who had reached that stage of fatigue the night before when—like Peter Dale, only for different reasons—her bed became her worst enemy, had scarcely slept a wink, but was nevertheless presiding gaily over the tea-table. She looked particularly small and slight in a little dress of thin grey stuff that Helena had coaxed her to wear in lieu of her perennial black, but there was that expression in her pretty eyes as of a lifted burden, and a new friendship with life, which persons in Philip Buntingford's neighbourhood, when they belonged to the race of the meek and gentle, were apt to put on. Peter Dale hung about her, distributing tea and cake, and obedient to all her wishes. More than once in these later weeks he had found, in the dumb sympathy and understanding of the little widow, something that had been to him like shadow in the desert. He was known to fame as one of the smartest young aide-de-camps in the army, and fabulously rich besides. His invitation cards, carelessly stacked in his Curzon Street rooms, were a sight to see. But Helena had crushed his manly spirit. Sitting under the shadow of Mrs. Friend, he liked to watch from a distance the beautiful and dazzling creature who would have none of him. He was very sorry for himself; but, all the same, he had had some rattling games of tennis; the weather was divine, and he could still gaze at Helena; so that although the world was evil, "the thrushes still sang in it."

Buntingford and Geoffrey were seen walking up from the lake when tea was nearly over.

All eyes were turned to them.

"Now, then," said Julian Horne—"for the mystery, and its key. What a pity mysteries are generally such frauds! They can't keep it up. They let you down when you least expect it."

"Well, what news?" cried Helena, as the two men approached. Buntingford

shook his head.

"Not much to tell—very little, indeed."

It appeared to Horne that both men looked puzzled and vaguely excited. But their story was soon told. They had seen Richard Stimson, a labourer, who reported having noticed a strange lady crossing the park in the direction of the wood, which, however, she had not entered, having finally changed her course so as to bear towards the Western Lodge and the allotments.

"That, you will observe, was about ten o'clock," interjected French, "and I saw my lady about eight." Buntingford found a chair, lit a cigarette, and resumed:

"She appeared in the village some time yesterday morning and went into the church. She told the woman who was cleaning there that she had come to look at an old window which was mentioned in her guide-book. The woman noticed that she stayed some time looking at the monuments in the church, and the tombs in the Buntingford chantry, which all the visitors go to see. She ordered some sandwiches at the Rose-and-Crown and got into talk with the landlord. He says she asked the questions strangers generally do ask—'Who lived in the neighbourhood?'—If she took a lodging in the village for August were there many nice places to go and see?—and so on. She said she had visited the Buntingford tombs in the chantry, and asked some questions about the family, and myself—Was I married?—Who was the heir? etc. Then when she had paid her bill, she enquired the way across the park to Feetham Station, and said she would have a walk and catch a six o'clock train back to London. She loved the country, she said—and liked walking. And that really is—all!"

"Except about her appearance," put in Geoffrey. "The landlord said he thought she must be an actress, or 'summat o' that sort.' She had such a strange way of looking at you. But when we asked what that meant, he scratched his head and couldn't tell us. All that we got out of him was he wouldn't like to have her for a lodger—'she'd frighten his missus.' Oh, and he did say that she looked dead-tired, and that he advised her not to walk to Feetham, but to wait for the five o'clock bus that goes from the village to the station. But she said she liked walking, and would find some cool place in the park to sit in—till it was time to catch the train."

"She was well-dressed, he said," added Buntingford, addressing himself to Cynthia Welwyn, who sat beside him; "and his description of her hat and veil, etc., quite agreed with old Stimson's account."

There was a silence, in which everybody seemed to be trying to piece the evidence together as to the mysterious onlooker of the night, and make a collected whole of it. Buntingford and Geoffrey were especially thoughtful and preoccupied. At last the former, after smoking a while without speaking, got up with the remark that he must see to some letters before post.

"Oh, no!"—pleaded Helena, intercepting him, and speaking so that he only should hear. "To-morrow's Whitsunday, and Monday's Bank Holiday. What's the use of writing letters? Don't you remember—you promised to show me those drawings before dinner—and may Geoffrey come, too?"

A sudden look of reluctance and impatience crossed Buntingford's face. Helena perceived it at once, and drew back. But Buntingford said immediately:

"Oh, certainly. In half an hour, I'll have the portfolios ready."

He walked away. Helena sat flushed and silent, her eyes on the ground, twisting and untwisting the handkerchief on her lap. And, presently, she too disappeared. The rest of the party were left to discuss with Geoffrey French the ins and outs of the evidence, and to put up various theories as to the motives of the woman of the yew trees; an occupation that lasted them till dressing-time.

Cynthia Welwyn took but little share in it. She was sitting rather apart from the rest, under a blue parasol which made an attractive combination with her semi-transparent black dress and the bright gold of her hair. In reality, her thoughts

were busy with quite other matters than the lady of the yews. It did not seem to her of any real importance that a half-crazy stranger, attracted by the sounds and sights of the ball, on such a beautiful night, should have tried to watch it from the lake. The whole tale was curious, but—to her—irrelevant. The mystery she burned to find out was nearer home. Was Helena Pitstone falling in love with Philip? And if so, what was the effect on Philip? Cynthia had not much enjoyed her dance. The dazzling, the unfair ascendency of youth, as embodied in Helena, had been rather more galling than usual; and the "sittings out" she had arranged with Philip during the supper dances had been all cancelled by her sister's tiresome attack. Julian Horne, who generally got on with her, chivalrously moved his seat near to her, and tried to talk. But he found her in a rather dry and caustic mood. The ball had seemed to her "badly managed"; and the guests, outside the house-party, "an odd set."

Meanwhile, exactly at the hour named by Buntingford, he heard a knock at the library door. Helena appeared.

She stood just inside the door, looking absurdly young and childish in her white frock. But her face was grave.

"I thought just now"—she said, almost timidly,—"that you were bored by my asking you to show us those things. Are you? Please tell me. I didn't mean to get in the way of anything you were doing."

"Bored! Not in the least. Here they are, all ready for you. Come in."

She saw two or three large portfolios distributed on chairs, and one or two drawings already on exhibition. Her face cleared.

"Oh, what a heavenly thing!"

She made straight for a large drawing of the Val d'Arno in spring, and the gap in the mountains that leads to Lucca, taken from some high point above Fiesole. She knelt down before it in an ecstasy of pleasure.

"Mummy and I were there two years before the war. I do believe you came too?" She looked up, smiling, at the face above her.

It was the first time she had ever appealed to her childish recollections of him in any other than a provocative or half-resentful tone. He could remember a good

many tussles with her in her frail mother's interest, when she was a long-legged, insubordinate child of twelve. And when Helena first arrived at Beechmark, it had hurt him to realize how bitterly she remembered such things, how grossly she had exaggerated them. The change indicated in her present manner, soothed his tired, nervous mood. His smile answered her.

"Yes, I was there with you two or three days. Do you remember the wild tulips we gathered at Settignano?"

"And the wild cherries—and the pear-blossoms! Italy in the spring is *Heaven*!" she said, under her breath, as she dropped to a sitting posture on the floor while he put the drawings before her.

"Well!—shall we go there next spring?"

"Don't tempt me—and then back out!"

"If I did," he said, laughing, "you could still go with Mrs. Friend."

She made no answer. Another knock at the door.

"There's Geoffrey. Come in, old boy. We've only just begun."

Half an hour's exhibition followed. Both Helena and French were intelligent spectators, and their amazement at the quality and variety of the work shown them seemed half-welcome, half-embarrassing to their host.

"Why don't you go on with it? Why don't you exhibit?" cried Helena.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It doesn't interest me now. It's a past phase."

She longed to ask questions. But his manner didn't encourage it. And when the half-hour was done he looked at his watch.

"Dressing-time," he said, smiling, holding it out to Helena. She rose at once. Philip was a delightful artist, but the operations of dressing were not to be trifled with. Her thanks, however, for "a lovely time!" and her pleading for a second show on the morrow, were so graceful, so sweet, that French, as he silently put

the drawings back, felt his spirits drop to zero. What could have so changed the thorny, insolent girl of six weeks before—but the one thing? He stole a glance at Buntingford. Surely he must realize what was happening—and his huge responsibility—he *must*.

Helena disappeared. Geoffrey volunteered to tie up a portfolio they had only half examined, while Buntingford finished a letter. While he was handling it, the portfolio slipped, and a number of drawings fell out pell-mell upon the floor.

Geoffrey stooped to pick them up. A vehement exclamation startled Buntingford at his desk.

"What's the matter, Geoffrey?"

"Philip! *That's* the woman I saw!—that's her face!—I could swear to it anywhere!"

He pointed with excitement to the drawing of a woman's head and shoulders, which had fallen out from the very back of the portfolio, whereof the rotting straps and fastenings showed that it had not been opened for many years.

Buntingford came to his side. He looked at the drawing—then at French. His face seemed suddenly to turn grey and old.

"My God!" he said under his breath, and again, still lower—"*My God*! Of course. I knew it!"

He dropped into a chair beside Geoffrey, and buried his face in his hands.

Geoffrey stared at him in silence, a bewildering tumult of ideas and conjectures rushing through his brain.

Another knock at the door. Buntingford rose automatically, went to the door, spoke to the servant who had knocked, and came back with a note in his hand, which he took to the window to read. Then with steps which seemed to French to waver like those of a man half drunk he went to his writing-desk, and wrote a reply which he gave to the servant who was waiting in the passage. He stood a moment thinking, his hand over his eyes, before he approached his nephew.

"Geoffrey, will you please take my place at dinner to-night? I am going out.

Make any excuse you like." He moved away—but turned back again, speaking with much difficulty—"The woman you saw—is at the Rectory. Alcott took her in last night. He writes to me. I am going there."

CHAPTER XI

Buntingford walked rapidly across the park, astonishing the old lodge-keeper who happened to see him pass through, and knew that his lordship had a large Whitsuntide party at the house, who must at that very moment be sitting down to dinner.

The Rectory lay at the further extremity of the village, which was long and straggling. The village street, still bathed in sun, was full of groups of holiday makers, idling and courting. To avoid them, Buntingford stepped into one of his own plantations, in which there was a path leading straight to the back of the Rectory.

He walked like one half-stunned, with very little conscious thought. As to the blow which had now fallen, he had lived under the possibility of it for fourteen years. Only since the end of the war had he begun to feel some security, and in consequence to realize a new ferment in himself. Well—now at least he would *know*. And the hunger to know winged his feet.

He found a gate leading into the garden of the Rectory open, and went through it towards the front of the house. A figure in grey flannels, with a round collar, was pacing up and down the little grass-plot there, waiting for him.

John Alcott came forward at sight of him. He took Buntingford's hand in both his own, and looked into his face. "Is it true?" he said, gently.

"Probably," said Buntingford, after a moment.

"Will you come into my study? I think you ought to hear our story before you see her."

He led the way into the tiny house, and into his low-roofed study, packed with

books from floor to ceiling, the books of a lonely man who had found in them his chief friends. He shut the door with care, suggesting that they should speak as quietly as possible, since the house was so small, and sound travelled so easily through it.

"Where is she?" said Buntingford, abruptly, as he took the chair Alcott pushed towards him.

"Just overhead. It is our only spare room."

Buntingford nodded, and the two heads, the black and the grey, bent towards each other, while Alcott gave his murmured report.

"You know we have no servant. My sister does everything, with my help, and a village woman once or twice a week. Lydia came down this morning about seven o'clock and opened the front door. To her astonishment she found a woman leaning against the front pillar of our little porch. My sister spoke to her, and then saw she must be exhausted or ill. She told her to come in, and managed to get her into the dining-room where there is a sofa. She said a few incoherent things after lying down and then fainted. My sister called me, and I went for our old doctor. He came back with me, said it was collapse, and heart weakness—perhaps after influenza—and that we must on no account move her except on to a bed in the dining-room till he had watched her a little. She was quite unable to give any account of herself, and while we were watching her she seemed to go into a heavy sleep. She only recovered consciousness about five o'clock this evening. Meanwhile I had been obliged to go to a diocesan meeting at Dansworth and I left my sister and Dr. Ramsay in charge of her, suggesting that as there was evidently something unusual in the case nothing should be said to anybody outside the house till I came back and she was able to talk to us. I hurried back, and found the doctor giving injections of strychnine and brandy which seemed to be reviving her. While we were all standing round her, she said quite clearly—'I want to see Philip Buntingford.' Dr. Ramsay knelt down beside her, and asked her to tell him, if she was strong enough, why she wanted to see you. She did not open her eyes, but said again distinctly—'Because I am'—or was—I am not quite sure which—'his wife.' And after a minute or two she said twice over, very faintly—'Send for him—send for him.' So then I wrote my note to you and sent it off. Since then the doctor and my sister have succeeded in carrying her upstairs—and the doctor gives leave for you to see her. He is coming back again presently. During her sleep, she talked incoherently once or

twice about a lake and a boat—and once she said—'Oh, do stop that music!' and moved her head about as though it hurt her. Since then I have heard some gossip from the village about a strange lady who was seen in the park last night. Naturally one puts two and two together—but we have said nothing yet to anyone. Nobody knows that she—if the woman seen in the park, and the woman upstairs are the same—is here."

He looked interrogatively at his companion. But Buntingford, who had risen, stood dumb.

"May I go upstairs?" was all he said.

The rector led the way up a small cottage staircase. His sister, a grey-haired woman of rather more than middle age, spectacled and prim, but with the eyes of the pure in heart, heard them on the stairs and came out to meet them.

"She is quite ready, and I am in the next room, if you want me. Please knock on the wall."

Buntingford entered and shut the door. He stood at the foot of the bed. The woman lying on it opened her eyes, and they looked at each other long and silently. The face on the pillow had still the remains of beauty. The powerful mouth and chin, the nose, which was long and delicate, the deep-set eyes, and broad brow under strong waves of hair, were all fused in a fine oval; and the modelling of the features was intensely and passionately expressive. That indeed was at once the distinction and, so to speak, the terror of the face,—its excessive, abnormal individualism, its surplus of expression. A woman to fret herself and others to decay—a woman, to burn up her own life, and that of her lover, her husband, her child. Only physical weakness had at last set bounds to what had once been a whirlwind force.

"Anna!" said Buntingford gently.

She made a feeble gesture which beckoned him to come nearer—to sit down—and he came. All the time he was sharply, irrelevantly conscious of the little room, the bed with its white dimity furniture, the texts on the distempered walls, the head of the Leonardo Christ over the mantelpiece, the white muslin dressing-table, the strips of carpet on the bare boards, the cottage chairs:—the spotless cleanliness and the poverty of it all. He saw as the artist, who cannot help but see, even at moments of intense feeling.

"You thought—I was dead?" The woman in the bed moved her haggard eyes towards him.

"Yes, lately I thought it. I didn't, for a long time."

"I put that notice in—so that—you might marry again," she said, slowly, and with difficulty.

"I suspected that."

"But you—didn't marry."

"How could I?—when I had no real evidence?"

She closed her eyes, as though any attempt to argue, or explain was beyond her, and he had to wait while she gathered strength again. After what seemed a long time, and in a rather stronger voice she said:

"Did you ever find out—what I had done?"

"I discovered that you had gone away with Rocca—into Italy. I followed you by motor, and got news of you as having gone over the Splugen. My car had a bad accident on the pass, and I was ten weeks in hospital at Chur. After that I lost all trace."

"I heard of the accident," she said, her eyes all the while searching out the changed details of a face which had once been familiar to her. "But Rocca wasn't with me then. I had only old Zélie—you remember?"

"The old *bonne*—we had at Melun?"

She made a sign of assent.—"I never lived with Rocca—till after the child was born."

"The child! What do you mean?"

The words were a cry. He hung over her, shaken and amazed.

"You never knew!"—There was a faint, ghastly note of triumph in her voice. "I wouldn't tell you—after that night we quarrelled—I concealed it. But he is your

son—sure enough."

"My son!—and he is alive?" Buntingford bent closer, trying to see her face.

She turned to look at him, nodding silently.

"Where is he?"

"In London. It was about him—I came down here. I—I—want to get rid of him."

A look of horror crossed his face, as though in her faint yet violent words he caught the echoes of an intolerable past. But he controlled himself.

"Tell me more—I want to help you."

"You—you won't get any joy of him!" she said, still staring at him.
"He's not like other children—he's afflicted. It was a bad doctor—when
I was confined—up in the hills near Lucca. The child was injured.
There's nothing wrong with him—but his brain."

A flickering light in Buntingford's face sank.

"And you want to get rid of him?"

"He's so much trouble," she said peevishly. "I did the best I could for him. Now I can't afford to look after him. I thought of everything I could do—before—"

"Before you thought of coming to me?"

