Great Possessions eBook

Great Possessions by Ray Stannard Baker

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE AMAZING WILL

The memorial service for Sir David Bright was largely attended. Perhaps he was fortunate in the moment of his death, for other men, whose military reputations had been as high as his, were to go on with the struggle while the world wondered at their blunders. It was only the second of those memorial services for prominent men which were to become so terribly usual as the winter wore on. Great was the sympathy felt for the young widow at the loss of one so brave, so kindly, so popular among all classes.

Lady Rose Bright was quite young and very fair. She did not put on a widow's distinctive garments because Sir David had told her that he hated weeds. But she wore a plain, heavy cloak, and a long veil fell into the folds made by her skirts. The raiment of a gothic angel, an angel like those in the portico at Rheims, has these same straight, stern lines. "Black is sometimes as suggestive of white," was the reflection of one member of the congregation, "as white may be suggestive of mourning." Sir Edmund Grosse, who had known Rose from her childhood, felt some new revelation in her movements; there was a fuller development of womanhood in her walk, and there was a reserve, too, as of one consecrated and set apart. He heaved a deep sigh as she passed near him going down the church, and their eyes met. She had no shrinking in her bearing; her reserves were too deep for her to avoid an open meeting with other human eyes. She looked at Sir Edmund for a moment as if giving, rather than demanding, sympathy; and indeed, there was more trouble in his eyes than in hers.

The service had gone perilously near to Roman practices. It was among the first of those uncontrollable instinctive expressions of faith in prayer for the departed which were a marked note of English feeling during the Boer war. Questions as to their legality were asked in Parliament, but little heeded, for the heart of the nation, "for her children mourning," sought comfort in the prayers used by the rest of the Christian world.

Rose's mother went home with her and they talked, very simply and in sympathy, of the tributes to the soldier's memory. Then, when luncheon came and the servants were present, they spoke quietly of the work to be done for soldiers' wives and of a meeting the mother was to attend that afternoon. Lady Charlton was the mother one would expect Rose to have—indeed, such complete grace of courtliness and kindness points to an education. Afterwards, while they were alone, Lady Charlton, in broken sentences, sketched the future. She supposed Rose would stay on although the house was too big. Much good might be done in it. There could be no doubt as to how money

must be spent this winter; and there were the services they both loved in the Church of the Fathers of St. Paul near at hand.

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Lady Charlton saw life in pictures and so did Rose. Neither of them broke through any reserve; neither of them was curious. It did not occur to Rose to wonder how her mother had lived and felt in her first days as a widow. Lady Charlton did not wonder how Rose felt now. Rose, she thought, was wonderful; life was full of mercies; there was so much to be thankful for; and could not those who had suffered be of great consolation to others in sorrow?

They arranged to meet at Evensong in St. Paul's Chapel, and then Lady Charlton would come back and stay the night. On the next day she was due at the house of her youngest married daughter.

Rose was presently left alone, and she cried quite simply. For a moment she thought of Edmund Grosse and the sadness in his eyes. Why had he not volunteered for the war? What a contrast!

A large photograph of Sir David in his general's uniform stood on the writing-table in the study downstairs. There were also a picture and a miniature in the drawing-room, but Rose thought she would like to look at the photograph again. It was the last that had been taken. Then too she would look over some of his things. She wanted little presents for his special friends; nothing for its own value, but because the hero had used them. And she would like to bring the big photograph upstairs.

The study, usually cold and deserted since the master had gone away, was bright with a large fire. Rose did not know that it was an expression of sympathy from the under-housemaid, whose lover was at the war. But when she stood opposite the big photograph of the fine manly face and figure, and the large open eyes looked so straight into hers, she shrank a little. Something in the room made her shrink into herself. Her eyes rested on the Victoria Cross in the photograph, on the medals that had covered his breast. "I shall have them all," she said, and then she faltered a little. She had faltered in that room before now; she had often shrunk into herself when the intensely courteous voice had asked her as she came into his study what she wanted. She blamed herself gently now, and for two opposite reasons: she blamed herself because she had wanted what she had not got, and she blamed herself because she had not done more to get it. "He was always so gentle, so courteous. I ought to have been quite, quite happy. And why didn't I break through our reserve, and then we might——" Dimly she felt, but she did not want to own it to herself, that she had married him as a hero-worshipper. She had reverenced him more than she loved him. "I ought not to have done it," she thought, "but I meant what was right, and I could have loved him—— Oh, I did love him afterwards—only I never could tell him, and——" Further thoughts led the way to irreverence, even to something worse. They were wrong thoughts, thoughts against faith and truth and right; there was no place for such thoughts in Rose's heart. She moved

