The Helpmate eBook

The Helpmate by May Sinclair

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CHAPTER I

It was four o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Walter Majendie still lay on the extreme edge of the bed, with her face turned to the dim line of sea discernible through the open window of the hotel bedroom.

Since midnight, when she had gone to bed, she had lain in that uncomfortable position, motionless, irremediably awake. Mrs. Walter Majendie was thinking.

At first the night had gone by her unperceived, black and timeless. Now she could measure time by the dull progress of the dawn among the objects in the room. A slow, unhappy thing, born between featureless grey cloud and sea, it had travelled from the window, shimmered in the watery square of the looking-glass, and was feeling for the chair where her husband had laid his clothes down last night. He had thought she was asleep, and had gone through his undressing noiselessly, with movements of angelic and elaborate gentleness that well-nigh disarmed her thought. He was sleeping now. She tried not to hear the sound of his placid breathing. Only the other night, their wedding night, she had lain awake at this hour and heard it, and had turned her face towards him where he lay in the divine unconsciousness of sleep. The childlike, huddled posture of the sleeper had then stirred her heart to an unimaginable tenderness.

Now she had got to think, to adjust a new and devastating idea to a beloved and divine belief.

Somewhere in the quiet town a church clock clanged to the dawn, and the sleeper stretched himself. The five hours' torture of her thinking wrung a low sob from the woman at his side.

He woke. His hand searched for her hand. At his touch she drew it away, and moved from under her cramped shoulder the thick, warm braid of her hair. It tossed a gleam of pale gold to the risen light. She felt his drowsy, affectionate fingers pressing and smoothing the springy bosses of the braid.

The caress kindled her dull thoughts to a point of flame. She sat up and twisted the offending braid into a rigid coil.

"Walter," she said, "*who* is Lady Cayley?"

She noticed that the name waked him.

"Does it matter now? Can't you forget her?"

"Forget her? I know nothing about her. I want to know."

“Haven’t you been told everything that was necessary?”

“I’ve been told nothing. It was what I heard.”

There was a terrible stillness about him. Only his breath came and went unsteadily, shaken by the beating of his heart.

She quieted her own heart to listen to it; as if she could gather from such involuntary motions the thing she had to know.

“I know,” she said, “I oughtn’t to have heard it. And I can’t believe it,—I don’t, really.”

“Poor child! What is it that you don’t believe?”

His calm, assured tones had the force of a denial.

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“Walter—if you’d only say it isn’t true—”

“What Edith told you?”

“Edith? Your sister? No; about that woman—that you—that she—”

“Why are you bringing all that up again, at this unearthly hour?”

“Then,” she said coldly, “it *is* true.”

His silence lay between them like a sword.

She had rehearsed this scene many times in the five hours; but she had not prepared herself for this. Her dread had been held captive by her belief, her triumphant anticipation of Majendie’s denial.

Presently he spoke; and his voice was strange to her as the voice of another man.

“Anne,” he said, “didn’t she tell you? It was before I knew you. And it was the only time.”

“Don’t speak to me,” she cried with a sudden passion, and lay shuddering.

She rose, slipped from the bed, and went to a chair that stood by the open window. There she sat, with her back to the bed, and her eyes staring over the grey parade and out to the eastern sea.

“Anne,” said her husband, “what are you doing there?”

Anne made no answer.

“Come back to bed; you’ll catch cold.”

He waited.

“How long are you going to sit there in that draught?”

She sat on, upright, immovable, in her thin nightgown, raked by the keen air of the dawn. Majendie raised himself on his elbow. He could just see her where she glimmered, and her braid of hair, uncoiled, hanging to her waist. Up till now he had been profoundly unhappy and ashamed, but something in the unconquerable obstinacy of her attitude appealed to the devil that lived in him, a devil of untimely and disastrous humour. The right thing, he felt, was not to appear as angry as he was. He sat up on his pillow, and began to talk to her with genial informality.

“See here,—I suppose you want an explanation. But don’t you think we’d better wait until we’re up? Up and dressed, I mean. I can’t talk seriously before I’ve had a bath and—and brushed my hair. You see, you’ve taken rather an unfair advantage of me by getting out of bed.” (He paused for an answer, and still no answer came.)—“Don’t imagine I’m ignobly lying down all the time, wrapped in a blanket. I’m sitting on my pillow. I know there’s any amount to be said. But how do you suppose I’m going to say it if I’ve got to stay here, all curled up like a blessed Buddha, and you’re planted away over there like a monument of all the Christian virtues? Are you coming back to bed, or are you not?”

She shivered. To her mind his flippancy, appalling in the circumstances, sufficiently revealed the man he was. The man she had known and married had never existed. For she had married Walter Majendie believing him to be good. The belief had been so rooted in her that nothing but his own words or his own silence could have cast it out. She had loved Walter Majendie; but it was another man who

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called to her, and she would not listen to him. She felt that she could never go back to that man, never sit in the same room, or live in the same house with him again. She would have to make up her mind what she would do, eventually. Meanwhile, to get away from him, to sit there in the cold, inflexible, insensitive, to obtain a sort of spiritual divorce from him, while she martyrised her body which was wedded to him, that was the young, despotic instinct she obeyed.

“If you won’t come,” he said, “I suppose it only remains for me to go.”

He got up, took Anne’s cloak from the door where it hung, and put it tenderly about her shoulders.

“Whatever happens or unhappens,” he said, “we must be dressed.”

He found her slippers, and thrust them on her passive feet. She lay back and closed her eyes. From the movements that she heard, she gathered that Walter was getting into his clothes. Once, as he struggled with an insufficiently subservient shirt, he laughed, from mere miserable nervousness. Anne, not recognising the utterance of his helpless humanity, put that laugh down to the account of the devil that had insulted her. Her heart grew harder.

“I am clothed, and in my right mind,” said Majendie, standing before her with his hand on the window sill.

She looked up at him, at the face she knew, the face that (oddly, it seemed to her) had not changed to suit her new conception of him, that maintained its protest. She had loved everything about him, from the dark, curling hair of his head to his well-finished feet; she had loved his slender, virile body, and the clean red and brown of his face, the strong jaw and the mouth that, hidden under the short moustache, she divined only to be no less strong. More than these things she had loved his eyes, the dark, bright dwelling-places of the “goodness” she had loved best of all in him. Used to smiling as they looked at her, they smiled even now.

“If you’ll take my advice,” he said, “you’ll go back to your warm bed. You shall have the whole place to yourself.”

And with that he left her.

She rose, went to the bed, arranged the turned-back blanket so as to hide the place where he had lain, and slid on to her knees, supporting herself by the bedside.

Never before had Anne hurled herself into the heavenly places in turbulence and disarray. It had been her wont to come, punctual to some holy, foreappointed hour, with

firm hands folded, with a back that, even in bowing, preserved its pride; with meek eyes, close-lidded; with breathing hushed for the calm passage of her prayer; herself marshalling the procession of her dedicated thoughts, virgins all, veiled even before their God.

Now she precipitated herself with clutching hands thrown out before her; with hot eyes that drank the tears of their own passion; with the shamed back and panting mouth of a Magdalen; with memories that scattered the veiled procession of the Prayers. They fled before her, the Prayers, in a gleaming tumult, a rout of heavenly wings that obscured her heaven. When they had vanished a sudden vagueness came upon her.

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And then it seemed that the storm that had gone over her had rolled her mind out before her, like a sheet of white-hot iron. There was a record on it, newly traced, of things that passion makes indiscernible under its consuming and aspiring flame. Now, at the falling of the flame, the faint characters flashed into sight upon the blank, running in waves, as when hot iron changes from white to sullen red. Anne felt that her union with Majendie had made her one with that other woman, that she shared her memory and her shame. For Majendie's sake she loathed her womanhood that was yesterday as sacred to her as her soul. Through him she had conceived a thing hitherto unknown to her, a passionate consciousness and hatred of her body. She hated the hands that had held him, the feet that had gone with him, the lips that had touched him, the eyes that had looked at him to love him. Him she detested, not so much on his own account, as because he had made her detestable to herself.

Her eyes wandered round the room. Its alien aspect was becoming transformed for her, like a scene on a tragic stage. The light had established itself in the windows and pier-glasses. The wall-paper was flushing in its own pink dawn. And the roses bloomed again on the grey ground of the bed-curtains. These things had become familiar, even dear, through their three days' association with her happy bridals. Now the room and everything in it seemed to have been created for all time to be the accomplices and ministers of her degradation. They were well acquainted with her and it; they held foreknowledge of her, as the pier-glass held her dishonoured and dishevelled image.

She thought of her dead father's house, the ivy-coated Deanery in the south, and of the small white bedroom, a girl's bedroom that had once known her and would never know her again. She thought of her father and mother, and was glad that they were dead. Once she wondered why their death had been God's will. Now she saw very clearly why. But why she herself should have been sent upon this road, of all roads of suffering, was more than Anne could see.

She, whose nature revolted against the despotically human, had schooled herself into submission to the divine. Her sense of being supremely guided and protected had, before now, enabled her to act with decision in turbulent and uncertain situations of another sort. Where other people writhed or vacillated, Anne had held on her course, uplifted, unimpassioned, and resigned. Now she was driven hither and thither, she sank to the very dust and turned in it, she saw no way before her, neither her own way nor God's way.

Widowhood would not have left her so abject and so helpless. If her husband's body had lain dead before her there, she could have stood beside it, and declared herself consoled by the immortal presence of his spirit. But to attend this deathbed of her belief and of her love, love that had already given itself over, too weak to struggle against dissolution, it was as if she had seen some horrible reversal of the law of death, spirit returning to earth, the incorruptible putting on corruption.

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Not only was her house of life made desolate; it was defiled. Dumb and ashamed, she abandoned herself like a child to the arms of God, too agonised to pray.

An hour passed.

Then slowly, as she knelt, the religious instinct regained possession of her. It was as if her soul had been flung adrift, had gone out with the ebb of the spiritual sea, and now rocked, poised, waiting for the turn of the immortal tide.

Her lips parted, almost mechanically, in the utterance of the divine name. Aware of that first motion of her soul, she gathered herself together, and concentrated her will upon some familiar prayer for guidance. For a little while she prayed thus, grasping at old shadowy forms of petition as they went by her, lifting her sunken mind by main force from stupefaction; and then, it was as if the urging, steadying will withdrew, and her soul, at some heavenly signal, moved on alone into the place of peace.

CHAPTER II

It was broad daylight outside. A man was putting out the lights one by one along the cold little grey parade. A figure, walking slowly, with down-bent head, was approaching the hotel from the pier. Anne recognised it as that of her husband. Both sights reminded her that her life had to be begun all over again, and to go on.

Another hour passed. Majendie had sent up a waitress with breakfast to her room. He was always thoughtful for her comfort. It did not occur to her to wonder what significance there might be in his thus keeping away from her, or what attitude toward her he would now be inclined to take. She would not have admitted that he had a right to any attitude at all. It was for her, as the profoundly injured person, to decide as to the new disposal of their relations.

She was very clear about her grievance. The facts, that her husband had been pointed at in the public drawing-room of their hotel; that the terrible statement she had overheard had been made and received casually; that he had assumed, no less casually, her knowledge of the thing, all bore but one interpretation: that Walter Majendie and the scandal he had figured in were alike notorious. The marvel was that, staying in the town where he lived and was known, she herself had not heard of it before. A peculiarly ugly thought visited her. Was it possible that Scarby was the very place where the scandal had occurred?

She remembered now that, when she had first proposed that watering-place for their honeymoon, he had objected on the ground that Scarby was full of people whom he knew. Besides, he had said, she wouldn’t like it. But whether she would like it or not, Anne, who had her bridal dignity to maintain, considered that in the matter of her

honeymoon his wishes should give way to hers. She was inclined to measure the extent of his devotion by that test. Scarby, she said, was not full of people who knew *her*. Anne had been insistent and Majendie passive, as he was in most unimportant matters, reserving his energies for supremely decisive moments.

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Anne, bearing her belief in Majendie in her innocent breast, failed at first to connect her husband with the remarkable intimations that passed between the two newcomers gossiping in the drawing-room before dinner. They, for their part, had no clue linking the unapproachably strange lady on the neighbouring sofa with the hero of their tale. The case, they said, was "infamous." At that point Majendie had put an end to his own history and his wife's uncertainty by entering the room. Three words and a look, observed by Anne, had established his identity.

Her mind was steadied by its inalienable possession of the facts. She had returned through prayer to her normal mood of religious resignation. She tried to support herself further by a chain of reasoning. If all things were divinely ordered, this sorrow also was the will of God. It was the burden she was appointed to take up and bear.

She bathed and dressed herself for the day. She felt so strange to herself in these familiar processes that, standing before the looking-glass, she was curious to observe what manner of woman she had become. The inner upheaval had been so profound that she was surprised to find so little record of it in her outward seeming.

Anne was a woman whose beauty was a thing of general effect, and the general effect remained uninjured. Nature had bestowed on her a body strongly made and superbly fashioned. Having framed her well, she coloured her but faintly. She had given her eyes of a light thick grey. Her eyebrows, her lashes, and her hair were of a pale gold that had ashen undershades in it. They all but matched a skin honey-white with that even, sombre, untransparent tone that belongs to a temperament at once bilious and robust. For the rest, Nature had aimed nobly at the significance of the whole, slurring the details. She had built up the forehead low and wide, thrown out the eyebones as a shelter for the slightly prominent eyes; saved the short, straight line of the nose by a hair's-breadth from a tragic droop. But she had scamped her work in modelling the close, narrow nostrils. She had merged the lower lip with the line of the chin, missing the classic indentation. The mouth itself she had left unfinished. Only a little amber mole, verging on the thin rose of the upper lip, foreshortened it, and gave to its low arc the emphasis of a curve, the vivacity of a dimple (Anne's under lip was straight as the tense string of a bow). When she spoke or smiled Anne's mole seemed literally to catch up her lip against its will, on purpose to show the small white teeth below. Majendie loved Anne's mole. It was that one charming and emphatic fault in her face, he said, that made it human. But Anne was ashamed of it.

She surveyed her own reflection in the glass sadly, and sadly went through the practised, mechanical motions of her dressing; smoothing the back of her irreproachable coat, arranging her delicate laces with a deftness no indifference could impair. Yesterday she had had delight in that new garment and in her own appearance. She knew that Majendie admired her for her distinction and refinement. Now she wondered what he could have seen in her—after Lady Cayley. At Lady Cayley's

personality she had not permitted herself so much as to guess. Enough that the woman was notorious—infamous.

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There was a knock at the door, the low knock she had come to know, and Majendie entered in obedience to her faint call.

The hours had changed him, given his bright face a tragic, submissive look, as of a man whipped and hounded to her feet.

He glanced first at the tray, to see if she had eaten her breakfast.

“There are some things I should like to say to you, with your permission. But I think we can discuss them better out of doors.”

He looked round the disordered room. The associations of the place were evidently as painful to him as they were to her.

They went out. The parade was deserted at that early hour, and they found an empty seat at the far end of it.

“I, too,” she said, “have things that I should like to say.”

He looked at her gravely.

“Will you allow me to say mine first?”

“Certainly; but I warn you, they will make no difference.”

“To you, possibly not. They make all the difference to me. I’m not going to attempt to defend myself. I can see the whole thing from your point of view. I’ve been thinking it over. Didn’t you say that what you heard you had not heard from Edith?”

“From Edith? Never!”

“When did you hear it, then?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“From some one in the hotel?”

“Yes.”

“From whom? Not that it matters.”

“From those women who came yesterday. I didn’t know whom they were talking about. They were talking quite loud. They didn’t know who I was.”

“You say you didn’t know whom they were talking about?”

“Not at first—not till you came in. Then I knew.”

“I see. That was the first time you had heard of it?”

Her lips parted in assent, but her voice died under the torture.

“Then,” he said, “I am profoundly sorry. If I had realised that, I would not have spoken to you as I did.”

The memory of it stung her.

“That,” she said, “was—in any circumstances—unpardonable.”

“I know it was. And I repeat, I am profoundly sorry. But, you see, I thought you knew all the time, and that you had consented to forget it. And I thought, don’t you know, it was—well, rather hard on me to have it all raked up again like that. Now I see how very hard it was on you, dear. Your not knowing makes all the difference.”

“It does indeed. If I *had* known——”

“I understand. You wouldn’t have married me?”

“I should not.”

“Dear—do you suppose I didn’t know that?”

“I know nothing.”

“Do you remember the day I asked you why you cared for me, and you said it was because you knew I was good?”

Her lip trembled.

“And of course I know it’s been an awful shock to you to discover that—I—was *not* so good.”

She turned away her face.

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“But I never meant you to discover it. Not for yourself, like this. I couldn’t have forgiven myself—after what you told me. I meant to have told you myself—that evening—but my poor little sister promised me that she would. She said it would be easier for you to hear it from her. Of course I believed her. There *were* things she could say that I couldn’t.”

“She never said a word.”

“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly. Except—yes—she *did* say——”

It was coming back to her now.

“Do you mind telling me exactly what she said?”

“N—no. She made me promise that if I ever found things in you that I didn’t understand, or that I didn’t like——”

“Well—what did she make you promise?”

“That I wouldn’t be hard on you. Because, she said, you’d had such a miserable life.”

“Poor Edith! So that was the nearest she could get to it. Things you didn’t understand and didn’t like!”

“I didn’t know what she meant.”

“Of course you didn’t. Who could? But I’m sorry to say that Edith made me pretty well believe you did.”

He was silent a while, trying to fathom the reason of his sister’s strange duplicity. Apparently he gave it up.

“You can’t be a brute to a poor little woman with a bad spine,” said he; “but I’m not going to forgive Edith for that.”

Anne flamed through her pallor. “For what?” she said. “For not having had more courage than yourself? Think what you put on her.”

“I didn’t. She took it on herself. Edith’s got courage enough for anybody. She would never admit that her spine released her from all moral obligations. But I suppose she meant well.”

The spirit of the grey, cold morning seemed to have settled upon Anne. She gazed sternly out over the eastern sea. Preoccupied with what he considered Edith's perfidy, he failed to understand his wife's silence and her mood.

"Edith's very fond of you. You won't let this make any difference between you and her?"

"Between her and me it can make no difference. I am very fond of Edith."

"But the fact remains that you married me under false pretences? Is that what you mean?"

"You may certainly put it that way."

"I understand your point of view completely. I wish you could understand mine. When Edith said there were things she could have told you that I couldn't, she meant that there were extenuating circumstances."

"They would have made no difference."

"Excuse me, they make all the difference. But, of course, there's no extenuation for deception. Therefore, if you insist on putting it that way—if—if it has made the whole thing intolerable to you, it seems to me that perhaps I ought, don't you know, to release you from your obligations——"

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She looked at him. She knew that he had understood the meaning and the depth of her repugnance. She did not know that such understanding is rare in the circumstances, nor could she see that in itself it was a revelation of a certain capacity for the "goodness" she had once believed in. But she did see that she was being treated with a delicacy and consideration she had not expected of this man with the strange devil. It touched her in spite of her repugnance. It made her own that she had expected nothing short of it until yesterday.

"*Do* you insist?" he went on. "After what I've told you?"

"After what you've told me—no. I'm ready to believe that you did not mean to deceive me."

"Doesn't that make any difference?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes. It makes some difference—in my judgment of you."

"You mean you're not—as Edith would say—going to be too hard on me?"

"I hope," said Anne, "I should never be too hard on any one."

"Then," he inquired, eager to be released from the strain of a most insupportable situation, "what are we going to do next?"

He had assumed that the supreme issue had been decided by a polite evasion; and his question had been innocent of all momentous meaning. He merely wished to know how they were going to spend the day that was before them, since they had to spend days, and spend them together. But Anne's tense mind contemplated nothing short of the supreme issue that, for her, was not to be evaded, nor yet to be decided hastily.

"Will you leave me alone," she said, "to think it over? Will you give me three hours?"

He stared and turned pale; for, this time, he understood.

"Certainly," he said coldly, rising and taking out his watch. "It's twelve now."

"At three, then?"

They met at three o'clock. Anne had spent one hour of bewilderment out of doors, two hours of hard praying and harder thinking in her room.

Her mind was made up. However notorious her husband had been, between him and her there was to be no open rupture. She was not going to leave him, to appeal to him for a separation, to deny him any right. Not that she was moved by a profound veneration for the legal claim. Marriage was to her a matter of religion even more than

of law. And though, at the moment, she could no longer discern its sacramental significance through the degraded aspect it now wore for her, she surrendered on the religious ground. The surrender would be a martyrdom. She was called upon to lay down her will, but not to subdue the deep repugnance of her soul.

Protection lay for her in Walter's chivalry, as she well knew. But she would not claim it. Chastened and humbled, she would take up her wedded life again. There was no vow that she would not keep, no duty she would not fulfil. And she would remain in her place of peace, building up between them the ramparts of the spiritual life.

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Meanwhile she gave him credit for his attitude.

“Things can never be as they were between us,” she said. “That you cannot expect. But—”

He listened with his eyes fixed on hers, accepting from her his destiny. She reddened.

“It was good of you to offer to release me—” He spared her.

“Are you not going to hold me to it, then?”

“I am not.” She paused, and then forced herself to it. “I will try to be a good wife to you.”

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER III

It was impossible for them to stay any longer at Scarby. The place was haunted by the presence and the voice of scandalous rumour. Anne had the horrible idea that it had been also a haunt of Lady Cayley, of the infamy itself.

The week-old honeymoon looked at them out of its clouds with such an aged, sinister, and disastrous aspect that they resolved to get away from it. For the sake of appearances, they spent another week of aimless wandering on the East coast, before returning to the town where an unintelligible fate had decided that Majendie should have a business he detested, and a house.

Anne had once asked herself what she would do if she were told that she would have to spend all her life in Scale on Humber. Scale is prevailingly, conspicuously commercial. It is not beautiful. Its streets are squalidly flat, its houses meanly rectangular. The colouring of Scale is thought by some to be peculiarly abominable. It is built in brown, paved and pillared in unclean grey. Its rivers and dykes run brown under a grey northeastern sky.

Once a year it yields reluctantly to strange passion, and Spring is born in Scale; born in tortures almost human, a relentless immortality struggling with visible corruption. The wonder is that it should be born at all.

To-day, the day of their return, the March wind had swept the streets clean, and the evening had secret gold and sharp silver in its grey. Anne remembered how, only last year, she had looked upon such a spring on the day when she guessed for the first time that Walter cared for her. She was not highly endowed with imagination; still, even she

had felt dimly, and for once in her life, that sense of mortal tenderness and divine uplifting which is the message of Spring to all lovers.

But that emotion, which had had its momentary intensity for Anne Fletcher, was over and done with for Anne Majendie. Like some mourner for whom superb weather has been provided on the funeral day of his beloved, she felt in this young, wantoning, unsympathetic Spring the immortal cruelty and irony of Nature. She was bearing her own heart to its burial; and each street that they passed, as the slow cab rattled heavily on its way from the station, was a stage in the intolerable progress; it brought her a little nearer to the grave.

From her companion's respectful silence she gathered that, though lost to the extreme funereal significance of their journey, he was not indifferent; he shared to some extent her mourning mood. She was grateful for that silence of his, because it justified her own.

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They were both, by their temperaments, absurdly and diversely, almost incompatibly young. At two-and-thirty Majendie, through very worldliness, was a boy in his infinite capacity for recoil from trouble. Anne had preserved that crude and cloistral youth which belongs to all lives passed between walls that protect them from the world. At seven-and-twenty she was a girl, with a girl's indestructible innocence. She had not yet felt within her the springs of her own womanhood. Marriage had not touched the spirit, which had kept itself apart even from her happiness, in the days that were given her to be happy in. Her suffering was like a child's, and her attitude to it bitterly immature. It bounded her; it annihilated the intellectual form of time, obliterating the past, and intercepting any view of a future. Only, unlike a child, and unlike Majendie, she lacked the power of the rebound to joy.

"Dear," said her husband anxiously, as the cab drew up at the door of the house in Prior Street, "have you realised that poor Edith is probably preparing to receive us with glee? Do you think you could manage to look a little less unhappy?"

The words were a shock to her, but they did her the service of a shock by recalling her to the realities outside herself. All the courtesies and kindnesses she owed to those about her insisted that her bridal home-coming must lack no sign of grace. She forced a smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know I was looking particularly unhappy."

It struck her that Walter was not looking by any means too happy himself.

"It doesn't matter; only, we don't want to dash her down, first thing, do we?"

"No—no. Dear Edith. And there's Nanna—how sweet of her—and Kate, and Mary, too."

The old nurse stood on the doorstep to welcome them; her fellow-servants were behind her, smiling, at the door. Interested faces appeared at the windows of the house opposite. At the moment of alighting Anne was aware that the eyes of many people were upon them, and she was thankful that she had married a man whose self-possession, at any rate, she could rely on. Majendie's manner was perfect. He avoided both the bridegroom's offensive assiduity and his no less offensive affectation of indifference. It had occurred to him that, in the circumstances, Anne might find it peculiarly disagreeable to be stared at.

"Look at Nanna," he whispered, to distract her attention. "There's no doubt about her being glad to see you."

Nanna grasped the hands held out to her, hanging her head on one side, and smiling her tremorous, bashful smile. The other two, Kate and Mary, came forward,

affectionate, but more self-contained. Anne realised with a curious surprise that she was coming back to a household that she knew, that knew her and loved her. In the last week she had forgotten Prior Street.

Majendie watched her anxiously. But she, too, had qualities which could be relied on. As she passed into the house she had held her head high, with an air of flinging back the tragic gloom like a veil from her face. She was not a woman to trail a tragedy up and down the staircase. Above all, he could trust her trained loyalty to convention.

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The servants threw open two doors on the ground floor, and stood back expectant. On such an occasion it was proper to look pleased and to give praise. Anne was fine in her observance of each propriety as she looked into the rooms prepared for her. The house in Prior Street had not lost its simple old-world look in beautifying itself for the bride. It had put on new blinds and clean paint, and the smell of spring flowers was everywhere. The rest was familiar. She had told Majendie that she liked the old things best. They appealed to her sense of the fit and the refined; they were signs of good taste and good breeding in her husband's family and in himself. The house was a survival, a protest against the terrible all-invading soul of Scale on Humber.

For another reason, which she could not yet analyse, Anne was glad that nothing had been changed for her coming. It was as if she felt that it would have been hard on Majendie if he had been put to much expense in renovating his house for a woman in whom the spirit of the bride had perished. The house in Prior Street was only a place for her body to dwell in, for her soul to hide in, only walls around walls, the shell of the shell.

She turned to her husband with a smile that flashed defiance to the invading pathos of her state. Majendie's eyes brightened with hope, beholding her admirable behaviour. He had always thoroughly approved of Anne.

Upstairs, in the room that was her own, poor Edith (the cause, as he felt, of their calamity) had indeed prepared for them with joy.

Majendie's sister lay on her couch by the window, as they had left her, as they would always find her, not like a woman with a hopelessly injured spine, but like a lady of the happy world, resting in luxury, a little while, from the assault of her own brilliant and fatiguing vitality. The flat, dark masses of her hair, laid on the dull red of her cushions, gave to her face an abrupt and lustrous whiteness, whiteness that threw into vivid relief the features of expression, the fine, full mouth, with its temperate sweetness, and the tender eyes, dark as the brows that arched them. Edith, in her motionless beauty, propped on her cushions, had acquired a dominant yet passionless presence, as of some regal woman of the earth surrendered to a heavenly empire. You could see that, however sanctified by suffering, Edith had still a placid mundane pleasure in her white wrapper of woollen gauze, and in her long lace scarf. She wore them with an appearance of being dressed appropriately for a superb occasion.

The sign of her delicacy was in her hands, smoothed and wasted with inactivity. Yet they had an energy of their own. The hands and the weak, slender arms had a surprising way of leaping up to draw to her all beloved persons who bent above her couch. They leapt now to her brother and his wife, and sank, fatigued with their effort. Two frail, nervous hands embraced Majendie's, till one of them let go, as she remembered Anne, and held her, too.

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Anne had been vexed, and Majendie angry with her; but anger and vexation could not live in sight of the pure, tremulous, eager soul of love that looked at them out of Edith's eyes.

"What a skimpy honeymoon you've had," she said. "Why did you go and cut it short like that? Was it just because of me?"

In one sense it was because of her. Anne was helpless before her question; but Majendie rose to it.

"I say—the conceit of her! No, it wasn't just because of you. Anne agreed with me about Scarby. And we're not cutting our honeymoon short, we're spinning it out. We're going to have another one, some day, in a nicer place."

"Anne didn't like Scarby, after all?"

"No, I knew she wouldn't. And she lived to own that I was right."

"That," said Edith, laughing, "was a bad beginning. If I'd been you, Anne, whether I was right or not, I'd never have owned that *he* was."

"Anne," said Majendie, "is never anything but just. And this time she was generous."

Edith's hand was on the sleeve of Majendie's coat, caressing it. She looked up at Anne.

"And what," said she, "do you think of my little brother, on the whole?"

"I think he says a great many things he doesn't mean."

"Oh, you've found that out, have you? What else have you discovered?"

The gay question made Anne's eyelids drop like curtains on her tragedy.

"That he means a great many things he doesn't say? Is that it?"

Majendie, becoming restive under the flicker of Edith's cheerful tongue, withdrew the arm she cherished. Edith felt the nervousness of the movement; her glance turned from her brother's face to Anne's, rested there for a tense moment, and then veiled itself.

At that moment they both knew that Edith had abandoned her glad assumption of their happiness. The blessings of them all were upon Nanna as she came in with the tea-tray.

Nanna was sly and shy and ceremonial in her bearing, but under it there lurked the privileged audacity of the old servant, and (as poor Majendie perceived) the secret,

terrifying gaiety of the hymeneal devotee. The faint sound of giggling on the staircase penetrated to the room. It was evident that Nanna was preparing some horrid and tremendous rite.

She set her tray in its place by Edith's couch, and cleared a side table which she had drawn into a central and conspicuous position. The three, as if humouring a child in its play, feigned a profound ignorance of what Nanna had in hand.

She disappeared, suppressed the giggling on the stairs, and returned, herself in jubilee let loose. She carried an enormous plate, and on the plate Anne's wedding-cake with all its white terraces and towers, and (a little shattered) the sugar orange blossoms and myrtles of its crown. She stood it alone on its table of honour, and withdrew abruptly.

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The three were stricken dumb by the presence of the bridal thing. Nanna, listening outside the door, attributed their silence to an appreciation too profound for utterance.

They looked at it, and it looked at them. Its veil of myrtle, trembling yet with the shock of its entrance, gave it the semblance of movement and of life. It towered in the majesty of its insistent whiteness. It trailed its mystic modesties before them. Its brittle blossoms quivered like innocence appalled. The wide cleft at its base betrayed the black and formidable heart beneath the fair and sugared surface. These crowding symbols, perceptible to Edith's subtler intelligence, massed themselves in her companions' minds as one vast sensation of discomfort.

As usual when he was embarrassed, Majendie laughed.

"It's the very spirit of dyspepsia," he said. "A cold and dangerous thing. *Must* we eat it?"

"*You* must," said Edith; "Nanna would weep if you didn't."

"I don't think I can—possibly," said Anne, who was already reaping her sowing to the winds of emotion in a whirlwind of headache.

"Let's all eat it—and die," said Majendie. He hacked, laid a ruin of fragments round the evil thing, scattered crumbs on all their plates, and buried his own piece in a flower-pot. "Do you think," he said, "that Nanna will dig it up again?"

Anne turned white over her tea, pleaded her headache, and begged to be taken to her room. Majendie took her there.

"Isn't Anne well?" asked Edith anxiously, when he came back.

"Oh, it's nothing. She's been seedy all day, and the sight of that cake finished her off. I don't wonder. It's enough to upset a strong man. Let's ring for Nanna to take it away."

He rang. When Nanna appeared Edith was eating her crumbs ostentatiously, as if unwilling to leave the last of a delicious thing.

"Oh, Nanna," said she, "that's a heavenly wedding-cake!"

Majendie was reminded of the habitual tender perfidy of that saint, his sister. She was always lying to make other people happy, saying that she had everything she wanted, when she hadn't, and that her spine didn't hurt her, when it did. When Edith was too exhausted to lie, she would look at you and smile, with the sweat of her torture on her forehead. He knew Edith, and wondered how far she had lied to Anne, and what she had done it for. He had a good mind to ask her; but he shrank from "dashing her down the first day."

But Edith herself dashed everything down the first five minutes. There was nothing that *she* shrank from.

“I’m sorry for poor Anne,” said she; “but it’s nice to get you all to myself again. Just for once. Only for once. I’m not jealous.”

He smiled, and stroked her hair.

“I was jealous—oh, furiously jealous, just at first, for five minutes. But I got over it. It was so undignified.”

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“It didn’t show, dear.”

“I didn’t mean it to. It wouldn’t have been pretty. And now, it’s all over and I like Anne. But I don’t like her as much as you.”

“You must like her more,” he said gravely. “She’ll need it—badly.”

Edith looked at him. “How can she need it badly, when she has you?”

“You’re a good woman, and I’m a mere mortal man. She’s found that out already, and she doesn’t like it.”

“Wallie, *dear*, what do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I say. She’s found it out. She’s found *me* out. She’s found everything out.”

“Found out? But how?”

“It doesn’t matter how. Edie, why didn’t you tell her? You said you would.”

“Yes—I said I would.”

“And you told me you had.”

“No. I didn’t tell you I had.”

“What did you tell me, then?”

“I told you there was nothing to be afraid of, that it was all right.”

“And of course I thought you’d told her.”

“If I had told her it wouldn’t have been all right; for she wouldn’t have married you.”

Majendie scowled, and Edith went on calmly.

“I knew that—she as good as told me so—and I knew *her*.”

“Well—what if she hadn’t married me?”

“That would have been very bad for both of you. Especially for you.”

“For me? And how do you know this isn’t going to be worse? For both of us. It’s generally better to be straight, and face facts, however disagreeable. Especially when everybody knows that you’ve got a skeleton in your cupboard.”

“Anne didn’t, and she was so afraid of skeletons.”

“All the more reason why you should have hauled the horrid thing out and let her have a good look at it. She mightn’t have been afraid of it then. Now she’s convinced it’s a fifty times worse skeleton than it is.”

“She wouldn’t have lived with it in the house, dear. She said so.”

“But I thought you never told her?”

“She was talking about somebody else’s skeleton, dear.”

“Oh, somebody else’s, that’s a very different thing.”

“She meant—if she’d been the woman. I was testing her, to see how she’d take it. Do you think I was very wrong?”

“Well, frankly, dear, I cannot say you were very wise.”

“I wonder——”

She lay back wondering. Doubt of her wisdom shook her through all her tender being. She had been so sure.

“How would you have liked it,” said she, “if Anne had given you up and gone away, and you’d never seen her again?”

His face said plainly that he wouldn’t have liked it at all.

“Well, that’s what she’d have done. And I wanted her to stay and marry you.”

“Yes, but with her eyes open.”

She shook her head, the head that would have been so wise for him.

“No,” said she. “Anne’s one of those people who see best with their eyes shut.”

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“Well, they’re open enough now in all conscience. But there’s one thing she hasn’t found out. She doesn’t know how it happened. Can you tell her? *I* can’t. I told her there were extenuating circumstances; but of course I couldn’t go into them.”

“What did she say?”

“She said no circumstances could extenuate facts.”

“I can hear her saying it.”

“I understand her state of mind,” said Majendie. “She couldn’t see the circumstances for the facts.”

“Our Anne is but young. In ten years’ time she won’t be able to see the facts for the circumstances.”

“Well—will you tell her?”

“Of course I will.”

“Make her see that I’m not necessarily an utter brute just because I——”

“I’ll make her see everything.”

“Forgive me for bothering you.”

“Dear—forgive me for breaking my promise and deceiving you.”

He bent to her weak arms.

“I believe,” she whispered, “the end will yet justify the means.”

“Oh—the end.”

He didn’t see it; but he was convinced that there could hardly be a worse beginning.

He went upstairs, where Anne lay in the agonies of her bilious attack. He found comfort, rather than gave it, by holding handkerchiefs steeped in eau-de-Cologne to her forehead. It gratified him to find that she would let him do it without shrinking from his touch.

But Anne was past that.

CHAPTER IV

For once in his life Majendie was glad that he had a business. Shipping (he was a ship-owner) was a distraction from the miserable problem that weighed on him at home.

Anne's morning face was cold to him. She lay crushed in her bed. She had had a bad night, and he knew himself to be the cause of it.

His pity for her hurt like passion.

"How is she?" asked Edith, as he came into her room before going to the office.

"She's a wreck," he said, "a ruin. She's had an awful night. Be kind to her, Edie."

Edie was very kind. But she said to herself that if Anne was a ruin that was not at all a bad thing.

Edith Majendie was a loving but shrewd observer of the people of her world. Lying on her back she saw them at an unusual angle, almost as if they moved on a plane invisible to persons who go about upright on their legs. The four walls of her room concentrated her vision in bounding it. She saw few women and fewer men, but she saw them apart from those superficial activities which distract and darken judgment. Faces that she was obliged to see bending over her had another aspect for Edith than that which they presented to the world at large. Anne Majendie, who had come so near to Edith, had always put a certain distance between herself and her other friends. While they were chiefly impressed with her superb superiority, and saw her forever standing on a pedestal,

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Edith declared that she knew nothing of Anne's austere and impressive attributes. She protested against anything so dreary as the other people's view of her. They and their absurd pedestals! She refused to regard her sister-in-law as an established solemnity, eminent and lonely in the scene. Pedestals were all very well at a proper distance, but at a close view they were foreshortening to the human figure. Other people might like to see more pedestal than Anne; she preferred to see more Anne than pedestal. If they didn't know that Anne was dear and sweet, she did. So did Walter.

If they wanted proof of it, why, would any other woman have put up with her and her wretched spine? Weren't they all, Anne's friends, sorry for Anne just because of it, of her? If you came to think of it, if you traced everything back to the beginning, her spine had been the cause of all Anne's troubles.

That was how she had always reasoned it out. No suffering had ever obscured the lucidity of Edith's mind. She knew that it was her spine that had kept her brother from marrying all those years. He couldn't leave her alone with it, neither could he ask any woman to share the house inhabited, pervaded, dominated by it. Unsafeguarded by marriage, he had fallen into evil hands. To Edith, who had plenty of leisure for reflection, all this had become terribly clear.

Then Anne had come, the strong woman who could bear Walter's burden for him. She had been jealous of Anne at first, for five minutes. Then she had blessed her.

But Edith, as she had told her brother, was not a fool. And all the time, while her heart leapt to the image of Anne in her dearness and sweetness, her brain saw perfectly well that her sister-in-law had not been free from the sin of pride (that came, said Edith, of standing on a pedestal. It was better to lie on a couch than stand on a pedestal; you knew, at any rate, where you were).

Now, as Edith also said, there can be nothing more prostrating to a woman's pride than a bad bilious attack. Especially when it exposes you to the devoted ministrations of a husband you have made up your mind to disapprove of, and compels you to a baffling view of him.

Anne owned herself baffled.

Her attack had chastened her. She had been touched by Walter's kindness, by the evidence (if she had needed it) that she was as dear to him in her ignominious agony as she had been in the beauty of her triumphal health. As he moved about her, he became to her insistent outward sense the man she had loved because of his goodness. It was so that she had first seen his strong masculine figure moving about Edith on her couch, handling her with the supreme gentleness of strength. She had not been two days in

the house in Prior Street before her memories assailed her. Her new and detestable view of Walter contended with her old beloved vision of him. The two were equally real, equally vivid, and she could not reconcile them. Walter himself, seen again in his old surroundings, was protected by an army of associations. The manifestations of his actual presence were also such as to appeal to her memory against her judgment. Her memory was in league with her. But when the melting mood came over her, her conscience resisted and rose against them both.

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Edith, watching for the propitious moment, could not tell by what signs she would recognise it when it came. Her own hour was the early evening. She had always brightened towards six o'clock, the time of her brother's home-coming.

To-day he had removed himself, to give her her chance with Anne. She could see him pottering about the garden below her window. He had kept that garden with care. He had mown and sown, and planted, and weeded, and watered it, that Edith might always have something pretty to look at from her window. With its green grass plot and gay beds, the tiny oblong space defied the extending grime and gloom of Scale. This year he had planted it for Anne. He had set a thousand bulbs for her, and many thousand flowers were to have sprung up in time to welcome her. But something had gone wrong with them. They had suffered by his absence. As Edith looked out of the window he was stooping low, on acutely bended knees, sorrowfully preoccupied with a broken hyacinth. He had his back to them.

To Edith's mind there was something heart-rending in the expression of that intent, innocent back, so surrendered to their gaze, so unconscious of its own pathetic curve. She wondered if it appealed to Anne in that way. She judged from the expression of her sister-in-law's face that it did not appeal to her in any way at all.

"Poor dear," said she, "he's still worrying about those blessed bulbs of mine—of yours, I mean."

"Don't, Edie. As if I wanted to take your bulbs away from you. I'm not jealous."

"No more am I," said Edie. "Let's say both our bulbs. I wish he wouldn't garden quite so much, though. It always makes his head ache."

"Why does he do it, then?" asked Anne calmly.

Her calmness irritated Edith.

"Oh, why does Walter do anything? Because he's an angel!"

Anne's silence gave her the opening she was looking for.

"You know, you used to think so, too."

"Of course I did," said Anne evasively.

"And equally of course, you don't, now you've married him?"

"I *have* married him. What more could I do to prove my appreciation?"

"Oh, heaps more. Mere marrying's nothing. Any woman can do that."

“Do you think so? It seems to me that marrying—mere marrying—may be a great deal—about as much as many men have a right to ask.”

“Hasn’t every man a right to ask for—what shall I say—a little understanding—from the woman he cares for?”

“Edith, what has he told you?”

“Nothing, my dear, that I hadn’t seen for myself.”

“Did he tell you that I ‘misunderstood’ him?”

“Did he pose as *l’homme incompris*? No, he didn’t.”

“Still—he told you,” Anne insisted.

“Of course he did.” She brushed the self-evident aside and returned to her point. “He does care for you. That, at least, you can understand.”

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“No, that’s just what I don’t understand. I can’t understand his caring. I can’t understand him. I can’t understand anything.” Her voice shook.

“Poor darling, I know it’s hard, sometimes. Still, you do know what he is.”

“I know what he was—what I thought him. It’s hard to reconcile it with what he is.”

“With what you think him? You can’t, of course. I suppose you think him something too bad for words?”

Anne broke down weakly.

“Oh, Edith, why didn’t you tell me?”

“What? That Wallie was bad?”

“Yes, yes. It would have been better if you’d told me everything.”

“Well, dear, whatever I told you, I couldn’t have told you that. It wouldn’t have been true.”

“He says himself that everything was true.”

“Everything probably is true. But then, the point is that you don’t know the whole truth, or even half of it. That’s just what he couldn’t tell you. I should have told you. That’s where I bungled it. You know he left it to me; he said I was to tell you.”

“Yes, he told me that. He didn’t mean to deceive me.”

“No more did I. If my brother had been a bad man, dear, do you suppose for a moment I’d have let him marry my dearest friend?”

“You didn’t know. We don’t know these things, Edith. That’s the terrible part of it.”

“Yes, it’s the terrible part of it. But *I* knew all right. He never kept anything from me, not for long.”

“But, Edith—how *could* he? How *could* he? When the woman—Lady Cayley—She was *bad*, wasn’t she?”

“Of course she was bad. Bad as they make them—worse. You know she was divorced?”

“Yes,” said Anne, “that’s what I do know.”

“Well, she wasn’t divorced on Walter’s account, my dear. There were several others—-four, five, goodness knows how many. Poor Walter was a mere drop in her ocean.”

Anne stared a moment at the expanse presented to her.

“But,” said she, “he was in it.”

“Oh yes, he was in it. The ocean swallowed him as it swallowed the others. But it couldn’t keep him. He couldn’t live in it, like them.”

“But how did she get hold of him?”

“She got hold of him by appealing to his chivalry.”

(His chivalry—she knew it.)

“It’s what happens, over and over again. He thought her a vilely injured woman. He may have thought her good. He certainly thought her pathetic. It was the pathos that did it.”

“That—did—it?”

“Yes. Did it. She hurled herself at his head—at his knees—at his feet——till he *had* to lift her. And that’s how it happened.”

Anne’s spirit writhed as she contemplated the happening.

“I know it oughtn’t to have happened. I know Walter wasn’t the holy saint he ought to have been. But oh, he was a martyr!” She paused. “And—he was very young.”

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“Edith—when was it?”

“Seven years ago.”

Anne pondered. The seven years helped to purify him. Every day helped that threw the horror further back in time—separated it from her. If—if he had not been steeped too long in it. She wanted to know *how* long, but she was afraid to ask; afraid lest it should be brought nearer to her than she could bear. Edith saw her fear.

“It lasted two years. It was all my fault.”

“Your fault?”

“Yes, my fault. Because of my horrid spine. You see, it kept him from marrying.”

“Well, but—”

“Well, but it couldn’t have happened if he had married. How *could* it? How could it have happened if you had been there? You would have saved him.”

She paused on that note, a long, illuminating pause. The note itself was a divine inspiration. It rang all golden. It thrilled to the verge of the dominant chord in Anne. It touched her soul, the mother of brooding, mystic harmonies.

“You would have saved him.”

Anne saw herself for one moment as his guardian angel, her mission frustrated through a flaw of time. That vision was dashed by another, herself as the ideal, the star he should have looked to before its dawn, herself dishonoured by his young haste, his passion, his failure to foresee.

“He should have waited for me.”

“Did you wait for him?”

A quick flush pulsed through the whiteness of Anne’s face. She looked back seven years to her girlhood in the southern Deanery, her home. She had another vision, a vision of a Minor Canon, whom she had loved with the pure worship of her youth, a love of which somehow she was now ashamed. Ashamed, though it had then seemed to her so spiritual. Her dead parents had desired the marriage, but neither she nor they had the power to bring it about.

Edith had never heard of the Minor Canon. She had drawn a bow at a venture.

“My dear,” she said, “why not? It’s only the very elect lovers who can say to each other, ‘I never loved any one but you.’”

“At any rate,” said Anne, “I never loved any one else well enough to marry him.”

For, in her fancy, the Minor Canon, being withdrawn in time, had ceased to occupy space; he had become that which he was for her girlhood, a disembodied dream. She could not have explained why she was so ashamed of him. What ground of comparison was there between that blameless one and Lady Cayley?

“Edith,” she said suddenly, “did you ever see her?”

“Never,” said Edith emphatically.

“You don’t know what she was like?”

“I don’t. I never wanted to. I dare say there are people in Scale who could tell you all about her, only I wouldn’t inquire if I were you.”

“Did it happen at Scarby?” She was determined to know the worst.

“I believe so.”

“Oh—why did I ever go there?”

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“He didn’t want you to. That was why.”

“Where is she now?”

“Nobody knows. She might be anywhere.”

“Not here?”

“No, not here. My dear, you mustn’t get her on your nerves.”

“I’m afraid of meeting her.”

“It isn’t likely that you ever will. She isn’t the sort one does meet—now, poor thing.”

“Who was she?”

“The wife of Sir Andrew Cayley, a tallow-chandler.”

“Oh, how did Walter ever—”

“My dear, one meets all sorts of funny people in Scale. He was a very wealthy tallow-chandler. Besides, it wasn’t he that Walter did meet, naturally.”

“How can you joke about it? It makes me sick to think of it.”

“It made me sick enough once, dear. But I don’t think of it.”

“I can’t help thinking of it.”

“Well, whenever you do, when it does come over you—it will, sometimes—think of what Walter’s life was before he knew you. Everything was spoiled for him because of me. He was sent to a place he detested because of me; put into an office which he loathed, shut up here in this hateful house, because of me. And he was good to me, good and dear. Even at the worst he hardly ever left me if he thought I wanted him—not even to go to *her*. But he was young, and it was an awful life for him; you don’t know how awful. It would have been bad enough for a woman. It was intolerable for a man. I was worse then than I am now. I was horribly fretful, and I worried him. I think I drove him to her—I know I did. He had to get away from it sometimes. Won’t you think of that?”

“I’ll try to think of it.”

“And it won’t make you not like him?”

“My dear, I liked him first for your sake, then I liked you for his, now I suppose I must like him for yours again.”

“No—for his own sake.”

“Does it matter which?”

“Not much—so long as you like him. He really is angelic, though you mayn’t think it.”

“I think you are.”

Edith was not only angelic, but womanly and full of guile, and she knew with whom she had to do. She had humbled Anne with shrewd shafts that hit her in all her weak places; now she exalted her. Anne had not her likeness in a thousand. She was a woman magnificently planned, of stature not to be diminished by the highest pedestal. A figure fit for a throne, a niche, a shrine. Edith could see the dear little downy feathers sprouting on Anne’s shoulder-blades, and the infant aureole playing in her hair.

“You’re a saint,” said Edith.

“I am not,” said Anne, while her pale cheek glowed with the flattery.

“Of course you are,” said Edith, “or you could never have put up with me.”

Whereupon Anne kissed her.

“And I may tell Walter what you’ve said?”

It was thus that she spared Anne’s mortal pride. She knew how it would shrink from telling him.

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Anne went down to Majendie in the garden and sent him to his sister. They returned to the house by the open window of his study. A bright fire was burning in the room. He looked at her shyly and half in doubt, drew up an arm-chair to the hearth, and left her there.

His manner brought back to her the days of their engagement when that room had been their refuge. Not that they had often been alone together. She could count the times on the fingers of one hand, the times when Edith was too ill to be wheeled into her room. It had been nearly always in Edith's room that she had seen him, surrounded by all the feminine devices, the tender trivialities that were part of the moving pathos of the scene. She had so associated him with his sister that it had been hard for her to realise that he had any separate life of his own. She felt that his love for her had simply grown out of his love for Edith, it was the flame, the flower of his tenderness. It was one with his goodness, and she had been glad to have it so. There was no jealousy in Anne.

It came over her now with a fresh shock, how very little, after all, she had known of him. It was through Edith that she really knew him. And yet it was impossible that Edith could have absorbed him utterly. Anne had not counted his business; for it had not interested her, and to say that Walter was a ship-owner did not define him in the very least. What remained over of Walter was a secret that this room, his study, must partially reveal.

She remembered how she had first come there, and had looked shyly about her for intimations of his inner nature, and how it was his pipe-rack and his boots that had first suggested that he had a life apart and dealings with the outer world. Now she rose and went round the room, searching for its secret, and finding no new impressions, only fresh lights on the old. If the room told her anything it told her how little Majendie had used it, how little he had been able to call anything his own. The things in it had no comfortable look of service. He could not have smoked there much, the curtains were too innocent. He could not have sat in that arm-chair much, the surface was too smooth. He could not have come there much at any time, for, though the carpet was faded, there was no well-worn passage from the threshold to the hearth. As far as she could make out he came there for no earthly purpose but to change his boots before going upstairs to Edith.

The bookcase told the same story. It held histories and standard works inherited from Majendie's father; the works of Dickens, and Thackeray, and Hardy, read over and over again in the days when he had time for reading; several poets whom, by his own confession, he could not have read in any circumstances. One Meredith, partly uncut, testified to an honest effort and a baulked accomplishment. On a shelf apart stood the books that he had loved when he was a boy, the Annuals, the tales of travel and adventure, and one or two school prizes gorgeously bound.

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As she looked at them his boyhood rose before her; its dead innocence appealed to her comprehension and compassion.

She knew that he had been disappointed in his ambition. Instead of being sent to Oxford he had been sent into business, that he might early support himself. He had supported himself. And he had stuck to the business that he might the better support Edith.

She could not deny him the virtue of unselfishness.

She remembered one Sunday, three weeks before their wedding-day, when she had stood alone with him in this room, at the closing of their happy day. It was then that he had asked her why she cared for him, and she had answered: "Because you are good. You always have been good."

And he had said (how it came back to her!), "And if I hadn't always? Wouldn't you have cared then?"

She had answered, "I would have cared, but I couldn't marry you."

And he had turned away from her, and looked out of the window, keeping his back to her, and had stood so without speaking for a moment. She had wondered what had come over him.

Now she knew. He had not been good. And she had married him.

At the recollection the thoughts she had quieted stirred again and stung her, and again she trampled them down.

She faced the question how she was going to build up the wedded life that her knowledge of him had laid low. She told herself that, after all, much remained. She had loved Walter for his unhappiness as well as for his goodness. He had needed her, and she had felt that there was no other woman who could have borne his burden half so well. Edith was too sweet to be thought of as a burden, but it could not be denied she weighed. In marrying Walter she would lift half the weight. Anne was strong, and she glorified in her strength. That was what she was there for.

How much more was she prepared to do? Keeping his house was nothing; Nanna had always kept it well. Caring for Edith was nothing; she could not help but care for her. She had promised Walter that she would be a good wife to him, and she had vowed to herself that she would live her spiritual life apart.

Was that being a good wife to him? To divorce her soul, her best self, from him? If she confined her duty to the preservation of the mere material tie, what would she make of herself? Of him?

It came to her that his need of her was deeper and more spiritual than that. She argued that there must be something fine in him, or he never would have appreciated *her*. That other woman didn't count; she had thrust herself on him. When it came to choosing, he had chosen a spiritual woman! (Anne had no doubt that she was what she aspired to be.) And since all things were divinely ordered, Walter's choice was really God's will. God's hand had led him to her.

It had been a blow to Anne's pride to realise that she had married—spiritually—beneath her. Her pride now recovered wonderfully, seeing in this very inequality its opportunity. She beheld herself superbly seated on an eminence, her spiritual opulence supplying Walter's poverty. Spiritually, she said, it might also be more blessed to give than to receive.

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Their marriage, in this its new, its immaterial consummation, would not be unequal. She would raise Walter. That, of course, was what God had meant her to do all the time. Never again could she look at her husband with eyes of mortal passion. But her love, which had died, was risen again; it could still turn to him a glorified and spiritual face; it could still know passion, a passion immortal and supreme.

But it was an emotion of which by its very nature she could not bring herself to speak. It could mean nothing to Walter in his yet unspiritual state. She felt that when he came to her he would insist on some satisfaction, and there was no satisfaction that she could give to the sort of claim he would make. Therefore she awaited his coming with nervous trepidation.

He came in as if nothing had happened. He sank with every symptom of comfortable assurance into the opposite arm-chair. And he asked no more formidable question than, “How’s your headache?”

“Better, thank you.”

“That’s all right.”

He did not look at her, but his eyes were smiling as if at some agreeable thought or reminiscence. He had apparently assumed that Anne had recovered, not only from her headache, but from its cause. To Anne, tingling with the tension of a nervous crisis, this attitude was disconcerting. It seemed to reduce her and her crisis to insignificance. She had expected him to be tingling too. He had more cause to.

“Do you mind my smoking? Say if you really do.”

She really did, but she forbore to say so. Forbearance henceforth was to be part of her discipline.

He smoked contentedly, with half-closed eyes; and when he talked, he talked of the garden and of bulbs.

Of bulbs, after what he had discussed with Edith upstairs. She would rather that he had asked his question, forced her to the issue. That at least would have shown some comprehension of her state. But he had taken the issue for granted, refused to face the immensity of it all. She had had her first taste of sacrificial flames, and her spirit was prepared to go through fire to reach him. And he presented himself as already folded and protected; satisfied with some inferior and independent secret of his own.

She felt that a little perturbation would have become him more than that impenetrable peace.

It would make it so difficult to raise him.

CHAPTER V

The bell of St. Saviour's had ceased. Over the open market-place the air throbbed with a thousand pulses from the dying heart of sound. The great grey body of the Church was still; tower and couchant nave watched in their monstrous, motionless dominion, till the music stirred in them like a triumphant soul.

As they hurried over the open market-place, Anne realised with some annoyance that she was late again for the Wednesday evening service. She dearly loved punctuality and order, and disliked to be either checked or hastened in her superb movements. She disliked to be late for anything. Above all she disliked standing on a mat outside a closed church door, in the middle of a General Confession, trying to surrender her spirit to the spirit of prayer, while Walter lingered, murmuring profane urbanities that claimed her as his own.

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He had perceived what he called her innocent design, her transparent effort to lead him to her heavenly heights. He had lent himself to it, tenderly, gravely, as he would have lent himself to a child's heart-rending play. He could not profess to follow the workings of his wife's mind, but he did understand her point of view. She had been "let in" for something she had not expected, and he was bound to make it up to her.

There had been a week of concessions, crowned by his appearance at St. Saviour's.

But that was on a Sunday. This was Wednesday, and he drew the line at Wednesdays.

Oh yes, he saw her drift. He knew that what she expected of him was incessant penitence. But, after all, it was difficult to feel much abasement for a fault committed quite a number of years ago and sufficiently repented of at the time. He had settled his account, and it was hard that he should be made to pay twice over. To-night his mood was strangely out of harmony with Lent.

Anne slackened her pace to intimate as much to him. Whereupon he lapsed into strange and disturbing legends of his childhood. He told her he had early weaned himself from the love of Lenten Services, observing their effect upon the unfortunate lady, his aunt, who had brought him up. Punctually at twelve o'clock on Palm Sunday, he said, the poor soul, exhausted with her endeavours after the Christian life, would fly into a passion, and punctually would rise from it at the same hour on Easter Day. For quite a long time he had believed that that was why they called it Passion Week.

She moaned "Oh, Walter—don't!" as if he had hurt her, while she repressed the play of a little, creeping, curling, mundane smile.

If he would only leave her! But, as they crossed to the curbstone, he changed over, preserving his proper place. He leaned to her with the indestructible attention of a lover. His whole manner was inimitably chivalrous, protective, and polite.

Anne hardened her heart against him. At the church gate she turned and faced him coldly.

"If you're not going in," said she, "you needn't come any further."

He glanced at the belated group of worshippers gathered before the church door, and became more than ever polite and chivalrous and protective.

"I must see you safely in," he said, and took up his stand beside her on the mat.

Her eyes rested on him for a second in reproach, then dropped behind the veil of their lids. In another moment he would have to go. He had already surrendered her prayer-book, tucking it gently under her arm.

“You’ll be all right when you get in, won’t you?” he said encouragingly.

“Please go,” she whispered.

“Do I jar, dear?” he asked sweetly.

“You do, very much.”

“I’m so sorry. I won’t do it again.”

But his whispered vows and promises belied him, battling with her consecrated mood. She felt that his innermost spirit remained in its profanity, unillumined by her rebuke.

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Once more she set her face, and hardened her heart against him, and removed herself in the silence and isolation of her prayer.

Through the closed door there came the rich, confused murmur of the Confession. He saw her lips curl, flower-like, with emotion, as her breath rose and fell in unison with the heaving chant. He watched her with a certain reverence, incomprehensibly chastened, till the door opened, and she went from him, moving down the lighted aisle with her remote, renunciating air.

The door was shut in Majendie's face, and he turned away, intending to kill, to murder the next hour at his club.

Anne was self-trained in the habit of detachment. She had only to kneel, to close her eyes and cover her face, and her soul slid of its own accord into the place of peace. Her very breathing and the beating of her heart were stayed. Her mind, emptied in a moment, was in a moment filled, brimming over with the thought of God. To her veiled vision that thought was like a sheet of blank light let down behind her drooped eyelids, and centring in a luminous whorl. It fascinated her. Her prayer shot straight to the heart of it, a communion too swift to trouble or divide the blessed light.

In that instant her husband, the image and the thought of him, were cast into the secular darkness.

She remembered how difficult it had once been thus to renounce him. Her trouble, in the days of her engagement, had been that, thrust him from her as she would, the idea of his goodness—the goodness that justified her through its own appeal—would call up his presence, emerging radiant from the outermost abyss. Inferior emotions then mingled indistinguishably with her holiest ardours. Spiritually ambitious, she had had her young eye on a hard-won crown of glory, and she had found that happiness made the spiritual life almost contemptibly easy. It was no effort in those days to realise divine mysteries, when the miracle of the Incarnation was, as it were, worked for her in her own soul; when she heard in her own heart the beating of the heart of God; when his hand touched her with a tenderness that warmed her place of peace. She had hardly known this flamed and lyric creature for herself. It was as if her soul, resting after long flight, had contemplated for the first time the silver and fine gold of her wings.

It was the facility of the revelation that had first caused her to suspect it. And she had thrown ashes on the flame, and set a watch upon her soul, lest she should mistake an earthly for a heavenly content. She could not bear to think that she was cheated, that her pulses counted in her sense of exaltation and beatitude. She desired, purely, the utmost purity in that divine communion, so as to be sure that it was divine.

Now, having suffered, she was completely sure. Her wound was the seal God set upon her soul. It was easy enough now for her to achieve detachment, oblivion of Walter

Majendie, to pour out her whole soul in the prayer for light: “Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.”

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Her hands, as she prayed, were folded close over her eyes. Having annihilated her husband, she was disagreeably astonished to find that he was there, that he had been there for some time, in the seat beside her.

He was sitting in what he took to be an attitude of extreme reverence, his head bowed and resting on his left arm, which was supported by the back of the seat in front of him. His right arm embraced, unconsciously, Anne's muff. Anne was vividly, painfully aware of him. Over the crook of his elbow one eye looked up at her, bright, smiling with inextinguishable affection. His lips gave out a sound that was not a prayer, but something between a murmur and a moan, distinctly audible. She felt his gaze as a gross, tangible thing, as a violent hand, parting the veils of prayer. She bowed her head lower and pressed her hands to her face till the blood tingled.

The sermon obliged her to sit upright and exposed. It gave him iniquitous opportunity. He turned in his seat; his eyes watched her under half-closed lids, two slits shining through the thick, dark curtain of their lashes. He kept on pulling at his moustache, as if to hide the dumb but expressive adoration of his mouth. Anne, who felt that her soul had been overtaken, trapped, and bared to the outrage, removed herself by a yard's length till the hymn brought them together, linked by the book she could not withhold. The music penetrated her soul and healed its hurt.

"Christian, doth thou see them,
On the holy ground,
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?"

sang Anne in a dulcet pianissimo, obedient to the choir.

Profound abstraction veiled him, a treacherous unspiritual calm. Majendie was a man with a baritone voice, which at times possessed him like a furious devil. It was sleeping in him now, biding its time, ready, she knew, to be roused by the first touch of a *crescendo*. The *crescendo* came.

"Christian! Up and fight them!"

The voice waked; it leaped from him; and to Anne's terrified nerves it seemed to be scattering the voices of the choir before it. It dropped on the Amen and died; but in dying it remained triumphant, like the trump of an archangel retreating to the uttermost ends of heaven.

Anne's heart pained her with a profane tenderness, and a poignant repudiation. Her soul being once more adjusted to the divine, it was intolerable to think that this preposterous human voice should have power to shake it so.

She sank to her knees and bowed her head to the Benediction.

“Did you like it?” he asked as they emerged together into the open air.

He spoke as if to the child she seemed to him now to be. They had been playing together, pretending they were two pilgrims bound for the Heavenly City, and he wanted to know if she had had a nice game. He nursed the exquisite illusion that this time he had pleased her by playing too.

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“Of course I liked it.”

“So did I,” he answered joyously, “I quite enjoyed it. We’ll do it again some other night.”

“What made you come, like that?” said she, appeased by his innocence.

“I couldn’t help it. You looked so pretty, dear, and so forlorn. It seemed brutal, somehow, to abandon you on the weary road to heaven.”

She sighed. That was his chivalry again. He would escort her politely to the door of heaven, but would he ever go in with her, would he ever stay there?

Still, it was something that he should have gone with her so far. It gave her confidence and an idea of what her power might come to be. Not that she relied upon herself alone. Her plan for Majendie’s salvation was liberal and large, it admitted of other methods, other influences. There was no narrowness, any more than there was jealousy, in Anne.

“Walter,” said she, “I want you to know Mrs. Eliott.”

“But I do know her, don’t I?”

He called up a vision of the lady whose house had been Anne’s home in Scale. He was grateful to Mrs. Eliott. But for her slender acquaintance with his sister, he would never have known Anne. This made him feel that he knew Mrs. Eliott.

“But I want you to know her as I know her.”

He laughed. “Is that possible? Does a man ever know a woman as another woman knows her?”

Anne felt that she was not only being diverted from her purpose, but led by a side tract to an unexplored profundity. On the further side of it she discerned, dimly, the undesirable. It was a murky region, haunted by still murkier presences, by Lady Cayley and her kind. She persisted with a magnificent irrelevance.

“You must know her. You would like her.”

He didn’t in the least want to know Mrs. Eliott, he didn’t think that he would like her. But he was soothed, flattered, insanely pleased with Anne’s assumption that he would. It was as if in her thoughts she were drawing him towards her. He felt that she was softening, yielding. His approaches were a delicious wooing of an unfamiliar, unwedded Anne.

“I would like her, because you like her, is that it?”

“It wouldn’t follow.”

“Oh, how you spoil it!”

“Spoil what?”

“My inference. It pleased me. But, as you say, the logic wasn’t sound.”

Silence being the only dignified course under mystification, Anne was silent. Some men had that irritating way with women; Walter’s smile suggested that he might have it. She was not going to minister to his male delight. Unfortunately her silence seemed to please him too.

“Never mind, dear, I do like her; because she likes you.”

“You will like her for herself when you know her.”

“Will she like me for myself when she knows me? It’s extremely doubtful. You see, hitherto she has made no ardent sign.”

“My dear, she says you’ve never been near her. You’ve never come to one of her Thursdays.”

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“Oh, her Thursdays—no, I haven’t.”

“Well, how can you expect—but you’ll go sometimes, now, to please me?”

“Won’t Wednesdays do?”

“Wednesdays?”

“Yes. It wasn’t half bad to-night. I’ll go to every blessed Wednesday, as long as they last, if you’ll only let me off Thursdays.”