She assented. A long pause followed, during which Miss Alcott came in, administered stimulant, and whispered to Buntingford to let her rest a little. He sat there beside her motionless, for half an hour or more, unconscious of the passage of time, his thoughts searching the past, and then again grappling dully with the extraordinary, the incredible statement that he possessed a son—a living but, apparently, an idiot son. The light began to fail, and Miss Alcott slipped in noiselessly again to light a small lamp out of sight of the patient. "The doctor will soon be here," she whispered to Buntingford.

The light of the lamp roused the woman. She made a sign to Miss Alcott to lift her a little.

"Not much," said the Rector's sister in Buntingford's ear. "It's the heart that's wrong."

Together they raised her just a little. Miss Alcott put a fan into Buntingford's hands, and opened the windows wider.

"I'm all right," said the stranger irritably. "Let me alone. I've got a lot to say." She turned her eyes on Buntingford. "Do you want to know—about Rocca?"

"Yes."

"He died seven years ago. He was always good to me—awfully good to me and to the boy. We lived in a horrible out-of-the-way place—up in the mountains near Naples. I didn't want you to know about the boy. I wanted revenge. Rocca changed his name to Melegrani. I called myself Francesca Melegrani. I used to exhibit both at Naples and Rome. Nobody ever found out who we were."

"What made you put that notice in the *Times*?"

She smiled faintly, and the smile recalled to him an old expression of hers, half-cynical, half-defiant.

"I had a pious fit once—when Rocca was very ill. I confessed to an old priest—in the Abruzzi. He told me to go back to you—and ask your forgiveness. I was living in sin, he said—and would go to hell. A dear old fool! But he had some influence with me. He made me feel some remorse—about you—only I wouldn't give up the boy. So when Rocca got well and was going to Lyons, I made him post the notice from there—to the *Times*. I hoped you'd believe it." Then, unexpectedly, she slightly raised her head, the better to see the man beside her.

"Do you mean to marry that girl I saw on the lake?"

"If you mean the girl that I was rowing, she is the daughter of a cousin of mine. I am her guardian."

"She's handsome." Her unfriendly eyes showed her incredulity.

He drew himself stiffly together.

"Don't please waste your strength on foolish ideas. I am not going to marry her,

nor anybody."

"You couldn't—till you divorce me—or till I die," she said feebly, her lids dropping again—"but I'm quite ready to see any lawyers—so that you can get free."

"Don't think about that now, but tell me again—what you want me to do."

"I want—to go to—America. I've got friends there. I want you to pay my passage—because I'm a pauper—and to take over the boy."

"I'll do all that. You shall have a nurse—when you are strong enough—who will take you across. Now I must go. Can you just tell me first where the boy is?"

Almost inaudibly she gave an address in Kentish Town. He saw that she could bear no more, and he rose.

"Try and sleep," he said in a voice that wavered. "I'll see you again to-morrow. You're all right here."

She made no reply, and seemed again either asleep or unconscious.

As he stood by the bed, looking down upon her, scenes and persons he had forgotten for years rushed back into the inner light of memory:—that first day in Lebas's atelier when he had seen her in her Holland overall, her black hair loose on her neck, the provocative brilliance of her dark eyes; their close comradeship in the contests, the quarrels, the ambitions of the atelier; her patronage of him as her junior in art, though her senior in age; her increasing influence over him, and the excitement of intimacy with a creature so unrestrained, so gifted, so consumed with jealousies, whether as an artist or a woman; his proposal of marriage to her in one of the straight roads that cut the forest of Compiegne; the ceremony at the Mairie, with only a few of their fellow students for witnesses; the little apartment on the Rive Gauche, with its bits of old furniture, and unframed sketches pinned up on the walls; Anna's alternations of temper, now fascinating, now sulky, and that steady emergence in her of coarse or vulgar traits, like rocks in an ebbing sea; their early quarrels, and her old mother who hated him; their poverty because of her extravagance; his growing reluctance to take her to England, or to present her to persons of his own class and breeding in Paris, and her frantic jealousy and resentment when she discovered it; their scenes of an alternate violence and reconciliation and finally her disappearance,

in the company, as he had always supposed, of Sigismondo Rocca, an Italian studying in Paris, whose pursuit of her had been notorious for some time.

The door opened gently, and Miss Alcott's grey head appeared.

"The doctor!" she said, just audibly.

Buntingford followed her downstairs, and found himself presently in Alcott's study, alone with a country doctor well known to him, a man who had pulled out his own teeth in childhood, had attended his father and grandfather before him, and carried in his loyal breast the secrets and the woes of a whole countryside.

They grasped hands in silence.

"You know who she is?" said Buntingford quietly.

"I understand that she tells Mr. Alcott that she was Mrs. Philip Bliss, that she left you fifteen years ago, and that you believed her dead?"

He saw Buntingford shrink.

"At times I did—yes, at times I did—but we won't go into that. Is she ill—really ill?"

Ramsay spoke deliberately, after a minute's thought:

"Yes, she is probably very ill. The heart is certainly in a dangerous state. I thought she would have slipped away this morning, when they called me in—the collapse was so serious. She is not a strong woman, and she had a bad attack of influenza last week. Then she was out all last night, wandering about, evidently in a state of great excitement. It was as bad a fainting fit as I have ever seen."

"It would be impossible to move her?"

"For a day or two certainly. She keeps worrying about a boy—apparently her own boy?"

"I will see to that."

Ramsay hesitated a moment and then said—"What are we to call her? It will not

be possible, I imagine, to keep her presence here altogether a secret. She called herself, in talking to Miss Alcott, Madame Melegrani."

"Why not? As to explaining her, I hardly know what to say."

Buntingford put his hand across his eyes; the look of weariness, of perplexity, intensified ten-fold.

"An acquaintance of yours in Italy, come to ask you for help?" suggested Ramsay.

Buntingford withdrew his hand.

"No!" he said with decision. "Better tell the truth! She was my wife. She left me, as she has told the Alcotts, and took steps eleven years ago to make me believe her dead. And up to seven years ago, she passed as the wife of a man whom I knew by the name of Sigismondo Rocca. When the announcement of her death appeared, I set enquiries on foot at once, with no result. Latterly, I have thought it must be true; but I have never been quite certain. She has reappeared now, it seems, partly because she has no resources, and partly in order to restore to me my son."

"Your son!" said Ramsay, startled.

"She tells me that a boy was born after she left me, and that I am the father. All that I must verify. No need to say anything whatever about that yet. Her main purpose, no doubt, was to ask for pecuniary assistance, in order to go to America. In return she will furnish my lawyers with all the evidence necessary for my divorce from her."

Ramsay slowly shook his head.

"I doubt whether she will ever get to America. She has worn herself out."

There was a silence. Then Buntingford added:

"If these kind people would keep her, it would be the best solution. I would make everything easy for them. To-morrow I go up to Town—to the address she has given me. And—I should be glad if you would come with me?"

The doctor looked surprised.

"Of course—if you want me—"

"The boy—his mother says—is abnormal—deficient. An injury at birth. If you will accompany me I shall know better what to do."

A grasp of the hand, a look of sympathy answered; and they parted. Buntingford emerged from the little Rectory to find Alcott again waiting for him in the garden. The sun had set some time and the moon was peering over the hills to the east. The mounting silver rim suddenly recalled to Buntingford the fairy-like scene of the night before?—the searchlight on the lake, the lights, the music, and the exquisite figure of Helena dancing through it all. Into what Vale of the Shadow of Death had he passed since then?—

Alcott and he turned into the plantation walk together. Various practical arrangements were discussed between them. Alcott and his sister would keep the sick woman in their house as long as might be necessary, and Buntingford once more expressed his gratitude.

Then, under the darkness of the trees, and in reaction from the experience he had just passed through, an unhappy man's hitherto impenetrable reserve, to some extent, broke down. And the companion walking beside him showed himself a true minister of Christ—-humble, tactful, delicate, yet with the courage of his message. What struck him most, perhaps, was the revelation of what must have been Buntingford's utter loneliness through long years; the spiritual isolation in which a man of singularly responsive and confiding temper had passed perhaps a quarter of his life, except for one blameless friendship with a woman now dead. His utmost efforts had not been able to discover the wife who had deserted him, or to throw any light upon her subsequent history. The law, therefore, offered him no redress. He could not free himself; and he could not marry again. Yet marriage and fatherhood were his natural destiny, thwarted by the fatal mistake of his early youth. Nothing remained but to draw a steady veil over the past, and to make what he could of the other elements in life.

Alcott gathered clearly from the story that there had been no other woman or women in the case, since his rupture with his wife. Was it that his marriage, with all its repulsive episodes, had disgusted a fastidious nature with the coarser aspects of the sex relation? The best was denied him, and from the worse he

himself turned away; though haunted all the time by the natural hunger of the normal man.

As they walked on, Alcott gradually shaped some image for himself of what had happened during the years of the marriage, piecing it together from Buntingford's agitated talk. But he was not prepared for a sudden statement made just as they were reaching the spot where Alcott would naturally turn back towards the Rectory. It came with a burst, after a silence.

"For God's sake, Alcott, don't suppose from what I have been telling you that all the fault was on my wife's side, that I was a mere injured innocent. Very soon after we married, I discovered that I had ceased to love her, that there was hardly anything in common between us. And there was a woman in Paris—a married woman, of my own world—cultivated, and good, and refined—who was sorry for me, who made a kind of spiritual home for me. We very nearly stepped over the edge—we should have done—but for her religion. She was an ardent Catholic and her religion saved her. She left Paris suddenly, begging me as the last thing she would ever ask me, to be reconciled to Anna, and to forget her. For some days I intended to shoot myself. But, at last, as the only thing I could do for her, I did as she bade me. Anna and I, after a while, came together again, and I hoped for a child. Then, by hideous ill luck, Anna, about three months after our reconciliation, discovered a fragment of a letter—believed the very worst—made a horrible scene with me, and went off, as she has just told me,—not actually with Rocca as I believed, but to join him in Italy. From that day I lost all trace of her. Her concealment of the boy's birth was her vengeance upon me. She knew how passionately I had always wanted a son. But instead she punished him—the poor, poor babe!"

There was an anguish in the stifled voice which made sympathy impertinent. Alcott asked some practical questions, and Buntingford repeated his wife's report of the boy's condition, and her account of an injury at birth, caused by the unskilful hands of an ignorant doctor.

"But I shall see him to-morrow. Ramsay and I go together. Perhaps, after all, something can be done. I shall also make the first arrangements for the divorce."

Alcott was silent a moment—hesitating in the dark.

"You will make those arrangements immediately?"

"Of course."

"If she dies? She may die."

"I would do nothing brutal—but—She came to make a bargain with me."

"Yes—but if she dies—might you not have been glad to say, 'I forgive'?"

The shy, clumsy man was shaken as he spoke, with the passion of his own faith. The darkness concealed it, as it concealed its effect on Buntingford. Buntingford made no direct reply, and presently they parted, Alcott engaging to send a messenger over to Beechmark early, with a report of the patient's condition, before Buntingford and Dr. Ramsay started for London. Buntingford walked on. And presently in the dim moonlight ahead he perceived Geoffrey French.

The young man approached him timidly, almost expecting to be denounced as an intruder. Instead, Buntingford put an arm through his, and leaned upon him, at first in a pathetic silence that Geoffrey did not dare to break. Then gradually the story was told again, as much of it as was necessary, as much as Philip could bear. Geoffrey made very little comment, till through the trees they began to see the lights of Beechmark.

Then Geoffrey said in an unsteady voice:

"Philip!—there is one person you must tell—perhaps first of all. You must tell Helena—yourself."

Buntingford stopped as though under a blow.

"Of course, I shall tell Helena—but why?—"

His voice spoke bewilderment and pain.

"Tell her *yourself*—that's all," said Geoffrey, resolutely—"and, if you can, before she hears it from anybody else."

CHAPTER XII

Buntingford and French reached home between ten and eleven o'clock. When they entered the house, they heard sounds of music from the drawing-room. Peter Dale was playing fragments from the latest musical comedy, with a whistled accompaniment on the drawing-room piano. There seemed to be nothing else audible in the house, in spite of the large party it contained. Amid the general hush, unbroken by a voice or a laugh, the "funny bits" that Peter was defiantly thumping or whistling made a kind of goblin chorus round a crushed and weary man, as he pushed past the door of the drawing-room to the library. Geoffrey followed him.

"No one knows it yet," said the young man, closing the door behind them. "I had no authority from you to say anything. But of course they all understood that something strange had happened. Can I be any help with the others, while—"

"While I tell Helena?" said Buntingford, heavily. "Yes. Better get it over. Say, please—I should be grateful for no more talk than is inevitable."

Geoffrey stood by awkwardly, not knowing how to express the painful sympathy he felt. His very pity made him abrupt.

"I am to say—that you always believed—she was dead?"

Under what name to speak of the woman lying at the Rectory puzzled him. The mere admission of the thought that however completely in the realm of morals she might have forfeited his name, she was still Buntingford's wife in the realm of law, seemed an outrage.

At the question, Buntingford sprang up suddenly from the seat on which he had fallen; and Geoffrey, who was standing near him involuntarily retreated a few steps, in amazement at the passionate animation which for the moment had

transformed the whole aspect of the elder man.

"Yes, you may say so—you must say so! There is no other account you can give of it!—no other account I can authorize you to give it. It is four-fifths true—and no one in this house—not even you—has any right to press me further. At the same time, I am not going to put even the fraction of a lie between myself and you, Geoffrey, for you have been—a dear fellow—to me!" He put his hand a moment on Geoffrey's shoulder, withdrawing it instantly. "The point is—what would have come about—if this had not happened? That is the test. And I can't give a perfectly clear answer." He began to pace the room—thinking aloud. "I have been very anxious—lately—to marry. I have been so many years alone; and I—well, there it is!—I have suffered from it, physically and morally; more perhaps than other men might have suffered. And lately—you must try and understand me, Geoffrey!—although I had doubts—yes, deep down, I still had doubts—whether I was really free—I have been much more ready to believe than I used to be, that I might now disregard the doubts—silence them!—for good and all. It has been my obsession—you may say now my temptation. Oh! the divorce court would probably have freed me—have allowed me to presume my wife's death after these fifteen years. But the difficulty lay in my own conscience. Was I certain? No! I was not certain! Anna's ways and standards were well known to me. I could imagine various motives which might have induced her to deceive me. At the same time"—he stopped and pointed to his writing-table—"these drawers are stuffed full of reports and correspondence, from agents all over Europe, whom I employed in the years before the war to find out anything they could. I cannot accuse myself of any deliberate or wilful ignorance. I made effort after effort—in vain. I was entitled—at last—it often seemed to me to give up the effort, to take my freedom. But then"—his voice dropped—"I thought of the woman I might love—and wish to marry. I should indeed have told her everything, and the law might have been ready to protect us. But if Anna still lived, and were suddenly to reappear in my life—what a situation!—for a sensitive, scrupulous woman!"

"It would have broken—spoiled—everything!" said Geoffrey, under his breath, but with emphasis. He was leaning against the mantelpiece, and his face was hidden from his companion. Buntingford threw him a strange, deprecating look.

"You are right—you are quite right. Yet I believe, Geoffrey, I might have committed that wrong—but for this—what shall I call it?—this 'act of God' that has happened to me. Don't misunderstand me!" He came to stand beside his

nephew, and spoke with intensity. "It was *only* a possibility—and there is no guilt on my conscience. I have no real person in my mind. But any day I might have failed my own sense of justice—my own sense of honour—sufficiently—to let a woman risk it!"

Geoffrey thought of one woman—if not two women—who would have risked it. His heart was full of Helena. It was as though he could only appreciate the situation as it affected her. How deep would the blow strike, when she knew? He turned to look at Buntingford, who had resumed his restless walk up and down the room, realizing with mingled affection and reluctance the charm of his physical presence, the dark head, the kind deep eyes, the melancholy selfishness that seemed to enwrap him. Yet all the time he had not been selfless! There had been no individual woman in the case. But none the less, he had been consumed with the same personal longing—the same love of loving; the *amor amandi*—as other men. That was a discovery. It brought him nearer to the young man's tenderness; but it made the chance of a misunderstanding on Helena's part greater.

"Shall I tell Helena you would like to speak to her?" he said, breaking the silence.

Buntingford assented.

Philip, left alone, tried to collect his thoughts. He did not conceal from himself what had been implied rather than said by Geoffrey. The hint had startled and disquieted him. But he could not believe it had any real substance; and certainly he felt himself blameless. A creature so radiant, with the world at her feet!—and he, prematurely aged, who had seemed to her, only a few weeks ago, a mere old fogy in her path! That she should have reconsidered her attitude towards him, was surely natural, considering all the pains he had taken to please her. But as to anything else—absurd!

Latterly, indeed, since she had come to that tacit truce with Jim, he was well aware how much her presence in his house had added to the pleasant moments of daily life. In winning her good will, in thinking for her, in trying to teach her, in watching the movements of her quick untrained intelligence and the various phases of her enchanting beauty, he had found not only a new occupation, but a new joy. Rachel's prophecy for him had begun to realize itself. And, all the time, his hopes as to Geoffrey's success with her had been steadily rising. He and

Geoffrey had indeed been at cross-purposes, if Geoffrey really believed what he seemed to believe! But it was nothing—it could be nothing—but the fantasy of a lover, starting at a shadow.