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now, and opened drawers and dusted and put together a few things—paper-knives, match-boxes, a writing-case, a silver sealing-wax holder, and so on; the occupation interested and soothed her. She had the born mystic's love of little kind actions, little presents, things treasured as symbols of the union of spirits, all the more because of their slight material value. Then, too, the child element, which is in every good woman, gave a zest to the occupation and made it restful.

Lady Rose had put several small relics in a row on the edge of the lower part of the big mahogany bookcase, and was counting on her fingers the names of the friends for whom they were intended. Her grief was sufficiently real to make her, perhaps, overestimate the number of those to whom such relics would be precious. A tender smile was on her lips at the recollection of an old soldier servant of Sir David's who had been with him in Egypt. She hesitated a moment between two objects—one, a good silver-mounted leather purse, and the other an inkstand of brass and marble. These two things were the recipients of her unjust aversion for long after that moment.

Simmonds, the butler, opened the door, quite certain that the visitor he announced must be admitted, and conscious of the fitness of the big study for his reception. It was Sir David's solicitor. But the butler was disappointed at the manner of his entrance. He did not analyse the disappointment. He was half conscious of the fact that the *role* of the family lawyer on the occasion was so simple and easy. He would himself have assumed a degree of pomp, of sympathy, of respect, carrying a subdued implication that he brought solid consolation in his very presence. Simmonds grieved truly for Sir David, but he felt, too, the blank caused by the absence of all funeral arrangements in a death at the war. He had been butler in more than one house of mourning before, and he knew all his duties in that capacity. After this he would know how to be butler in the event of death in battle. But now, when the memorial service had taken, in a poor sort of way, the place of the funeral, of course the solicitor ought to come, and past deficiencies could be overlooked. Why, then, should the man prove totally unequal to his task? Mr. Murray, Junior, had usually a much better manner than to-day. Perhaps he was startled at being shown at once into the widow's presence. Probably he might have expected to wait a few moments in the big study, while Simmonds went to seek his mistress.

But there was Lady Rose turning round from the bookcase as they came in. Mr. Murray stooped to-day, and his large head was bent downwards, making it the more evident that the drops of perspiration stood out upon his brow. He cast a look almost of fear at the fair face with its gentle, benignant expression. He had seen Rose once or twice before, and he knew the old-fashioned type of great lady when he met it. Was it of Rose's gentle, subtle dignity that he was afraid?

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Rose drew up a chair on one side of the big square writing-table, and signed to him to take the leather arm-chair where he had last seen Sir David Bright seated. Mr. Murray plunged into his subject with an abruptness proportioned to the immense time he had taken during the morning in preparing a diplomatic opening.

“May I ask, first of all,” he said, “whether you have found any will, or any document looking like a will, besides the one I have with me?”

“No,” said Lady Rose in surprise, “there are no papers of any importance here, I believe; there is nothing in the house under lock and key. Sir David gave me a few rings and studs to put away, but he never cared for jewellery, and there is nothing of value.”

“And do you think he can have executed any other will or written a letter that might be of use to us now?”

Rose looked still more surprised. Mr. Murray held some papers in his hand that shook as if the wintry wind outside were trying to blow them away. Rose tried not to watch them, and it teased her that she could not help doing so. The hand that held them was not visible above the table. Mr. Murray struggled to keep to the most absolutely business-like and unemotional side of his professional manner, but his obviously extreme discomfort was infectious, and Rose’s calm of manner was already disturbed.

“I cannot but think, Lady Rose, that some papers may be forwarded to you through the War Office.” He hesitated. “You had no marriage settlements?” he then asked abruptly.