“Please don’t talk about being ‘let off.’ I thought you might like to know my friends, that’s all.”

“So I would. I’d like it awfully. By the way, that reminds me. I met Hannay at the club to-night, and he asked if his wife might call on you. Would you mind very much?”

“Why should I mind, if she’s a friend of yours and Edith’s?”

“Oh well, you see, she isn’t exactly—”

“Isn’t exactly what?”

“A friend of Edith’s.”

CHAPTER VI

There is a polite and ancient rivalry between Prior Street and Thurston Square, a rivalry that dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, when Prior Street and Thurston Square were young. Each claims to be the aristocratic centre of the town. Each acknowledges the other as its solitary peer. If Prior Street were not Prior Street it would be Thurston Square. There are a few old families left in Scale. They inhabit either Thurston Square or Prior Street. There is nowhere else that they could live with any dignity or comfort. In either place they are secure from the contamination of low persons engaged in business, and from the wide invading foot of the newly rich. These build themselves mansions after their kind in the Park, or in the broad flat highways leading into the suburbs. They have no sense for the dim undecorated charm of Prior Street and Thurston Square.

Nothing could be more distinguished than Prior Street, with its sombre symmetry, its air of delicate early Georgian reticence. But its atmosphere is a shade too professional; it opens too precipitately on the unlovely and unsacred street.

Thurston Square is approached only by unfrequented ancient ways paved with cobble stones. It is a place of garden greenness, of seclusion and of leisure. It breathes a provincial quietness, a measured, hallowed breath as of a cathedral close. Its inhabitants pride themselves on this immemorial calm. The older families rely on it for the sustenance of their patrician state. They sit by their firesides in dignified attitudes, impressively, luxuriously inert. Their whole being is a religious protest against the spirit of business.

But the restlessness of the times has seized upon the other families, the Pooleys, the Gardners, the Eliotts, younger by a century at least. They utilise the perfect peace for the cultivation of their intellects.

Every Thursday, towards half-past three, a wave of agreeable expectation, punctual, periodic, mounts on the stillness and stirs it. Thursday is Mrs. Eliott's day.

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The Eliotts belong to the old high merchant-families, the aristocracy of trade, whose wealth is mellowed and beautified by time. Three centuries met in Mrs. Eliott's drawing-room, harmonised by the gentle spirit of the place. Her frail modern figure moved (with elegance a little dishevelled by abstraction) on an early Georgian background, among mid-Victorian furniture, surrounded by a multitude of decorative objects. There were great jars and idols from China and Japan; inlaid tables; screens and cabinets and chairs in Bombay black wood, curiously carved; a splendid profusion of painted and embroidered cloths; the spoils of seventy years of Eastern trade. And on the top of it all, twenty years or so of recent culture. The culture was represented by a well-filled bookcase, a few diminished copies of antique sculpture, some modern sketches made in Rome and Venice (for the Eliotts had travelled), and an illuminated triptych with its saints in glory.

Here, Thursday after Thursday, the same people met each other; they met, Thursday after Thursday, the same fervid little company of ideas, of aspirations and enthusiasms.

It was five o'clock on one of her Thursdays, and Mrs. Eliott had been conversing with great sweetness and fluency ever since half-past three. That was the way she and Mrs. Pooley kept it up, and they could have kept it up much longer but for the arrival of Miss Proctor.

There was nothing, in Miss Proctor's opinion (if dear Fanny only knew it), so provincial as an enthusiasm. As for aspirations (and Mrs. Pooley was full of them) what could be more provincial than these efforts to be what you were not? Miss Proctor disapproved of Thurston Square's preoccupation with its intellect, a thing no well-bred person is ever conscious of. She announced that she had come to take dear Fanny down from her clouds and humanise her by a little gossip. She ignored Mrs. Pooley, since Mrs. Pooley apparently wished to be ignored.

"I want," said she, "the latest news of Anne."

"If you wait, you may get it from herself."

"My dear, do you suppose she'd give it me?"

"It depends," said Mrs. Eliott, "on what you want to know."

"I want to know whether she's happy. I want to know whether, by this time, she *knows*."

"You can't ask her."

"Of course I can't. That's why I'm asking you."

"I know nothing. I've hardly seen her."

Miss Proctor looked as if she were seeing her that moment without Fanny Eliott's help.

"Poor dear Anne."

Anne Fletcher had been simply dear Anne, Mrs. Walter Majendie was poor dear Anne.

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Her friends were all sorry for her. They were inclined to be indignant with Edith Majendie, who, they declared, had been at the bottom of her marriage all along. She was the cause of Anne's original callings in Prior Street. If it had not been for Edith, Anne could never have penetrated that secret bachelor abode. The engagement had been an awkward, unsatisfactory, sinister affair. It was a pity that Mr. Majendie's domestic circumstances were such that poor dear Anne appeared as having made all the necessary approaches and advances. If Mr. Majendie had had a family that family would have had to call on Anne. But Mr. Majendie hadn't a family, he had only Edith, which was worse than having nobody at all. And then, besides, there was his history.

Mrs. Eliott looked distressed. Mr. Majendie's history could not be explained away as too ancient to be interesting. In Scale a seven-year-old event is still startlingly, unforgetably modern. Anne's marriage had saddled her friends with a difficult responsibility, the justification of Anne for that astounding step.

Acquaintances had been made to understand that Mrs. Eliott had had nothing to do with it. They went away baffled, but confirmed in their impression that she knew; which was, after all, what they wanted to know.

It was not so easy to satisfy the licensed curiosity of Anne's friends. They came to-day in quantities, attracted by the news of the Majendies' premature return from their honeymoon. Mrs. Eliott felt that Miss Proctor and the Gardners were sitting on in the hope of meeting them.

Mrs. Eliott had been obliged to accept Anne's husband, that she might retain Anne's affection. In this she did violence to her feelings, which were sore on the subject of the marriage. It was not only on account of the inglorious clouds he trailed. In any case she would have felt it as a slight that her friend should have married without her assistance, and so far outside the charmed circle of Thurston Square. She herself was for the moment disappointed with Anne. Anne had once taken them all so seriously. It was her solemn joy in Mrs. Eliott and her circle that had enabled her young superiority to put up so long with the provincial hospitalities of Scale on Humber. They, the slender aristocracy of Thurston Square, were the best that Scale had to offer her, and they had given her of their best. Socially, the step from Thurston Square to Prior Street could not be defined as a going down; but, intellectually, it was a decline, and morally (to those who knew Fanny Eliott and to Fanny Eliott who *knew*) it was, by comparison, a plunge into the abyss. Fanny Eliott was the fine flower of Thurston Square. She had satisfied even the fastidiousness of Anne.

She owned that Mr. Majendie had satisfied it too. It was not that quality in Anne that made her choice so—well, so incomprehensible.

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It was Dr. Gardner's word. Dr. Gardner was the President of the Scale Literary and Philosophic Society, and in any discussion of the incomprehensible his word had weight. Vagueness was his foible, the relaxation of an intellect uncomfortably keen. The spirit that looked at you through his short-sighted eyes (magnified by enormous glasses) seemed to have just returned from a solitary excursion in a dream. In that mood the incomprehensible had for him a certain charm.

Mrs. Eliott had too much good taste to criticise Anne Majendie's. They had simply got to recognise that Prior Street had more to offer her than Thurston Square. That was the way she preferred to put it, effacing herself a little ostentatiously.

Miss Proctor maintained that Prior Street had nothing to offer a creature of Anne Fletcher's kind. It had everything to take, and it seemed bent on taking everything. It was bad enough in the beginning, when she had given herself up, body and soul, to the spinal lady; but to go and marry the brother, without first disposing of the spinal lady in a comfortable home for spines, why, what must the man be like who could let her do it?

"My dear," said Mrs. Eliott, "he's a saint, if you're to believe Anne."

Even Dr. Gardner smiled. "I can't say that's exactly what I should call him."

"Need we," said Mr. Eliott, "call him anything? So long as she thinks him a saint—"

Mr. Eliott—Mr. Johnson Eliott—hovered on the borderland of culture, with a spirit purified from commerce by a Platonic passion for the exact sciences. He was, therefore, received in Thurston Square on his own as well as his wife's merits. He too had his little weaknesses. Almost savagely determined in matters of business, at home he liked to sit in a chair and fondle the illusion of indifference. There was no part of Mr. Eliott's mental furniture that was not a fixture, yet he scorned the imputation of conviction. A hunted thing in his wife's drawing-room, Mr. Eliott had developed in a quite remarkable degree the protective colouring of stupidity.

"How can she?" said Miss Proctor. "She's a saint herself, and she ought to know the difference."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Gardner, "that's why she doesn't."

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Eliott, "it was the original attraction. There could be no other for Anne."

"The attraction was the opportunity for self-sacrifice. Whatever she's makes of Mr. Majendie, she's bent on making a martyr of herself." Miss Proctor met the vague eyes of her circle with a glance that was defiance to all mystery. "It's quite simple. This marriage is a short cut to canonisation, that's all."

Then it was that little Mrs. Gardner spoke. She had been married for a year, and her face still wore its bridal look of possession that was peace, the look that it would wear when Mrs. Gardner was seventy. Her voice had a certain lucid and profound precision.

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“Anne was always certain of herself. And since she cares for Mr. Majendie enough to accept him and to accept his sister, and the rather *triste* life which is all he has to offer her, doesn’t it look as if, probably, she knew her own business best?”

“I think,” said Mr. Eliott firmly, “we may take it that she does.”

Miss Proctor’s departure was felt as a great liberation of the intellect.

Mrs. Pooley sat up in her corner and revived the conversation interrupted by Miss Proctor. Mrs. Pooley had felt that to talk about Mrs. Majendie was to waste Mrs. Eliott. Mrs. Majendie apart, Mrs. Pooley had many ideas in common with her friend; but, whereas Mrs. Eliott would spend superbly on one idea at a time, Mrs. Pooley’s intellect entertained promiscuously and beyond its means. It was inclined to be hospitable to ideas that had never met outside it, whose encounter was a little distressing to everybody concerned. Whenever this happened Mrs. Pooley would appeal to Mr. Eliott, and Mr. Eliott would say, “Don’t ask me. I’m a stupid fellow. Don’t ask me to decide anything.”

Thus did Mr. Eliott wilfully obscure himself.

To-day he was more impregnably concealed than ever. He hadn’t any opinions of his own. They were too expensive. He borrowed other people’s when he wanted them. “But,” said Mr. Eliott, “it is very seldom that I do want an opinion. If you have any facts to give me—well and good.” For he knew that, at the mention of facts, Mrs. Pooley’s intellect would retreat behind a cloud and that his wife would pursue it there.

“I suppose,” said Mrs. Eliott, “there’s such a thing as realising your ideals.”

Her eyes gleamed and wandered and rested upon Mrs. Gardner. Mrs. Gardner had a singularly beautiful intellect which she was known to be shy of displaying. People said that Dr. Gardner had fallen in love with it years ago, and had only waited for it to mature before he married it. Mrs. Gardner had a habit of sitting apart from the discussion and untroubled by it, tolerant in her own excess of bliss. It irritated Mrs. Eliott, on her Thursdays, to think of the distinguished ideas that Mrs. Gardner might have introduced and didn’t. She felt Mrs. Gardner’s silence as a challenge.

“I wonder” (Mrs. Eliott was always wondering) “what becomes of our ideals when we’ve realised them.”

The doctor answered. “My dear lady, they cease to be ideals, and we have to get some more.”

Mrs. Eliott, in her turn, was received into the cloud.

“Of course,” said Mrs. Pooley, emerging from it joyously, “we must have them.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Eliott vaguely, as her spirit struggled with the cloud.

“Of course,” said Dr. Gardner. He was careful to array himself for tea-parties in all his innocent metaphysical vanities, to scatter profundities like epigrams, to flatter the pure intellects of ladies, while the solemn vagueness of his manner concealed from them the innermost frivolity of his thought. He didn’t care whether they understood him or not. He knew his wife did. Her wedded spirit moved in secret and unsuspected harmony with his.

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He had a certain liking for Mrs. Eliott. She seemed to him an apparition mainly pathetic. With her attenuated distinction, her hectic ardour, her brilliant and pursuing eye, she had the air of some doomed and dedicated votress of the pure intellect, haggard, disturbing and disturbed. His social self was amused with her enthusiasms, but the real Dr. Gardner accounted for them compassionately. It was no wonder, he considered, that poor Mrs. Eliott wondered. She had so little else to do. Her nursery upstairs was empty, it always had been, always would be empty. Did she wonder at that too, at the transcendental carelessness that had left her thus frustrated, thus incomplete? Mrs. Eliott would have been scandalised if she had known the real Dr. Gardner's opinion of her.

"I wonder," said she, "what will become of Anne's ideal."

"It's safe," said the doctor. "She hasn't realised it."

"I wonder, then, what will become of Anne."

Mrs. Pooley retreated altogether before this gross application of transcendent truth. She had not come to Mrs. Eliott's to talk about Mrs. Majendie.

Dr. Gardner smiled. "Oh, come," he said, "you *are* personal."

"I'm not," said Mrs. Eliott, conscious of her lapse and ashamed of it. "But, after all, Anne's my friend. I know people blamed me because I never told her. How could I tell her?"

"No," said Mrs. Gardner soothingly, "how could you?"

"Anne," continued Mrs. Eliott, "was so reticent. The thing was all settled before anybody could say a word."

"Well," said Dr. Gardner, "there's no good worrying about it now."

"Isn't it possible," said the little year-old bride, "that Mr. Majendie may have told her himself?"

For Dr. Gardner had told her everything the day before he married her, confessing to the light loves of his youth, the young lady in the Free Library and all. She looked round with eyes widened by their angelic candour. Even more beautiful than Mrs. Gardner's intellect were Mrs. Gardner's eyes, and the love of them that brought the doctor's home from their wanderings in philosophic dream. Nobody but Dr. Gardner knew that Mrs. Gardner's intellect had cause to be jealous of her eyes.

"There's one thing," said Mrs. Eliott, suddenly enlightened. "Our not having said anything at the time makes it easier for us to receive him now."

“Aren’t we all talking,” said Mrs. Gardner, “rather as if Anne had married a monster? After all, have we ever heard anything against him—except Lady Cayley?”

“Oh no, never a word, have we, Johnson dear?”

“Never. He’s not half a bad fellow, Majendie.”

Dr. Gardner rose to go.

“Oh, please—don’t go before they come.”

Mrs. Gardner hesitated, but the doctor, vague in his approaches, displayed a certain energy in his departure.

They passed Mrs. Walter Majendie on the stairs.

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She had come alone. That, Mrs. Eliott felt, was a bad beginning. She could see that it struck even Johnson's obtuseness as unfavourable, for he presently effaced himself.

"Fanny," said Anne, holding her friend's evasive eye with the determination of her query, "tell me, who are the Ransomes?"

"The Ransomes? Have they called?"

"Yes, but I was out. I didn't see them."

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Eliott, in a tone which implied that when Anne *did* see them ——

"Are they very dreadful?"

"Well—they're not your sort."

Anne meditated. "Not—my—sort. And the Lawson Hannays, what sort are they?"

"Well, we don't know them. But there are a great many people in Scale one doesn't know."

"Are they socially impossible, or what?"

"Oh—socially, they would be considered—in Scale—all right. But he is, or was, mixed up with some very queer people."

Anne's cold face intimated that the adjective suggested nothing to her. Mrs. Eliott was compelled to be explicit. The word queer was applied in Scale to persons of dubious honesty in business; whereas it was not so much in business as in pleasure that Mr. Lawson Hannay had been queer.

"Mr. Hannay may be very steady now, but I believe he belonged to a very fast set before he married her."

"And she? Is she nice?"

"She may be very nice for all I know."

"I think," said Anne, "she wouldn't call if she wasn't nice, you know."

She meant that if Mrs. Lawson Hannay hadn't been nice Walter would never have sanctioned her calling.

“Oh, as for that,” said her friend, “you know what Scale is. The less nice they are the more they keep on calling. But I should think”—she had suddenly perceived where Anne’s argument was tending—“she is probably all right.”

“Do you know anything of Mr. Charlie Gorst?”

“No. But Johnson does. At least I’m sure he’s met him.”

Mrs. Eliott saw it all. Poor Anne was being besieged, bombarded by her husband’s set.

“Then he isn’t impossible?”

“Oh no, the Gorsts are a very old Lincolnshire family. Quite grand. What a number of people you’re going to know, my dear. But, your husband isn’t to take you away from *all* your old friends.”

“He isn’t taking me anywhere. I shall stay,” said Anne proudly, “exactly where I was before.”

She was determined that her old friends should never know to what a sorrowful place she had been taken.

“You dear,” said Mrs. Eliott, holding out a suddenly caressing hand.

Anne trembled a little under the caress. “Fanny,” said she, “I want you to know him.”

“I mean to,” said Mrs. Eliott hurriedly.

“And I want him, even more, to know you.”

“Then,” Mrs. Elliot argued to herself, “she knows nothing; or she never could suppose we would be kindred spirits.”

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But she carried it off triumphantly. “Well,” said she, “I hope you’re free for the fifteenth?”

“The fifteenth?”

“Yes, or any other evening. We want to give a little dinner, dear, to you and to your husband—for him to meet all your friends.”

Anne tried not to look too grateful.

The upward way, then, was being prepared for him. Beneficent intelligences were at work, influences were in the air, helping her to raise him.

In her gladness she had failed to see that, considering the very obvious nature of the civility, Fanny Eliott was making the least shade too much of it.

CHAPTER VII

Anne presented herself that evening in her husband’s study with a sheaf of visiting cards in her hand. She thought it possible that she might obtain further illumination by confronting him with them.

“Walter,” said she “all these people have called on us. What do you think I’d better do?”

“I think you’ll have to call on them some day.”

“All of them?”

He took the cards from her and glanced through them.

“Let me see. Charlie Gorst—we must be nice to him.”

“Is *he* nice?”

“I think so. Edie’s very fond of him.”

“And Mrs. Lawson Hannay?”

“Oh, you must call on her.”

“Shall I like her.”

“Possibly. You needn’t see much of her if you don’t.”

“Is it easy to drop people?”

"Perfectly."

"And what about Mrs. Ransome?"

He frowned. "Has *she* called?"

"Yes."

"I'll find out when she's not at home and let you know. You can call then."

A fourth card he tore up and threw into the fire.

"Some people have confounded impudence."

Anne went away confirmed in her impression that Walter had a large acquaintance to whom he was by no means anxious to introduce his wife. He might, she reflected, have incurred the connection through the misfortune of his business. The life of a ship-owner in Scale was fruitful in these embarrassments.

But if these disagreeable people indeed belonged to the period she mentally referred to as his "past," she was not going to tolerate them for an instant. He must give them up.

She judged that he was prepared for so much renunciation. She hoped that he would, in time, adopt her friends in place of them. He was inclined, after all, to respond amicably to Mrs. Eliott's overtures.

Anne wondered how he would comport himself at the dinner on the fifteenth. She owned to a little uneasiness at the prospect. Would he indeed yield to the sobering influence of Thurston Square? Or would he try to impose his alien, his startling personality on it? She had begun to realise how alien he was, how startling he could be. Would he sit silent, uninspiring and uninspired? Or

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would unholy and untimely inspirations seize him? Would he scatter to the winds all conversational conventions, and riot in his own unintelligible frivolity? What would he say to Mrs. Eliott, that priestess of the pure intellect? Was there anything in him that could be touched by her uncoloured, immaterial charm? Would he see that Mr. Eliott's density was only a mask? Would the Gardners bore him? And would he like Miss Proctor? And if he didn't, would he show it, and how? His mere manners would, she knew, be irreproachable, but she had no security for his spiritual behaviour. He impressed her as a creature uncaught, undriven; graceful, but immeasurably capricious.

The event surprised her.

For the first five minutes or so, it seemed that Mrs. Eliott and her dinner were doomed to failure; so terrible a cloud had fallen on her, and on her husband, and on every guest. Never had the poor priestess appeared so abstract an essence, so dream-driven and so forlorn. Never had Mr. Eliott worn his mask to so extinguishing a purpose. Never had Miss Proctor been so obtrusively superior, Mrs. Gardner so silent, Dr. Gardner so vague. They were all, she could see, possessed, crushed down by their consciousness of Majendie and his monstrous past.

Into this circle, thus stupefied by his presence, Majendie burst with the courage of unconsciousness.

Mr. Eliott had started a topic, the conduct of Sir Rigley Barker, the ex-member for Scale. A heavy ball of conversation began to roll slowly up and down the table, between Mr. Eliott and Dr. Gardner. Majendie snatched at it deftly as it passed him, caught it, turned it in his hands till it grew golden under his touch. Mr. Eliott thought there wasn't much in poor Sir Rigley.

"Not much in him?" said Majendie. "How about that immortal speech of his?"

"Immortal—" echoed Mr. Eliott dubiously.

"Indestructible! The poor fellow couldn't end it. It simply coiled and uncoiled itself and went off, in great loops, into eternity. It began in all innocence—naturally, as it was his maiden speech—when he rose, don't you know, to propose an amendment. I take it that speech was so maidenly that it shrank from anything in the nature of a proposal. It went on in a terrified manner, coyly considering and hesitating—till it cleared the House. And he was awfully pleased when we congratulated him on his 'maidenly reserve.'"

"How did he ever get elected?" said Miss Proctor.

“My dear lady, it was a glorious stroke of the Opposition. They withdrew their candidate when he contested the election. Of course, they felt that he’d only got to make a speech and there’d be a dissolution. You simply saw Parliament melting away before him. If he’d gone on he’d have worn out the British constitution.”

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Dr. Gardner looked at Mrs. Gardner and their eyes brightened, as Majendie continued to unfold the amazing resources of Sir Rigley. He breathed on the ex-member like a god, and played with him like a juggler; he tossed him into the air and kept him there, a radiant, unsubstantial thing. The ex-member disported himself before Mrs. Eliott's dinner-party as he had never disported himself in Parliament. Majendie had given him a career, endowed him with glorious attributes. The ex-member, as a topic, developed capacities unsuspected in him before. The others followed his flight breathless, afraid to touch him lest he should break and disappear under their hands.

By the time Majendie had done with him, the ex-member had entered on a joyous immortality in Scale.

And in the middle of it all Anne laughed.

Miss Proctor was the first to recover from the surprise of it. She leaned across the table with a liberal and vivid smile, opulent in appreciation.

"Well, Mr. Majendie, Sir Rigley ought to be grateful to you. If ever there was a dull subject dead and buried, it was he, poor man. And now the difficulty will be to forget him."

"I don't think," said Majendie gravely, "I shall forget him myself in a hurry."

Oh no, he never would forget Sir Rigley. He didn't want to forget him. He would be grateful to him as long as he lived. He had made Anne laugh. A girl's laugh, young and deliciously uncontrollable, springing from the immortal heart of joy.

It was the first time he had heard her laugh so. He didn't know she could do it. The hope of hearing her do it again would give him something to live for. He would win her yet if he could make her laugh.

Anne was more surprised than anybody, at him and at herself. It was a revelation to her, his cleverness, his brilliant social gift. She was only intimate with one kind of cleverness, the kind that feeds itself on lectures and on books. She had not thought of Walter as clever. She had only thought of him as good. That one quality of goodness had swallowed up the rest.

Miss Proctor took possession of her where she sat in the drawing-room, as it were amid the scattered fragments of the ex-member (he still, among the ladies, emitted a feeble radiance). Miss Proctor had always approved of Anne. If Anne had no metropolitan distinction to speak of, she was not in the least provincial. She was something by herself, superior and rare. A little inclined to take herself too seriously, perhaps; but her husband's admirable levity would, no doubt, improve her.

“My dear,” said Miss Proctor, “I congratulate you. He’s brilliant, he’s charming, he’s unique. Why didn’t we know of him before? Where has he been hiding his talents all this time?”

(A talent that had not bloomed in Thurston Square was a talent pitiably wasted.)

Anne smiled a blanched, perfunctory smile. Ah, where had he been hiding himself, indeed?

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Miss Proctor stood central, radiating the rich afterglow of her appreciation. Her gaze was a little critical of her friends' faces, as if she were measuring the effect, on a provincial audience, of Majendie's conversational technique. She swept down to a seat beside her hostess.

"My dear Fanny," she said, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you—"

"That he was that sort. I didn't know there was such a delightful man in Scale. What have you all been dreaming of?"

Mrs. Eliott tried to look both amiable and intelligent. In the presence of Mr. Majendie's robust reality it was indeed as if they had all been dreaming. Her instinct told her that the spirit of pure comedy was destruction to the dreams she dreamed. She tried to be genial to her guest's accomplishment; but she felt that if Mr. Majendie's talents were let loose in her drawing-room, it would cease to be the place of intellectual culture. On the other hand she perceived that Miss Proctor's idea was to empty that drawing-room by securing Mr. Majendie for her own. Mrs. Eliott remained uncomfortably seated on her dilemma.

Sounds of laughter reached her from below. The men were unusually late in returning to the drawing-room. They appeared a little flushed by the hilarious festival, as if Majendie had had on them an effect of mild intoxication. She could see that even Dr. Gardner was demoralised. He wore, under his vagueness, the unmistakable air of surrender to an unfamiliar excess. Mr. Eliott too had the happy look of a man who has fed loftily after a long fast.

"Anne dear," said Majendie, as they walked back the few yards between Thurston Square and Prior Street, "we shan't have to do that very often, shall we?"

"Why not? You can't say we didn't have a delightful evening."

"Yes, but it was very exhausting, dear, for me."

"You? You didn't show much sign of exhaustion. I never heard you talk so well."

"Did I talk well?"

"Yes. Almost too well."

"Too much, you mean. Well, I had to talk, when nobody else did. Besides, I did it for a purpose."

But what his purpose was Majendie did not say.

Anne had been human enough to enjoy a performance so far beyond the range of her anticipations. She was glad, above all, that Walter had made himself acceptable in Thurston Square. But when she came to think of what was, what must be known of him in Scale, she was appalled by his incomprehensible ease of attitude. She reflected that this must have been the first time he had dined in Thurston Square since the scandal. Was it possible that he did not realise the insufferable nature of that incident, the efforts it must have cost to tolerate him, the points that had been stretched to take him in? She felt that it was impossible to exaggerate the essential solemnity of that evening. They had met together, as it were, to celebrate Walter's

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return to the sanctities and proprieties he had offended. He had been formally forgiven and received by the society which (however Fanny Eliott might explain away its action) had most unmistakably cast him out. She had not expected him to part with his indomitable self-possession under the ordeal, but she could have wished that he had borne himself with a little more modesty. He had failed to perceive the redemptive character of the feast, he had turned it into an occasion for profane personal display.

Mrs. Eliott's dinner-party had not saved him; on the contrary, he had saved the dinner-party.

CHAPTER VIII

Anne was right. Though Majendie was, as he expressed it, "up to her designs upon his unhappy soul," he remained unconscious of the part to be played by Mrs. Eliott and her circle in the scheme of his salvation. From his observation of the aristocracy of Thurston Square, it would never have occurred to him that they were people who could count, whichever way you looked at them.

Meanwhile he was a little disturbed by his own appearance as a heavenward pilgrim. He was not sure that he had not gone a little too far that way, and he felt that it was a shame to allow Anne to take him seriously.

He confided his scruples to Edith.

"Poor dear," he said, "it's quite pathetic. You know, she thinks she's saving me."

"And do you mind being saved?"

"Well, no, I don't mind a little of it. But the question is, how long I can keep it up."

"You mean, how long she'll keep it up?"

He laughed. "Oh, she'll keep it up for ever. No possible doubt about that. She'll never tire. I wonder if I ought to tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"That it won't work. That she can't do it that way. She's wasting my time and her own."

"Oh, what's a little time, dear, when you've all eternity in view?"

"But I haven't. I've nothing in view. My view, at present, is entirely obscured by Anne."

“Poor Anne! To think she actually stands between you and your Maker.”

“Yes, you know—in her very anxiety to introduce us.”

They looked at each other. Her sainthood was so accomplished, her union with heaven so complete, that she could afford herself these profaner sympathies. She was secretly indignant with Anne’s view of Walter as unpresentable in the circles of the spiritual *elite*.

“It never struck her that you mightn’t need an introduction after all; that you were in it as much as she. That’s the sort of mistake one might expect from—from a spiritual parvenu, but not from Anne.”

“Oh, come, I don’t consider myself her equal by a long chalk.”

“Well, say she does belong to the peerage; you’re a gentleman, and what more can she require?”

“She can’t see that I am (If I am. You say so). She considers me—spiritually—a bounder of the worst sort.”

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“That’s her mistake. Though I must say you sometimes lend yourself to it with your horrible profanity.”

“I can’t help it, Edie. She’s so funny with it. She *makes* me profane.”

“Dear Walter, if you can think Anne funny—”

“I do. I think she’s furiously funny, and horribly pathetic. All the time, you know, she thinks she’s leading me upward. Profanity’s my only refuge from hypocrisy.”

“Oh no, not your only refuge. You say she thinks she’s leading you. Don’t *let* her think it. Make her think you’re leading her.”

“Do you think,” said Majendie, “she’d enjoy that quite so much?”

“She’d enjoy it more. If you took her the right way. The way I mean.”

“What’s that?”

“You must find out,” said she. “I’m not going to tell you everything.”

Majendie became thoughtful. “My only fear was that I couldn’t keep it up. But you really don’t think, then, that I should score much if I did?”

“No, my dear, I don’t. And as for keeping it up, you never could. And if you did she’d never understand what you were doing it for. That’s not the way to show you’re in love with her.”

“But that’s just what I don’t want her to see. That’s what she hates so much in me. I’ve always understood that in these matters it’s discreeter not to show your hand too plainly. You see, it’s just as if we’d never been married, for all she cares. That’s the trouble.”

“There’s something in that. If she’s not in love with you—”

“Look here, Edie, you’re a woman, and you know all about them. Do you really, honestly think Anne ever was in love with me?”

“Oh, don’t ask me. How should I know?”

“No, but,” he persisted, “what do you think?”

“I think she *was* in love.”

“But not with me, though?”

“No, no, not with you.”

“With whom, then?”

“Darling idiot, there wasn’t any who. If there was, do you think I’d give her away like that? If you’d asked me *what* she was in love with—”

“Well, what then?”

“Your goodness. She was head over ears in love with that.”

“I see. With something that I wasn’t.”

“No, with something that you were, that you are, only she doesn’t know it.”

“Then,” said Majendie, “you can’t get out of it, she’s in love with *me*.”

“Oh no, no, you dear goose, not with you. To be in love with you she’d have to be in love with everything you’re *not*, as well as everything you are; with everything you have been, with everything you never were, with everything you will be, with everything you might be, could be, should be.”

“That’s a large order, Edie.”

“There’s a larger one than that. She might sweep all that overboard, see it go by whole pieces (the best pieces) at a time, and still be in love with the dear, incomprehensible, indescribable *you*. That,” said Edie, triumphant in her wisdom, “is what being in love is.”

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“And do you think she isn’t in it?”

“No. Not anywhere near it. But—it’s a big but—”

“I don’t care how big it is. Don’t bother me with it.”

“Bother you? Why, it’s a beautiful but. As I said, she isn’t in love with you; but she may be any minute. It’s just touch and go with her. It depends on *you*.”

“Heavens, what am I to do? I’ve done everything.”

“Yes, you have, but she hasn’t. She’s done nothing. She doesn’t know how to. You’ve got to show her.”

He shook his head hopelessly. “You’re beyond me. I don’t understand. There isn’t anything for me to do. How am I to show her?”

“I mean show her what there is in it. What it means. What it’s going to be for her as well as you. Just go at it hard, harder than you did before you married her.”

“*I* see, I’ve got to make love to her all over again.”

“Exactly. All over again from the very beginning.”

“I say!” He took it in, her idea, in all the width and splendour of its simplicity. “And do it differently?”

“Oh, very differently.”

“I don’t quite see where the difference is to come in. What did I do before that was so wrong?”

“Nothing. That’s just the worst of it. It was all too right. Ever so much too right. Don’t you see? It’s what we’ve been talking about. You made her in love with your goodness. And she was in love with it, not because it was *your* goodness, but because it was her own. That’s why she wanted to marry it. She couldn’t be in love with it for any other reason, because she’s an egoist.”

“No. There you’re quite wrong. That’s what she isn’t.”

“Oh, you *are* in love with her. Of course she’s an egoist. All the nicest women are. I’m an egoist myself. Do you love me less for it?”

“I don’t love you less for anything.”

“Well—unless you can make Anne jealous of me—and you can’t—you’ve got to love me less, now, dear boy. That’s where I come in—to be kept out of it.”

She had led him breathless on her giddy round; she plunged him back into bewilderment. He hadn’t a notion where she was taking him to, where they would come out; but there was a desperate delight in the impetuous journey, the wind of her sudden flight lifted him and carried him on. He had always trusted the marvellous inspirations of her heart. She had failed him once; but now he could not deny that she had given him lights, and he looked for a stupendous illumination at the end of the way.

“Out of it!” he exclaimed. “Why, where should I have been without you? You were the beginning of it.”

“I was indeed. You’ve got to take care I’m not the end of it, that’s all.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“I mean what I say. You don’t want Anne to be in love with you for *my* sake, do you?”

“N—no. I don’t know that I do exactly. At least I should prefer that she was in love with me for my own.”

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“Well, you must make her, then. That’s why you’ve got to leave me out of it. I’ve been too much in it all along. It was through me she conceived that unfortunate idea of your goodness. I’m its father and its mother and its nurse, I ministered to it every hour. I fed it, I brought it up, I brought it *out*, I provided all the opportunity for its display. Nothing else had a show beside your goodness, Wallie dear. It was something monstrous. It took Anne’s affection from you and concentrated it all on itself. She worshipped it, she clung to it, she saw nothing else but it, and when it went everything went. *You* went first of all. Well, you must just see that that doesn’t happen again.”

“You mean that I must lead a life of iniquity?”

“You mustn’t lead a life of anything.”

“Do you mean I mustn’t be good any more?”

Majendie’s imagination played hilariously with this fantastic, this preposterous notion of his goodness.

“Oh yes, be good,” said Edith, “but not too good. Above all, not too good to me. Concentrate on her, stupid.”

“I have concentrated,” he moaned, mystified beyond endurance. “Besides, you said I couldn’t make her jealous.”

“No, I wish you could. I mean, don’t let her fall in love with your devotion to me again. Don’t hold her by that one rope. Hold her by all your ropes; then, if one goes, it doesn’t so much matter.”

“I see. You don’t trust my goodness.”

“Oh, *I* trust it, so will she again. But don’t *you* trust it. That precious goodness of yours is your rival. A bad, dangerous rival. You’ve got to beat it out of the field. Show that you’re jealous of it. A little judicious jealousy won’t hurt.” Edith’s eyes were still and profound with wisdom. “I don’t believe you’ve ever yet made love to Anne properly. That’s what it all comes to.”

“Oh, I say,” said he, “what do you know about it?”

“I’m only judging,” said Edith, “by the results.”

“Oh, that isn’t fair.”

“Perhaps it isn’t,” she owned, her wisdom growing by what it fed on.

“You see, she wouldn’t let me do it properly.”

Edith pondered. “Yes, but how long ago is it? And you’ve been married since.”

“What difference does that make?”

“I should say it would make all the difference. Anne was a girl, then. She didn’t understand. She’s a woman now. She does understand. She can be appealed to.”

He hid his face in his hands.

“I never thought of that,” he murmured thickly.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“Edie,” he said, and his face was still hidden, “however did you think of it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I see some things, and then other things come round to me. But you mustn’t forget that *you’ve* got to begin all over again from the very beginning. You’ll have to be very careful with her, every bit as careful as if she were a strange lady you’ve just met at a dance. Don’t forget that she’s strange, that she’s another woman, in fact.”

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“I see. If there are to be many of these remarkable transformations of Anne, I shall have all the excitement of polygamy without its drawbacks.”

“You will. And it’s the same for her, remember. You’re a strange man. You’ve just been introduced, you know—by me—and you’re begging for the pleasure of the first waltz, and Anne pretends that her programme is full, and you look over her shoulder and see that it isn’t, and that she puts you down for all the nice ones. And you sit out all the rest, and you flirt on the stairs, and take her in to supper, and, finally, you know, you pull yourself together and you do it—in the conservatory. Oh, it’ll be so amusing, and so funny to watch. You’ll begin by being most awfully polite to each other.”

“I suppose I may yet be permitted to call this strange young lady Anne?”

“Yes. That’s because you remember that you *have* known her once before, a very long time ago, when you were children. You are children, both of you. Oh, Walter, I believe you’re looking forward to it; I believe you’re glad you’ve got to do it all over again.”

“Yes, Edie, I positively believe I am.”

He rose, laughing, prepared to begin that minute his new wooing of Anne.

“Good-bye,” said Edith, “it *is* good-bye, you know, and good luck to you.”

This time she knew that she had been wise for him.

Anne would have been horrified if she had known that the situation, so terrible for her, was developing for her husband certain possibilities of charm. His irrepressible boyishness refused to accept it in all its moral gloom. There were, he perceived, advantages in these strained relations. They had removed Anne into the mysterious realm her maidenhood had inhabited, before marriage had had time to touch her magic. She had become once more the unapproachable and unattained. Their first courtship, pursued under intolerable restrictions of time and place, had been a rather uninspired affair, and its end a foregone conclusion. He had been afraid of himself, afraid sometimes of her. For he had not brought her the spontaneous, unalarmed, unspoiled spirit of his youth. He had come to her with a stain on his imagination and a wound in his memory. And she was holy to him. He had held himself in, lest a touch, a word, a gesture should recall some insufferable association.

Marriage had delivered him from the tyranny of reminiscence. No reminiscence could stand before the force of passion in possession. It purified; it destroyed; it built up in three days its own inviolable memory.

And Anne, with the best will in the world, had had no power to undo its work in him.

In herself, too, below her kindling spiritual consciousness, in the unexplored depth and darkness of her, its work remained.

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Majendie was unaware how far he had become another man and she another woman. He was merely alive to the unusual and agreeable excitement of wooing his own wife. There was a piquancy in the experiment that appealed to him. Her new coldness called to him like a challenge. Her new remoteness waked the adventurous youth in him. His imagination was touched as it had not been touched before. He could see that Anne had not yet got over her discovery. The shock of it was in her nerves. He felt that she shrank from him, and his chivalry still spared her.

He ceased to be her husband and became her very courteous, very distant lover. He made no claims, and took nothing for granted. He simply began all over again from the very beginning. His conscience was vaguely appeased by the illusion of the new leaf, the rejuvenated innocence of the blank page. They had never been married (so the illusion suggested). There had been no revelations. They met as strangers in their own house, at their own table. In support of this pleasing fiction he set about his courtship with infinite precautions. He found himself exaggerating Anne's distance and the lapse of intimacy. He made his way slowly, through all the recognised degrees, from mere acquaintance, through friendship to permissible fervour.

And from time to time, with incomparable discretion, he would withhold himself that he might make himself more precious. He was hardly aware of his own restraint, his refinements of instinct and of mood. It was as if he drew, in his desperate necessity, upon unrealised, untried resources. There was something in Anne that checked the primitive impulse of swift chase, and called forth the curious half-feminine cunning of the sophisticated pursuer. She froze at his ardour, but his coldness almost kindled her, so that he approached by withdrawals and advanced by flights.

He displayed, first of all, a heavenly ignorance, an inspired curiosity regarding her. He consulted her tastes, as if he had never known them; he started the time-honoured lovers' topics; he talked about books—which she preferred and the reasons for her preference.

He did not advance very far that way. Anne was simply annoyed at the lapses in his memory.

He then began to buy books on the chance of her liking them, which answered better.

He promoted himself by degrees to personalities. He talked to her about herself, handling her with religious reticence as a thing of holy and incomprehensible mystery.

"I suppose," he said one day, "if I were good enough, I should understand you. Why do you sigh like that? Is it because I'm not good enough? Or because I don't understand?"

"I think," said she, "it is because I don't understand you."

“My dear” (he allowed himself at this point the more formal endearment), “I thought I was disgracefully transparent—I’m limpidity, simplicity itself. I’ve only one idea and one subject of conversation. Ask Edith. She understands me.”

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“Ah, Edith—” said Anne, as if Edith were a very different affair.

The intonation was hopeful, it suggested some slender and refined jealousy. (If only he could make her jealous!)

On the strength of it he advanced to the punctual daily offering of flowers, flowers for her drawing-room, flowers for her bedroom, flowers for her to wear. After that he took to writing her letters from the office with increasing frequency and fervour. Anne, too, was courteous and distant. She accepted all he had to offer as a becoming tribute to her feminine superiority, and evaded dexterously the deeper issue.

Now and then he reported his progress to Edith.

“I rather think,” he said, “she’s coming round. I’m regarded as a distinctly eligible person.”

They laughed at his complete adoption of the part and his innocent joy in it.

That had always been his way. When he had begun a game there was no stopping him. He played it through to the end.

Edith would look up smiling and say: “Well, how goes the affair?” (They always called it the affair.) Or: “How did you get on to-day?”

And it would be: “Pretty well.”—“Better to-day than yesterday.”—“No luck to-day.”

One Sunday he came to her radiant.

“She really does,” said he, “seem interested in what I say.”

“What did you talk about?”

“The influence of Christianity on woman. Was that good?”

“Very good.”

“I didn’t know very much about it, but I got her to tell me things.”

“That,” said Edith, “was still better.”

“But she sticks to it that she doesn’t understand me. That’s bad.”

“No,” said Edith, “that’s best of all. It shows she’s thinking of you. She wants to understand. Believe me, the affair marches.”

He meditated on that.

In the evening, the better to meditate, he withdrew to his study. It was not long before Anne came to him of her own accord. She asked if she might read aloud to him.

“I should be honoured,” he replied stiffly.

She chose Emerson, “On Compensation.” And Majendie did not care for Emerson.

But Anne had a charming voice; a voice with tones that penetrated like pain, that thrilled like a touch, that clung delicately like a shy caress; tones that were as a funeral bell for sadness; tones that rose to passion without ever touching it; clear, cool tones that were like water to passion’s flame. Majendie closed his eyes and let her voice play over him.

“Did you like it?” she asked gravely.

“Like it? I love it.”

“So do I. I *hoped* you would.”

“My dear, I didn’t understand one word of it.”

“You can’t make me believe you loved it then.”

He looked at her.

“I loved the sound of your voice, dear.”

“Oh,” said she coldly, “is that all?”

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“Yes,” he said, “isn’t it enough?”

“I’d rather—” she began and hesitated.

“You’d rather I understood Emerson?”

Her blood flushed in the honey whiteness of her face. She rose, put the book in its place, and left the room.

“Edith,” he said, relating the incident afterwards, “I thought she was coming round when she wanted to read to me. Why did she get up and go like that?”

“She went, dear goose, because she was afraid to stay.”

“Why afraid?”

“Because she’s fighting you, Wallie. It’s all right if she’s got to fight.”

“Yes, but suppose she wins?”

“She can’t win fighting—she’s a woman. Her only chance is to run away.”

That night Anne knelt by her bedside and hid her face and prayed for Walter; that he might be purified, so that she might love him without sin; that he and she might travel together on the divine way, and together be received into the heavenly places.

She had felt that night the stirring of natural affection. It had come back to her, a feeble, bruised, humiliated thing. She could not harbour it without spiritual justification.

She kept herself awake by saying: “I can’t love him, I can’t love him—unless God makes him fit for me to love.”

Sleeping, she dreamed that she was in his arms.

CHAPTER IX

It was Anne’s birthday. It shone in mid-May like the front of June. Anne’s bedroom was over Edith’s and looked out on the garden. A little rain had fallen over night. Through the open window the day greeted her with a breath of flowers and earth; a day that came to her all golden, ripe and sweet from the south.

Her dressing-table was placed sideways from the window. Anne, fresh from her cold bath, in a white muslin gown, with her thick sleek hair coiled and burnished, sat before the looking-glass.

There was a knock at the door, not Nanna's bold awakening summons, but a shy and gentle sound. Her heart shook her voice as she responded.

"Is it permitted?" said Majendie.

"If you like," she answered quietly.

He presented his customary morning sacrifice of flowers. Hitherto he had not presumed so far as to bring it to her room. It waited for her decorously at breakfast time, beside her plate.

She took the flowers from him, acknowledged their fragrance by a quiver of her delicate nostrils, thanked him, and laid them on the dressing-table.

He seated himself on the window-sill, where he could see her with the day upon her. She noticed that he had brought with him, beside the flowers, a small oblong wooden box. He laid the box on his knee and covered it with his hand. He sat very still, looking at her as her firm white hands caressed her coiled hair into shape. Once she moved his flowers to find her comb, and laid them down again.

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“Aren’t you going to wear them?” he inquired anxiously.

Her upper lip lifted an instant, caught up, in its fashion, by the pretty play of the little sensitive amber mole. Two small white teeth showed and were hidden again. It was as if she had been about to smile, or to speak, and had thought better of it.

She took up the flowers and tried them, now at her breast, and now at her waist.

“Where shall I put them?” said she. “Here? Or here?”

“Just there.”

She let them stay there in the hollow of her breast.

He laid the box on the dressing-table close to her hand where it searched for pins.

“I’ve brought you this,” he said gently.

She smiled that divine and virgin smile of hers. Anne was big, but her smile was small and close and shy.

“You remembered my birthday?”

“Did you think I should forget?”

She opened the lid with cool unhurried fingers. Under the wrappings of tissue paper and cotton wool, a shape struck clear and firm and familiar to her touch. A sacred thrill ran through her as she felt there the presence of the holy thing, the symbol so dear and so desired that it was divined before seen.

She lifted from the box an old silver crucifix. It must have been the work of some craftsman whose art was pure and fine as the silver he had wrought in. But that was not what Anne saw. She had always found something painful and repellent in those crucifixes of wood which distort and deepen the lines of ivory, or in those of ivory which gives again the very pallor of human death. But the precious metal had somehow eternalised the symbol of the crucified body. She saw more than the torture, the exhaustion, the attenuation. Surely, on the closed eyelids there rested the glory and the peace of divine accomplishment?

She stood still, holding it in her hand and looking at it. Majendie stood still, also looking at her. He was not quite sure whether she were going to accept that gift, whether she would hesitate to take from his profane hands a thing so sacred and so supreme. He was aware that his fate somehow hung on her acceptance, and he waited in silence, lest a word should destroy the work of love in her.

Anne, too (when she could detach her mind from the crucifix), felt that the moment was decisive. To accept that gift, of all gifts, was to lay her spirit under obligation to him. It was more than a surrender of body, heart, or mind. It was to admit him to association with the unspeakably sacred acts of prayer and adoration.

If it were possible that that had been his desire; if he had meant his gift as a tribute, not to her only, but to the spirit of holiness in her; if, in short, he had been serious, then, indeed, she could not hesitate. For, if it were so, her prayer was answered.

She laid down the crucifix and turned to him. They searched each other with their eyes. She saw, without wholly understanding, the pain in his. He saw, also unintelligently, the austerity in hers.

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“Are you not going to take it, then?” he said.

“I don’t know. Do you realise that you are giving me a very sacred thing?”

“I do.”

“And that I can’t treat it as I would an ordinary present?”

He lowered his eyelids. “I didn’t think you’d want to wear it in your hair, dear.”

She was about to ask him what he did mean then; but some instinct held her, told her not to press the sign of grace too hard. She looked at him still more intently. His eyes had disconcerted and baffled her, but now she was sheltered by their lowered lids. Then she noticed for the first time that his face showed the marks of suffering. It was as if it had dropped suddenly the brilliant mask it wore for her, and given up its secret unaware. He had suffered so that he had not slept. It was plain to her in the droop of his eyelids, and in the drawn lines about his eyes and mouth and nostrils. She was touched with tenderness and pity, and a certain unintelligible awe. And she knew her hour. She knew that if she closed her heart now, it would never open to him. She knew that it was his hour as well as hers. She felt, reverently, that it was, above all, God’s hour.

She laid her hand on her husband’s gift, saying to herself that if she took that crucifix she would be taking him with it into the holy places of her heart.

“I will take it.” Her voice came shy and inarticulate as a marriage vow.

“Thank you,” he said.

He wondered if she would turn to him with some sign of tenderness, whether she would stoop to him and touch him with her hand or her lips; or whether she looked to him to offer the first caress.

She did nothing. It was as if her intentness, her concentration upon her holy purpose held her. While her soul did but turn to him in the darkness, it kept and would keep their hands and lips apart.

He divined that she was only half-won. But, though her body yet moved in its charmed inviolate circle, he felt dimly that the spiritual barrier was down.

She turned from him and went slowly to the door. He opened it and followed her. On the stairs she parted from him and went alone into his sister’s bedroom.

Edith’s spine had been hurting her in the night. She lay flat and exhausted, and the embrace of her loving arms was slow and frail.

Edith was what she called “dressed,” and waiting for her sister-in-law. The little table by her bed was strewn with the presents she had bought and made for Anne. A birthday was a very serious affair for Edith. She was not content to buy (buying was nothing; anybody could buy); she must also make, and make beautifully. “I mayn’t have any legs that can carry me,” said Edith; “but I’ve hands and I *will* use them. If it wasn’t for my hands I’d be nothing but a great lumbering, lazy mass of palpitating heart.” But her making had become every year more and more expensive. Her beautiful, pitiful embroideries were paid for in bad nights. And at six o’clock that morning she had given her little dismal cry: “Oh, Nanna, Nanna, my beast of a spine is going to bother me to-day, and it’s Anne’s birthday!”

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“And what else,” said Nanna severely, “do you expect, Miss Edith?”

“I didn’t expect this. I do believe it’s getting worse.”

“Worse?” Nanna was contemptuous. “It was worse on Master Walter’s birthday last year.”

(Last year she had made a waistcoat.)

“I can’t think,” moaned Edith, “why it’s always bad on birthdays.”

But however badly “it” might behave in the night, it was never permitted to destroy the spirit of the day.

Anne looked anxiously at the collapsed, exhausted figure in the bed.

“Yes,” said Edith, having smiled at her sister-in-law with magnificent mendacity, “you may well look at me. You couldn’t make yourself as flat as I am if you tried. There are two books for you, and a thingummy-jig, and a handkerchief to blow your dear nose with.”

“Edie—”

“Do you like them?”

“Like them? Oh, you dear—”

“Why don’t you have a birthday oftener? It makes you look so pretty, dear.”

Anne’s heart leaped. Edie’s ways, her very words sometimes were like Walter’s.

“Has Walter seen you?”

Anne’s face became instantly solemn, but it was not sad.

“Edie,” she said, “do you know what he has given me!”

“Yes,” said Edith. Her eyes searched Anne’s eyes with pain in them that was somehow akin to Walter’s pain.

“She knows everything,” thought Anne, “and it was her idea, then, not his.”

“Edith,” said she, “was it you who thought of it, or he?”

“I? Never. He didn’t say a word about it. He just went and got it. He thought it all out by himself, poor dear.”

“Can you think why he thought of it?”

“Yes,” said Edith gravely, “I can. Can’t you?”

Anne was silent.

“It’s very simple. He wants you to trust him a little more, that’s all.”

Anne’s mouth trembled, and she tightened it.

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Yes,” she said, “I am.”

“Because you think he isn’t very spiritual?”

“Perhaps.”

“Oh, but he’s on his way there,” said Edith. “He’s human. You’ve got to be human before you can be spiritual. It’s a most important part of the process. Don’t you omit it.”

“Have I omitted it?”

She stroked one of the thin hands that were out-stretched towards her on the coverlet, and the other closed on her caress. The touch brought the tears into her eyes. She raised her head to keep them from falling.

“Dear,” said Edith, and paused and reiterated, “dear, you have about all the big things that I haven’t. You’re splendid. There’s only one thing I want for you. If you could only see how divinely sacred the human part of us is—and how pathetic.”

Anne looked at her as she lay there, bright and brave, untroubled by her own mortal pathos. In her, humanity, woman’s humanity, was reduced to its simplest expression of spiritual loving and bodily suffering. Anne was a child in her ignorance of the things that had been revealed to Edith lying there.

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Looking at her, Anne's tears grew heavy and fell.

"It's your birthday," said Edith softly.

And as she heard Majendie's foot on the stairs Anne dried her eyes on the birthday pocket handkerchief.

"Here she is," said Edith as he entered. "What are you going to do with her? She doesn't have a birthday every day."

"I'm going," he said, "to take her down to breakfast."

Their meals so abounded in occasions for courtesy that they had become profoundly formal. This morning Anne's courtesy was coloured by some emotion that defied analysis. She wore her new mood like a soft veil that heightened her attraction in obscuring it.

He watched her with a baffled preoccupation that kept him unusually quiet. His quietness did him good service with Anne in her new mood.

When the meal was over she rose and went to the window. The sedate Georgian street was full of the day that shone soberly here from the cool clear north.

"What are you thinking of?" said he.

"I'm thinking what a beautiful day it is."

"Yes, isn't it a jolly day?"

"If it's beautiful here, what must it be in the country?"

"The country?" A thought struck him. "I say, would you like to go there?"

"Do you mean to-day?"

Her upper lip lifted, and the two teeth showed again on the pale rose of its twin. In spite of the dignity of her proportions, Anne had the look of a child contemplating some hardly permissible delight.

"Now, this minute. There's a train to Westleydale at nine fifty."

"It would be very nice. But—how about business?"

"Business be—"

"No, no, *not* that word."

“But it is, you know; it can’t help itself. There’s a devil in all the offices in Scale at this time of the year.”

“Would *you* like it?”

“I? Rather. I’m on!”

“But—Edith—oh no, we can’t.”

She turned with a sudden gesture of renunciation, so that she faced him where he stood smiling at her. His face grew grave for her.

“Look here,” he said, “you mustn’t be morbid about Edith. It isn’t necessary. All the time we’re gone, she’ll be there, in perfect bliss with simply thinking of the good time *we*’re having.”

“But her back’s bad to-day.”

“Then she’ll be glad that we’re not there to feel it. Her back will add to her happiness, if anything.”

She drew in a sharp breath, as if he had hurt her.

“Oh, Walter, how can you?”

He replied with emphasis. “How can I? I can, not because I’m a brute, as you seem to suppose, but because she’s a saint and an angel. I take off my hat and go down on my knees when I think of her. Go and put *your* hat on.”

She felt herself diminished, humbled, and in two ways. It was as if he had said: “You are not the saint that Edith is, nor yet the connoisseur in saintship that I am.”

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She knew that she was not the one; but to the other distinction she certainly fancied that she had the superior claim. And she had never yet come behind him in appreciation of Edith. Besides, she was hurt at being spoken to in that way on her birthday.

Her resentment faded when she found him standing at the foot of the stairs by Edith's door, waiting for her. He looked up at her as she descended, and his eyes brightened with pleasure at the sight.

Edith was charmed with their plan. It might have been conceived as an exquisite favour to herself, by the fine style in which she handled it.

They set out, Majendie carrying the luncheon basket and Anne's coat. He had changed, and appeared in the Norfolk jacket, knickerbockers, and cap he had worn at Scarby. The pang that struck her at the sight of them was softened by her practical perception of their fitness for the adventure. They became him, too, and she had memory of the charm he had once worn for her with that open-air attire.

An hour's journey by rail brought them to the little wayside station. They turned off the high road, walked for ten minutes across an upland field, and came to the bridle-path that led down into the beech-woods of Westleydale, in the heart of the hills.

They followed a mossy trail. The shade fell thin, warm, and coloured, from leaves so tender that the light passed through their half-transparent panes. Overhead there was the delicate scent of green things and of sap, and underfoot the deep smell of moss and moistened earth.

Anne drew the deep breath of delight. She took off her hat and gloves, and moved forward a few steps to a spot where the wood opened and the vivid light received her. Majendie hung back to look at her. She turned and stood before him, superb and still, shrined in a crescent of tall beech stems, column by column, with the light descending on the fine gold of her hair. Nothing in Anne even remotely suggested a sylvan and primeval creature; but, as she stood there in her temperate and alien beauty, she seemed to him to have yielded to a brief enchantment. She threw back her head, as if her white throat drank the sweet air like wine. She held out her white hands, and let the warmth play over them palpably as a touch.

And Majendie longed to take her by those white hands and draw her to him. If he could have trusted her; but some instinct plucked him backward, saying to him: "Not yet."

A mossy rise under a beech-tree offered itself to Anne as a suitable throne for the regal woman that she was. He spread out her coat, and she made room for him beside her. He sat for a long time without speaking. The powers which were working that day for Majendie gave to him that subtle silence. He had, at most times, an inexhaustible capacity for keeping still.

Above them, just discernible through the tree-tops, veiled by a gauze of dazzling air, the hill brooded in its majestic dream. Its green arms, plunging to the valley, gathered them and shut them in.

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Majendie's figure was not diminished by the background. The smallest nervous movement on his part would have undone him, but he did not move. His profound stillness, suggesting an interminable patience, gave him a beautiful immensity of his own.

Anne, left in her charmed, inviolate circle, surrendered sweetly to the spirit of Westleydale.

The place was peace folded upon the breast of peace.

Presently she spoke, calling his name, as if out of the far-off unutterable peace.

"Walter, it was kind of you to bring me here."

"I am so glad you like it."

"I do indeed."

He tried to say more, but his heart choked him.

She closed her eyes, and the peace poured over her, and sank in. Her heart beat quietly.

She opened her eyes and turned them on her husband. She knew that it was his gaze that had compelled them to open. She smiled to herself, like a young girl, shyly but happily aware of him, and turned from him to her contemplation of the woods.

Anne had always rather prided herself on her susceptibility to the beauty of nature, but it had never before reached her with this poignant touch. Hitherto she had drawn it in with her eyes only; now it penetrated her through every nerve. She was vaguely but deliciously aware of her own body as a part of it, and of her husband's joy in contemplating her.

"He thinks me good-looking," she said to herself, and the thought came to her as a revelation.

Then her young memory woke again and thrust at her.

"He thinks me good-looking. That's why he married me."

She longed to find out if it were so.

"Walter," said she, "I want to ask you a question."

"Well—if it's an easy one."

“It isn’t—very. What made you want to marry me?”

He paused a moment, searching for the truth.

“Your goodness.”

“Is that really true?”

“To the best of my belief, madam, it is.”

“But there are so many other women better than me.”

“Possibly. I haven’t been happy enough to meet them.”

“And if you had met them?”

“As far as I can make out, I shouldn’t have fallen in love with them. I shouldn’t have fallen in love with *you*, if it hadn’t been for your goodness. But I shouldn’t have fallen in love with your goodness in any other woman.”

“Have you known many other women?”

“One way and another, in the course of my life—yes. And what I liked so much about you was your difference from those other women. You gave me rest from them and their ways. They bored me even when I was half in love with them, and made me restless for them even when I wasn’t a little bit. It was as if they were always expecting something from me—I couldn’t for the life of me tell what—always on the look out, don’t you know, for some mysterious moment that never arrived.”

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She thought she knew. She felt that he was describing vaguely and with incomparable innocence the approaches of the ladies who had once designed to marry him. He had never seen through them; they (and they must have been so obvious, those ladies) had remained for him inscrutable, mysterious. He could deal competently with effects, but he was not clever at assigning causes.

He seemed conscious of her reflections. “They were quite nice, don’t you know. Only they couldn’t let you alone. You let me alone so perfectly. Being with you was peace.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “It was peace. That was all.”

“Oh, was it? That was only the beginning, if you must know how it began.”

“It began,” she murmured, “in peace. That was what struck you most in me. I must have seemed to you at peace, then.”

“You did—you did. Weren’t you?”

“I must have been. But I’ve forgotten. It’s so long ago. There’s peace here, though. Why didn’t we choose this place instead of Scarby?”

“I wish we had. I say—are you never going to forget that?”

“I’ve forgiven it. I might forget it if I could only understand.”

“Understand *what*?”

“How you could be capable of caring for me—like that—and yet—”

“But the two things are so entirely different. It’s impossible to explain to you how different. Heaven forbid that you should understand the difference.”

“I understand enough to know—”

“You understand enough to know nothing. You must simply take my word for it. Besides, the one thing’s an old thing, over and done with.”

“Over and done with. But if the two things are so different, how can you be sure?”

“That sounds awfully clever of you, but I’m hanged if I know what you mean.”

“I mean, how can you tell that it—the old thing—never would come back?”

It *was* clever of her. He realised that he had to deal now with a more complete and complex creature than Anne had been.

“How could it?” he asked.

“If *she* came back—”

“Never. And if it did—”

“Ah, if it did—”

“It couldn’t in this case—my case—your case—”

“Her case—” she whispered.

“Her case? She hasn’t got one. She simply doesn’t exist. She might come back as much as she pleased, and still she wouldn’t exist. Is *that* what you’ve been afraid of all the time?”

“I never was really afraid till now.”

“What you’re afraid of couldn’t happen. You can put that out of your head for ever. If I could mention you in the same sentence as that woman you should know why I am so certain. As it is, I must ask you again to take my word for it.”

He paused.

“But, since you have raised the question—and it’s interesting, too—I knew a man once—not a ‘bad’ man—to whom that very thing did happen. And it didn’t mean that he’d left off caring for his wife. On the contrary, he was still insanely fond of her.”

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“What did it mean, then?”

“That she’d left off showing that she cared for him. And he cared more for her, that man, after having left her, than he did before. In its way it was a sort of test.”

“I pray heaven—” said Anne; but she was too greatly shocked by the anecdote to shape her prayer.

Majendie, feeling that the time, the place, and her mood were propitious for the exposition, went on.

“There’s another man I know. He was very fond of Edie. He’s fond of her still. He’ll come and sit for hours playing backgammon with her. And yet all his fondness for her hasn’t kept him entirely straight. But he’d have been as straight as anybody if he could have married her.”

“But what does all this prove?”

“It proves nothing,” he said almost passionately, “except that these two things, just because they’re different, are not so incompatible as you seem to think.”

“Did Edie care for that man?”

“I believe so.”

“Ah, don’t you see? There’s the difference. What made Edie a saint made him a sinner.”

“I doubt if Edie would look on it quite in that light. She thinks it was uncommonly hard on him.”

“Does she know?”

“Oh, there’s no end to the things that Edie knows.”

“And she loves him in spite of it?”

“Yes. I suppose there’s no end to that either.”

No end to her loving. That was the secret, then, of Edie’s peace.

Anne meditated upon that, and when she spoke again her voice rang on its vibrating, sub-passionate note.

“And you said that I gave you rest. You were different.”

He made as if he would draw nearer to her, and refrained. The kind heart of Nature was in league with his. Nature, having foreknowledge of her own hour, warned him that his hour was not yet.

And so he waited, while Nature, mindful of her purpose, began in Anne Majendie her holy, beneficent work. The soul of the place was charged with memories, with presciences, with prophecies. A thousand woodland influences, tender timidities, shy assurances, wooed her from her soul. They pleaded sweetly, persistently, till Anne's brooding face wore the flush of surrender to the mysteries of earth.

The spell was broken by a squirrel's scurrying flight in the boughs above them. Anne looked up, and laughed, and their moment passed them by.

CHAPTER X

"Are you tired?" he asked.

They had walked about the wood, made themselves hungry, and lunched like labourers at high noon.

"No, I'm only thirsty. Do you think there's a cottage anywhere where you could get me some water?"

"Yes, there's one somewhere about. I'll try and find it if you'll sit here and rest till I come back."

She waited. He came back, but without the water. His eyes sparkled with some mysterious, irrepressible delight.

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“Can’t you find it?”

“Rather. I say, do come and look. There’s such a pretty sight.”

She rose and went with him. Up a turning in the dell, about fifty yards from their tree, a long grassy way cut sheer through a sheet of wild hyacinths. It ran as if between two twin borders of blue mist, that hemmed it in and closed it by the illusion of their approach. On either side the blue mist spread, and drifted away through the inlets of the wood, and became a rarer and rarer atmosphere, torn by the tree-trunks and the fern. The path led to a small circular clearing, a shaft that sucked the daylight down. It was as if the sunshine were being poured in one stream from a flooded sky, and danced in the dark cup earth held for it. The trees grew close and tall round the clearing. Light dripped from their leaves and streamed down their stems, turning their grey to silver. The bottom of the cup was a level floor of grass that had soaked in light till it shone like emerald. A stone cottage faced the path; so small that a laburnum brushed its roof and a may-tree laid a crimson face against the grey gable of its side. The patch of garden in front was stuffed with wall-flowers and violets. The sun lay warm on them; their breath stirred in the cup, like the rich, sweet fragrance of the wine of day.

Majendie grasped Anne’s arm and led her forward.

In the middle of the green circle, under the streaming sun, cradled in warm grass, a girl baby sat laughing and fondling her naked feet. She laughed as she lay on her back and opened one folded, wrinkled foot to the sun; she laughed as she threw herself forward and beat her knees with the outspread palms of her hands; she laughed as she rocked her soft body to and fro from her rosy hips; then she stopped laughing suddenly, and began crooning to herself a delicious, unintelligible song.

“Look,” said Majendie, “that’s what I wanted to show you.”

“Oh—oh—oh—” said Anne, and looked, and stood stock-still.

The beatitude of that adorable little figure possessed the scene. Green earth and blue sky were so much shelter and illumination to its pure and solitary joy.

“Did you ever see anything so heart-rending?” said Majendie. “That anything could be so young!”

Anne shook her head, dumb with the fascination.

As they approached again, the little creature rolled on its waist, and crawled over the grass to her feet.

“The little lamb—” said she, and stooped, and lifted it.

It turned to her, cuddling. Through the thin muslin of her bodice she could feel the pressure of its tender palms.