And suddenly his mind, as he stood waiting, plunged into matters which were not shadows—but palpitating realities. *His son*!—whom he was to see on the morrow. He believed the word of the woman who had been his wife. Looking back on her character with all its faults, he did not think she would have been capable of a malicious lie, at such a moment. Forty miles away then, there was a human being waiting and suffering, to whom his life had given life. Excitement—yearning—beat through his pulses. He already felt the boy in his arms; was already conscious of the ardour with which every device of science should be called in, to help restore to him, not only his son's body, but his mind.

There was a low tap at the door. He recalled his thoughts and went to open it.

"Helena!—my dear!"

He took her hand and led her in. She had changed her white dress of the afternoon for a little black frock, one of her mourning dresses for her mother, with a bunch of flame-coloured roses at her waist. The semi-transparent folds of the black brought out the brilliance of the white neck and shoulders, the pale carnations of the face, the beautiful hair, following closely the contours of the white brow. Even through all his pain and preoccupation, Buntingford admired; was instantly conscious of the sheer pleasure of her beauty. But it was the pleasure of an artist, an elder brother—a father even. Her mother was in his mind, and the strong affection he had begun to feel for his ward was shot through and through by the older tenderness.

"Sit there, dear," he said, pushing forward a chair. "Has Geoffrey told you anything?"

"No. He said you wanted to tell me something yourself, and he would speak to the others."

She was very pale, and the hand he touched was cold. But she was perfectly self-possessed.

He sat down in front of her collecting his thoughts.

"Something has happened, Helena, to-day—this very evening—which must—I fear—alter all your plans and mine. The poor woman whom Geoffrey saw in the wood, whose bag you found, was just able to make her escape, when you and Geoffrey landed. She wandered about the rest of the night, and in the early morning she asked for shelter—being evidently ill—at the Rectory, but it was not till this evening that she made a statement which induced them to send for me. Helena!—what did your mother ever tell you about my marriage?"

"She told me very little—only that you had married someone abroad—when you were studying in Paris—and that she was dead."

Buntingford covered his eyes with his hand.

"I told your mother, Helena, all I knew. I concealed nothing from her—both what I knew—and what I didn't know."

He paused, to take from his pocket a small leather case and to extract from it a newspaper cutting. He handed it to her. It was from the first column of the *Times*, was dated 1907, and contained the words:—"On July 19th at Lyons, France, Anna, wife of Philip Bliss, aged 28."

Helena read it, and looked up. Buntingford anticipated the words that were on her lips.

"Wait a moment!—let me go on. I read that announcement in the *Times*, Helena, three years after my wife had deserted me. I had spent those three years, first in recovering from a bad accident, and then in wandering about trying to trace her. Naturally, I went off to Lyons at once, and could discover—nothing! The police there did all they could to help me—our own Embassy in Paris got at the Ministry of the Interior—useless! I recovered the original notice and envelope from the *Times*. Both were typewritten, and the Lyons postmark told us no more than the notice had already told. I could only carry on my search, and for some years afterwards, even after I had returned to London, I spent the greater part of all I earned and possessed upon it. About that time my friendship with your mother began. She was already ill, and spent most of her life—as you remember—except for those two or three invalid winters in Italy—in that little drawing-room, I knew so well. I could always be sure of finding her at home; and gradually—as you recollect—she became my best friend. She was the only person in England who knew the true story of my marriage. She always

suspected, from the time she first heard of it, that the notice in the *Times*—"

Helena made a quick movement forward. Her lips parted.

"—was not true?"

Buntingford took her hand again, and they looked at each other, she trembling involuntarily.

"And the woman last night?" she said, breathlessly—"was she someone who knew—who could tell you the truth?"

"She was my wife—herself!"

Helena withdrew her hand.

"How strange!—how strange!" She covered her eyes. There was a silence. After it, Buntingford resumed:

"Has Geoffrey told you the first warning of it—you left this room?"

"No."

He described the incident of the sketch.

"It was a drawing I had made of her only a few weeks before she left me. I had no idea it was in that portfolio. We had scarcely time to put it away before Mr. Alcott's note arrived—sending for me at once."

Helena's hands had dropped, while she hung upon his story. And a wonderful unconscious sweetness had stolen into her expression. Her young heart was in her eyes.

"Oh, I am so glad—so glad—you had that warning!"

Buntingford was deeply touched.

"You dear child!" he said in a rather choked voice, and, rising, he walked away from her to the further end of the room. When he returned, he found a pale and thoughtful Helena.

"Of course, Cousin Philip, this will make a great change—in your life—and in mine."

He stood silently before her—preferring that she should make her own suggestions.

"I think—I ought to go away at once. Thanks to you—I have Mrs. Friend—who is such a dear."

"There is the London house, Helena. You can make any use of it you like."

"No, I think not," she said resolutely. Then with an odd laugh which recalled an earlier Helena—"I don't expect Lucy Friend would want to have the charge of me in town; and you too—perhaps—would still be responsible—and bothered about me—if I were in your house."

Buntingford could not help a smile.

"My responsibility scarcely depends—does it—upon where you are?" Then his voice deepened. "I desire, wherever you are, to cherish and care for you—in your mother's place. I can't say what a joy it has been to me to have you here."

"No!—that's nonsense!—ridiculous!—" she said, suddenly breaking down, and dashing the tears from her eyes.

"It's very true," he said gently. "You've been the dearest pupil, and forgiven me all my pedantic ways. But if not London—I will arrange anything you wish."

She turned away, evidently making a great effort not to weep. He too was much agitated, and for a little while he busied himself with some letters on his table.

When, at her call, he returned to her, she said, quite in her usual voice:

"I should like to go somewhere—to some beautiful place—and draw. That would take a month—perhaps. Then we can settle." After a pause, she added without hesitation—"And you?—what is going to happen?"

"It depends—upon whether it's life at the Rectory—or death."

She was evidently startled, but said nothing, only gave him her beautiful eyes

again, and her unspoken sympathy.

Then an impulse which seemed invincible came upon him to be really frank with her—to tell her more.

"It depends, also,—upon something else. But this I asked Geoffrey not to tell the others in the drawing-room—just yet—and I ask you the same. Of course you may tell Mrs. Friend." She saw his face work with emotion. "Helena, this woman that was my wife declares to me—that I have a son living."

He saw the light of amazement that rushed into her face, and hurried on:—"But in the same breath that she tells me that, she tells me the tragedy that goes with it." And hardly able to command his voice, he repeated what had been told him.

"Of course everything must be enquired into—verified. I go to town to-morrow—with Ramsay. Possibly I shall bring him back—perhaps to Ramsay's care, for the moment. Possibly, I shall leave him with someone in town."

"Couldn't I help," she said, after a moment, "if I stayed?"

"No, no!" he said with repugnance, which was almost passion. "I couldn't lay such a burden upon you, or any young creature. You must go and be happy, dear Helena—it is your duty to be happy! And this home for a time will be a tragic one. Well, but now, where would you like to go? Will you and Geoffrey and Mrs. Friend consult? I will leave any money you want in Geoffrey's hands."

"You mean"—she said abruptly—"that I really ought to go at once—to-morrow."

"Wouldn't it be best? It troubles me to think of you here—under the shadow—of this thing."

"I see!—I see! All right. You are going to London to-morrow morning?"
She had risen, and was moving towards the door.

"Yes, I shall go to the Rectory first for news. And then on to the station."

She paused a moment.

"And if—if she—I don't know what to call her—if she lives?"

"Well, then—I must be free," he said, gravely; adding immediately—"She passed for fifteen years after she left me as the wife of an Italian I used to know. It would be very quickly arranged. I should provide for her—and keep my boy. But all that is uncertain."

"Yes, I understand." She held out her hand. "Cousin Philip—I am awfully sorry for you. I—I realized—somehow—only after I'd come down here—that you must have had—things in your life—to make you unhappy. And you've been so nice—so awfully nice to me! I just want to thank you—with all my heart."

And before he could prevent her, she had seized his hands and kissed them. Then she rushed to the door, turning to show him a face between tears and laughter.

"There!—I've paid you back!"

And with that she vanished.

Helena was going blindly through the hall, towards her own room, when Peter Dale emerged from the shadows. He caught her as she passed.

"Let me have just a word, Helena! You know, everything will be broken up here. I only want to say my mother would just adore to have you for the season. We'd all make it nice for you—we'd be your slaves—just let me wire to Mater to-morrow morning."

"No, thank you, Peter. Please—please! don't stop me! I want to see Mrs. Friend."

"Helena, do think of it!" he implored.

"No, I can't. It's impossible!" she said, almost fiercely. "Let me go, Peter! Good-night!"

He stood, a picture of misery, at the foot of the stairs watching her run up. Then at the top she turned, ran down a few steps again, kissed her hand to him, and vanished, the bright buckles on her shoes flashing along the gallery overhead.

But in the further corner of the gallery she nearly ran into the arms of Geoffrey French, who was waiting for her outside her room.

"Is it too late, Helena—for me to have just a few words in your sitting-room?"

He caught hold of her. The light just behind him showed him a tense and frowning Helena.

"Yes—it is much too late! I can't talk now."

"Only a few words?"

"No"—she panted—"no!—Geoffrey, I shall *hate* you if you don't let me go!"

It seemed to her that everybody was in league to stand between her and the one thing she craved for—to be alone and in the dark.

She snatched her dress out of his grasp, and he fell back.

She slipped into her own room, and locked the door. He shook his head, and went slowly downstairs. He found Peter pacing the hall, and they went out into the June dark together, a discomfited pair.

Meanwhile Mrs. Friend waited for Helena. She heard voices in the passage and the locking of Helena's door. She was still weak from her illness, so it seemed wisest to get into bed. But she had no hope or intention of sleep. She sat up in bed, with a shawl round her, certain that Helena would come. She was in a ferment of pity and fear,—she scarcely knew why—fear for the young creature she had come to love with all her heart; and she strained her ears to catch the sound of an opening door.

But Helena did not come. Through her open window Lucy could hear steps along the terrace coming and going—to and fro. Then they ceased; all sounds in the house ceased. The church clock in the distance struck midnight, and a little owl close to the house shrieked and wailed like a human thing, to the torment of Lucy's nerves. A little later she was aware of Buntingford coming upstairs, and going to his room on the further side of the gallery.

Then, nothing. Deep silence—that seemed to flow through the house and all its rooms and passages like a submerging flood.

Except!—What was that sound, in the room next to hers—in Helena's room?

Lucy Friend got up trembling, put on a dressing-gown, and laid an ear to the wall between her and Helena. It was a thin wall, mostly indeed a panelled partition, belonging to an old bit of the house, in which the building was curiously uneven in quality—sometimes inexplicably strong, and sometimes mere lath and plaster, as though the persons, building or re-building, had come to an end of their money and were scamping their work.

Lucy, from the other side of the panels, had often heard Helena singing while she dressed, or chattering to the housemaid. She listened now in an anguish, her mind haunted alternately by the recollection of the scene in the drawing-room, and the story told by Geoffrey French, and by her rising dread and misgiving as to Helena's personal stake in it. She had observed much during the preceding weeks. But her natural timidity and hesitancy had forbidden her so far to draw hasty deductions. And now—perforce!—she drew them.

The sounds in the next room seemed to communicate their rhythm of pain to Lucy's own heart. She could not bear it after a while. She noiselessly opened her own door, and went to Helena's. To her scarcely audible knock there was no answer. After an interval she knocked again—a pause. Then there were movements inside, and Helena's muffled voice through the door.

"Please, Lucy, go to sleep! I am all right."

"I can't sleep. Won't you let me in?"

Helena seemed to consider. But after an interval which seemed interminable to Lucy Friend, the key was slowly turned and the door yielded.

Helena was standing inside, but there was so little light in the room that Lucy could only see her dimly. The moon was full outside, but the curtains had been drawn across the open window, and only a few faint rays came through. As Mrs. Friend entered Helena turned from her, and groping her way back to the bed, threw herself upon it, face downwards. It was evidently the attitude from which she had risen.

Lucy Friend followed her, trembling, and sat down beside her. Helena was still fully dressed, except for her hair, which had escaped from combs and hairpins. As her eyes grew used to the darkness, Lucy could see it lying, a dim mass on the white pillow, also a limp hand upturned. She seized the hand and cherished it in hers.

"You are so cold, dear! Mayn't I cover you up and help you into bed?"

No answer. She found a light eiderdown that had been thrown aside, and covered the prone figure, gently chafing the cold hands and feet. After what seemed a long time, Helena, who had been quite still, said in a voice she had to stoop to hear:

"I suppose you heard me crying. Please, Lucy, go back to bed. I won't cry any more."

"Dear—mayn't I stay?"

"Well, then—you must come and lie beside me. I am a brute to keep you awake."

"Won't you undress?"

"Please let me be! I'll try and go to sleep."

Lucy slipped her own slight form under the wide eiderdown. There was a long silence, at the end of which Helena said:

"I'm only—sorry—it's all come to an end—here."

But with the words the girl's self-control again failed her. A deep sob shook her from head to foot. Lucy with the tears on her own cheeks, hung over her, soothing and murmuring to her as a mother might have done. But the sob had no successor, and presently Helena said faintly—"Good-night, Lucy. I'm warm now. I'm going to sleep."

Lucy listened for the first long breaths of sleep, and seemed to hear them, just as the dawn was showing itself, and the dawn-wind was pushing at the curtains. But she herself did not sleep. This young creature lying beside her, with her full passionate life, seemed to have absolutely absorbed her own. She felt and saw with Helena. Through the night, visions came and went—of "Cousin Philip,"—the handsome, melancholy, courteous man, and of all his winning ways with the girl under his care, when once she had dropped her first foolish quarrel with him, and made it possible for him to show without reserve the natural sweetness and chivalry of his character. Buntingford and Helena riding, their well-matched figures disappearing under the trees, the sun glancing from the glossy coats of their horses; Helena, drawing in some nook of the park, her face flushed with the

effort to satisfy her teacher, and Buntingford bending over her; or again, Helena dancing, in pale green and apple-blossom, while Buntingford leaned against the wall, watching her with folded arms, and eyes that smiled over her conquests.

It all grew clear to Lucy—Helena's gradual capture, and the innocence, the unconsciousness, of her captor. Her own shrewdness, nevertheless, put the same question as Buntingford's conscience. Could he ever have been quite sure of his freedom? Yet he had taken the risks of a free man. But she could not, she did not blame him. She could only ask herself the breathless question that French had already asked:

"How far has it gone with her? How deep is the wound?"

CHAPTER XIII

Cynthia and Georgina Welwyn were dining at Beechmark on the eventful evening. They took their departure immediately after the scene in the drawing-room when Geoffrey French, at his cousin's wish, gathered Buntingford's guests together, and revealed the identity of the woman in the wood. In the hurried conversation that followed, Cynthia scarcely joined, and she was more than ready when Georgina proposed to go. Julian Horne found them their wraps, and saw them off. It was a beautiful night, and they were to walk home through the park.

"Shall I bring you any news there is to-morrow?" said Horne from the doorstep—"Geoffrey has asked me to stay till the evening. Everybody else of course is going early. It will be some time, won't it,"—he lowered his voice—"before we shall see the bearing of all this?"

Cynthia assented, rather coldly; and when she and her sister were walking through the moonlit path leading to the cottage, her silence was still marked, whereas Georgina in her grim way was excited and eager to talk.

The truth was that Cynthia was not only agitated by the news of the evening. She was hurt—bitterly hurt. Could not Buntingford have spared her a word in private? She was his kinswoman, his old and particular friend, neglectful as he had shown himself during the war. Had he not only a few weeks before come to ask her help with the trouble-some girl whose charge he had assumed? She had been no good, she knew. Helena had not been ready to make friends; and Cynthia's correctness had always been repelled by the reckless note in Helena. Yet she had done her best on that and other occasions and she had been rewarded by being treated in this most critical, most agitated moment like any other of Buntingford's week-end guests. Not a special message even—just the news that everybody might now know, and—Julian Horne to see them off! Yet Helena had been sent for at once. Helena had been closeted with Philip for half an hour. No

doubt he had a special responsibility towards her. But what use could she possibly be? Whereas Cynthia felt herself the practical, experienced woman, able to give an old friend any help he might want in a grave emergency.

"Of course we must all hope she will die—and die quickly!" said Lady Georgina, with energy, after some remarks to which Cynthia paid small attention. "It would be the only sensible course for Providence—after making such a terrible mistake."

"Is there any idea of her dying?" Cynthia looked down upon her sister with astonishment. "Geoffrey didn't say so."

"He said she was 'very ill,' and from her conduct she must be crazy. So there's hope."