“No, there were no settlements,” said Rose. She spoke quickly and nervously. “We did not think them necessary. Sir David offered to make them, but just then he was ordered abroad and there was very little time, and my mother and I did not think it of enough importance to make us delay the wedding. It was shortly after my father’s death.” She paused a moment, and then went on, as if speech were a relief.

“You know that, when we married, Sir David had no reason to expect that he would ever be a rich man. We hardly knew the Steele cousins, and only had a vague idea that Mr. John Steele had been making money on the Stock Exchange. When he left his fortune to Sir David, who was his first cousin, and, in fact, his nearest relation, my mother did ask me if my husband intended to make his will. More than once after that she tried to persuade me to speak to him about it, but I disliked the subject too much.”

Mr. Murray looked as if he wished that Lady Rose would go on talking; he seemed to expect more from her, but, as nothing more came, he made a great effort and plunged into the subject.

“The will I have here”—he held up the papers as he spoke—“was, in fact, made a few months after Sir David inherited Mr. John Steele’s large fortune, and there was no

subsequent alteration to it, but this time last year we were directed to make a codicil to this will, and I was away at the time. My brother, who is my senior partner, ventured to urge Sir David to make a new will altogether, but he declined."

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There was silence in the room for some moments. Mr. Murray leant over the writing-table now, and both hands were occupied in smoothing out the papers before him.

“It is the worst will I have ever come across,” he said quite suddenly, the professional manner gone and the vehemence of a strong mind in distress breaking through all conventionality. Rose drew herself up and looked at him coldly. In that moment she completely regained her self-possession.

“It is absolutely inexplicable,” he went on, with a great effort at self-control. “Sir David Bright leaves this house and L800 a year to you, Lady Rose, for your lifetime, and a few gifts to friends and small legacies to old servants.” He paused. Rose, with slightly heightened colour, spoke very quietly.

“Then the fortune was much smaller than was supposed?”

“It was larger, far larger than any one knew; but it is all left away.”

Rose was disturbed and frankly sorry, but not by any means miserable. She knew life, and did not dislike wealth, and had had dreams of much good that might be done with it.

“To whom is it left?” she asked.

“After the small legacies I mentioned are paid off, the bulk of the fortune goes”—the lawyer’s voice became more and more business-like in tone—“to Madame Danterre, a lady living in Florence.”

“And unless anything is sent to me from South Africa, this will is law?”

“Yes.”

Rose covered her face with her hands; she did not move for several moments. It would not have surprised Mr. Murray to know that she was praying. Presently she raised her face and looked at him with troubled eyes, but absolute dignity of bearing.

“And the codicil?”

“The codicil directs that if you continue to live in this house——”

Rose made a little sound of surprised protest.

“——the ground rent, all rates, and all taxes are to be paid. A sum much larger than can be required is left for this purpose, and it can also be spent on decorating or furnishing, or in any way be used for the house and garden. It is an elaborate affair, going into every detail.”

“Should I be able to let the house?”

“For a period of four months, not longer. But should you refuse to live in this house, this sum will go with the bulk of the fortune. We had immediate application on behalf of Madame Danterre from a lawyer in Florence as soon as the news of the death reached us. It seems that she has a copy of the will.”

“Has she”—Rose hesitated, and then repeated, “Has Madame Danterre any children?”

“I do not know,” said Mr. Murray. “Beyond paying considerable sums to this lawyer from time to time for her benefit, we have known nothing about her. There has been also a large annual allowance since the year when Sir David came into his cousin’s fortune.” There was another silence, and then Mr. Murray spoke in a more natural way, though it was impossible to conceal all the sympathy that was filling his heart with an almost murderous wrath.

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“After all, the General had plenty of time before starting for the war to arrange his affairs; he was not a man who would neglect business. I came here with a faint hope—-or I tried to think it was a hope—that you might have another will in the house. I’m afraid this—document represents Sir David Bright’s last wishes.” There was a ring of indignant scorn in his voice.

Rose looked through the window on to the thin black London turf outside, and her eyes were blank from the intensity of concentration. She had no thought for the lawyer; if he had been sympathetic even to impertinence she would not have noticed it.