Majendie stood close to her and tried gently to detach and possess himself of the delicate clinging fingers. But his eyes were upon Anne's eyes. They drew her; she looked up, her eyes flashed to the meeting-point; his widened in one long penetrating gaze.

A sudden pricking pain went through her, there where the pink and flaxen thing lay sun-warm and life-warm to her breast.

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At first she did not heed it. She stood hushed, attentive to the prescience that woke in her; surrendered to the secret, with desire that veiled itself to meet its unveiled destiny.

Then the veil fell.

The eyes that looked at her grew tender, and before their tenderness the veil, the veil of her desire that had hidden him from her, fell.

Her face burned, and she hid it against the child's face as it burrowed into the softness of her breast. When she would have parted the child from her, it clung.

She laughed. "Release me." And he undid the clinging arms, and took the child from her, and laid it again in the cradling grass.

"It's conceived a violent passion for you," said he.

"They always do," said she serenely.

The door of the cottage was open. The mother stood on the threshold, shading her eyes and wondering at them. She gave Anne water, hospitably, in an old china cup.

When Anne had drunk she handed the cup to her husband. He drank with his eyes fixed on her over the brim, and gave it to her again. He wondered whether she would drink from it after him (Anne was excessively fastidious). To his intense satisfaction, she drank, draining the last drop.

They went back together to their tree. On the way he stopped to gather wild hyacinths for her. He gathered slowly, in a grave and happy passion of preoccupation. Anne stood erect in the path and watched him, and laughed the girl's laugh that he longed to hear.

It was as if she saw him for the first time through Edith's eyes, with so tender an intelligence did she take in his attitude, the absurd, the infantile intentness of his stooping figure, the still more absurdly infantile emotion of his hands. It was the very same attitude which had melted Edith, that unhappy day when they had watched him as he walked disconsolate in the garden, and she, his wife, had hardened her heart against him. She remembered Edith's words to her not two hours ago: "If you could only see how unspeakably sacred the human part of us is, and how pathetic." Surely she saw.

The deep feeling and enchantment of the woods was upon her. He was sacred to her; and for pathos, it seemed to her that there was poured upon his stooping body all the pathos of all the living creatures of God.

She saw deeper. In the illumination that rested on him there, she saw the significance of that carelessness, that happiness of his which had once troubled her. It was simply

that his experience, his detestable experience, had had no power to harm his soul. Through it all he had preserved, or, by some miracle of God, recovered an incorruptible innocence. She said to herself: "Why should I not love him? His heart must be as pure as the heart of that little blessed child."

The warning voice of the wisdom she had learnt from him whispered: "And it rests with you to keep him so."

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He led her to her tree, where she seated herself regally as before. He poured his sheaves of hyacinths as tribute into her lap. As his hands touched hers her cold face flushed again and softened. He stretched himself beside her and love stirred in her heart, unforbidden, as in a happy dream. He watched the movements of her delicate fingers as they played with the tangled hyacinth bells. Her hands were wet with the thick streaming juice of the torn stalks; she stretched them out to him helplessly. He knelt before her, and spread his handkerchief on his knees, and took her hands and wiped them. She let them rest in his for a moment, and, with a low, panting cry, he bowed his head and covered them with kisses.

At his cry her lips parted. And as her soul had called to him across the spiritual ramparts, so her eyes said to him: "Come"; and he knew that with all her body and her soul she yearned to him and consented.

He held her tight by the wrists and drew her to him; and she laid her arms lightly on his neck and kissed him.

"I'm glad now," she whispered, "that Edith didn't tell me. She knew you. Oh, my dear, she knew."

And to herself she said proudly: "It rests with me."

BOOK II

CHAPTER XI

It was October, five months after Anne's birthday. She was not to know again the mood which determined her complete surrender. Supreme moods can never be recaptured or repeated. The passion that inspires them is unique, self-sacrificial, immortal only through fruition; doomed to pass and perish in its exaltation. She would know tenderness, but never just that tenderness; gladness, but never that gladness; peace, but never the peace that possessed her in the woods at Westleydale.

The new soul in her moved steadily, to a rhythm which lacked the diviner thrill of the impulse which had given it birth. It was but seldom that the moment revived in memory. If Anne had accounted to herself for that day, she would have said that they had taken the nine-fifty train to Westleydale, that they had had a nice luncheon, that the weather was exceptionally fine, and that well, yes, certainly, that day had been the beginning of their entirely satisfactory relations. Anne's mind had a tendency to lapse into the commonplace when not greatly stirred. Happily for her, she had a refuge from it in her communion with the Unseen.

Only at times was she conscious of a certain foiled expectancy. For the greater while it seemed to her that she had attained an indestructible spiritual content.

She conceived a profound affection for her home. The house in Prior Street became the centre of her earthward thoughts, and she seldom left it for very long. Her health remained magnificent; her nature being adapted to an undisturbed routine, appeased by the well-ordered, even passage of her days.

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She had made a household religion for herself, and would have suffered in departing from it. To be always down before her husband for eight-o'clock breakfast; to sit with Edith from twelve till luncheon time, and in the early afternoon; to spend her evenings with her husband, reading aloud or talking, or sitting silent when silence soothed him; these things had become more sacred and imperative than her attendance at St. Saviour's. The hours of even-song struck for her no more.

For, above all, she had made a point of always being at home in time for Majendie's return from his office. At five o'clock she was ready for him, beside her tea-table, irreproachably dressed. Her friends complained that they had lost sight of her. Regularly at a quarter to five she would forsake the drawing-rooms of Thurston Square. However absorbing Mrs. Eliott's conversation, towards the quarter, the tender abstraction of Anne's manner showed plainly that her spirit had surrendered to another charm. Mrs. Eliott, in letting her go, had the air of a person serenely sane, indulgent to a persistent and punctual obsession. Anne divided her friends into those who understood and those who didn't. Fanny Eliott would never understand. But little Mrs. Gardner, through the immortality of her bridal spirit, understood completely. And for Anne Mrs. Gardner's understanding of her amounted to an understanding of her husband. Anne's heart went out to Mrs. Gardner.

Not that she saw much of her, either. She had grown impatient of interests that lay outside her home. Once she had decided to give herself up to her husband, other people's claims appeared as an impertinence beside that perfection of possession.

She was less vividly aware of her own perfect possession of him. Majendie was hardly aware of it himself. His happiness was so profound that he had not yet measured it. He, too, had slipped into the same imperturbable routine. It was seldom that he kept her waiting past five o'clock. He hated the people who made business appointments with him for that hour. His old associates saw little of him, and his club knew him no more. He preferred Anne's society to that of any other person. They had no more fear of each other. He saw that she was beginning to forget.

In one thing only he was disappointed. The trembling woman who had held him in her arms at Westleydale had never shown herself to him again. She had been called, created, for an end beyond herself. The woman he had married again was pure from passion, and of an uncomfortable reluctance in the giving and taking of caresses. He forced himself to respect her reluctance. He had simply to accept this emotional parsimony as one of the many curious facts about Anne. He no longer went to Edith for an explanation of them, for the Anne he had known in Westleydale was too sacred to be spoken of. An immense reverence possessed him when he thought of her. As for the actual present Anne, loyalty was part of the large simplicity of his nature, and he could not criticise her. Remembering Westleydale, he told himself that her blanched susceptibility was tenderness at white heat. If she said little, he argued that (like himself) she felt the more. And at times she could say perfect things.

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“I wonder, Nancy,” he once said to her, “if you know how divinely sweet your voice is?”

“I shall begin to think it is, if you think so,” said she.

“And would you think yourself beautiful, if I thought so?”

“Very beautiful. At any rate, as beautiful as I want to be.”

He could not control the demonstration provoked by that admission, and she asked him if he were coming to church with her to-morrow.

His Nancy chose her moments strangely.

But not for worlds would he have admitted that she was deficient in a sense of humour. She had her small hilarities that passed for it. Keenness in that direction would have done violence to the repose and sweetness of her blessed presence. The peace of it remained with him during his hours of business.

Anne did not like his business. But, in spite of it, she was proud of him, of his appearance, his charm, his distinction, his entire superiority to even the aristocracy of Scale.

She no longer resented his indifference to her friends in Thurston Square, since it meant that he desired to have her to himself. Of his own friends he had seen little, and she nothing. If she had not pressed Fanny Eliott on him, he had spared her Mrs. Lawson Hannay and Mrs. Dick Ransome. She had been fortunate enough to find both these ladies out when she returned their calls. And Majendie had spoken of his most intimate friend, Charlie Gorst, as absent on a holiday in Norway.

It was, therefore, in a mood of more than usual concession that she proposed to return, now in October, the second advance made to her by Mrs. Hannay in July.

Majendie was relieved to think that he would no longer be compelled to perjure himself on Anne’s account. The Hannays had frequently reproached him with his wife’s unreadiness in response, and (as he had told her) he had exhausted all acceptable explanations of her conduct. He had “worked” her headaches “for all they were worth” with Hannay; for weeks he had kept Hannay’s wife from calling, by the fiction, discreetly presented, of a severe facial neuralgia; and his last shameless intimation, that Anne was “rather shy, you know,” had been received with a respectful incredulity that left him with nothing more to say.

Mrs. Hannay was not at home when Anne called, for Anne had deliberately avoided her “day.” But Mrs. Hannay was irrepressibly forgiving, and Anne found herself invited to dine at the Hannays’ with her husband early in the following week. It was hardly an

hour since she had left Mrs. Hannay's doorstep when the pressing, the almost alarmingly affectionate little note came hurrying after her.

"I'll go, dear, if you really want me to," said she.

"Well—I think, if you don't mind. The Hannays have been awfully good to me."

So they went.

"Don't snub the poor little woman too unmercifully," was Edith's parting charge.

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“I promise you I’ll not snub her at all,” said Anne.

“You can’t,” said Majendie. “She’s like a soft sofa cushion with lots of frills on. You can sit on her, as you sit on a sofa cushion, and she’s as plump, and soft, and accommodating as ever the next day.”

The Hannays lived in the Park.

Majendie talked a great deal on the way there. His supporting and attentive manner was not quite the stimulant he had meant it to be. Anne gathered that the ordeal would be trying; he was so eager to make it appear otherwise.

“Once you’re there, it won’t be bad, you know, at all. The Hannays are really all right. They’ll ask the very nicest people they know to meet you. They think you’re doing them a tremendous honour, you know, and they’ll rise to it. You’ll see how they’ll rise.”

Mrs. Hannay had every appearance of having risen to it. Anne’s entrance (she was impressive in her entrances) set the standard high; yet Mrs. Hannay rose. When agreeably excited Mrs. Hannay was accustomed to move from one end of her drawing-room to the other with the pleasing and impalpable velocity of all soft round bodies inspired by gaiety. So exuberant was the softness of the little lady and so voluminous her flying frills, that at these moments her descent upon her guests appeared positively winged like the descent of cherubim. To-night she advanced slowly from her hearth-rug with no more than the very slightest swaying and rolling of all her softness, the very faintest tremor of her downy wings. Mrs. Hannay’s face was the round face of innocence, the face of a cherub with blown cheeks and lips shaped for the trumpet.

“My dear Mrs. Majendie—at last.” She retained Mrs. Majendie’s hand for the moment of presenting her to her husband. By this gesture she appropriated Mrs. Majendie, taking her under her small cherubic wing. “Wallie, how d’you do?” Her left hand furtively appropriated Mrs. Majendie’s husband. Anne marked the familiarity with dismay. It was evident that at the Hannays’ Walter was in the warm lap of intimacy.

It was evident, too, that Mr. Hannay had married considerably beneath him. Anne owned that he had a certain dignity, and that there was something rather pleasing in his loose, clean-shaven face. The sharp slenderness of youth was now vanishing in a rosy corpulence, corpulence to which Mr. Hannay resigned himself without a struggle. But above it the delicate arch of his nose attested the original refinement of his type. His mouth was not without sweetness, Mr. Hannay being as indulgent to other people as he was to himself.

He received Anne with a benign air; he assured her of his delight in making her acquaintance; and he refrained from any allusions to the long delay of his delight.

Little Mrs. Hannay was rolling softly in another direction.

“Canon Wharton, let me present you to Mrs. Walter Majendie.”

She had risen to Canon Wharton. For she had said to her husband: “You must get the Canon. She can’t think us such a shocking bad lot if we have him.” Her face expressed triumph in the capture of Canon Wharton, triumph in the capture of Mrs. Walter Majendie, triumph in the introduction. Owing to the Hannays’ determination to rise to it, the dinner-party, in being rigidly select, was of necessity extremely small.

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“Miss Mildred Wharton—Sir Rigley Barker—Mr. Gorst. Now you all know each other.”

The last person introduced had lingered with a certain charming diffidence at Mrs. Majendie’s side. He was a man of about her husband’s age, or a little younger, fair and slender, with a restless, flushed face and brilliant eyes.

“I can’t tell you what a pleasure this is, Mrs. Majendie.”

He had an engaging voice and a still more engaging smile.

“You may have heard about me from your husband. I was awfully sorry to miss you when I called before I went to Norway. I only came back this morning, but I *made* Hannay invite me.”

Anne murmured some suitable politeness. She said afterwards that her instinct had warned her against Mr. Gorst, with his restlessness and brilliance; but, as a matter of fact, her instinct had done nothing of the sort, and his manners had prejudiced her in his favour. Fanny Eliott had told her that he belonged to a very old Lincolnshire family. There was a distinction about him. And he really had a particularly engaging smile.

So she received him amiably; so amiably that Majendie, who had been observing their encounter with an intent and rather anxious interest, appeared finally reassured. He joined them, releasing himself adroitly from Sir Rigley Barker.

“How’s Edith?” said Mr. Gorst.

His use of the name and something in his intonation made Anne attentive.

“She’s better,” said Majendie. “Come and see her soon.”

“Oh, rather. I’ll come round to-morrow. If,” he added, “Mrs. Majendie will permit me.”

“Mrs. Majendie,” said her husband, “will be delighted.”

Anne smiled assent. Her amiability extended even to Mrs. Hannay, who had risen to it, so far, well.

During dinner Anne gave her attention to her right-hand neighbour, Canon Wharton; and Mrs. Hannay, looking down from her end of the table, saw her selection justified. In rising to the Canon she had risen her highest; for the ex-member hardly counted; he was a fallen star. But Canon Wharton, the Vicar of All Souls, stood on an eminence, social and spiritual, in Scale. He had built himself a church in the new quarter of the town, and had filled it to overflowing by the power of his eloquence. Lawson Hannay, in a moment of unkind insight, had described the Canon as “a speculative builder”; but he lent him money for his building, and liked him none the less.

Out of the pulpit the Vicar of All Souls was all things to all men. In the pulpit he was nothing but the Vicar of All Souls. He stood there for a great light in Scale, “holding,” as he said, “the light, carrying the light, battling for light in the darkness of that capital of commerce, that stronghold of materialism, founded on money, built up in money, cemented with money!” He snarled out the word “money,” and flung it in the face of his fashionable congregation; he gnashed

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his teeth over it; he shook his fist at them; and they rose to his mood, delighting in little Tommy Wharton's pluck in "giving it them hot." He was always giving it them hot, warming himself at his own fire. And then little Tommy Wharton slipped out of his little surplice and his little cassock, and into the Hannays' house for whiskey and soda. He could drink peg for peg with Lawson Hannay, without turning a hair, while poor Lawson turned many hairs, till his little wife ran in and hid the whiskey and shook her handkerchief at the little Canon, and "shooed" him merrily away. And Lawson, big, good-natured Lawson, would lend him more "money" to build his church with.

So the Vicar of All Souls, who aspired to be all things to all men, was hand in glove with the Lawson Hannays. He had occasionally been known to provide for the tables of the poor, but he dearly loved to sit at the tables of the rich; and he justified his predilection by the highest example.

Anne, who knew the Canon by his spiritual reputation only, turned to him with interest. Her eye, keen to discern these differences, saw at once that he was a man of the people. He had the unfinished features, the stunted form of an artisan; his body sacrificed, his admirers said, to the energies of his mighty brain. His face was a heavy, powerful oval, bilious-coloured, scarred with deep lines, and cleft by the wide mouth of an orator, a mouth that had acquired the appearance of strength through the Canon's habit of bringing his lips together with a snap at the close of his periods. His eyes were a strange, opaque grey, but the clever Canon made them seem almost uncomfortably penetrating by simply knitting his eyebrows in a savage pent-house over them. They now looked forth at Anne as if the Canon knew very well that her soul had a secret, and that it would not long be hidden from him.

They talked about the Eliotts, for the Canon's catholicity bridged the gulf between Thurston Square and vociferous, high-living, fashionable Scale. He had lately succeeded (by the power of his eloquence) in winning over Mrs. Eliott from St. Saviour's to All Souls. He hoped also to win over Mrs. Eliott's distinguished friend. For the Canon was mortal. He had yielded to the unspiritual seduction of filling All Souls by emptying other men's churches. Lawson Hannay smiled on the parson's success, hoping (he said) to see his money back again.

Money or no money, he left him a clear field with Mrs. Majendie. Ladies, when they were pretty, appealed to Lawson as part of the appropriate decoration of a table; but, much as he loved their charming society, he loved his dinner more. He loved it with a certain pure extravagance, illuminated by thought and imagination. Mrs. Hannay was one with him in this affection. Her heart shared it; her fancy ministered to it, rising higher and higher in unwearying flights. It was a link between them; almost (so fine was the passion) an intellectual tie. But reticence was not in Hannay's nature; and his emotion affected Anne very unpleasantly. She missed the high lyric note in it. All

epicurean pleasures, even so delicate and fantastic a joy as Hannay's in his dinner, appeared gross to Anne.

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Majendie at the other end of the table caught sight of her detached, unhappy look, and became detached and unhappy himself, till Mrs. Hannay rallied him on his abstraction.

“If you *are* in love, my dear Wallie,” she whispered, “you needn’t show it so much. It’s barely decent.”

“Isn’t it? Anyhow, I hope it’s quite decently bare,” he answered, tempted by her folly. They were gay at Mrs. Hannay’s end of the table. But Anne, who watched her husband intently, looked in vain for that brilliance which had distinguished him the other night, when he dined in Thurston Square. These Hannays, she said to herself, made him dull.

Now, though Anne didn’t in the least want to talk to Mr. Hannay, Mr. Hannay displeased her by not wanting to talk more to her. Not that he talked very much to anybody. Now and then the Canon’s niece, Mildred Wharton, the pretty girl on his left, moved him to a high irrelevance, in those rare moments when she was not absorbed in Mr. Gorst. Pretty Mildred and Mr. Gorst were flirting unabashed behind the roses, and it struck Anne that the Canon kept an alarmed and watchful eye upon their intercourse.

To Anne the dinner was intolerably long. She tried to be patient with it, judging that its length was a measure of the height her hosts had risen to. There she did them an injustice; for in the matter of a menu the Hannays could not rise; for they lived habitually on a noble elevation.

At the other end of the table Mrs. Hannay called gaily on her guests to eat and drink. But, when the wine went round, Anne noticed that she whispered to the butler, and after that, the butler only made a feint of filling his master’s glass, and turned a politely deaf ear to his protests. And then her voice rose.

“Lawson, that pineapple ice is delicious. Gould, hand the pineapple ice to Mr. Hannay. I adore pineapple ice,” said Mrs. Hannay. “Wallie, you’re drinking nothing. Fill Mr. Majendie’s glass, Gould, fill it—fill it.” She was the immortal soul of hospitality, was Mrs. Hannay.

In the drawing-room Mrs. Hannay again took possession of Anne and led her to the sofa. She fairly enthroned her there; she hovered round her; she put cushions at her head, and more cushions under her feet; for Mrs. Hannay liked to be comfortable herself, and to see every one comfortable about her. “You come,” said she, “and sit down by me on this sofa, and let’s have a cosy talk. That’s it. Only you want another cushion. No?—Do—Won’t you really? Then it’s four for me,” said Mrs. Hannay, supporting herself in various postures of experimental comfort, “one for my back, two for my fat sides, and one for my head. Now I’m comfy. I adore cushions, don’t you? My husband says I’m a little down cushion myself, so I suppose that’s why.”

Anne, in her mood, had crushed many innocent vulgarities before now; but she owned that she could no more have snubbed Mrs. Hannay effectually than you could snub a little down cushion. It would be impossible, she thought, to make any impression at all on that yielding surface. Impossible to take any impression from her, to say where her gaiety ended and her vulgarity began.

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“Isn’t it funny?” the little lady went on, unconscious of Mrs. Majendie’s attitude. “My husband’s your husband’s oldest friend. So I think you and I ought to be friends too.”

Anne’s face intimated that she hardly considered the chain of reasoning unbreakable; but Mrs. Hannay continued to play cheerful elaborations on the theme of friendship, till her husband appeared with the other three men. He had his hand on Majendie’s shoulder, and Mrs. Hannay’s soft smile drew Mrs. Majendie’s attention to this manifestation of intimacy. And it dawned on Anne that Mrs. Hannay’s gaiety would not end here; though it was here, with the mixing of the company, that her vulgarity would begin.

“Did you ever see such a pair? I tell Lawson he’s fonder of Wallie than he is of me. I believe he’d go down on his knees and black his boots for nothing, if he asked him. I’d do it myself, only you mustn’t tell Lawson I said so.” She paused. “I think Lawson wants to come and have a little talk with you.”

Hannay approached heavily, and his wife gave up her place to him, cushions and all. He seated himself heavily. His eyes wandered heavily to the other side of the room, following Majendie. And as they rested on his friend there was a light in them that redeemed their heaviness.

He had come to Mrs. Majendie prepared for weighty utterance.

“That man,” said Hannay, “is the best man I know. You’ve married, dear lady, my dearest and most intimate friend. He’s a saint—a Bayard.” He flung the name at her defiantly, and with a gesture he emphasised the crescendo of his thought. “A *preux chevalier, sans peur*” said Mr. Hannay, “*et sans reproche*.”

Having delivered his soul, he sat, still heavily, in silence.

Anne repressed the rising of her indignation. To her it was as if he had been defending her husband against some accusation brought by his wife.

And so, indeed, he was. Poor Hannay had been conscious of her attitude—conscious under her pure and austere eyes, of his own shortcomings, and it struck him that Majendie needed some defence against her judgment of his taste in friendship.

When the door closed behind the Majendies, Mr. Gorst was left the last lingering guest.

“Poor Wallie,” said Mrs. Hannay.

“*Poor* Wallie,” said Mr. Hannay, and sighed.

“What do you think of her?” said the lady to Mr. Gorst.

“Oh, I think she’s magnificent.”

“Do you think he’ll be able to live up to it?”

“Why not?” said Mr. Gorst cheerfully.

“Well, it wasn’t very gay for him before he married, and I don’t imagine it’s going to be any gayer now.”

“*Now*” said Mr. Hannay, “I understand what’s meant by the solemnisation of holy matrimony. That woman would solemnise a farce at the Vaudeville, with Gwen Richards on.”

“She very nearly solemnised my dinner,” said Mrs. Hannay.

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“She doesn’t know,” said Mr. Hannay, “what a dinner is. She’s got no appetite herself, and she tried to take mine away from me. A regular dog-in-the-manger of a woman.”

“Oh, come, you know,” said Gorst. “She can’t be as bad as all that. Edith’s awfully fond of her.”

“And *that’s* good enough for you?” said Mrs. Hannay.

“Yes. That’s good enough for me. *I* like her,” said Gorst stoutly; and Mrs. Hannay hid in her pocket-handkerchief a face quivering with mirth.

But Gorst, as he departed, turned on the doorstep and repeated, “Honestly, I like her.”

“Well, honestly,” said Mr. Hannay, “I don’t.” And, lost in gloomy forebodings for his friend, he sought consolation in whiskey and soda.

Mrs. Hannay took a seat beside him.

“And what did you think of the dinner?” said she.

“It was a dead failure, Pussy.”

“You old stupid, I mean the dinner, not the dinner-party.”

Mrs. Hannay rubbed her soft, cherubic face against his sleeve, and as she did so she gently removed the whiskey from his field of vision. She was a woman of exquisite tact.

“Oh, the dinner, my plump Pussy-cat, was a dream—a happy dream.”

CHAPTER XII

“There are moments, I admit,” said Majendie, “when Hannay saddens me.”

Anne had drawn him into discussing at breakfast-time their host and hostess of the night before.

“Shall you have to see very much of them?” She had made up her mind that she would see very little, or nothing, of the Hannays.

“Well, I haven’t, lately, have I?” said he, and she owned that he had not.

“How you ever could—” she began, but he stopped her.

“Oh well, we needn’t go into that.”

It seemed to her that there was something dark and undesirable behind those words, something into which she could well conceive he would not wish to go. It never struck her that he merely wished to put an end to the discussion.

She brooded over it, and became dejected. The great tide of her trouble had long ago ebbed out of her sight. Now it was as if it had turned, somewhere on the edge of the invisible, and was creeping back again. She wished she had never seen or heard of the Hannays—detestable people.

She betrayed something of this feeling to Edith, who was impatient for an account of the evening. (It was thus that Edith entered vicariously into life.)

“Did you expect me to enjoy it?” she replied to the first eager question.

“No, I don’t know that I did. *I* should have enjoyed it very much indeed.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Was there anybody there that you disliked so much?”

“The Hannays were there. It was enough.”

“You liked Mr. Gorst?”

“Yes. He was different.”

“Poor Charlie. I’m glad you liked him.”

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“I don’t like him any better for meeting him there, my dear.”

“Don’t say that to Walter, Nancy.”

“I have said it. How Walter can care for those people is a mystery to me.”

“He ought to be ashamed of himself if he didn’t. Lawson Hannay has been a good friend to him.”

“Do you mean that he’s under any obligation to him?”

“Yes. Obligations, my dear, that none of us can ever repay.”

“It’s intolerable!” said Anne.

“Is it? Wait till you know what the obligations are. That man you dislike so much stood by Walter when your friends the Eliotts, my child, turned their virtuous backs on him—-when none of his own people, even, would lend him a helping hand. It was Lawson Hannay who saved him.”

“Saved him?”

“Saved him. Moved heaven and earth to get him out of that woman’s clutches.”

Anne shook her head, and put her hands over her eyes to dispel her vision of him. Edith laughed.

“You can’t see Mr. Hannay moving heaven?”

“No, really I can’t.”

“Well, *I* saw him. At least, if he didn’t move heaven, he moved earth. When nothing else could shake her hold, he bought her off.”

“Bought—her—off?”

“Yes, bought her—paid her money to go. And she went.”

“He owes him money, then?”

“Money, and a great many other things beside. You don’t like it?”

“I can’t bear it.”

“Of course you can’t. It hurts your pride. It hurt mine badly. But my pride has had to go down in the dust before Lawson Hannay.”

Anne raised her head as if she refused to lower her pride an inch to him. She was trying to put the whole episode behind her, as it had come before her. She had nothing whatever to do with it. Edith, of course, had to be grateful. *She* was not bound by the same obligation. But she was determined that they should be quit of the Hannays. She would make Walter pay back that money.

Meanwhile Edith's eyes filled with tears at the recollection. "Lawson Hannay may not have been a very good man himself—I believe at one time he wasn't. But he loved his friend, and he didn't want to see him going the same way."

"The same way? That means that, if it hadn't been for Mr. Hannay, he would never have met her."

"Mr. Hannay did his best to prevent his meeting her. He knew what she was, and Walter didn't. He took him off in his yacht for weeks at a time, to get him out of her way. When she followed him he brought him back. When she persecuted him—well, I've told you what he did."

Anne lifted her hand in supplication, and rose and went to the open window, as if, after that recital, she thirsted for fresh air. Edith smiled, in spite of herself, at her sister-in-law's repudiation of the subject.

"Poor Mr. Hannay," said she, "the worst you can say of him now is that he eats and drinks a little more than's good for him."

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“And that he’s married a wife who sets him the example,” said Anne, returning from the window-sill refreshed.

“She keeps him straight, dear.”

“Edith! I shall never understand you. You’re angelically good. But it’s horrible, the things you take for granted. ‘She keeps him straight!’”

“You think I take for granted a natural tendency to crookedness. I don’t—I don’t. What I take for granted is a natural tendency to straightness, when it gets its way. It doesn’t always get it, though, especially in a town like Scale.”

“I wish we were out of it.”

“So did I, dear, once; but I don’t now. We must make the best of it.”

“Has Walter paid any of that money back to Mr. Hannay?”

Edith looked up at her sister-in-law, startled by the hardness in her voice. She had meant to spare Anne’s pride the worst blow, but something in her question stirred the fire that slept in Edith.

“No,” she said, “he hasn’t. He was going to, but Mr. Hannay cancelled the debt, in order that he might marry—that he might marry you.”

Anne drew back as if Edith had struck her bodily. She, then, had been bought, too, with Mr. Hannay’s money. Without it, Walter could not have afforded to marry her; for she was poor.

She sat silent, until her self-appointed hour with Edith ended; and then, still silently, she left the room.

And Edith turned her cheek on her cushions and sobbed weakly to herself. “Walter would never forgive me if he knew I’d told her that. It was awful of me. But Anne would have provoked the patience of a saint.”

Anne owned that Edith was a saint, and that the provocation was extreme.

In the afternoon, Edith, at her own request, was forgiven, and Anne, by way of proving and demonstrating her forgiveness, announced her amiable intention of calling on Mrs. Hannay on her “day.”

The day fell within a week of the dinner. It was agreed that Majendie was to meet his wife at the Hannays, and to take her home. There was a good mile between Prior Street and the Park; and Anne was a leisurely walker; so it happened that she was late,

and that Majendie had arrived a few minutes before her. She did not notice him there all at once. Mrs. Hannay was a sociable little lady; the radius of her circle was rapidly increasing, and her “day” drew crowds. The lamps were not yet lit, and as Anne entered the room, it was dim to her after the daylight of the open air. She had counted on an inconspicuous entrance, and was astonished to find that the announcement of her name caused a curious disturbance and division in the assembly. A finer ear than Anne’s might have detected an ominous sound, something like the rustling of leaves before a storm. But Anne’s self-possession rendered her at times insensible to changes in the social atmosphere. In any case the slight commotion was no more than she had come prepared for in a whole roomful of ill-bred persons.

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“Pussy,” said a lady who stood near Mrs. Hannay. Mrs. Hannay had her back to the doorway. The lady’s voice rang on a low note of warning, and she brought her mouth close to Mrs. Hannay’s ear.

The hostess started, turned, and came at once towards Mrs. Majendie, rolling deftly between the persons who obstructed her perturbed and precipitate way. The perfect round of her cheeks had dropped a little; it was the face of a poor cherub in vexation and dismay.

“Dear Mrs. Majendie,”—her voice, once so triumphant, had dropped too, almost to a husky whisper,—“how very good of you.”

She led her to a sofa, the seat of intimacy, set back a little from the central throne. (Majendie could be seen fairly immersed in the turmoil, struggling desperately through it, with a plate in his hand.)

Mrs. Hannay was followed by her husband, by the other lady, and by Gorst. She introduced the other lady as Mrs. Ransome, and they seated themselves, one on each side of Anne. The two men drew up in front of the sofa, and began to talk very fast, in loud tones and with an unnatural gaiety. The women, too, closed in upon her somewhat with their knees; they were both a little confused, both more than a little frightened, and the manner of both was mysteriously apologetic.

Anne, with her deep, insulating sense of superiority, had no doubt as to the secret of the situation. She felt herself suitably protected, guarded from contact, screened from view, distinguished very properly from persons to whom it was manifestly impossible, even for Mrs. Hannay, to introduce her. She was very sorry for poor Mrs. Hannay, she tried to make it less difficult for her, by ignoring the elements of confusion and fright. But poor Mrs. Hannay kept on being frightened; she refused to part with her panic and be natural. So terrified was she, that she hardly seemed to take in what Mrs. Majendie was saying.

Anne, however, conversed with the utmost amiability, while her thoughts ran thus: “Dear lady, why this agitation? You cannot help being vulgar. As for your friends, what do you think I expected?”

The other lady, Mrs. Dick Ransome, could not be held accountable for anything but her own private vulgarity; and it struck Anne as odd that Mrs. Dick Ransome, who was not responsible for Mrs. Hannay, seemed, if anything, more terrified than Mrs. Hannay, who was responsible for her.

Mrs. Dick Ransome did not, at the first blush, inspire confidence. She was a woman with a great deal of blonde hair, and a fresh-coloured, conspicuously unspiritual face;

coarse-grained, thick-necked, ruminantly animal, but kind; kind to Mrs. Hannay, kind to Anne, kinder even than Mrs. Hannay who was responsible for all the kindness.

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Charlie Gorst hurried away to get Mrs. Majendie some tea, and Lawson's Hannay's large form moved into the gap thus made, blocking Anne's view of the room. He stood looking down upon her with an extraordinary smile of mingled apology and protection. Gorst's return was followed by Majendie, wandering uneasily with his plate. He smiled at Anne, too; and his smile conveyed the same suggestion of desperation and distress. It was as if he said to her: "I'm sorry for letting you in for such a crew, but how can I help it?" She smiled back at him brightly, as much as to say; "Don't mind. It amuses me. I'm taking it all in."

He wandered away, and Anne felt that the women exchanged looks across her shoulders.

"I think I'll be going, Pussy dear," said Mrs. Ransome, nodding some secret intelligence. She elbowed her way gently across the room, and came back again, shaking her head hopelessly and helplessly. "She says I can go if I like, but she'll stay," said Mrs. Ransome under her breath.

"Oh-h-h," said Mrs. Hannay under hers.

"What am I to do?" said Mrs. Ransome, flurried into audible speech.

"Stay—stay. It's much better." Mrs. Hannay plucked her husband by the sleeve, and he lowered an attentive ear. Mrs. Ransome covered the confidence with a high-pitched babble.

"You find Scale a very sociable place, don't you, Mrs. Majendie?" said Mrs. Ransome.

"Go," said Mrs. Hannay, "and take her off into the conservatory, or somewhere."

"More sociable in the winter-time, of course." (Mrs. Ransome, in her agitation, almost screamed it.)

"I can't take her off anywhere, if she won't go," said Mr. Hannay in a thick but penetrating whisper. He collapsed into a chair in front of Anne, where he seemed to spread himself, sheltering her with his supine, benignant gaze.

Mrs. Hannay was beside herself, beholding his invertebrate behaviour. "Don't sit down, stupid. Do something—anything."

He went to do it, but evidently, whatever it was, he had no heart for it.

A maid came in and lit a lamp. There was a simultaneous movement of departure among the nearer guests.

"Oh, heavens," said Mrs. Hannay, "don't tell me they're all going to go!"

Anne, serenely contemplating these provincial manners, was bewildered by the horror in Mrs. Hannay's tone. There was no accounting for provincial manners, or she would have supposed that Mrs. Hannay, mortified by the presence of her most undesirable acquaintance, would have rejoiced to see them go.

Their dispersal cleared a space down the middle of the room to the bay-window, and disclosed a figure, a woman's figure, which occupied, majestically, a settee. The settee, set far back in the bay of the window, was in a direct line with Anne's sofa. That part of the room was still unlighted, and the figure, sitting a little sideways, remained obscure.

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A servant went round lighting lamps.

The first lamp to be lit stood beside Anne's sofa. The effect of the illumination was to make the lady in the window turn on her settee. Across the space between, her eyes, obscure lights in a face still undefined, swept with the turning of her body, and fastened upon Anne's face, bared for the first time to their view. They remained fixed, as if Anne's face had a peculiar fascination for them.

"Who is the lady sitting in the window?" asked Anne.

"It's my sister." Mrs. Ransome blinked as she answered, and her blood ran scarlet to the roots of her blonde hair.

A cherub, discovering a horrible taste in his trumpet, would have looked like Mrs. Hannay.

"Do let me give you some more tea, Mrs. Majendie?" said she, while Mrs. Ransome signalled to her husband. "Here, Dick, come and make yourself useful."

Mr. Ransome, a little stout man with a bald head, a pale puffy face, a twinkling eye and a severe moustache, was obedient to her summons.

"Let me see," said she, "have you met Mrs. Majendie?"

"I have not had that pleasure," said Mr. Ransome, and bowed profoundly. He waited assiduously on Mrs. Majendie. The Ransomes might have been responsible for the whole occasion, they so rallied around and supported her.

Hannay and Gorst, Ransome and another man were gathered together in a communion with the lady of the settee. There was a general lull, and her voice, a voice of sweet but somewhat penetrating quality, was heard.

"Don't talk to me," said she, "about women being jealous of each other. Do you suppose I mind another woman being handsome? I don't care how handsome she is, so long as she isn't handsome in my style. Of course, I don't say I could stand it if she was the very moral of me."

"I say, supposing Toodles met the very moral of herself?"

"Could Toodles have a moral? I doubt it."

"I want to know what she'd do with it."

"Yes, by Jove, what *would* you do?"

“Do? I should do my worst. I should make her sit somewhere with a good strong light on her.”

“Hold hard there,” said her brother-in-law (the man who called her Toodles), “Lady Cayley doesn’t want that lamp lit just yet”

In the silence of the rest, the name seemed to leap straight across the room to Anne.

The two women beside her heard it, and looked at each other and at her. Anne sickened under their eyes, struck suddenly by the meaning of their protection and their sympathy. She longed to rise, to sweep them aside and go. But she was kept motionless by some superior instinct of disdain.

Outwardly she appeared in no way concerned by this revelation of the presence of Lady Cayley. She might never have heard of her, for any knowledge that her face betrayed.

Majendie, not far from the settee in the window, was handing cucumber sandwiches to an old lady. And Lady Cayley had taken the matches from the maid and was lighting the lamp herself, and was saying, “I’m not afraid of the light yet, I assure you. There—-look at me.”

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Everybody looked at her, and she looked at everybody, as she sat in the lamplight, and let it pour over her. She seemed to be offering herself lavishly, recklessly, triumphantly, to the light.

Lady Cayley was a large woman of thirty-seven, who had been a slender and a pretty woman at thirty. She would have been pretty still if she had been a shade less large. She had tiny upward-tilted features in her large white face; but the lines of her jaw and her little round prominent chin were already vanishing in a soft enveloping fold, flushed through its whiteness with a bloom that was a sleeping colour. Her forehead and eyelids were exceedingly white, so white that against them her black eyebrows and blue eyes were vivid and emphatic. Her head carried high a Gainsborough hat of white felt, with black plumes and a black line round its brim. Under its upward and its downward curve her light brown hair was tossed up, and curled, and waved, and puffed into an appearance of great exuberance and volume. Exuberance and volume were the note of this lady, a note subdued a little by the art of her dressmaker. A gown of smooth black cloth clung to her vast form without a wrinkle, sombre, severe, giving her a kind of slenderness in stoutness. She wore a white lace vest and any quantity of lace ruffles, any number of little black velvet lines and points set with paste buttons. And every ruffle, every line, every point and button was an accent, emphasising some beauty of her person.

And Anne looked at Lady Cayley once and no more.

It was enough. The trouble that she had put from her came again upon her, no longer in its merciful immensity, faceless and formless (for she had shrunk from picturing Lady Cayley), but boldly, abominably defined. She grasped it now, the atrocious tragedy, made visible and terrible for her in the body of Lady Cayley, the phantom of her own horror made flesh.

A terrible comprehension fell on her of that body, of its power, its secret, and its sin.

For the first moment, when she looked from it to her husband, her mind refused to associate him with that degradation. Reverence held her, and a sudden memory of her passion in the woods at Westleydale. Mercifully, they veiled her intelligence, and made it impossible for her to realise that he should have sunk so low.

Then she remembered. She had known that it was, that it would be so, that, sooner or later, the woman would come back. Her brain conceived a curious two-fold intuition of the fact.

It was all foreappointed and foreknown, that she should come to this hateful house, and should sit there, and that her eyes should be opened and that she should see.

And the woman's voice rose again. "Do I see cucumber sandwiches?" said Lady Cayley. "Dick, go and tell Mr. Majendie that if he doesn't want all those sandwiches himself, I'll have one."

Ransome gave the message, and Majendie turned to the lady of the settee, presenting the plate with the finest air of abstraction. Her large arm hovered in selection long enough for her to shoot out one low quick speech.

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“I only wanted to see if you’d cut me, Wallie. Topsy bet me two to ten you wouldn’t.”

“Why on earth should I?”

“Oh, on earth I know you wouldn’t. But didn’t I hear just now you’d married and gone to heaven?”

“Gone to——?”

“Sh—sh—sh—I’m sure she doesn’t let you use those naughty words. You needn’t say you’re not in heaven, for I can see you are. You didn’t expect to meet me there, did you?”

“I certainly didn’t expect to meet you here.”

“How can you be so rude? Dick, take that tiresome plate from him, he doesn’t know what to do with it. Yes. I’ll have another before it goes away for ever.”

Majendie had given up the plate before he realised that he was parting with the link that bound him to the outer world. He turned instantly to follow it there; but she saw his intention and frustrated it.

“Butter? Ugh! You might hold my cup for me while I take my gloves off.”

She peeled two skin-tight gloves from her plump hands, so carefully that the operation gave her all the time she wanted.

“I believe you’re still afraid of me?” said she.

He was doing his best to look over her head; but she smiled a smile so flashing that it drew his eyes to her involuntarily; he felt it as positively illuminating their end of the room.

“You’re not? Well, prove it.”

“Is it possible to prove anything to you?”

Again he was about to break from her impatiently. Nothing, he had told himself, would induce him to stay and talk to her. But he saw Anne’s face across the room; it was pale and hard, fixed in an expression of implacable repulsion. And she was not looking at Lady Cayley, but at him.

“You can prove it,” said Lady Cayley, “to me and everybody else—they’re all looking at you—by sitting down quietly for one moment, and trying to look a little less as if we compromised each other.”

He stayed, to prove his innocence before Anne; and he stood, to prove his independence before Lady Cayley. He had longed to get away from the woman, to stand by his wife's side—to take her out of the room, out of the house, into the open air. And now the perversity that was in him kept him where he hated to be.

"That's right. Thank heaven one of us has got some presence of mind."

"Presence of *mind*?"

"Yes. You don't seem to think of *me*," she added softly.

"Why should I?" he replied with a brutality that surprised himself.

She looked at him with blue eyes softly suffused, and the curve of a red mouth sweet and tremulous. "Why?" her whisper echoed him. "Because I'm a woman."

Her eyelids dropped ever so little, but their dark lashes (following the upward trend of her features) curled to such a degree that the veil was ineffectual. He saw a large slit of the wonderful, indomitable blue.

"I'm a woman, and you're a man, you see; and the world's on your side, my friend, not on mine."

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She said it sweetly. If she had been bitter she would have (as she expressed it) “choked him off”; but Lady Cayley knew better than to be bitter now, at thirty-seven. She had learnt that her power was in her sweetness.

His face softened (from the other end of the room Anne saw it soften), and Lady Cayley pursued with soundless feet her fugitive advantage.

“Poor Wallie, you needn’t look so frightened. I’m quite safe now, or soon will be. Didn’t I tell you I was going there too? I’m going to be married.”

“I’m delighted to hear it,” he said stiffly.

“To a perfect angel,” said she.

“Really? If you’re going up to heaven, he, I take it, is not coming down to earth.”

“Nothing is settled,” said Lady Cayley, with such monstrous gravity that his stiffness melted, and he laughed outright.

Anne heard him.

“Who, if I may ask, is this celestial, this transcendent being?”

She shook her head. “I can’t tell you, yet.”

“What, isn’t even that settled?”

Majendie was so genuinely diverted at that moment that he would not have left her if he could.

She took the sting of it, and flushed, dumbly. Remorse seized him, and he sought to soothe her.

“My dear lady, I had a vision of heavenly hosts standing round you in such quantities that it might be difficult to make a selection, you know.”

She rallied finely under the reviving compliment. “My dear, it’s a case of quality, not quantity—” Her past was so present to them both that he almost understood her to say, “this time.”

“I see,” he said. “The wings. But nothing’s settled?”

“It’s settled right enough,” said she, by which he understood her to imply that the “angel’s” case was. She had settled him. Majendie could see her doing it. His

imagination played lightly with the preposterous idea. He conceived her in the act of bringing down her bird of heaven, actually “winging him.”

“But it’s not given out yet.”

“I see.”

“You’re the first I’ve told, except Topsy. Topsy knows it. So you mustn’t tell anybody else.”

“I never tell anybody anything,” said he.

He gathered that it was not quite so settled as she wished him to suppose, and that Lady Cayley anticipated some possible dashing of the cup of matrimony from her lips.

“So I’m not to have panics, in the night, and palpitations, every time I think of it?”

“Certainly not, if it rests with me.”

“I wanted you to know. But it’s so precious, I’m afraid of losing it. Nothing,” said Lady Cayley, “can make up for the loss of a good man’s love. Except,” she added, “a good woman’s.”

“Quite so,” he assented coldly, with horror at his perception of her drift.

His coldness riled her.

“Who,” said she with emphasis, “is the lady who keeps making those awful eyes at us over Pussy’s top-knot?”

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“That lady,” said Majendie, “as it happens, is my wife.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before? That’s what comes, you see, of not introducing people. I’ll tell you one thing, Wallie. She’s awfully handsome. But you always had good taste. Br-r-r, there’s a draught cutting my head off. You might shut that window, there’s a dear.”

He shut it.

“And put my cup down.”

He put it down.

Anne saw him. She had seen everything.

“And help me on with my cape.”

He lifted the heavy sable thing with two fingers, and helped her gingerly. A scent, horrid and thick, and profuse with memories, was shaken from her as she turned her shoulder. He hoped she was going. But she was not going; not she. Her body swayed towards him sinuously from hips obstinately immobile, weighted, literally, with her unshakable determination to sit on.

She rewarded him with a smile which seemed to him, if anything, more atrociously luminous than the last. “I must keep you up to the mark,” said she, as she turned with it. “Your wife’s looking at you, and I feel responsible for your good behaviour. Don’t keep her waiting. Can’t you see she wants to go?”

“And I want to go, too,” said he savagely. And he went.

And as she watched Mrs. Walter Majendie’s departure, Lady Cayley smiled softly to herself; tasting the first delicious flavour of success.

She had made Mrs. Walter Majendie betray herself; she had made her furious; she had made her go.

She had sat Mrs. Walter Majendie out.

If the town of Scale, the mayor and the aldermen, had risen and given her an ovation, she could not have celebrated more triumphally her return.

CHAPTER XIII

Anne and her husband walked home in silence across the Park, grateful for its darkness. Majendie could well imagine that she would not want to talk. He made allowance for her repulsion; he respected it and her silence as its sign. She had every right to her resentment. He had let her in for the Hannays, who had let her in for the inconceivable encounter. On the day of her divorce Sarah Cayley had removed herself from Scale, and he had shrunk from providing for the supreme embarrassment of her return. He had looked on her as definitely, consummately departed. She had disappeared, down dingy vistas, into unimaginable obscurities. He pictured her as sunk, in Continental abysses, beyond all possibility of resurgence. And she had emerged (from abominations) smiling that indestructible smile. The incident had been unpleasant, so unpleasant that he didn't want to talk about it. All the same, he would have done violence to his feelings and apologised for it then and there, but that he really judged it better to let well alone. It was well, he thought, that Anne was so silent. She might have had a great deal to say, and it was kind of her not to say it, to let him off so easily.

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Anne's interpretation of Majendie's silence was not so favourable. After being exposed to the pain and insult of Lady Cayley's presence she had expected an immediate apology, and she inferred from its omission an unpardonable complicity. Any compliance with the public toleration of that person would have been inexcusable, and he had been more than compliant, more than tolerant; he had been solicitous, attentive, deferent. And deference to such a woman was insolence to his wife. Anne was struck dumb by the shameless levity of the proceedings. The two had behaved as if nothing had happened, or rather (she bitterly corrected herself) as if everything had happened, and might happen any day again (she inferred as much from his silence). It would—it would happen. *Her* intentions were, to Anne's mind, unmistakable; that was plainly what she had come back for. As to his intentions, Anne was not yet clear. She had not made up her mind that they were bad; but she shuddered as she said to herself that he was "weak." He had come at that woman's call; he had hung round her; he had waited on her at her bidding; at her bidding he had sat down beside her; he had listened to her, attracted, charmed, delighted; he had talked to her in the low voice Anne knew. How could she tell what had or had not passed between them there, what intimacies, what recognitions, what resurrections of the corrupt, ill-buried past? He had been "weak—-weak—weak." Henceforth she must reckon with his weakness, and reckoning with it, she must keep him from that woman by any method, and at any cost! It was something that he had the grace to be ashamed of himself (another inference from his silence). No wonder, after that communion, if he was ashamed to look at his wife or speak to her.

He went straight to Edith when they reached home, and Anne went upstairs to her bedroom.

She had a great desire to be alone. She wanted to pray, as she had prayed in that room at Scarby on the morning of her discovery. Not that she felt in the least as she had felt then. She was more profoundly wounded—wounded beyond passion and beyond tears, calm and self-contained in her vision of the inevitable, the fore-ordained reality. She had to get rid of her vision; it was impossible to live with it, impossible to live through another hour like the last. Her desire to pray was a terrible, urgent longing that consumed her, impatient of every minute that kept her from her prayer. She controlled it, moving slowly as she took off her outdoor clothes and put them decorously away; feeling that the force of her prayer gathered and mounted behind these minute obstructions and delays.

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She knelt down by her bed. She had been used to pray there with her eyes fixed upon the crucifix which he had given her. It hung low, almost between the pillows of their bed. Now she closed her eyes to shut it from her sight. It was then that she realised what had been done to her. With the closing of her eyes she opened some back room in her brain, a hot room, now dark, and now charged with a red light, vaporous and vivid, that ran in furious pulses, as it were the currents of her blood made visible. The room thus opened was tenanted by the revolting image of Lady Cayley. Now it loomed steadily in the dark, now it leapt quiveringly into the red, vaporous light. She could not see her husband, but she had a sickening sense that he was there, looming, and that his image, too, would leap into sight at some signal of her unwilling thought. She knew that that back room would remain, built up indestructibly in the fabric of her mind. It would be set apart for ever for the phantom of her husband and her husband's mistress. By a tremendous effort of will she shut the door on it. There it must be for ever, but wherever she looked, she would not look there; much less allow herself to dwell in the unclean place. It was not to think of that woman, his mistress, that she had gone down on her knees. To think of her was contamination. After all, the woman had no power over her inner life. She was not forced to think of her. She had her sanctuary and her way of escape.

But before she could get there she had to struggle against the fatigue which came of her effort not to think. Once she would have resigned herself to this physical lassitude, mistaking it for the sinking of the soul in the beatific self-surrender. But Anne's sufferings had brought her a little further on her path. She had come to recognise that supine state as a great danger to the spiritual life. It was not by lassitude, but by concentration that the intense communion was attained. She lifted her bowed head as a sign of her exaltation.

And as she lifted it, she caught, as it were, the approach of triumphal music. Words gathered, as on wings, from the clean-swept heavenly spaces—they went by her like the passing of an immense processional: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in...." It came on, that heavenly invasion, and all her earthly barriers went down before it. And it was as if something strong in her, something solitary and pure, had cloven its way through the mesh of the throbbing nerves, through the beating currents of the blood, through the hot red lights of the brain, and had escaped into the peaceful blank. She remained there a moment, in the place of bliss, the divine place of the self-surrendered soul, where mortal emptiness draws down immortality.

She said to herself, "I have my refuge; no one can take it from me. Nothing matters so long as I can get there."

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She rose from her knees more calm and self-contained than ever, barely conscious of her wound.

So calm and so self-contained was she at dinner that Majendie had an agreeable rebound; he supposed that she had recovered from the abominable encounter, and had put Lady Cayley out of her head like a sensible woman. Edith had received his account of that incident with a gravity that had made him profoundly uncomfortable; and his relief was in proportion to his embarrassment. Unfortunately it gave him the appearance of complacency; and complacency in the circumstances was more than Anne could bear. Coming straight from her exaltation and communion, she was crushed by the profound, invisible difference that separated them, the perpetual loneliness of her unwedded, unsubjugated soul. They lived a whole earth and a whole heaven apart. He was untouched by the fires that burnt and purified her. The tragic crises that destroyed, the spiritual moments that built her up again, passed by him unperceived. If she were to tell him how she had attained her present serenity of mind, by what vision, by what effort, by what sundering of body and soul, he would not understand.

And that was not the worst. She had learnt not to look for that spiritual understanding in him. It mattered little that her unique suffering and her unique consolation should remain alike ignored. The terrible thing was that he should have come out of his own ordeal so smiling and so unconcerned; that he could have sinned as he had sinned, and that he could meet, after seven years, in his wife's presence, the partner of his sin (whose face was a revelation of its grossness)—meet her, and not be shaken by the shame of it. It showed how lightly he held it, how low his standard was. She recalled, shuddering, the woman's face. Nothing in the visions she had so shrunk from could compare with the violent reality. For one moment of repulsion she saw him no less gross. She wondered, would she have to reckon with that, henceforth, too?

She looked up, and met across the table the engaging innocence that she recognised as the habitual expression of his face. He had no idea of what dreadful things she was thinking of him. She put her thoughts from her, admitting that she had never had to reckon with that, yet. But it was terrible to her that, while he forced her to such thinking, he could sit there so unconscious, and so unashamed. He sat there, bright-eyed, smiling, a little flushed, playing with a light topic in a manner that suggested a conscience singularly at ease. He went on sitting there, absolutely unembarrassed, eating dessert. The eating of dinner was bad enough, it showed complacency. But dessert argued callousness. She had wondered how he could have any appetite at all. Her dinner had almost choked her.

And she sat waiting for him to finish, hardly looking at him, detached, saint-like, and still.

At last her silence struck him as a little ominous. He had distinct misgivings as they turned into the study for coffee and his cigarette. Anne sat up in her chair, refusing the support and luxury of cushions, leaning a little forward with a brooding air.

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“Well, Nancy,” said he, “are you going to read to me?”

(Better to read than talk.)

“Not now,” said she. “I want to talk to you.”

He saw that it was not to be avoided. “Won’t you let me have my coffee and a cigarette first?”

She waited, silent, with a strained air of patience more uncomfortable than words.

“Well,” said he, lighting a second cigarette, and settling in the position that would best enable him to bear it, “out with it, and get it over.”

“I want to know,” said she, “what you are going to do.”

“To do?” He was genuinely bewildered.

“Yes, to do.”

“But about what?”

“About that woman.”

He was so charmed with the angelic absurdity of the question that he paused while he took it in, smiling.

“I can’t see,” he said presently, “that I’m called upon to take action. Why should I?”

She drew herself up proudly.

“For my sake.”

He was instantly grave. “For your sake, dear, I would do a great deal. But”—he smiled again—“what action should I take?”

“Is it for me to say?”

“Well, I hardly know. I should be glad, at any rate, if you’d make a suggestion. I can’t, for instance, get up and turn the lady out of her own sister’s house. Do you want me to do that? Would you like me to—to take her away in a cab?”

There was a long silence, so awful that he forced himself to speak. “I am extremely sorry. It was, of course, outrageous that you should have had to sit in the same room with her for five minutes. But what could I do?”

“You could have taken *me* away.”

“I did, as soon as I got the chance.”

“Not before you had”—she paused for her phrase—“condoned her appearance.”

“Condoned her appearance? How?”

“By your whole manner to her.”

“Would you have had me uncivil?”

“There are degrees,” said she, “between incivility and marked attention.”

He coloured. “Marked attention! There was nothing marked about it. What could I do? Would you, I say, have had me turn my back on the unfortunate woman? That would have been marked attention, if you like.”

“I don’t know what I would have had you do. One has no rules beforehand for inconceivable situations. It was inconceivable that I should have met her as I did, in your friend’s house. Inconceivable that I should meet such people anywhere. What I do ask is that you will not let me be exposed in that way again.”

“That I certainly will not. The Ransomes did their best to get her out of the room to-day. They won’t annoy you. I can’t conceive why they called—except that they have always been rather fond of me. You can’t hold people accountable for all the doings of all their relations, can you?”

“In this case I should say you could—perfectly well.”

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“Well, I don’t, as it happens. But you needn’t have anything to do with them; not, at least, while she’s living in their house.”

“It was in the Hannays’ house I met her. But I’m not thinking of myself.”

“I’m thinking of you, and of nothing else.”

“You needn’t,” said she, cold to his warmth. “I can take care of myself. It’s you I’m thinking of.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because I’m your wife and have a right to. It’s out of the question that I should call on Mrs. Hannay or receive her calls. I must also beg of you to give up going there, and to the Ransomes, and to every place where you will be brought into contact with Lady Cayley.”

He stared at her in amazement. “My dear girl, you don’t expect me to cut the Ransomes because she isn’t brute enough to turn her sister out of doors?”

“I expect you to give up going to them, and to the Hannays, as long as Lady Cayley is in Scale. Promise me.”

“I can’t promise you anything of the sort. Heaven knows how long she’s going to stay.”

“I ought not to have to explain that by countenancing her you insult me. You should see it for yourself.”

“I can’t see it. In the first place, with all due regard to you, I don’t insult you by countenancing her, as you call it. In the second place, I don’t countenance her by going into other people’s houses. If I went into her house, you might complain. She hasn’t got a house, poor lady.”

She ignored his pity. “In spite of your regard for me, then, you will continue to meet her?”

“I shan’t if I can help it. But if I must, I must. I can’t be rude to people.”

“You can be firm.”

He laughed. “What have I got to be firm about?”

“Not meeting her.”

“What if I do meet her? I sincerely hope I shan’t; but what if I do?”

Her mouth trembled; her eyes filled with tears. He sprang up and leaned over her, resting his arms on the back of her chair, bringing his face close to hers and smiling into her eyes.

“No—no—no!” She drew back her head and shrank away from him. He put out his hand and turned her face to him, gazing into her eyes, as if for the first time he saw and could fathom the sorrow and the fear in them.

“What if I do?” he repeated.

She tried to push his hand from her, but she could not.

“You stupid child,” he said, “do you mean to say that you’re still afraid of that?”

“It’s you who have made me—”

“My sweetheart—”

“No, no. Don’t touch me.”

“What do you mean?” he asked gravely, still leaning over and looking down at her.

“I mean—I mean—I can’t bear it!” she cried, gasping for breath under the oppression of his nearness.

He realised her repugnance, and removed himself.

“Do you mean,” he said, “because of her?”

“Yes,” she said, “because of her.”

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He laughed softly. “Dear child—she doesn’t exist. She doesn’t exist.” He swept her out of existence with a gesture of his hand. “Not for me at any rate.”

The emphasis was lost upon her. “It’s all nonsense to talk in that way. If she doesn’t exist for you, you shouldn’t have gone near her, you shouldn’t have sat talking—to her.”

“What do you suppose we were talking about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I saw and heard enough.”

“Look here, Anne. You wanted me to be rude to her, didn’t you? I *was* rude. I was brutal. She had to remind me that she was a woman. By heaven, I’d forgotten it. If you’re always to be going back on that—”

“I’m not going back. She has come back.”

“It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t exist. What difference does she make?”

She rose for better delivery of what she had to say.

“She makes the whole difference. It’s not that I’m afraid of her. I don’t think I am. I believe that you love me.”

“Ah—if you believe that—” He came nearer.

“I do believe it. It’s to me that it makes the difference. I must be honest with you. It’s not that I’m afraid. It is—I think—that I’m disgusted.”

He lowered his eyes and moved from her uneasily.

“I was horrified enough when I first knew of it, as you know. You know, too, that I forgave you, and that I forgot. That was because I didn’t realise it. I didn’t know what it was. I couldn’t before I had seen her. Now I have seen her, and I know.”

“What do you know?” he said coldly.

“The awfulness of it.”

“Do you! Do you!”

“Yes—and if you had realised it yourself—But you don’t, and your not realising it is what shocks me most.”

“I don’t realise it?” His smile, this time, was grim. “I should think I was in a better position for realising it than you.”

“You don’t realise the shame, the sin of it”

“Oh, don’t I?” He turned to her, “Look here, whatever I’ve done, it’s all over. I’ve taken my punishment, and repented in sackcloth and ashes. But you can’t go on for ever repenting. It wears you out. It seems to me that, after all this time, I might be allowed to leave off the sackcloth and brush the ashes out of my hair. I want to forget it if I can. But you are never—never—going to forget it. And you are going to make me remember it every day of my life. Is that it?”

“It is not.” She could not see herself thus hard and implacable. She had vowed that there was no duty that she would omit; and it was her duty to forgive; if possible, to forget. “I am going to try to forget it, as I have forgotten it before. But it will be very hard, and you must be patient with me. You must not remind me of it more than you can help.”

“When have I—?”

She was silent.

“When?” he insisted.

She shook her head and turned away. A sudden impulse roused him, and he sprang after her. He grasped her wrist as she laid her hand on the door to open it. He drew her to him. “When?” he repeated. “How? Tell me.”

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She paused, gazing at him. He would have kissed her, hoping thus to make his peace with her; but she broke from him.

“Ah,” she cried, “you are reminding me of it now.”

He opened the door, dumb with amazement, and turned from her as she went through.

CHAPTER XIV

It was a fine day, early in November, and Anne was walking alone along one of the broad flat avenues that lead from Scale into the country beyond. Made restless by her trouble, she had acquired this pedestrian habit lately, and Majendie encouraged her in it, regarding it less as a symptom than as a cure. She had flagged a little in the autumn, and he was afraid that the strain of her devotion to Edith was beginning to tell upon her health. On Saturdays and Sundays they generally walked together, and he did his best to make his companionship desirable. Anne, given now to much self-questioning as to their relations, owned, in an access of justice, that she enjoyed these expeditions. Whatever else she had found her husband, she had never yet found him dull. But it did not occur to her, any more than it occurred to Majendie, to consider whether she herself were brilliant.

She made a point of never refusing him her society. She had persuaded herself that she went with him for his own good. If he wanted to take long walks in the country, it was her duty as his wife to accompany him. She was sustained perpetually by her consciousness of doing her duty as his wife; and she had persuaded herself also that she found her peace in it. She kept his hours for him as punctually as ever; she aimed more than ever at perfection in her household ways. He should never be able to say that there was one thing in which she had failed him.

No; she knew that neither he nor Edith, if they tried, could put their finger on any point, and say: There, or there, she had gone wrong. Not in her understanding of him. She told herself that she understood him completely now, to her own great unhappiness. The unhappiness was the price she paid for her understanding.

She was absorbed in these reflections as she turned (in order to be home by five o’clock), and walked towards the town. She was awakened from them by the trampling of hoofs and the cheerful tootling of a horn. A four-in-hand approached and passed her; not so furiously but that she had time to recognise Lady Cayley on the box-seat, Mr. Gorst beside her, driving, and Mr. Ransome and Mr. Hannay behind amongst a perfect horticultural show in millinery.

Anne had no acquaintance with the manners and customs of the Scale and Beesly Four-in-hand Club, and her intuition stopped short of recognising Miss Gwen Richards,

of the Vaudeville, and the others. All the same her private arraignment of these ladies refused them whatever benefit they were entitled to from any doubt. Not that Anne wasted thought on them. In spite of her condemnation, they barely counted; they were mere attendants, accessories in the vision of sin presented by Lady Cayley.

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Nothing could have been more conspicuous than her appearance, more unabashed than the proclamation of her gay approach. Mounted high, heralded by the tootling horn, her hair blown, her cheeks bright with speed, her head and throat wrapped in a rosy veil that flung two broad streamers to the wind (as it were the banners of the red dawn flying and fluttering over her), she passed, the supreme figure in the pageant of triumphal vice.

Her face was turned to Gorst's face, his to hers. He looked more than ever brilliant, charming and charmed, laughing aloud with his companion. Hannay and Ransome raised their hats to Mrs. Majendie as they passed. Gorst was too much absorbed in Lady Cayley.

Anne shivered, chilled and sick with the resurgence of her old disgust. These were her husband's chosen associates and comrades; they stood by one another; they were all bound up together in one degrading intimacy. His dear friend Mr. Gorst was the dear friend of Lady Cayley. He knew what she was, and thought nothing of it. Mr. Ransome, her brother-in-law, knew, and thought nothing of it. As for Mr. Hannay, Walter's other dear friend, you only had to look at the women he was with to see how much Mr. Hannay thought. There could have been nothing very profound in his supposed repudiation of Lady Cayley. If it was true that he had once paid her money to go, he was doing his best to welcome her, now she had come back. But it was Gorst, with his vivid delight in Lady Cayley, who amazed her most. Anne had identified him with the man of whom Walter had once told her, the man who was "fond of Edith," the man of whom Walter admitted that he was not "entirely straight." And this man was always calling on Edith.

She was resolved that, if she could prevent it, he should call no more. It should not be said that she allowed her house to be open to such people. But it required some presence of mind to state her determination. Before she could speak with any authority she would have to find out all that could be known about Mr. Gorst. She would ask Fanny Eliott, who had seemed to know, and to know more than she had cared to say.

Instead of going straight home, she turned aside into Thurston Square; and had the good luck to find Fanny Eliott at home.

Fanny Eliott was rejoiced to see her. She looked at her anxiously, and observed that she was thin. She spoke of her call as a "coming back"; the impression conveyed by Anne's manner was so strikingly that of return after the pursuit of an illusion.

Anne smiled wearily, as if it had been a long step from Prior Street to Thurston Square.

"I thought," said Mrs. Eliott, "I was never going to see you again."

"You might have known," said Anne.

“Oh yes, I might have known. And you’re not going to run away at five o’clock?”

“No. I can stay a little—if you’re free.”

Mrs. Eliott interpreted the condition as a request for privacy, and rang the bell to ensure it. She knew something was coming; and it came.

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“Fanny, I want you to tell me what you know of Mr. Gorst.”

Mrs. Eliott looked exceedingly embarrassed. She avoided gossip as inconsistent with the intellectual life. And unpleasant gossip was peculiarly distasteful to her. Therefore she hesitated. “My dear, I don’t know much—”

“Don’t put me off like that. You know something. You must tell me.”