"You mean, for Philip?"

"For the world in general," said Georgina, cautiously, with an unnoticed glance at her companion. "But of course Philip has only himself to blame. Why did he marry such a woman?"

"She may have been very beautiful—or charming—you don't know."

Lady Georgina shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, of course there must have been something to bait the hook! But when a man marries out of his own class, unless the woman dies, the man goes to pieces."

"Philip has not gone to pieces!" cried Cynthia indignantly.

"Because she removed herself. For practical purposes that was as good as dying. He has much to be grateful for. Suppose she had come home with him! She would have ruined him socially and morally."

"And if she doesn't die," said Cynthia slowly, "what will Philip do then?"

"Ship her off to America, as she asks him, and prove a few little facts in the divorce court—simple enough! It oughtn't to take him much more than six months to get free—which he never has been yet!" added Georgina, with

particular emphasis.

"It's a mercy, my dear, that you didn't just happen to be Lady Buntingford!"

"As if I had ever expected to be!" said Cynthia, much nettled.

"Well, you would, and you wouldn't have been!" said Georgina obstinately. "It's very complicated. You would have had to be married again—after the divorce."

"I don't know why you are so unkind, Georgie!" There was a little quaver in Cynthia's voice. "Philip's a very old friend of mine, and I'm very sorry and troubled about him. Why do you smirch it all with these horrid remarks?"

"I won't make any more, if you don't like them," said Georgina, unabashed—"except just to say this, Cynthia—for the first time I begin to believe in your chance. There was always something not cleared up about Philip, and it might have turned out to be something past mending. Now it is cleared up; and it's bad—but it might have been worse. However—we'll change the subject. What about that handsome young woman, Helena?"

"Now, if you'd chanced to say it was a mercy *she* didn't happen to be Lady Buntingford, there'd have been some sense in it!" Cynthia's tone betrayed the soreness within.

Lady Georgina laughed, or rather chuckled.

"I know Philip a great deal better than you do, my dear, though he is your friend. He has made himself, I suspect, as usual, much too nice to that child; and he may think himself lucky if he hasn't broken her heart. He isn't a flirt—I agree. But he produces the same effect—without meaning it. Without meaning anything indeed—except to be good and kind to a young thing. The men with Philip's manners and Philip's charm—thank goodness, there aren't many of them!—have an abominable responsibility. The poor moth flops into the candle before she knows where she is. But as to marrying her—it has never entered his head for a moment, and never would."

"And why shouldn't it, please?"

"Because she is much too young for him—and Philip is a tired man. Haven't you

seen that, Cynthy? Before you knew him, Philip had exhausted his emotions—that's my reading of him. I don't for a moment believe his wife was the only one, if what Geoffrey said of her, and what one guesses, is true. She would never have contented him. And now it's done. If he ever marries now, it will be for peace—not passion. As I said before, Cynthy—and I mean no offence—your chances are better than they were."

Cynthia winced and protested again, but all the same she was secretly soothed by her odd sister's point of view. They began to discuss the situation at the Rectory,—how Alice Alcott, their old friend, with her small domestic resources, could possibly cope with it, if a long illness developed.

"Either the woman will die, or she will be divorced," said Georgina trenchantly. "And as soon as they know she isn't going to die, what on earth will they do with her?"

As she spoke they were passing along the foot of the Rectory garden. The Rectory stood really on the edge of the park, where it bordered on the highroad; and their own cottage was only a hundred yards beyond. There were two figures walking up and down in the garden. The Welwyns identified them at once as the Rector and his sister.

Cynthia stopped.

"I shall go and ask Alice if we can do anything for her."

She made for the garden gate that opened on the park and called softly. The two dim figures turned and came towards her. It was soon conveyed to the Alcotts that the Welwyns shared their knowledge, and a conversation followed, almost in whispers under a group of lilacs that flung round them the scents of the unspoilt summer. Alice Alcott, to get a breath of air, had left her patient in the charge of their old housemaid, for a quarter of an hour, but must go back at once and would sit up all night. A nurse was coming on the morrow.

Then, while Georgina employed her rasping tongue on Mr. Alcott, Cynthia and the Rector's sister conferred in low tones about various urgent matters—furniture for the nurse's room, sheets, pillows, and the rest. The Alcotts were very poor, and the Rectory had no reserves.

"Of course, we could send for everything to Beechmark," murmured

Miss Alcott.

"Why should you? It is so much further. We will send in everything you want. What are we to call this—this person?" said Cynthia.

"Madame Melegrani. It is the name she has passed by for years."

"You say she is holding her own?"

"Just—with strychnine and brandy. But the heart is very weak. She told Dr. Ramsay she had an attack of flu last week—temperature up to 104. But she wouldn't give in to it—never even went to bed. Then came the excitement of travelling down here and the night in the park. This is the result. It makes me nervous to think that we shan't have Dr. Ramsay to-morrow. His partner is not quite the same thing. But he is going to London with Lord Buntingford."

"Buntingford—going to London?" said Cynthia in amazement.

Miss Alcott started. She remembered suddenly that her brother had told her that no mention was to be made, for the present, of the visit to London. In her fatigue and suppressed excitement she had forgotten. She could only retrieve her indiscretion—since white lies were not practised at the Rectory—by a hurried change of subject and by reminding her brother it was time for them to go back to the house. They accordingly disappeared.

"What is Buntingford going to London for?" said Georgina as they neared their own door.

Cynthia could not imagine—especially when the state of the Rectory patient was considered. "If she is as bad as the Alcotts say, they will probably want to-morrow to get a deposition from her of some kind," remarked Georgina, facing the facts as usual. Cynthia acquiesced. But she was not thinking of the unhappy stranger who lay, probably dying, under the Alcotts' roof. She was suffering from a fresh personal stab. For, clearly, Geoffrey French had not told all there was to be known; there was some further mystery. And even the Alcotts knew more than she. Affection and pride were both wounded anew.

But with the morning came consolation. Her maid, when she called her, brought in the letters as usual. Among them, one in a large familiar hand. She opened it eagerly, and it ran:—

"Saturday night, 11 p.m.

"MY DEAR CYNTHIA:—I was so sorry to find when I went to the drawing-room just now that you had gone home. I wanted if possible to walk part of the way with you, and to tell you a few things myself. For you are one of my oldest friends, and I greatly value your sympathy and counsel. But the confusion and bewilderment of the last few hours have been such—you will understand!

"To-morrow we shall hardly meet—for I am going to London on a strange errand! Anna—the woman that was my wife—tells me that six months after she left me, a son was born to me, whose existence she has till now concealed from me. I have no reason to doubt her word, but of course for everybody's sake I must verify her statement as far as I can. My son—a lad of fifteen—is now in London, and so is the French *bonne*—Zélie Ronchicourt—who originally lived with us in Paris, and was with Anna at the time of her confinement. You will feel for me when you know that he is apparently deaf and dumb. At any rate he has never spoken, and the brain makes no response. Anna speaks of an injury at birth. There might possibly be an operation. But of all this I shall know more presently. The boy, of course, is mine henceforth—whatever happens.

"With what mingled feelings I set out to-morrow, you can imagine. I feel no bitterness towards the unhappy soul who has come back so suddenly into my life. Except so far as the boy is concerned—(*that* I feel cruelly!)—I have not much right—For I was not blameless towards her in the old days. She had reasons—though not of the ordinary kind—for the frantic jealousy which carried her away from me. I shall do all I can for her; but if she gets through this illness, there will be a divorce in proper form.

"For me, in any case, it is the end of years of miserable uncertainty—of a semi-deception I could not escape—and of a moral loneliness I cannot describe. I must have often puzzled you and many others of my friends. Well, you have the key now. I can and will speak freely when we meet again.

"According to present plans, I bring the boy back to-morrow. Ramsay is to find me a specially trained nurse and will keep him under his own observation for a time. We may also have a specialist down at once.

"I shall of course hurry back as soon as I can—Anna's state is critical—

"Yours ever effectionately,

"P.S.—I don't know much about the domestic conditions in the Ramsays' house. Ramsay I have every confidence in. He has always seemed to me a very clever and a very nice fellow. And I imagine Mrs. Ramsay is a competent woman."

"She isn't!" said Cynthia, suddenly springing up in bed. "She is an incompetent goose! As for looking after that poor child and his nurse—properly—she couldn't!"

Quite another plan shaped itself in her mind. But she did not as yet communicate it to Georgina.

After breakfast she loaded her little pony carriage with all the invalid necessaries she had promised Miss Alcott, and drove them over to the Rectory. Alcott saw her arrival from his study, and came out, his finger on his lip, to meet her.

"Many, many thanks," he said, looking at what she had brought. "It is awfully good of you. I will take them in—but I ask myself—will she ever live through the day? Lord Buntingford and Ramsay hurried off by the first train this morning. She has enquired for the boy, and they will bring him back as soon as they can. She gives herself no chance! She is so weak—but her will is terribly strong! We can't get her to obey the doctor's orders. Of course, it is partly the restlessness of the condition."

Cynthia's eyes travelled to the upper window above the study. Buntingford's wife lay there! It seemed to her that the little room held all the secrets of Buntingford's past. The dying woman knew them, and she alone. A new jealousy entered into Cynthia—a despairing sense of the irrevocable. Helena was forgotten.

At noon Julian Horne arrived, bringing a book that Cynthia had lent him. He stayed to gossip about the break-up of the party.

"Everybody has cleared out except myself and Geoffrey. Miss Helena and her chaperon went this morning before lunch. Buntingford of course had gone before they came down. French tells me they have gone to a little inn in Wales he recommended. Miss Helena said she wanted something to draw, and a quiet place. I must say she looked pretty knocked up!—I suppose by the dance?"

His sharp greenish eyes perused Cynthia's countenance. She made no reply. His remark did not interest a preoccupied woman. Yet she did not fail to remember, with a curious pleasure, that there was no mention of Helena in Buntingford's letter.

Between five and six that afternoon a party of four descended at a station some fifteen miles from Beechmark, where Buntingford was not very likely to be recognized. It consisted of Buntingford, the doctor, a wrinkled French *bonne*, in a black stuff dress, and black bonnet, and a frail little boy whom a spectator would have guessed to be eleven or twelve years old. Buntingford carried him, and the whole party passed rapidly to a motor standing outside. Then through a rainy evening they sped on at a great pace towards the Beechmark park and village. The boy sat next to Buntingford who had his arm round him. But he was never still. He had a perpetual restless motion of the head and the emaciated right hand, as though something oppressed the head, and he were trying to brush it away. His eyes wandered round the faces in the car,—from his father to the doctor, from the doctor to the Frenchwoman. But there was no comprehension in them. He saw and did not see. Buntingford hung over him, alive to his every movement, absorbed indeed in his son. The boy's paternity was stamped upon him. He had Buntingford's hair and brow; every line and trait in those noticeable eyes of his father seemed to be reproduced in him; and there were small characteristics in the hands which made them a copy in miniature of his father's. No one seeing him could have doubted his mother's story; and Buntingford had been able to verify it in all essential particulars by the evidence of the old *bonne*, who had lived with Anna in Paris before her flight, and had been present at the child's birth. The old woman was very taciturn, and apparently hostile to Buntingford, whom she perfectly remembered; but she had told enough.

The June evening was in full beauty when the car drew up at the Rectory. Alcott and Dr. Ramsay's partner received them. The patient they reported had insisted on being lifted to a chair, and was feverishly expecting them.

Buntingford carried the boy upstairs, the *bonne* following. The doctors remained on the landing, within call. At sight of her mistress, Zélie's rugged face expressed her dismay. She hurried up to her, dropped on her knees beside her, and spoke to her in agitated French. Anna Melegrani turned her white face and clouded eyes upon her for a moment; but made no response. She looked past her indeed to where Buntingford stood with the boy, and made a faint gesture that seemed to summon him.

He put him down on his feet beside her. The pathetic little creature was wearing a shabby velveteen suit, with knickerbockers, which bagged about his thin frame. The legs like white sticks appearing below the knickerbockers, the blue-veined hollows of the temples, and the tiny hands—together with the quiet wandering look—made so pitiable an impression that Miss Alcott standing behind the sick woman could not keep back the tears. The boy himself was a centre of calm in the agitated room, except for the constant movement of the head. He seemed to perceive something familiar in his mother's face, but when she put out a feeble hand to him, and tried to kiss him, he began to whimper. Her expression changed at once; with what strength she had she pushed him away. "*Il est afreux*!" she said sombrely, closing her eyes.

Buntingford lifted him up, and carried him to Zélie, who was in a neighbouring room. She had brought with her some of the coloured bricks, and "nests" of Japanese boxes which generally amused him. He was soon sitting on the floor, aimlessly shuffling the bricks, and apparently happy. As his father was returning to the sickroom a note was put into his hand by the Rector. It contained these few words—"Don't make final arrangements with the Ramsays till you have seen me. Think I could propose something you would like better. Shall be here all the evening. Yours affectionately—Cynthia."

He had just thrust it into his pocket, when the Rector drew him aside at the head of the stairs, while the two doctors were with the patient.

"I don't want to interfere with any of your arrangements," whispered the Rector, "but I think perhaps I ought to tell you that Mrs. Ramsay is no great housewife. She is a queer little flighty thing. She spends her time in trying to write plays and bothering managers. There's no harm in her, and he's very fond of her. But it is an untidy, dirty little house! And nothing ever happens at the right time. My sister said I must warn you. She's had it on her mind—as she's had a good deal of experience of Mrs. Ramsay. And I believe Lady Cynthia has another plan."

Buntingford thanked him, remembering opportunely that when he had proposed to Ramsay to take the boy into his house, the doctor had accepted with a certain hesitation, which had puzzled him. "I will go over and see my cousin when I can be spared."

But a sudden call from the sickroom startled them both. Buntingford hurried forward.

When Buntingford entered he found the patient lying in a deep old-fashioned chair propped up by pillows. She had been supplied with the simplest of night-gear by Miss Alcott, and was wearing besides a blue cotton overall or wrapper in which the Rector's sister was often accustomed to do her morning's work. There was a marked incongruity between the commonness of the dress, and a certain cosmopolitan stamp, a touch of the grand air, which was evident in its wearer. The face, even in its mortal pallor and distress, was remarkable both for its intellect and its force. Buntingford stood a few paces from her, his sad eyes meeting hers. She motioned to him.

"Send them all away."

The doctors went, with certain instructions to Buntingford, one of them remaining in the room below. Buntingford came to sit close by her.

"They say I shall kill myself if I talk," she said in her gasping whisper. "It doesn't matter. I must talk! So—you don't doubt the boy?" Her large black eyes fixed him intently.

"No. I have no doubts—that he is my son. But his condition is very piteous. I have asked a specialist to come down."

There was a gleam of scorn in her expression.

"That'll do no good. I suppose—you think—we neglected the boy. *Niente*. We did the best we could. He was under a splendid man—in Naples—as good as any one here. He told me nothing could be done—and nothing can be done."

Buntingford had the terrible impression that there was a certain triumph in the faint tone. He said nothing, and presently the whisper began again.

"I keep seeing those people dancing—and hearing the band. I dropped a little bag—did anybody find it?"

"Yes, I have it here." He drew it out of his pocket, and put it in her hand, which feebly grasped it.

"Rocca gave it to me at Florence once, I am very fond of it. I suppose you wonder that—I loved him?"

There was a strange and tragic contrast between the woman's weakness, and her bitter provocative spirit; just as there was between the picturesque strength of Buntingford—a man in his prime—and the humble, deprecating gentleness of his present voice and manner.

"No," he answered. "I am glad—if it made you happy."

"Happy!" She opened her eyes again. "Who's ever happy? We were never happy!"

"Yes—at the beginning," he said, with a certain firmness. "Why take that away?"

She made a protesting movement.

"No—never! I was always—afraid. Afraid you'd get tired of me. I was only happy—working—and when they hung my picture—in the Salon—you remember?"

"I remember it well."

"But I was always jealous—of you. You drew better—than I did. That made me miserable."

After a long pause, during which he gave her some of the prepared stimulant Ramsay had left ready, she spoke again, with rather more vigour.

"Do you remember—that Artists' Fête—in the Bois—when I went as Primavera—Botticelli's Primavera?"

"Perfectly."

"I was as handsome then—as that girl you were rowing. And now—But I don't want to die!"—she said with sudden anguish—"Why should I die? I was quite well a fortnight ago. Why does that doctor frighten me so?" She tried to sit more erect, panting for breath. He did his best to soothe her, to induce her to go back to bed. But she resisted with all her remaining strength; instead, she drew him down to her.

"Tell me!—confess to me!"—she said hoarsely—"Madame de Chaville was your mistress!"

"Never! Calm yourself, poor Anna! I swear to you. Won't you believe me?"

She trembled violently. "If I left you—for nothing—"

She closed her eyes, and tears ran down her cheeks.