She was questioning her own instincts, her perceptions. No, it was almost more as if she were emptying her mind of any conscious action that her whole power of instinctive perception might have play. When the blow had fallen, her only surprise had been to find that she was not surprised, not astonished. It seemed as if she had known this all the time, for the thing had been alongside of her for years, she had lived too close to it for any surprise when it raised its head and found a name. Her reasoning powers indeed asked with astonishment why she was not surprised. She could not explain, the symptoms of the thing that had haunted her had been too subtle, too elusive, too minute to be brought forward now as witnesses. But while the lawyer looked at the open face and the large eyes, and the frank bearing of the figure in the photograph, and felt that outer man to have been the disguise of a villain, Rose, the victim, knew better. It was a supreme proof of the clear vision of her soul that she was not surprised, and that, even while she seemed to be flayed morally and exposed to things evil and of shame, she did not judge with blind indignation. He had not been wholly bad, he had not been callous in his cruelty; what he had been there would be time to understand—time for the delicacies, almost for the luxuries of forgiveness. What she was feeling after now was a point of view above passion and pain from which to judge this final opinion of the lawyer’s, from which to know whether Sir David had left another will.

“There has been another will,” she said very gently, “but, of course, it is more than likely that it will never be found. I am convinced”—she looked at the black and green turf all the time, and obviously spoke to herself, not to Mr. Murray—“that he did not intend to leave me to open shame”—the words were gently but very distinctly pronounced—“or to leave a scandal round his own memory. Perhaps he carried another will about with him, and if so it may be sent to me. Somehow I don’t think this will happen. I think the will you have in your hand is the only one I shall ever see, but I do not therefore judge him of having faced death with the intention of spoiling my life. I shall live in this house and I shall honour his memory; he died for his country, and I am his widow.”

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That was all she could say on the subject then, and she could only just ask Mr. Murray if he could see her again any time the next morning. After answering that question the lawyer went silently away.

Rose stood by the table where he had sat a moment before, looking long and steadfastly at the photograph. She looked at the open face, she looked at the military bearing, she looked at the Victoria Cross,—it had been the amazing courage shown in that story that had really won her,—she looked, too, at the many medals. She had been with him once in a moment of peril in a fire and had seen the unconscious pride with which he always answered to the call of danger. She had, too, seen him bear acute pain as if that had been his talent, the thing he knew how to do.

“Ah, poor David!” she said softly. “What did she do to frighten you? Poor, poor David, you were always a coward!”

CHAPTER II

IN THE EVENING

But this was a trial to search out every part of Rose’s nature. She had too much faith for sickness, death, or even terrible physical pain, to be to her in any sense a poisoned wound. There are women like Rose whose inner life can only be in peril from the pain and shame of the sin of others. To them it is an intolerable agony to be troubled in their faith in man.

Lady Charlton, swept out of the calm belonging to years of gentle actions and ideal thoughts into a storm of indignation and horror, might have lost all dignity and discretion if she had not been checked by reverence for the dumb anguish and misery of her favourite daughter. She had some notion of the thoughts that must pass in Rose’s mind, now dull and heavy, now alert and inflicting sudden deep incisions into the quivering soul. Marriage had been to them both very sacred. They hated, beyond most good women, anything that seemed to materialise or lower the ideal. If there can be imagined a scale of standards for the relations of men and women, of which Zola had not touched the extremity at one end, the first place at the other extremity might be assigned to such Englishwomen as Rose and her mother. The most subtle and amazingly high motives had been assigned to Lord Charlton’s most ordinary actions, and happily he had been so ordinary a person that no impossible shock had been given to the ideal built up about him. And it had not been difficult or insincere to carry on something of the same illusion with regard to the man who had won the Victoria Cross and had been very popular with Tommy Atkins. David Bright’s very reserves, the closed doors in his domestic life, did not prevent, and indeed in some ways helped, the process. The mother had known in the depth of her heart that Rose was lonely, but then she was childless. Rose had never, even in moments when the nameless mystery

that was in her home oppressed her most in its dull, voiceless way, tried to tell her mother what she did not herself understand. Sir David had been courteous, gentle, attentive, but never happy. Rose knew now that he had always been guiltily afraid.