Mrs. Eliott reflected that Anne had no more love of scandalous histories than she had; therefore, if she asked for knowledge, it must be because her need was pressing.

“My dear, I only know that Johnson won’t have him in the house.”

She spoke as if this were nothing, a mere idiosyncrasy of Johnson’s.

“Why not?” said Anne. “He has very nice manners.”

“I dare say, but Johnson doesn’t approve of him.” (Another eccentricity of Johnson’s.)

“And why doesn’t he?”

“Well, you know, Mr. Gorst has a very unpleasant reputation. At least he goes about with most objectionable people.”

“You mean he’s the same sort of person as Mr. Hannay?”

“I should say he was, if anything, worse.”

“You mean he’s a bad man?”

“Well—”

“So bad that you won’t have him in the house?”

“Well, dear, you know we are particular.” (A singularity that she shared with Johnson.)

“So am I,” said Anne.

“And this,” she said to herself, “is the man whom Edie’s fond of, Walter’s dearest friend. And my friends won’t have him in their house.”

“Charming, I believe, and delightful,” said Mrs. Eliott, “but perhaps a little dangerous on that account. And one has to draw the line. I want to know about you, dear. You’re well, though you’re so thin?”

“Oh, very well.”

“And happy?” (She ventured on it.)

“Could I be well if I weren’t happy? How’s Mrs. Gardner?”

The thought of happiness called up a vision of the perpetually radiant bride.

“Oh, Mrs. Gardner, she’s as happy as the day is long. Much too happy, she says, to go about paying calls.”

“*I* haven’t called much, have I?” said Anne, hoping that her friend would draw the suggested inference.

“No, you haven’t. *You* ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Why I any more than Mrs. Gardner? But I am.”

Mrs. Eliott perceived her blunder. “Well, I forgive you, as long as you’re happy.”

Anne kissed her more tenderly than usual as they said good-bye, so tenderly that Mrs. Eliott wondered “Is she?”

Majendie was late that afternoon, and Anne had an hour alone with Edith. She had made up her mind to speak seriously to her sister-in-law on the subject of Mr. Gorst, and she chose this admirable opportunity.

“Edith,” said she with the abruptness of extreme embarrassment, “did you know that Lady Cayley had come back?”

“Come back?”

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“She’s here, living in Scale.”

There was a pause before Edith answered. Anne judged from the quiet of her manner that this was not the first time that she had heard of the return.

“Well, dear, after all, if she is, what does it matter? She must live somewhere.”

“I should have thought that for her own sake it was a pity to have chosen a town where she was so well known.”

“Oh well, that’s her own affair. I suppose she argues that most people here know the worst; and that’s always a comfort.”

“Oh, for all they appear to care—” Her face became tragic, and she lost her unnatural control. “I can’t understand it. I never saw such people. She’s received as if nothing had happened.”

“By her own people. It’s decent of them not to cast her off.”

“Oh, as for decency, they don’t seem to have a shred of it amongst them. And the Hannays are not her own people. I thought I should be safe in going there after what you told me. And it was there I met her.”

“I know. They were most distressed about it.”

“And yet they received her, too, as if nothing had happened.”

“Because nothing can happen now. They got rid of her when she was dangerous. She isn’t dangerous any more. On the contrary, I believe her great idea now is to be respectable. I suppose they’re trying to give her a lift up. You must admit it’s nice of them.”

“You think them nice?”

“I think *that’s* nice of them. It’s the sort of thing they do. They’re kind people, if they’re not the most spiritual I have met.”

“You may call it kindness, I call it shocking indifference. They’re worse than the Ransomes. I don’t believe the Ransomes know what’s decent. The Hannays know, but they don’t care. They’re all dreadful people; and their sympathy with each other is the most dreadful thing about them. They hold together and stand up for each other, and are ‘kind’ to each other, because they all like the same low, vulgar, detestable things. That’s why Mr. Hannay married Mrs. Hannay, and Mr. Ransome married Lady Cayley’s sister. They’re all admirably suited to each other, but not, my dear Edie, to you or me.”

“They’re certainly not your sort, I admit.”

“Nor yours either.”

“No, nor mine either,” said Edith, smiling. “Poor Anne, I’m sorry we’ve let you in for them.”

“I’m not thinking only of myself. The terrible thing is that you should be let in, too.”

“Oh, me—how can they harm me?”

“They have harmed you.”

“How?”

“By keeping other people away.”

“What people?”

“The nice people you should have known. You were entitled to the very best. The Eliotts and the Gardners—those are the people who should have been your friends, not the Hannays and the Ransomes; and not, believe me, darling, Mr. Gorst.”

For a moment Edith unveiled the tragic suffering in her eyes. It passed, and left her gaze grave and lucid and serene.

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“What do you know of Mr. Gorst?”

“Enough, dear, to see that he isn’t fit for you to know.”

“Poor Charlie, that’s what he’s always saying himself. I’ve known him too long, you see, not to know him now. Years and years, my dear, before I knew you.”

“It was through Mrs. Eliott that I knew you, remember.”

“Because you were determined to know me. It was through you that I knew Mrs. Eliott. Before that, she never made the smallest attempt to know me better or to show me any kindness. Why should she?”

“Well, my dear, if you kept her at arm’s length—if you let her see, for instance, that you preferred Mr. Gorst’s society to hers—”

“Do you think I let her see it?”

“No, I don’t. And it wouldn’t enter her head. But, considering that she can’t receive Mr. Gorst into her own house—”

“Why should she?”

“Edie—if she cannot, how can you?”

Edith closed her eyes. “I’ll tell you some day, dear, but not now.”

Anne did not press her. She had not the courage to discuss Mr. Gorst with her, nor the heart to tell her that he was to be received into her house no more. She saw Edith growing tender over his very name; she felt that there would be tears and entreaties, and she was determined that no entreaties and no tears should move her to a base surrender. Her pause was meant to banish the idea of Mr. Gorst from Edith’s mind, but it only served to fix it more securely there.

“Edith,” she said presently, “I will keep my promise.”

“Which promise?” Edith was mystified. Her mind unwillingly renounced the idea of Mr. Gorst, and the promise could not possibly refer to him.

“The promise I made to you about Walter.”

“My dear one, I never thought you would break it.”

“I shall never break it. I’ve accepted Walter once for all, and in spite of everything. But I will not accept these people you say I’ve been let in for. I will not know them. And I shall have to tell him so.”

“Why should you tell him anything? He doesn’t want you to take them to your bosom. He sees how impossible they are.”

“Ah—if he sees that.”

“Believe me” (Edith said it wearily), “he sees everything.”

“If he does,” thought Anne, “it will be easier to convince him.”

CHAPTER XV

The task was so far unpleasant to her that she was anxious to secure the first opportunity and get it over. Her moment would come with the two hours after dinner in the study.

It did not come that evening; for Majendie telegraphed that he had been detained in town, and would dine at the Club. He did not come home till Anne (who sat up till midnight waiting for that opportunity) had gone tired to bed.

Her determination gathered strength with the delay, and when her moment came with the next evening, it came gloriously. Majendie gave himself over into her hands by bringing Gorst, of all people, back with him to dine.

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The brilliant prodigal approached her with a little embarrassed youthful air of humility and charm; the air almost of taking her into his confidence over something unfortunate and absurd. He had evidently counted on the ten minutes before dinner when he would be left alone with her. He selected a chair opposite to her, leaning forward in it at ease, his nervousness visible only in the flushed hands clasped loosely on his knees, his eyes turned upon his hostess with a look of almost infantile candour. It was as if he mutely implored her to forget yesterday's encounter, and on no account to mention in what compromising company he had been seen. His engaging smile seemed to take for granted that she was a lady of pity and understanding, who would never have the heart to give a poor prodigal away. His eyes intimated that Mrs. Majendie knew what it amounted to, that awful prodigality of his.

But Mrs. Majendie had no illusions concerning sinners with engaging smiles and beautiful manners. And with every tick of the clock he deepened the impression of his insolence and levity. His very charm and the flush and brilliance that were part of it went to swell the prodigal's account. The instinct that had wakened in her knew them, the lights and colours, the heralding banners and vivid signs, all the paraphernalia of triumphant sin. She turned upon her guest the cold eyes of a condign destiny.

By the time dinner was served it had dawned on Gorst that he was looking in Mrs. Majendie for something that was not there. He might even have had some inkling of her resolution; he sat at his friend's table so consciously on sufferance, with an oppressed, extinguished air, eating his dinner as if it choked him, like the last sad meal in a beloved house.

Majendie, too, felt himself drawn in and folded in the gloom cast by his wife's protesting presence. The shadow of it wrapped them even after Anne had left the dining-room, as though her indignant spirit had remained behind to preserve her protest. Gorst had changed his oppression for a nervous restlessness intolerable to Majendie.

"My dear fellow," he said, "what is the matter with you?"

"How should I know?" said Gorst with a spurt of ill-temper. "I'm not a nerve specialist."

Majendie looked at him attentively. "I say, *you* mustn't go in for nerves, you know; you can't afford it."

"My dear Walter, I can't afford anything, if it comes to that." He paused with an obscure air of injury and foreboding. "Not even, it seems, the most innocent amusements. At the rate," he added, "I have to pay for them." Again he brooded, while Majendie wondered at him, in brotherly anxiety. "I suppose," Gorst said suddenly, "I can go up and see Edith, can't I?"

He spoke as if he doubted, whether, in the wreck of his world, with all his “innocent amusements,” that supreme consolation would be still open to him.

“Of course you can,” said Majendie. “It’s the best thing you can do. I told her you were coming.”

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“Thanks,” said Gorst, checking the alacrity with which he rose to go to Edith.

Oh yes, he knew it was the best thing he could do.

Edith’s voice called gladly to him as he tapped at her door. He entered noiselessly, wearing the wondering and expectant look with which a new worshipper enters a holy place. Perpetual backslidings kept poor Gorst’s worship perpetually new.

Colour came slowly back into Edith’s face and a tender light into her eyes, as if from the springing of some deep untroubled well of life. She seemed more than ever a creature of imperial vitality, bound by some cruel enchantment to her couch. She held out her hands to him; and he raised them to his lips and kissed her fingers lightly.

“It’s weeks since I’ve seen you,” said she.

“Months, isn’t it?” said he.

“Weeks, three weeks, by the calendar.”

“I say—tell me—I *am* to come and see you, just the same?”

“Just the same? Why, what’s different?”

“Oh, I don’t know. But it seems to me, when a man’s married, it’s bound to make a difference.”

Edith’s colour mounted; she made an effort to control the trembling of her mouth, the soft woman’s mouth where all that was bodily in her love still lingered. But the sweetness deepened in her eyes, which were the dwelling-place of the immortal, immaterial power. They met Gorst’s eyes steadily, laying on his restlessness their peace.

“Are you going to be married, Charlie?” said she, and smiled bravely.

He laughed. “Oh, Lord, no; not I.”

“Who is, then?”

“Walter, of course. I mean he is married, don’t you know.”

“Yes, and is there any difference in him to you?”

“In him? Oh, rather not.”

“In whom, then?”

“Well—I don’t think, Edie, that Mrs. Walter—I like her—” he stuck to it—“I like her, you know, she’s charming, but—I don’t think she particularly cares for *me*.”

“How do you know that?”

“How do I know anything? By the way she looks at me.”

“Oh, the way Anne looks at people—”

“Well, you know, it’s something tremendous, something terrible. Unutterable things, you know. She knocks the Inquisition and the day of judgment all to pieces. They’re simply not in it. It’s awfully hard lines on me, you see, because I like her.”

“I’m glad you like her.”

“Oh, I only like her because she likes you, I think.”

“And I like her. Please remember that.”

“I do remember it. I say, Edie, tell me, is she awfully devoted and all that?”

“To Walter? Yes, very devoted.”

“That’s all right, then. I don’t think I mind so much now. As long as I can come and see you just the same.”

“Of course you’ll come and see me, just the same.”

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He pondered for a long time over that. Seeing Edith was the best thing he could do. To-night it seemed the only good thing left for him to do. He lived in a state of alternate excitement and fatigue, forever craving his innocent amusements, and forever tired of them. None of them were worth while. Seeing Edith was the only thing that was worth while. He refused to contemplate with any calmness a life in which it would be impossible for him to see her. If the poor prodigal had not chosen the most elevated situation for the building of his house of life, he was always making desperate efforts to leave the insalubrious spot, and return to the high and windswept mansions of his youth. To be with Edith was to nourish the illusion of return. Return itself seemed possible, when goodness, in the person of Edith, looked at him with such tender and alluring eyes. In spirit he prostrated himself before it, while he cursed the damnable cruelty that had prevented him from marrying her. Through that act of adoration he was enabled to live through his alien and separated days. It kept him, as he phrased it, "going," which meant that, wherever his rebellious feet might carry him, he continued to breathe, through it, the diviner air.

And Edith had lain for ten years on her back, and every year the hours had gone more lightly, through the hope of seeing him. She had outlived her time of torment and rebellion. There was a sense in which her life, in spite of its frustration, was complete. The love through which her womanhood struggled for victory in defeat had fulfilled itself by gradual growth into something like maternal passion. There was no selfishness in her attitude to him and his devotion. By accepting it she took his best and offered it to God for him. With fragile, dedicated hands she nursed and sheltered the undying votive flame. She seemed a saint who had foregone heaven and remained on earth to help him. Her womanhood, wrapped from him in veil upon veil of her mysterious suffering, had never removed itself from him. She held him by all that was indomitable in her own nature, and in spite of his lapses, he remained her lover.

She was aware of these lapses and grieved over them and forgave them, laying them, as she had laid her brother's sin, to the account of her unhappy spine. In Edith's tender fancy her spine had become responsible for all the shortcomings of these beloved persons. If Walter could have married Anne seven years ago there would have been no dreadful Lady Cayley; and if she could have married poor Charlie she would not have had to think of him as "poor Charlie" now. It had been hard on him.

That was precisely what poor Charlie was thinking. And if that sister-in-law was to come between them, too, it would be harder still. But Edith insisted that she would make no difference.

"In fact," said she, "you can come more than ever. For if Walter's absorbed in Anne, and Anne's absorbed in Walter—"

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He took it up gaily. “Then I may be absorbed in you? So, after all, it turns out to my advantage.”

“Yes. You can console me. You can console me now, this minute, if you’ll play to me.”

He was always lamenting that he could do nothing for her. Playing to her was the one thing he could do, and he did it well.

He rose joyously and went to the piano, removing the dust from the keys with his handkerchief. “How will you have it? Sentimental and soporific? Or loud and strong?”

“Oh, loud and strong, please. Very strong and very loud.”

“Right you are. You shall have it hot and strong, and loud enough to wake the dead.”

That was his rendering of Chopin’s “Grande Polonaise.” He let himself loose in it, with a rush, a vehemence, a diabolic brilliance and clamour. The quiet room shook with the sounds he wrenched out of the little humble piano in the corner. And as Edith lay and listened, her spirit, too, triumphed, and was free; it rode gloriously on the storm of sound. It was, she said, laughing, quite enough to wake the dead. This was the miracle that he alone could accomplish for her.

And downstairs in the study, Anne heard his music and started, as the dead may start in their sleep. It seemed to her, that Polonaise of Chopin, the most immoral music, the music of defiance and revolt. It flung abroad the prodigal’s prodigality, his insolent and iniquitous joy. That was what he, a bad man, made of an innocent thing.

Majendie’s face lit up, responsive to the delight and challenge of the opening chord. “He’s all right,” said he, “as long as he can play.”

He listened, glancing now and then at Anne with a smile of pride in his friend’s performance. It was as if he were asking her to own that there must be some good in a fellow who could play like that.

Anne was considering in what words she would intimate to him that Mr. Gorst’s music was never to be heard again in that house. Some instinct told her that she was courting danger, but the approval of her conscience urged her on. She waited till the Polonaise was over before she spoke.

“You say,” said she, “he’s all right as long as he can play like that. To me, it’s the most convincing proof that he’s all wrong.”

“How do you make that out?”

“I don’t want to go into it,” said Anne. “I don’t approve of Mr. Gorst; but I should think better of him if he had only better taste.”

“You’re the first person who ever accused Gorst of bad taste.”

“Do you call it good taste to live as he does, as I know he does, and you know he does, and yet to come here, and sit with Edie, and behave as if he’d never done anything to be ashamed of? It would be infinitely better taste if he kept away.”

“Not at all. There are a great many very nice things about Gorst, and his caring to come here is one of the nicest. He has been faithful to Edith for ten years. That sort of thing isn’t so common that one can afford to despise it.”

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“Faithful to her? Poor darling, does she think he is?”

“She doesn’t think. She knows.”

“Preserve me from such faithfulness.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I do know. And you know that I know.” In proof of her contention she offered him the incident of the four-in-hand.

Majendie made a movement of impatience. “Oh, that’s nothing,” he said. “He doesn’t like her. He likes driving, and she likes a front seat at any show (I can’t see her taking a back one); and if she insisted on climbing up beside him, he couldn’t very well knock her off, you know. You don’t seem to realise how difficult it is to knock a woman off any seat she takes a fancy to sit on. You simply can’t do it.”

Anne was silent. She felt weak and helpless before his imperturbable levity.

He smoked placidly. “No,” he said presently. “Gorst mayn’t be a saint, but I will acquit him of an unholy passion for poor Sarah.”

Anne fired. “He may be a very bad man for all that.”

“There again, you show that you don’t know what you’re talking about. He is not a ‘very bad man’. You’ve no discrimination in these things. You simply lump us all together as a bad lot. And so we may be, compared with the angels and the saints. But there are degrees. If Gorst isn’t as good as—as Edie, it doesn’t necessarily follow that he’s bad.”

“Please—I would rather not argue the point. But I am not going to have anything to do with Mr. Gorst.”

“Of course not. You disapprove of him. There’s nothing more to be said.”

He spoke placably as if he made allowance for her attitude while he preserved his own.

“There is a great deal more to be said, dear. And I may as well say it now. I disapprove of him so strongly that I cannot have him received in this house if I am to remain in it.”

Astonishment held him dumb.

“You have no right to expect me to,” said she.

“To expect you to remain, or what?”

“To receive a man of Mr. Gorst’s character.”

“My dear girl, what right have you to expect me to turn him out?”

“My right as your wife.”

“My wife has a right to ask me a great many things, but not that.”

“I ought not to have to ask you. You should have thought of it yourself. You should have had more care for my reputation.”

At this he laughed, greatly to his own annoyance and to hers.

“Your reputation? Your reputation, I assure you, is in no danger from poor Gorst.”

“Is it not? My friends—the Eliotts—will not receive him.”

“There’s no reason why they should.”

“Is there any reason why I should? Do you want me to be less fastidious than they are? You forget that I was brought up with very fastidious people. My father wouldn’t have allowed me to speak to a man like Mr. Gorst. Do you want me to accept a lower standard that his, or my mother’s?”

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“Have you considered what my standard would look like if I turned my best friend out of the house—a man I’ve known all my life—just because my wife doesn’t happen to approve of him? I know nothing about your Eliotts; but if Edie can stand him, I should think you might.”

“I,” said Anne coldly, “am not in love with him.”

He frowned, and a dull flush of anger coloured the frown. “I must say, your standard is a remarkable one if it permits you to say things like that.”

“I would not have said it but for what you told me yourself.”

“What did I tell you?”

“That Edith cared for him.”

He remembered.

“If I did tell you that, it was because I thought you cared for Edie.”

“I do care for her.”

“You’ve rather a strange way of showing it. I wonder if you realise how much she did care? What it must have meant to her when she got ill? What it meant to him? Have you the remotest conception of the infernal hardship of it?”

“I know it was hard.”

“Forgive me; you don’t know, or you wouldn’t be so hard on both of them.”

“It isn’t I who am hard.”

“Isn’t it? When you’re just proposing to stop Gorst’s coming here?”

“It’s not I that’s stopping him. It’s his own conduct. He is hard on himself, and he is hard on her. There’s nobody else to blame.”

“Do you mean to say you think I’m actually going to tell him not to come any more?”

“My dear, it’s the least you can do for me after—”

“After what?”

“After everything.”

“After letting you in for marrying me, you mean. And as I suppose poor Edie was to blame for that, it’s the least *she* can do for you to give him up. Is that it? Seeing him is about the only pleasure that’s left to her, but that doesn’t come into it, does it?”

She was silent.

“Well, and what am I to think of you for all this?”

“I cannot *help* what you think of me,” said she with the stress of despair.

“Well, I don’t think anything, as it happens. But, if you were capable of understanding in the least what you’re trying to do, I should think you a hard, obstinate, cruel woman. What I’m chiefly struck with is your extreme simplicity. I suppose I mustn’t be surprised at your wanting to turn Gorst out; but how you could imagine for one moment that I would do it—No, that’s beyond me.”

“I can only say I shall not receive him. If he comes into the house, I shall go out of it.”

“Well—” said Majendie judicially, as if she had certainly hit upon a wise solution.

“If he dines here I must dine at the Eliotts’.”

“Well—and you’ll like that, won’t you? And I shall like having Gorst, and so will Edie, and Gorst will like seeing her, and everybody will be pleased.”

Overhead Mr. Gorst burst into a dance measure, so hilarious that it seemed the very cry of his delight.

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“As long as Edie goes on seeing him, he’ll think it’s all right.”

Overhead Mr. Gorst’s gay tune proclaimed that indeed he thought so. He broke off suddenly, and began another and a better one, till the spirit of levity ran riot in immortal sounds.

“So it’s all right. She’s a good woman. It’s the only hold we’ve got on him.”

“If all good women were to reason that way—”

“If all good women were to reason your way, what do you think would happen?”

“There would be more good men in the world.”

“Would there? There would be more good men ruined by bad women. Because, don’t you see, there’d be no others left for them to speak to.”

“If you’re thinking of his good—”

“Have you thought of hers?”

“Yes. Supposing he ends by marrying somebody else, what will she do then?—poor Edie!”

“If the somebody else is a good woman, poor Edie will fold her dear little hands, and offer up a dear little prayer of thankfulness to heaven.”

Upstairs the music ceased. The prodigal’s footsteps were heard crossing the room and coming to a halt by Edith’s couch.

Majendie rose, placid and benignant.

“I think,” said he, “it’s time for you to go to bed.”

CHAPTER XVI

Majendie could never be angry with any woman for more than five minutes. And this time he understood his wife better than she knew. He had seen, as Edith had said, “everything.”

But Anne was convinced that he never would see. She said to herself, “He thinks me hard, and obstinate, and cruel.”

She crept into bed in misery that suggested a defeated thing. The outward eye would never have perceived that the pale woman quivering under the eider-down was inspired

with an indomitable purpose, the salvation of a weak man from his weakness. To be sure, she had been worsted in her encounter by something that conveyed the illusion of superior moral force. But that there was any strength in her husband that could be described as moral Anne would not have admitted for a moment. She believed herself to be crushed, grossly, by the superior weight of moral deadness that he carried.

It was, it always had been, his placidity that caused her most despair. But whereas, at the time of their first rupture, it had made him utterly impenetrable, she now took it simply as one more sign of his inability to understand her. She argued that he would never have remained so calm if he had realised the sincerity of her determination to repudiate Mr. Gorst. Of course she didn't expect him to appreciate the force and the fine quality of her feeling. Still, he might at least have known that, if she had found it hard to pardon her own husband his lapses in the past, she would not be likely to accept a recent and notorious evildoer.

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She tried to forget that in this she herself had been wounded as a woman and a wife. It was the offence to heaven that she minded, rather than her own mere human hurt. Still, he had asked her to share his house and the sad burden of it (her thought touched gently on the sadness and the burden); and it was the least he could do to keep it undefiled by such presences. He ought to have known what was due to the woman he had married. If he did not, she said to herself sorrowfully, he must learn.

She never doubted that he would learn completely when he was once persuaded that she had meant what she had said; when he saw that he was driving her out of the house by inviting Mr. Gorst into it. To her the question was of supreme importance. Whatever happiness was now left to them must stand or fall by the expulsion of the prodigal.

If she had examined herself, Anne would have found that she hardly knew which she really wished for more: that Majendie would at once surrender to her view and leave off inviting Gorst, or that he would invite him at once, and thus give her an occasion for her protest. That Majendie was peaceable and disinclined to fight she gathered from the fact that he had not invited him at once.

At last, one morning, he looked up quietly from his breakfast, and remarked that he had invited Gorst (he laid a slightly irritating stress upon the name) to dinner on Friday.

The day was Tuesday.

“And is he coming?” said Anne.

“He is,” said Majendie.

When Friday came, Anne remarked at breakfast that she was going to dine with Mrs. Eliott.

“I thought you would,” said Majendie.

She had hoped that he would think she wouldn’t.

They dined at seven o’clock in Thurston Square, and at half-past seven in Prior Street, so that she would be well out of the house before Gorst came into it. It was raining heavily. But Anne looked upon the rain as her ally. Walter would be ashamed to think he had driven her out in such weather.

He insisted on accompanying her to the Eliotts’ door.

“Not a nice evening for turning out,” said he as he opened his umbrella and held it over her.

“Not at all,” said she significantly.

At ten o’clock he came to fetch her in a cab.

Now, the cab, the escort, and the sheltering umbrella somewhat diminished the grievance of her enforced withdrawal from her home. And Majendie’s manner did still more to take the wind out of the proud sails of her tragic adventure. But Anne herself was a sufficiently pathetic figure as she appeared under his umbrella, descending from the Eliotts’ doorstep, with delicate slippered feet, gathering her skirts high from the bounding rain, and carrying in her hands the boots she had not waited to put on.

Majendie uttered the little tender moan with which he was used to greet a pathetic spectacle.

“He sounds,” said Anne to herself, “as if he were sorry.”

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He looked it, too; he seemed the very spirit of contrition, as he sat in the cab, with Anne's boots on his knees, guarding them with a caressing hand. But she detected an impenitent brilliance in his eye as he stood in the lamplight and helped her off with the mackintosh which dripped with its passage from the cab to their doorstep.

"I think my feet are wet," said she.

"There's a splendid fire in the study," said he.

He drew up a chair, and made her sit in it, and took off her shoes and stockings, and dried them at the fire. He held her cold feet in his hands to warm them. Then he stooped down and laid his face against them and kissed them. And she heard again his low, tender moan, and took it for a cry of contrition. He rose from his knees and laid his hand on her shoulder. She looked up, prepared to receive his chivalrous submission, to gather into her bosom the full harvest of her protest, and then magnanimously forgive.

It was not surrender, certainly not surrender, that she saw in the downward gaze that had drawn her to him. His eyes were dancing, dancing gaily, to some irresistible measure in his head.

"It was worth while, wasn't it?" said he.

"What was worth while?"

"Getting your feet wet, for the pleasure of not dining with Gorst?"

There were moments, Anne might have owned, when he did not fail in sympathy and comprehension. Had she been capable of self-criticism, she would have found that her attitude of protest was a moral luxury, and that moral luxuries were a necessity to natures such as hers. But Anne had a secret, cherishing eye on martyrdom, and it was intolerable to her to be reminded in this way that, after all, she was only a spiritual voluptuary.

Still more intolerable was the large indulgence of her husband's manner. He seemed positively to pander to her curious passion, while preserving an attitude of superior purity. He multiplied her opportunities. A week had hardly passed before Mr. Gorst dined in Prior Street again, and Anne again took refuge in Thurston Square.

This time Majendie made no comment on her action. He seemed to take it for granted.

But Anne, standing up heroically for her principle, was sustained by a sense of moving in a divine combat. Every time she dined in Thurston Square, she felt that she had thrown down her gage; every time that Majendie invited Gorst, she felt that he stooped to pick it up. Thus unconsciously she breathed hostility, and was suspicious of hostility in him.

When she announced, at breakfast one Monday, that she had asked the Eliotts, the Gardners, Canon Wharton, and Miss Proctor, for dinner on Wednesday, she uttered each name as if it had been a challenge, and looked for some irritating maneuver in response. He would, of course, proclaim that he was going to dine with the Hannays, or he would effect a retreat to Mr. Gorst's rooms, or to his club.

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But Majendie lacked her passion and her inspiration. He simply said he was delighted to hear it, and that he would make a point of being at home. He would have to give up an engagement which he would not have made if he had known. But that did not greatly matter.

They came, the Eliotts and the rest, and Miss Proctor again pronounced him charming. To be sure, he was not half so amusing as he had been on his first appearance in Thurston Square; but it was only becoming that he should repress himself a little at his own table and in the presence of the Canon. *He*, the Canon, was brilliant, if you like.

For that night the Canon was, as usual, all things to all men, and especially to all women. He was the man of the world for Miss Proctor; the fine epicure of books for Mrs. Eliott; for Mr. Eliott and Dr. Gardner, the broad-minded searcher and enthusiast, the humble camp-follower of the conquering sciences. "You are the pioneers," said he; "you go before us on the march. But we keep up, we keep up. We can step out—-cassock and all."

But he spread out all his spiritual lures for Mrs. Majendie. His eyes seemed more than ever to pursue her, to search her, to be gazing discreetly at the secret of her soul. They drew her with the clear and candid flattery of their understanding. She could feel the clever little Canon taking her in and making notes on her. "Sensitive. Unhappy. Intensely spiritual nature. Too fine and pure for *him*." And over the unhallowed, half-abandoned table, flushed slightly with Majendie's good wine, the Canon drew up his chair to his host, and stretched his little legs, and let his spirit expand in a rosy, broad humanity. As he had charmed the spiritual woman he saw in Anne, so he laid himself out to flatter the natural man he saw in Majendie. And Majendie leaned back in his chair, and gazed at the Canon, the remarkable, the clever, the versatile little Canon, with half-closed eyelids veiling his contemptuous eyes. (He confided to Hannay, later on, that the Canon, in his after-dinner moments, made him sick.)

Anne heard nothing more of Mr. Gorst for over a fortnight. It was on a Saturday, and Majendie asked her suddenly, during luncheon, if she thought the Eliotts would be disengaged that evening.

"Why?"

"Because I've asked Gorst" (again that disagreeable emphasis) "to dine to-night."

"Very well. I will ask Mrs. Eliott if she can have me."

"Can you?"

"Perfectly."

“Oh—and I must prepare you for something quite horrible. Some time, you know” (he smiled provokingly), “I shall have to ask the Hannays. Do you think you can arrange that?”

“I shall have to,” said she.

This time (it was the third) she was obliged to take Mrs. Eliott into her confidence. She fairly flung herself on her friend’s mercy.

“I feel as if I were making use of you,” said she.

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“My dear, make any use of me you please. I’m always here. You can come to me any time you want to escape.”

“To escape?” Anne’s face flew a colour that was a flag of defiance to any reflection on her husband. She would be loyal to him as long as she lived. Not one of her friends should know of her trouble and her fear.

“From your Gorsts and Hannays and people.”

“Oh, from them.” Anne felt that she was shielding him.

Mrs. Eliott marked the flag of defiance and the attitude of defence. If Anne had meant to “give him away,” she could not have given him more lavishly. Mrs. Elliott’s sad inward comment was that there was more in all this than met the eye.

And Anne’s life now continued on this rather uncomfortable footing. The Hannays came to dinner, and she dined with Mrs. Eliott. The Ransomes came, and she dined with Mrs. Eliott. Mr. Gorst came (for the fourth time in as many weeks), and she dined with Mrs. Eliott. She began to wonder whether the Eliotts’ hospitality would stand the strain. She also wondered whether her other friends in Thurston Square were wondering; and what Canon Wharton must think of it. It had not occurred to her to wonder what Mr. Gorst would think.

At first he thought nothing of it. When he found that he had not to encounter the terrible eyes of Mrs. Majendie, Mr. Gorst’s relief was so great that it robbed him of reflection. And when he began to think, he merely thought that Majendie had asked him because his wife was absent, rather than that Majendie’s wife was absent because he had been asked. Majendie had calculated on this. He was not in the least distressed by Anne’s absences. He believed that she was thoroughly enjoying both her own protest and Mrs. Eliott’s society. And the arrangement really solved the problem nicely. Otherwise the whole thing was trivial to him. He remained unaware of the tremendous spiritual conflict that was being waged round the person of the unhappy Gorst.

But Christmas was now at hand and Christmas brought the problem back again in a terrific form. For ten years poor Gorst had dined with his friends in Prior Street on Christmas Day. His presence was considered by Edith to borrow a peculiar significance and sanctity from the festival. Did they not celebrate on that day the birth of the Divine Humanity, the solemn advent of redeeming love? Punctually on Christmas Day the prodigal returned from his farthest wanderings, and made for Prior Street as for his home. He had never missed a Christmas. And how could they expel him now? His coming was such a sacred and established thing, that he had spoken of it to Edith as a certainty. And it was as a certainty that Edith spoke of it to Majendie.

She asked him how they were to break the news to Anne.

“Better not break it at all,” said he. “Just let him come.”

“If he does,” said Edith, “she’ll walk straight out of the house.”

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“Oh no, she won’t.”

“Yes, she will. On principle. I understand her.”

“I confess I don’t.”

“But I believe,” said she, “if you explained it all to her, she’d give in for once.”

Rather against his judgment, he endeavoured to explain, “We simply can’t not ask him, you know.”

“Ask him by all means. But I shall have to put myself on the Gardners, or the Proctors, for the Eliotts are away.”

“Don’t be absurd. You know you won’t be allowed to do anything of the sort.”

“There’s nothing else left for me to do.”

He looked at her gravely; but his speech was light, for it was not in him to be weighty. “Don’t you think that, at this holy season, for the sake of peace, and good-will, and all the rest of it, you might drop it just for once? And let the poor chap have a happy Christmas?”

She seemed to be considering it. “You think me very hard,” said she.

“Oh no, no, not hard.” But he was wondering for the first time what this wife of his was made of.

“Yes, hard. I don’t want you to think me hard. If you could understand why I cannot meet that man—what it means to me—the effect it has on me.”

“What,” he said, “is the precise effect?” He was really interested. He had always been curious to know how different men affected different women, and to get his knowledge at first hand.

“It’s the effect,” said she, “of being brought into contact with something terribly painful and repulsive, the effect of intense suffering—of unbearable disgust.”

He listened with his thoughtful, interested air. “I know. The effect that your friend Canon Wharton sometimes has on me.”

“I see no resemblance between Canon Wharton and your friend Mr. Gorst.”

“And I see no resemblance between my friend Mr. Gorst and Canon Wharton.”

She was silent, gathering all her strength to deliver her spirit’s last appeal.

“Dear,” said she (for she wished to be very gentle with him, since he had thought her hard), “dear, I wonder if you ever realise what the thing we call—purity is?”

He blushed violently.

“I only know it’s one of those things one doesn’t speak about.”

“I must speak,” said she.

“You needn’t,” he said curtly; “I understand all right.”

“If you did you wouldn’t ask me. All the same, Walter—” She lifted to him the set face of a saint surrendered to the torture—“If you compel me—”

“Compel you? I can’t compel you. Especially if you’re going to look like that.”

“It’s no use,” he said to Edith. “First she talks of dining with the Gardners—”

“She will, too—”

“No. She’ll stay—if I compel her.”

“Oh, I see. That’s worse. She’d let him see it. He wouldn’t enjoy his Christmas if he came.”

“No, poor fellow, I really don’t think he would. She’s awfully funny about him.”

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“You still think her funny?”

“My dear—it’s the only way to take her. I’m sorry, but I can’t let Charlie spoil her Christmas; nor,” he added, “Anne his.”

So Mr. Gorst did not come to Prior Street that Christmas. There came instead of him whole sheaves and stacks of flowers, Christmas roses and white lilies, the sacred flowers which, at that festival, the poor prodigal brought as his tribute to his adored and beloved lady.

He spent the greater part of his Christmas Day in the society of Mr. Dick Ransome, and the greater part of his Christmas Night in the society of pretty Maggie Forrest, the new girl in Evans’s shop who had sold him the Christmas roses and the lilies. “For,” said he, “if I can’t go and see Edie, I’ll go and see Maggie.” And he enjoyed seeing Maggie as much as it was possible to enjoy anything that was not seeing Edie.

And Edie lay among her Christmas roses and her lilies, and smiled, with a high courage, at Nanna, at Majendie, and Anne; and did her best to make everybody believe that she was having a very happy Christmas. But at night, when it was all over, Majendie held a tremulous and tearful Edie in his arms.

“Don’t think me a brute, darling,” he said. “I would have insisted, only if he’d come to-day he’d have found out he wasn’t wanted.”

“I know; and he never would have come again.”

He didn’t come. For Canon Wharton enlightened Mrs. Hannay, and Mrs. Hannay enlightened Mr. Hannay, and Mr. Hannay enlightened Mr. Gorst.

“Of course,” said the prodigal, “if she walks out of the house when I walk into it, I can’t very well go.”

“Well, not at present, perhaps, for the sake of peace,” said Hannay. “It strikes me poor old Majendie’s in a pretty tight place with that wife of his.”

So, for the sake of peace, Mr. Gorst kept away from Prior Street and his Edie, and spent a great deal of time in Evans’s shop, cultivating the attention of Miss Forrest.

And, for the sake of peace, Majendie kept silence, and his sister concealed her trembling and her tears.

CHAPTER XVII

Gloom fell on the house in Prior Street in the weeks that followed Christmas. The very servants went heavily in the shadow of it. Anne began to have her bad headaches again. Deep lines of worry showed on Majendie's face. And on her couch by the window, looking on the blackened winter garden, Edith fought day after day a losing battle with her spine.

The slow disease that held her captive there seemed to be quickening its pace. In January there came a whole procession of bad nights, without, as she pathetically said, "anything to show for it," for her hands could make nothing now. She lay flatter than ever; each day she seemed to sink deeper into her couch.

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Anne, between her headaches, devoted herself to her sister with a kind of passion. Her keenest experience of passion came to her through the emotion wakened in her by the sight of Edith's suffering. She told herself that her love for Edith satisfied her heart completely; that she fulfilled herself in it as she never could have fulfilled herself in any other way. Nothing could degrade or spoil the spiritual beauty of this relation. It served as a standard by which she could better judge her relation to her husband. "I love her more than I ever loved him," she thought. "I cannot help it. If it had been possible to love him as I love her—but I have lowered myself by loving him. I will raise myself by loving her."

She was never tired of being with Edith, sewing silently by her fireside, or reading aloud to her (for Edith's hands were too tremulous now to hold a book), or sitting close up against her couch, nursing her hands in hers, as if she would have given them her own strength.

And thus her ardour spent and renewed itself, and left her colder than ever to her husband.

At times she mourned, obscurely, the destruction of the new soul that had been given her last year, on her birthday, when she had been born again to her sweet human destiny. At times she had glimpses of the perfect thing it might have been. There was no logical sequence in the events that had destroyed it, the return of Lady Cayley and the spectacle of her triumph. She could not say that her husband had deteriorated in consequence. The change was in herself, and not in him. He was what he always had been; only she seemed to see him more completely now. At times, when the high spiritual life died down in sleep, she slipped from her trouble, and turned, with her arms stretched towards him, where he lay. In her dreams he came to her with the low cry she had heard in the wood at Westleydale. And in her dreams she was tender; but her waking thoughts were sad and hard.

Majendie found it more than ever difficult to realise that she had ever shown him kindness, that her arms had opened to him and her pulses beaten with his own. Her face and her body were changing with this change of soul. Her health suffered. Her eyes became dull, her skin dry; her small, reticent mouth had taken on the tragic droop; she was growing austerely thin. She had abandoned the pleasing and worldly fashion of her dress, and arrayed herself now in straight-cut, sombre garments, very serviceable in the sick-room, but mournfully suggestive, to her husband's fancy, of her renunciation of the will to please.

On her first appearance in this garb he enquired whether she had embraced the religious life.

"I always have embraced it," said she in her ringing voice.

“I believe it’s about the only thing you ever wanted to embrace.”

“You need not say so,” she returned.

“Then why, oh why, do you wear those awful clothes?”

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“My clothes are suitable,” said she.

“Suitable? My dear girl, they suggest a divorce-suit, Majendie *versus* Majendie, if you like. You’re a walking prosecution. Your face, with that expression on it, is a decree *nisi* with costs. You don’t want to be a libel on your husband, do you?”

“How can you say such things?”

“Well—look in the glass, dear, if you don’t believe me.”

She looked. The dress was certainly not becoming. She greeted the joyless apparition with her thin, unwilling smile.

He put his arm around her and drew her to him. He loved her dearly, for all her sadness and unsweetness.

“Poor Nancy,” he said, “I *am* a brute. Forgive me.”

“I do forgive you.”

The words seemed the refrain of her life’s sad song.

And as he kissed her he said to himself, “That’s all very well; but if I only knew what I’m supposed to have done to her! Her friends must think me a perfect monster.”

And, indeed, there was more truth than Majendie was aware of in his extravagant jests. His wife’s face was so eloquent of misery that her friends were not slow in drawing their conclusions. Thurston Square prepared itself to rally round her. Mrs. Eliott was loyal in keeping what she supposed to be Anne’s secret, but when she found that the Gardners also understood that young Mrs. Majendie wasn’t very happy with her husband, discussion became free in Thurston Square, though it went no further.

“The kindest thing we can do is to give her a refuge sometimes from his dreadful friends,” said Mrs. Eliott. “I have to ask her here every time they’re there.”

Mrs. Gardner declared that she also would ask her gladly. Miss Proctor said that she would ask Mr. Majendie and Mr. Gorst, which would come to the same thing for Anne, but that she would not have Anne without her husband. Miss Proctor could be depended on to take a light view of any situation, a view entirely her own.

So the Gardners, as well as the Eliotts, rallied round Mrs. Majendie, and offered their house also as her refuge. And thus poor Anne, whose ideal was an indestructible loyalty, contrived to build up the most undesirable reputation for her husband in Thurston Square. Of this reputation she now became aware, and it reacted on her own

estimate of him. She said to herself, “They don’t approve of him. They seem to know something. They are sorry for me.” And she was humbled in her pride.

The one who seemed to know most, and to be sorriest of all, was Canon Wharton. She was always meeting him now. It was positively as if he lay in wait for her. His eyes seemed more than ever to have penetrated her secret. They held it safe under the pent-house of his brows. They seemed to be always making allusions to it, while his tongue preserved a delicate reticence. At meeting they said to her, “It doesn’t matter if I know your secret. Do you suppose it is so evident to everybody? Why, in all this town, there is no one—no one, dear lady—capable of discovering it but I. It is a spiritual secret.” And at parting they said, “When you can bear it no longer you must come to me. Sooner or later you will come to me.”

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And the weeks went on towards Lent. Anne longed for the time of cleansing, and absolution and communion; for the peace of the week-day services; and for the sweet, sharp, grey light of the young Spring at evening, a light that recalled, piercingly, the long Lent of her girlhood, and the passing of its pure and consecrated days.

She had not yet completely forsaken St. Saviour's for All Souls. She loved the grey old church in the market-place. Set in the midst of that sordid scene of chaffering and grime, St. Saviour's perpetuated for her the ancient beauty and the majesty of her faith. When she desired to forget herself, to sink humbly back into the ages, passive to a superb tradition, she went to St. Saviour's. When she wished to be stirred and strengthened, to realise her spiritual value, to feel the grip of divine forces centring on her, she went to All Souls.

On the Sunday before Lent she was fairly possessed by this ardent personal mood. In obedience to it she attended Matins at the Canon's church.

She had had a scruple about going, for Edith had been worse that morning, and more evidently unhappy. She went alone. Majendie had admitted lately that he liked going to St. Saviour's, but he refused to accompany her to All Souls.

She went in a strange, premonitory mood, expectant of some great illumination. It came with the Collect for the day. Anne was deeply moved by the Collect. She prayed inaudibly, with parted lips thirsting for the sources of her spiritual help. Her light went up with the ascending, sentence by sentence, of the prayer.

"Oh, Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth;

"Send Thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues;

"Without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before Thee;

"Grant this for thine only Son, Jesus Christ's sake." The ritual rang upon that note. The music of the hymns of charity was part of the light that penetrated her, poignant, but tender.

Poignant but tender, too, were the aspect and the mood of the Canon as he ascended the pulpit and looked upon his congregation.

There was a rustling, sliding sound as the congregation turned to listen to their vicar.

"Though I speak,'" said the Canon, "'with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or as a tinkling cymbal."

He gripped his hearers with the stress he laid upon certain words, “angels,” and “cymbal.” He bade them mark that it was not by hazard that the great prayer for Charity was appointed for the Sunday before Lent. “The Church,” he said, “has such care for her children that she does nothing by hazard. This call is made to us on the eve of the great battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Why, but that those among us who come off victors may have mercy upon those

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weakly ones who are worsted and fallen in the fight. The life of the spirit has its own unique temptations. It is against these that we pray to-day. We are all prepared to repent, to use abstinence, to mortify the body with its corrupt affections. Are we prepared to bear the burden of our brother's and our sister's unrepentance? Of their self-indulgence? Of their sin? To follow in all things the Divine Example? We are told that the Saviour of the world was the friend of publicans and sinners. We accept the statement, we have gone on accepting it, year after year, as the statement of a somewhat remote, but well-authenticated historical fact. Have we yet realised its significance? Have we pictured, are we able to picture to ourselves, what company He kept? Among what surroundings His divine figure was actually seen? In what purlieus of degenerate Jerusalem? In what iniquitous splendours? In what orgies of the Gentiles? And who are they to whom He showed most tenderness? Who but the rich young man? The woman taken in adultery? And Mary Magdalene with her seven devils? Which is the divinest of the divine parables? The parable of the prodigal son who devoured his father's living with harlots!"

The Canon's voice rose and fell, and rose again; thrilling, as his breast heaved with the immense pathos and burden of the world.

Anne had a vision of the Hannays and the Ransomes, and of the prodigal cast out from the house that loved him. And she said to herself for the first time: "Have I done right? Have I done what Christ would have me do?" The light that went up in her was a light by which her deeds looked doubtful. If she had failed in this, in charity? She pondered the problem, while the Canon approached, gloriously, his peroration.

"Therefore we pray for charity"—the Canon's voice rang tears—"for charity, oh, dear and tender Lord, lest, having known Thy love, we fall, ourselves, into the sins of unpity and of pride."

Tears came into Anne's eyes. She was overcome, bowed, shaken by the Canon's incomparable pleading. The Canon was shaken by it himself, his voice trembled in the benediction that followed. No one had a clearer vision of the spiritual city. It was his tragedy that he saw it, and could not enter in. Many, remembering that sermon, counted it, long afterwards, to him for righteousness. It had conquered Anne. The tongues of men and of angels, of all spiritual powers, human and divine, spoke to her in that vibrating, indomitable voice.

The problem it had raised remained with her, oppressed, tormented her. What she had done had seemed to her so good. But if, after all, she had done wrong? If she had failed in charity?

She had come to a turning in her way when she could no longer see for herself, or walk alone. She was prepared to surrender, meekly, her own judgment. She must ask help of the priest whose voice told her that he had suffered, and whose eyes told her that he knew.

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She sent a note to All Souls Vicarage, requesting an interview, at Canon Wharton's house rather than her own. She did not want Edith or the servants to know that she had been closeted with the Canon. The answer came that night, making an appointment after early Evensong on the morrow.

After early Evensong, Anne found herself in the Canon's library. He did not keep her waiting, and, as he entered, he held out to her, literally, the hand of help. For the Canon never wasted a gesture. There was no detail of social observance to which he could not give some spiritual significance. This was partly the secret of his power. His face had lost the light that illuminated it in the pulpit, but his eyes gleamed with a lambent triumph. They said, "Sooner or later. But rather sooner than I had expected."

Anne presented her case in a veiled form, as a situation in the abstract. She scrupulously refrained from mentioning any names.

The Canon smiled at her precautions. "We are working in the dark," said he. "I think I can help you a little bit more if you'll allow me to come down to the concrete. You are speaking, I fancy, of our poor friend, Mr. Gorst?"

She looked at him helplessly, startled at his penetration and her own betrayal, but appeased by the pitying adjective which brought Gorst into the regions of pardonable discussion.

"You needn't be afraid," he said. "I had to be certain before I could advise you. I can now tell you with confidence that you are doing right. I—know—the—man."

He uttered the phrase with measured emphasis, and closed his teeth upon the last words with a snap. It was impossible to convey a stronger effect of moral reprobation. "But I see your difficulty," he continued. "I understand that he is a rather intimate friend of Miss Majendie."

Anne noticed that he deliberately avoided all mention of her husband.

"She has known him for a very long time."

"Ah yes. And it is your affection, your pity for your sister that makes you hesitate. You do not wish to be hard, and at the same time you wish to do right. Is it not so?"

She murmured her assent. (How well he understood her!)

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Majendie, we have sometimes to be a little hard, in order that we may not be harder. You have thought, perhaps, that you should be tender to this friendship? Now, I am an old man, and I have had a pretty large experience of men and women, and I tell you that such friendships are unwholesome. Unwholesome. Both for the woman and the man."

“If I thought that—”

“You may think it. Look at the man—What has it done for him? Has it made him any better, any stronger, any purer? Has it made her any happier?”

“I think so. It is all she has—”

“How can you say that, my dear Mrs. Majendie, when she has you?”

“And her brother.”

The Canon gave her a keen glance. He seemed to be turning a little extra light on to her secret, to see it the better by. And under that light her mind conceived again a miserable suspicion.

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“He knows something,” she thought. “What is it that he knows? They all seem to know.”

She turned the subject back again to her sister-in-law and Mr. Gorst. “She thinks she can save him.”

“Her brother?”

It was another turn of the searchlight, but this time the Canon veiled his eyes, as if in mercy. He really knew nothing, nothing at all; but, as a man of the world, he felt that there was a great deal more than Mr. Gorst and Miss Majendie at the back of this discussion, and he was very curious to know what it might be.

Anne recoiled from the veiled condemnation of his face more than she had from its open intimations. She was not clever enough to see that the clever Canon had simply laid a trap for her.

She was now convinced that there was something that he knew. She lifted her head in loyal defiance of his knowledge. “No,” said she proudly, “Mr. Gorst. It was of him I was speaking.”

“Ah,” said the Canon, as if his mind had come down with difficulty from the contemplation of another and more interesting personality; and again the significance of his manner was not lost upon Anne.

“I do not know Miss Majendie,” he went on, still with the air of forcing himself to deal equitably with a subject of minor interest; “but if I am not much mistaken, she is, is she not, a little morbid?”

“She is a hopeless invalid.”

“I know she is” (his voice dropped pity). “Poor thing—poor thing! And she thinks that she can save him? Mark me, I put no limit to the saving grace of God, and I would not like to say whom He may not choose as His instrument. But before we presume to act for Him, we should be very sure about the choice. Judging by the fruits—the fruits of this friendship”—he paused, as if seeking for a perfect justice—“Yes. That is what we must look at. I imagine Miss Majendie has been morbid on this subject. Morbid; and, perhaps, a little weak?”

Anne flushed. She was distressed to think she had given such an impression. “Indeed, indeed she isn’t. You wouldn’t say that if you knew her.”

“I do not know her. But the strongest of us may be sometimes weak. You must be strong for her. And I”—he smiled—“must be strong for you. And I tell you that you have been—so far—wise and right. As long as this man continues in his evil courses, go on

as you are doing. Do not encourage him by admitting him to your house and to your friendship. But"—(the Canon stood up, both for the better emphasis of his point, and as a gentle reminder to Mrs. Majendie that his dinner-hour was now approaching)—"but let him repent; let him give up his most objectionable companions; let him lead a pure life—and *then*—accept him—welcome him—"(the Canon opened his arms, as if he were that moment receiving a repentant sinner) "rejoice over him"—(the Canon's face became fairly illuminated) "as—as much as you like."

The peroration was rapid, valedictory, complete. He thrust out his hand, displaying the whole palm of it as a sign of openness, honesty, and good-will.

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“God bless you.”

The solemn benediction atoned for any little momentary brusquerie.

Anne went away with a conscience wholly satisfied, in an exalted mood, fortified by all the ramparts of the spiritual life.

She was very gentle with Edith that evening. She said to herself that her love must make up to Edie for the loss her conscience had been compelled to inflict. “After all,” she said to herself, “it’s not as if she hadn’t me.” Measuring her services with those of the disreputable Mr. Gorst, it seemed to her that she was amply making up. She had a hatred of moral indebtedness, as of any other, and she loved to spend. In reckoning the love she had spent so lavishly on Edie, she had not allowed for the amount of forgiveness that Edie had spent on her. Forgiveness is a gift we have to take, whether we will or no, and Anne was blissfully unaware of what she took.

Majendie watched her ministrations curiously. Her tenderness was the subtlest lure to the love in him that still watched and waited for its hour. That night, in the study, he was silent, nervous, and unhappy. She shrank from the unrest and misery in his eyes. They followed or were fixed on her, rousing in her an obscure resentment and discomfort. She was beginning to be afraid of him. It had come to that.

She left him earlier than usual, and went very miserably to bed. She prayed, to-night, with her eyes fixed on the crucifix. It had become for her the symbol of her life, and of her marriage, which was nothing to her now but a sacrifice, a martyrdom, a vicarious expiation of her husband’s sin.

As she lay down, the beating of her pulses told her that she was not to sleep. She longed for sleep, and tried to win it to her by repeating the Psalm which had been her comfort in all times of her depression. “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”

She closed her eyes under the peace of the beloved words. And as she closed them she felt herself once more in the arms of the green hills, the folding hills of Westleydale.

She shook off the obsession and prayed another prayer. She longed to be alone; but, to her grief, she heard the opening and shutting of a door and her husband’s feet moving in the room beyond.

A few blessed moments of solitude were left her during Majendie’s undressing. She devoted them to the final expulsion of all lingering illusions. She had long ago lost the illusion of her husband’s immaculate goodness; and now she cast off, once for all, the dear and pitiful belief that had revived in her under her brief enchantment in the wood at Westleydale. She told herself that she had married a man who had, not only a lower

standard than her own, but an entirely different code of morals, a man irremediably contaminated, destitute of all perception of spiritual values. And she had got to make

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the best of him, that was all. Not quite all; for she had still to make the best of herself; and the two things seemed, at moments, incompatible. To guard herself from all contact with the invading evil; to take her stand bravely, to raise the spiritual ramparts and retire behind them, that was no more than her bare duty to herself and him. She must create a standard for him by keeping herself for ever high and pure. He loved her still, in his fashion; he must also respect her, and, in respecting her, respect goodness—the highest goodness—in her.

Accustomed to move in a region of spiritual certainty, Anne was untroubled by any misgivings as to the soundness of her attitude. It was open to no criticism except the despicable wisdom of the world.

Her chief difficulty was poor Majendie's imperishable affection. She tried to protect herself from it to-night by feigning drowsiness. She lay still as a stone, stiff with her fear. Once, at midnight, she felt him stir, and turn, and raise himself on his elbow. She was conscious through all her unhappy being of the adoring tenderness with which he watched her sleep.

At last she slept, and sleeping, she dreamed a strange dream. She found herself again in Westleydale, walking in green aisles of the holy, mystic, cathedral woods. The tall beech-stems were the pillars of the temple. A still light came through them, guiding her to the beech-tree that she knew. And she saw an angel lying under the beech-tree. It lay on its side, with its wings stretched out so that the right wing covered the left. As she approached, it raised the covering wing, and in the warm hollow of the other she saw that it cradled a little naked child. And at the sight there came a thorn in her breast that pricked her. The child stirred in its sleep, and crawled to the place of the angel's breast, and it fondled it with searching lips and hands. Then it wailed, and as she heard its cry the thorn pressed sharper into Anne's breast; and the angel's eyes turned to her with an immortal anguish, and pity, and despair. She looked, and saw that its breast was as the breast of the little child. And she was moved to compassion at the helplessness of them both, of the heavenly and of the earthly thing; and she stooped and lifted the child, and laid it to her own breast, and nourished it; and had peace from her pain.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was the first day in Lent. Anne had come down in a state of depression. She was silent during breakfast, and Majendie became absorbed in his morning paper. So much wisdom he had learnt. Presently he gave a sudden murmur of interest, and looked up with a smile. "I see," said he, "your friend Mrs. Gardner has got a little son."

“Has she?” said Anne coldly.

The blood flushed in her cheeks, and a sudden pang went through her and rose to her breasts with a pricking pain, such pain as she had felt once in her dream, and only once in her waking life before. She thought of dear little Mrs. Gardner, and tried to look glad. She failed miserably, achieving an expression of more than usual austerity. It was the expression that Majendie had come to associate with Lent. He thought he saw in it the spiritual woman’s abhorrence of her natural destiny. And with the provocation of it the devil entered into him.

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“Is there anything in poor Mrs. Gardner’s conduct to displease you?”

She looked at him in a dull passion of reproach.

“Oh,” she said, “how can you be so unkind to me!”

Her breast heaved, her lower lip trembled. She rose suddenly, pressing her handkerchief to her mouth, and left the room. He heard the study door open hastily and shut again. And he said to himself, as if with a sudden lucid freshness, “What an extraordinary woman my wife is. If I only knew what I’d done.”

As she had left her breakfast unfinished, he waited a judicious interval and then went to fetch her back.

He found her standing by the window, holding her hands tight to her heaving sides, trying by main force to control the tempest of her sobs. He approached her gently.

“Go away,” she whispered, through loose lips that shook with every word. “Go away. Don’t come near me.”

“Nancy—what is it?”

She turned from him, and leaned up against the folded window shutter. Her emotion was the more terrible to him because she was so seldom given to these outbursts. She had seemed to him a woman passionless, and of almost superhuman self-possession. He removed himself to the hearth-rug and waited for five minutes.

“Poor child,” he said at last. “Can’t you tell me what it is?”

No answer.

He waited another five minutes, thinking hard.

“Was it—was it what I said about Mrs. Gardner?”

He still waited. Then he conceived a happy idea. He would try to make her laugh.

“Just because I said she’d had a little son?”

Her tears fell to answer him.

She gathered herself together with a supreme effort, and steadied her lips to speak. “Please leave me. I came here to be alone.”

A light broke in on him, and he left her.

He shut himself up in the dining-room with his light. He had pushed his breakfast aside, too preoccupied to eat it.

“So that’s it?” he said to himself. “That’s it. Poor Nancy. That’s what she’s wanted all the time. What a fool I was never to have thought of it.”

He breathed with an immense relief. He had solved the enigma of Anne with all her “funniness.” It was not that she had turned against him, nor against her destiny. She had been disappointed of her destiny, that was all. It was enough. She must have been fretting for months, poor darling, and just when she could bear it no longer, Mrs. Gardner, he supposed, had come as the last straw. No wonder that she had said he was unkind.

And in that hour of his enlightenment a great chastening fell upon Majendie. He told himself that he must be as gentle with her as he knew how; gentler than he had ever yet known how. And his heart smote him as he thought how he had hurt her, how he might hurt her again unknowingly, and how the tenderness of the tenderest male was brutality when applied to these wonderful, pitiful, incomprehensible things that women were. He accepted the misery of the last three months as a fit punishment for his lack of understanding.

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His light brought a great longing to him and a great hope. From that moment he watched her anxiously. He had never realised till now, after three months of misery, quite what she meant to him, how sacred and dear she was, and how much he loved her.

The depth of this feeling left him for the most part dumb before her. His former levity forsook him, and Anne wondered at this change in him, and brooded over the possible cause of his serious and unintelligible silences. She attributed them to some deep personal preoccupation of which she was not the object.

Meanwhile her days went on much as before, a serene and dignified procession to the outward eye. She was thankful that she had so established her religion of the household that its services could still continue in their punctual order, after the joy of the spirit had departed from them. The more she felt that she was losing, hour by hour, her love of the house in Prior Street, the more she clung to the observances that held her days together. She had become a pale, sad-eyed, perfunctory priestess of the home. Majendie protested against what he called her base superstition, her wholesale sacrifice to the gods of the hearth. He forbade her to stay so much indoors, or to sit so long in Edith's room.

One afternoon he came home unexpectedly and found her there, doing nothing, but watching Edith, who dozed. He touched her gently, and told her to get up and go out for a walk.

"I'm too tired," she whispered.

"Then go upstairs and lie down."

She went; but, instead of lying down, she wandered through the house, restless and unsettled. She was possessed by a terrible sense of isolation. It came over her that this house of which she was the mistress did not in the least belong to her. She had not been consulted or thought of in any of its arrangements. There was no place in it that appealed to her as her own. She went into the little grave old-fashioned drawing-room. It had a beauty she approved of, a dignity that was in keeping with her own traditions, but to-day its aspect roused in her discontent and irritation. The room had remained unchanged since the days when it was inhabited, first by her husband's mother, then by his aunt, then by his sister. He had handed it over, just as it stood, to his wife. It was full, the whole house was full, of portraits of the Majendies; Majendies in oils; Majendies in water-colours; Majendies in crayons, in miniatures and silhouettes. She thought of Mrs. Eliott's room in Thurston Square, of the bookcases, the bronzes, the triptych with its saints in glory, and of how Fanny sat enthroned among these things that reflected completely her cultured individuality. Fanny had counted. Her rarity had been appreciated by the man who married her; her tastes had been studied, consulted,

exquisitely indulged. Anne did not want more books, nor bronzes, nor a triptych in her drawing-room. But such things were symbols.

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Their absence stood for the immense spiritual want through which her marriage had been made void. Brooding on it, she closed her heart to her unspiritual husband. She looked round the room with her cold disenchanted eyes. Numberless signs of his thought and care for her rebuked her, and rebuking, added to her misery. As her restlessness increased, it occurred to her that she might find some satisfaction in arranging the furniture on an entirely different plan. She rang the bell and sent for Walter. He came, and found her sitting on the high-backed chair whose cover had been worked by his grandmother. He smiled at the uncomfortable figure she presented.

“So that’s what you call resting, is it?”

“Walter—do you mind if I move some of the furniture in this room?”

“Move it? Of course I don’t. But why?”

“Because I don’t very much like the room as it is.”

“Why don’t you like it?” (He really wanted to know.)

“Because I don’t feel comfortable in it.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear. Perhaps—we’d better have some new things.”

“I don’t want any new things.”

“What do you want, then?” His voice was gentleness itself.

“Just to move all the old ones—to move everything.”

She spoke with an almost infantile petulance that appealed to him as pathetic. There was something terrible about Anne when armoured in the cold steel of her spirituality, taking her stand upon a lofty principle. But Anne, sitting on a high-backed chair, uttering tremulous absurdities, Anne, protected by the unconscious humour of her own ill-temper, was adorable. He loved this humanly captious and capricious, childishly unreasonable Anne. And her voice was sweet even in petulance.

“My darling,” he said, “you shall turn the whole house upside down if it makes you any happier. But”—he looked round the room in quest of its deficiencies—“what’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong. You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t.” His eye fell upon the corner where the piano once stood that was now in Edith’s room.

“There are three things,” said he, “that you certainly ought to have. A piano, and a reading-stand, and a comfortable sofa. You shall have them.”

She threw back her head and closed her eyes to shut out the stupidity, and the mockery, and the misery of that idea.

“I—don’t—want”—she spoke slowly. Her voice dropped from its high petulant pitch, and rounded to its funeral-bell note—“I don’t want a piano, nor a reading-stand, nor a sofa. I simply want a place that I can call my own.”

“But, bless you, the whole house is your own, if it comes to that, and every mortal thing in it. Everything I’ve got’s yours except my razors and my braces, and a few little things of that sort that I’m keeping for myself.”

She passed her hand over her forehead, as if to brush away the irritating impression of his folly.

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“Come,” he said, “let’s begin. What do you want moved first? And where?”

She indicated a cabinet which she desired to have removed from its place between the windows to a slanting position in the corner. He was delighted to hear her express a preference, still more delighted to be able to gratify it by his own exertions. He took off his coat and waistcoat, turned up his shirt cuffs, and set to work. For an hour he laboured under her directions, struggling with pieces of furniture as perverse and obstinate as his wife, but more ultimately amenable.

When it was all over, Anne seated herself on the settee between the windows, and surveyed the scene. Majendie, in a rumpled shirt and with his hair in disorder, stood beside her, and smiled as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s all altered. There isn’t a blessed thing, not a chair, or a footstool, or a candlestick, that isn’t in some place where it wasn’t. And the room doesn’t look a bit better, and you won’t be a bit better pleased with it to-morrow.”

He put on his coat and sat down beside her. “See here,” said he, “you don’t want me really to believe that that’s where the trouble is?”

“The trouble?”

“Yes, Nancy, the trouble. Do you think I’m such a fool that I don’t see it? It’s been coming on a long time. I know you’re not happy. You’re not satisfied with things as they are. As they are, you know, there’s a sort of incompleteness, something wanting, isn’t there?”

She sighed. “It’s you who are putting it that way, not I.”

“Of course I’m putting it that way. How am I to put it any other way? Let me think now—well—of course I know perfectly well that it’s not a piano, or a reading-stand, or a sofa that you want, any more than I do. We want the same thing, sweetheart.”

She smiled sadly. “Do we? I should have said the trouble is that we don’t want the same thing, and never did.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Nor I you. You think I’m always wanting something. What is it that you think I want?”

“Well—do you remember Westleydale?”

She drew back. “Westleydale? What has put that into your head?”

He grew desperate under her evasions, and plunged into his theme. “Well, that jolly baby we saw there—in the wood—you looked so happy when you grabbed it, and I thought, perhaps—”

“There’s no use talking about that,” said she. “I don’t like it.”

“All right—only—it’s still a little soon, you know, isn’t it, to give it up?”

“You’re quite mistaken,” she said coldly. “It isn’t that. It never has been. If I want anything, Walter, that you haven’t given me, it’s something that you cannot give me. I’ve long ago made up my mind to that.”