He bent over her—"Won't you rest now—and let them take you back to bed? You mustn't talk like this any more. You will kill yourself."

He left her in Ramsay's charge, and went first to find Alcott, begging him to pray with her. Then he wandered out blindly, into the summer evening. It was clear to him that she had only a few more hours—or at most—days to live. In his overpowering emotion—a breaking up of the great deeps of thought and feeling—he found his way into the shelter of one of the beechwoods that girdled the park, and sat there in a kind of moral stupor, till he had somehow mastered himself. The "old unhappy far-off things" were terribly with him; the failures and faults of his own distant life, far more than those of the dying woman. The only thought—the only interest—which finally gave him fresh strength—was the recollection of his boy.

Cynthia!—her letter—what was it she wanted to say to him? He got up, and resolutely turned his steps towards the cottage.

Cynthia was waiting for him. She brought him into the little drawing-room where a lamp had been lighted, and a tray of food was waiting of which she persuaded him to eat some mouthfuls. But when he questioned her as to the meaning of her letter, she evaded answering for a little while, till he had eaten something and drunk a glass of wine. Then she stretched out a hand to him, with a quiet smile.

"Come and see what I have been doing upstairs. It will be dreadful if you don't approve!"

He followed her in surprise, and she led him upstairs through the spotless passages of the cottage, bright with books and engravings, where never a thing was out of place, to a room with a flowery paper and bright curtains, looking on the park.

"I had it all got ready in a couple of hours. We have so much room—and it is such a pleasure—" she said, in half apology. "Nobody ever gets any meals at the

Ramsays'—and they can't keep any servants. Of course you'll change it, if you don't like it. But Dr. Ramsay himself thought it the best plan. You see we are only a stone's throw from him. He can run in constantly. He really seemed relieved!"

And there in a white bed, with the newly arrived special nurse—kind-faced and competent—beside him, lay his recovered son, deeply and pathetically asleep. For in his sleep the piteous head movement had ceased, and he might have passed for a very delicate child of twelve, who would soon wake like other children to a new summer day.

Into Buntingford's strained consciousness there fell a drop of balm as he sat beside him, listening to the quiet breathing, and comforted by the mere peace of the slight form.

He looked up at Cynthia and thanked her; and Cynthia's heart sang for joy.

CHAPTER XIV

The Alcotts' unexpected guest lingered another forty-eight hours under their roof,—making a hopeless fight for life. But the influenza poison, recklessly defied from the beginning, had laid too deadly a grip on an already weakened heart. And the excitement of the means she had taken to inform herself as to the conditions of Buntingford's life and surroundings, before breaking in upon them, together with the exhaustion of her night wandering, had finally destroyed her chance of recovery. Buntingford saw her whenever the doctors allowed. She claimed his presence indeed, and would not be denied. But she talked little more; and in her latest hours it seemed to those beside her both that the desire to live had passed, and that Buntingford's attitude towards her had, in the end, both melted and upheld her. On the second night after her arrival, towards dawn she sent for him. She then could not speak. But her right hand made a last motion towards his. He held it, till Ramsay who had his fingers on the pulse of the left, looked up with that quiet gesture which told that all was over. Then he himself closed her eyes, and stooping, he kissed her brow—

"*Pardonnons—nous! Adieu*!" he said, under his breath, in the language familiar to their student youth together. Then he went straight out of the room, and through the dewy park, and misty woods already vocal with the awakening birds; he walked back to Beechmark, and for some hours shut himself into his library, where no one disturbed him.

When he emerged it was with the air of a man turning to a new chapter in life. Geoffrey French was still with him. Otherwise the big house was empty and seemed specially to miss the sounds of Helena's voice, and tripping feet. Buntingford enquired about her at once, and Geoffrey was able to produce a letter from Mrs. Friend describing the little Welsh Inn, near the pass of Aberglasslyn, where they had settled themselves; the delicious river, shrunken however by the long drought, which ran past their windows, and the many virtues—qualified by too many children—of the primitive Welsh pair who ran

the inn.

"I am to say that Miss Pitstone likes it all very much, and has found some glorious things to draw. Also an elderly gentleman who is sketching on the river has already promised her a lesson."

"You'll be going down there sometime?" said Buntingford, turning an enquiring look on his nephew.

"The week-end after next," said Geoffrey—"unless Helena forbids it. I must inspect the inn, which I recommended—and take stock of the elderly gentleman!"

The vision of Helena, in "fresh woods and pastures new" radiantly transfixing the affections of the "elderly gentleman," put them both for the moment in spirits. Buntingford smiled, and understanding that Geoffrey was writing to his ward, he left some special messages for her.

But in the days that followed he seldom thought of Helena. He buried his wife in the village church-yard, and the wondering villagers might presently read on the headstone he placed over her grave, the short inscription—"Anna Buntingford, wife of Philip, Lord Buntingford," with the dates of her birth and death. The Alcotts, authorized by Philip, made public as much of the story as was necessary, and the presence of the poor son and heir in the Welwyns' house, together with his tragic likeness to his father, both completed and verified it. A wave of unspoken but warm sympathy spread through the countryside. Buntingford's own silence was unbroken. After the burial, he never spoke of what had happened, except on one or two rare occasions to John Alcott, who had become his intimate friend. But unconsciously the attitude of his neighbours towards him had the effect of quickening his liking for Beechmark, and increasing the probability of his ultimate settlement there, at least for the greater part of the year.

Always supposing that it suited the boy—Arthur Philip—the names under which, according to Zélie, he had been christened in the church of the hill village near Lucca where he was born. For the care of this innocent, suffering creature became, from the moment of his mother's death, the dominating thought of Buntingford's life. The specialist, who came down before her death, gave the father however little hope of any favourable result from operation. But he gave a

confident opinion that much could be done by that wonderful system of training which modern science and psychology combined have developed for the mentally deficient or idiot child. For the impression left by the boy on the spectator was never that of genuine idiocy. It was rather that of an imprisoned soul. The normal soul seemed somehow to be there; but the barrier between it and the world around it could not be broken through. By the specialist's advice, Buntingford's next step was to appeal to a woman, one of those remarkable women, who, unknown perhaps to more than local or professional fame, are every year bringing the results of an ardent moral and mental research to bear upon the practical tasks of parent and teacher. This woman, whom we will call Mrs. Delane, combined the brain of a man of science with the passion of motherhood. She had spent her life in the educational service of a great municipality, varied by constant travel and investigation; and she was now pensioned and retired. But all over England those who needed her still appealed to her; and she failed no one. She came down to see his son at Buntingford's request, and spent some days in watching the child, with Cynthia as an eager learner beside her.

The problem was a rare one. The boy was a deaf-mute, but not blind. His very beautiful eyes—; his father's eyes—seemed to be perpetually interrogating the world about him, and perpetually baffled. He cried—a monotonous wailing sound—but he never smiled. He was capable of throwing all his small possessions into a large basket, and of taking them out again; an operation which he performed endlessly hour after hour; but of purpose, or any action that showed it, he seemed incapable. He could not place one brick upon another, or slip one Japanese box inside its fellow. His temper seemed to be always gentle; and in simple matters of daily conduct and habit Zélie had her own ways of getting from him an automatic obedience. But he heard nothing; and in his pathetic look, however clearly his eyes might seem to be meeting those of a companion, there was no answering intelligence.

Mrs. Delane set patiently to work, trying this, and testing that; and at the end of the first week, she and Cynthia were sitting on the floor beside the boy, who had a heap of bricks before him. For more than an hour Mrs. Delane had been guiding his thin fingers in making a tower of bricks one upon another, and then knocking them down. Then, at one moment, it began to seem to her that each time his hand enclosed in hers knocked the bricks down, there was a certain faint flash in the blue eyes, as though the sudden movement of the bricks gave the child a thrill of pleasure. But to fall they must be built up. And his absorbed

teacher laboured vainly, through sitting after sitting, to communicate to the child some sense of the connection between the two sets of movements.

Time after time the small waxen hand lay inert in hers as she put a brick between its listless fingers, and guided it towards the brick waiting for it. Gradually the column of bricks mounted—built by her action, her fingers enclosing his passive ones—and, finally, came the expected crash, followed by the strange slight thrill in the child's features. But for long there was no sign of spontaneous action of any kind on his part. The ingenuity of his teacher attempted all the modes of approach to the obstructed brain that were known to her, through the two senses left him—sight and touch. But for many days in vain.

At last, one evening towards the end of June, when his mother had been dead little more than a fortnight, Cynthia, Mrs. Delane's indefatigable pupil, was all at once conscious of a certain spring in the child's hand, as though it became—faintly—self-moved, a living thing. She cried out. Buntingford was there looking on; and all three hung over the child. Cynthia again placed the brick in his hand, and withdrew her own. Slowly the child moved it forward—dropped it—then, with help, raised it again—and, finally, with only the very slight guidance from Cynthia, put it on top of the other. Another followed, and another, his hand growing steadier with each attempt. Then breathing deeply,—flushed, and with a puckered forehead—the boy looked up at his father. Tears of indescribable joy had rushed to Buntingford's eyes. Cynthia's were hidden in her handkerchief.

The child's nurse peremptorily intervened and carried him off to bed. Mrs. Delane first arranged with Buntingford for the engagement of a special teacher, taught originally by herself, and then asked for something to take her to the station. She had set things in train, and had no time to lose. There were too many who wanted her.

Buntingford and Cynthia walked across the park to Beechmark. From the extreme despondency they were lifted to an extreme of hope. Buntingford had felt, as it were, the spirit of his son strain towards his own; the hidden soul had looked out. And in his deep emotion, he was very naturally conscious of a new rush of affection and gratitude towards his old playfellow and friend. The thought of her would be for ever connected in his mind with the efforts and discoveries of the agitating days through which—with such intensity—they had both been living. When he remembered that wonder-look in his son's, eyes, he would always see Cynthia bending over the child, no longer the mere agreeable

and well-dressed woman of the world, but, to him, the embodiment of a heavenly pity, "making all things new."

Cynthia's spirits danced as she walked beside him. There was in her a joyous, if still wavering certainty that through the child, her hold upon Philip, whether he spoke sooner or later, was now secure. But she was still jealous of Helena. It had needed the moral and practical upheaval caused by the reappearance and death of Anna, to drive Helena from Philip and Beechmark; and if Helena—enchanting and incalculable as ever, even in her tamer mood—were presently to resume her life in Philip's house, no one could expect the Fates to intervene again so kindly. Georgina might be certain that in Buntingford's case the woman of forty had nothing to fear from the girl of nineteen. Cynthia was by no means so certain; and she shivered at the risks to come.

For it was soon evident that the question of his ward's immediate future was now much on Philip's mind. He complained that Helena wrote so little, and that he had not yet heard from Geoffrey since the week-end he was to spend in Wales. Mrs. Friend reported indeed in good spirits. But obviously, whatever the quarters might be, Helena could not stay there indefinitely.

"Of course I suggested the London house to her at once—with Mrs. Friend for chaperon. But she didn't take to it. This week I must go back to my Admiralty work. But we can't take the boy to London, and I intended to come back here every night. We mustn't put upon you much longer, my dear Cynthia!"

The colour rushed to Cynthia's face.

"You are going to take him away?" she said, with a look of consternation.

"Mustn't I bring him home, some time?" was his half-embarrassed reply.

"But not yet! And how would it suit—with week-ends and dances for Helena?"

"It wouldn't suit at all," he said, perplexed—"though Helena seems to have thrown over dancing for the present."

"That won't last long!"

He laughed. "I am afraid you never took to her!" he said lightly.

"She never took to me!"

"I wonder if that was my fault? She suspected that I had called you in to help me to keep her in order!"

"What was it brought her to reason—so suddenly?" said Cynthia, seeking light at last on a problem that had long puzzled her.

"Two things, I imagine. First that she was the better man of us all, that day of the Dansworth riot. She could drive my big car, and none of the rest of us could! That seemed to put her right with us all. And secondly—the reports of that abominable trial. She told me so. I only hope she didn't read much of it!"

They had just passed the corner of the house, and come out on the sloping lawn of Beechmark, with the lake, and the wood beyond it. All that had happened behind that dark screen of yew, on the distant edge of the water, came rushing back on Philip's imagination, so that he fell silent. Cynthia on her side was thinking of the moment when she came down to the edge of the lake to carry off Geoffrey French, and saw Buntingford and Helena push off into the puckish rays of the searchlight. She tasted again the jealous bitterness of it—and the sense of defeat by something beyond her fighting—the arrogance of Helena's young beauty. Philip was not in love with Helena; that she now knew. So far she, Cynthia, had marvellously escaped the many chances that might have undone her. But if Helena came back?

Meanwhile there were some uneasy thoughts at the back of Philip's mind; and some touching and tender recollections which he kept sacred to himself. Helena's confession and penitence—there, on that still water—how pretty they were, how gracious! Nor could he ever forget her sweetness, her pity on that first tragic evening. Geoffrey's alarms were absurd. Yet when he thought of merely reproducing the situation as it had existed before the night of the ball, something made him hesitate. And besides, how could he reproduce it? All his real mind was now absorbed in this overwhelming problem of his son; of the helpless, appealing creature to whose aid the whole energies of his nature had been summoned.

He walked back some way with Cynthia, talking of the boy, with an intensity of hope that frightened her.

"Don't, or don't be too certain—yet!" she pleaded. "We have only just seen the

first sign—the first flicker. If it were all to vanish again!"

"Could I bear it?" he said, under his breath—"Could I?"

"Anyway, you'll let me keep him—a little longer?"

She spoke very softly and sweetly.

"If your kindness really wishes it," he said, rather reluctantly. "But what does Georgina say?"

"Georgina is just as keen as I am," said Cynthia boldly. "Don't you see how fond she is of him already?"

Buntingford could not truthfully say that he had seen any signs on Georgina's part, so far, of more than a decent neutrality in the matter. Georgina was a precisian; devoted to order, and in love with rules. The presence of the invalid boy, his nurse, and his teacher, must upset every rule and custom of the little house. Could she really put up with it? In general, she made the impression upon Philip of a very wary cat, often apparently asleep, but with her claws ready. He felt uncomfortable; but Cynthia had her way.

A specially trained teacher, sent down by Mrs. Delane, arrived a few days later, and a process began of absorbing and fascinating interest to all the spectators, except Georgina, who more than kept her head.

Every morning Buntingford would motor up to town, spend some strenuous hours in demobilization work at the Admiralty, returning in the evening to receive Cynthia's report of the day. Miss Denison, the boy's teacher, who had been trained in one of the London Special Schools, was a little round-faced lady with spectacles, apparently without any emotions, but really filled with that educator's passion which in so many women of our day fills the place of motherhood. From the beginning she formed the conclusion that the pitiable little fellow entrusted to her was to a great extent educable; but that he would not live to maturity. This latter conclusion was carefully hidden from Buntingford, though it was known to Cynthia; and Philip knew, for a time, all the happiness, the excitement even of each day's slight advance, combined with a boundless hope for the future. He spent his evenings absorbed in the voluminous literature dealing with the deaf-mute, which has grown up since the days of Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller. But Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller—as he

eagerly reminded himself—were both of them blind; only one sense—that of touch—was left to them. Arthur's blue eyes, the copy of his own, already missed his father when he left home in the morning, and greeted him when he came home at night. They contained for Philip a mystery and a promise that he was never tired of studying. Every evening he would ride over from Dansworth station to the cottage, put up his horse, and spend the long summer twilights in carrying his son about the garden or the park, or watching Miss Denison at her work. The boy was physically very frail, and soon tired. But his look was now placid; the furrows in the white brow were smoothed away; his general nutrition was much better; his delicate cheeks had filled out a little; and his ghostly beauty fascinated Philip's artistic sense, while his helplessness appealed to the tenderest instinct of a strong man. Buntingford had discovered a new and potent reason for living; and for living happily.

And meanwhile with all this slowly growing joy, Cynthia was more and more closely connected. She and Buntingford had a common topic, which was endlessly interesting and delightful to them both. Philip was no longer conscious of her conventionalities and limitations, as he had been conscious of them on his first renewed acquaintance with her after the preoccupations of the war. He saw her now as Arthur's fairy godmother, and as his own daily companion and helper in an exquisite task.

But Georgina was growing impatient. One evening she came home tired and out of temper. She had been collecting the rents of some cottages belonging to her, and the periodical operation was always trying to everybody concerned. Georgina's secret conviction that "the poor in a loomp is bad" was stoutly met by her tenants' firm belief that all landlords are extortionate thieves. She came home, irritated by a number of petty annoyances, to find the immaculate little drawing-room, where every book and paper-knife knew its own place and kept it, given up to Arthur and Miss Denison, with coloured blocks, pictures and models used in that lady's teaching, strewn all over the floor, while the furniture had been pushed unceremoniously aside.

"I won't have this house made a bear-garden!" she said, angrily, to the dismayed teacher; and she went off straightway to find her sister.