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Lady Charlton had had a few moments' warning of disaster, for she was horrified at the change in Rose's face when she met her at the door of the church after Evensong. She herself had been utterly soothed and rested by the beauty of the service. There was so much that fitted in with all her ideals in mourning the great soldier. Little phrases about him and about Rose flitted through her mind. Widows were widows indeed to Lady Charlton. Rose would live now chiefly for Heaven and to soothe the sorrows of earth. She did not say to herself that Rose would not be broken-hearted and crushed, nor did she take long views. If years hence Rose were to marry again her mother could make another picture in which Sir David would recede into the background. Now he was her hero whom Rose mourned, and whose loss had consecrated her more entirely to Heaven; then he would unconsciously become in her mother's eyes a much older man whom Rose had married almost as a child. There would be nothing necessarily to mar the new picture if all else were fitting.

But the peace of gentle sorrow had left Rose's face, and it wore a look her mother had never seen on it before. The breath of evil was close upon her; it had penetrated very near, so near that she seemed evil to herself as it embraced her. She was too dazed, too confused to remember that Divine purity had been enclosed in that embrace. What terrified her most was the thought that had suddenly come that possibly the unknown woman in Florence had been the real lawful wife, and that her own marriage had been a sin, a vile pretence and horror. For the first time in her life the grandest words of confidence that have expressed and interpreted the clinging faith of humanity seemed an unreality. Rose had never known the faintest temptation to doubt Providence before this miserable evening. She resented with her whole being the idea that possibly she had been the cause of the grossest wrong to an injured wife. And there was ground in reason for such a fear, for it seemed difficult to believe that any claim short of that of a wife could have frightened Sir David into such a course. The other and more common view, that it was because he had loved his mistress throughout, did not appeal to her. Vice had for her few recognisable features; she had no map for the country of passion, no precedents to refer to. It seemed to Rose most probable that Sir David had believed his first wife to be dead when he married her; that, on finding he was mistaken, his courage had failed, and that he had carried on a gigantic scheme of bribery to prevent her coming forward. This view was in one sense a degree less painful, as it would make him innocent of the first great deception, the huge lie of making love to her as if he were a free man. The depths and extent of her misery could be measured by the strange sense of a bitter gladness invading the very recesses of her maternal instinct, and replacing what had been the heartfelt sorrow of six years. "It is a mercy I have no child!" she cried, and the cry seemed to herself almost blasphemous.

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When she came out of the church it was raining, and the wind blowing. It was only a short walk to her own house, and she and her mother had made a rule not to take out servants and the carriage for their devotions. She would have walked on in total silence, but her mother could not bear the suspense.

“Rose, what is it?” she cried, in a tone of authority and intense anxiety. After all it might be easier to answer now as they battled with the rain.

“I don’t know how to tell you, mother. Mr. Murray has been with me and shown me the will. There was some one all the time who had some claim on him. She may have been his real wife—I know nothing except that since we have had John Steele’s fortune David has always paid her an income and now has left her a very great deal and me very little. That would not matter—God knows it is not the poverty that hurts—but the thing itself, the horror, the shame, the publicity. I mind it all, everything, more than I ought. I——” She stopped, not a word more would come.

Lady Charlton could only make broken sounds of incredulous horror. When they crossed the brilliantly lighted hall the mother suddenly seemed much older, and Rose, for the first time, bore all the traces of a great, an overpowering sorrow.

“It wasn’t natural to be so calm,” thought the maid, who had been with her since her girlhood, as she helped her to take off her cloak. “She didn’t understand at first. It’s coming over her now, poor dear, and indeed he was a real gentleman, and such a husband! Never a harsh word—not one—that I ever heard, at least.”

It was some time before Lady Charlton could be brought to believe it all, and then at first she was overwhelmed with self-blame. Her mind fastened chiefly on the fact that she had allowed the marriage without settlements. Then the next thought was the horror of the publicity, the way in which this dreadful woman must be heard of and talked about. Lady Charlton’s broken sentences had almost the feebleness of extreme old age that cannot accept as true what it cannot understand. “It seems impossible, quite impossible,” she said. She was very tired, and Rose wished it had been practicable to keep this knowledge from her till later. She knew that her mother was one of those highly-strung women whose nerve power is at its best quite late at night. As it was, Lady Charlton had to dress for dinner and sit as upright as usual through the meal, and to talk a little before the servants. Rose appeared the more dazed of the two then, though her mind had been quite clear before. There was nothing said as soon as they were alone, but, as if with one accord, both glanced at each of the many letters brought by the last post, and, if it were one of condolence, laid it aside unread. The butler had placed on a small table two evening papers, which had notices of the memorial service for Sir David Bright, and one had some lines “In Memoriam” from a poet