“But why make up your mind to anything? How do you know I can’t give it you—-whatever it is—if you won’t tell me anything about it? What *do* you want, dear?”

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“Ah, my dear, I want nothing, except not to have to feel like this.”

“What do you feel like?”

“Like what I am. A stranger in my husband’s house.”

“And is that my fault?” he asked gently.

“It is not mine. But there it is. I feel sometimes as if I’d never been married to you. That’s why you must never talk to me as you did just now.”

“Good God, what a thing to say!”

He hid his face in his hands. The pain she had inflicted would have been unbearable but for the light that was in him.

He rose to leave her. But before he left, he took one long, scrutinising look at her. It struck him that she was not, at the moment, entirely responsible for her utterances. And again his light helped him.

“Look here,” said he, “I don’t think you’re feeling very well. This isn’t exactly a joyous life for you.”

“I want no other,” said she.

“You don’t know what you want. You’re overstrained—frightfully—and you ought to have a long rest and a change. You’re too good, you know, to my little sister. I’ve told you before that I won’t allow you to sacrifice yourself to her. I shall get some one to come and stay, and I shall take you down this week to the south coast, or wherever you like to go. It’ll do you all the good in the world to get away from this beastly place for a month or two.”

“It’ll do me no good to get away from poor Edie.”

“It will, dearest, it will, really.”

“It will not. If you go and take me away from Edie I shall get ill myself.”

“You only think so because you’re ill already.”

“I am not ill.” She turned to him her sombre, tragic face. “Walter—whatever you do, don’t ask me to leave Edie, for I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked gently.

“Because I love her. And it’s—it’s the only thing.”

“I see,” he said; and left her.

He went back to Edith. She smiled at his disarray and enquired the cause of it. He entertained her with an account of his labours.

“How funny you must both have looked,” said Edith, “and, oh, how funny the poor drawing-room must feel.”

“The fact is,” said Majendie gravely, “I don’t think she’s very well. I shall get her to see Gardner.”

“I would, if I were you.”

He wrote to Dr. Gardner that night and told Anne what he had done. She was indignant, and expounded his anxiety as one more instance of his failure to understand her nature. But she did not refuse to receive the doctor when he called the next morning.

When Majendie came back from the office he found his wife calm, but disposed to a terrifying reticence on the subject of her health. “It’s nothing—nothing,” she said; and that was all the answer she would give him. In the evening he went round to Thurston Square to get the truth out of Gardner.

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He stayed there an hour, although a very few words sufficed to tell him that his hope had become a certainty. The President of the Scale Philosophic Society had cast off all his vagueness. His wandering eyes steadied themselves to grip Majendie as they had gripped Majendie's wife. To Gardner Majendie, with his consuming innocence and anxiety, was, at the moment, by far the more interesting of the two. The doctor brought all his grave lucidity to bear on Majendie's case, and sent him away unspeakably consoled; giving him a piece of advice to take with him. "If I were you," said he, "I wouldn't say anything about it until she speaks to you herself. Better not let her know you've consulted me."

In one hour Majendie had learnt more about his wife than he had found out in the year he had lived with her; and the doctor had found out more about Majendie than he had learnt in the ten years he had been practising in Scale.

And upstairs in her drawing-room, little Mrs. Gardner waited impatiently for her husband to come back and finish the very interesting conversation that Majendie had interrupted.

"Who is the fiend," she said, "who's been keeping you all this time? One whole hour he's been."

"The fiend, my dear, is Mr. Majendie." The doctor's face was thoughtful.

"Is he ill?"

"No; but I think he would have been if he hadn't come to me. I've been revising my opinion of Majendie to-night. Between you and me, our friend the Canon is a very dangerous old woman. Don't you go and believe those tales he's told you."

"I don't believe the tales," said Mrs. Gardner, "but I can't help believing poor Mrs. Majendie's face. *That* tells a tale, if you like."

"Poor Mrs. Majendie's face is a face of poor Mrs. Majendie's own making, I'm inclined to think."

"I don't think Mrs. Majendie would make faces. I'm sure she isn't happy."

"Are you? Well then, if you're fond of her, I think you'd better try and see a little more of her, Rosy. You can help her a good deal better than I can now."

Professional honour forbade him to say more than that. He passed to a more absorbing topic.

"I must say I can't see the force of this fellow's reasoning. What's that?"

"I thought I heard baby crying."

“You didn’t. It was the cat. You must learn the difference, my dear. Don’t you see that these pragmatists are putting the cart before the horse? Conduct is one of the things to be explained. How can you take it, then, as the ground of the explanation?”

“I don’t,” said Mrs. Gardner.

“But you do,” said Dr. Gardner. It was in such bickerings that they lived and moved and had their happy being. Each was the possessor of a strenuous soul, made harmless by its extreme simplicity. They were united by their love of argument, divided only by their adoration of each other. They now plunged with joy into the heart of a vast metaphysical contention; and Majendie, his conduct and the explanation of it, were forgotten until another cry was heard and, this time, Mrs. Gardner fled.

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She came back full of reproach. “Oh, Philip, to think that you can’t recognise the voice of your little son!”

Dr. Gardner looked guilty. “I really thought,” said he, “it was the cat.” He hated these interruptions.

He looked for Mrs. Gardner to take up the thread of the delicious argument where she had dropped it; but something had reminded Mrs. Gardner that she must write a note to Mrs. Majendie. She sat down and wrote it at once while she remembered. She could think of nothing to say but, “When will you come and take tea with me, and see my little son?”

Anne came that week, and saw the little son, and rejoiced over him. She kept on coming to see him. She always had been fond of Mrs. Gardner, now she was growing fonder of her than ever. In her happy presence she felt wonderfully at peace. There had been a time when the spectacle of Mrs. Gardner’s happiness would have given her sharp pangs of jealousy; but that time was over now for Anne. She liked to sit and look at her and watch the happiness flowering in Mrs. Gardner’s face. She thought Mrs. Gardner’s face was more beautiful than any woman’s she had ever seen, except Edie’s. Edie’s face was perfect; but Mrs. Gardner’s was a simple oval that sacrificed perfection in the tender amplitude of her chin. There were no lines on it; for Mrs. Gardner was never worried, nor excited, nor perplexed. How could she be worried when Dr. Gardner was well and happy? Or excited, when, having Dr. Gardner, there was nothing left to be excited about? Or perplexed, when Dr. Gardner held the solution of all problems in his mighty brain?

Mrs. Gardner’s bridal aspect had not disappeared with the advent of her motherhood. She was not more wrapped up in the baby than she was in Dr. Gardner and his metaphysics. She even admitted to Anne that the baby had been something of a disappointment. Anne was sitting in the nursery with her when Mrs. Gardner ventured on this confidence.

“You know I’d rather have had a little daughter.”

Anne confessed that her own yearning was for a little son.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Gardner, “I wouldn’t have him different now. He’s going to have as happy a life as ever I can give him. I’ve got so much to make up for.”

“To make up for?” Anne wondered what little Mrs. Gardner could possibly have to make up for.

“Well, you see it’s a shocking confession to make; but I didn’t care for him at all before he came. I didn’t want him. I didn’t want anybody but Philip, and Philip didn’t want anybody but me. Are you horrified?”

“I think I am,” said Anne. She had difficulty in believing that dear little Mrs. Gardner could ever have taken this abnormal, this monstrous attitude.

“You see our life was so perfect as it was. And we have so little time to be together, because of his tiresome patients. I grudged every minute taken from him. And, when I knew that this little creature was coming, I sat down and cried with rage. I felt that he was going to spoil everything, and keep me from Philip. I hadn’t a scrap of tenderness for him, poor little darling.”

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“Oh,” said Anne.

“I hadn’t really. I was quite happy with my husband.” She paused, feeling that the ground under her was perilous. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this, dear Mrs. Majendie. I’ve never told another soul. But I thought, perhaps, you ought to know.”

“Why,” Anne wondered, “does she think I ought to know?”

“You see,” Mrs. Gardner went on, “*I* thought I couldn’t be any happier than I was. But I am. Ten times happier. And I didn’t think I *could* love my husband more than I did. But I do. Ten times more, and quite differently. Just because of this tiny, crying thing, without an idea in his little soft head. I’ve learned things I never should have learned without him. He takes up all my time, and keeps me from enjoying Philip; and yet I know now that I never was really married till he came.”

Mrs. Gardner looked up at Anne with shy, beautiful eyes that begged forgiveness if she had said too much. And Anne realised that it was for her that the little bride had been singing that hymn of hope, for her that she had been laying out the sacred treasures of her mysteriously wedded heart.

In the same spirit Mrs. Gardner now laid out her fine store of clothing for the little son. And Anne’s heart grew soft over the many little vests, and the jackets, and the diminutive short-waisted gowns.

She was busy with a pile of such things one evening up in her bedroom when Majendie came in. The bed was strewn with the absurd garments, and Anne sat beside side it, sorting them, and smiling to herself that small, pure, shy smile of hers. Her soft face drew him to her. He thought it was his hour. He took up one of the little vests and spanned it with his hand. “I’m so glad,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shook her head.

“Nancy—”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Not to me?”

“No,” she said. “Not to you.”

“I should have thought—”

Her face hardened. “I can’t. Please understand that, Walter. I don’t think I ever can, now. You’ve made everything so that I can’t bear it.”

She took the little vest from him and laid it with the rest.

And as he left her his hope grew cold. Her motherhood was only another sanctuary from which she shut him out. There was something so humiliating in his pain that he would have hidden it even from Edith. But Edith was too clever for him.

“Has she said anything to you about it?” he asked.

“Yes. Has she not to you?”

“Not yet. She won’t let me speak about it. She’s funnier than ever. She treats me as if I were some obscene monster just crawled up out of the primeval slime.”

“Poor Wallie!”

“Well, but it’s pretty serious. Do you think she’s going to keep it up for all eternity?”

“No, I don’t, dear. I don’t think she’ll keep it up at all.”

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“I’m not so sure. I’m tired out with it. I give her up.”

“No, you don’t, dear, any more than I do.”

“But what can I do? Is it, honestly, Edie, is it in any way my fault?”

“Well—I think, perhaps, if you’d approached her in another spirit at the first—she told me that what shocked her more than anything that night at Scarby, was, darling, your appalling flippancy. You know, if you’d taken that tone when you first spoke to me about it, I think it would have killed me. And she’s your wife, not your sister. It’s worse for her. Think of the shock it must have been to her.”

“Think of the shock it was to me. She sprang the whole thing on me at four o’clock in the morning—before I was awake. What could I do? Besides, she got over all that in the summer. And now she goes back to it worse than ever, though I haven’t done anything in between.”

“It was all brought back to her in the autumn, remember.”

“Granted that, it’s inconceivable how she can keep it up. It isn’t as if she was a hard woman.”

“No. She’s softer than any woman I know, in some ways. But she happens to be made so that that is the one thing she finds it hardest to forgive. Besides, think of her health.”

“I wonder if that really accounts for it.”

“I think it may.”

“I don’t know. It began before, and I’m afraid it’s come to stay.”

“What has come to stay?”

“The dislike she’s taken to me.”

“I don’t believe in her dislike. Give her time.”

“Oh, the time I have given her! A year and more.”

“What’s a year? Wait,” said Edith. “Wait.”

He waited; and as the months went on, Anne schooled herself, for her child’s sake, into strength and calm. Her white, brooding face grew full and tender; but its tenderness was not for him. He remained shut out from the sanctuary where she sat nursing her dream.

He suffered indescribably; but he told himself that Anne had merely taken one of those queer morbid aversions of which Gardner had told him. And at the birth of their child he looked for it to pass.

The child was born in mid-October. Majendie had sat up all night; and very early in the morning he was sent for to her room. He came, stealing in on tiptoe, dumb, with his head bowed in terror and a certain awe.

He found Anne lying in the big bed under the crucifix. Her face was dull and white, and her arms were stretched out by her sides in utter exhaustion. When he bent over her she closed her eyes, but her lips moved as if she were trying to speak to him. He felt her breath upon his face, but he could hear no words.

“What is it?” he whispered to the nurse who stood beside him. She held in one arm the new-born child, hooded and folded in a piece of flannel.

The nurse touched him on the shoulder. “She’s trying to tell you to look at your little daughter, sir.”

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He turned and saw something—something queer and red between two folds of flannel, something that stirred and drew itself into puckers, and gave forth a cry.

And as he touched the child, his strength melted in him, as it melted when he laid his hands for the first time upon its mother.

CHAPTER XIX

After the birth of her child Anne was restored to her normal poise and self-possession. She appeared the large, robust, superb creature she had once been. The serenity of her bearing proclaimed that in her motherhood her nature was fulfilled. She had given herself up to the child from the first moment that she held it to her breast. She had found again her tenderness, her gladness, and her peace.

Majendie had waited for this. He believed that if the child made her so happy, she could hardly continue to cherish an aversion from its father.

In the months that followed he witnessed the slow destruction of this hope. The very fact that Anne had become "normal" made its end more certain. There were no longer any affecting moods, any divine caprices for him to look to, nor was there much likelihood of a profounder change. Such as his wife was now, she always would be.

She had settled down.

And he had accepted the situation.

He had had his illusions. He loved the child. It was white, and weak, and sickly, as if it drew a secret bitterness from its mother's breast. It kept Anne awake at night with its crying. Once Majendie got up, and came to her, and took it from her, and it was suddenly pacified, and fell asleep in his arms. He had risen many nights after that to quiet it. It had seemed to him then that something passed between them with the small tender body his arms took from her and gave to her again. But he had abandoned that illusion now. And when he saw her with the child he said to himself, "I see. She has got all she wanted. She has no further use for me."

Thus the child that should have united separated them. Anne took from him whatever small comfort it might have given him. She was disposed to ignore those paternal passages in the night-watches, and to combat the idea of his devotion to the child. That situation he had accepted, too.

But Anne, in appearing to accept everything, accepted nothing. She was conscious of a mute rebellion, even of a certain disloyalty of the imagination. She disapproved of Majendie more than ever. She guarded her own purity now as her child's inheritance, and her motherhood strengthened her spiritual revolt. Her mind turned sometimes to

the ideal father of her child, evoking visions of the Minor Canon whom her soul had loved. Lent brought the image of the Minor Canon nearer to her, and towards his perfections she turned the tender face of her dreams, while she presented to her husband the stern face of duty. She had never swerved from that. There was no reason why she should close her door to him, since the material bond was torture to her, and the ramparts of the spiritual life rose high. Her marriage was more than ever a martyrdom and a sacrifice, redemptive, propitiatory of powers she abhorred and but dimly understood.

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Majendie was aware that she had now no attitude to him but one of apathy touched by repugnance. He accepted the apathy, but the repugnance he could not accept. The very tenderness and fineness of his nature held him back from that, and Anne found once more her refuge in his chivalry. She made no attempt to reconcile it with her estimate of him.

By the time the child was a year old their separation was complete.

As yet their good taste shrank from any acknowledgment of the rupture. Majendie did his best to cover it by a certain fineness of transition, and by a high smooth courtesy punctiliously applied. Anne responded on the same pure note; for, tried by courtesy, her breeding rang golden to the test.

She was not a woman (as Majendie had reflected several times already) to trail an untidy tragedy through the house; she had never desired to play a passionate part; and she was glad to exchange tragedy for the decent drama of convention. She was helped both by her weakness and her strength. Her soul was satisfied with its secret communion with the Unseen; her heart was filled with its profound affection for her child; her mind was appeased by appearances, and she had no doubt as to her ability to keep them up.

It was Majendie who felt the strain. His mind had an undying contempt for appearances; his heart and soul had looked to one woman for satisfaction, and could not be appeased with anything but her. Among all the things he had accepted, he accepted most of all the fact that she was perfect. Too perfect to be the helpmate of his imperfection. He shuddered at the years that were in store for him. Always to do without her, always to be tortured by the fairness of her presence and the sweetness of her voice; always to sit up late and rise up early, in order to get away from the thought of them; to come down and find her fairness and sweetness smiling politely at him over the teapot; to hunt in the morning-paper for news to interest her; to mix with business men all day, and talk business, and to return at five o'clock and find her, punctual and perfect, smiling in her duty, over another teapot; to rack his brains for something to talk about to her; not to be allowed to mention his own friends, but to have to feign indestructible interest in the Eliotts and the Gardners; to dine with the inspiration drawn again from the paper; and then, perhaps, to be read aloud to all evening, till it was time to go to bed again. That was how his days went on. The child and Edie were his only accessible sources of consolation. But Edie was dying by inches; and he had to suppress his affection for the child, as well as his passion for the mother.

For that was the thorn in Anne's side now. The child was content with her only when Majendie was not there. The moment he came into the room she would struggle from her mother's lap, and crawl frantically to his feet. Her tiny face curled in its white, angelic smile as soon as he lifted her in his arms. Little Peggy had an adorable way of turning her back on her mother and tucking her face away under Majendie's chin.

When she was cross or ailing she cried for Majendie, and refused to take food or medicine from any one but him.

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He was sitting one day in the nursery with the little year-old thing on his knees, feeding her deftly from a cup of warm milk that she had pushed away when presented by her mother. The nurse and Nanna looked kindly on the spectacle of Majendie's success, while his wife watched him steadily without a word. The nurse, presuming on her privileges, made an injudicious remark.

"She won't do anything for anybody but her daddy. I never saw such a funny little girl."

"I never saw such a shocking little flirt," said Majendie; "she takes after her mother."

"She's the living image of you, ma'am," said Nanna, conscious of the other's blunder.

"I wish she had my strength," said Anne, in a voice fine and trenchant as a sword.

Nanna and the nurse retired discreetly.

The parents looked at each other over the frail body of the little girl. Majendie's face had flushed under his wife's blow. He knew that she was thinking of Edith and her fate. The same malady had appeared in more than one member of his family, as Anne was well aware. (Her own strain was pure.) Instinctively he put his hand to the child's spine. Little Peggy sat up straight and strong enough. And another thought passed through him. His eyes conveyed it to Anne as plainly as if he had said, "I don't know about her mother's strength. She's the child of her mother's coldness."

He set the child down on Anne's lap, told her to be good there, and left them.

Anne saw how she had hurt him, and was visited with an unfamiliar pang of self-reproach. She was very nice to him all that evening. And out of his own pain a kinder thought came to him. He had been the cause of great unhappiness to Anne. There might be a sense in which the child was suffering from her mother's martyrdom. He persuaded himself that the least he could do was to leave Anne in supreme possession of her.

CHAPTER XX

What with anxiety about his daughter and his sister, and a hopeless attachment to his wife, Majendie's misery became so acute that it told upon his health. His friends, Gorst and the Hannays, noticed the change and spent themselves in persistent efforts to cheer him. And, at times when his need of distraction became imperious, he declined from Anne's lofty domesticities upon the Hannays. He liked to go over in the evening, and sit with Mrs. Hannay, and talk about his child. Mrs. Hannay was never tired of listening. The subject drew her out quite remarkably, so that Mrs. Hannay, always soft and kind, showed at her very softest and kindest. To talk to her was like resting an aching head upon the down cushion to which it was impossible not to compare her. It

was the Hannays' bitter misfortune that they had no children; but this frustration had left them hearts more hospitably open to their friends.

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Mrs. Hannay called in Prior Street, at stated intervals, to see Edith and the baby. On these occasions Anne, if taken unaware by Mrs. Hannay, was always perfect and polite, but when she knew that Mrs. Hannay was coming, she contrived adroitly to be out. Her attitude to the Hannays was one of the things she undoubtedly meant to keep up. The natural result was that Majendie was driven to an increasing friendliness, by way of making up for the slights the poor things had to endure from his wife. He was always meaning to remonstrate with Anne, and always putting off the uncomfortable moment. The subject was so mixed with painful matters that he shrank from handling it. But, with the New Year following Peggy's first birthday, circumstances forced him to take, once for all, a firm stand. Certain entanglements in the affairs of Mr. Gorst had called for his intervention. There had been important developments in his own business; Majendie was about to enter into partnership with Mr. Hannay. And Anne had given him an opportunity for protest by expressing her unqualified disapprobation of Mrs. Hannay. Mrs. Hannay had offended grossly; she had passed the limits; having no instincts, Anne maintained, to tell her where to stop. Mrs. Hannay had a passion for Peggy which she was wholly unable to conceal. Moved by a tender impulse of vicarious motherhood, she had sent her at Christmas a present of a little coat. Anne had acknowledged the gift in a note so frigid that it cut Mrs. Hannay to the heart. She had wept over it, and had been found weeping by her husband, who mentioned the incident to Majendie.

It was more than Majendie could bear; and that night, in the drawing-room (Anne had left off sitting in the study. She said it smelt of smoke), he entered on an explanation, full, brief, and clear.

"I must ask you," he said, "to behave a little better to poor Mrs. Hannay. You've never known her anything but kind, and sweet, and forgiving; and your treatment of her has been simply barbarous."

"Indeed?"

"I think so. There are reasons why you will have to ask the Hannays to dinner next week, and reasons why you will have to be nice to them."

"What reasons?"

"One's enough. I'm going into partnership with Lawson Hannay."

She stared. The announcement was a blow to her.

"Is that a reason why I should make a friend of Mrs. Hannay?"

"It's a reason why you should be civil to her. You will send an invitation to Gorst at the same time."

She winced. "That I cannot do."

“You can, dear, and you will. Gorst’s in a pretty bad way. I knew he would be. He’s got entangled now with some wretched girl, and I’ve got to disentangle him. The only way to do it is to get him to come here again.”

“And *I* am to write to him?” Her tone proclaimed the idea preposterous.

“It will come best from you, as it’s you who have kept him out of the house. You must, please, put your own feelings aside, and simply do what I ask you.”

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He rose and went to the writing-place, and prepared a place for her there.

Anne said nothing. She was considering how far it was possible to oppose him. It had always been his way to yield greatly in little things; to drift and let “things” drift till he created an illusory impression of his weakness. Then when “things” had gone too far, he would rise, as he had risen now, and take his stand with a strength the more formidable because it came as a complete surprise.

“Come,” said he, “it’s got to be done; and you may as well do it at once and get it over.”

She gave one glance at him, as if she measured his will against hers. Then she obeyed.

She handed the notes to him in silence.

“That’s all right,” said he, laying down her note to Gorst. “And this couldn’t be better. I’m glad you’ve written so charmingly to Mrs. Hannay.”

“I’m sorry that I ever seemed ungracious to her, Walter. But the other note I wrote under compulsion, as you know.”

“I don’t care how you did it, my dear, so long as it’s done.” He slipped the note to Mrs. Hannay into his pocket.

“Where are you going?” she asked anxiously.

“I’m going to take this myself to Mrs. Hannay.”

“What are you going to say to her?”

“The first thing that comes into my head.”

She called him back as he was going. “Walter—have you paid Mr. Hannay that money you owed him?”

He stood still, astounded at her knowledge, and inclined for one moment to dispute her right to question him.

“I have,” he said sternly. “I paid it yesterday.”

She breathed freely.

Majendie found Mrs. Hannay by her fireside, alone but cheerful. She gave him a little anxious look as she took his hand. “Wallie,” said she, “you’re depressed. What is it?”

He owned to the charge, but declined to give an account of himself.

She settled him comfortably among her cushions; she told him to light his pipe; and while he smoked she poured out consolation as she best knew how. She drew him on to talk of Peggy.

“That child’s going to be a comfort to you, Wallie. See if she isn’t. I wanted you to have a little son, because I thought he’d be more of a companion. But I’m glad now it’s been a little daughter.”

“So am I. Anne would have fidgeted frightfully about a son. But Peggy’ll be a help to her.”

“And what helps her will help you, my dear; mind that.”

“Oh, rather,” he said vaguely. “The worst of it is she isn’t very strong. Peggy, I mean.”

“Oh, rubbish,” said Mrs. Hannay. “*I* was a peaky, piny baby, and look at me now!”

He looked at her and laughed.

“Sarah’s coming in this evening,” said she. “I hope you won’t mind.”

“Why should I?”

“Why, indeed? Nobody need mind poor Sarah now. I don’t know what’s happened. She went abroad last year, and came back quite chastened. I suppose you know it’s all come to nothing?”

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“What has?”

“Her marriage.”

“Oh, her marriage. She has told *you* about it?”

“My dear, she’s told everybody about it. He was an angel; and he’s been going to marry her for the last four years. I say, Wallie, do you think he really was?”

“Do I think he really was an angel? Or do I think he really was going to marry her?”

“If he *was*, you know, perhaps he wouldn’t.”

“Oh no, if he was, he would; because he wouldn’t know what he was in for. Anyhow the angel has flown, has he? I fancy some rumour must have troubled his bright essence.”

Mrs. Hannay suppressed her own opinion, which was that the angel, wings and all, was merely a stage property in the comedy of respectability that poor Sarah had been playing in so long. He was one of many brilliant and entertaining fictions which had helped to restore her to her place in society. “And you really,” she repeated, “don’t mind meeting her?”

“I don’t think I mind anything very much now.”

The entrance of the lady showed him how very little there really was to mind. Lady Cayley had (as her looking-glass informed her) both gone off and come on quite remarkably in the last three years. Her face presented a paler, softer, larger surface to the eye. Her own eye had gained in meaning and her mouth in sensuous charm; while her figure had acquired a quality to which she herself gave the name of “presence.” Other women of forty might go about looking like incarnate elegies on their dead youth; Lady Cayley’s “presence” was as some great ode, celebrating the triumph of maturity.

She took the place Mrs. Hannay had vacated, settling down by Majendie among the cushions. “How delightfully unexpected,” she murmured, “to meet *you* here.”

She ignored the occasion of their last meeting, just as she had then ignored the circumstances of their last parting. Lady Cayley owed her success to her immense capacity for ignoring. In her way, she lived the glorious life of fantasy, lapped in the freshest and most beautiful illusions. Not but what she saw through every one of them, her own and other people’s; for Lady Cayley’s intelligence was marvellously subtle and astute. But the fierce will by which she accomplished her desires urged her intelligence to reject and to destroy whatever consideration was hostile to the illusion. It was thus that she had achieved respectability.

But respectability accomplished had lost all the charm of its young appeal to the imagination; and it was not agreeing very well with Lady Cayley just at present. The sight of Majendie revived in her memories of the happy past.

“Mr. Majendie, why have I not met you here before?”

Some instinct told her that if she wished him to approve of her, she must approach him with respect. He had grown terribly unapproachable with time.

He smiled in spite of himself. “We did meet, more than three years ago.”

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“I remember.” Lady Cayley’s face shone with the illumination of her memory. “So we did. Just after you were married?”

She paused discreetly. “You haven’t brought Mrs. Majendie with you?”

“N—no—er—she isn’t very well. She doesn’t go out much at night.”

“Indeed? I *did* hear, didn’t I, that you had a little—” She paused, if anything, more discreetly than before.

“A little girl. Yes. That history is a year old now.”

“Wallie!” cried Mrs. Hannay, “it’s a year and three months. And a darling she is, too.”

“I’m sure she is,” said Sarah in the softest voice imaginable. There was another pause, the discreetest of them all. “Is she like Mr. Majendie?”

“No, she’s like her mother.” Mrs. Hannay was instantly transported with the blessed vision of Peggy. “She’s got blue, blue eyes, Sarah; and the dearest little goldy ducks’ tails curling over the nape of her neck.”

Majendie’s sad face brightened under praise of Peggy.

“Sweet,” murmured Sarah. “I love them when they’re like that.” She saw how she could flatter him. If he loved to talk about the baby, *she* could talk about babies till all was blue. They talked for more than half an hour. It was the prettiest, most innocent conversation in which Sarah had ever taken part.

When Majendie had left (he seldom kept it up later than ten o’clock), she turned to Mrs. Hannay.

“What’s the matter with him?” said she. “He looks awful.”

“He’s married the wrong woman, my dear. That’s what’s the matter with him.”

“I knew he would. He was born to do it.”

“Thank goodness,” said Mrs. Hannay, “he’s got the child.”

“Oh—the child!”

She intimated by a shrug how much she thought of that consolation.

CHAPTER XXI

The new firm of Hannay & Majendie promised to do well. Hannay had a genius for business, and Majendie was carried along by the inspiration of his senior partner. Hannay was the soul of the firm and Majendie its brain. He was, Hannay maintained, an ideal partner, the indefatigable master of commercial detail.

The fourth year of his marriage found Majendie supremely miserable at home; and established, in his office, before a fair, wide prospect of financial prosperity. The office had become his home. He worked there early and late, with a dumb, indomitable industry. For the first time in his life Majendie was beginning to take an interest in his business. Disappointed in the only form of happiness that appealed to him, he applied himself gravely and steadily to shipping, finding some personal satisfaction in the thought that Anne and Peggy would benefit by this devotion. There was Peggy's education to be thought of. When she was older they would travel. There would be greater material comfort and a wider life for Anne. He himself counted for little in his schemes. At thirty-five he found himself, with all his flames extinguished, settling down into the dull habits and the sober hopes of middle age.

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To the mind of Gorst, the spectacle of Majendie in his office was, as he informed him, too sad for words. To Majendie's mind nothing could well be sadder than the private affairs of Gorst, to which he was frequently required to give his best attention.

The prodigal had been at last admitted to Prior Street on a footing of his own. He blossomed out in perpetual previous engagements whenever he was asked to dine; but he had made a bargain with Majendie by which he claimed unlimited opportunity for seeing Edie as the price of his promise to reform. This time Majendie was obliged to intimate to him that his reform must be regarded as the price of his admission.

For, this time, in the long year of his exile, the prodigal's prodigality had exceeded the measure of all former years. And, to his intense surprise, he found that Majendie drew the line somewhere. In consequence of this, and of the "entanglement" to which Majendie had once referred, the aspect of Gorst's affairs was peculiarly dark and threatening.

In the spring of the year they gathered to their climax. One afternoon Gorst appeared in Majendie's office, sat down with a stricken air, and appealed to his friend to help him out.

"I thought you *were* out," said Majendie.

"So I am. It's because I'm so well out that I'm in for it. Evans's have turned her off. She's down on her luck—and—well—you see, *now* she wants me to marry her."

"I see. Well—"

"Well, of course I can't. Maggie's a dear little thing, but—you see—I'm not the first."

"You're sure of that?"

"Certain. She confessed, poor girl. Besides, I knew it. I'm not a brute. I'd marry her if I'd been the first and only one. I'd marry her if I were sure I'd be the last. I'd marry her, as it is, if I cared enough for her. Always provided I could keep her. But you know—"

"You don't care and you can't keep her. What are you going to do for her?"

Gorst in his anguish glared at Majendie.

"I can't do anything. That's the damnedest part of it. I'm simply cleaned out, till I get a berth somewhere."

Majendie looked grave. This time the prodigal had devoured his living. "You're going to leave her there, then. Is that it?"

“No, it isn’t. There’s another fellow who’d marry her, if she’d have him, but she won’t. That’s it.”

“Because she’s fond of you, I suppose?”

“Oh, I don’t know about being fond,” said Gorst sulkily. “She’s fond of anybody.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“I’d be awfully glad if you’d go and see her.”

“See her?”

“Yes, and explain the situation. I can’t. She won’t let me. She goes mad when I try. She keeps on worrying at it from morning to night. When I don’t go, she writes. And it knocks me all to pieces.”

“If she’s that sort, what good do you suppose I’ll do by seeing her?”

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“Oh, she’ll listen to reason from any one but me. And there are things you can say to her that I can’t. I say, will you?”

“I will if you like. But I don’t suppose it will do one atom of good. It never does, you know. Where does the woman live?”

He took down the address on the visiting-card that Gorst gave him.

Between six and seven that evening he presented himself at one of many tiny, two-storied, red brick and stucco houses that stood in a long flat street, each with a narrow mat of grass laid before its bay-window. It was the new quarter of the respectable milliners and clerks; and Majendie gathered that the prodigal had taken some pains to lodge his Maggie with decent people. He reasoned farther that such an arrangement could only be possible, given the complete rupture of their relations.

A clean, kindly woman opened the door. She admitted with some show of hesitation that Miss Forrest was at home, and led him to a sitting-room on the upper floor. As he followed her he heard a door open; a dress rustled on the landing, and another door opened and shut again.

Maggie was not in the room as Majendie entered. From signs of recent occupation he gathered that she had risen up and fled at his approach.

The woman went into the adjoining room and returned, politely embarrassed. “Miss Forrest is very sorry, sir, but she can’t see anybody.”

He wrote his name on Gorst’s card and sent her back with it.

Then Maggie came to him.

He remembered long afterwards the manner of her coming; how he heard her blow her poor nose outside the door before she entered; how she stood on the threshold and looked at him, and made him a stiff little bow; how she approached shyly and slowly, with her arms hanging awkwardly at her sides, and her eyes fixed on him in terror, as if she were drawn to him against her will; how she held Gorst’s card tight in her poor little hand; how her eyes had foreknowledge of his errand and besought him to spare her; and how in her awkwardness she yet preserved her inimitable grace.

He could hardly believe that this was the girl he had once seen in Evans’s shop when he was buying flowers for Anne. The girl in Evans’s shop was only a pretty girl. Maggie, at five-and-twenty, living under Gorst’s “protection,” and attired according to his taste, was almost (but not quite) a pretty lady. Maggie was neither inhumanly tall, nor inhumanly slender; she was simply and supremely feminine. She was dressed delicately in black, a choice which made brilliant the beauty of her colouring. Her hair was abundant, fawn-dark, laced with gold. Her face was a full short oval. Its whiteness

was the tinged whiteness of pure cream, with a rose in it that flamed, under Maggie's swift emotions, to a sudden red. She had soft grey eyes dappled with a tawny green. Her little high-arched nose was sensitive to the constant play of her upper lip;

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and that lip was so short that it couldn't always cover the tips of her little white teeth. Majendie judged that Maggie's mouth was the prettiest feature in her face, and there was something about it that reminded him, preposterously, of Anne. The likeness bothered him, till he discovered that it lay in that trick of the lifted lip. But the small charm that was so brief and divine an accident in Anne was perpetual in Maggie. He thought he should get tired of it in time.

Maggie had been crying. Her sobs had left her lips still parted; her eyelids were swollen; there were little ashen shades and rosy flecks all over her pretty face. Her diminutive muslin handkerchief was limp with her tears. As he looked at her he realised that he had a painful and disgusting task before him, and that there would be no intelligence in the girl to help him out.

He bade her sit down; for poor Maggie stood before him humbly. He told her briefly that his friend, Mr. Gorst, had asked him to explain things to her, and he was beginning to explain them, very gently, when Maggie cut him short.

"It's not that I want to be married," she said sadly. "Mr. Mumford would *marry* me."

"Well—then—" he suggested, but Maggie shook her head. "Isn't he nice to you, Mr. Mumford?"

"He's nice enough. But I can't marry 'im. I won't. I don't love 'im. I can't—Mr. Magendy—because of Charlie."

She looked at him as if she thought he would compel her to marry Mr. Mumford.

"Oh dear—" said Maggie, surprised at herself, as she began to cry again.

She pressed the little muslin handkerchief to her eyes; not making a show of her grief; but furtive, rather, and ashamed.

And Majendie took in all the pitifulness of her sweet, predestined nature. Pretty Maggie could never have been led astray; she had gone out, fervent and swift, dream-drunk, to meet her destiny. She was a creature of ardours, of tenderness, and of some perverse instinct that it would be crude to call depravity. Where her heart led, her flesh, he judged, had followed; that was all. Her brain had been passive in her sad affairs. Maggie had never schemed, or calculated, or deliberated. She had only felt.

"See here," he said. "Charlie *can't* marry you. He can't marry anybody."

"Why not?"

“Well, for one thing, he’s too poor.”

“I know he’s poor.”

“And you wouldn’t be happy if he did marry you. He couldn’t make you happy.”

“I’d be unhappy, then.”

“Yes. And he’d be unhappy, too. Is that what you want?”

“No—no—no! You don’t understand.”

“I’ll try to. What do you want? Tell me.”

“To help him.”

“You can’t help him,” he said softly.

“I couldn’t help him if ’e was rich. I can help him if he’s poor.”

He smiled. “How do you make that out, Maggie?”

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“Well—he ought to marry a lady, I know. But he can’t marry a lady. She’d cost him pounds and pounds. If he married me I’d cost him nothing. I’d work for him.”

Majendie was startled at this reasoning. Maggie was more intelligent than he had thought.

She went on. “I can cook, I can do housework, I can sew. I’m learning dressmaking. Look—” She held up a coarse lining she had been stitching at when he came. From its appearance he judged that Maggie was as yet a novice in her art.

“I’d work my fingers to the bone for him.”

“And you think he’d be happy seeing you do that? A gentleman can’t let his wife work for him. He has to work for her.” He paused. “And there’s another reason, Maggie, why he can’t marry you.”

Maggie’s head drooped. “I know,” she said. “But I thought—if he was poor—he wouldn’t mind so much. They don’t, sometimes.”

“I don’t think you quite know what I mean.”

“I do. You mean he’s afraid. He won’t trust me. He doesn’t think I’m very good. But I would be—if he married me—I would—I would indeed.”

“Of course you would. Whatever happens you’re going to be good. That wasn’t what I meant by the other reason.”

Her face flamed. “Has he left off caring for me?”

He was silent, and the flame died in her face.

“Does he care for somebody else?”

“It would be better for you if you could think so.”

“*I* know,” she said; “it’s the lady he used to send flowers to. I thought it was all right. I thought it was funerals.”

She sat very still, taking it in.

“Is he going to marry her?”

“No. He isn’t going to marry her.”

“She’s not got enough money, I suppose. *She* can’t help him.”

“You must leave him free to marry somebody who can.”

He waited to see what she would do. He expected tears, and a storm of jealous rage. But all Maggie did was to sit stiller than ever, while her tears gathered, and fell, and gathered again.

Majendie rose. “I may tell Mr. Gorst that you accept his explanation? That you understand?”

“Am I never to see him again?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Nor write to him?”

“It’s better not. It only worries him.”

She looked round her, dazed by the destruction of her dream.

“What am I to do, then? Where am I to go to?”

“Stay where you are, if you’re comfortable. Your rent will be paid for you, and you shall have a small allowance.”

“But who’s going to give it me?”

“Mr. Gorst would, if he could. As he cannot, I am.”

“You mustn’t,” said she. “I can’t take it from you.”

He had approached this point with a horrible dread lest she should misunderstand him.

“Better to take it from me than from him, or anybody else,” he said significantly; “if it must be.”

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But Maggie had not misunderstood.

“I can work,” she said. “I can pay a little *now*.”

“No, no. Never mind about that. Keep it—keep all you earn.”

“I can’t keep it. I’ll pay you back again. I’ll work my fingers to the bone.”

“Oh, not for me” he said, laughing, as he took up his hat to go.

Maggie lifted her sad head, and faced him with all her candour.

“Yes,” she said, “for you.”

CHAPTER XXII

Majendie owned to a pang of shame as he turned from Maggie’s door. In justice to Gorst it could not be said that he had betrayed the passionate, perverted creature. And yet there was a sense in which Maggie’s betrayal cried to Heaven, like the destruction of an innocent. Majendie’s finer instinct had surrendered to the charm of her appealing and astounding purity, by which he meant her cleanness from the mercenary taint. He had seen himself contending, grossly, with a fierce little vulgar schemer, who (he had been convinced) would hang on to poor Gorst’s honour by fingers of a murderous tenacity. His own experience helped him to the vision. And Maggie had come to him, helpless as an injured child, and feverish from her hurt. He had asked her what she had wanted with Gorst, and it seemed that what Maggie wanted was “to help him.”

He said to himself that he wouldn’t be in Gorst’s place for a good deal, to have that on his conscience.

As it happened, the prodigal’s conscience was by no means easy. He called in Prior Street that evening to learn the result of his friend’s intervention. He submitted humbly to Majendie’s judgment of his conduct. He agreed that he had been a brute to Maggie, that he might certainly do worse than marry her, and that his best reason for not marrying her was his knowledge that Maggie was ten times too good for him. He was only disposed to be critical of his friend’s diplomacy when he learned that Majendie had not succeeded in persuading Maggie to marry Mr. Mumford. But, in the end, he allowed himself to be convinced of the futility, not to say the indecency, of pressing Mr. Mumford upon the girl at the moment of her fine renunciation. He admitted that he had known all along that Maggie had her own high innocence. And when he realised the extent to which Majendie had “got him out of it,” his conscience was roused by a salutary shock of shame.

But it was to Edith that he presented the perfection of his penitence. From his stillness and abasement she gathered that, this time, her prodigal had fallen far. That night, before his departure, he confirmed her sad suspicions.

“It’s awfully good of you,” he said stiffly, “to let me come again.”

“Good of me? Charlie!” Her eyes and voice reproached him for this strained formality.

“Yes. Mrs. Majendie’s perfectly right. I’ve justified her bad opinion of me.”

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“I don’t know that you’ve justified it. I don’t know what you’ve done. No more does she, my dear. And you didn’t think, did you, that Walter and I were going to give you up?”

“I’d have forgiven you if you had.”

“I couldn’t have forgiven myself, or Walter.”

“Oh, Walter—if it hadn’t been for him I should have gone to pieces this time. He’s pulled me out of the tightest place I ever was in.”

“I’m sure he was very glad to do it.”

“I wish to goodness I could do the same for him.”

“Why do you say that, Charlie?”

The prodigal became visibly embarrassed. He seemed to be considering the propriety of a perfect frankness.

“I say, you don’t mind my asking, do you? Has anything gone wrong with him and Mrs. Majendie?”

“What makes you think so?”

“Well, you see, I’ve got a sort of notion that she doesn’t understand him. She’s never realised in the least the stuff he’s made of. He’s the finest man I know on God’s earth, and somehow, it strikes me that she doesn’t see it.”

“Not always, I’m afraid.”

“Well—see here—you’ll tell her, won’t you, what he’s done for me? That ought to open her eyes a bit. You can give me away as much as ever you like, if you want to rub it in. Only tell her that I’ve chucked it—chucked it for good. He’s made me loathe myself. Tell her that I’m not as bad as she thinks me, but that I probably would be if it hadn’t been for him. And you, Edie, only I’m going to leave you out of it.”

“You certainly may.”

“It’s because she knows all that already; and the point is to get her to appreciate him.”

Edith smiled. “I see. And I’m to make what I like of you, if I can only get her to appreciate him?”

“Yes. Tell her that, as far as I’m concerned, I respect her attitude profoundly.”

“Very well. I’ll tell her just what you’ve told me.”

She spoke of it the next day, when Anne came to read to her in the afternoon. Anne was as punctual as ever in her devotion, but the passion of it had been transferred to Peggy. The child was with them, playing feebly at her mother's knee, and Anne's mood was propitious. She listened intently. It was the first time that she had brought any sympathy into a discussion of the prodigal.

"Did he tell you," said she, "what Walter did for him?"

"No."

"Nor what had happened?"

"No. I didn't like to ask him. Whatever it was, it has gone very deep with him. Something has made a tremendous difference."

"Has it made him change his ways?"

"I believe it has. You see, Nancy, that's what Walter was trying for. He always had that sort of hold on him. That was why he was so anxious not to have him turned away."

Anne's face was about to harden, when Peggy gave the sad little cry that brought her mother's arms about her. Peggy had been trying vainly to climb into Anne's lap. She was now lifted up and held there while her feet trampled the broad maternal knees, and her hands played with Anne's face; stroking and caressing; smoothing her tragic brow to tenderness; tracing with soft, attentive fingers the line of her small, close mouth, until it smiled.

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Anne seized the little hands and kissed them. “My lamb,” she said, “what are you doing to your poor mother’s face?” She did not see, as Edith saw, that Peggy, a consummate little sculptor, was moulding her mother’s face into the face of love.

“I should never have dreamed,” said Anne, “of turning him away, if I had thought he was really going to reform. Besides, I was afraid he would be bad for Walter.”

“It didn’t strike you that Walter might be good for him?”

“It struck me that I had to be strong for Walter.”

“Ah, Walter can be strong for all of us.” She paused on that, to let it sink in. Anne’s face was thoughtful.

“Anne, if you believed that all I’ve said to you was true, would you still object to having Charlie here?”

“Certainly not. I would be the first to welcome him.”

“Then, will you write to him of your own accord, and tell him that, if what I’ve told you is true, you’ll be glad to see him? He knows why you couldn’t receive him before, dear, and he respects you for it.”

Anne thought better of Mr. Gorst for that respect. It was the proper attitude; the attitude she had once vainly expected Majendie to take.

“After all, what have I to do with it? He comes to see you.”

“Yes, dear; but I shan’t always be here for him to see. And if I thought that you would help Walter to look after him—will you?”

“I will do what I can. My little one!”

Anne bowed her head over the soft forehead of her little one. She had a glad and solemn vision of herself as the protector of the penitent. It was in keeping with all the sanctities and pieties she cherished. She had not forgotten that Canon Wharton (a saint if ever there was one) had enjoined on her the utmost charity to Mr. Gorst, should he turn from his iniquity.

She was better able to admit the likelihood of that repentance because Mr. Gorst had never stood in any close relation to her. His iniquity had not profoundly affected her. But she found it impossible to realise that Majendie’s influence could count for anything in his redemption. Where her husband was concerned Anne’s mind was made up, and it refused to acknowledge so fine a merit in so gross a man. She was by this time comfortably fixed in her attitude, and any shock to it caused her positive uneasiness.

Her attitude was sacred; it had become one of the pillars of her spiritual life. She was constrained to look for justification lest she should put herself wrong with God.

She considered that she had found it in Majendie's habits, his silences, his moods, the facility of his decline upon the Hannays and the Ransomes. He was determined to deteriorate, to sink to their level.

To-night, when he remarked tentatively that he thought he would dine at the Hannays', she made an effort to stop him.

"Must you go?" said she. "You are always dining with them."

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“Why?—do you mind?” said he.

“Well—when it’s night after night—”

“Is it that you mind my dining with the Hannays, or my leaving you?”

“I mind both.”

“Oh—if I’d thought you wanted me to stay—”

She made no answer, but rose and led the way to the dining-room.

He followed. Her arm had touched him as she passed him in the doorway, and his heart beat thickly, as he realised the strength of her dominion over him. She had only to say “Stay,” and he stayed; or “Come,” and she could always draw him to her. He had never turned away. His very mind was faithful to her. It had not even conceived, and it would have had difficulty in grasping, the idea of happiness without her.

To-night he was profoundly moved by this intimation of his wife’s desire to have him with her. His surprise and satisfaction made him curiously shy. He sat through two courses without speaking, without lifting his eyes from his plate; brooding over their separation. He was wondering whether, after all, it had been so inevitable; whether he had misunderstood her; whether, if he had had the sense to understand, he might not have kept her. It was possible she had been wounded by his absences. He had never explained them. He could not tell her that she had made him afraid to be alone with her.

The situation, which he had accepted so obediently, had been more than a mere mortal man could endure. Especially in the terrible five minutes after dinner, before they settled for the evening, when each sat waiting to see if the other had anything to say. Sometimes Majendie would take up his book and Anne her work. She would sew, and sew, patient, persistent, in her tragic silence. And when he could bear it no longer, he would put down his book and go quietly away, to relieve the intolerable constraint that held her. Sometimes it was Anne who read, while he smoked and brooded. Then, in the warm, consenting stillness of the summer evenings (they were now in June), her presence seemed to fill the room; he was possessed by the sense of it; by the sound of her breathing; by the stirring of her body in the chair, or of her fingers on the pages of her book; and he would get up suddenly and leave her, dragging his passion from the sight of her.

As he considered these things, many perplexities, many tendernesses, stirred in him and kept him still.

Anne watched him from the other end of the table, and her thoughts debased him. He seemed to her disagreeably incommunicative, and she had found an ignoble explanation of his mood. There had been too much salt in the soup, and now there was

something wrong with the salmon. He had not responded to her apology for these accidents, and she supposed that they had been enough to spoil his evening with her.

She had come to consider him a creature grossly wedded to material things.

“It’s a pity you stayed,” said she. “Mrs. Hannay would have given you a better dinner.”

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He had nothing to say to so preposterous a charge. His eyes were fixed more than ever on his plate. She saw his face flush as he bowed his head in eating; she allowed her fancy to rest in its morbid abhorrence of the act, and in its suspicion of its grossness. She went on, lashed by her fancy. "I cannot understand your liking to go there so much, when you might go to the Eliotts or the Gardners. They're always asking you, and you haven't been near them for a year."

"Well, you see, the Hannays let me do what I like. They don't bother me."

"Do the Eliotts bother you?"

"They bore me. Horribly."

"And the Gardners?"

"Sometimes—a little."

"And Canon Wharton? No. I needn't ask."

He laughed. "You needn't. *He* bores me to extinction."

"I'm sorry it is my friends who are so unfortunate."

"It's your husband who's unfortunate. He is not an intellectual person. Nor a spiritual one, either, I'm afraid."

He looked up. Anne had finished her morsel, and her fingers played irritably with the hand-bell at her side. Poor Majendie's abstraction had combined with his appetite to make him deplorably slow over his dinner. She still sat watching him, pure from appetite, in resignation that veiled her contempt of the male hunger so incomprehensibly prolonged. He had come to dread more than anything those attentive, sacrificial eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "to keep you waiting."

She rang the bell. "Will you have the lamp lit in the drawing-room or the study?"

He looked at her. There was no lamp for him in her eyes.

"Whichever you like. I think I shall go over to the Hannays', after all."

He went; and by the lamp in the drawing-room Anne sat and brooded in her turn.

She said to herself: "It's no use my trying to keep him from them. It only irritates him. He lets me see plainly that he prefers their society to mine. I don't wonder. They can

flatter him and kow-tow to him, and I cannot. He can be a little god to them; and he must know what he is to me. We haven't a thought in common—not a feeling—and he cannot bear to feel himself inferior. As for me—if I've married beneath me, I must pay the penalty."

But there was no penalty for her in these reflections. They satisfied her. They were part of the curious mental process by which she justified herself.

CHAPTER XXIII

Up to that moment when he had looked across the dinner table at Anne, Majendie had felt secure in the bonds of his marriage. Anne's repugnance had broken the natural tie; but up to that moment he had never doubted that the immaterial link still held. If at times her presence was a bodily torment, at other times he felt it as a spiritual protection. His immense charity made allowance for all the extraordinary

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attitudes of Anne. In his imagination they reduced themselves to one, the attitude of inscrutable physical repugnance. He had accepted (as he had told himself so often) the situation she had created. It appeared to him, of all situations, the crudest and most simple. It had its merciful limits. The discomfort of it, once vague, had grown, to his thwarted senses, almost brutally defined. He could at least say, “It was here the trouble began, and here, therefore, it shall end.”

He thought he had sounded the depths of her repugnance, and could measure by it his own misery. He said, “At any rate I know where I am”; and he believed that if he stayed where he was, if he respected his wife’s prejudices, her prejudices would be bound to respect him. He could not make her love him, but at least he considered that he had justified his claim to her respect.

And now she had opened his eyes, and he had looked at her, and seen things that had not (till that moment) come into his vision of their separation. He saw subtler hostilities, incurable, indestructible repugnances, attitudes at which his charity stood aghast. The situation (so far from being crude and simple) involved endless refinements and complexities of torture. He despaired now of ever reaching her.

Majendie had caught his first clear sight of the spiritual ramparts.

“I’m not good enough for her,” he said. She had kept him with her that evening, not because she wanted him to stay, but because she wanted him to understand.

He had shown her that he understood by going to the friends for whom he was good enough, who were good enough for him.

He went more than ever now, sometimes to the Ransomes, oftener to Gorst, oftenest of all to Lawson Hannay. He liked more than ever to sit with Mrs. Hannay; to lean up against the everlasting soft cushion she presented to his soreness. More than ever he liked to talk to her of simple things; of their acquaintance; of Edith, who had been a little better, certainly no worse, this summer; of Peggy, of Peggy’s future and her education. He would sit for hours on Mrs. Hannay’s sofa, his body leaning back, his head bowed forward, his chin sunk on his breast, listening attentively, yet with a dazed and rather stupid expression, to Mrs. Hannay’s conversation. His own was sometimes monotonous and a little dull. He was growing even physically heavy. But Mrs. Hannay did not seem to mind.

There was a certain justice in Anne’s justification. He didn’t consciously prefer the Hannays’ society to hers; but he actually found it more agreeable, and for the reasons she suspected. They did worship him; and their worship did make him feel superior, perhaps when he was least so. They did flatter him; for, as Mrs. Hannay said, “He

needed a little patting on the back, now and then, poor fellow." And perhaps he was really sinking a little to her level; he had so lost his sense of her vulgarity.

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He used to wonder how it was that she had kept Lawson straight. Perfectly straight, Lawson had been, ever since his marriage. Possibly, probably, if he had married a wife too inflexibly refined, he would have deviated somewhat from that perfect straightness. His tastes had always been a little vulgar. But there was no reason why he should go abroad to gratify them when he possessed the paragon of amenable vulgarity at home. The Gardners, whose union was almost miraculously complete, were not in their way more admirably mated. And Lawson's reform must have been a stiff job for any woman to tackle at the start.

A woman of marvellous ingenuity and tact. For she had kept Lawson straight without his knowing it. She had played off one of Lawson's little weaknesses against the other; had set, for instance, his fantastic love of eating against his sordid little tendency to drink. Lawson was now a model of sobriety.

And as she kept Lawson straight without his knowing it, she helped Majendie, too, without his knowing it, to hold his miserable head up. She ignored, resolutely, his attitude of dejection. She reminded him that if he could make nothing else out of his life he could make money. She convinced him that life, the life of a prosperous ship-owner in Scale, was worth living, as long as he had Edith and Anne and Peggy to make money for, especially Peggy.

And Majendie became more and more absorbed in his business, and more and more he found his pleasure in it; in making money, that is to say, for the persons whom he loved.

He had come even to find pleasure in making it for a person whom he did not love, and hardly knew. He provided himself with one punctual and agreeable sensation every week when he sent off the cheque for the small sum that was poor Maggie's allowance. Once a week (he had settled it), not once a month. For Maggie might (for anything he knew) be thriftless. She might feast for three days, and then starve; and so find her sad way to the street.

But Maggie was not thriftless. First at irregular intervals, weeks it might be, or months, she had sent him various diminutive sums towards the payment of her debt. Maggie was strictly honourable. She had got a little work, she said, and hoped soon to have it regularly. And soon she began to return to him, weekly, the half of her allowance. These sums he put by for her, adding the interest. Some day there would be a modest hoard for Maggie. He pleased himself, now and then, by wondering what the girl would do with it. Buy a wedding-gown perhaps, when she married Mr. Mumford. Time, he felt, was Mr. Mumford's best ally. In time, when she had forgotten Gorst, Maggie would marry him.

Maggie's small business entailed a correspondence out of all proportion to it. He had not yet gone to see her. Some day, he supposed, he would have to go, to see whether the girl, as he phrased it vaguely, was "really all right." With little creatures like Maggie

you never could be sure. There would always be the possibility of Gorst's successor, and he had no desire to make Maggie's maintenance easier for him. He had made her independent of all iniquitous sources of revenue.

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At last, suddenly, the postal orders and the letters ceased; for three weeks, four, five weeks. Then Majendie began to feel uneasy. He would have to look her up.

Then one morning, early in September, a letter was brought to him at the office (Maggie's letters were always addressed to the office, never to his house). There was no postal order with it. For three weeks Maggie had been ill, then she had been very poorly, very weak, too weak to sit long at work. And so she had lost what work she had; but she hoped to get more when she was strong again. When she was strong the repayments would begin again, said Maggie. She hoped Mr. Majendie would forgive her for not having sent any for so long. She was very sorry. But, if it wasn't too much to ask, she would be very glad if Mr. Majendie would come some day and see her.

He sent her an extra remittance by the bearer, and went to see her the next day. His conscience reproached him for not having gone before.

Mrs. Morse, the landlady, received him with many appearances of relief. In her mind he was evidently responsible for Maggie. He was the guardian, the benefactor, the sender of rent.

"She's been very ill, sir," said Mrs. Morse; "but she wouldn't 'ave you written to till she was better."

"Why not?"

"I'm sure I can't say, sir, wot 'er feeling was."

It struck him as strange and pathetic that Maggie could have a feeling. He was soon to know that she had little else.

He found her sitting by a fire, wrapped in a shawl. It slipped from her as she rose, as she leaped, rather, from her seat like one unnerved by a sudden shock. He stooped and picked up the shawl before he spoke, that he might give the poor thing time to recover herself.

"Did I startle you?" he said.

Maggie was still breathing hard. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she said weakly, and sat down again. Maggie was very weak. She was not like the Maggie he remembered, the creature of brilliant flesh and blood. Maggie's flesh was worn and limp; it had a greenish tint; her blood no longer flowed in the cream rose of her face. She had parted with the sources of her radiant youth.

She seemed to him to be suffering from severe anaemia. A horrible thought came to him. Had the little thing been starving herself to save enough to repay him?

“What have you been doing to yourself, Maggie?” he said brusquely.

Maggie looked frightened. “Nothing,” she said.

“Working your fingers to the bone?”

She shook her head. “I was no good at dressmaking. They wouldn’t have me.”

“Well—” he said kindly.

“There are a great many things I can do. I can make wreaths and crosses and bookays. I made them at Evans’s. I could go back there. Mr. Evans would have me. But Mrs. Evans wouldn’t.” She paused, surveying her immense resources. “Or I could do the flowers for people’s parties. I used to. Do you think—perhaps—they’d have me?”

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Maggie's pitiful doubt was always whether "they" would "have" her.

"Yes," he said, smiling at her pathos, "perhaps they would."

"Or I could do embroidery. I learned, years ago, at Madame Ponting's. I could go back. Only Madame wouldn't have me." (Maggie was palpably foolish; but her folly was adorable.)

"Why wouldn't she have you?"

Maggie reddened, and he forbore to press the unkind inquiry. He gathered that Maggie's ways had been not unknown to Madame Ponting, "years ago."

"Would you like to see some of my embroidery?"

He assented gravely. He did not want to turn Maggie from the path of industry, which was to her the path of virtue.

She went to a cupboard, and returned with her arms full of little rolls and parcels wrapped in paper. She unfolded and spread on the table various squares, and strips, and little pieces, silk and woollen stuffs, and canvas, exquisitely embroidered. There were flowers in most of the patterns—flowers, as it appeared, of Maggie's fancy.

"I say, did you do all that yourself, Maggie?"

"Yes, that's what I *can* do. I make the patterns out of me head, and they're mostly flowers, because I love 'em. It's pretty, isn't it?" said Maggie, stroking tenderly a pattern of pansies, blue pansies, such as she had never sold in Evans's shop.

"Very pretty—very beautiful."

"I've sold lots—to a lady, before I was ill. See here."

Maggie unfolded something that was pinned in silver paper with a peculiar care. It was a small garment, in some faint-coloured silk, embroidered with blue pansies (always blue pansies).

"That's a frock," said she, "for a little girl. You've got a little girl—a little fair girl."

He reddened. How the devil, he wondered, does she know that I have a little fair girl? "I don't think it would fit her," he said.

Maggie reddened now.

"Oh—I don't want you to buy it. I don't want you to buy anything. Only to tell people."

So much he promised her. He tried to think of all the people he could tell. Mrs. Hannay, Mrs. Ransome, Mrs. Gardner—no, Mrs. Gardner was Anne's friend. If Anne had been different he could have told Anne. He could have told her everything. As it was—No.

He rose to go, but, instead of going, he stayed and bought several pieces of embroidery for Mrs. Hannay, and the frock, not for Peggy, but for Mrs. Ransome's little girl. They haggled a good deal over the price, owing to Maggie's obstinate attempts to ruin her own market. (She must always have been bent on ruining herself, poor child.) Then he tried to go again, and Mrs. Morse came in with the tea-tray, and Maggie insisted on making him a cup of tea, and of course he had to stay and drink it.

Maggie revived over her tea-tray. Her face flushed and rounded again to an orb of jubilant content. And he asked her if she were happy. If she liked her work.

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She hesitated. “It’s this way,” she said. “Sometimes I can’t think of anything else. I can sit and sit at it for weeks on end. I don’t want anything else. Then, all of a sudden, something comes over me, and I can’t put in another stitch. Sometimes—when it comes—I’m that tired, it’s as if I ’ad weights on me arms, and I couldn’t ’old them up to sew. And sometimes, again, I’m that restless, it’s as if you’d lit a fire under me feet. I’m frightened,” said Maggie, “when I feel it coming. But I’m only tired now.”

She broke off; but by the expression of her face, he saw that her thoughts ran underground. He wondered where they would come out again.

“I haven’t seen anybody this time,” said Maggie, “for six months.”

“Not even Mr. Mumford?”

“Oh, no, not him. I don’t want to see him.” And her thoughts ran back to where they started from.

“It hasn’t come lately,” said Maggie, “it hasn’t come for quite a long time.”

“What hasn’t come?”

“What I’ve been telling you—what I’m afraid of.”

“It won’t come, Maggie,” he said quickly. (He might have been her father or the doctor.)

“If it does, it’ll be worse now.”

“Why should it be?”

“Because I can’t get away from it. I’ve nowhere to go to. Other girls have got their friends. I’ve got nobody. Why, Mr. Majendie—think—there isn’t a place in this whole town where I can go to for a cup of tea.”

“You’ll make friends.”

She shook her head, guarding her little air of tragic wisdom.

Mrs. Morse popped her head in at the door, and out again.

“Is that woman kind to you?”

“Yes, very kind.”

“She looks after you well?”

“Looks after me? I don’t want looking after.”

“Takes care of you, I mean. Gives you plenty of nice nourishing things to eat?”

“Yes, plenty of nice things. And she comes and sits with me sometimes.”

“You like her?”

“I love her.”

“That’s all right. You see, you *have* got a friend, after all.”

“Yes,” said Maggie mournfully; and he saw that her thoughts were with Gorst. “But it isn’t the same thing, is it?”

Majendie could not honestly say it was; so he smiled, instead.

“It’s a shame,” said she, “to go on like this when you’ve been so good to me.”

“If I wasn’t, you couldn’t do it, could you? But what you want me to understand is that, however good I’ve been, I haven’t made things more amusing for you.”

“No, no,” said Maggie vehemently, “I didn’t mean that. Indeed I didn’t. I only wanted you to know—”

“How good *you*’ve been. Is that it? Well, because you’re good, there’s no reason why you should be dull. Is there?”

“I don’t know,” said Maggie simply.

“See here, supposing that, instead of sending me all you earn, you keep some of it to play with? Get Mrs. What’s-her-name to go with you to places.”

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“I don’t want to go to places,” she said. “I want to send it all to you.”

He lapsed again into his formula. “There really is no reason why you should.”

“I want to. That’s a reason, isn’t it?” said she. She said it shyly, tentatively, solemnly almost, as if it were some point in an infant’s metaphysics. There was no assurance in her tone, nothing to remind him that Maggie had been the spoiled child of pleasure whose wants were always reasons; nothing to suggest the perverted consciousness of power.

“Well—” He straightened himself stiffly for departure.

“Are you going?” she said.

“I must.”

“Will you—come again?”

“Yes, I’ll come, if you want me.”

He saw again how piteous, how ill she looked. A pang of compassion went through him. And after the pang there came a warm, delicious tremor. It recalled the feeling he used to have when he did things for Edith, a sensation singularly sweet and singularly pure.

It was consolation in his misery to realise that any one could want him, even poor, perverted Maggie.

Maggie said nothing. But the flame rose in her face.

Downstairs Majendie found Mrs. Morse waiting for him at the door. “What’s been the matter with her?” he asked.

“I don’t rightly know, sir. But between you and me, I think she’s fretted herself ill.”

“Well, you’ve got to see that she doesn’t fret, that’s all.”

He gave into her palm an earnest of the reward of vigilance.

That night he sent off the embroidered pieces to Mrs. Hannay, and the embroidered frock to Mrs. Ransome; with a note to each lady recommending Maggie, and Maggie’s beautiful and innocent art.

CHAPTER XXIV

As Majendie declined more and more on his inferior friendships, Anne became more and more dependent on the Eliotts and the Gardners. Her evenings would have been intolerable without them. Edith no longer needed her. Edith, they still said, was growing better, or certainly no worse; and Mr. Gorst spent his evenings in Prior Street with Edie. The prodigal had made his peace with Anne, and came and went unquestioned. He was bent on making up for his long loss of Edie, and for the still longer loss of her that had to be. They felt that his brilliant presence kept the invading darkness from her door.

Autumn passed, and winter and spring, and in summer Edith was still with them.

Anne was no longer a stranger in her husband's house since her child had been born in it; but in the long light evenings, after Peggy had been put to bed at six o'clock, Peggy's mother was once more alien and alone. It was then that she would get up and leave her husband (why not, since he left her?) and slip from Prior Street to Thurston Square; then that she moved once more superbly in her superior circle. She was proud of her circle.

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It was so well defined; and if the round was small, that only meant that there was no room in it for borderlands and other obscure and undesirable places. The commercial world, so terrifying in its approaches, remained, and always would remain, outside it. Sitting in Mrs. Eliott's drawing-room she forgot that the soul of Scale on Humber was given over to tallow, and to timber, and Dutch cheeses. But for her constant habit of depreciation, she could almost have forgotten that her husband was only a ship-owner, and a ship-owner who had gone into a horrible partnership with Lawson Hannay. It appeased her to belittle him by comparisons. He had no spiritual fineness and fire like Canon Wharton, no intellectual interests like Mr. Eliott and Dr. Gardner. She had long ago noticed his inability to converse with any brilliance; she was now aware of the heaviness, the physical slowness, that was growing on him. He was losing the personal distinction that had charmed her once, and made her proud to be seen with him at gatherings of the fastidious in Thurston Square.

Her fancy, still belittling him, ranked him now with the dull business men of Scale. In a few years, she said, he will be like Lawson Hannay.