Cynthia was in her own little den on the first floor happily engaged in trimming a new hat. Georgina swept in upon her, shut the door, and stood with her back to it.

"Cynthia—is this house yours or mine?"

As a matter of fact the house was Buntingford's. But Georgina was formally the tenant of it, while the furniture was partly hers and partly Cynthia's. In fact, however, Georgina had been always tacitly held to be the mistress.

Cynthia looked up in astonishment, and at once saw that Georgina was seriously roused. She put down her work and faced her sister.

"I thought it belonged to both of us," she said mildly. "What is the matter, Georgie?"

"I beg you to remember that I am the tenant. And I never consented to make it an institution for the training of imbeciles!"

"Georgie!—Arthur is not an imbecile!"

"Of course I know he is an interesting one," said Georgina, curtly. "But all the same, from my point of view—However, I won't repeat the word, if it annoys you. But what I want to know is, when are we to have the house to ourselves again? Because, if this is to go on indefinitely, I depart!"

Cynthia came nearer to her sister. Her colour fluttered a little.

"Don't interfere just at present, Georgie," she said imploringly, in a low voice.

The two sisters looked at each other—Georgina covered with the dust and cobwebs of her own cottages, her battered hat a little on one side, and her coat and skirt betraying at every seam its venerable antiquity; and Cynthia, in pale grey, her rose-pink complexion answering to the gold of her hair, with every detail of her summer dress as fresh and dainty as the toil of her maid could make it.

"Well, I suppose—I understand," said Georgina, at last, in her gruffest voice. "All the same, I warn you, I can't stand it much longer. I shall be saying something rude to Buntingford."

"No, no—don't do that!"

"I haven't your motive—you see."

Cynthia coloured indignantly.

"If you think I'm only pretending to care for the child, Georgie, you're very much mistaken!"

"I don't think so. You needn't put words into my mouth, or thoughts into my head. All the same, Cynthia,—cut it short!"

And with that she released the door and departed, leaving an anxious and meditative Cynthia behind her.

A little later, Buntingford's voice was heard below. Cynthia, descending, found him with Arthur in his arms. The day had been hot and rainy—an oppressive scirocco day—and the boy was languid and out of sorts. The nurse advised his being carried up early to bed, and Buntingford had arrived just in time.

When he came downstairs again, he found Cynthia in a garden hat, and they strolled out to look at the water-garden which was the common hobby of both the sisters. There, sitting among the rushes by the side of the little dammed-up stream, he produced a letter from Mrs. Friend, with the latest news of his ward.

"Evidently we shan't get Helena back just yet. I shall run up next week to see her, I think, Cynthia, if you will let me. I really will take Arthur to Beechmark this week. Mrs. Mawson has arranged everything. His rooms are all ready for him. Will you come and look at them to-morrow?"

Cynthia did not reply at once, and he watched her a little anxiously. He was well aware what giving up the boy would mean to her. Her devotion had been amazing. But the wrench must come some time.

"Yes, of course—you must take him," said Cynthia, at last. "If only—I hadn't come to love him so!"

She didn't cry. She was perfectly self-possessed. But there was something in her pensive, sorrowful look that affected Philip more than any vehement emotion could have done. The thought of all her devotion—their long friendship—her womanly ways—came upon him overwhelmingly.

But another thought checked it—Helena!—and his promise to her dead mother. If he now made Cynthia the mistress of Beechmark, Helena would never return

to it. For they were incompatible. He saw it plainly. And to Helena he was bound; while she needed the shelter of his roof.

So that the words that were actually on Philip's lips remained unspoken. They walked back rather silently to the cottage.

At supper Cynthia told her sister that the boy, with Zélie and his teacher, would soon trouble her no more. Georgina expressed an ungracious satisfaction, adding abruptly—"You'll be able to see him there, Cynthy, just as well as here."

Cynthia made no reply.

CHAPTER XVI

Mrs. Friend was sitting in the bow-window of the "Fisherman's Rest," a small Welsh inn in the heart of Snowdonia. The window was open, and a smell of damp earth and grass beat upon Lucy in gusts from outside, carried by a rainy west wind. Beyond the road, a full stream, white and foaming after rain, was dashing over a rocky bed towards some rapids which closed the view. The stream was crossed by a little bridge, and beyond it rose a hill covered with oak-wood. Above the oak-wood and along the road to the right—mountain forms, deep blue and purple, were emerging from the mists which had shrouded them all day. The sun was breaking through. A fierce northwest wind which had been tearing the young leaf of the oak-woods all day, and strewing it abroad, had just died away. Peace was returning, and light. The figure of Helena had just disappeared through the oak-wood; Lucy would follow her later.

Behind Mrs. Friend, the walls of the inn parlour were covered deep in sketches of the surrounding scenery—both oil and water-colour, bad and good, framed and unframed, left there by the artists who haunted the inn. The room was also adorned by a glass case full of stuffed birds, badly moth-eaten, a book-case containing some battered books mostly about fishing, and a large Visitors' Book lying on a centre-table, between a Bradshaw and an old guide-book. Shut up, in winter, the little room would smell intolerably close and musty. But with the windows open, and a rainy sun streaming in, it spoke pleasantly of holidays for plain hard-working folk, and of that "passion for the beauty flown," which distils, from the summer hours of rest, strength for the winter to come.

Lucy had let Helena go out alone, of set purpose. For she knew, or guessed, what Nature and Earth had done for Helena during the month they had passed together in this mountain-land, since that night at Beechmark. Helena had made no moan—revealed nothing. Only a certain paleness in her bright cheek, a certain dreamy habit that Lucy had not before noticed in her; a restlessness at night which the thin partitions of the old inn sometimes made audible, betrayed that the youth in

her was fighting its first suffering, and fighting to win. Lucy had never dared to speak—still less to pity. But her love was always at hand, and Helena had repaid it, and the silence it dictated, with an answering love. Lucy believed—though with trembling—that the worst was now over, and that new horizons were opening on the stout soul that had earned them. But now, as before, she held her peace.

Her diary lay on her lap, and she was thoughtfully turning it over. It contained nothing but the barest entries of facts. But they meant a good deal to her, as she looked through them. Every letter, for instance, from Beechmark had been noted. Lord Buntingford had written three times to Helena, and twice to herself. She had seen Helena's letters; and Helena had read hers. It seemed to her that Helena had deliberately shown her own; that the act was part of the conflict which Lucy guessed at, but must not comment on, by word or look. All the letters were the true expression of the man. The first, in which he described in words, few; but singularly poignant, the death of his wife, his recognition of his son, and the faint beginnings of hope for the boy's maimed life, had forced tears from Lucy. Helena had read it dry-eyed. But for several hours afterwards, on an evening of tempest, she had vanished out of ken, on the mountainside; coming back as night fell, her hair and clothes, dripping with rain, her cheeks glowing from her battle with the storm, her eyes strangely bright.

Her answers to her guardian's letters had been, to Lucy's way of thinking, rather cruelly brief; at least after the first letter written in her own room, and posted by herself. Thenceforward, only a few post-cards, laid with Lucy's letters, for her or any one else to read, if they chose. And meanwhile Lucy was tolerably sure that she was slowly but resolutely making her own plans for the months ahead.

The little diary contained also the entry of Geoffrey French's visit—a long week-end, during which as far as Lucy could remember, Helena and he had never ceased "chaffing" from morning till night, and Helena had certainly never given him any opportunity for love-making. She, Lucy, had had a few short moments alone with him, moments in which his gaiety had dropped from him, like a ragged cloak, and a despondent word or two had given her a glimpse of the lover he was not permitted to be, beneath the role of friend he was tired of playing. He was coming again soon. Helena had neither invited nor repelled him. Whereas she had peremptorily bidden Peter Dale for this particular Sunday, and he had thrown over half a dozen engagements to obey her.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Friend. Is Miss Pitstone at home?"

The speaker was a shaggy old fellow in an Inverness cape and an ancient wide-awake, carrying a portfolio and a camp-stool. He had stopped in his walk outside the open window, and his disappointed look searched the inn parlour for a person who was not there.

"Oh, Mr. McCready, I'm so sorry!—but Miss Pitstone is out, and I don't know when she will be back."

The artist undid his portfolio, and laid a half-finished sketch—a sketch of Helena's—on the window-sill.

"Will you kindly give her this? I have corrected it—made some notes on the side. Do you think Miss Helena will be likely to be sketching to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't promise for her. She seems to like walking better than anything else just now."

"Yes, she's a splendid walker," said the old man, with a sigh. "I envy her strength. Well, if she wants me, she knows where to find me—just beyond that bend there." He pointed to the river.

"I'll tell her—and I'll give her the sketch. Good-bye."

She watched him heavily cross the foot-bridge to the other side of the river. Her quick pity went with him, for she herself knew well what it meant to be solitary and neglected. He seldom sold a picture, and nobody knew what he lived on. The few lessons he had given Helena had been as a golden gleam in a very grey day. But alack, Helena had soon tired of her lessons, as she had tired of the mile of coveted trout-fishing that Mr. Evans of the farm beyond the oak-wood had pressed upon her—or of the books the young Welsh-speaking curate of the little mountain church near by was so eager to lend her. Through and behind a much gentler manner, the girl's familiar self was to be felt—by Lucy at least—as clearly as before. She was neither to be held nor bound. Attempt to lay any fetter upon her—of hours, or habit—and she was gone; into the heart of the mountains where no one could follow her. Lucy would often compare with it the eager docility of those last weeks at Beechmark.

* * * * *

Helena's walk had taken her through the dripping oak-wood and over the crest of the hill to a ravine beyond, where the river, swollen now by the abundant rains which had made an end of weeks of drought, ran, noisily full, between two steep banks of mossy crag. From the crag, oaks hung over the water, at fantastic angles, holding on, as it seemed, by one foot and springing from the rock itself; while delicate rock plants, and fern fringed every ledge down to the water. A seat on the twisted roots of an overhanging oak, from which, to either side, a little green path, as though marked for pacing, ran along the stream, was one of her favourite haunts. From up-stream a mountain peak now kerchiefed in wisps of sunlit cloud peered in upon her. Above it, a lake of purest blue from which the wind, which had brought them, was now chasing the clouds; and everywhere the glory of the returning sun, striking the oaks to gold, and flinging a chequer of light on the green floor of the wood.

Helena sat down to wait for Peter, who would be sure to find her wherever she hid herself. This spot was dear to her, as those places where life has consciously grown to a nobler stature are dear to men and women. It was here that within twenty-four hours of her last words with Philip Buntingford, she had sat wrestling with something which threatened vital forces in her that her will consciously, desperately, set itself to maintain. Through her whole ripened being, the passion of that inner debate was still echoing; though she knew that the fight was really won. It had run something like this:

"Why am I suffering like this?

"Because I am relaxed—unstrung. Why should I have everything I want—when others go bare? Philip went bare for years. He endured—and suffered. Why not I?

"But it is worse for me—who am young! I have a right to give way to what I feel—to feel it to the utmost.

"That was the doctrine for women before the war—the old-fashioned women. The modern woman is stronger. She is not merely nerves and feeling. She must *never* let feeling—pain—destroy her will! Everything depends upon her will. If I choose I *can* put this feeling down. I have no right to it. Philip has done me no wrong. If I yield to it, if it darkens my life, it will be another grief added to those he has already suffered. It shan't darken my life. I will—and can master it. There is so much still to learn, to do, to feel. I must wrench myself free—and go

forward. How I chattered to Philip about the modern woman!—and how much older I feel, than I was then! If one can't master oneself, one is a slave—all the same. I didn't know—how could I know?—that the test was so near. If women are to play a greater and grander part in the world, they must be much, much greater in soul, firmer in will.

"Yet—I must cry a little. No one could forbid me that. But it must be over soon."

Then the letters from Beechmark had begun to arrive, each of them bringing its own salutary smart as part of a general cautery. No guardian could write more kindly, more considerately. But it was easy to see that Philip's whole being was, and would be, concentrated on his unfortunate son. And in that ministry Cynthia Welwyn was his natural partner, had indeed already stepped into the post; so that gratitude, if not passion, would give her sooner or later all that she desired.

"Cynthia has got the boy into her hands—and Philip with him. Well, that was natural. Shouldn't I have done the same? Why should I feel like a jealous beast, because Cynthia has had her chance, and taken it? I won't feel like this! It's vile!—it's degrading! Only I wish Cynthia was bigger, more generous—because he'll find it out some day. She'll never like me, just because he cares for me—or did. I mean, as my guardian, or an elder brother. For it was never—no never!—anything else. So when she comes in at the front door, I shall go out at the back. I shall have to give up even the little I now have. Let me just face what it means.

"Yet perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps Cynthia isn't as mean-spirited as I think.

"It's wonderful about the boy. I envy Cynthia—I can't help it. I would have given my whole life to it. I would have been trained—perhaps abroad. No one should have taught him but me. But then—if Philip had loved me—only that was never possible!—he would have been jealous of the boy—and I should have lost him. I never do things in moderation. I go at them so blindly. But I shall learn some day."

Thoughts like these, and many others, were rushing through Helena's mind, as after a long walk she found her seat again over the swollen stream. The evening had shaken itself free of the storm, and was pouring an incredible beauty on wood and river. The intoxication of it ran through Helena's veins. For she possessed in perfection that earth-sense, that passionate sense of kinship, kinship both of the senses and the spirit, with the eternal beauty of the natural world,

which the gods implant in a blest minority of mortals. No one who has it can ever be wholly forlorn, while sense and feeling remain.

Suddenly:—a little figure on the opposite bank, and a child's cry.

Helena sprang to her feet in dismay. She saw the landlord's small son, a child of five, who had evidently lost his footing on the green bank above the crag which faced her, and was sliding down, unable to help himself, towards the point where nothing could prevent his falling headlong into the stream below. The bank, however, was not wholly bare. There were some thin gnarled oaks upon it, which might stop him.

"Catch hold of the trees, Bobby!" she shouted to him, in an agony.

The child heard, turned a white face to her, and tried to obey. He was already a stalwart little mountaineer, accustomed to trot over the fells after his father's sheep, and the physical instinct in his, sturdy limbs saved him. He caught a jutting root, held on, and gradually dragged himself up to the cushion of moss from which the tree grew, sitting astride the root, and clasping the tree with both arms. The position was still extremely dangerous, but for the moment he was saved.

"All right, Bobby—clever boy! Hold tight—I'm coming!"

And she rushed towards a little bridge at the head of the ravine. But before she could reach it, she saw the lad's father, cautiously descending the bank, helped by a rope tied to an oak tree at the top. He reached the child, tied the rope to the stem of the tree where the little fellow was sitting, and then with the boy under one arm and hauling on the rope with the other hand, he made his way up the few perilous yards that divided them from safety. At the top he relieved his parental feelings by a good deal of smacking and scolding. For Bobby was a notorious "limb," the terror of his mother and the inn generally. He roared vociferously under the smacking. But when Helena arrived on the scene, he stopped at once, and put out a slim red tongue at her. Helena laughed, congratulated the father on his skill, and returned to her seat.

"That's a parable of me!" she thought, as she sat with her elbows on her knees, staring at the bank opposite.

"I very nearly slipped in!—like Bobby—but not quite. I'm sound—though

bruised. No desperate harm done." She drew a long breath—laughing to herself—though her eyes were rather wet. "Well, now, then—what am I going to do? I'm not going into a convent. I don't think I'm even going to college. I'm going to take my guardian's advice. 'Marry—my dear child—and bring up children.' 'Marry?'—Very well!"—she sprang to her feet—"I shall marry!—that's settled. As to the children—that remains to be seen!"

And with her hands behind her, she paced the little path, in a strange excitement and exaltation. Presently from the tower of the little church, half a mile down the river, a bell began to strike the hour. "Six o'clock!—Peter will be here directly. Now, *he's* got to be lectured—for his good. I'm tired of lecturing myself. It's somebody else's turn—"

And taking a letter from her pocket, she read and pondered it with smiling eyes. "Peter will think I'm a witch. Dear old Peter! … Hullo!"

For the sound of her name, shouted by some one still invisible, caught her ear. She shouted back, and in another minute the boyish form of Peter Dale emerged among the oaks above her. Three leaps, and he was at her side.

"I say, Helena, this is jolly! You were a brick to write. How I got here I'm sure I don't know. I seem to have broken every rule, and put everybody out. My boss will sack me, I expect. Never mind!—I'd do it again!"

And dropping to a seat beside her, on a fallen branch that had somehow escaped the deluge of the day, he feasted his eyes upon her. She had clambered back into her seat, and taken off her water-proof hat. Her hair was tumbling about her ears, and her bright cheeks were moist with rain, or rather with the intermittent showers that the wind shook every now and then from the still dripping oak trees above her. Peter thought her lovelier than ever—a wood-nymph, half divine. Yet, obscurely, he felt a change in her, from the beginning of their talk. Why had she sent for him? The wildest notions had possessed him, ever since her letter reached him. Yet, now that he saw her, they seemed to float away from him, like thistle-down on the wind.