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of considerable repute. Rose, finding the papers at her elbow, got up and changed her chair. It was not till they had gone up to their rooms and parted that Lady Charlton felt speech to be possible. She wrapped her purple dressing-gown round her and went into Rose's room. She found her sitting in a low chair by the fire leaning forward, her elbows pressed on her knees, her face buried in her hands. Then, very quietly and impersonally, they discussed the situation. With a rare self-command the mother never used one expression of reprobation; if she had done so, Rose could not have spoken again. It seemed more and more, as they spoke in the two gentle voices, so much alike in tone and accent, in a half pathetic, half musical intonation; it seemed as they sat so quietly without tears, almost without gestures, as if they discussed the story of another woman and another man. There were some differences in their views, and the mother's was ever the hardest on the dead man. For instance, Rose believed through all that another will existed, although she was convinced that she should never see it. Her mother's judgment coincided with the lawyer's; the soldier would have made the change, if it were made at all, before starting for the war. No, the whole thing had been too recently gone into; it was so short a time since the codicil had been added. Of that codicil, too, Lady Charlton's view was quite clear. She thought the object of adding it had been to save appearances. "As long as you live in this house, furnished as well as possible, people will forget the wording of the will, or they will think that money was given to you in his lifetime to escape the death duties."

Like many idealists and even mystics, both mother and daughter took sensible views on money matters. They did not undervalue the fortune that had gone; they were both honestly sorry it had gone, and would have taken any reasonable means to get it back again. Only Rose allowed that possibly there might have been some claim in justice on the woman's part; she could not frame her lips to use the words again. Without "legal wife" or any such terms passing between them, they were really arguing the point. Lady Charlton had not the faintest shadow of a doubt "the woman was a wicked woman, and the wicked woman, as wicked women do, had entrapped a" (the adjective was conspicuous by its absence) "a man." Such a woman was to be forgiven, even—a bitter sigh could not be suppressed—to be prayed for; but it was not necessary to try to take a falsely charitable view of her, or invent unlikely circumstances in her defence. It was a relief to the darkest of all dark thoughts in Rose's mind, the doubt of the validity of her own marriage, to hear her mother settling this question as she had settled so many questions years ago, by the weight of personal authority.

At last the clock on the stairs below told them that it was two in the morning, and Lady Charlton had to leave London by an early train. She was torn between the claim of her youngest married daughter, who was laid up in a lonely country house in Scotland, and that of Rose in this new and miserable trouble.

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“I could telegraph to Bertha that I can’t come,” she said suddenly. “But I am afraid she would miss me.”

“No, no,” murmured Rose firmly, “Bertha needs you most now; you must go,” and then, fearing her mother might think she did not want her quite, quite enough, “I shall look forward to your coming back soon, very soon.”

“Could you—could you come and sleep in my room, Rose?” They were standing up by the fireplace now.

“If you like mother, only it will be worse for me to-morrow night.” They both looked away from the fire round the room—the room that had been hers since the first days after the honeymoon.

Then at the same moment Lady Charlton opened her arms and Rose drew within them, and leant her fair head on her mother’s shoulder. So they stood for a few moments in absolute stillness.

“God bless you, my child,” and Rose was left, as she wished, alone.

CHAPTER III

“*As you hope to be forgiven*”

Two months passed, and at last the War Office received a parcel for Lady Rose Bright. It had been sent to headquarters by the next officer in command under Sir David, who had met his own fate a few weeks later. Rose received the parcel at tea-time, brought to her by a mounted messenger from the War Office.