A change was coming over her. She was no longer apathetic. Now that she saw less of her husband she thought more frequently of him, if only to his disparagement. At times the process was unconscious; at times, when she caught her thoughts dealing thus uncharitably with him, she was touched by a pang of contrition and of shame. At times she was pulled up in her thinking with a sudden shock. She said to herself that he used to be so different, and her heart would turn gently to the man he used to be. Then, as in the sad days of her bridal home-coming, the dear immortal memory of him rose up before her, and pleaded mercy for the insufferably mortal man. She saw him, with the body and the soul that had been once so familiar to her, slender, alert, and strong, a creature of appealing goodness and tenderness and charm. And she was troubled with a great longing for the presence of the thing she had so loved. She yearned even for signs of the old brilliant, startling personality, in face of the growing dulness that she saw. She found herself recalling with a smile sayings of his that had once vexed and now amused her. For Anne was softer.

At times she was aware of a new source of uneasiness. She was accustomed to judge all things in relation to the spiritual life. She had no other measure of their excellence. She had found profit for her soul in its divorce from her husband. She had persuaded herself that since she could not raise him, she herself would have sunk if she had clung to him or let him cling. She had felt that their tragic rupture strengthened the tie between her soul and God. But more than once lately, she had experienced difficulty in reaching her refuge, her place of peace. Something threatened her former inviolable security.

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The ramparts of the spiritual life were shaken. Her prayers, that were once an ascension of flamed and winged powers carrying her to heaven, had become mere clamorous petitions, drawing down the things of heaven to earth. Night and morning the same passionate prayer for herself and her child, the same prayer for her husband, painful and perfunctory; but not always now the same sense of absolution, of supreme and intimate communion. It was as if a veil, opaque but intangible, were drawn between her spirit and the Unseen. She thought it had come of living in perpetual contact with Walter's deterioration.

Yet Anne was softer.

Her love for Peggy had become more and more an engrossing passion, as Majendie left her more and more to the dominion of her motherhood. He had seen enough of the effect of rivalry. It was Anne's pleasure to take Peggy from her nurse and wash her and dress her, to tend her fine limbs, and comb her pale soft hair. It was as if her care for the little tender body had taught her patience and gentleness towards flesh and blood; as if, through the love it invoked, some veil was torn for her, and she saw, wrought in the body of her child, the wonder of the spirit's fellowship with earth.

She dreaded the passing of the seasons, as they would take with them each some heart-rending charm of Peggy's infancy. Now it would be the ceasing of her pretty, helpless cry, as Peggy acquired mastery over things; now the repudiation of her delicious play, as Peggy's intellect perceived its puerility; and now the leaving off for ever of the speech that was Peggy's own, as Peggy adopted the superstition of the English language. A few years and Peggy would have cast off pinafores, a very few more, and Peggy would be at a boarding-school; and before she left it she would have her hair up. There was a pang for Peggy's mother in looking backward, and in looking forward pang upon intolerable pang.

But Peggy was in no hurry to grow up. Her delicacy prolonged her babyhood and its sweet impunity. The sad state of Peggy's little body accounted for all the little sins that weighed on Peggy's mother's soul. You couldn't punish Peggy. An untender look made her tremble; at a harsh word she cried till she was sick. When Peggy committed sin she ran and told her mother, as if it were some wonderful and interesting experience. Anne was afraid that she would never teach the child the difference between right and wrong.

In this, by some strange irony, Majendie, for all his self-effacement, proved more effectual than Anne.

They were all three in the drawing-room one Sunday afternoon at tea-time. It was Peggy's hour. And in that hour she had found her moment, when her parents' backs

were turned to the tea-table. The moment over, she came to Majendie, shivering with delight.

“Oh, daddy, daddy,” she cried, “I did ’teal some sugar. I did ’teal it my own self, and eated it all up.”

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Peggy had been forbidden to touch the sugar basin ever since one very miserable day.

“Oh, Peggy, Peggy,” said her mother, “that was very naughty.”

“No, mummy, it wasn’t. It wasn’t naughty ’t all.”

She pondered, gravely working out her case. “I’d be sorry if it was naughty.”

Majendie laughed.

“If you laugh every time she’s naughty, how am I to make her learn?”

Majendie held out his hand. “Come here, Peggy.”

Peggy came and cuddled against him, smiling sidelong mischief at her mother.

“Look here, Peggy, if you eat too much sugar, you’ll be ill; and if you’re ill, mummy’ll be unhappy. See?”

“I’m sorry, daddy.”

Peggy’s mouth shook; she turned, and hid her face against his breast.

“There, there,” he said, petting her. “Look at mummy; she’s happy now.”

Peggy’s face peeped out, but it was not at her mother that she looked.

“Are you happy, daddy?”

He stooped, and kissed her, and left the room.

And then Peggy said, “I’m sorry, mummy. Why did daddy go away?”

“I don’t know, darling.”

“Do you think he will come back again?”

“Darling, I don’t know.”

“You’d like him to come back, wouldn’t you, mummy?”

“Of course, Peggy.”

“Then I’ll go and tell him.”

She trotted downstairs to the study, and came back shaking her head sadly.

“Daddy isn’t coming. Naughty daddy.”

“Why do you say that, Peggy?”

“Because he won’t come when you want him to.”

“Perhaps he’s busy.”

“Yes,” said Peggy thoughtfully. “I fink he’s busy.” She sat very quiet on a footstool, thinking. “I fink,” she said presently, “I’d better go and tell daddy he isn’t naughty, else he’ll be dreff’ly unhappy.”

And she trotted downstairs and up again.

“Daddy sends his love, mummy, and he *is* busy. S’all I take your love to him?”

That was how it went on, now Peggy was older. That was how she made her mother’s heart ache.

Anne was in terror for the time when Peggy would begin to see. For that, and for her own inability to teach her the stupendous difference between right and wrong.

But one day Peggy ran to her mother, crying as if her heart would break.

“Oh, muvver, muvver, kiss me,” she sobbed. “I did kick daddy! Kiss me.”

She flung her arms round Anne’s knees, as if clinging for protection against the pursuing vision of her sin.

“Hush, hush, darling,” said Anne. “Perhaps daddy didn’t mind.”

But Peggy howled in agony. “Y-y-yes, he did. I hurted him, I hurted him. He minded ever so.”

“My little one,” said Anne, “my little one!” and clung to her and comforted her.

She saw that Peggy’s little mind recognised no sin except the sin against love; that Peggy’s little heart could not conceive that love should refuse to forgive her and kiss her.

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And Anne did not refuse.

Thus her terror grew. If it was to come to Peggy that way, her knowledge of the difference, what was Peggy to think when she grew older? When she began to see?

That was how Anne grew soft.

Her very body was changing into the beauty of her motherhood. The sweetness of her face, arrested in its hour of blossom, had unfolded and flowered again. Her mouth had lost its sad droop, and for Peggy there came many times laughter, and many times that lifting of the upper lip, the gleam of the white teeth, and the play of the little amber mole that Majendie loved and Anne was ashamed of.

She had become for her child that which she had been for her husband in her strange, immortal moments of surrender, a woman warmed and transfigured by a secret fire. Her new beauty remained, like a brooding charm, when the child was not with her.

And as the seasons, passing, made her more and more a woman dear and desirable, Majendie's passion for her became almost insane through its frustration.

Anne was aware of the insanity without realising its cause. He avoided her touch, and she wondered why. Her voice, heard in another room, drew his heart after her in longing. At the worst moments, to get away from her, he went out of the house. And she wondered where. Hours of stupefying depression were followed by fits of irritability that frightened her. And then she wished that he would not go to the Hannays, and eat things that disagreed with him.

Little Peggy helped to make his misery more unendurable. She was always running to and fro between her father and her mother, with questions concerning kisses and other endearments, till he, too, wondered what she would make of it when she began to see. Everything conspired against him. Peggy's formidable innocence was re-enforced by the still more formidable innocence of her mother. Anne positively flaunted before him the spectacle of her maternal passion. She showered her tendernesses on the child, without measuring their effect on him, for whom she had none. She did not allow herself to wonder how he felt, when he sat there hungry, looking on, while the little creature, greedy for caresses, was given her fill of love.

And when he was tortured by headache, she brought him an effervescing drink, and considered that she had done her duty.

A worse headache than usual had smitten him one late Sunday afternoon in August. A Sunday afternoon that made (but for Majendie and his headache) a little sacred idyl, so golden was it, so holy and so happy, with Peggy trotting between her father's and

mother's knees, and the prodigal, burning with penitence, upstairs in Edie's room, singing *Lead, Kindly Light*, in a heavenly tenor.

Peggy tugged at Majendie's coat.

"Sing, daddy, sing! Mummy, make daddy sing."

"I can't make him sing, darling," said Anne, who was making soft eyes at Peggy, and curling her mouth into the shape it took when it sent kisses to her across the room.

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Instead of singing, Majendie, with his eyes on Anne, flung his arms round Peggy and lifted her up and covered her little face with kisses. The child lay across his knees with her head thrown back and her legs struggling, and laughed for terror and delight.

Anne spoke with some austerity. “Put her down, Walter; I don’t care for all this hugging and kissing. It excites the child.”

Peggy was put down. But when bed-time came she achieved an inimitable revenge. Anne had to pick her up from the floor to carry her to bed. At first Peggy refused to be carried; then she surrendered on conditions that brought the blood to her mother’s face.

From her mother’s arms Peggy’s head hung down as she struggled to say good-night a second time to daddy. He rose, and for a moment he and Anne stood linked together by the body of their child.

And Peggy reiterated, “I’ll be a good girl, mummy, if you’ll kiss daddy.”

Anne raised her face to his and closed her eyes, and Majendie felt her soft lips touch his forehead without parting.

That night, when he refused his supper, she looked up anxiously.

“Are you not well, Walter?”

“I’ve got a splitting headache.”

“You’d better take some anti-pyrine.”

“I’m damned if I’ll take any anti-pyrine.”

“Well, don’t, dear; but you needn’t be so violent.”

“I beg your pardon.”

He cooled his hands against a jug of iced water, and pressed them to his forehead.

She left her place and came and sat beside him. “Come,” she said in the sweet voice that pierced him, “come and lie down in the study.” She laid her hand on his shoulder, and he rose and followed her.

She made him lie down on the sofa in the study, and put cushions under his head, and brought him the anti-pyrine. She sat beside him and dabbed eau-de-cologne all over his forehead, and blew on it with her soft breath. She paused, and sat very still, watching him, for a moment that seemed eternity. She didn’t like the flush on his cheek

nor the queer burning brilliance in his eyes. She was afraid he was in for a bad illness, and fear made her kind.

“Tell me how you feel, dear,” she said gently. She was determined to be very gentle with him.

“Can’t you see how I feel?” he answered.

She laid her firm, cool hand upon his forehead; and he gave a cry, the low cry she had once heard and dreamed of afterwards. He flung up his arm, and caught at her hand, and dragged it down, and held it close against his mouth, and kissed it.

She drew in her breath. Her hand stiffened against his in her effort to withdraw it; and when he had let it go, she turned from him and left him without a word.

He threw himself face downwards on the cushions, wounded and ashamed.

CHAPTER XXV

It was Friday evening, the Friday that followed that Sunday when Majendie’s hope had risen at the touch of his wife’s hand, and died again under her repulse.

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Friday was the day which Maggie Forrest marked in her calendar sometimes with a query and sometimes with a cross. The query stood for "Will he come?" The cross meant "He came." To-night there was no cross, though Maggie had brushed her hair till it shone again, and put on her best dress, and laid out her little table for tea, and sat there waiting, like the ladies in those houses where he went; like Mrs. Hannay or Mrs. Ransome who bought her embroidery; or like that grand lady with the title, who had come with Mrs. Ransome—the lady who had bought more embroidery than anybody, the scent on whose clothes was enough, Maggie said, to take your breath away.

Maggie loved her tea-table. She embroidered beautiful linen cloths for it. Every Friday it was decked as an altar dedicated to the service of a god—in case he came.

He hadn't come. It was past eight, yet Maggie left the altar standing with the cloth on it, and waited. It would be terrible if the god should come and find no altar. Once, even at this late hour, he had come.

The house was very quiet. Mrs. Morse was out marketing, and Maggie was alone. Friday was market night in Scale. She wondered if he would remember that, and come. Her heart beat violently with the thought that he might be beginning to come late. The others had come late when they began to love her.

She had forgotten them, or only cared to remember such of their ways as threw light on Mr. Majendie's. For he was, as yet, obscure to her.

It seemed to her that a new thing had come to her, a thing marvellously and divinely new, this, that she should be waiting, counting hours, and marking days on calendars, measuring her own pulses with a hand, now on her heart, now on her throbbing forehead, and wondering what could be the matter with her. Maggie was six-and-twenty; but ever since she was nine she had been waiting and wondering. For there always had been somebody whom Maggie loved insanely. First it was the little boy who lived in the house opposite, at home. He had abandoned Maggie's society, and broken her heart on the day when he "went into trousers." Then it was the big boy in her father's shop who gave her chocolates one day and snubbed her cruelly the next. Then it was the young man who came to tune the piano in the back parlour. Then the arithmetic master in the little boarding-school they sent her to. And then (for Maggie's infatuations rose rapidly in the social scale) it was one of the young gentlemen who "studied" at the Vicarage. He was engaged to Maggie for a whole term; and he went away and jilted her, so that Maggie's heart was broken a second time. At last, on an evil day for Maggie, it was one of the gentlemen (not so young) staying up at "the big house." He watched for Maggie in dark lanes, and followed her through the fields at evening, till one evening he made her turn and follow her heart and him. And so Maggie went on her predestined way.

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For after him there was the gentleman who came to Madame Ponting's, and after him, Mr. Gorst, who came to Evans's, and after Mr. Gorst—Last year Maggie could not have believed that there could be another after him. For each of these persons she would willingly have died. To each of them her soul leaped up and bowed itself, swept forward like a flame bowed and driven by the wind.

As long as each loved her, the flame burned steadily and still. Maggie's soul was appeased for a season. As each left her, the flame died out in tears, and her pulses beat feebly, and her life languished. Maggie went from flame to flame; for the hours when there was nobody to love simply dropped into the darkness and were forgotten. She left off living when she had to leave off loving. To be sure there was always Mr. Mumford. He was a tobacconist, and he lived over the shop in a house fronting the pier, a unique and dominant situation. And he was prepared to overlook the past and make Maggie his wife and mistress of the house fronting the pier. Unfortunately, Maggie did not love him. You couldn't love Mr. Mumford. You could only be sorry for him.

But though Maggie went from flame to flame, there were long periods of placidity when she loved nothing but her work, and was as good as gold. Maggie's father wouldn't believe it. He had never forgiven her, not even when the doctor told him that there was no sense in which the poor girl could be held responsible; they should have looked after her better, that was all. Maggie's father, the grocer, did not deal in smooth, extenuating phrases. He called such madness sin. So did Maggie in her hours of peace and sanity. She was terrified when she felt it coming on, and hid her face from her doom. But when it came she went to meet it, uplifted, tremulous, devoted, carrying her poor scorched heart in her hand for sacrifice.

Each time that she loved, it was as if her former sins had been blotted out; for there came a merciful forgetfulness that renewed, almost, her innocence. Her heart had its own perverted constancy. No lover was like her last lover, and for him she rejected and repudiated the past.

And each time that she loved she was torn asunder. She gave herself in pieces; her heart first, then her soul, then, if it must needs be, her body. The finest first, then all that was left of her. That was her unique merit, what marked her from the rest.

Majendie, she divined by instinct, had recognised her quality. He was the only one who had. And he had asked nothing of her. She would have lived miserably for Charlie Gorst. She would have died with joy for Mr. Majendie. And Maggie feared death worse than life, however miserable.

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But there was something in her love for Majendie that revealed it as a thing apart. It had not made her idle. Her passion for Mr. Majendie blossomed and flowered, and ran over in beautiful embroidery. That industry ministered to it. Her heart was set on having those little sums to send him every week; for that was the only way she could hope to approach him of her own movement. She loved the curt little notes in which Majendie acknowledged the receipt of each postal order. She tied them together with white ribbon, and treasured them in a little box under lock and key. All the time, she knew he had a wife and child, but her fancy refused to recognise Mrs. Majendie's existence. It allowed him to have a child, but not a wife. She knew that he spent his Saturdays and Sundays with them at his home. He never came, or could come, on a Saturday or Sunday, and Maggie refused to consider the significance of this. She simply lived from Friday to Friday. No other day in the week existed for Maggie. All other days heralded it, or followed in its train. The blessed memory of it rested upon Saturday and Sunday. Wednesday and Thursday glowed and vibrated with its coming; Mondays and Tuesdays were forlorn and grey. Terrible were the days which followed a Friday when he had not come.

He had not come last Friday, nor the Friday before that. She had always a comfortable little theory to cheat herself with, to account for his not coming. He had been ill last Friday; that, of course, was why he had not come, Maggie knew. She did not like to think he was ill; but she did like to think that only illness could prevent his coming. And she had always believed what she liked.

The presumption in Maggie's mind amounted to a certainty that he would come to-night.

And at nine o'clock he came.

Her eyes shone as she greeted him. There was nothing about her to remind him of the dejected, anaemic girl who had sat shivering over the fire last September. Maggie had got all her lights and colours back again. She was lifted from her abasement, glorified. And yet, for all her glory, Maggie, on her good behaviour, became once more the prim young lady of the lower middle class. She sat, as she had been used to sit on long, dull Sunday afternoons in the parlour above the village shop, bolt upright on her chair, with her meek hands folded in her lap. But her eyes were fixed on Majendie, their ardent candour contrasting oddly with the stiff modesty of her deportment.

"Have you been ill?" she asked.

"Why should I have been ill?"

"Because you didn't come."

"You mustn't suppose I'm ill every time I don't come. I might be a chronic invalid at that rate."

He hadn't realised how often he came. *He* didn't mark the days with crosses in a calendar.

"But you *were* ill, this time, I know."

"How do you know?"

The processes of Maggie's mind amused him. It was such a funny, fugitive, burrowing, darting thing, Maggie's mind, transparent and yet secret in its ways.

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“I know, because I saw—” she hesitated.

“Saw what?”

“The light in your window.”

“My window?”

“Yes. The one that looks out on the garden at the back. It was twelve o’clock on Sunday night, and on Monday night the light was gone, and I knew that you were better.”

“As it happens, you saw the light in my sister’s room. She’s always ill.”

“Oh,” said Maggie; and her face fell with the fall of her great argument.

“Sometimes,” he said, “the light burns all night long.”

“Yes,” said Maggie, musing; “sometimes it burns all night long. But in the room above that room, there’s a little soft light that burns all night, too. That’s your room.”

“No, that’s my wife’s room.”

Maggie became thoughtful. “I used to think that was where your little girl sleeps, because of the night-light. Then your room’s next it.” Maggie desired to know all about the blessed house that contained him.

“That’s the spare room,” he said, laughing.

“Goodness! what a lot of rooms. Then yours is the one next the nursery, looking on the street. Fancy! That little room.”

Again she became thoughtful. So did he.

“I say, Maggie, how did you know those lights burned all night?”

“Because I saw them.”

“You can’t see them.”

“Yes, you can; from the little alley that goes along at the back.”

He hadn’t thought of the alley. Nobody ever passed that way after dark; it ended in a blind wall.

“What were you doing there at twelve o’clock at night?”

He looked for signs of shame and confusion on Maggie's face. But Maggie's face was one flame of joy. Her eyes were candid.

"Walking up and down," she said. "I was watching."

"Watching?"

"Your window."

"You mustn't, Maggie. You mustn't watch people's windows. They don't like it. It doesn't do."

The flame was troubled; but not the lucid candour of Maggie's eyes. "I had to. I thought you were ill. I came to make sure. I was all alone. I didn't let anybody see me. And when I saw the light I was frightened. And I came again the next night to see. I didn't think you'd mind. It's not as if I'd come to the front door, or written letters, was it?"

"No. But you must never do that again, mind. How did you know the house?"

Maggie hung her head. "I saw your little girl go in there."

"Were you 'watching'?"

"N-no. It was an accident."

"How did you know it was my little girl?"

"I saw you walking with her, one Saturday, in the Park. It was an accident—really. I was taking my work to that lady who buys from me—Mrs. 'Anny."

"I see."

"You're not angry with me, Mr. Magendy?"

"Of course not. What made you think I was?"

"Your face. You would be angry if I followed you. But I wouldn't do such a thing. I've never followed any one—never. And I wouldn't do it now, not if I was paid," she protested.

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“It’s all right, Maggie, it’s all right.”

Maggie clasped her knees and sat thinking. She seemed to know by intuition when it was advantageous to be silent, and when to speak. But Majendie was thinking, too. He was wondering whether he was not being a little too kind to Maggie; whether a little unkindness would not be a salutary change for both of them. Why couldn’t the girl marry Mr. Mumford? He didn’t want to profit by the transaction. He would have gladly paid Mr. Mumford to marry her, and take her away.

He put his hand over his eyes as a veil for his thoughts; and when he took it away again, Maggie had risen and was going on soundless feet towards the door.

“Don’t go,” she said, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He flung himself back in the chair and waited. The minutes dragged. He had wanted Maggie away; and now she had gone he wanted her back again.

Maggie did not stay away long enough to give him time to discover how much he wanted her. She came back, carrying a tray with cups and a steaming coffee pot, and set it on the table.

A fragrance of strong coffee filled the room. The service of the god had begun.

She stood close against his side, yet humbly, as she handed him his cup. “It’s nice and strong,” she said. “Drink it. It’ll do your head good.”

And she sat down opposite him, and watched him drink it.

Maggie’s watching face was luminous and tender. In her eyes there was the look that love gives for his signal—love that, in that moment, was pure and sweet as a mother’s. She was glad to think that the coffee was strong, and would do his head good. She had no other thought in her mind, at that moment.

After the coffee she brought matches and cigarettes, which she offered shyly. Nature had given her an immortal shyness, born of her extreme humility.

“They’re all right,” she said, “Charlie smoked them.” (Charlie was at times a useful memory.)

She struck a match and prepared to light the cigarette. This she did gravely and efficiently, with no sign of feminine consciousness or coquetry. It was part of the solemn evening service of the god. And, as he smoked, the devotee retreated to her chair and watched him.

“Maggie,” he said, “supposing Mr. Mumford was to come in?”

“He won’t. Sunday’s *his* day; or would be, if I let him ’ave a day.”

“Why don’t you?”

She shook her head. “I’ve seen nobody.”

There was silence for five minutes.

“Mr. Magendy—”

“Majendie, Maggie, Majendie.”

“Mr. Mashendy—I’m beginning to be afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“What I’ve always told you about. That awful feeling. It’s coming on again, I think.”

“It won’t come, Maggie, it won’t come. Don’t think about it, and it won’t come.”

He didn’t understand very clearly what Maggie was talking about; but he remembered that, last September, after her illness, she had been afraid of something. And he remembered that he had comforted her with some such words as these.

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“Yes,” said she, “but I feel it coming.”

“Maggie, you oughtn’t to live alone like this. See here, you ought to marry. You ought to marry Mr. Mumford. Why don’t you?”

“I don’t want to marry anybody. And I don’t love him.”

“Well, don’t think about that other thing. Don’t think about it. You’ll be all right.”

“I won’t think,” said Maggie, and thought profoundly.

“Mr. Majendie,” she said suddenly.

“Madam.”

“You mustn’t be afraid. I shall never do anything I know you wouldn’t like me to.”

“All right. Only don’t think too much about that, either.”

“I can’t help thinking. You’ve been so good to me.”

“I should try and forget that, too, a little more, if I were you. I’m only paying some of Mr. Gorst’s debts for him.”

The name called up no colour to her cheek. Maggie had forgotten Gorst, and all *he* had done for her.

“And you’re paying me back.”

She shook her head. “I can’t ever pay you back.”

Poor little girl! Was that what her mind was always running on?

There was silence again between them. And then Majendie looked at Maggie.

She was sitting very still, as if she were waiting for something, and yet content. Her eyes were swimming, as if with tears; but there were no tears in them. Her face was reddening, as if with shame, but there was no shame in it. She seemed to be listening, dazed and enchanted, to her own secret, the running whisper of her blood. Her lips were parted, and, as he looked at her, they closed and opened again in sympathy with the delicate tremors that moved her throat under her rounded chin. In her brooding look there was neither reminiscence nor foreboding; it was the look of a creature surrendered wholly to her hour.

As he looked at her his nerves sent an arrow of warning, a hot tremor darting from heart to brain.

“I must go now, Maggie,” he said.

When he stood up, his knees shook under him.

“Not yet,” said Maggie. “I’m all alone in the house, and I’m afraid.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he said roughly. “I’ve got to go.”

He strode towards the door while Maggie stared after him in terror. She understood nothing but that he was going to leave her. What had she done to drive him away?

“You’re ill,” she cried, as she followed him, panting in her fright.

He pushed her back gently from the threshold.

“Don’t be a little fool, Maggie. I’m not ill.”

Out in the street, five yards from Maggie’s door, he battled with a vision of her that almost drove him back again. “It was I who was a fool,” he thought. “I shall go back. Why not? She is predestined. Why not I as well as anybody else?”

All the way to his own door an insistent, abominable voice kept calling to him, “Why not? Why not?”

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He went with noiseless footsteps up his own stairs, past the dark doors below, past Edith's open door where the lamp still burned brightly beyond the threshold. At Anne's door he paused.

It stood ajar in a dim light. He pushed it softly open and went in.

Anne and her child lay asleep under the silver crucifix.

Peggy had been taken into Anne's bed, and had curled herself close up against her mother's side. Her arm lay on Anne's breast; one hand clutched the border of Anne's nightgown. The long thick braid of Anne's hair was flung back on the pillow, framing the child's golden head in gold.

His eyes filled with tears as he looked at them. For a moment his heart stood still. Why not he as well as anybody else? His heart told him why.

As he turned he sighed. A sigh of longing and tenderness, and of thankfulness for a great deliverance. Above all, of thankfulness.

CHAPTER XXVI

The light burned in Edith's room till morning; for her spine kept sleep from her through many nights. They no longer said, "She is better, or certainly no worse." They said, "She is worse, or certainly no better." The progress of her death could be reckoned by weeks and measured by inches. Soon they would be giving her morphia, to make her sleep. Meanwhile she was terribly awake.

She heard her brother's soft footsteps as he passed her door. She heard him pause on the upper landing and creep into the room overhead. She heard him go out again and shut himself up in the little room beyond. There came upon her an awful intuition of the truth.

The next day she sent for him.

"What is it, Edie?" he said.

She looked at him with loving eyes, and asked him as Maggie had asked, "Are you ill?"

He started. The question brought back to him vividly the scene of the night before; brought back to him Maggie with her love and fear.

"What is it? Tell me," she insisted.

He owned to headaches. She knew he often had them.

“It’s not a bit of use,” she said, “trying to deceive *me*. It’s not headaches. It’s Anne.”

“Poor Anne. I think she’s all right. After all, she’s got the child, you know.”

“Yes. *She*’s got Peggy. If I could see you all right, too, I should die happy.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not worth it.”

She gazed at him searchingly, confirmed in her intuition. That was the sort of thing poor Charlie used to say.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “It always has been.”

“Angel, if you could lay everybody’s sins on your own shoulders, you would.”

“I mean it. You were right and I was wrong. Ah, how one pays! Only *you*’ve had to pay for my untruthfulness. I can see it now. If I’d done as you asked me, in the beginning, and told her the truth—”

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“She wouldn’t have married me. No, Edie. You’re assuming that I’ve lived to regret that I married her. I never have regretted it for one single moment. Not for myself, that is. For her, yes. Granted that I’m as unhappy as you please, I’d rather be unhappy with her than happy without her. See?”

“Walter—if you keep true to her, I believe you’ll have your happiness yet. I don’t know how it’s coming. It may come very late. But it’s bound to come. She’s good—”

He assented with a groan. “Oh, much *too* good.”

“And the goodness in her must recognise the goodness in you; when she understands. I believe she’s beginning to understand. She doesn’t know how much she understands.”

“Understands what?”

“Your goodness. She loved you for it. She’ll love you for it again.”

“My dear Edie, you’re the only person who believes in my goodness—you and Peggy.”

“I and Peggy. And Charlie and the Hannays. And Nanna and the Gardners—and God.”

“I wish God would give Anne a hint that He thinks well of me.”

“Dear—if you keep true to her—He will.”

If he kept true to her! It was the second time she had said it. It was almost as if she had divined what had so nearly happened.

“I think,” she said, “I’d like to talk to Anne, now, while I can talk. You see, once they go giving me morphia”—she closed her eyes. “Just let me lie still for half an hour, and then bring Anne to me.”

She lay still. He watched her for an hour. And he knew that in that hour she had prayed.

He found Anne sitting on the nursery floor, playing with Peggy. “Edie wants you,” he said, loosening Peggy’s little hands as they clung about his legs.

“Mother must go, darling,” said she.

But all Peggy said was, “Daddy’ll stay.”

He did not stay long. He had to restrain himself, to go carefully with Peggy, lest he should help her to make her mother’s heart ache.

Anne found Nanna busied about the bed. Nanna was saying, “Is that any easier, Miss Edie?”

“It’s heavenly, Nanna,” said Edie, stifling a moan. “Oh dear, I hope in the next world I shan’t feel as if my spine were still with me, like people when their legs are cut off.”

“Miss Edie, what an idea!”

“Well, Nanna, you can’t tell whether it mayn’t be so. Anne, dear, you’ve got such a nice, pretty body, why have you such a withering contempt for it? It behaves so well to you, too. That’s more than I can say of mine; and yet, I believe I shall quite miss it when it’s gone. At any rate, I shall be glad that I was decent to the poor thing while it was with me. Run away now, please, Nanna, and shut the door.”

Nanna thought she knew why Miss Edie wanted the door shut. She, too, had her intuitive forebodings. She was aware, the whole household was aware, that the mistress cared more for her child than for the husband who had given it her. Their master’s life was not altogether happy. They wondered many times how he was going to stand it.

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“Anne” said Edith, “I’m uneasy about Walter.”

“You need not be,” said Anne.

“Why? Aren’t you?”

“I know he hasn’t been well lately—”

“How can you expect him to be well when he’s so unhappy?”

Anne was silent.

“How long is it going to last, dear? And where is it going to end?”

“Edith, you needn’t be afraid. I shall never leave him.”

That was not what Edith was afraid of, but she did not say so.

“How can I,” Anne went on, “when I believe the Church’s doctrine of marriage?”

“Do you? Do you believe that love is a provision for the soul’s redemption of the body? or for the body’s redemption of the soul?”

“I believe that, having married Walter, whatever he is or does, I cannot leave him without great sin.”

“Then you’ll be shocked when I tell you that if your husband were a bad man, I should be the first to implore you to leave him, though he is my brother. Where there can be no love on either side there’s no marriage, and no sacrament. That’s *my* profane belief.”

“And when there’s love on one side only?”

“The sacrament is there, offered by the loving person, and refused by the unloving. And that refusal, my dear child, may, if you like, be a great sin—supposing, of course, that the love is pure and devoted. I hardly know which is the worst sin, then, to refuse to give, or to refuse to take it; or to take it, and then throw it away. What would you think if Peggy hardened her little heart against you?”

“My Peggy!”

“Yes, your Peggy. It’s the same thing. You’ll see it some day. But I want you to see it now, before it’s too late.”

“Edie, if you’d only tell me where I’ve failed! If you’re thinking of our—our separation—”

“I was not. But, since you *have* mentioned it, I can’t help reminding you that you fell in love with Walter because you thought he was a saint. And so I don’t see what’s to prevent you now. He’s qualifying. He mayn’t be perfect; but, in some ways, a saint couldn’t very well do more. Has it never occurred to that you are indulging the virtue that comes easiest to you, and exacting from him the virtue that comes hardest? And he has stood the test.”

“It was his own doing—his own wish.”

“Is it? I doubt it—when he’s more in love with you than he was before he married you.”

“That’s all over.”

“For you. Not for him. He’s a man, as you may say, of obstinate affections.”

“Ah, Edie—you don’t know.”

“I know,” said Edith, “you’re perfectly sweet, the way you take my scoldings. It’s cowardly of me, when I’m lying here safe, and you can’t scold back again. But I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t love you.”

“I know—I know you love me.”

“But I couldn’t love you so much, if I didn’t love Walter more.”

“You well may, Edie. He’s been a good brother to you.”

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“Some day you’ll own he’s been as good a husband as he’s been a brother. Better; for it’s a more difficult post, my dear. I don’t really think my body, spine and all, can have tried him more than your spirit.”

“What have I done? Tell me—tell me.”

“Done? Oh, Nancy, I hate to have to say it to you. What haven’t you done? There’s no way in which you haven’t hurt and humiliated him. I’m not thinking of your separation—-I’m thinking of the way you’ve treated him, and his affection for you and Peggy. You won’t let him love you. You won’t even let him love his little girl.”

“Does he say that?”

“Would he say it? People in my peculiar position don’t require to have things said to them; they *say them*. You see, if I didn’t say them now I should have to get up out of my grave and do it, and that would be ten times more disagreeable for you. It might even be very uncomfortable for me.”

“Edie, I wish I knew when you were serious.”

“Well, if I’m not serious now, when *shall* I be?”

Anne smiled. “You’re very like Walter.”

“Yes. He’s every bit as serious as I am. And he’s getting more and more serious every day.”

“Oh, Edie, you don’t understand. I—I’ve suffered so terribly.”

“I do understand. I’ve gone through it—every pang of it—and it’s all come back to me again through your suffering—and I know it’s been worse for you. I’ve told him so. It’s because I don’t want you to suffer more that I’m saying these awful things to you.”

“Oh! *Am* I to suffer more?”

“I believe that’s the only way your happiness can come to you—through great suffering. I’m only afraid that the suffering may come through Peggy, if you don’t take care.”

“Peggy—”

It was her own terror put into words.

“Yes. That child has a terrible capacity for loving. And for her that means suffering. She loves you. She loves her father. Do you suppose she won’t suffer when she sees? Her little heart will be torn in two between you.”

“Oh, Edith—I cannot bear it.”

She hid her face from the anguish.

“You needn’t. That’s it. It rests with you.”

“With me? If you would only tell me how.”

“I can’t tell you anything. It’ll come. Probably in the way you least expect it. But—it’ll come.”

“Edie, I feel as if you held us all together. And when you’ve gone—”

“You mean when *it’s* gone. When it’s ‘gone,’” said Edie, smiling. “I shall hold you together all the more. You needn’t sigh like that.”

“Did I sigh?”

As Anne stooped over the bed she sighed again, thinking how Edith’s loving arms used to leap up and hold her, and how they could never hold anything any more.

Of all the things that Edith said to her that afternoon, two remained fixed in Anne’s memory: how Peggy would suffer through overmuch loving—she remembered that saying, because it had confirmed her terror; and how love was a provision for the soul’s redemption of the body, or for the body’s redemption of the soul. This she remembered, because she did not understand it.

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That was in August. Before the month was out they were beginning to give Edith morphia.

In September Gorst came to see her for the last time.

In October she died in her brother's arms.

In the days that followed, it was as if her spirit, refusing to depart from them, had rested on the sister she had loved. Spirit to spirit, she stooped, kindling in Anne her own dedicated flame. In the white death-chamber, and through the quiet house, the presence of Anne, moving with a hushed footfall, was like the presence of a blessed spirit. Her face was as a face long hidden upon the heart of peace. Her very grief aspired; it had wings, lifting her towards her sister in her heavenly place.

For Anne, in the days that followed, was possessed by a great and burning charity. Mrs. Hannay called and was taken into the white room to see Edith. And Anne's heart went out to Mrs. Hannay, when she spoke of the beauty and goodness of Edith; and to Lawson Hannay, when he pressed her hand without speaking; and to Gorst, when she saw him stealing on tiptoe from Edith's room, his face swollen and inflamed with grief. Her heart went out to all of them, because they had loved Edith.

And to her husband her heart went out with a tenderness born of an immense pity and compassion. For the first three days, Majendie gave no sign that he was shaken by his sister's death. But on the evening of the day they buried her, Anne found him in the study, sitting in his low chair by the fire, his head sunk, his body bowed forward over his knees, convulsed with a nervous shivering. He started and stared at her approach, and straightened himself suddenly. She held out her hand. He looked at it dumbly, as if unwilling or afraid to take it.

"My dear," she said softly.

Then she knelt beside him, and drew his head down upon her breast, and let it rest there.

CHAPTER XXVII

It was a Thursday night in October, three weeks after Edith's death. Anne was in her room, undressing. She moved noiselessly, with many tender precautions, for fear of waking Peggy, and for fear of destroying the peace that possessed her own soul like heavenly sleep. It was the mystic mood that went before prayer.

In those three weeks Anne felt that she had been brought very near to God. She had not known such stillness and content since the days at Scarby that had made her life

terrible. It was as if Edith's spirit in bliss had power given it to help her sister, to draw Anne with it into the divine presence.

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And the dead woman bound the living to each other also, as she had said. How she bound them Anne had not realised until to-day. It was Mrs. Elliott's day, her Thursday. Anne had spent half an hour in Thurston Square, and had come away with a cold, unsatisfactory feeling towards Fanny. Fanny, for the first time, had jarred on her. She had so plainly hesitated between condolence and congratulation. She seemed to be secretly rejoicing in Edith Majendie's death. Her manner intimated clearly that a burden had been removed from her friend's life, and that the time had now come for Anne to blossom out and enjoy herself. Anne had been glad to get away from Fanny, to come back to the house in Prior Street and to find Walter waiting for her. Fanny, in spite of her intellectual rarity, lacked the sense that, after all, *he* had, the sense of Edith's spiritual perfection. Strangely, inconsistently, incomprehensibly, he had it. He and his wife had that in common, if they had nothing else. They were bound to each other by Edith's dear and sacred memory, an immaterial, immortal tie. They would always share their knowledge of her. Other people might take for granted that her terrible illness had loosened, little by little, the bond that held them to her. They knew that it was not so. They never found themselves declining on the mourner's pitiful commonplaces, "Poor Edie"; "She is released"; "It's a mercy she was taken." It was their tribute to Edith's triumphant personality that they mourned for her as for one cut off in the fulness of a strong, beneficent life.

For those three weeks Anne remained to her husband all that she had been on the night of Edith's burial.

And, as she felt that nobody but her husband understood what she had lost in Edith, she realised for the first time his kindred to his sister. She forced herself to dwell on his many admirable qualities. He was unselfish, chivalrous, the soul of honour. On his chivalry, which touched her more nearly than his other virtues, she was disposed to put a very high interpretation. She felt that, in his way, he acknowledged her spiritual perfection, also, and reverenced it. If their relations only continued as they were, she believed that she would yet be happy with him. To think of him as she had once been obliged to think was to profane the sorrow that sanctified him now. She was persuaded that the shock of Edith's death had changed him, that he was ennobled by his grief. She could not yet see that the change was in herself. She said to herself that her prayers for him were answered.

For it was no longer an effort, painful and perfunctory, to pray for her husband. Since Edith's death she had prayed for him, as she had prayed in the time of reconciliation that followed her first discovery of his sin. She was horrified when she realised how in six years her passion of redemption had grown cold. It was there that she had failed him, in letting go the immaterial hold by which she

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might have drawn him with her into the secret shelter of the Unseen. She perceived that in those years her spiritual life had suffered by the invasion of her earthly trouble. She had approached the silent shelter with cries of supplication for herself and for her child, the sweet mortal thing she had loved above all mortal things. Every year had made it harder for her to reach the sources of her help, hardest of all to achieve the initiatory state, the nakedness, the prostration, the stillness of the dedicated soul. Too many miseries cried and strove in her. She could no longer shut to her door, and bar the passage to the procession of her thoughts, no longer cleanse and empty her spirit's house for the divine thing she desired to dwell with her.

And now she was restored to her peace; lifted up and swept, effortless, into the place of heavenly help. Anne's soul had no longer to reach out her hand and feel her way to God, for it was God who sought for her and found her. She heard behind her, as it were, the footsteps of the divine pursuing power. Once more, as in the mystic days before her marriage, she had only to close her eyes, and the communion was complete. At night, when her prayer was ended, she lay motionless in the darkness, till she seemed to pass into the ultimate bliss, beyond the reach of prayer. There were moments when she felt herself to be close upon the very vision of God, the beatitude of the pure.

After these moments Anne found herself contemplating her own inviolate sanctity.

There was in Anne an immense sincerity, underlying a perfect tangle of minute deceptions and hypocrisies. She was not deceived as to the supreme event. She was truly experiencing the great spiritual passion which, alone of passions, is destined to an immortal satisfaction. She had all but touched the end of the saint's progress. But she was ignorant, both of the paths that brought her there, and the paths that had led and might again lead, her feet astray.

Each night, when she closed her bedroom door, she felt that she was entering into a sanctuary. She was profoundly, tenderly grateful to her husband for the renunciation that made that refuge possible to her. She accepted her blessed isolation as his gift.

This Thursday had been a day of little lacerating distractions. She had gone through it thirsting for the rest and surrender, the healing silence of the night.

She undressed slowly, being by nature thorough and deliberate in all her movements.

She was standing before her looking-glass, about to unpin her hair, when she heard a low knock at her door. Majendie had been detained, and was late in coming to take his last look at Peggy before going to bed.

Anne opened the door softly, and signed to him to make no noise. He stole on tiptoe to the child's cot, and stood there for a moment. Then he came and sat down in the chair by the dressing-table, where Anne was standing with her arms raised, unpinning her hair. Majendie had always admired that attitude in Anne. It was simple, calm, classic, and superbly feminine. Her long white wrapper clothed her more perfectly than any dress.

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He sat looking at the quick white fingers untwisting the braid of hair. It hung divided into three strands, still rippling with the braiding, still dull with its folded warmth. She combed the three into one sleek sheet that covered her like a veil, drawn close over head and shoulders. Her face showed smooth and saint-like between the cloistral bands. Majendie thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than that face and hair, with their harmonies of dull gold and sombre white.

“I like you,” he said; “but isn’t the style just a trifle severe?”

Anne said nothing. She was trying to forget his presence while she yet permitted it.

“Do you mind my looking at you like this?”

“No.”

(They spoke in low voices, for fear of waking the sleeping child.)

She took up her brush, and with a turn of her head swept her hair forward over one shoulder. It hung in one mass to her waist. Then she began to brush it.

The first strokes of the brush stirred the dull gold that slept in its ashen furrows. A shining undulation passed through it, and broke, at the ends, as it were, into a curling golden foam. Then Anne stood up and tossed it backwards. Her brush went deep and straight, like a ploughshare, turning up the rich, smooth swell of the under-gold; it went light on the top, till numberless little threads of hair rippled, and rose, and knitted themselves, and lay on her head like a fine gold net; then, with a few swift swimming movements, upwards and outwards. It scattered the whole mass into drifting strands and flying wings and soft falling feathers, and, under them, little tender curls of flaxen down. With another stroke of the brush and a shake of her head, Anne’s hair rose in one whorl and fell again, and broke into a shower of woven spray; pure gold in every thread.

Majendie held out a shy hand and caught the receding curl of it. Its faint fragrance reached him, winging a shaft of memory. His nerves shook him, and he looked away.

Anne had been cool and business-like in every motion, unconscious of her effect, unconscious almost of him. Now she gathered her hair into one mass, and began plaiting it rapidly, desiring thus to hasten his departure. She flung back the stiff braid, and laid her finger on the extinguisher of the shaded lamp, as a hint for him to go.

“Anne,” he whispered, “Anne—”

The whisper struck fear into her.

She faced him calmly, coldly; not unkindly. Unkindness would have given him more hope than that pitiless imperturbability.

“Have you anything to say to me?” she said.

“No.”

“Well, then, will you be good enough to go?”

“Do you really mean it?”

“I always mean what I say. I haven’t said my prayers yet.”

“And when you have said them?”

She had turned out the lamp, so that she might not see his unhappy face. She did not see it; she only saw her spiritual vision destroyed and scattered, and the havoc of dreams, resurgent, profaning heavenly sleep.

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“Please,” she whispered, “please, if you love me, leave me to myself.”

He left her; and her heart turned after him as he went, and blessed him.

“He is good, after all,” her heart said.

But Majendie’s heart had hardened. He said to himself, “She is too much for me.” As he lay awake thinking of her, he remembered Maggie. He remembered that Maggie loved him, and that he had gone away from her and left her, because he loved Anne. And now, because he loved Anne, he would go to Maggie. He remembered that it was on Fridays that he used to go and see her.

Very well, to-morrow night would be Friday night.

To-morrow night he would go and see her.

And yet, when to-morrow night came, he did not go. He never went until December, when Maggie’s postal orders left off coming. Then he knew that Maggie was ill again. She had been fretting. He knew it; although, this time, she had not written to tell him so.

He went, and found Maggie perfectly well. The postal orders had not come, because the last lady, the lady with the title, had not paid her. Maggie was good as gold again, placid and at peace.

“Why,” he asked himself bitterly, “why did I not leave her to her peace?”

And a still more bitter voice answered, “Why not you, as well as anybody else?”

BOOK III

CHAPTER XXVIII

Eastward along the Humber, past the brown wharves and the great square blocks of the warehouses, past the tall chimneys and the docks with their thin pine-forest of masts, there lie the forlorn flat lands of Holderness. Field after field, they stretch, lands level as water, only raised above the river by a fringe of turf and a belt of silt and sand. Earth and water are of one form and of one colour, for, beyond the brown belt, the widening river lies like a brown furrowed field, with a clayey gleam on the crests of its furrows. When the grey days come, water and earth and sky are one, and the river rolls sluggishly, as if shores and sky oppressed it, as if it took its motion from the dragging clouds.

Eleven miles from Scale a thin line of red roofs runs for a field's length up the shore, marking the neck of the estuary. It is the fishing hamlet of Fawlness. Its one street lies on the flat fields low and straight as a dyke.

Beyond the hamlet there is a little spit of land, and beyond the spit of land a narrow creek.

Half a mile up the creek the path that follows it breaks off into the open country, and thins to a track across five fields. It struggles to the gateway of a low, red-roofed, red-brick farm, and ends there. The farm stands alone, and the fields around it are bare to the skyline. Three tall elms stand side by side against it, sheltering it from the east, marking its humble place in the desolate land. To the west a broad bridle-path joins the road to Fawlness.

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Majendie had a small yacht moored in the creek, near where the path breaks off to Three Elms Farm. Once, sometimes twice, a week, Majendie came to Three Elms Farm. Sometimes he came for the week-end, more often for a single night, arriving at six in the evening, and leaving very early the next day. In winter he took the train to Hesson, tramped seven miles across country, and reached the farm by the Fawlness road. In summer the yacht brought him from “Hannay & Majendie’s” dock to Fawlness creek. At Three Elms Farm he found Maggie waiting for him.

This had been going on, once, sometimes twice a week, for nearly three years, ever since he had rented the farm and brought Maggie from Scale to live there.

The change had made the details of his life difficult. It called for all the qualities in which Majendie was most deficient. It necessitated endless vigilance, endless harassing precautions, an unnatural secrecy. He had to make Anne believe that he had taken to yachting for his health, that he was kept out by wind and weather, that the obligations and complexities of business, multiplying, tied him, and claimed his time. Maggie had to be hidden away, in a place where no one came, lodged with people whose discretion he could trust. Pearson, the captain of his yacht, a close-mouthed, close-fisted Yorkshireman, had a wife as reticent as himself. Pearson and his wife and their son Steve knew that their living depended on their secrecy. And cupidity apart, the three were devoted to their master and his mistress. Pearson and his son Steve were acquainted with the ways of certain gentlemen of Scale, who sailed their yachts from port to port, up and down the Yorkshire coast. Pearson was a man who observed life dispassionately. He asked no questions and answered none.

It was six o’clock in the evening, early in October, just three years after Edith’s death. Majendie had left the yacht lying in the creek with Pearson, Steve, and the boatswain on board, and was hurrying along the field path to Three Elms Farm. A thin rain fell, blurring the distances. The house stood humbly, under its three elms. A light was burning in one window. Maggie stood at the garden gate in the rain, listening for the click of the field gate which was his signal. When it sounded she came down the path to meet him. She put her hands upon his shoulders, drew down his face and kissed him. He took her arm and led her, half clinging to him, into the house and into the lighted room.

A fire burned brightly on the hearth. His chair was set for him beside it, and Maggie’s chair opposite. The small round table in the middle of the room was laid for supper. Maggie had decorated walls and chimney-piece and table with chrysanthemums from the garden, and autumn leaves and ivy from the hedgerows. The room had a glad light and welcome for him.

As he came into the lamplight Maggie gave one quick anxious look at him. She had always two thoughts in her little mind between their meetings: Is he ill? Is he well?

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He was, to the outward seeing eye, superlatively well. Three years of life lived in the open air, life lived according to the will of nature, had given him back his outward and visible health. At thirty-nine, Majendie had once more the strength, the firm, upright slenderness, and the brilliance of his youth. His face was keen and brown, fined and freshened by wind and weather.

Maggie, waiting humbly on his mood, saw that it was propitious.

“What cold hands,” said she. “And no overcoat? You bad boy.” She felt his clothes all over to feel if they were damp. “Tired?”

“Just a little, Maggie.”

She drew up his chair to the fire, and knelt down to unlace his boots.

“No, Maggie, I can’t let you take my boots off.”

“Yes, you can, and you will. Does *she* ever take your boots off?”

“Never.”

“You don’t allow her?”

“No. I don’t allow her.”

“You allow *me*” said Maggie triumphantly. She was persuaded that (since his wife was denied the joy of waiting on him) hers was the truly desirable position. Majendie had never had the heart to enlighten her.

She pressed his feet with her soft hands, to feel if his stockings were damp, too.

“There’s a little hole,” she cried. “I shall have to mend that to-night.”

She put cushions at his back, and sat down on the floor beside him, and laid her head on his knee.

“There’s a sole for supper,” said she, in a dreamy voice, “and a roast chicken. And an apple tart. I made it.” Maggie had always been absurdly proud of the things that she could do.

“Clever Maggie.”

“I made it because I thought you’d like it.”

“Kind Maggie.”

“You didn’t get any of those things yesterday, or the day before, did you?”

She was always afraid of giving him what he had had at home. That was one of the difficulties, she felt, of a double household.

“I forget,” he said, a little wearily, “what I had yesterday.”

Maggie noticed the weariness and said no more.

He laid his hand on her head and stroked her hair. He could always keep Maggie quiet by stroking her hair. She shifted herself instantly into a position easier for his hand. She sat still, only turning to the caressing hand, now her forehead, now the nape of her neck, now her delicate ear.

Maggie knew all his moods and ministered to them. She knew to-night that, if she held her tongue, the peace she had prepared for him would sink into him and heal him. He was not very tired. She could tell. She could measure his weariness to a degree by the movements of his hand. When he was tired she would seize the caressing hand and make it stop. In a few minutes supper would be ready, and when he had had supper, she knew, it would be time to talk.

Majendie was grateful for her silence. He was grateful to her for many things, for her beauty, for her sweetness, for her humility, for her love which had given so much and asked so little. Maggie had still the modest charm that gave to her and to her affection the illusion of a perfect innocence. It had been heightened rather than diminished by their intimacy.

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Somehow she had managed so that, as long as he was with her, shame was impossible for himself or her. As long as he was with her he was wrapped in her illusion, the illusion of innocence, of happiness, of all the unspoken sanctities of home. He knew that whether he was or was not with her, as long as he loved her no other man would come between him and her; no other man would cross his threshold and stand upon his hearth. The house he came to was holy to her. There were times, so deep was the illusion, when he could have believed that Maggie, sitting there at his feet, was the pure spouse, the helpmate, and Anne, in the house in Prior Street, the unwedded, unacknowledged mistress, the distant, the secret, the forbidden. He had never disguised from Maggie the temporary and partial nature of the tie that bound them. But the illusion was too strong for both of them. It was strong upon him now.

The woman, Mrs. Pearson, came in with supper, moving round the room in silence, devoted and discreet.

Majendie was hungry. Maggie was unable to conceal her frank joy in seeing him eat and drink. She ate little and talked a great deal, drawn by his questions.

“What have you been doing, Maggie?”

Maggie gave an account of her innocent days, of her labours in house and farm and garden. She loved all three, she loved her flowers and her chickens and her rabbits, and the little young pigs. She loved all things that had life. She was proud of her house. Her hands were always busy in it. She had stitched all the linen for it. She had made all the tablecloths, sofa covers and curtains, and given to them embroidered borders. She liked to move about among all these beautiful things and feel that they were hers. But she loved those most which Majendie had used, or noticed, or admired. After supper she took up her old position by his chair.

“How long can you stay?” said she.

“I must go to-morrow.”

“Oh, why?”

“I’ve told you why, dear. It’s my little girl’s birthday to-morrow.”

She remembered.

“Her birthday. How old will she be to-morrow?”

“Seven.”

“Seven. What does she do all day long?”

“Oh, she amuses herself. We have a garden.”

“How she would love this garden, and the flowers, and the swing, and the chickens, and all the animals, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes. Yes.”

Somehow he didn’t like Maggie to talk about his child, but he hadn’t the heart to stop her.

“Is she as pretty as she was?”

“Prettier.”

“And she’s not a bit like you.”

“Not a bit, not a little bit.”

“I’m glad,” said Maggie.

“Why on earth are you glad?”

“Because—I couldn’t bear *her* child to be like you.”

“You mustn’t say those things, Maggie, I don’t like it.”

“I won’t say them. You don’t mind my thinking them, do you? I can’t help thinking.”

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She thought for a long time; then she got up, and came to him, and put her arm round his neck, and bowed her head and whispered.

“Don’t whisper. I hate it. Speak out. Say what you’ve got to say.”

“I can’t say it.”

She said it very low.

He bent forward, freeing himself from her mouth and clinging arm.

“No, Maggie. Never. I told you that in the beginning. You promised me you wouldn’t think of it. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“What’s bad enough?”

“Everything, my child. I’m bad enough, if you like; but I’m not as bad as all that, I can assure you.”

“You don’t think *me* bad?”

“You know I don’t. You know what I think of you. But you must learn to see what’s possible and what isn’t.”

“I do see. Tell me one thing. Is it because you love *her*?”

“We can’t go into that, Maggie. Can’t you understand that it may be because I love *you*?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t mind so long as I know it isn’t only because you love *her*.”

“You’re not to talk about her, Maggie.”

“I know. I won’t. I don’t want to talk about her, I’m sure. I try not to think about her more than I can help.”

“But you must think of her.”

“Oh—must I?”

“At any rate, you must think of me.”

“I do think of you. I think of you from morning till night. I don’t think of anything else. I don’t want anything else. I’m contented as long as I’ve got you. It wasn’t that.”

“What was it, Maggie?”

“Nothing. Only—it’s so awfully lonely in between, when you’re not here. That was why I asked you.”

“Poor child, poor Maggie. Is it very bad to bear?”

“Not when I know you’re coming.”

“See here—if it gets too bad to bear, we must end it.”

“End it?”

“Yes, Maggie. *You* must end it; you must give me up, when you’re tired—”

“Oh no—no,” she cried.

“Give me up,” he repeated, “and go back to town.”

“To Scale?”

“Well, yes; if it’s so lonely here.”

“And give you up?”

“Yes, Maggie, you must; if you go back to Scale.”

“I shall never go back. Who could I go to? There’s nobody who’d ’ave me. I’ve got nobody.”

“Nobody?”

“Nobody but you, Wallie. Nobody but you. Have you never thought of that? Why, where should *I* be if I was to give you up?”

“I see, Maggie. *I* see. *I* see.”

Up till then he had seen nothing. But Maggie, unwise, had put her hand through the fine web of illusion. She had seen, and made him see, the tragedy of the truth behind it, the real nature of the tie that bound them. It was an inconsistent tie, permanent in its impermanence, with all its incompleteness terribly complete. He could not give her up; he had not thought of giving her up; but neither had he thought of keeping her.

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It was all wrong. It was wrong to keep her. It would be wrong to give her up. He was all she had. Whatever happened he could not give her up.

And so he said, "*I* see. *I* see."

"See here," said she (she had adopted some of his phrases), "when I said there was nobody, I meant nobody I'd have anything to do with. If I went back to Scale, there are plenty of low girls in the town who'd make friends with me, if I'd let 'em. But I won't be seen with them. You wouldn't have me seen with them, would you?"

"No, Maggie, not for all the world."

"Well, then, 'ow can you go on talking about my giving you up?"

No. He could not give her up. There was no tie between them but their sin, yet he could not break it. Degraded as it was, it saved him from deeper degradation.

He loved Anne with his whole soul, with his heart and with his body, and he had given his body to Maggie, with as much heart as went with it. In the world's sight he loved Maggie and was bound to Anne. In his own sight he loved Anne and was bound to Maggie.

It had come to that.

He did not care to look back upon the steps by which it had come. He only knew that, seven years ago, he had been sound and whole, a man with one aim and one passion and one life. Now he and his life were divided, cut clean in two by a line not to be passed or touched upon by either sundered half. All of him that Anne had rejected he had given to Maggie.

As far as he could judge he had acted, not grossly, not recklessly, but with a kind of passionate deliberation. He knew he would have to pay for it. He had not stopped to haggle with his conscience or to ask: how much? But he was prepared to pay.

Up to this moment his conscience had not dunned him. But now he foresaw a season when the bills would be falling due.

Maggie had torn the veil of illusion, and he looked for the first time upon his sin.

Even his conscience admitted that he had not meant it to come to that. He had had no ancient private tendency to sin. He wanted nothing but to live at home, happy with the wife he loved, and with his child, his children. And poor Maggie, she too would have asked no more than to be a good wife to the man she loved, and to be the mother of his children.

This life with Maggie, hidden away in Three Elms Farm, in the wilds of Holderness, it could not be called dissipation, but it was division. Where once he had been whole he was now divided. The sane, strong affection that should have knit body and soul together was itself broken in two.

And it was she, the helpmate, she who should have kept him whole, who had caused him to be thus sundered from himself and her.

They were all wrong, all frustrated, all incomplete. Anne, in her sublime infidelity to earth; Maggie, turned from her own sweet use that she might give him what Anne could not give; and he, who between them had severed his body from his soul.

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Thus he brooded.

And Maggie, with her face hidden against his knee, brooded too, piercing the illusion.

He tried to win her from her sad thoughts by talking again of the house and garden. But Maggie was tired of the house and garden now.

“And do the Pearsons look after you well still?” he asked.

“Yes. Very well.”

“And Steve—is he as good to you as ever?”

Maggie brightened and became more communicative.

“Yes, very good. He was all day mending my bicycle, Sunday, and he takes me out in the boat sometimes; and he’s made such a dear little house for the old Angora rabbit.”

“Do you like going out in the boat?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Do you like going out with him?”

“No,” said Maggie, making a little face, half of disgust and half of derision. “No. His hands are all dirty, and he smells of fish.”

Majendie laughed. “There are drawbacks, I must own, to Steve.”

He looked at his watch, an action Maggie hated. It always suggested finality, departure.

“Ten o’clock, Maggie. I must be up at six to-morrow. We sail at seven.”

“At seven,” echoed Maggie in despair.

They were up at six. Maggie went with him to the creek, to see him sail. In the garden she picked a chrysanthemum and stuck it in his buttonhole, forgetting that he couldn’t wear her token. There were so many things he couldn’t do.

A little rain still fell through a clogging mist. They walked side by side, treading the drenched grass, for the track was too narrow for them both. Maggie’s feet dragged, prolonging the moments.

A white pointed sail showed through the mist, where the little yacht lay in the river off the mouth of the creek.

Steve was in the boat close against the creek's bank, waiting to row Majendie to the yacht. He touched his cap to Majendie as they appeared on the bank, but he did not look at Maggie when her gentle voice called good-morning.

Steve's face was close-mouthed and hard set.

She put her hands on Majendie's shoulders and kissed him. Her cheek against his face was pure and cold, wet with the rain. Steve did not look at them. He never looked at them when they were together.

Majendie dropped into the boat. Steve pushed off from the bank. Maggie stood there watching them go. She stood till the boat reached the creek's mouth, and Majendie turned, and raised his cap to her; stood till the white sail moved slowly up the river and disappeared, rounding the spit of land.

Majendie, as he paced the deck and talked to his men of wind and weather, turned casually, on his heel, to look at her where she stood alone in the level immensity of the land. The world looked empty all around her.

And he was touched with a sudden poignant realisation of her life; its sadness, its incompleteness, its isolation.

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That was what he had brought her to.

CHAPTER XXIX

The rain cleared off, the mist lifted, and at nine o'clock it was a fine day for Peggy's birthday. Even Scale, where it stretched its flat avenues into the country, showed golden in the warm and brilliant air.

The household in Prior Street had been up early, making preparations for the day. Peggy had waked before it was light, to feel her presents which lay beside her on her bed; and, by the time Majendie's sail had passed Fawlness Point, she was up and dressed, waiting for him.

Anne had to break it to her gently that perhaps he would not be home in time for eight-o'clock breakfast. Then the child's mouth trembled, and Anne comforted her, half-smiling and half-afraid.

"Ah, Peggy, Peggy," she said, as she rocked her against her breast, "What shall I do with you? Your little heart is too big for your little body."

Anne's terror had not left her in three years. It was always with her now. The child was bound to suffer. She was a little mass of throbbing nerves, of trembling emotions.

Yet Anne herself was happier. The three years had passed smoothly over her. Her motherhood had laid its fine, soft, finishing touch upon her. Her face, her body, had rounded and ripened, year after slow year, to an abiding beauty, born of her tenderness. At thirty-five Anne Majendie had reached the perfect moment of her physical maturity.

Her mind was no longer harassed by anxiety about her husband. He seemed to have settled down. He had ceased to be uncertain in his temper, by turns irritable and depressed. He had parted with the heaviness which had once roused her aversion, and had recovered his personal distinction, the slender refinement of his youth. She rejoiced in his well-being. She attributed it, partly to his open-air habits, partly to the spiritual growth begun in him at the time of his sister's death.

She desired no change in their relations, no further understanding, no closer intimacy.

To Anne's mind, her husband's attitude to her was perfect. The passion that had been her fear had left him. He waited on her hand and foot, with humble, heart-rending devotion. He let her see that he adored her with discretion, at a distance, as a divinely, incomprehensibly high and holy thing.

Her household life had simplified itself. Her days passed in noiseless, equable procession. Many hours had been given back to her empty after Edith's death. She had filled them with interests outside her home, with visiting the poor in the district round All Souls, with evening classes for shop-girls, with "Rescue" work. Not an hour of her day was idle. At the end of the three years Mrs. Majendie was known in Scale by her broad charities and by her saintly life.

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She had fallen away a little from her friends in Thurston Square. In three years Fanny Eliott and her circle had grown somewhat unreal to her. She had been aware of their inefficiency before. There had been a time when she felt that Mrs. Eliott's eminence had become a little perilous. She herself had placed her on it, and held her there by a somewhat fatiguing effort of the will to believe. She had been partly (though she did not know it) the dupe of Mrs. Eliott's delight in her, of all the sweet and dangerous ministrations of their mutual vanities. Mrs. Eliott had been uplifted by Anne's preposterously grave approval. Anne had been ravished by her own distinction as the audience of Fanny Eliott's loftier and profounder moods. There could be no criticism of these heights and depths. To have depreciated Fanny Eliott's rarity by a shade would have been to call in question her own.

But all this had ceased long ago, when she married Walter Majendie, and his sister became her dearest friend. Fanny Eliott had always looked on Edith Majendie as her rival; retreating a little ostentatiously before her formidable advance. There should have been no rivalry, for there had been no possible ground of comparison. Neither could Edith Majendie be said to have advanced. The charm of Edith, or rather, her pathetic claim, was that she never could have advanced at all. To Anne's mind, from the first, there had been no choice between Edith, lying motionless on her sofa by the window, and Fanny at large in the drawing-rooms of her acquaintances, scattering her profuse enthusiasms, revolving in her intellectual round, the prisoner of her own perfections. To come into Edith's room had been to come into thrilling contact with reality; while Fanny Eliott was for ever putting you off with some ingenious refinement on it. Edith's personality had triumphed over death and time. Fanny Eliott, poor thing, still suffered by the contrast.

Of all Anne's friends, the Gardners alone stood the test of time. She had never had a doubt of them. They had come later into her life, after the perishing of her great illusion. The shock had humbled her senses and disposed her to reverence for the things of intellect. Dr. Gardner's position, as President of the Scale Literary and Philosophic Society, was as a high rock to which she clung. Mrs. Gardner was dear to her for many reasons.

The dearness of Mrs. Gardner was significant. It showed that, thanks to Peggy, Anne's humanisation was almost complete.

To-day, which was Peggy's birthday, Anne's heart was light and happy. She had planned, that, if the day were fine, the festival was to be celebrated by a picnic to Westleydale.

And the day was fine. Majendie had promised to be home in time to start by the nine-fifty train. Meanwhile they waited. Peggy had helped Mary the cook to pack the luncheon basket, and now she felt time heavy on her little hands.

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Anne suggested that they should go upstairs and help Nanna. Nanna was in Majendie's room, turning out his drawers. On his bed there was a pile of suits of the year before last, put aside to be given to Anne's poor people. When Peggy was tired of fetching and carrying, she watched her mother turning over the clothes and sorting them into heaps. Anne's methods were rapid and efficient.

"Oh, mummy!" cried Peggy, "don't! You touch daddy's things as if you didn't like them."

"Peggy, darling, what do you mean?"

"You're so quick." She laid her face against one of Majendie's coats and stroked it. "Must daddy's things go away?"

"Yes, darling. Why don't you want them to go?"

"Because I love them. I love all his little coats and hats and shoes and things."

"Oh, Peggy, Peggy, you're a little sentimentalist. Go and see what Nanna's got there."