"Helena!—why did you send for me?"

"I was very dull, Peter,—I wanted you to amuse me!"

The boy laughed indignantly.

"That's all very well, Helena—but it won't wash. You're jolly well used to getting all you want, I know—but you wouldn't have ordered me up from Town—twelve hours in a beastly train—packed like sardines—just to tell me that."

Helena looked at him thoughtfully. She began to eat some unripe bilberries which she had gathered from the bank beside her, and they made little blue stains on her white teeth.

"Old boy—I wanted to give you some advice."

"Well, give it quick," said Peter impatiently.

"No—you must let me take my time. Have you been to a great many dances lately, Peter?"

"You bet!" The young Adonis shrugged his shoulders. "I seem to have been through a London season, which I haven't done, of course, since 1914. Never went to so many dances in my life!"

"Somebody tells me, Peter, that—you're a dreadful flirt!" said Helena, still with those grave, considering eyes.

Peter laughed—but rather angrily.

"All very well for you to talk, Miss Helena! Please—how many men were you making fools of—including your humble servant—before you went down to Beechmark? You have no conscience, Helena! You are the 'Belle Dame sans merci.'"

"All that is most unjust—and ridiculous!" said Helena mildly.

Peter went off into a peal of laughter. Helena persisted.

"What do you call flirting, Peter?"

"Turning a man's head—making him believe that you're gone on him—when, in fact, you don't care a rap!"

"Peter!—then of course you *know* I never flirted with you!" said Helena, with vigour. Peter hesitated, and Helena at once pursued her advantage.

"Let's talk of something more to the point. I'm told, Peter, that you've been paying great attentions—marked attentions—to a very nice girl—that everybody's talking about it,—and that you ought long ago either to have fixed it up,—or cleared out. What do you say to that, Peter?"

Peter flushed.

"I suppose you mean—Jenny Dumbarton," he said slowly. "Of course, she's a very dear, pretty, little thing. But do you know why I first took to her?" He looked defiantly at his companion.

"No."

"Because—she's rather like you. She's your colour—she has your hair—she's a way with her that's something like you. When I'm dancing with her, if I shut my eyes, I can sometimes fancy—it's you!"

"Oh, goodness!" cried Helena, burying her face in her hands. It was a cry of genuine distress. Peter was silent a moment. Then he came closer.

"Just look at me, please, Helena!"

She raised her eyes unwillingly. In the boy's beautiful clear-cut face the sudden intensity of expression compelled her—held her guiltily silent.

"Once more, Helena"—he said, in a voice that shook—"is there no chance for me?"

"No, no, dear Peter!" she cried, stretching out her hands to him. "Oh, I thought that was all over. I sent for you because I wanted just to say to you—don't trifle!—don't shilly-shally! I know Jenny Dumbarton a little. She's charming—she's got a delicate, beautiful character—and such a warm heart! Don't break anybody's heart, Peter—for my silly sake!"

The surge of emotion in Peter subsided slowly. He began to study the moss at his feet, poking at it with his stick.

"What makes you think I've been breaking Jenny's heart?" he said at last in another voice.

"Some of your friends, Peter, yours and mine—have been writing to me. She's—she's very fond of you, they say, and lately she's been looking a little limp ghost—all along of you, Mr. Peter! What have you been doing?"

"What any other man in my position would have been doing—wishing to Heaven I knew *what* to do!" said Peter, still poking vigorously at the moss.

Helena bent forward from the oak tree, and just whispered—"Go back to-morrow, Peter,—and propose to Jenny Dumbarton!"

Peter could not trust himself to look up at what he knew must be the smiling seduction of her eyes and lips. He was silent; and Helena withdrew—dryad-like—into the hollow made by the intertwined stems of the oak, threw her head back against the main trunk, dropped her eyelids, and waited.

"Are you asleep, Helena?" said Peter's voice at last.

"Not at all."

"Then sit up, please, and listen to me."

She obeyed. Peter was standing over her, his hands on his sides, looking very manly, and rather pale.

"Having disposed of me for the last six months—you may as well dispose of me altogether," he said slowly. "Very well—I will go—and propose to Jenny Dumbarton—-the day after to-morrow. Her people asked me for the week-end. I gave a shuffling answer. I'll wire to her to-morrow that I'm coming—"

"Peter—you're a darling!" cried Helena in delight, clapping her hands. "*Oh*!—I wish I could see Jenny's face when she opens the wire! You'll be very good to her, Peter?"

She looked at him searchingly, stirred by one of the sudden tremors that beset even the most well-intentioned match-maker.

Peter smiled, with a rather twisted lip, straightening his shoulders.

"I shouldn't ask any girl to marry me, that I couldn't love and honour, not even to please you, Helena! And she knows all about you!"

"She doesn't!" said Helena, in consternation.

"Yes, she does. I don't mean to say that I've told her the exact number of times you've refused me. But she knows quite enough. She'll take me—if she does take me—with her eyes open. Well, now that's settled!—But you interrupted me. There's one condition, Helena!"

"Name it." She eyed him nervously.

—"That in return for managing my life, you give me some indication of how you're going to manage your own!"

Helena fell back on the bilberry stalk, to gain time.

—"Because—" resumed Peter—"it's quite clear the Beechmark situation is all bust up. Philip's got an idiot-boy to look after—with Cynthia Welwyn in constant attendance. I don't see any room for you there, Helena!"

"Neither do I," said Helena, quietly. "You needn't tell me that."

"Well, then, what are you going to do?"

"You forget, Peter, that I possess the dearest and nicest little chaperon. I can roam the world where I please—without making any scandals."

"You'll always make scandals—"

"*Scandals,* Peter!" protested Helena.

"Well, victories, wherever you go—unless somebody has you pretty tightly in hand. But you and I—both know a man—that would be your match!"

He had moved, so as to stand firmly across the little path that ran from Helena's seat to the inn. She began to fidget—to drop one foot, that had been twisted under her, to the ground, as though "on tiptoe for a flight."

"It's time for supper, Peter. Mrs. Friend will think we're drowned. And I caught such a beautiful dish of trout yesterday,—all for your benefit! There's a dear man here who puts on the worms."

"You don't go, till I get an answer, Helena."

"There's nothing to answer. I've no plans. I draw, and fish, and read poetry. I have some money in the bank; and Cousin Philip will let me do what I like with it. Lastly—I have another month in which to make up my mind."

"About what?"

"Goose!—where to go next, of course."

Peter shook his head. His mood was now as determined, as hot in pursuit, as hers had been, a little earlier.

"I bet you'll have to make up your mind about something much more important than that—before long. I happened to be—in the Gallery of the House of Commons yesterday—"

"Improving your mind?"

"Listening to a lot of wild men talking rot about the army. But there was one man who didn't talk rot, though I agreed with scarcely a thing he said. But then he's a Labour man—or thinks he is—and I know that I'm a Tory—as blue as you make 'em. Anyway I'm perfectly certain you'd have liked to be there, Miss Helena!"

"Geoffrey?" said Helena coolly.

"Right you are. Well, I can tell you he made a ripping success! The man next to me in the gallery, who seemed to have been born and bred there—knew everybody and everything—and got as much fun out of it as I do out of 'Chu-Chin-Chow'—he told me it was the first time Geoffrey had really got what he called the 'ear of the House'—it was pretty full too!—and that he was certain to get on—office, and all that kind of thing—if he stuck to it. He certainly did it jolly well. He made even an ignorant ass like me sit up. I'd go and hear him again—I vow I would! And there was such a fuss in the lobby! I found Geoffrey there, shovelling out hand-shakes, and talking to press-men. An old uncle of mine—nice old boy—who's sat for a Yorkshire constituency for about a hundred years, caught hold of me. 'Know that fellow, Peter?' 'Rather!' 'Good for you! *He's* got his foot on the ladder—he'll climb.'"

"Horrid word!" said Helena.

"Depends on what you mean by it. If you're to get to the top, I suppose you must climb. Now, then, Helena!—if you won't take a man like me whom you can run—take a man like Geoffrey who can run you—and make you jolly happy all the same! There—I can give advice too, you see—and you've no right to be offended!"

Helena could not keep her features still. Her eyes shot fire, though of what kind the fire might be Peter was not quite sure. The two young creatures faced each

other. There was laughter in each face, but something else; something strenuous, tragic even; as though "Life at its grindstone set" had been at work on the radiant pair, evoking the Meredithian series of intellect from the senses,—"brain from blood"; with "spirit," or generous soul, for climax.

But unconsciously Peter had moved aside. In a flash Helena had slipped past him, and was flying through the wood, homeward, looking back to mock him, as he sped after her in vain.

CHAPTER XVI

A week had passed. Mrs. Friend at ten o'clock in the morning had just been having a heart to heart talk with the landlady of the inn on the subject of a decent luncheon for three persons, and a passable dinner for four. Food at the inn was neither good nor well-cooked, and as criticism, even the mildest, generally led to tears, Mrs. Friend's morning lot, when any guest was expected, was not a happy one. It was a difficult thing indeed to get anything said or settled at all; since the five-year old Bobby was generally scrimmaging round, capturing his mother's broom and threatening to "sweep out" Mrs. Friend, or brandishing the meat-chopper, as a still more drastic means of dislodging her. The little villain, having failed to drown himself, was now inclined to play tricks with his small sister, aged eight weeks; and had only that morning, while his mother's back was turned, taken the baby out of her cradle, run down a steep staircase with her in his arms, and laid her on a kitchen chair, forgetting all about her a minute afterwards. Even a fond mother had been provoked to smacking, and the inn had been filled with howls and roarings, which deadened even the thunder of the swollen stream outside. Then Helena, her fingers in her ears, had made a violent descent upon the kitchen, and carried off the "limb" to the river, where, being given something to do in the shape of damming up a brook that ran into the main stream, he had suddenly developed angelic qualities, and tied himself to Helena's skirts.

There they both were, on the river's pebbly bank, within hail, Helena in a short white skirt with a green jersey and cap. She was alternately helping Bobby to build the dam, and lying with her hands beneath her head, under the shelter of the bank. Moderately fine weather had returned, and the Welsh farmer had once more begun to hope that after all he might get in his oats. The morning sun sparkled on the river, on the freshly washed oak-woods, and on Bobby's bare curly head, as he sat busily playing beside Helena.

What was Helena thinking of? Lucy Friend would have given a good deal to

know. On the little table before Lucy lay two telegrams: one signed "Geoffrey" announced that he would reach Bettws station by twelve, and the "Fisherman's Rest" about half an hour later. The other announced the arrival of Lord Buntingford by the evening train. Lord Buntingford's visit had been arranged two or three days before; and Mrs. Friend wished it well over. He was of course coming to talk about plans with his ward, who had now wasted the greater part of the London season in this primitive corner of Wales. And both he and Geoffrey were leaving historic scenes behind them in order to spend these few hours with Helena. For this was Peace Day, when the victorious generals and troops of the Empire, and the Empire's allies, were to salute England's king amid the multitudes of London, in solemn and visible proof that the long nightmare of the war had found its end. Buntingford had naturally no heart for pageants; but Helena had been astonished by Geoffrey's telegram, which had arrived the night before from the Lancashire town he represented in Parliament. As an M.P. he ought surely to have been playing his part in the great show. Moreover, she had not expected him so soon, and she had done nothing to hurry his coming. His telegram had brought a great flush of colour into her face. But she made no other sign.

"Oh, well, we can take them out to see bonfires!" she had said, putting on her most careless air, and had then dismissed the subject. For that night the hills of the north were to run their fiery message through the land, blazoning a greater victory than Drake's; and Helena, who had by now made close friends with the mountains, had long since decided on the best points of view.

Since then Lucy had received no confidences, and asked no questions. A letter had reached her, however; by the morning's post, from Miss Alcott, giving an account of the situation at Beechmark, of the removal of the boy to his father's house, and of the progress that had been made in awakening his intelligence and fortifying his bodily health.

"It is wonderful to see the progress he has made—so far, entirely through imitation and handwork. He begins to have some notion of counting and numbers—he has learnt to crochet and thread beads—-poor little lad of fifteen! —he has built not only a tower but something like a house, of bricks—and now his enthusiastic teacher is attempting to teach him the first rudiments of speech, in this wonderful modern way—lip-reading and the like. He has been under training for about six weeks, and certainly the results are most promising. I believe his mother protested to Lord Buntingford that he had not been neglected.

Nobody can believe her, who sees now what has been done. Apparently a brain-surgeon in Naples was consulted as to the possibility of an operation. But when that was dropped, nothing else was ever tried, no training was attempted, and the child would have fared very badly, if it had not been for the old *bonne*—Zélie—who was and is devoted to him. His mother was ashamed of him, and came positively to hate the sight of him.

"But the tragic thing is that as his mind develops, his body seems to weaken. Food, special exercise, massage—poor Lord Buntingford has been trying everything—but with small result. It is pitiful to see him watching the child, and hanging on the doctors. 'Shall we stop all the teaching?' he said to John the other day in despair—'my first object is that he should *live*,' But it would be cruel to stop the teaching now. The child would not allow it. He himself has caught the passion of it. He seems to me to live in a fever of excitement and joy, as one step follows another, and the door opens a little wider for his poor prisoned soul. He adores his father, and will sit beside him, stroking his silky beard, with his tiny fingers, and looking at him with his large pathetic eyes … They have taken him to Beechmark, as you know, and given him a set of rooms, where he and his wonderful little teacher, Miss Denison—trained in the Séguin method, they say—and the old *bonne* Zélie live. The nurse has gone.

"I am so sorry for Lady Cynthia—she seems to miss him so. Of course she goes over to Beechmark a good deal, but it is not the same as having him under her own roof. And she was so good to him! She looks tired of late, and rather depressed. I wonder if her dragoon of a sister has been worrying her. Of course Lady Georgina is enchanted to have got rid of Arthur.

"I am very glad to hear Lord Buntingford is going to Wales. Miss Pitstone has been evidently a great deal on his mind. He said to John the other day that he had arranged everything at Beechmark so that, when you and she came back, he did not think you would find Arthur in the way. The boy's rooms are in a separate wing, and would not interfere at all with visitors. I said to him once that I was sure Miss Helena would be very fond of the little fellow. But he frowned and looked distressed. 'I should scarcely allow her to see him,' he said. I asked why. 'Because a young girl ought to be protected from anything irremediably sad. Life should be always bright for her. And I can still make it bright for Helena—I intend to make it bright.'

"Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Friend. John and I miss you very much."

A last sentence which gave Lucy Friend a quite peculiar pleasure. Her modest ministrations in the parish and the school had amply earned it. But it amazed her that anyone should attach any value to them. And that Mr. Alcott should miss her—why, it was ridiculous!

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Helena, returning to the inn along the river bank, with Bobby clinging to her skirt.

"Take him in tow, please," said Helena through the window. "I am going to walk a little way to meet Geoffrey."

Bobby's chubby hand held her so firmly that he could only be detached from her by main force. He was left howling in Mrs. Friend's grasp, till Helena, struck with compunction, turned back from the bend of the road, to stuff a chocolate into his open mouth, and then ran off again, laughing at the sudden silence which had descended on hill and stream.

Through the intermittent shade and sunshine of the day, Helena stepped on. She had never held herself so erect; never felt so conscious of an intense and boundless vitality. Yet she was quite uncertain as to what the next few hours would bring her. Peter had given a hint—that she was sure; and she was now, it seemed, to be wooed in earnest. On Geoffrey's former visit, she had teased him so continuously, and put so many petty obstacles of all kinds in his way, that he had finally taken his cue from her, and they had parted, in a last whirlwind of "chaff," but secretly angry, with each other or themselves.

"He might have held out a little longer," thought Helena. "When shall I ever get a serious word from her?" thought French.

Slowly she descended the long and winding hill leading to the village. From the few scattered cottages and farms in sight, flags were fluttering out. Groups of school children were scattered along the road, waving little flags and singing. Over the wide valley below her, with its woody hills and silver river, floated great cloud-shadows, chasing and chased by the sun. There were wild roses in the hedges, and perfume in every gust of wind. The summer was at its height, and the fire and sap of it were running full-tilt in Helena's pulses.

Far down the winding road she saw at last a man on a motor bicycle—bare-headed, and long-bodied.

Up he came, and soon was near enough to wave to her, while Helena was still scolding her own emotions. When he flung himself off beside her, she saw at once that he had come in an exultant mood expecting triumph. And immediately something perverse in her—or was it merely the old primeval instinct of the pursued maiden—set itself to baffle him.

"Very nice to see you!" she smiled, as she gave him a passive hand—"but why aren't you in the Mall?"

"My Sovereign had not expressed any burning desire for my presence. Can't we go to-night and feed a bonfire?"

"Several, if you like. I have watched the building of three. But it will rain."

"That won't matter," he said joyously. "Nothing will matter!" And again his ardent look challenged in her the Eternal Feminine.

"I don't agree. I hate a wet mackintosh dripping into my boots, and Cousin Philip won't see any fun in it if it rains."

He drew up suddenly.

"Philip!" he said, with a frown of irritation. "What has Philip to do with it?"

"He arrives to-night by the London train."

He resumed his walk beside her, in silence, pushing his bicycle. Had she done it of malice prepense? No—impossible! He had only telegraphed his own movements to her late on the previous evening, much too late to make any sudden arrangement with Philip, who was coming from an Eastern county.

"He is coming to find out your plans?"

"I suppose so. But I have no plans."

He stole a look at her. Yes—there was change in her, even since they had met last:—a richer, intenser personality, suggested by a new self-mastery. She seemed to him older—and a thought remote. Fears flew through him. What had been passing in her mind since he had seen her last? or in Philip's? Had he been fooled after all by those few wild words from Peter, which had reached him in

Lancashire, bidding him catch his opportunity, or rue the loss of it for ever?

She saw the effervescence in him die down, and became gracious at once. Especially because they were now in sight of the inn, and of Lucy Friend sitting in the little garden beside the road. Geoffrey pulled himself together, and prepared to play the game that Helena set him, until the afternoon and the walk she could not deny him, should give him his chance.

The little meal passed gaily, and after it Lucy Friend watched—not without trepidation—Helena's various devices for staving off the crisis. She had two important letters to write; she must go and watch Mr. McCready sketching, as she had promised to do, or the old fellow would never forgive her; and finally she invited the fuming M.P. to fish the preserved water with her, accompanied by the odd-man as gilly. At this Geoffrey's patience fairly broke. He faced her, crimson, in the inn parlour; forgetting Lucy altogether and standing in front of the door, so that Lucy could not escape and could only roll herself in a curtain and look out of the window.

"I didn't come here to fish, Helena—or to sketch—but simply and solely to talk to you! And I have come a long way. Suppose we take a walk?"

Helena eyed him. She was a little pale—but composed.

"At your service. Lead on, Sir Oracle!"

They went out together, Geoffrey taking command, and Lucy watched them depart, across the foot-bridge, and by a green path that would lead them before long to the ferny slopes of the mountain beyond the oak-wood. As Helena was mounting the bridge, a servant of the inn ran out with a telegram which had just arrived and gave it her.

Helena peered at the telegram, and then with a dancing smile thrust it into her pocket without a word.

Her mood, as they walked on, was now, it seemed, eagerly political. She insisted on hearing his own account of his successful speech in the House; she wished to discuss his relations with the Labour party, which were at the moment strained, on the question of Coal Nationalization; she asked for his views on the Austrian Treaty, and on the prospects of the Government. He lent himself to her caprice, so long as they were walking one behind the other through a crowded oak-wood

and along a narrow path where she could throw her questions back over her shoulder, herself well out of reach. But presently they came out on a glorious stretch of fell, clothed with young green fern, and running up into a purple crag fringed with junipers. Then he sprang to her side, and Helena knew that the hour had come and the man. There was a flat rock on the slope below the crag, under a group of junipers, and Helena presently found herself sitting there, peremptorily guided by her companion, and feeling dizzily that she was beginning to lose control of the situation, as Geoffrey sank down into the fern beside her.

"At last!" he said, drawing a long breath—"*At last*!"

He lay looking up at her, his long face working with emotion—the face of an intellectual, with that deep scar on the temple, where a fragment of shrapnel had struck him on the first day of the Somme advance.

"Unkind Helena!" he said, in a low voice that shook—"*unkind Helena*!"

Her lips framed a retort. Then suddenly the tears rushed into her eyes, and she covered them with her hands.

"I'm not unkind. I'm afraid!"

"Afraid of what?"

"I told you," she said piteously, "I didn't want to marry—I didn't want to be bound!"

"And you haven't changed your mind at all?"

She didn't answer. There was silence a moment. Then she said abruptly:

"Do you want to hear secrets, Geoffrey?"

He pondered.

"I don't know. I expect I guess them."

"What do you guess?" She lifted a proud face. He touched her hand tenderly.

"I guess that when you came here—you were unhappy?"

Her lip trembled.

"I was—very unhappy."

"And now?" he asked, caressing the hand he held.

"Well, now—I've walked myself back into—into common sense. There!—I had it out with myself. I may as well have it out with you! Two months ago I was a bit in love with Cousin Philip. Now, of course, I love him—I always shall love him—but I'm not *in* love with him!"

"Thank the Lord!" cried French—"since it has been the object of my life for much more than two months to persuade you to be in love with me!"

"I don't think I am—yet," said Helena slowly.

Her look was strange—half repellent. On both sides indeed there was a note of something else than prosperous love-making. On his, the haunting doubt lest she had so far given her heart to Philip that full fruition for himself, that full fruition which youth at its zenith instinctively claims from love and fortune, could never be his. On hers, the consciousness, scarcely recognized till now, of a moment of mental exhaustion caused by mental conflict. She was half indignant that he should press her, yet aware that she would miss the pressure if it ceased; while he, believing that his cause was really won, and urged on by Peter's hints, resented the barriers she would still put up between them.

There was a short silence after her last speech. Then Helena said softly—half laughing:

"You haven't talked philosophy to me, Geoffrey, for such a long time!"

"What's the use?" said Geoffrey, who was lying on his face, his eyes covered by his hands—"I'm not feeling philosophical."

"All the same, you made me once read half a volume of Bergson. I didn't understand much of it, except that—whatever else he is, he's a great poet. And I do know something about poetry! But I remember one sentence very well—Life—isn't it Life?—is 'an action which is making itself, across an action of the same

kind which is unmaking itself.' And he compares it to a rocket in a fire-works display rushing up in flame through the falling cinders of the dead rockets."

She paused.

"Go on—"

"Give the cinders a little time to fall, Geoffrey!" she said in a faltering voice.

He looked up ardently.

"Why? It's only the living fire that matters! Darling—let's come to close quarters. You gave a bit of your warm heart to Philip, and you imagined that it meant much more than it really did. And poor Philip all the time was determined—cribbed and cabined—by his past,—and now by his boy. We both know that if he marries anybody it will be Cynthia Welwyn; and that he would be happier and less lonely if he married her. But so long as your life is unsettled he will marry nobody. He remembers that your mother entrusted you to him in the firm belief that, in his uncertainty about his wife, he neither could nor would marry anybody. So that for these two years, at any rate, he holds himself absolutely bound to his compact with her and you."

"And the moral of that is—" said Helena, flushing.

"Marry me!—Nothing simpler. Then the compact falls—and at one stroke you bring two men into port."

The conflict of expressions passing through her features showed her shaken. He waited.

"Very well, Geoffrey—" she said at last, with a long, quivering breath, as though some hostile force rent her and came out.

"If you want me so much—take me!"

But as she spoke she became aware of the lover in him ready to spring.
She drew back instantly from his cry of joy, and his outstretched arms.

"Ah, but give me time—dear Geoffrey, give me time! You have my word."

He controlled himself, warned by her agitation, and her pallor.

"Mayn't we tell Philip—when he comes?"

"Yes, we'll tell Philip—and Lucy—to-night. Not a word!—till then." She jumped up—"Are you going to climb that crag before tea? I am!"

She led him breathlessly up its steep side and down again. When they regained the inn, Geoffrey had not even such a butterfly kiss to remember as she had once given him in the lime-walk at Beechmark; and Lucy, trying in her eager affection to solve the puzzle they presented her with, had simply to give it up.

* * * * *

The day grew wilder. Great flights of clouds came up from the west and fought the sun, and as the afternoon declined, light gusts of rain, succeeded by bursts of sunshine, began to sweep across the oak-woods. The landlord of the inn and his sons, who had been mainly responsible for building the great bonfire on Moel Dun, and the farmers in their gigs who stopped at the inn door, began to shake their heads over the prospects of the night. Helena, Lucy Friend, and Geoffrey spent the afternoon chiefly in fishing and wandering by the river. Helena clung to Lucy's side, defying her indeed to leave her, and Geoffrey could only submit, and count the tardy hours. They made tea in a green meadow beside the stream, and immediately afterwards Geoffrey, looking at his watch, announced to Mrs. Friend that he proposed to bicycle down to Bettws to meet Lord Buntingford.

Helena came with him to the inn to get his bicycle. They said little to each other, till, just as he was departing, French bent over to her, as she stood beside his machine.

"Do I understand?—I may tell him?"

"Yes." And then for the first time she smiled upon him; a smile that was heavenly soft and kind; so that he went off in mounting spirits.

Helena retraced her steps to the river-side, where they had left Lucy. She sat down on a rock by Lucy's side, and instinctively Lucy put down some knitting she held, and turned an eager face—her soul in her eyes.

"Lucy—I am engaged to Geoffrey French."

Lucy laughed and cried; held the bright head in her arms and kissed the cheek that lay upon her shoulder. Helena's eyes too were wet; and in both there was the memory of that night at Beechmark which had made them sisters rather than friends.

"And of course," said Helena—"you'll stay with me for ever."

But Lucy was far too happy to think of her own future. She had made friends—real friends—in these three months, after years of loneliness. It seemed to her that was all that mattered. And half guiltily her memory cherished those astonishing words—"*Mr. Alcott* and I miss you very much."

A drizzling rain had begun when towards eight o'clock they heard the sound of a motor coming up the Bettws road. Lucy retreated into the inn, while Helena stood at the gate waiting.

Buntingford waved to her as they approached, then jumped out and followed her into the twilight of the inn parlour.

"My dear Helena!" He put his arm round her shoulder and kissed her heartily. "God bless you!—good luck to you! Geoffrey has given me the best news I have heard for many a long day."

"You are pleased?" she said, softly, looking at him.

He sat down by her, holding her hands, and revealing to her his own long-cherished dream of what had now come to pass. "The very day you came to Beechmark, I wrote to Geoffrey, inviting him. And I saw you by chance the day after the dance, together, in the lime-walk." Helena's start almost drew her hands away. He laughed. "I wasn't eavesdropping, dear, and I heard nothing. But my dream seemed to be coming true, and I went away in tip-top spirits—just an hour, I think, before Geoffrey found that drawing."

He released her, with an unconscious sigh, and she was able to see how much older he seemed to have grown; the touches of grey in his thick black hair, and the added wrinkles round his eyes,—those blue eyes that gave him his romantic look, and were his chief beauty. But he resumed at once:

"Well, now then, the sooner you come back to Beechmark the better. Think of the lawyers—the trousseau—the wedding. My dear, you've no time to waste!—

nor have I. Geoffrey is an impatient fellow—he always was."

"And I shall see Arthur?" she asked him gently.

His look thanked her. But he did not pursue the subject.

Then Geoffrey and Lucy Friend came in, and there was much talk of plans, and a merry dinner *à quatre*. Afterwards, the rain seemed to have cleared off a little, and through the yellow twilight a thin stream of people, driving or on foot, began to pour past the inn, towards the hills. Helena ran upstairs to put on an oilskin hat and cape over her white dress.

"You're coming to help light the bonfire?" said Geoffrey, addressing Philip.

Buntingford shook his head. He turned to Lucy.

"You and I will let the young ones go—won't we? I don't see you climbing Moel Dun in the rain, and I'm getting too old! We'll walk up the road a bit, and look at the people as they go by. I daresay we shall see as much as the other two."

So the other two climbed, alone and almost in silence. Beside them and in front of them, scattered up and along the twilight fell, were dim groups of pilgrims bent on the same errand with themselves. It was not much past nine o'clock, and the evening would have been still light but for the drizzle of rain and the low-hanging clouds. As it was, those bound for the beacon-head had a blind climb up the rocks and the grassy slopes that led to the top. Helena stumbled once or twice, and Geoffrey caught her. Thenceforward he scarcely let her go again. She protested at first, mountaineer that she was; but he took no heed, and presently the warmth of his strong clasp seemed to hypnotize her. She was silent, and let him pull her up.

On the top was a motley crowd of farmers, labourers and visitors, with a Welsh choir from a neighbouring village, singing hymns and patriotic songs. The bonfire was to be fired on the stroke of ten, by a neighbouring landowner, whose white head and beard flashed hither and thither through the crowd and the mist, as he gave his orders, and greeted the old men, farmers and labourers, he had known for a lifetime. The sweet Welsh voices rose in the "Men of Harlech," "Land of My Fathers," or in the magnificent "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord." And when the moment arrived, and the white-haired Squire, with his three chosen men, fired the four corners of the high-built pile,

out rushed the blaze, flaring up to heaven, defying the rain, and throwing its crimson glow on the faces ringed round it. "God Save the King!" challenged the dark, and then, hand in hand, the crowd marched round about the pyramid of fire in measured rhythm, while "Auld Lang Syne," sorrowfully sweet, echoed above the haunted mountain-top where in the infancy of Britain, Celt and Roman in succession had built their camps and reared their watch-towers. And presently from all quarters of the great horizon sprang the answering flames from mountain peaks that were themselves invisible in the murky night, while they sent forward yet, without fail or break, the great torch-race of victory, leaping on, invincible by rain or dark, far into the clouded north.

But Geoffrey's eyes could not tear themselves from Helena. He saw her bathed in light, from top to toe, now gold, now scarlet, a fire-goddess, inimitably beautiful. They danced hand in hand, intoxicated by the music, and by the movement of their young swaying bodies. He felt Helena unconsciously leaning on him, her soft breath on his cheek. Her eyes were his now, and her smiling lips, just parted over her white teeth, tempted him beyond his powers of resistance.

"Come!" he whispered to her, and with a quick turn of the hand he had swung her out of the fiery circle, and drawn her towards the surrounding dark. A few steps and they were on the mountainside again, while behind them the top was still aflame, and black forms still danced round the drooping fire.

But they were safely curtained by night and the rising storm. After the first stage of the descent, suddenly he flung his arms round her, his mouth found hers, and all Helena's youth rushed at last to meet him as he gathered her to his breast.

"Geoffrey—my Tyrant!—let me go!" she panted.

"Are you mine—are you mine, at last?—you wild thing!"

"I suppose so—" she said, demurely. "Only, let me breathe!"

She escaped, and he heard her say with low sweet laughter as though to herself:

"I seem at any rate to be following my guardian's advice!"

"What advice? Tell me! you darling, tell me everything. I have a right now to all your secrets."

"Some day—perhaps."

Darkness hid her eyes. Hand in hand they went down the hillside, while the Mount of Victory still blazed behind them.

Philip and Lucy were waiting for them. And then, at last, Helena remembered her telegram of the afternoon, and read it to a group of laughing hearers.

"Right you are. I proposed last night to Jennie Dumbarton. Wedding, October—Await reply. PETER."

"He shall have his reply," said Helena. And she wrote it with Geoffrey looking on.

Not quite twenty-four hours later, Buntingford was walking up through the late twilight to Beechmark. After the glad excitement kindled in him by Helena's and Geoffrey's happiness, his spirits had dropped steadily all the way home. There before him across the park, rose his large barrack of a house, so empty, but for that frail life which seemed now part of his own.

He walked on, his eyes fixed on the lights in the rooms where his boy was. When he reached the gate into the gardens, a figure came suddenly out of the shrubbery towards him.

"Cynthia!"

"Philip! We didn't expect you till to-morrow."

He turned back with her, inexpressibly comforted by her companionship. The first item in his news was of course the news of Helena's engagement. Cynthia's surprise was great, as she showed; so also was her relief, which she did not show.

"And the wedding is to be soon?"

"Geoffrey pleads for the first week in September, that they may have time to get to some favourite places of his in France before Parliament meets. Helena and Mrs. Friend will be here to-morrow."

After a pause he turned to her, with another note in his voice:

"You have been with Arthur?"

She gave an account of her day.

"He misses you so. I wanted to make up to him a little."

"He loves you—so do I!" said Buntingford. "Won't you come and take charge of us both, dear Cynthia? I owe you so much already—I would do my best to pay it."

He took her hand and pressed it. All was said.

Yet through all her gladness, Cynthia felt the truth of Georgina's remark—"When he marries it will be for peace—not passion." Well, she must accept it. The first-fruits were not for her. With all his chivalry he would never be able to give her what she had it in her to give him. It was the touch of acid in the sweetness of her lot. But sweet it was all the same.

When she told Georgina, her sister broke into a little laugh—admiring, not at all unkind.

"Cynthia, you are a clever woman! But I must point out that Providence has given you every chance."

Peace indeed was the note of Philip's mood that night, as he paced up and down beside the lake after his solitary dinner. He was, momentarily at least, at rest, and full of patient hope. His youth was over. He resigned it, with a smile and a sigh; while seeming still to catch the echoes of it far away, like music in some invisible city that a traveller leaves behind him in the night. His course lay clear before him. Politics would give him occupation, and through political life power might come to him. But the real task to which he set his most human heart, in this moment of change and reconstruction, was to make a woman and a child happy.

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