Nanna had given a cry of joyous discovery. "Look, ma'am," said she, "what I've found in master's portmanteau."

Nanna came forward, shaking out a child's frock. A frock of pure white silk, embroidered round the neck and wrists with a deep border of daisies, pink and white and gold.

"Nanna!"

"Oh, mummy, what is it?"

Peggy touched a daisy with her soft forefinger and shrank back shyly. She knew it was her birthday, but she did not know whether the frock had anything to do with that, or no.

"I wonder," said Anne, "what little girl daddy brought that for."

"Did daddy bring it?"

"Yes, daddy brought it. Do you think he meant it for her birthday, Nanna?"

"Well, m'm, he may have meant it for her birthday last year. I found it stuffed into 'is portmanteau wot 'e took with him in the yacht a year ago. It's bin there—poked away in the cupboard, ever since. I suppose he bought it, meaning to give it to Miss Peggy, and put it away and forgot all about it. See, m'm"—Nanna measured the frock against Peggy's small figure—"it'd 'a' bin too large for her, last birthday. It'll just fit her now, m'm."

“Oh, Peggy!” said Anne. “She must put it on. Quick, Nanna. You shall wear it, my pet, and surprise daddy.”

“What fun!” said Peggy.

“*I*sn’t it fun?” Anne was as gay and as happy as Peggy. She was smiling her pretty smile.

Peggy was solemnly arrayed in the little frock. The borders of daisies showed like a necklace and bracelets against her white skin.

“Well, m’m,” said Nanna, “if master did forget, he knew what he was about, at the time, anyhow. It’s the very frock for her.”

“Yes. See, Peggy—it’s daisies, marguerites. That’s why daddy chose it—for your little name, darling, do you see?”

“My name,” said Peggy softly, moved by the wonder and beauty of her frock.

“There he is, Peggy! Run down and show yourself.”

“Oh, muvver,” shrieked Peggy, “it will be a surprise for daddy, won’t it?”

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She ran down. They followed, and leaned over the bannisters to listen to the surprise. They heard Peggy's laugh as she came to the last flight of stairs and showed herself to her father. They heard her shriek "Daddy! daddy!" Then there was calm.

Then Peggy's voice dropped from its high joy and broke. "Oh, daddy, are you angry with me?"

Anne came downstairs. Majendie had the child in his arms and was kissing her.

"Are you angry with me, daddy?" she repeated.

"No, my sweetheart, no." He looked up at Anne. He was very pale, and a sweat was on his forehead. "Who put that frock on her?"

"I did," said Anne.

"I think you'd better take it off again," he said quietly.

Anne raised her eyebrows as a sign to him to look at Peggy's miserable mouth. "Oh, let her wear it," she said. "It's her birthday."

Majendie wiped his forehead and turned aside into the study.

"Muvver," said Peggy, as they went hand in hand upstairs again; "do you think daddy *really meant* it as a surprise for *me*?"

"I think he must have done, darling."

"Aren't you sorry we spoiled his surprise, mummy?"

"I don't think he minds, Peggy."

"*I* think he does. Why did he look angry, and say I was to take it off?"

"Perhaps, because it's rather too nice a frock for every day."

"My birthday isn't every day," said Peggy.

So Peggy wore the frock that Maggie had made for her and given to Majendie last year. He had hidden it in his portmanteau, meaning to give it to Mrs. Ransome at Christmas. And he had thrown the portmanteau into the darkest corner of the cupboard, and gone away and forgotten all about it.

And now the sight of Maggie's handiwork had given him a shock. For his sin was heavy upon him. Every day he went in fear of discovery. Anne would ask him where he had

got that frock, and he would have to lie to her. And it would be no use; for, sooner or later, she would know that he had lied; and she would track Maggie down by the frock.

He hated to see his innocent child dressed in the garment which was a token and memorial of his sin. He wished he had thrown the damned thing into the Humber.

But Anne had no suspicion. Her face was smooth and tranquil as she came downstairs. She was calling Peggy her “little treasure,” and her eyes were smiling as she looked at the frail, small, white and gold creature, stepping daintily and shyly in her delicate dress.

Peggy was buttoned into a little white coat to keep her warm; and they set out, Majendie carrying the luncheon basket, and Peggy an enormous doll.

Peggy enjoyed the journey. When she was not talking to Majendie she was singing a little song to keep the doll quiet, so that the time passed very quickly both for her and him. There were other people in the carriage, and Anne was afraid they would be annoyed at Peggy’s singing. But they seemed to like it as much as she and Majendie. Nobody was ever annoyed with Peggy.

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In Westleydale the beech trees were in golden leaf. It was green underfoot and on the folding hills. Overhead it was limitless blue above the uplands; and above the woods, among the golden tree-tops, clear films and lacing veins and brilliant spots of blue.

Majendie felt Peggy's hand tighten on his hand. Her little body was trembling with delight.

They found the beech tree under which he and Anne had once sat. He looked at her. And she, remembering, half turned her face from him; and, as she stooped and felt for a soft dry place for the child to sit on, she smiled, half unconsciously, a shy and tender smile.

Then he saw, beside her half-turned face, the face of another woman, smiling, shyly and tenderly, another smile; and his heart smote him with the sorrow of his sin.

They sat down, all three, under the beech tree; and Peggy took, first Majendie's hand, then Anne's hand, and held them together in her lap.

"Mummy," said she, "aren't you glad that daddy came? It wouldn't be half so nice without him, would it?"

"No," said Anne, "it wouldn't."

"Mummy, you don't say that as if you meant it."

"Oh, Peggy, of course I meant it."

"Yes, but you didn't make it sound so."

"Peggy," said Majendie, "you're a terribly observant little person."

"She's a little person who sometimes observes all wrong."

"No, mummy, I don't. You never talk to daddy like you talk to me."

"You're a little girl, dear, and daddy's a big grown-up man."

"That's not what I mean, though. You've got a grown-up voice for me, too. I don't mean your grown-up voice. I mean, mummy, you talk to daddy as if—as if you hadn't known him a very long time. And you talk to me as if you'd known me—oh, ever so long. *Have* you known me longer than you've known daddy?"

Majendie gazed with feigned abstraction at the shoulder of the hill visible through the branches of the trees.

“Bless you, sweetheart, I knew daddy long before you were ever thought of.”

“When was I thought of, mummy?”

“I don’t know, darling.”

“Do you know, daddy?”

“Yes, Peggy. *I* know. You were thought of here, in this wood, under this tree, on mummy’s birthday, between eight and nine years ago.”

“Who thought of me?”

“Ah, that’s telling.”

“Who thought of me, mummy?”

“Daddy and I, dear.”

“And you forgot, and daddy remembered.”

“Yes. I’ve got a rather better memory than your mother, dear.”

“You forgot my old birthday, daddy.”

“I haven’t forgotten your mother’s old birthday, though.”

Peggy was thinking. Her forehead was all wrinkled with the intensity of her thought.

“Mummy—am I only seven?”

“Only seven, Peggy.”

“Then,” said Peggy, “you *did* think of me before I was born. How did you know me before I was born?”

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Anne shook her head.

“Daddy, how did you know me before I was born?”

“Peggy, you’re a little tease.”

“You brought it on yourself, my dear. Peggy, if you’ll leave off teasing daddy, I’ll tell you a story.”

“Oh!—”

“Once upon a time” (Anne’s voice was very low) “mummy had a dream. She dreamed she was in this wood, walking along that little path—just there—not thinking of Peggy. And when she came to this tree she saw an angel, with big white wings. He was lying under this very tree, on this very bit of grass, just there, where daddy’s sitting. And one of his wings was stretched out on the grass, and it was hollow like a cradle. It was all lined with little feathers, like the inside of a swan’s wing, as soft as soft. And the other wing was stretched over it like the top of a cradle. And inside, all among the soft little feathers, there was a little baby girl lying, just like Peggy.”

“Oh, mummy, was it me?”

“Sh—sh—sh! Whoever it was, the angel saw that mummy loved it, and wanted it very much—”

“The little baby girl?”

“Yes. And so he took the baby and gave it to mummy, to be her own little girl. That’s how Peggy came to mummy.”

“And did he give it to daddy, too, to be his little girl?”

“Yes,” said Majendie, “I was wondering where I came in.”

“Yes. He gave it to daddy to be his little girl, too.”

“I’m glad he gave me to daddy. The angel brought me to you in the night, like daddy brought me my big dolly. You did bring my big dolly, and put her on my bed, didn’t you, daddy? Last night?”

Majendie was silent.

“Daddy wasn’t at home last night, Peggy.”

“Oh, daddy, where were you?”

Majendie felt his forehead getting damp again.

“Daddy was away on business.”

“Oh, mummy, don’t you wish he’d never go away?”

“I think it’s time for lunch,” said Majendie.

They ate their lunch; and when it was ended, Majendie went to the cottage to find water, for Peggy was thirsty. He returned, carrying water in a pitcher, and followed by a red-cheeked, rosy little girl who brought milk in a cup for Peggy.

Anne remembered the cup. It was the same cup that she had drunk from after her husband. And the child was the same child whom he had found sitting in the grass, whom he had shown to her and taken from her arms, whose little body, held close to hers, had unsealed in her the first springs of her maternal passion. It all came back to her.

The little girl beamed on Peggy with a face like a small red sun, and Peggy conceived a sudden yearning for her companionship. It seemed that, at the cottage, there were rabbits, and a new baby, and a litter of puppies three days old. And all these wonders the little girl offered to show to Peggy, if Peggy would go with her.

Peggy begged, and went through the wood, hand in hand with the little beaming girl. Majendie and Anne watched them out of sight.

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“Look at the two pairs of legs,” said Majendie.

Anne sighed. Her Peggy showed very white and frail beside the red, lusty-legged daughter of the woods.

“I’m not at all happy about her,” said she.

“Why not?”

“She gets so terribly tired.”

“All children do, don’t they?”

Anne shook her head. “Not as she does. It isn’t a child’s healthy tiredness. It doesn’t come like that. It came on quite suddenly the other day, after she’d been excited; and her little lips turned grey.”

“Get Gardner to look at her.”

“I’m going to. He says she ought to be more in the open air. I wish we could get a cottage somewhere in the country, with a nice garden.”

Majendie said nothing. He was thinking of Three Elms Farm, and the garden and the orchard, and of the pure wind that blew over them straight from the sea. He remembered how Maggie had said that the child would love it.

“You could afford it, Walter, couldn’t you, now?”

“Of course I can afford it.”

He thought how easily it could be done, if he gave up his yacht and the farm. His business was doing better every year. But the double household was a drain on his fresh resources. He could not very well afford to take another house, and keep the farm too. He had thought of that before. He had been thinking of it last night when he spoke to Maggie about giving him up. Poor Maggie! Well, he would have to manage somehow. If the worst came to the worst they could sell the house in Prior Street. And he would sell the yacht.

“I think I shall sell the yacht,” he said.

“Oh no, you mustn’t do that. You’ve been so well since you’ve had it.”

“No, it isn’t necessary. I shall be better if I take more exercise.”

Peggy came back and the subject dropped.

Peggy was very unhappy before the picnic ended. She was tired, so tired that she cried piteously, and Majendie had to take her up in his arms and carry her all the way to the station. Anne carried the doll.

In the train Peggy fell asleep in her father's arms. She slept with her face pressed close against him, and one hand clinging to his breast. Her head rested on his arm, and her hair curled over his rough coat-sleeve.

"Look—" he whispered.

Anne looked. "The little lamb—" she said.

Then she was silent, discerning in the man's face, bent over the sleeping child, the divine look of love and tenderness. She was silent, held by an old enchantment and an older vision; brooding on things dear and secret and long-forgotten.

CHAPTER XXX

Though Thurston Square saw little of Mrs. Majendie, the glory of Mrs. Eliott's Thursdays remained undiminished. The same little procession filed through her drawing-room as before. Mrs. Pooley, Miss Proctor, the Gardners, and Canon Wharton. Mrs. Eliott was more than ever haggard and pursuing; she had more than ever the air of clinging, desperate and exhausted, on her precipitous intellectual heights.

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But Mrs. Pooley never flagged, possibly because her ideas were vaguer and more miscellaneous, and therefore less exhausting. It was she who now urged Mrs. Eliott on. This year Mrs. Pooley was going in for thought-power, and for mind-control, and had drawn Mrs. Eliott in with her. They still kept it up for hours together, and still they dreaded the disastrous invasions of Miss Proctor.

Miss Proctor rode roughshod over the thought-power, and trampled contemptuously on the mind-control. Mrs. Gardner's attitude was mysterious and unsatisfactory. She seemed to stand serenely on the shore of the deep sea where Mrs. Eliott and Mrs. Pooley were for ever plunging and sinking, and coming up again, bobbing and bubbling, to the surface. Her manner implied that she would die rather than go in with them; it also suggested that she knew rather more about the thought-power and the mind-control than they did; but that she did not wish to talk so much about it.

Mr. Eliott, dexterous as ever, and fortified by the exact sciences, took refuge from the occult under his covering of profound stupidity. He had a secret understanding with Dr. Gardner on the subject. His spirit no longer searched for Dr. Gardner's across the welter of his wife's drawing-room, knowing that it would find it at the club.

Now, in October, about four o'clock on the Thursday after Peggy's birthday, Canon Wharton and Miss Proctor met at Mrs. Eliott's. The Canon had watched his opportunity and drawn his hostess apart.

"May I speak with you a moment," he said, "before your other guests arrive?"

Mrs. Eliott led him to a secluded sofa. "If you'll sit here," said she, "we can leave Johnson to entertain Miss Proctor."

"I am perplexed and distressed," said the Canon, "about our dear Mrs. Majendie."

Mrs. Eliott's eyes darkened with anxiety. She clasped her hands. "Oh why? What is it? Do you mean about the dear little girl?"

"I know nothing about the little girl. But I hear very unpleasant things about her husband."

"What things?"

The Canon's face was reticent and grim. He wished Mrs. Eliott to understand that he was no unscrupulous purveyor of gossip; that if he spoke, it was under constraint and severe necessity.

"I do not," said the Canon, "usually give heed to disagreeable reports. But I am afraid that, where there is such a dense cloud of smoke, there must be some fire."

“I think,” said Mrs. Eliott, “perhaps they didn’t get on very well together once. But they seem to have made it up after the sister’s death. *She* has been happier these last three years. She has been a different woman.”

“The same woman, my dear lady, the same woman. Only a better saint. For the last three years, they say, he has been living with another woman.”

“Oh—it’s impossible. Impossible. He is away a great deal—but—”

“He is away a great deal too often. Running up to Scarby every week in that yacht of his. In with the Ransomes and all that disreputable set.”

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“Is Lady Cayley in Scale?”

“Lady Cayley is at Scarby.”

“Do you mean to say—”

“I mean,” said the Canon, rising, “to say nothing.”

Mrs. Eliott detained him with her eyes of anguish.

“Canon Wharton—do you think she knows?”

“I cannot tell you.”

The Canon never told. He was far too clever.

Mrs. Eliott wandered to Miss Proctor.

“Do you know,” said Miss Proctor, searching Mrs. Eliott’s face with an inquisitive gaze, “how our friends, the Majendies, are getting on?”

“Oh, as usual. I see very little of her now. Anne is quite taken up with her little girl and with her good works.”

“Oh! That,” said Miss Proctor, “was a most unsuitable marriage.”

It was five o’clock. The Canon and Miss Proctor had drunk their two cups of tea and departed. Mrs. Pooley had arrived soon after four; she lingered, to talk a little more about the thought-power and the mind-control. Mrs. Pooley was convinced that she could make things happen. That they were, in fact, happening. But Mrs. Eliott was no longer interested.

Mrs. Pooley, too, departed, feeling that dear Fanny’s Thursday had been a disappointment. She had been quite unable to sustain the conversation at its usual height.

Mrs. Pooley indubitably gone, Mrs. Eliott wandered down to Johnson in his study. There, in perfect confidence, she revealed to him the Canon’s revelations.

Johnson betrayed no surprise. That story had been going the round of his club for the last two years.

“What will Anne do?” said Mrs. Eliott, “when she finds out?”

“I don’t suppose she’ll do anything.”

“Will she get a separation, do you think?”

“How can I tell you?”

“I wonder if she knows.”

“She’s not likely to tell you, if she does.”

“She’s bound to know, sooner or later. I wonder if one ought to prepare her?”

“Prepare her for what?”

“The shock of it. I’m afraid of her hearing in some horrid way. It would be so awful, if she didn’t know.”

“It can’t be pleasant, any way, my dear.”

“Do advise me, Johnson. Ought I or ought I not to tell her?”

Mr. Eliott’s face told how his nature shrank from the agony of decision. But he was touched by her distress.

“Certainly not. Much better let well alone.”

“If I were only sure that it *was* well I was letting alone.”

“Can’t be sure of anything. Give it the benefit of the doubt.”

“Yes—but if you were I?”

“If I were you I should say nothing.”

“That only means that I should say nothing if I were you. But I’m not.”

“Be thankful, my dear, at any rate, for that.”

He took up a book, *The Search for Stellar Parallaxes*, a book that he understood and that his wife could not understand. That book was the sole refuge open to him when pressed for an opinion. He knew that, when she saw him reading it, she would realise that he was her intellectual master.

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The front doorbell announced the arrival of another caller.

She went away, wondering, as he meant she should, whether he were so very undecided, after all. Certainly his indecisions closed a subject more effectually than other people's verdicts.

She found Anne in the empty, half-dark drawing-room waiting for her. She had chosen the darkest corner, and the darkest hour.

"Fanny," she said, and her voice trembled, "are you alone? Can I speak to you a moment?"

"Yes, dear, yes. Just let me leave word with Mason that I'm not at home. But no one will come now."

In the interval she heard Anne struggling with the sob that had choked her voice. She felt that the decision had been made for her. The terrible task had been taken out of her hands. Anne knew.

She sat down beside her friend and put her hand on her shoulder. In that moment poor Fanny's intellectual vanities dropped from her, like an inappropriate garment, and she became pure woman. She forgot Anne's recent disaffection and her coldness, she forgot the years that had separated them, and remembered only the time when Anne was the girlfriend who had loved her, and had come to her in all her griefs, and had made her house her home.

"What is it, dear?" she murmured.

Anne felt for her hand and pressed it. She tried to speak, but no words would come.

"Of course," thought Mrs. Eliott, "she cannot tell me. But she knows I know."

"My dear," she said, "can I or Johnson help you?"

Anne shook her head; but she pressed her friend's hand tighter.

Wondering what she could do or say to help her, Mrs. Eliott resolved to take Anne's knowledge for granted, and act upon it.

"If there's trouble, dear, will you come to us? We want you to look on our house as a refuge, any hour of the day or night."

Anne stared at her friend. There was something ominous and dismaying in her solemn tenderness, and it roused Anne to wonder, even in her grief.

“You cannot help me, dear,” she said. “No one can. Yet I had to come to you and tell you—”

“Tell me everything,” said Mrs. Eliott, “if you can.”

Anne tried to steady her voice to tell her, and failed. Then Fanny had an inspiration. She felt that she must divert Anne’s thoughts from the grief that made her dumb, and get her to talk naturally of other things.

“How’s Peggy?” said she. She knew it would be good to remind her that, whatever happened, she had still the child.

But at that question, Anne released Mrs. Eliott’s hand, and laid her head back upon the cushion and cried.

“Dear,” whispered Mrs. Eliott, with her inspiration full upon her, “you will always have *her*.”

Then Anne sat up in her corner, and put away her tears, and controlled herself to speak.

“Fanny,” she said, “Dr. Gardner has seen her. He says I shall not have her very long. Perhaps—a few years—if we take the very greatest care—”

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“Oh, my dear! What is it?”

“It’s her heart. I thought it was her spine, because of Edie. But it isn’t. She has valvular disease. Oh, Fanny, I didn’t think a little child could have it.”

“Nor I,” said Mrs. Eliott, shocked into a great calm. “But surely—if you take care—”

“No. He gives no hope. He only says a few years, if we leave Scale and take her into the country. She must never be overtired, never excited. We must never vex her. He says one violent crying fit might kill her. And she cries so easily. She cries sometimes till she’s sick.”

Mrs. Eliott’s face had grown white; she trembled, and was dumb before the anguish of Anne’s face.

But it was Anne who rose, and put her arms about the childless woman, and kissed and comforted her.

It was as if she had said: Thank God you never had one.

CHAPTER XXXI

The rumour which was going the round of the clubs in due time reached Lady Cayley through the Ransomes. It roused in her many violent and conflicting emotions.

She sat trembling in the Ransomes’ drawing-room. Mrs. Ransome had just asked whether there was anything in it; because if there was, she, Mrs. Ransome, washed her hands of her. She intimated that it would take a good deal of washing to get Sarah off her hands.

Sarah had unveiled the face of horror, the face of outraged virtue, and the wrath and writhing of propriety wounded in the uncertain, quivering, vital spot. During the unveiling Dick Ransome had come in. He wanted to know if Topsy had been bullying poor Toodles. Whereupon Topsy wept feebly, and poor Toodles had a moment of monstrous calm.

She wanted to get it quite clear, to make no mistake. They might as well give her the details. Majendie had left his wife, had he? Well, she wasn’t surprised at that. The wonder was that, having married her, he had stuck to her so long. He had left his wife, and was living at Scarby, was he, with her? Well, she only wanted to get all the details clear.

At this Sarah fell into a fit of laughter very terrifying to see. Since her own sister wouldn’t take her word for it, she supposed she’d have to prove that it was not so.

And, under the horror of her virtue and respectability, there heaved a dull, dumb fury, born of her memory that it once was, her belief that it might have been again, and her knowledge that it was not so. She trembled, shaken by the troubling of the fire that ran underground, the immense, unseen, unliberated, primeval fire. She was no longer a creature of sophistries, hypocrisies, and wiles. She was the large woman of the simple earth, welded by the dark, unspiritual flame.

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Dick Ransome turned on his sister-in-law a pale, puffy face in which two little dark eyes twinkled with a shrewd, gross humour. Nothing could possibly have pleased Dick Ransome more than an exhibition of indignant virtue, as achieved by Sarah. He knew a great deal more about Sarah than Mrs. Ransome knew, or than Sarah knew herself. To Dick Ransome's mind, thus illumined by knowledge, that spectacle swept the whole range of human comedy. He sat taking in all the entertainment it presented; and, when it was all over, he remarked quietly that Toodles needn't bother about her proofs. He had got them too. He knew that it was not so. He could tell her that much, but he wasn't going to give Majendie away. No, she couldn't get any more out of him than that.

Sarah smiled. She did not need to get anything more out of him. She had her proof; or, if it didn't exactly amount to proof, she had her clue. She had found it long ago; and she had followed it up, if not to the end, at any rate, quite far enough. She reflected that Majendie, like the dear fool he always was, had given it to her himself, five years ago.

Men's sins take care of themselves. It is their innocent good deeds that start the hounds of destiny. When Majendie sent Maggie Forrest's handiwork to Mrs. Ransome, with a kind note recommending the little embroideress, by that innocent good deed he woke the sleeping dogs of destiny. Mrs. Ransome's sister had tracked poor Maggie down by the long trail of her beautiful embroidery. She had been baffled when the embroidered clue broke off. Now, after three years, she leaped (and it was not a very difficult leap for Lady Cayley) to the firm conclusion. Maggie Forrest and her art had disappeared for three years; so, at perilous intervals, had Majendie; therefore they had disappeared together.

Sarah did not like the look in Dick Ransome's eye. She removed herself from it to the seclusion of her bedroom. There she bathed her heated face with toilette vinegar, steadied her nerves with a cigarette, lay down on a couch and rested, and, pure from passion, revised the situation calmly. She was an eminently practical, sensible woman, who knew the facts of life, and knew, also, how to turn them to her own advantage.

Seen by the larger, calmer spirit that was Sarah now, the situation was not as unpleasant as it had at first appeared. To be sure, the rumour in which she had figured was fatal to the matrimonial vision, and to the beautiful illusion of propriety in which she had once lived. But Sarah had renounced the vision; she had abandoned the pursuit of the fugitive propriety. She had long ago seen through the illusion. She might be a deceiver, but she had no power to hoodwink her own indestructible lucidity. Looking back on her life, after the joyous romances of her youth, the years had passed like so many funeral processions, each bearing some pleasant scandal to its burial. Then there had come the dreary funeral feast, and

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then the days of mournful rehabilitation. Oh, that rehabilitation! There had been three years of it. Three years of exhausting struggle for a position in society, three years of crawling, and pushing, and scrambling, and climbing. There had been a dubious triumph. Then six years of respectable futility, ambiguous courtship, and palpable frustration. After all that, there was something flattering in the thought that, at forty-five, she should yet find her name still coupled with Walter Majendie's in a passionate adventure.

It might easily have been, but for Walter's imbecile, suicidal devotion to his wife. He had got nothing out of his marriage. Worse than nothing. He was the laughing-stock of all his friends who were in the secret; who saw him grovelling at the heels of a disagreeable woman who had made him conspicuous by her aversion. Of course, it might easily have been.

Sarah's imagination (for she had an imagination) drew out all the sweetness that there was for it in that idea. Then it occurred to her sound, prosaic commonsense that a reputation is still a reputation, all the more precious if somewhat precariously acquired; that, though you may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, hanging is very poor fun when for years you have seen nothing of sheep or lamb either; that, in short, she must take steps to save her reputation.

The shortest way to save it was the straight way. She would go straight to Mrs. Majendie with her proofs. Her duty to herself justified the somewhat unusual step. And, more than her duty, Sarah loved a scene. She loved to play with other people's emotions and to exhibit her own. She wanted to see how Mrs. Majendie would take it; how the white-faced, high-handed lady would look when she was told that her husband had consoled himself for her high-handedness. She had always been possessed by an ungovernable curiosity with regard to Majendie's wife.

She did not know Majendie's wife, but she knew Majendie. She knew all about the separation and its cause. That was where she had come in. She divined that Mrs. Majendie had never forgiven her husband for his old intimacy with her. It was Mrs. Majendie's jealousy that had driven him out of the house, into the arms of pretty Maggie. Where, she wondered, would Mrs. Majendie's jealousy of pretty Maggie drive him?

Though Sarah knew Majendie, that was more than she would undertake to say. But the more she thought about it, the more she wondered; and the more she wondered, the more she desired to know.

She wondered whether Mrs. Majendie had heard the report. From all she could gather, it was hardly likely. Neither Mrs. Majendie nor her friends mixed in those circles where it

went the round. The scandal of the clubs and of the Park would never reach her in the high seclusion of the house in Prior Street.

Into that house Lady Cayley could not hope to penetrate except by guile. Once admitted, straightforwardness would be her method. She must not attempt to give the faintest social colour to her visit. She must take for granted Mrs. Majendie's view of her impossibility. To be sure Mrs. Majendie's prejudices were moral even more than social. But moral prejudice could be overcome by cleverness working towards a formidable moral effect.

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She would call after six o'clock, an hour incompatible with any social intention. An hour when she would probably find Mrs. Majendie alone.

She rested all afternoon. At five o'clock she fortified herself with strong tea and brandy. Then she made an elaborate and thoughtful toilette.

At forty-five Sarah's face was very large and horribly white. She restored, discreetly, delicately, the vanished rose. The beautiful, flower-like edges of her mouth were blurred. With a thin thread of rouge she retraced the once perfect outline. Wrinkles had drawn in the corners of the indomitable eyes, and ill-health had dulled their blue. That saddest of all changes she repaired by hand-massage, pomade, and belladonna. The somewhat unrefined exuberance of her figure she laced in an inimitable corset. Next she arrayed herself in a suit of dark blue cloth, simple and severely reticent; in a white silk blouse, simpler still, sewn with innocent daisies, Maggie's handiwork; in a hat, gay in form, austere in colour; and in gloves of immaculate whiteness.

Nobody could have possessed a more irreproachable appearance than Lady Cayley when she set out for Prior Street.

At the door she gave neither name nor card. She announced herself as a lady who desired to see Mrs. Majendie for a moment on important business.

Kate wondered a little, and admitted her. Ladies did call sometimes on important business, ladies who approached Mrs. Majendie on missions of charity; and these did not always give their names.

Anne was upstairs in the nursery, superintending the packing of Peggy's little trunk. She was taking her away to-morrow to the seaside, by Dr. Gardner's orders. She supposed that the nameless lady would be some earnest, beneficent person connected with a case for her Rescue Committee, who might have excellent reasons for not announcing herself by name.

And, at first, coming into the low lit drawing-room, she did not recognise her visitor. She advanced innocently, in her perfect manner, with a charming smile and an appropriate apology.

The smile died with a sudden rigour of repulsion. She paused before seating herself, as an intimation that the occasion was not one that could be trusted to explain itself. Lady Cayley rose to it.

"Forgive me for calling at this unconventional hour Mrs. Majendie."

Mrs. Majendie's silence implied that she could not forgive her for calling at any hour. Lady Cayley smiled inimitably.

“I wanted to find you at home.”

“You did not give me your name Lady Cayley.”

Their eyes crossed like swords before the duel.

“I didn’t, Mrs. Majendie, *because* I wanted to find you at home. I can’t help being unconventional—”

Mrs. Majendie raised her eyebrows.

“It’s my nature.”

Mrs. Majendie dropped her eyelids, as much as to say that the nature of Lady Cayley did not interest her.

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"—And I've come on a most unconventional errand."

"Do you mean an unpleasant one?"

"I'm afraid I do, rather. And it's just as unpleasant for me as it is for you. Have you any idea, Mrs. Majendie, why I've been obliged to come? It'll make it easier for me if you have."

"I assure you I have none. I cannot conceive why you have come, nor how I can make anything easier for you."

"I think I mean it would have made it easier for you."

"For me?"

"Well—it would have spared you some painful explanations." Sarah felt herself sincere. She really desired to spare Mrs. Majendie. The part which she had rehearsed with such ease in her own bedroom was impossible in Mrs. Majendie's drawing-room. She was charmed by the spirit of the place, constrained by its suggestion of fair observances, high decencies, and social suavities. She could not sit there and tell Mrs. Majendie that her husband had been unfaithful to her. You do not say these things. And so subdued was Sarah that she found a certain relief in the reflection that, by clearing herself, she would clear Majendie.

"I don't in the least know what you want to say to me," said Mrs. Majendie. "But I would rather take everything for granted than have any explanations."

"If I thought you would take my innocence for granted—"

"Your innocence? I should be a bad judge of it, Lady Cayley."

"Quite so." Lady Cayley smiled again, and again inimitably. (It was extraordinary, the things *she* took for granted.) "That's why I've come to explain."

"One moment. Perhaps I am mistaken. But, if you are referring to—to what happened in the past, there need be no explanation. I have put all that out of my mind now. I have heard that you, too, have left it far behind you; and I am willing to believe it. There is nothing more to be said."

There was such a sweetness and dignity in Mrs. Majendie's voice and manner that Lady Cayley was further moved to compete in dignity and sweetness. She suppressed the smile that ignored so much and took so much for granted.

"Unfortunately a great deal more *has* been said. Your husband is an intimate friend of my sister, Mrs. Ransome, as of course you know."

Mrs. Majendie's face denied all knowledge of the intimacy.

"I might have met him at her house a hundred times, but, I assure you, Mrs. Majendie, that, since his marriage, I have not met him more than twice, anywhere. The first time was at the Hannays'. You were there. You saw all that passed between us."

"Well?"

"The second time was at the Hannays', too. Mrs. Hannay was with us all the time. What do you suppose he talked to me about? His child. He talked about nothing else."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Majendie coldly, "there was nothing else to talk about."

"No—but it was so dear and naif of him." She pondered on his naivete with down-dropped eyes whose lids sheltered the irresponsibly hilarious blue.

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“He talked about his child—your child—to *me*. I hadn’t seen him for two years, and that’s all he could talk about. *I* had to sit and listen to *that*.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you, Lady Cayley.”

“It didn’t—and I’m sure the little girl is charming—only—it was so delicious of your husband, don’t you see?”

Her face curled all over with its soft and sensual smile.

“If we’d been two babes unborn there couldn’t have been a more innocent conversation.”

“Well?”

“*Well*, since that night we haven’t seen each other for more than five years. Ask him if it isn’t true. Ask Mrs. Hannay—”

“Lady Cayley, I do not doubt your word—nor my husband’s honour. I can’t think why you’re giving yourself all this trouble.”

“Why, because they’re saying *now*—”

Mrs. Majendie rose. “Excuse me, if you’ve only come to tell me what people are saying, it is useless. I never listen to what people say.”

“It isn’t likely they’d say it to you.”

“Then why should *you* say it to me?”

“Because it concerns my reputation.”

“Forgive me, but—your reputation does not concern me.”

“And how about your husband’s reputation, Mrs. Majendie?”

“My husband’s reputation can take care of itself.”

“Not in Scale.”

“There’s no more scandal talked in Scale than in any other place. I never pay any attention to it.”

“That’s all very well—but you must defend yourself sometimes. And when it comes to saying that I’ve been living with Mr. Majendie in Scarby for the last three years—”

Mrs. Majendie was so calm that Lady Cayley fancied that, after all, this was not the first time she had heard that rumour.

“Let them say it,” said she. “Nobody’ll believe it.”

“Everybody believes it. I came to you because I was afraid you’d be the first.”

“To believe it? I assure you, Lady Cayley, I should be the last.”

“What was to prevent you? You didn’t know me.”

“No. But I know my husband.”

“So do I.”

“Not *now*” said Mrs. Majendie quietly.

Lady Cayley’s bosom heaved. She had felt that she had risen to the occasion. She had achieved a really magnificent renunciation. With almost suicidal generosity, she had handed Majendie over intact, as it were, to his insufferable wife. She was wounded in several very sensitive places by the married woman’s imperious denial of her part in him, by her attitude of indestructible and unique possession. If *she* didn’t know him she would like to know who did. But up till now she had meant to spare Mrs. Majendie her knowledge of him, for she was not ill-natured. She was sorry for the poor, inept, unhappy prude.

Even now, seated in Mrs. Majendie’s drawing-room, she had no impulse to wound her mortally. Her instinct was rather to patronise and pity, to unfold the long result of a superior experience, to instruct this woman who was so incompetent to deal with men, who had spoiled, stupidly, her husband’s life and her own. In that moment Sarah contemplated nothing more outrageous than a little straight talk with Mrs. Majendie.

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“Look here, Mrs. Majendie,” she said, with an air of finely ungovernable impulse, “you’re a saint. You know no more about men than your little girl does. I’m not a saint, I’m a woman of the world. I think I’ve had a rather larger experience of men—”

Mrs. Majendie cut her short.

“I do not want to hear anything about your experience.”

“Dear lady, you shan’t hear anything about it. I was only going to tell you that, of all the men I’ve known, there’s nobody I know better than your husband. My knowledge of him is probably a little different from yours.”

“That I can well believe.”

“You mean you think I wouldn’t know a good man if I saw one? My experience isn’t as bad as all that. I can tell a good woman when I see one, too. You’re a good woman, Mrs. Majendie, and I’ve no doubt that you’ve been told I’m a bad one. All I can say is, that Walter Majendie was a good man when I first knew him. He was a good man when he left me and married you. So my badness can’t have hurt him very much. If he’s gone wrong now, it’s that goodness of yours that’s done it.”

Anne’s lips turned white, but their muscles never moved. And the woman who watched her wondered in what circumstances Mrs. Majendie would display emotion, if she did not display it now.

“What right have you to say these things to me?”

“I’ve a right to say a good deal more. Your husband was very fond of me. He would have married me if his friends hadn’t come and bullied me to give him up for the good of his morals. I loved him—” She suggested by an adroit shrug of her shoulders that her love was a thing that Mrs. Majendie could either take for granted or ignore. She didn’t expect her to understand it—“And I gave him up. I’m not a cold-blooded woman; and it was pretty hard for me. But I did it. And” (she faced her) “what was the good of it? Which of us has been the best for his morals? You or me? He lived with me two years, and he married you, and everybody said how virtuous and proper he was. Well, he’s been married to you for nine years, and he’s been living with another woman for the last three.”

She had not meant to say it; for (in the presence of the social sanctities) you do not say these things. But flesh and blood are stronger than all the social sanctities; and flesh and blood had risen and claimed their old dominion over Sarah. The unspeakable depths in her had been stirred by her vision of the things that might have been. She was filled with a passionate hatred of the purity which had captured Majendie, and

drawn him from her, and made her seem vile in his sight. She rejoiced in her power to crush it, to confront it with the proof of its own futility.

“I do not believe it,” said Mrs. Majendie.

“Of course you don’t believe it. You’re a good woman.” She shook her meditative head. “The sort of woman who can live with a man for nine years without seeing what he’s like. If you’d understood your husband as well as I do, you’d have known that he couldn’t run his life on your lines for six months, let alone nine years.”

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Mrs. Majendie's chin rose, as if she were lifting her face above the reach of the hand that had tried to strike it. Her voice throbbed on one deep monotonous note.

"I do not believe a word of what you say. And I cannot think what your motive is in saying it."

"Don't worry about my motive. It ought to be pretty clear. Let me tell you—you can bring your husband back to-morrow, and you can keep him to the end of time, if you choose, Mrs. Majendie. Or you can lose him altogether. And you will, if you go on as you're doing. If I were you, I should make up my mind whether it's good enough. I shouldn't think it was, myself."

Mrs. Majendie was silent. She tried to think of some word that would end the intolerable interview. Her lips parted to speak, but her thoughts died in her brain unborn.

She felt her face turning white under the woman's face; it hypnotised her; it held her dumb.

"Don't you worry," said Lady Cayley soothingly. "You can get your husband back from that woman to-morrow, if you choose." She smiled. "Do you see my motive now?"

Lady Cayley had not seen it; but she had seen herself for one beautiful moment as the benignant and inspired conciliator. She desired Mrs. Majendie to see her so. She had gratified her more generous instincts in giving the unfortunate lady "the straight tip." She knew, perfectly well, that Mrs. Majendie wouldn't take it. She knew, all the time, that whatever else her revelation did, it would not move Mrs. Majendie to charm her husband back. She could not say precisely what it would do. Used to live solely in the voluptuous moment, she had no sense of drama beyond the scene she played in.

"Your motive," said Mrs. Majendie, "is of no importance. No motive could excuse you."

"You think not." She rose and looked down on the motionless woman. "I've told you the truth, Mrs. Majendie, because, sooner or later, you'd have had to know it; and other people would have told you worse things that aren't true. You can take it from me that there's nothing more to tell. I've told you the worst."

"You've told me, and I do not believe it."

"You'd better believe it. But, if you really don't, you can ask your husband. Ask him where he goes to every week in that yacht of his. Ask him what's become of Maggie Forrest, the pretty work-girl who made the embroidered frock for Mrs. Ransome's little girl. Tell him you want one like it for your little girl; and see what he looks like."

Anne rose too. Her faint white face frightened Lady Cayley. She had wondered how Mrs. Majendie would look if she told her the truth about her husband. Now she knew.

“My dear lady,” said she, “what on earth did you expect?”

Anne went blindly towards the chimney-piece where the bell was. Lady Cayley also turned. She meant to go, but not just yet.

“One moment, Mrs. Majendie, please, before you turn me out. I wouldn’t break my heart about it, if I were you. He might have done worse things.”

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“He has done nothing.”

“Well—not much. He has done what I’ve told you. But, after all, what’s that?”

“Nothing to you, Lady Cayley, certainly,” said Anne, as she rang the bell.

She moved slowly towards the door. Lady Cayley followed to the threshold, and laid her hand delicately on the jamb of the door as Mrs. Majendie opened it. She raised to her set face the tender eyes of a suppliant.

“Mrs. Majendie,” said she, “don’t be hard on poor Wallie. He’s never been hard on you. He might have been.” The latch sprang to under her gentle pressure. “Look at it this way. He has kept all his marriage vows—except one. You’ve broken all yours—except one. None of your friends will tell you that. That’s why *I* tell you. Because I’m not a good woman, and I don’t count.”

She moved her hand from the door. It opened wide, and Lady Cayley walked serenely out.

She had said her say.

CHAPTER XXXII

Anne sat in her chair by the fireside, very still. She had turned out the light, for it hurt her eyes and made her head ache. She had felt very weak, and her knees shook under her as she crossed the room. Beyond that she felt nothing, no amazement, no sorrow, no anger, nor any sort of pang. If she had been aware of the trembling of her body, she would have attributed it to the agitation of a disagreeable encounter. She shivered. She thought there was a draught somewhere; but she did not rouse herself to shut the window.

At eight o’clock a telegram from Majendie was brought to her. She was not to wait dinner. He would not be home that night. She gave the message in a calm voice, and told Kate not to send up dinner. She had a bad headache and could not eat anything.

Kate had stood by waiting timidly. She had had a sense of things happening. Now she retired with curiosity relieved. Kate was used to her mistress’s bad headaches. A headache needed no explanation. It explained everything.

Anne picked up the telegram and read it over again. Every week, for nearly three years, she had received these messages. They had always been sent from the same post office in Scale, and the words had always been the same: “Don’t wait. May not be home to-night.”

To-night the telegram struck her as a new thing. It stood for something new. But all the other telegrams had meant the same thing. Not a new thing. A thing that had been going on for three years; four, five, six years, for all she knew. It was six years since their separation; and that had been his wish.

She had always known it; and she had always put her knowledge away from her, tried not to know more. Her friends had known it too. Canon Wharton, and the Gardners, and Fanny. It all came back to her, the words, and the looks that had told her more than any words, signs that she had often wondered at and refused to understand. They had known all the depths of it. It was only the other day that Fanny had offered her house to her as a refuge from her own house in its shame. Fanny had supposed that it must come to that.

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God knew she had been loyal to him in the beginning. She had closed her eyes. She had forbidden her senses to take evidence against him. She had been loyal all through, loyal to the very end. She had lied for him. If, indeed, she *had* lied. In denying Lady Cayley's statements, she had denied her right to make them, that was all.

Her mind, active now, went backwards and forwards over the chain of evidence, testing each link in turn. All held. It was all true. She had always known it.

Then she remembered that she and Peggy would be going away to-morrow. That was well. It was the best thing she could do. Later on, when they were home again, it would be time enough to make up her mind as to what she could do. If there was anything to be done.

Until then she would not see him. They would be gone to-morrow before he could come home. Unless he saw them off at the station. She would avoid that by taking an earlier train. Then she would write to him. No; she would not write. What they would have to say to each other must be said face to face. She did not know what she would say.

She dragged herself upstairs to the nursery, where the packing had been begun. The room was empty. Nanna had gone down to her supper.

Anne's heart melted. Peggy had been playing at packing. The little lamb had gathered together on the table a heap of her beloved toys, things which it would have broken her heart to part from.

Her little trunk lay open on the floor, packed already. The embroidered frock lay uppermost, carefully folded, not to be crushed. At the sight of it Anne's brain flared in anger.

A bright fire burned in the grate. She picked up the frock; she took a pair of scissors and cut it in several places at the neck, then tore it to pieces with strong, determined hands. She threw the tatters on the fire; she watched them consume; she raked out their ashes with the tongs, and tore them again. Then she packed Peggy's toys tenderly in the little trunk, her heart melting over them. She closed the lid of the trunk, strapped it, and turned the key in the lock.

Then, crawling on slow, quiet feet, she went to bed. Undressing vexed her. She, once so careful and punctilious, slipped her clothes like a tired Magdalen, and let them fall from her and lie where they fell. Her nightgown gaped unbuttoned at her throat. Her long hair lay scattered on her pillow, unbrushed, unbraided. Her white face stared to the ceiling. She was too spent to pray.

When she lay down, reality gripped her. And, with it, her imagination rose up, a thing no longer crude, but full-grown, large-eyed, and powerful. It possessed itself of her

tragedy. She had lain thus, nearly nine years ago, in that room at Scarby, thinking terrible thoughts. Now she saw terrible things.

Peggy stirred in her sleep, and crept from her cot into her mother's bed.

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“Mummy, I’m so frightened.”

“What is it, darling? Have you had a little dream?”

“No. Mummy, let me stay in your bed.”

Anne let her stay, glad of the comfort of the little warm body, and afraid to vex the child. She drew the blankets round her. “There,” she said, “go to sleep, pet.”

But Peggy was in no mind to sleep.

“Mummy, your hair’s all loose,” she said; and her fingers began playing with her mother’s hair.

“Mummy, where’s daddy? Is he in his little bed?”

“He’s away, darling. Go to sleep.”

“Why does he go away? Is he coming back again?”

“Yes, darling.” Anne’s voice shook.

“Mummy, did you cry when Auntie Edie went away?”

Anne kissed her.

“Auntie Edie’s dead.”

“Lie still, darling, and let mother go to sleep.”

Peggy lay still, and Anne went on thinking.

There was nothing to be done. She would have to take him back again, always. Whatever shame he dragged her through, she must take him back again, for the child’s sake.

Suddenly she remembered Peggy’s birthday. It was only last week. Surely she had not known then. She must have forgotten for a time.

Then tenderness came, and with it an intolerable anguish. She was smitten and was melted; she was torn and melted again. Her throat was shaken, convulsed; then her bosom, then her whole body. She locked her teeth, lest her sobs should break through and wake the child.

She lay thus tormented, till a memory, sharper than imagination, stung her. She saw her husband carrying the sleeping child, and his face bending over her with that look of

love. She closed her eyes, and let the tears rain down her hot cheeks and fall upon her breast and in her hair. She tried to stifle the sobs that strangled her, and she choked. That instant the child's lips were on her face, tasting her tears.

"Oh, mummy, you're crying."

"No, my pet. Go to sleep."

"Why are you crying?"

Anne made no sound; and Peggy cried out in terror.

"Mummy—is daddy dead?"

Anne folded her in her arms.

"No, my pet, no."

"He is, mummy, I know he is. Daddy! Daddy!"

If Majendie had been in the house she would have carried the child into his room, and shown him to her, and relieved her of her terror. She had done that once before when she had cried for him.

But now Peggy cried persistently, vehemently; not loud, but in an agony that tore and tortured her as she had seen her mother torn and tortured. She cried till she was sick; and still her sobs shook her, with a sharp mechanical jerk that would not cease.

Gradually she grew drowsy and fell asleep.

All night Anne lay awake beside her, driven to the edge of the bed, that she might give breathing space to the little body that pushed, closer and closer, to the warm place she made.

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Towards dawn Peggy sighed three times, and stretched her limbs, as if awakening out of her sleep.

Then Anne turned, and laid her hands on the dead body of her child.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The yacht had lain all night in Fawlness creek. Majendie had slept on board. He had sent Steve up to the farm with a message for Maggie. He had told her not to expect him that night. He would call and see her very early in the morning. That would prepare her for the end. In the morning he would call and say good-bye to her.

He had taken that resolution on the night when Gardner had told him about Peggy.

He did not sleep. He heard all the sounds of the land, of the river, of the night, and of the dawn. He heard the lapping of the creek water against the yacht's side; the wash of the steamers passing on the river; the stir of wild fowl at daybreak; the swish of wind and water among the reeds and grasses of the creek.

All night he thought of Peggy, who would not live, who was the child of her father's passion and her mother's grief.

At dawn he got up. It was a perfect day, with the promise of warmth in it. Over land and water the white mist was lifting and drifting, eastwards towards the risen sun. Inland, over the five fields, the drops of fallen mist glittered on the grass. The Farm, guarded by its three elms, showed clear, and red, and still, as if painted under an unchanging light. A few leaves, loosened by the damp, were falling with a shivering sound against the house wall, and lay where they fell, yellow on the red-brick path.

Maggie was not at the garden gate. She sat crouched inside, by the fender, kindling a fire. Tea had been made and was standing on the table. She was waiting.

She rose, with a faint cry, as Majendie entered. She put her arms on his shoulders in her old way. He loosened her hands gently and held her by them, keeping her from him at arm's length. Her hands were cold, her eyes had foreknowledge of the end; but, moved by his touch, her mouth curled unaware and shaped itself for kissing.

He did not kiss her. And she knew.

Upstairs in the bedroom overhead, Steve and his mother moved heavily. There was a sound of drawers opening and shutting, then a grating sound. Something was being dragged from under the bed. Maggie knew that they were packing Majendie's portmanteau with the things he had left behind him.

They stood together by the hearth, where the fire kindled feebly. He thrust out his foot, and struck the woodpile; it fell and put out the flame that was struggling to be born.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” he said.

Maggie stooped and built up the pile again and kindled it. She knelt there, patient and humble, waiting for the fire to burn.

He did not know whether he was going to have trouble with her. He was afraid of her tenderness.

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“Why didn’t you come last night?” she said.

“I couldn’t.”

She looked at him with eyes that said, “That is not true.”

“You couldn’t?”

“I couldn’t.”

“You came last week.”

“Last week—yes. But since then things have happened, do you see?”

“Things have happened,” she repeated, under her breath.

“Yes. My little girl is very ill.”

“Peggy?” she cried, and covered her face with her hands. Then with her hands she made a gesture that swept calamity aside. Maggie would only believe what she wanted.

“She will get better,” she said.

“Perhaps. But I must be with my wife.”

“You weren’t with her last night,” said Maggie. “You could have come then.”

“No, Maggie, I couldn’t.”

“D’you mean—because of the little girl?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” she said softly. She had understood.

“She will get better,” she said, “and then you can come again.”

“No. I’ve told you. I must be with my wife.”

“I thought—” said Maggie.

“Never mind what you thought,” he said with a quick, fierce impatience.

“Are you fond of her?” she asked suddenly.

“You know I am,” he said; and his voice was kind again. “You’ve known it all the time. I told you that in the beginning.”

“But—since then,” said Maggie, “you’ve been fond of me, haven’t you?”

“It’s not the same thing. I’ve told you that, too, a great many times. I don’t want to talk about it. It’s different.”

“How is it different?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You mean—it’s different because I’m not good.”

“No, my child, I’m afraid it’s different because I’m bad. That’s as near as we can get to it.”

She shook her head in persistent, obstinate negation.

“See here, Maggie, we must end it. We can’t go on like this any more. We must give it up.”

“I can’t,” she moaned. “Don’t ask me to do that, Wallie dear. Don’t ask me.”

“I must, Maggie. *I* must give it up. I told you, dear, before we took this place, that it must end, sooner or later, that it couldn’t last very long. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes—I remember.”

“And you promised me, didn’t you, that when the time came, you wouldn’t—”

“I know. I said I wouldn’t make a fuss.”

“Well, dear, we’ve got to end it now. I only came to talk it over with you. There’ll have to be arrangements.”

“I know. I’ve got to clear out of this.”

She said it sadly, without passion and without resentment.

“No,” he said, “not if you’d rather stay. Do you like the farm, Maggie?”

“I love it.”

“Do you? I was afraid you didn’t. I thought you hated the country.”

“I love it. I love it.”

“Oh, well then, you shan’t leave it. I’ll keep on the farm for you. And, see here, don’t worry about things. I’ll look after you, all your life, dear.”

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“Look after me?” Her face brightened, “Like you used to?”

“Provide for you.”

“Oh!” she cried. “*That*! I don’t want to be provided for. I won’t have it. I’d rather be let alone and die.”

“Maggie, I know it’s hard on you. Don’t make it harder. Don’t make it hard for me.”

“You?” she sobbed.

“Yes, me. It’s all wrong. I’m all wrong. I can’t do the right thing, whatever I do. It’s wrong to stay with you. It’s wrong, it’s brutally wrong to leave you. But that’s what I’ve got to do.”

“You said—you only said—just now—you’d got to end it.”

“That’s it. I’ve got to end it.”

She stood up flaming.

“End it then. End it this minute. Give up the farm. Send me away. I’ll go anywhere you tell me. Only don’t say you won’t come and see me.”

“See you? Don’t you understand, Maggie, that seeing you is what I’ve got to give up? The other things don’t matter.”

“Ah,” she cried, “it’s you who don’t understand. I mean—I mean—see me like you used to. That’s all I want, Wallie. Only just to see you. That wouldn’t be awful, would it? There wouldn’t be any sin in that?”

Sin? It was the first time she had ever said the word. The first time, he imagined, she had formed the thought.

“Poor little girl,” he said. “No, no, dear, it wouldn’t do. It sounds simple, but it isn’t.”

“But,” she said, bewildered, “I love you.”

He smiled. “That’s why, Maggie, that’s why. You’ve been very sweet and very good to me. And that’s why I mustn’t see you. That’s how you make it hard for me.”

Maggie sat down and put her elbows on the table and hid her face in her hands.

“Will you give me some tea?” he said abruptly.

She rose.

“It’s all stewed. I’ll make fresh.”

“No. That’ll do. I can’t wait.”

She gave him his tea. Before he tasted it he got up and poured out a cup for her. She drank a little at his bidding, then pushed the cup from her, choking. She sat, not looking at him, but looking away, through the window, across the garden and the fields.

“I must go now,” he said. “Don’t come with me.”

She started to her feet.

“Ah, let me come.”

“Better not. Much better not.”

“I must,” she said.

They set out along the field-track. Steve, carrying his master’s luggage, went in front, at a little distance. He didn’t want to see them, still less to hear them speak.

But they did not speak.

At the creek’s bank Steve was ready with the boat.

Majendie took Maggie’s hand and pressed it. She flung herself on him, and he had to loose her hold by main force. She swayed, clutching at him to steady herself. He heard Steve groan. He put his hand on her shoulder, and kept it there a moment, till she stood firm. Her eyes, fixed on his, struck tears from them, tears that cut their way like knives under his eyelids.

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Her body ceased swaying. He felt it grow rigid under his hand.

Then he went from her and stepped into the boat. She stood still, looking after him, pressing one hand against her breast, as if to keep down its heaving.

Steve pushed off from the bank, and rowed towards the creek's mouth. And as he rowed, he turned his head over his right shoulder, away from the shore where Maggie stood with her hand upon her breast.

Majendie did not look back. Neither he nor Steve saw that, as they neared the mouth of the creek, Maggie had turned, and was going rapidly across the field, towards the far side of the spit of land where the yacht lay moored out of the current. As they had to round the point, her way by land was shorter than theirs by water.

When they rounded the point they saw her standing on the low inner shore, watching for them.

She stood on the bank, just above the belt of silt and sand that divided it from the river. The two men turned for a moment, and watched her from the yacht's deck. She waited till the big mainsail went up, and the yacht's head swung round and pointed up stream. Then she began to run fast along the shore, close to the river.

At that sight Majendie turned away and set his face toward the Lincolnshire side.

He was startled by an oath from Steve and a growl from Steve's father at the wheel. "Eh—the—little—!" At the same instant the yacht was pulled suddenly inshore and her boom swung violently round.

Steve and the boatswain rushed to the ropes and began hauling down the mainsail.

"What the devil are you doing there?" shouted Majendie. But no one answered him.

When the sail came down he saw.

"My God," he cried, "she's going in."

Old Pearson, at the wheel, spat quietly over the yacht's side. "Not she," said old Pearson. "She's too much afraid o' cold water."

Maggie was down on the lower bank close to the edge of the river. Majendie saw her putting her feet in the water and drawing them out again, first one foot, and then the other. Then she ran a little way, very fast, like a thing hunted. She stumbled on the slippery, slanting ground, fell, picked herself up again, and ran. Then she stood still and tried the water again, first one foot and then the other, desperate, terrified, determined. She was afraid of life and death.

The belt of sand sloped gently, and the river was shallow for a few feet from the shore. She was safe unless she threw herself in.

Majendie and Steve rushed together for the boat. As Majendie pushed against him at the gangway, Steve shook him off. There was a brief struggle. Old Pearson left the wheel to the boatswain and crossed to the gangway, where the two men still struggled. He put his hand on his master's sleeve.

"Excuse me, sir, you'd best stay where you are."

He stayed.

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The captain went to the wheel again, and the boatswain to the boat. Majendie stood stock-still by the gangway. His hands were clenched in his pockets: his face was drawn and white. The captain slewed round upon him a small vigilant eye. "You'd best leave her to Steve, sir. He's a good lad and he'll look after 'er. He'd give his 'ead to marry her. Only she wuddn't look at 'im."

Majendie said nothing. And the captain continued his consolation.

"*She's* only trying it on, sir," said he. "*I* know 'em. She'll do nowt. She'll do nubbut wet 'er feet. She's afeard o' cold water."

But before the boat could put off, Maggie was in again. This time her feet struck a shelf of hard mud. She slipped, rolled sideways, and lay, half in and half out of the water. There she stayed till the boat reached her.

Majendie saw Steve lift her and carry her to the upper bank. He saw Maggie struggle from his arms and beat him off. Then he saw Steve seize her by force, and drag her back, over the fields, towards Three Elms Farm.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Majendie landed at the pier and went straight to the office. There he found a telegram from Anne telling him of his child's death.

He went to the house. The old nurse opened the door for him. She was weeping bitterly. He asked for Anne, and was told that she was lying down and could not see him. It was Nanna who told him how Peggy died, and all the things he had to know. When she left him, he shut himself up alone in his study for the first hour of his grief. He wanted to go to Anne; but he was too deeply stupefied to wonder why she would not see him.

Later they met.

He knew by his first glance at her face that he must not speak to her of the dead child. He could understand that. He was even glad of it. In this she was like him, that deep feeling left her dumb. And yet, there was a difference. It was that he could not speak, and she, he felt, would not.

There were things that had to be done. He did them all, sparing her as much as possible. Once or twice she had to be consulted. She gave him a fact, or an opinion, in a brief methodic manner that set him at a distance from her sacred sorrow. She had betrayed more emotion in speaking to Dr. Gardner.

But for these things they went through their first day in silence, like people who respect each other's grief too profoundly for any speech.

In the evening they sat together in the drawing-room. There was nothing more to do.

Then he spoke. He asked to see Peggy. His voice was so low that she did not hear him.

"What did you say, Walter?"

He had to say it again. "Where is she? Can I see her?"

His voice was still low, and it was thick and uncertain, but this time she understood.

"In Edie's room," she said. "Nanna has the key."

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She did not go with him.

When he came back to her she was still cold and torpid. He could understand that her grief had frozen her.

At night she parted from him without a word.

So the days went on.

Sometimes he would sit in the study by himself for a little while. His racked nerves were soothed by solitude. Then he would think of the woman upstairs in the drawing-room, sitting alone. And he would go to her. She did not send him away. She did not leave him. She did nothing. She said nothing.

He began to be afraid. It would do her good, he said to himself, if she could cry. He wondered whether it was wise to leave her to her terrible torpor; whether he ought to speak to her. But he could not.

Yet she was kind to him for all her coldness. Once, when his grief was heaviest upon him, he thought she looked at him with anxiety, with pity. She came to him once, where he sat downstairs, alone. But though she came to him, she still kept him from her. And she would not go with him into the room where Peggy lay.

Now and then he wondered if she knew. He was not certain. He put the thought away from him. He was sure that for nearly three years she had not known anything. She had not known anything as long as she had had the child, when her knowing would not, he thought, have mattered half so much. It would be horrible if she knew now. And yet sometimes her eyes seemed to say to him: "Why not now? When nothing matters."

On the night before the funeral, the night they closed the coffin, he came to her where she sat upstairs alone. He put his hand on her shoulder and spoke her name. She shrank from him with a low cry. And again he wondered if she knew.

The day after the funeral she told him that she was going away for a month with Mrs. Gardner.

He said he was glad to hear it. It would do her good. It was the best thing she could do.

He had meant to take her away himself. She knew it. Yet she had arranged to go with Mrs. Gardner.

Then he was certain that she knew.

She went, with Mrs. Gardner, the next day. He and Dr. Gardner saw them off at the station. He thanked Mrs. Gardner for her kindness, wondering if she knew. The little woman had tears in her eyes. She pressed his hand and tried to speak to him, and broke down. He gathered that, whatever Anne knew, her friend knew nothing.

The doctor was inscrutable. He might or he might not know. If he did, he would keep his knowledge to himself. They walked together from the station, and the doctor talked about the weather and the municipal elections.

Anne was to be away a month. Majendie wrote to her every week and received, every week, a precise, formal little letter in reply. She told him, every week, of an improvement in her own health, and appeared solicitous for his.

While she was away, he saw a great deal of the Hannays and of Gorst. When he was not with the Hannays, Gorst was with him. Gorst was punctilious, but a little shy in his inquiries for Mrs. Majendie. The Hannays made no allusion to her beyond what decency demanded. They evidently regarded her as a painful subject.

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About a week before the day fixed for Anne's return, the firm of Hannay & Majendie had occasion to consult its solicitor about a mortgage on some office buildings. Price was excited and assiduous. Excited and assiduous, Hannay thought, beyond all proportion to the trivial affair. Hannay noticed that Price took a peculiar and almost morbid interest in the junior partner. His manner set Hannay thinking. It suggested the legal instinct scenting the divorce-court from afar.

He spoke of it to Mrs. Hannay.

"Do you think she knows?" said Mrs. Hannay.

"Of course she does. Or why should she leave him, at a time when most people stick to each other if they've never stuck before?"

"Do you think she'll try for a separation?"

"No, I don't."

"I do," said Mrs. Hannay. "Now that the dear little girl's gone."

"Not she. She won't let him off as easily as all that. She'll think of the other woman. And she'll live with him and punish him for ever."

He paused pondering. Then he delivered himself of that which was within him, his idea of Anne.

"I always said she was a she-dog in the manger."

CHAPTER XXXV

Anne was not expected home before the middle of November. She wrote to her husband, fixing Saturday for the day of her return.

Majendie, therefore, was surprised to find her luggage in the hall when he entered the house at six o'clock on Friday evening. Nanna had evidently been waiting for the sound of his latchkey. She hurried to intercept him.

"The mistress has come home, sir," she said.

"Has she? I hope you've got things comfortable for her."

"Yes, sir. We had a telegram this afternoon. She said she would like to see you in the study, sir, as soon as you came in."

He went at once into the study. Anne was sitting there in her chair by the hearth. Her hat and jacket were thrown on the writing-table that stood near in the middle of the room. She rose as he came in, but made no advance to meet him. He stood still for a moment by the closed door, and they held each other with their eyes.

“I didn’t expect you till to-morrow.”

“I sent a telegram,” she said.

“If you’d sent it to the office I’d have met you.”

“I didn’t want anybody to meet me.”

He felt that her words had some reference to their loss, and to the sadness of her home-coming. A sigh broke from him; but he was unaware that he had sighed.

He sat down, not in his accustomed seat by the hearth, opposite to hers, but in a nearer chair by the writing-table. He saw that she had been writing letters. He pushed them away and turned his chair round so as to face her. His heart ached looking at her.

There were deep lines on her forehead; and she was very pale, even her small close mouth had no colour in it. She kept her sad eyes half hidden under their drooping lids. Her lips were tightly compressed, her narrow nostrils white and pinched. It was a face in which all the doors of life were closing; where the inner life went on tensely, secretly, behind the closing doors.

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“Well,” he said, “I’m very glad you’ve come back.”

“Walter—have you any idea why I went away?”

“Why you went? Obviously, it was the best thing you could do.”

“It was the only thing I could do. And I am glad I did it. My mind has become clearer.”

“*I* see. I thought it would.”

“It would not have been clear if I had stayed.”

“No,” he said vaguely, “of course it wouldn’t.”

“I’ve seen,” she continued, “that there is nothing for me but to come back. It is the right thing.”

“Did you doubt it?”

“Yes. I even doubted whether it were possible—whether, in the circumstances, I could bear to come back, to stay—”

“Do you mean—to—the house?”

“No. I mean—to you.”

He turned away. “I understand,” he said. “So it came to that?”

“Yes. It came to that. I’ve been here three hours; and up to the last hour, I was not sure whether I would not pack the rest of my things and go away. I had written a letter to you. There it is, under your arm.”

“Am I to read it?”

“Yes.”

He turned his back on her, and read the letter.

“I see. You say here you want a separation. If you want it you shall have it. But hadn’t you better hear what I have to say, *first*?”

“I’ve come back for that. What have you to say?”

He bowed his head upon his breast.

“Not very much, I’m afraid. Except that I’m sorry—and ashamed of myself—and—I ask your forgiveness. What more can I say?”

“What more indeed? I’m to understand, then, that everything I was told is true?”

“It *was* true.”

“And is not now?”

“No. Whoever told you, omitted to tell you that.”

“You mean you have given up living with this woman?”

“Yes. If you call it living with her.”

“You have given it up—for how long?”

“About five weeks.” His voice was almost inaudible.

She winced. Five weeks back brought her to the date of Peggy’s death.

“I dare say,” she said. “You could hardly—have done less in the circumstances.”

“Anne,” he said. “I gave it up—I broke it off—before that. I—I broke with her that morning—before I heard.”

“You were away that night.”

“I was not with her.”

“Well—And it was going on, all the time, for three years before that?”

“Yes.”

“Ever since your sister’s death?”

He did not answer.

“Ever since Edie died,” she repeated, as if to herself rather than to him.

“Not quite. Why don’t you say—since you sent me away?”

“When did I ever send you away?”

“That night. When I came to you.”

She remembered.

“Then? Walter, that is unforgivable. To bring up a little thing like that—”

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“You call it a little thing? A little thing?”

“I had forgotten it. And for you to remember it all these years—and to cast it up against me—*now*—”

“I haven’t cast anything up against you.”

“You implied you held me responsible for your sin.”

“I don’t hold you responsible for anything. Not even for that.”

Her face never changed. She did not take in the meaning of his emphasis.

He continued. “And, if you want your separation, you shall have it. Though I did hope that you might consider that six years was about enough of it.”

“I did want it. But I do not want it now. When I wrote that letter I had forgotten my promise.”

“You shall have your promise back again if you want it. I shall not hold you to it, or to anything, if you’d rather not.”

“I can never have my promise back—I made it to Edie.”

“To Edie?”

“Yes. A short time before she died.”

His face brightened.

“What did you promise her?” he said softly.

“That I would never leave you.”

“Did she make you promise not to?”

“No. It did not occur to her that I could leave you. She did not think it possible.”

“But *you* did?”

“I thought it possible—yes.”

“Even then. There was no reason then. I had given you no cause.”

“I did not know that.”

“Do you mean that you suspected me—then?”

“I never accused you, Walter, even in my thoughts.”

“You suspected?”

“I didn’t know.”

“And—afterwards—did you suspect anything?”

“No. I never suspected anything—afterwards.”

“I see. You suspected me when you had no cause. And when I gave you cause you suspected nothing. I must say you are a very extraordinary woman.”

“I didn’t know,” she answered.

“Who told you? Or must I not ask that?”

“I cannot tell you. I would rather not. I was not told much. And there are some things that I have a right to know.”

“Well—”

“Who is this woman?—the girl you’ve been living with?”

“I’ve no right to tell you—that. Why do you want to know? It’s all over.”

“I must know, Walter. I have a reason.”

“Can you give me your reason?”

“Yes. I want to help her.”

“You would—really—help her?”

“If I can. It is my duty.”

“It isn’t in the least your duty.”

“And I want to help you. That also is my duty. I want to undo, as far as possible, the consequences of your sin. We cannot let the girl suffer.”

Majendie was moved by her charity. He had not looked for charity from Anne.

“If you will give me her name, and tell me where to find her, I will see that she is provided for.”

“She is provided for.”

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“How?”

“I am keeping on the house for her.”

Anne’s face flushed.

“What house?”

“A farm, out in the country.”

“That house is yours? You were living with her there?”

“Yes.”

Her face hardened. She was thinking of her dead child, who was to have gone into the country to get strong.

He was tortured by the same thought. Maggie, his mistress, had grown fat and rosy in the pure air of Holderness. Peggy had died in Scale.

In her bitterness she turned on him.

“And what guarantee have I that you will not go to her again?”

“My word. Isn’t that sufficient?”

“I don’t know, Walter. It would have been once. It isn’t now. What proof have I of your honour?”

“My—”

“I beg your pardon. I forgot. A man’s honour and a woman’s honour are two very different things.”

“They are both things that are usually taken for granted, and not mentioned.”

“I will try to take it for granted. You must forgive my having mentioned it. There is one thing I must know. Has she—that woman—any children?”

“She has none.”

Up till that moment, the examination had been conducted with the coolness of intense constraint. But for her one burst of feeling, Anne had sustained her tone of business-like inquiry, her manner of the woman of committees. Now, as she asked her question, her voice shook with the beating of her heart. Majendie, as he answered, heard her draw a long, deep breath of relief.

“And you propose to keep on this house for her?” she said calmly.

“Yes. She has settled in there, and she will be well looked after.”

“Who will look after her?”

“The Pearsons. They’re people I can trust.”

“And, besides the house, I suppose you will give her money?”

“I *must* make her a small allowance.”

“That is a very unwise arrangement. Whatever help is given her had much better come from me.”

“From *you*?”

“From a woman. It will be the best safeguard for the girl.”

He saw her drift and smiled.

“Am I to understand that you propose to rescue her?”

“It’s my duty—my work.”

“Your work?”

“You may not realise it; but that is the work I’ve been doing for the last three years. I am doubly responsible for a girl who has suffered through my husband’s fault.”

“What do you want to do with her?”

“I want, if possible, to reclaim her.”

He smiled again.

“Do you realise what sort of girl she is?”

“I’m afraid, Walter, she is what you have made her.”

“And so you want to reclaim her?”

“I do, indeed.”

“You couldn’t reclaim her.”

“She is very young, isn’t she?”

“N—no—She’s eight—and—twenty.”

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“I thought she was a young girl. But, if she’s as old as that—and bad—”

“Bad? Bad?”

He rose and looked down on her in anger.

“She’s good. You don’t know what you’re talking about. She isn’t a lady, but she’s as gentle and as modest as you are yourself. She’s sweet, and kind, and loving. She’s the most unworldly and unselfish creature I ever met. All the time I’ve known her she never did a selfish thing. She was absolutely devoted. She’d have stripped herself bare of everything she possessed if it would have done me any good. Why, the very thing you blame the poor little soul for, only proves that she hadn’t a thought for herself. It would have been better for her if she’d had. And you talk of ‘reclaiming’ a woman like that! You want to turn your preposterous committee on to her, to decide whether she’s good enough to be taken and shut up in one of your beastly institutions! No. On the whole, I think she’ll be better off if you leave her to me.”

“Say at once that you think I’d better leave you to her, since you think her perfect.”

“She *was* perfect to me. She gave me all she had to give. She couldn’t very well do more.”

“You mean she helped you to sin. So, of course, you condone her sin.”

“I should be an utter brute if I didn’t stand up for her, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes.” She admitted it. “I suppose you feel that you must defend her. Can you defend yourself, Walter?”

He was silent.

“I’m not going to remind you of your sin against your wife. *That* you would think nothing of. What have you to say for your sin against her?”

“My sin against her was not caring for her. *You* needn’t call me to account for it.”

“I am to believe that you did not care for her?”

“I never cared for her. I took everything from her and gave her nothing, and I left her like a brute.”

“Why did you go to her if you did not care for her?”

“I went to her because I cared for my wife. And I left her for the same reason. And she knew it.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that you left me for another woman, because you cared for me?”

“For no earthly reason except that.”

“You deceived me—you lived in deliberate sin with this woman for three years—and now you come back to me, because, I suppose, you are tired of her—and I am to believe that you cared for me!”

“I don’t expect you to believe it. It’s the fact, all the same. I wouldn’t have left you if I hadn’t been hopelessly in love with you. You mayn’t know it, and I don’t suppose you’d understand it if you did, but that was the trouble. It was the trouble all along, ever since I married you. I know I’ve been unfaithful to you, but I never loved any one but you. Consider how we’ve been living, you and I, for the last six years—can you say that I put another woman in your place?”

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She looked at him with her sad, uncomprehending eyes; her hands made a hopeless, helpless gesture.

“You know what you have done,” she said presently. “And you know that it was wrong.”

“Yes, it was wrong. But the whole thing was wrong. Wrong from the beginning. How are we going to make it right?”

“I don’t know, Walter. We must do our best.”

“Yes, but what are we going to do? What are you going to do?”

“I have told you that I am not going to leave you.”

“We are to go on, then, as we did before?”

“Yes—as far as possible.”

“Then,” he said, “we shall still be all wrong. Can’t you see it? Can’t you see *now* that it’s all wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“Our life. Yours and mine. Are you going to begin again like that?”

“Does it rest with me?”

“Yes. It rests with you, I think. You say we must make the best of it. What is your notion of the best?”

“I don’t know, Walter.”

“I *must* know. You say you’ll take me back—you’ll never leave me. What are you taking me back to? Not to that old misery? It wasn’t only bad for me, dear. It was bad for both of us.”

She sighed, and her sigh shuddered to a sob in her throat. The sound went to his heart and stirred in it a passion of pity.

“God knows,” he said, “I’d live with you on any terms. And I’ll keep straight. You needn’t be afraid. Only—See here. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t take me back. I wouldn’t ask you to if I’d left off caring for you. But it wasn’t there I went wrong. I can’t explain about Maggie. You wouldn’t understand. But, if you’d only try to, we might get along. There’s nothing that I won’t do for you to make up—”

“You can do nothing. There are things that cannot be made up for.”

“I know—I know. But still—we mightn’t be so unhappy—perhaps, in time—And if we had children—”

“Never,” she cried sharply, “never!”

He had not stirred in his chair where he sat bowed and dejected. But she drew back, flinching.

“I see,” he said. “Then you do not forgive me.”

“If you had come to me, and told me of your temptation—of your sin—three years ago, I would have forgiven you then. I would have taken you back. I cannot now. Not willingly, not with the feeling that I ought to have.”

She spoke humbly, gently, as if aware that she was giving him pain. Her face was averted. He said nothing; and she turned and faced him.

“Of course you can compel me,” she said. “You can compel me to anything.”

“I have never compelled you, as you know.”

“I know. I know you have been good in that way.”

“Good? Is that your only notion of goodness?”

“Good to me, Walter. Yes. You were very good. I do not say that I will not go back to you; but if I do, you must understand plainly, that it will be for one reason only. Because I desire to save you from yourself. To save some other woman, perhaps—”

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“You can let the other woman take care of herself. As for me, I appreciate your generosity, but I decline to be saved on those terms. I’m fastidious about a few things, and that’s one of them. What you are trying to tell me is that you do not care for me.”

She lifted her face. “Walter, I have never in all my life deceived you. I do not care for you. Not in that way.”

He smiled. “Well, I’ll be content so long as you care for me in any way—your way. I think your way’s a mistake; but I won’t insist on that. I’ll do my best to adapt my way to yours, that’s all.”

Her face was very still. Under their deep lids her eyes brooded, as if trying to see the truth inside herself.

“No—no,” she moaned. “I haven’t told you the truth. I believe there is *no* way in which I can care for you again. Or—well—I can care perhaps—I’m caring now—but—”

“I see. You do not love me.”

She shook her head. “No. I know what love is, and—I do not love you.”

“If you don’t love me, of course there’s nothing more to be said.”

“Yes, there is. There’s one thing that I have kept from you.”

“Well,” he said, “you may as well let me have it. There’s no good keeping things from me.”

“I had meant to spare you.”

At that he laughed. “Oh, don’t spare me.”

She still hesitated.

“What is it?”

She spoke low.

“If you had been here—that night—Peggy would not have died.”

He drew a quick breath. “What makes you think that?” he said quietly.

“She overstrained her heart with crying. As you know. She was crying for you. And you were not there. Nothing would make her believe that you were not dead.”

She saw the muscles of his face contract with sudden pain.

He looked at her gravely. The look expressed his large male contempt for her woman's cruelty; also a certain luminous compassion.

"Why have you told me this?" he said.

"I've told you, because I think the thought of it may restrain you when nothing else will."

"I see. You mean to say, you believe I killed her?"

Anne closed her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

He did not know whether he believed what she had said, nor whether she believed it herself, neither could he understand her motive in saying it.

At intervals he was profoundly sorry for her. Pity for her loosened, from time to time, the grip of his own pain. He told himself that she must have gone through intolerable days and nights of misery before she could bring herself to say a thing like that. Her grief excused her. But he knew that, if he had been in her place, she in his, he the saint and she the sinner, and that, if he had known her through her sin to be responsible for the child's death, there was no misery on earth that could have made him charge her with it.

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Further than that he could not understand her. The suddenness and cruelty of the blow had brutalised his imagination.

He got up and stretched himself, to shake off the oppression that weighed on him like an unwholesome sleep. As he rose he felt a queer feeling in his head, a giddiness, a sense of obstruction in his brain. He went into the dining-room, and poured himself out a small quantity of whiskey, measuring it with the accuracy of abstemious habit. The dose had become necessary since his nerves had been unhinged by worry and the shock of Peggy's death. This time he drank it almost undiluted.

He felt better. The stimulant had jogged something in his brain and cleared it.

He went back into the study and began to think. He remained thinking for some time, consecutively, and with great lucidity. He asked himself what he was to do now, and he saw clearly that he could do nothing. If Anne had been a passionate woman, hurling her words in a fury of fierce grief, he would have thought no more of it. If she had been the tender, tearful sort, dropping words in a weak, helpless misery, he would have thought no more of it. He could imagine poor little Maggie saying a thing like that, not knowing what she said. If it had been poor little Maggie he could have drawn her to him and comforted her, and reasoned with her till he had made her see the senselessness of her idea. Maggie would have listened to reason—his reason. Anne never would.

She had been cold and slow, and implacably deliberate. It was not blind instinct, but illuminated reason that had told her what to say and when to say it. Nothing he could ever do or say would make her take back her words. And if she took back her words, her thought would remain indestructible. She would never give it up; she would never approach him without it; she would never forget that it was there. It would always rise up between them, unburied, unappeased.

His brain swam and clouded again. He went again to the dining-room and drank more whiskey. Kate was in the dining-room and she saw him drinking. He saw Kate looking at him; but he didn't care. He was past caring for what anybody might think of him.

His brain was clearer than ever now. He realised Anne's omnipotence to harm him. He saw the hard, imperishable divinity in her. His wife was a spiritual woman. He had not always known what that meant. But he knew now; and now for the first time in his life he judged her. For the first time in his life his heart rose in a savage revolt against her power.

His head grew hot. The air of the study was stifling. He opened the window and went out into the cool, dark garden. He paced up and down, heedless of where he trod, trampling the flowerless plants down into their black beds. At the end of the path a little circle of white stones glimmered in the dark. That was Peggy's garden.

An agony of love and grief shook him as he thought of the dead child.

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He thought, with his hot brain, of Anne, and his anger flared like hate. It was through the child that she had always struck him. She was a fool to refuse to have more children, to sacrifice her boundless opportunities to strike.

There was a light in the upper window. He thought of Maggie, walking up and down in the back alley behind the garden, watching the lights of his house burning to the dawn. The little thing had loved him. She had given him all she had to give; and he had given her nothing. He had compelled her to live childless; and he had cast her off. She had been sacrificed to his passion, and to his wife's coldness.

Up there he could see Anne's large shadow moving on the lighted window-blind. She was dressing for dinner.

Kate was standing on the step, looking for him. As he came to the study window he saw Nanna behind her, going out of the room. His servants had been watching him. Kate was frightened. Her voice fluttered in her throat as she told him dinner was served.

He sat opposite his wife, with the little oblong table between them. Twice, sometimes three times a day, as long as they both lived, they would have to sit like that, separated, hostile, horribly conscious of each other.

Anne talked about the Gardners, and he stared at her stupidly, with eyes that were like heavy burning balls under his aching forehead. He ate little and drank a good deal. Half an hour after dinner he followed her to the drawing-room, dazed, not knowing clearly where he went.

Anne was seated at her writing-table. The place was strewn with papers. She was absorbed in the business of her committee, working off five weeks of correspondence in arrears.

He lay on the sofa and dozed, and she took no notice of him. He left the room, and she did not hear him go out.

He went to the Hannays. They were out. He went on to the Ransomes and found them there. He found Canon Wharton there, too, drinking whiskey and soda.

"Here's Wallie," some one said. Mrs. Hannay (it *was* Mrs. Hannay) gave a cry of delight, and made a little rush at him which confused him. Ransome poured out more whiskey, and gave it to him and to the Canon. The Canon drank peg for peg with them, while he eyed Majendie austerely. He used to drink peg for peg with Lawson Hannay, in the days when Hannay drank; now he drank peg for peg with Majendie, eyeing him austerely.

Then the Hannays came between them. They closed round Majendie and hemmed him in a corner, and kept him there talking to him. He had no clear idea what they were saying or what he was saying to them; but their voices were kind and they soothed him. Dick Ransome brought him more whiskey. He refused it. He had a sort of idea that he had had enough, rather more, in fact, than was quite good for him; and ladies were in the room. Ransome pressed him, and Lawson Hannay said something to Ransome; he couldn't tell what. He was getting drowsy and disinclined to answer when people spoke to him. He wished they would let him alone.

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Lawson Hannay put his hand on his shoulder, and said, “Come along with us, Wallie,” and he wished Lawson Hannay would let him alone. Mrs. Hannay came and stooped over him and whispered things in his ear, and he tried to rouse himself so far as to stare into her face and try to understand what she was saying.

She was saying, “Wallie, get up—Come with us, Wallie, dear.” And she laid her hand on his arm. He took her hand in his, and pressed it, and let it drop.

Then Ransome said, “Why can’t you let the poor chap alone? Let him stay if he likes.”

That was what he wanted. Ransome knew what he wanted—to be let alone.

He didn’t see the Hannays go. The only thing he saw distinctly was the Canon’s large grey face, and the eyes in it fixed unpleasantly on him. He wished the Canon would let him alone.

He was getting really *too* sleepy. He would have to rouse himself presently and go. With a tremendous effort he dragged himself up and went. Ransome walked with him to the club and left him there.

The club-room was in an hotel opposite the pier. He could get a bedroom there for the night; and when the night was over he would be able to think what he would do. He couldn’t go back to Prior Street as he was. He was too sleepy to know very much about it, but he knew that. He knew, too, that something had happened which might make it impossible for him to go back at all.

Ransome had told the manager of the hotel to take care of him. Every now and then the manager came and looked at him; and then the drowsiness lifted from his brain with a jerk, and he knew that something horrible had happened. That was why they kept on looking at him.

At last he dragged himself to his room. He rang the bell and ordered more whiskey. This time he drank, not for lucidity, but for blessed drunkenness, for kind sleep and pitiful oblivion.

He slept on far into the morning and woke with a headache. At twelve Hannay and Ransome called for him. It was a fine warm day with a southerly wind blowing and sails on the river. Ransome’s yacht lay off the pier, with Mrs. Ransome in it. The sails were going up in Ransome’s yacht. Hannay’s yacht rocked beside it. Dick took Majendie by the arm. Dick, outside in the morning light, looked paler and puffier than ever, but his eyes were kind. He had an idea. Dick’s idea was that Majendie should run up with him and Mrs. Ransome to Scarby for the week-end. Hannay looked troubled as Dick unfolded his idea.

“I wouldn’t go, old man,” said he, “with that head of yours.”

Dick stared. “Head? Just the thing for his head,” said Dick. “It’ll do him all the good in the world.”

Hannay took Dick aside. “No, it won’t. It won’t do him any good at all.”

“I say, you know, I don’t know what you’re driving at, but you might let the poor chap have a little peace. Come along, Majendie.”

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Majendie sent a telegram to Prior Street and went.

The wind blew away his headache and put its own strong, violent, gusty life into him. He felt agreeably excited as he paced the slanting deck. He stayed there in the wind.

Downstairs in the cabin the Ransomes were quarrelling.

“What on earth,” said she, “possessed you to bring him?”

“And why not?”

“Because of Sarah.”

“What’s she got to do with it?”

“Well, you don’t want them to meet again, do you?”

Dick made his face a puffy blank. “Why the devil shouldn’t they?” said he.

“Well, you know the trouble he’s had with his wife already about Sarah.”

“It wasn’t about Sarah. It was another woman altogether!”

“I know that. But she was the beginning of it.”

“Let her be the end of it, then. If you’re thinking of *him*. The sooner that wife of his gets a separation the better it’ll be for him.”

“And you want my sister to be mixed up in *that*?”

Mrs. Ransome began to cry.

“She can’t be mixed up in it. He’s past caring for Sarah, poor old girl.”

“She isn’t past caring for him. She isn’t past anything,” sobbed Mrs. Ransome.

“Don’t be a fool, Topsy. There isn’t any harm in poor old Toodles. Majendie’s a jolly sight safer with Toodles, I can tell you, than he is with that wife of his.”

“Has she come home, then?”

“She came yesterday afternoon. You saw what he was like last night. If I’d left him to himself this morning he’d have drunk himself into a fit. When a sober—a fantastically sober man does that—”

“What does it mean?”

“It generally means that he’s in a pretty bad way. And,” added Dick pensively, “they call poor Toodles a dangerous woman.”

All night the yacht lay in Scarby harbour.

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was nine o’clock on Sunday evening. Majendie was in Scarby, in the hotel on the little grey parade, where he and Anne had stayed on their honeymoon.

Lady Cayley was with him. She was with him in the sitting-room which had been his and Anne’s. They were by themselves. The Ransomes were dining with friends in another quarter of the town. He had accepted Sarah’s invitation to dine with her alone.

The Ransomes had tried to drag him away, and he had refused to go with them. He had very nearly quarrelled with the Ransomes. They had been irritating him all day, till he had been atrociously rude to them. He had told Ransome to go to a place where, as Ransome had remarked, he could hardly have taken Mrs. Ransome. Then he had explained gently that he had had enough knocking about for one day, that his head ached abominably, and that he wished they would leave him alone. It was all he wanted. Then they had left him alone, with Sarah. He was glad to be with her. She was the only person who seemed to understand that all he wanted was to be let alone.

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She had been with him all day. She had sat beside him on the deck of the yacht as they cruised up and down the coast till sunset. Afterwards, when the Ransomes' friends had trooped in, one after another, and filled the sitting-room with insufferable sounds, she had taken him into a quiet corner and kept him there. He had felt grateful to her for that.

She had been angelic to him during dinner. She had let him eat as little and drink as much as he pleased. And she had hardly spoken to him. She had wrapped him in a heavenly silence. Only from time to time, out of the divine silence, her woman's voice had dropped between them, soothing and pleasantly indistinct. He had been drinking hard all day. He had been excited, intolerably excited; and she soothed him. He was aware of her chiefly as a large, benignant presence, maternal and protecting.

His brain felt brittle, but extraordinarily clear, luminous, transparent, the delicate centre of monstrous and destructive energies. It burned behind his eyeballs like a fire. His eyes were hot with it, the pupils strained, distended, gorged with light.

This monstrous brain of his originated nothing, but ideas presented to it became monstrous, too. And their immensity roused no sense of the incredible.

The table had been cleared of everything but coffee-cups, glasses, and wine. They still sat facing each other. Sarah had her arms on the table, propping her chin up with her clenched hands. Her head was tilted back slightly, in a way that was familiar to him; so that she looked at him from under the worn and wrinkled white lids of her eyes. And as she looked at him she smiled slightly; and the smile was familiar, too.

And he sat opposite her, with his chin sunk on his breast. His bright, dark, distended eyes seemed to strain upwards towards her, under the weight of his flushed forehead.

"Well, Wallie," she said, "I didn't get married, you see, after all."

"Married—married? Why didn't you?"

"I never meant to. I only wanted you to think it."

"Why? Why did you want me to think it?"

He was no longer disinclined to talk. Though his brain lacked spontaneity, it responded appropriately to suggestion.

"I didn't want you to think something else."

"What? What should I think?"

His voice was thick and rapid, his eyes burned.

“That you’d made a mess of my life, my dear.”

“When did I make a mess of your life?”

“Never mind when. I *might* have married, only I didn’t. That’s the difference between me and you.”

“And that’s how I made a mess of your life, is it? I haven’t made a furious success of my own, have I?”

“I wouldn’t have brought it up against you, if you had. The awful thing was to stand by, and see you make a sinful muddle of it”

“A sinful muddle?”

“Yes. That’s what it’s been. A sinful muddle.”

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“Which is worse, d’you think, a sinful muddle? or a muddling sin?”

“Oh, don’t ask me, my dear. I can’t see any difference.”

“My God—nor I!”

“There’s no good talking. You’re so obstinate, Wallie, that I believe, if you could live your life over again, you’d do just the same.”

“I would, probably. Just the same.”

“There’s nothing you’d alter?”

“Nothing. Except one thing.”

“What thing?”

“Never mind what.”

“I don’t mind, if the one thing wasn’t *me*—was it?”

He did not answer.

“Was it?” she insisted, turning the full blue blaze of her eyes on him.

He started. “Of course it wasn’t. You don’t suppose I’d have said so if it had been, do you?”

“A-ah! So, if you could live your life over again, you wouldn’t turn me out of it? I didn’t take up much room, did I? Only two years.”

“Two years?”

“That was all. And you’d let me stay in for my two poor little years. Well, that’s something. It’s a great deal. It’s more than some women get.”

“Yes. More than some women get.”

“Poor Wallie. I’m afraid you wouldn’t live your life again.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“I would. I’d live mine, horrors and all. Just for those two little years. I say, if we’d keep each other in for those two years, we needn’t turn each other out now, need we?”

“Oh no, oh no.”

His brain followed her lead, originating nothing.

“See here,” she said, “if I come in—”

“Yes, yes,” he said vaguely.

He was bending forward now, with his hands clasped on the table. She stretched out her beautiful white arms and covered his hands with hers, and held them. Her eyes were full-orbed, luminous, and tender. They held him, too.

“I come in on my own terms, this time, not yours.”

“Oh, of course.”

“I mean I can’t come in on the same terms as before. All that was over nine years ago, when you married. You and I are older. We have had experience. We’ve suffered horribly. We know.”

“What do we know?”

She let go his hands.

“At least we know the limits—the lines we must draw. Fifteen years ago we didn’t know anything, either of us. We were innocents. You were an innocent when you left me, when you married.”

“When I married?”

“Yes, when you married. You were a blessed innocent, or you couldn’t have done it. You married a good woman.”

“I know.”

“So do I. Well, I’ve given one or two men a pretty bad time, but you may write it on my tombstone that I never hurt another woman.”

“Of course you haven’t.”

“And I’m not going to hurt your wife, remember.”

“I’m stupid, I don’t think I understand.”

“Can’t you understand that I’m not going to make trouble between you and her?”

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“Me? And her?”

“You and her. You’ve come back to me as my friend. We’ll be better friends if you understand that, whatever I let you do, dear, I’m not going to let you make love to me.”

She drew herself back and faced him with her resolution.

She knew the man with whom she had to deal. His soul must be off its guard before she could have any power over his body. In presenting herself as unattainable she would make herself desired. She would bring him back.

She knew what fires he had passed through on his way to her. She saw that she could not bring him back by playing poor, tender Maggie’s part. She could not move him by appearing as the woman she once was, by falling at his feet as she had once fallen. This time, it was he who must fall at hers.

Anne Majendie had held her empire, and had made herself for ever desirable, by six years of systematic torturings and deceptions and denials, by all the infidelities of the saint in love with her own sanctity. The woman who was to bring him back now would have to borrow for a moment a little of Anne Majendie’s spiritual splendour. She saw by his flaming face that she had suggested the thing she had forbidden.

“You think,” said she, “there isn’t any danger? I don’t say there is. But if there was, you’d never see it. You’d never think of it. You’d be up to your neck in it before you knew where you were.”

He moved impatiently. “At any rate I know where I am now.”

“And I,” said she, in response to his movement, “mean that you shall stay there.” She paused. “I know what you’re thinking. You’d like to know what right I have to say these things to you.”

“Well—I’m awfully stupid—”

“I earned the right fifteen years ago. When a woman gives a man all she has to give, and gets nothing, there are very few things she hasn’t a right to say to him.”

“I’ve no doubt you earned your right.”

“I’m not reproaching you, dear. I’m simply justifying the plainness of my speech.”

He stared at her, but he did not answer.

“Don’t think me hard,” said she. “I’m saying these things because I care for you. Because—” She rose, and flung her arms out with a passionate gesture towards him. “Oh, my dear—my heart aches for you so that I can’t bear it.”

She came over to where he sat staring at her, staring half stupefied, half inflamed. She stood beside him, and passed her hand lightly over his hair.

“I only want to help you.”

“You can’t help me.”

“I know I can’t. I can only say hard things to you.”

She stooped, and her lips swept his hair. For a moment love gave her back her beauty and the enchantment of her youth; it illuminated the house of flesh it dwelt in and inspired. And yet she could not reach him. His soul was on its guard.

“You’ve come back,” she whispered. “You’ve come back. But you never came till you were driven. That’s how I thought you’d come. When you were driven. When there was nobody but me.”

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He heard her speaking, but her words had no significance that pierced his thick and swift sensations.

“What have you done that you should have to pay so?”

“What have I done?”

“Or I?” she said.

He did not hear her. There was another sound in his ears.

Her voice ceased. Her eyes only called to him. He pushed back his chair and laid his arms on the table, and bowed his head upon them, hiding his face from her. She knelt down beside him. Her voice was like a warm wind in his ears. He groaned. She drew a short sharp breath, and pressed her shoulder to his shoulder, and her face to his hidden face.

At her touch he rose to his feet, violently sobered, loathing himself and her. He felt his blood leap like a hot fountain to his brain. When she clung he raged, and pushed her from him, not knowing what he did, thrusting his hands out, cruelly, against her breasts, so that he wrung from her a cry of pain and anger.

But when he would have gone from her his feet were loaded; they were heavy weights binding him to the floor. He had a sensation of intolerable sickness; then a pain beat like a hammer on one side of his head. He staggered, and fell, headlong, at her feet.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Anne, left alone at her writing-table, had worked on far into Friday night. The trouble in her was appeased by the answering of letters, the sorting of papers, the bringing of order into confusion. She had always had great practical ability; she had proved herself a good organiser, expert in the business of societies and committees.

In her preoccupation she had not noticed that her husband had left the house, and that he did not return to it.

In the morning, as she left her room, the old nurse came to her with a grave face, and took her into Majendie’s room. Nanna pointed out to her that his bed had not been slept in. Anne’s heart sank. Later on, the telegram he sent explained his absence. She supposed that he had slept at the Ransomes’ or the Hannays’, and she thought no more of it. The business of the day again absorbed her.

In the afternoon Canon Wharton called on her. It was the recognised visit of condolence, delayed till her return. In his manner with Mrs. Majendie there was no sign

of the adroit little man of the world who had drunk whiskey with Mrs. Majendie's husband the night before. His manner was reticent, reverential, not obtrusively tender. He abstained from all the commonplaces of consolation. He did not speak of the dead child; but reminded her of the greater maternal work that God had called upon her to do, and told her that the children of many mothers would rise up and call her blessed. He bade her believe that her life, which seemed to her ended, had in reality only just begun. He said that, if great natures were reserved for great sorrows, great afflictions, they were also dedicated to great uses. Uses to which their sorrows were the unique and perfect training.

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He left her strengthened, uplifted, and consoled.

On Sunday morning she attended the service at All Souls. In the afternoon she walked to the great flat cemetery of Scale, where Edith's and Peggy's graves lay side by side. In the evening she went again to All Souls.

The church services were now the only link left between her soul and God. She clung desperately to them, trying to recapture through these consecrated public methods the peace that should have been her most private personal possession.

For, all the time, now, she was depressed by a sense of separation from the Unseen. She struggled for communion; she prostrated herself in surrender, and was flung back upon herself, an outcast from the spiritual world. She was alone in that alien place of earth where everything had been taken from her. She almost rebelled against the cruelty of the heavenly hand, that, having smitten her, withheld its healing. She had still faith, but she had no joy nor comfort in her faith. Therefore she occupied herself incessantly with works; appeasing, putting off the hours that waited for her as their prey.

It was at night that her desolation found her most helpless. For then she thought of her dead child and of the husband whom she regarded as worse than dead.

She had one terrible consolation. She had once doubted the justice of her attitude to him. Now she was sure. Her justification was complete.

She was sitting at work again early on Monday morning, in the drawing-room that overlooked the street.

About ten o'clock she heard a cab drive up to the door.

She thought it was Majendie come back again, and she was surprised when Kate came to her and told her that it was Mr. Hannay, and that he wished to speak to her at once.

Hannay was downstairs, in the study; standing with his back to the fireplace. He did not come forward to meet her. His rosy, sensual face was curiously set. As she approached him, his loose lips moved and closed again in a firm fold.

He pressed her hand without speaking. His heaviness and immobility alarmed her.

"What is it?" she asked.

Her heart was like a wild whirlpool that sucked back her voice and suffocated it.

"I've come with very bad news, Mrs. Majendie."

"Tell me," she whispered.

“Walter is ill—very dangerously ill.”

“He is dead.”

The words seemed to come from her without grief, without any feeling. She felt nothing but a dull, dragging pain under her left breast, as if the doors of her heart were closed and its chambers full to bursting.

“No. He is not dead.”

Her heart beat again.

“He’s dying, then.”

“They don’t know.”

“Where is he?”

“At Scarby.”

“Scarby? How much time have I?”

“There’s a train at ten-twenty. Can you be ready in five—seven minutes?”

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“Yes.”

She rang the bell.

“Tell Kate where to send my things,” she said as she left the room. Her mind took possession of her, so that she did not waste a word of her lips, or a single motion of her feet. She came back in five minutes, ready to start.

“What is it?” she said as they drove to the station.

“Haemorrhage of the brain.”

“The brain?”

“Apoplexy.”

“Is he unconscious?”

“Yes.”

She closed her eyes.

“He will not know me,” she said.

Hannay was silent. She lay back and kept her eyes closed.

A van blocked the narrow street that led to the East Station. The driver reined in his horse. She opened her eyes in terror.

“We shall miss the train—if we stop.”

“No, no, we’ve plenty of time.”

They waited.

“Oh, tell him to drive round the other way.”

“We shall miss the train if we do *that*.”

“Well, make that man in front move on. Make him turn—up there.”

The van turned into a side street, and they drove on.

The Scarby train was drawn up along the platform. They had five minutes before it started; but she hurried into the nearest compartment. They had it to themselves.

The train moved on. It was a two hours' journey to Scarby.

A strong wind blew through the open window and she shivered. She had brought no warm wrap with her. Hannay laid his overcoat over her knees and about her body. His large hands moved gently, wrapping it close. She thanked him and tried to smile. And when he saw her smile, Hannay was sorry for the things he had thought and said of her. His voice when he spoke to her vibrated tenderly. She resigned herself to his hands. Grief made her passive now.

Hannay sank back in the far corner and left her to her grief. He covered his eyes with his hands that he might not see her. Poor Hannay hoped that, if he removed his painful presence, she would allow herself the relief of tears.

But no tears fell from under her closed eyelids. Her soul was withdrawn behind them into the darkness where the body's pang ceased, and there was help. She started when the train stopped at Scarby Station.

As they stopped at the hotel there came upon her that reminiscence which is foreknowledge and the sense of destiny.

A woman was coming down the staircase as they entered. She did not see her at first. She would not have seen her at all if Hannay had not taken her arm and drawn her aside into the shelter of a doorway. Then, as the woman passed out, she saw that it was Lady Cayley.

She looked helplessly at Hannay. Her eyes said, "Where is he?" She wondered where, in what room, she should find her husband.

She found him upstairs in the room that had been their bridal chamber. He lay on their bridal bed, motionless and senseless. There was a deep flush on one side of his face, one corner of his mouth was slightly drawn, and one eyelid drooped. He was paralysed down his left side.

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His lips moved mechanically as he breathed, and his breath came with a deep grating sound. His left arm was stretched outside, upon the blanket. A nurse stood at the head of the bed. She moved as Anne entered and gave place to her. Anne put out her hand and touched his arm, caressing it.

The nurse said, “There has been no change.” She lifted his arm by the wrist and laid it in his wife’s hand that she might see that he was paralysed.

And Anne sat still by the bedside, staring at her husband’s face, and holding his heavy arm in her hand, as if she could thus help him to bear the weight of it.

Hannay gave one look at her as she sat there. He said something to the nurse and went out of the room. The woman followed him.

After they went Anne bowed her head and laid it on the pillow beside her husband’s, with her cheek against his cheek. She stayed so for a moment. Then she lifted her head and looked about her. Her eyes took note of trifles. She saw that the blankets were drawn straight over his body, as if over the body of a dead man. The pillow-cases and the end of the sheet, which was turned down over the blankets, were clean and creaseless.

He could not move. He was paralysed. They had not told her that.

She saw that he wore a clean white nightshirt of coarse cotton. It must have been lent by one of the people of the hotel. His illness must have come upon him last night, when he was still up and dressed. They must have carried him in here, and laid him in the clean bed. Everything about him was very white and clean. She was glad.

She sat there till the nurse came back again. She had to move away from him then. It hurt her to see the woman bending over his bed, looking at him, to see, her hands touching him.

A bell rang somewhere in the hotel. Hannay came in and told her that there was luncheon in the sitting-room. She shook her head. He put his hand on her shoulder and spoke to her as if she had been a child. She must eat, he said; she would be no good if she did not eat. She got up and followed him. She ate and drank whatever he gave her. Then she went back to her husband, and watched beside him while the nurse went to her meal. The terrible thing was that she could do nothing for him. She could only wait and watch. The nurse came back in half an hour, and they sat there together, all the afternoon, one on each side of the bed, waiting and watching.

Towards evening the doctor, who had come at midnight and in the morning, came again. He looked at Anne keenly and kindly, and his manner seemed to her to say that there was no hope. He made experiments. He brought a lighted candle and held it to

the patient's eyes, and said that the pupils were still contracted. The nurse said nothing. She looked at Anne and she looked at the doctor, and when he went away, she made a sign to Anne to keep back while she followed him. Anne heard them talking together in low voices outside the door, and her heart ached with fear of what he would say to her presently.

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He sent for her, and she came to him in the sitting-room. He said, “There is no change.” Her brain reeled and righted itself. She had thought he was going to say “There is no hope.”

“Will he get better?” she said.

“I cannot tell you.”

The doctor seated himself and prepared to deal long and leisurely with the case.

“It’s impossible to say. He *may* get better. He may even get well. But I should do wrong if I let you hope too much for that.”

“You can give *no* hope?” she said, thinking that she uttered his real thought.

“I don’t say that. I only say that the chances are not—exclusively—in favour of recovery.”

“The chances?”

“Yes. The chances.” The doctor looked at her, considering whether she were a woman who could bear the truth. Her eyes assured him that she could. “I don’t say he won’t recover. It’s this way,” said he. “There’s a clot somewhere on the brain. If it absorbs completely he may get well—perfectly well.”

“And if it does not absorb?”

“He may remain as he is, paralysed down the left side. The paralysis may be only partial. He may recover the use of one limb and not the other. But he will be paralysed. Partially or completely.”

She pictured it.

“Ah—but,” she said, laying hold on hope again, “he will not die?”

“Well—there may be further lesions—in which case—”

“He will die?”

“He may die. He may die any moment.”

She accepted it, abandoning hope.

“Will there be any return of consciousness? Will he know me?”

“I’m afraid not. If consciousness returns we may begin to hope. As it is, I don’t want you to make up your mind to the worst. There are two things in his favour. He has evidently a sound constitution. And he has lived—up till now—Mr. Hannay tells me, a rather unusually temperate life. That is so?”

“Yes. He was most abstemious. Always—always. Why?”

The doctor recalled his eyes from their examination of Mrs. Majendie’s face. It was evident that there were some truths which she could not bear.

“My dear Mrs. Majendie, there is no *why*, of course. That is in his favour. There seems to have been nothing in his previous history which would predispose to the attack.”

“Would a shock—predispose him?”

“A shock?”

“Any very strong emotion—”

“It might. Certainly. If it was recent. Mr. Hannay told me that he—that you—had had a sudden bereavement. How long ago was that?”

“A month—nearly five weeks.”

“Ah—so long ago as that? No, I think it would hardly be likely. If there had been any recent violent emotion—”

“It would account for it?”

“Yes, yes, it might account for it.”

“Thank you.”

He was touched by her look of agony. “If there is anything else I can—”

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“No. Thank you very much. That is all I wanted to know.”

She went back into the sick-room. She stayed there all evening, and they brought her food to her there. She stayed, watching for the sign of consciousness that would give hope. But there was no sign.

The nurse went to bed at nine o’clock. Anne had insisted on sitting up that night. Hannay slept in the next room, on a sofa, within call.

When they had left her alone with her husband, she knelt down beside his bedside and prayed. And as she knelt, with her bowed head near to that body sleeping its strange and terrible sleep, she remembered nothing but that she had once loved him; she was certain of nothing but that she loved him still. His body was once more dear and sacred to her as in her bridal hour. She did not ask herself whether it were paying the penalty of its sin; her compassion had purged him of his sin. She had no memory for the past. It seemed to her that all her life and all her suffering were crowded into this one hour while she prayed that his soul might come back and speak to her, and that his body might not die. The hour trampled under it that other hour when she had knelt by the loathed bridal bed, wrestling for her own spiritual life. She had no life of her own to pray for now. She prayed only that he might live.

And though she knew not whether her prayer were answered she knew that it was heard.

CHAPTER XXXIX

It was the evening of the third day. There was no change in Majendie.

Dr. Gardner had been sent for. He had come and gone. He had confirmed the Scarby doctor’s opinion, with a private leaning to the side of hope. Hannay, who had waited to hear his verdict, was going back to Scale early the next morning. Mrs. Majendie had been in her husband’s room all day, and he had seen little of her.

He was sitting alone by the fire after dinner, trying to read a paper, when she came in. Her approach was so gentle that he was unaware of it till she stood beside him. He started to his feet, mumbling an apology for his bewilderment. He pulled up an arm-chair to the fire for her, wandered uneasily about the room for a minute or two, and would have left it, had she not called him back to her.

“Don’t go, Mr. Hannay. I want to speak to you.”

He turned, with an air of frustrated evasion, and remained, a supremely uncomfortable presence.

“Have you time?” she asked.

“Plenty. All my time is at your disposal.”

“You have been very kind—”

“My dear Mrs. Majendie—”

“I want you to be kinder still. I want you to tell me the truth.”

“The truth—” Hannay tried to tighten his loose face into an expression of judicial reserve.

“Yes, the truth. There’s no kindness in keeping things from me.”

“My dear Mrs. Majendie, I’m keeping nothing from you, I assure you. The doctors have told me no more than they have told you.”

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“I know. It’s not that.”

“What is it that’s troubling you?”

“Did you see Walter before he came here?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see him on Friday night?”

“Yes.”

“Was he perfectly well then?”

“Er—yes—he was well. Quite well.”

Anne turned her sorrowful eyes upon him.

“No. There was something wrong. What was it?”

“If there was he didn’t tell me.”

“No. He wouldn’t. Why did you hesitate just now?”

“Did I hesitate?”

“When I asked you if he was well.”

“I thought you meant did I notice any signs of his illness coming on. I didn’t. But of course, as you know, he was very much shaken by——by your little girl’s death.”

“You noticed that while I was away?”

“Y-es. But I certainly noticed it more on the night you were speaking of.”

“You would have said, then, that he must have received a severe shock?”

“Certainly—certainly I would.”

Hannay responded quite cheerfully in his immense relief.

It was what they were all trying for, to make poor Mrs. Majendie believe that her husband’s illness was to be attributed solely to the shock of the child’s death.

“Do you think that shock could have had anything to do with his illness?”

“Of course I do. At least, I should say it was indirectly responsible for it.”

She put her hand up to hide her face. He saw that in some way incomprehensible to him, so far from shielding her, he had struck a blow.

“Dr. Gardner told you that much,” said he. He felt easier, somehow, in halving the responsibility with Gardner.

“Yes. He told me that. But he had not seen him since October. You saw him on Friday, the day I came home.”

Hannay was confirmed in his suspicion that on Friday there had been a scene. He now saw that Mrs. Majendie was tortured by the remembrance of her part in it.

“Oh well,” he said consolingly. “He hadn’t been himself for a long time before that.”

“I know. I know. That only makes it worse.”

She wept slowly, silently, then stopped suddenly and held herself in a restraint that was ten times more pitiful to see. Hannay was unspeakably distressed.

“Perhaps,” said he, “if you could tell me what’s on your mind, I might be able to relieve you.”

She shook her head.

“Come,” he said kindly, “what is it, really? What do you imagine makes it worse?”

“I said something to him that I didn’t mean.”

“Of course you did,” said Hannay, smiling cheerfully. “We all say things to each other that we don’t mean. That wouldn’t hurt him.”

“But it did. I told him he was responsible for Peggy’s death. I didn’t know what I was saying. I let him think he killed her.”

“He wouldn’t think it.”

“He did. There was nothing else he could think. If he dies I shall have killed him.”

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“You will have done nothing of the sort. He wouldn’t think twice about what a woman said in her anger or her grief. He wouldn’t believe it. He’s got too much sense. You can put that idea out of your head for ever.”

“I cannot put it out. I had to tell you—lest you should think—”

“Lest I should think—what?”

“That it was something else that caused his illness.”

“But, my dear lady—it *was* something else. I haven’t a doubt about it.”

“I know what you mean,” she said quickly. “He had been drinking—poor dear.”

“How do you know that?”

“The doctor asked me. He asked me if he had been in the habit of taking too much.”

Hannay heaved a deep sigh of discomfort and disappointment.

“It’s no good,” said she, “trying to keep things from me. And there’s another thing that I must know.”

“You’re distressing yourself most needlessly. There is nothing more to know.”

“I know that woman was here. I do not know whether he came here to meet her.”

“Ah well—that I can assure you he did not.”

“Still—he must have met her. She was here.”

“How do you know that she was here?”

“You saw her yourself, coming out of the hotel. You were horrified, and you pulled me back so that I shouldn’t see her.”

“There’s nothing in that, nothing whatever.”

“If you’d seen your own face, Mr. Hannay, you would have said there was everything in it.”

“My face, dear Mrs. Majendie, does not prove that they met. Or that there was any reason why they shouldn’t meet. It only proves my fear lest Lady Cayley should stop and speak to you. A thing she wouldn’t be very likely to do if they had met—as you suppose.”

“There is nothing that woman wouldn’t do.”

“She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t do that.”

“I don’t know.”

“No. You don’t know. So you’re bound to give her the benefit of the doubt. I advise you to do it. For your own peace of mind’s sake. And for your husband’s sake.”

“It was for his sake that I asked you for the truth. Because—”

“You wanted me to clear him?”

“Yes. Or to tell me if there is anything I should forgive.”

“I can assure you he didn’t come here to see Sarah Cayley. As to forgiveness—you haven’t got to forgive him that; and if you only understood, you’d find that there was precious little you ever had to forgive.”

“If I only understood. You think I don’t understand, even yet?”

“I’m sure you don’t. You never did.”

“I would give everything if I could understand now.”

“Yes, if you could. But can you?”

“I’ve tried very hard. I’ve prayed to God to make me understand.”

Poor Hannay was embarrassed at the name of God. He fell to contemplating his waistcoat buttons in profound abstraction for a while. Then he spoke.

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“Look here, Mrs. Majendie. Poor Walter always said you were much too good for him. If you’ll pardon my saying so, I never believed that until now. Now, upon my soul, I do believe it. And I believe that’s where the trouble’s been all along. There are things about a man that a woman like you cannot understand. She doesn’t try to understand them. She doesn’t want to. She’d die rather than know. So—well—the whole thing’s wrapped up in mystery, and she thinks it’s something awful and iniquitous, something incomprehensible.”

“Yes. If she thinks about it at all.”

“My dear lady, very often she thinks about it a great deal more than is good for her, and she thinks wrong. She’s bound to, being what she is. Now, when an ordinary man marries that sort of woman there’s certain to be trouble.”

He paused, pondering. “My wife’s a dear, good, little woman,” he said presently; “she’s the best little woman in the world for me; but I dare say to outsiders, she’s a very ordinary little woman. Well, you know, I don’t call myself a remarkably good man, even now, and I wasn’t a good man at all before she married me. D’you mind my talking about myself like this?”

“No.” She tried to keep herself sincere. “No. I don’t think I do.”

“You do, I’m afraid. I don’t much like it myself. But, you see, I’m trying to help you. You said you wanted to understand, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I want to understand.”

“Well, then, I’m not a good man, and your husband is. And yet, I’d no more think of leaving my dear little wife for another woman than I would of committing a murder. But, if she’d been ‘too good’ for me, there’s no knowing what I mightn’t have done. D’you see?”

“I see. You’re trying to tell me that it was my fault that my husband left me.”

“Your fault? No. It was hardly your *fault*, Mrs. Majendie.”

He meditated. “There’s another thing. You good women are apt to run away with the idea that—that this sort of thing is so tremendously important to us. It isn’t. It isn’t.”

“Then why behave as if it were?”

“We don’t. That’s your mistake. Ten to one, when a man’s once married and happy, he doesn’t think about it at all. Of course, if he isn’t happy—but, even then, he doesn’t go thinking about it all day long. The ordinary man doesn’t. He’s got other things to attend

to—his business, his profession, his religion, anything you like. Those are *the* important things, the things he thinks about, the things that take up his time."

"I see. I see. The woman doesn't count."

"Of course she counts. But she counts in another way. Bless you, the woman may *be* his religion, his superstition. In your husband's case it certainly was so."

Her face quivered.

"Of course," he said, "what beats you is—how a man can love his wife with his whole heart and soul, and yet be unfaithful to her."

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“Yes. If I could understand that, I should understand everything. Once, long ago, Walter said the same thing to me, and I couldn’t understand.”

“Well—well, it depends on what one calls unfaithfulness. Some men are brutes, but we’re not talking about them. We’re talking about Walter.”

“Yes. We’re talking about Walter.”

“And Walter is my dearest friend, so dear that I hardly know how to talk to you about him.”

“Try,” she said.

“Well, I suppose I know more about him than anybody else. And I never knew a man freer from any weakness for women. He was always so awfully sorry for them, don’t you know. Sarah Cayley could never have fastened herself on him if he hadn’t been sorry for her. No more could that girl—Maggie Forrest.”

“How did he come to know her?”

“Oh, some fellow he knew had behaved pretty badly to her, and Walter had been paying for her keep, years before there was anything between them. She got dependent on him, and he on her. We are pathetically dependent creatures, Mrs. Majendie.”

“What was she like?”

“She? Oh, a soft, simple, clinging little thing. And instead of shaking her off, he let her cling. That’s how it all began. Then, of course, the rest followed. I’m not excusing him, mind you. Only—” Poor Hannay became shy and unhappy. He hid his face in his hands and lifted it from them, red, as if with shame. “The fact is,” he said, “I’m a clumsy fellow, Mrs. Majendie. I want to help you, but I’m afraid of hurting you.”

“Nothing can hurt me now.”

“Well—” He pondered again. “If you want to get down to the root of it, it’s as simple as hunger and thirst.”

“Hunger and thirst,” she murmured.

“It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. When you’re not thirsty you don’t think about drinking. When you are thirsty, you do. When you’re driven mad with thirst, you think of nothing else. And sometimes—not always—when you can’t get clean water, you drink water that’s—not so clean. Though you may be very particular. Walter was—morally—-the most particular man I ever knew.”

“I know. I know.”

“Mind you, the more particular a man is, the thirstier he’ll be. And supposing he can never get a drop of water at home, and every time he goes out, some kind person offers him a drink—can you blame him very much if, some day, he takes it?”

“No,” she said. She said it very low, and turned her face from him.

“Look here, Mrs. Majendie,” he said, “you know *why* I’m saying all this.”

“To help me,” she said humbly.

“And to help him. Neither you nor I know whether he’s going to live or die. And I’ve told you all this so that, if he does die, you mayn’t have to judge him harshly, and if he doesn’t die, you may feel that he’s—he’s given back to you. D’you see?”

“Yes, I see,” she said softly.

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She saw that there were depths in this man that she had not suspected. She had despised Lawson Hannay. She had detested him. She had thought him coarse in grain, gross, unsufferably unspiritual. She had denied him any existence in the world of desirable persons. She had refused to see any good in him. She had wondered how Edith could tolerate him for an instant. Now she knew.

She remembered that Edith was a proud woman, and that she had said that her pride had had to go down in the dust before Lawson Hannay. And now she, too, was humbled before him. He had beaten down all her pride. He had been kind; but he had not spared her. He had not spared her; but the gentlest woman could not have been more kind.

She rose and looked at him with a strange reverence and admiration. “Whether he lives or dies,” she said, “you will have given him back to me.”

She took up her third night’s watch.

The nurse rose as she entered, gave her some directions, and went to her own punctual sleep.

There was no change in the motionless body, in the drawn face, and in the sightless eyes.

Anne sat by her husband’s side and kept her hand upon his arm to feel the life in it. She was consoled by contact, even while she told herself that she had no right to touch him.

She knew what she had done to him. She had ruined him as surely as if she had been a bad woman. He had loved her, and she had cast him from her, and sent him to his sin. There was no humiliation and no pain that she had spared him. Even the bad women sometimes spare. They have their pity for the men they ruin; they have their poor, disastrous love. She had been merciless where she owed most mercy.

Three people had tried to make her see it. Edith, who was a saint, and that woman, who was a sinner; and Lawson Hannay. They had all taken the same view of her. They had all told her the same thing.

She was a good woman, and her goodness had been her husband’s ruin.

Of the three, Edith alone understood the true nature of the wrong she had done him. The others had only seen one side of it, the material, tangible side that weighed with them. Through her very goodness, she saw that that was the least part of it; she knew that it had been the least part of it with him.

Where she had wronged him most had been in the pitiless refusals of her soul. And even there she had wronged him less by the things she had refused to give than by the things that she had refused to take. There were sanctities and charities, unspeakable tendernesses, holy and half-spiritual things in him, that she had shut her eyes to. She had shut her eyes that she might justify herself.

Her fault was there, in that perpetual justification and salvation of herself; in her indestructible, implacable spiritual pride.

And she had shut her ears as she had shut her eyes. She had not listened to her sister's voice, nor to her husband's voice, nor to her little child's voice, nor to the voice of God in her own heart. Then, that she might be humbled, she had had to take God's message from the persons whom she had most detested and despised.

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She had not loved well. And she saw now that men and women only counted by their power of loving. She had despised and detested poor little Mrs. Hannay; yet it might be that Mrs. Hannay was nearer to God than she had been, by her share of that one godlike thing.

She, through her horror of one sin, had come to look upon flesh and blood, on the dear human heart, and the sacred, mysterious human body, as things repellent to her spirituality, fine only in their sacrifice to the hungry, solitary flame. She had known nothing of their larger and diviner uses, their secret and profound subservience to the flame. She had come near to knowing through her motherhood, and yet she had not known.

And as she looked with anguish on the helpless body, shamed, and humiliated, and destroyed by her, she realised that now she knew.

Edith's words came back to her, "Love is a provision for the soul's redemption of the body. Or, may be, for the body's redemption of the soul." She understood them now. She saw that Edith had spoken to her of the miracle of miracles. She saw that the path of all spirits going upward is by acceptance of that miracle. She, who had sinned the spiritual sin, could find salvation only by that way.

It was there that she had been led, all the while, if she had but known it. But she had turned aside, and had been sent back, over and over again, to find the way. Now she had found it; and there could be no more turning back.

She saw it all. She saw a purity greater than her own, a strong and tender virtue, walking in the ways of earth and cleansing them. She saw love as a divine spirit, going down into the courses of the blood and into the chambers of the heart, moving mortal things to immortality. She saw that there is no spirituality worthy of the name that has not been proven in the house of flesh.

She had failed in spirituality. She had fixed the spiritual life away from earth, beyond the ramparts. She saw that the spiritual life is here.

And more than this, she saw that in her husband's nature hidden deep down under the perversities that bewildered and estranged her, there was a sense of these things, of the sanctity of their life. She saw what they might have made of it together; what she had actually made of it, and of herself and him. She thought of his patience, his chivalry and forbearance, and of his deep and tender love for her and for their child.

God had given him to her to love; and she had not loved him. God had given her to him for his help and his protection; and she had not helped, she had not protected him.

God had dealt justly with her. She had loved God; but God had rejected a love that was owing to her husband. Looking back, she saw that she had been nearest to God in the days when she had been nearest to her husband. The days of her separation had been the days of her separation from God. And she had not seen it.

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All the love that was in her she had given to her child. Her child had been born that she might see that the love which was given to her was holy; and she had not seen it. So God had taken her child from her that she might see.

And seeing that, she saw herself aright. That passion of motherhood was not all the love that was in her. The love that was in her had sprung up, full-grown, in a single night. And it had grown to the stature of the diviner love she saw. And as she felt that great springing up of love, with all its strong endurances and charities, she saw herself redeemed by her husband's sin.

There she paused, trembling. It was a great and terrible mystery, that the sin of his body should be the saving of her soul. And as she thought of the price paid for her, she humbled herself once more in her shame.

She was no longer afraid that he would die. Something told her that he would live, that he would be given back to her. She dared not think how. He might be given back paralysed, helpless, and with a ruined mind. Her punishment might be the continual reproach of his presence, her only consolation the tending of the body she had tortured, humiliated, and destroyed. She prayed God to be merciful and spare her that.

And on the morning of the fifth day Majendie woke from his terrible sleep. He could see light. Towards evening his breathing softened and grew soundless. And on the dawn of the sixth day he called her name, "Nancy."

Then she knew that for a little time he would be given back to her. And, as she nursed him, love in her moved with a new ardour and a new surrender. For more than seven years her pulses had been proof against his passion and his strength. Now, at the touch of his helpless body, they stirred with a strange, adoring tenderness. But as yet she went humbly, in her fear of the punishment that might be measured to her. She told herself it was enough that he was aware of her, of her touch, of her voice, of her face as it bent over him. She hushed the new-born hope in her heart, lest its cry should wake the angel of the divine retribution.

Then, week by week, slowly, a little joy came to her, as she saw the gradual return of power to the paralysed body and clearness to the flooded brain. She wondered, when he would begin to remember, whether her face would recall to him their last interview, her cruelty, her repudiation.

At last she knew that he remembered. She dared not ask herself "How much?" It was borne in on her that it was this way that her punishment would come.

For, as he gradually recovered, his manner to her became more constrained; notwithstanding his helpless dependence on her. He was shy and humble; grateful for the things she did for him; grateful with a heart-rending, pitiful surprise. It was as if he

had looked to come back to the heartless woman he had known, and was puzzled at finding another woman in her place.

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As the weeks wore on, and her hands had less to do for him, she felt that his awakened spirit guarded itself from her, fenced itself more and more with that inviolable constraint. And she bowed her head to the punishment.

When he was well enough to be moved she took him to the south coast. There he recovered power rapidly. By the end of February he showed no trace of his terrible illness.

They were to return to Scale in the beginning of March.

Then, at their home-coming, she would know whether he remembered. There would be things that they would have to say to each other.

Sometimes she thought that she could never say them; that her life was secure only within some pure, charmed circle of inviolate silence; that her wisdom lay in simply trusting him to understand her. She *could* trust him. After all, she had been most marvellously “let off”; she had not had to pay the extreme penalty; she had been allowed, oh, divinely allowed, to prove her love for him. He could not doubt it now; it possessed her, body and soul; it was manifest to him in her eyes, and in her voice, and in the service of her hands.

And if he said nothing, surely it would mean that he, too, trusted her to understand.

CHAPTER XL

They had come back. They had spent their first evening together in the house in Prior Street. Anne had dreaded the return; for the house remembered its sad secrets. She had dreaded it more on her husband’s account than on her own.

She had passed before him through the doorway of the study; and her heart had ached as she thought that it was in that room that she had struck at him and put him from her. As he entered, she had turned, and closed the door behind them, and lifted her face to his and kissed him. He had looked at her with his kind, sad smile, but he had said nothing. All that evening they had sat by their hearth, silent as watchers by the dead.

From time to time she had been aware of his eyes resting on her in their profound and tragic scrutiny. She had been reminded then of the things that yet remained unsaid.

At night he had risen at her signal; and she had waited while he put the light out; and he had followed her upstairs. At her door she had stopped, and kissed him, and said good-night, and she had turned her head to look after him as he went. Surely, she had thought, he will come back and speak to me.

And now she was still waiting after her undressing. She said to herself, “We have come home. But he will not come to me. He has nothing to say to me. There is nothing that can be said. If I could only speak to him.”

She longed to go to him, to kneel at his feet and beg him to forgive her and take her back again, as if it had been she who had sinned. But she could not.

She stood for a moment before the couch at the foot of the bed, ready to slip off her long white dressing-gown. She paused. Her eyes rested on the silver crucifix, the beloved symbol of redemption. She remembered how he had given it to her. She had not understood him even then; but she understood him now. She longed to tell him that she understood. But she could not.

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She turned suddenly as she heard his low knock at her door. She had been afraid to hear it once; now it made her heart beat hard with longing and another fear. He came in. He stood by the closed door, gazing at her with the dumb look that she knew.

She went to meet him, with her hands out-stretched to him, her face glowing.

“Oh, my dear,” she said, “you’ve come back to me. You’ve come back.”

He looked down on her with miserable eyes. She put her arms about him. His face darkened and was stern to her. He held her by her arms and put her from him, and she trembled in all her body, humiliated and rebuked.

“No. Not that,” he said. “Not now. I can’t ask you to take me back now.”

“Need you ask me—now?”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “You don’t know. Darling, you don’t know.”

At the word of love she turned to him, beseeching him with her tender eyes.

“Sit down,” he said. “I want to talk to you.”

She sat down on the couch, and made room for him beside her.

“I don’t want,” she said, “to know more than I do.”

“I’m afraid you must know. When you do know you won’t talk about taking me back.”

“I have taken you back.”

“Not yet. I’d no business to come back at all, without telling you.”

“Tell me, then,” she said.

“I can’t. I don’t know how.”

She put her hand on his.

“Don’t,” he said, “don’t. I’d rather you didn’t touch me.”

She looked at him and smiled, and her smile cut him to the heart.

“Walter,” she said, “are you afraid of me?”

“Yes.”

"You needn't be."

"I am. I'm afraid of your goodness."

She smiled again.

"Do you think I'm good?"

"I know you are."

"You don't know how you're hurting me."

"I've always hurt you. And I'm going to hurt you more."

"You only hurt me when you talk about my goodness. I'm not good. I never was. And I never can be, dear, if you're afraid of me. What is it that I *must know*?"

His voice sank.

"I've been unfaithful to you. Again."

"With whom?" she whispered.

"I can't tell you. Only—it wasn't Maggie."

"When was it?"

"I think it was that Sunday—at Scarby."

"Why do you say you think?" she said gently. "Don't you know?"

"No. I don't know much about it. I didn't know what I was doing."

"You can't remember?"

"No. I can't remember."

"Then—are you sure you *were*—?"

"Yes. I think so. I don't know. That's the horrible part of it. I don't know, I can't remember anything about it. I must have been drinking."

She took his hand in hers again. "Walter, dear, don't think about it. Don't think it was possible. Just put it all out of your head and forget about it."

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“How can I when I don’t know?” He rose. “See here—I oughtn’t to look at you—I oughtn’t to touch you—I oughtn’t to live with you, as long as I don’t know. You don’t know, either.”

“No,” she said quietly. “I don’t know. Does that matter so very much when I understand?”

“Ah, if you could understand. But you never could.”

“I do. Supposing I had known, do you think I should not have forgiven you?”

“I’m certain you wouldn’t. You couldn’t. Not that.”

“But,” she said, “I did know.”

His mouth twitched. His eyelids dropped before her gaze.

“At least,” she said, “I thought—”

“You thought *that*?”

“Yes.”

“What made you think it?”

“I saw her there.”

“You saw her? You thought that, and yet—you would have let me come back to you?”

“Yes. I thought that.”

As he stood before her, shamed, and uncertain, and unhappy, the new soul that had been born in her pleaded for him and assured her of his innocence.

“But,” she said again, “I do not think it now.”

“You—you don’t believe it?”

“No. I believe in you.”

“You believe in me? After everything?”

“After everything.”

“And you would have forgiven me that?”

“I did forgive you. I forgave you all the time I thought it. There’s nothing that I wouldn’t forgive you now. You know it.”

“I thought you might forgive me. But I never thought you’d let me come back—after that.”

“You haven’t. You haven’t. You never left me. It’s I who have come back to you.”

“Nancy—” he whispered.

“It’s I who need forgiveness. Forgive me. Forgive me.”

“Forgive you? You?”

“Yes, me.”

Her voice died and rose again, throbbing to her confession.

“I was unfaithful to you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying, dear. You couldn’t have been unfaithful to me.”

“If I had been, would you have forgiven me?”

He looked at her a long time.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“You could have forgiven me that?”

“I could have forgiven you anything.”

She knew it. There was no limit to his chivalry, his charity. “Well,” she said, “you have worse things to forgive me.”

“What have I to forgive?”

“Everything. If I had forgiven you in the beginning, you would not have had to ask for forgiveness now.”

“Perhaps not, Nancy. But that wasn’t your fault.”

“It was my fault. It was all my fault, from the beginning to the end.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, yes. Mr. Hannay knew that. He told me so.”

“When?”

“At Scarby.”

Majendie scowled as he cursed Hannay in his heart.

“He was a brute,” he said, “to tell you that.”

“He wasn’t. He was kind. He knew.”

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“What did he know?”

“That I would rather think that I was bad than that you were.”

“And would you?”

“Yes I would—now. Mr. Hannay spared me all he could. He didn’t tell me that if you had died at Scarby it would have been my fault. But it would have been.”

He groaned.

“Darling—you couldn’t say that if you knew anything about it.”

“I know all about it.”

He shook his head.

“Listen, Walter. You’ve been unfaithful to me—once, years after I gave you cause. I’ve been unfaithful to you ever since I married you. And your unfaithfulness was nothing to mine. A woman once told me that. She said you’d only broken one of your marriage vows, and I had broken all of them, except one. It was true.”

“Who said that to you?”

“Never mind who. It needed saying. It was true. I sinned against the light. I knew what you were. You were good and you loved me. You were unhappy through loving me, and I shut my eyes to it. I’ve done more harm to you than that poor girl—Maggie. You would never have gone to her if I hadn’t driven you. You loved me.”

“Yes, I loved you.”

She turned to him again; and her eyes searched his for absolution. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t understand.”

“No. A woman doesn’t, dear. Not when she’s as good as you.”

At that a sob shook her. In the passion of her abasement she had cast off all her beautiful spiritual apparel. Now she would have laid down her crown, her purity, at his feet.

“I thought I was so good. And I sinned against my husband more that he ever sinned against me.”

He took her hands and tried to draw her to him, but she broke away, and slid to the floor and knelt there, bowing her head upon his knee. Her hair fell, loosened, upon her shoulders, veiling her.

He stooped and raised her. His hand smoothed back the hair that hid her face. Her eyes were closed.

Her drenched eyelids felt his lips upon them. They opened; and in her eyes he saw love risen to immortality through mortal tears. She looked at him, and she knew him as she knew her own soul.

The End

By MAY SINCLAIR

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The Literary Digest says: "The novels of May Sinclair make waste paper of most of the fiction of a season." This new story, the first written since "The Divine Fire," will strengthen the author's reputation. It has been serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Sun* says of an early instalment:

"Miss Sinclair's new novel, 'The Helpmate,' is attracting much attention. It is a miniature painting of delicacy and skill, reproducing few characters in a small space, with fine sincerity,—the invalid sister, the man with a past, and the wife with strict convictions. The riddle is to find which one of the women is the helpmate. In the vital situation thus far developed the sister is leading in the race."

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