A great calm had settled in Rose’s soul during these weeks. She had met her trouble alone and standing. At first, all had been utter darkness and bitter questioning. Then the questioning had ceased. Even the wish to have things clear to her mind and to know why she should have this particular trial was silenced, and in the completeness of submission she had come back to life and to peace. Nothing was solved, nothing made clear, but she was again in the daylight. But when she received the little parcel in its thick envelope she trembled excessively. It was addressed in a handwriting she had never seen before. She could not for some moments force herself to open it. When she did she drew out a faded photograph, a diamond ring, and a sheet of paper with writing in ink. The photograph was of Sir David as quite a young man—she had never seen it before; the ring had one very fine diamond, and that she had never seen before. On the paper was written in his own hand.—

“This will be brought to you if I die in battle. Forgive me, as you too hope to be forgiven. Justice had to be done. I have tried to make it as little painful as I could.”

That was all. There was nothing else in the envelope. She took up the photograph, she took up the ring, and examined them in turn. It was so strange, this very remarkable diamond, which she had never seen before, sent to her as if it were a matter of course. He had never worn much jewellery, and he had left in her care the few seals and rings he possessed. Then the photograph of her husband as a young man,

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so much younger than when she had known him. Why send it to her now? What had she to do with this remote past? But the paper was the most astonishing of all. She had been standing when she undid the things; she left the ring and the photograph on the table, and she sank into a chair near the fire holding the bit of paper. The tone of it astonished and confused her. It was more the stern moralist asking to be forgiven for doing right than the guilty husband asking for mercy in her thoughts of him.

“Yes,” thought Rose at length, “that is because she was his wife, and when he came to face death it was the great wrong of infidelity to her that haunted him. I must have seemed almost a partner in the wrong.”

Again the confused sense of guilt seized her, the horrible possibility of having been a wife only in name. She did not weigh the matter calmly enough to feel quite as distinctly as she ought to have done that she could not be touched or denied in the faintest degree by a sin that was not her sin. Still she raised her head as she could not have done some weeks before; for the most acute phase of her trial had been faced and had been passed. Now in her moments of most bitter pain in the very depths of her soul was peace. As she became calmer she tried again to connect together those three parts of the message from the battle-field, the ring, the photograph, and the letter; but she could not do so. At last she put them away in the drawer of her bureau, and then wrote to tell her mother and the lawyer that Sir David had sent her a photograph, a ring, and a few private lines—that was all. There was no will.

Still everything had not been brought back. There had been portmanteaux sent down to Capetown, and there might yet be discovered a small despatch box, or a writing case, something or other that might hold a will. But the limit of time was reached at last; the portmanteaux and a despatch box were recovered, but they held no will.

The solicitor delayed to the last possible moment, and then the will was proved. It was published in the papers at a moment when a lull in the war gave leisure for private gossip, and the gossip accordingly raged hotly. All the sweetness, gentleness, and kindness that made Rose deservedly popular did not prevent there being two currents of opinion. There are wits so active that they cannot share the views of all right-minded people. While the majority sympathised deeply with Rose, there were a few who insinuated that she must be to some degree to blame for what had happened.

“Well, don’t you know, I never could understand why she married a man so much older than herself. Of course she had not a penny and he was awfully rich, and people don’t look too close into a man’s character in such cases. It is rather convenient for some women to be very innocent.”

Sir Edmund Grosse, to whom the remark was addressed at a small country house party, turned his back for a moment on the speaker in order to pick up a paper, and then said in a low, indifferent voice: “David Bright came into his cousin’s fortune unexpectedly a year after he married Lady Rose.”

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The subject was dropped that time, but he met it again in somewhat the same terms in London. There seemed a sort of vague impression that Lady Rose had married for the sake of the wealth she had lost. Also at his club there was talk he did not like, not against Rose indeed, but dwelling on the other side of the story, and he hated to hear Rose's name connected with it. People forgot his relationship, and after all he was only a second cousin.

Edmund Grosse was at this time just over forty. He was a tall, loosely built man, with rather a colourless face, with an expression negative in repose, and faintly humorous when speaking. He was rich and supposed to be lazy; he knew his world and had lived it in and for it systematically. Some one had said that he took all the frivolous things of life seriously and all the serious things frivolously. He could advise on the choice of a hotel or a motor-car with intense earnestness, and he had healed more than one matrimonial breach that threatened to become tragic by appealing to the sense of humour in both parties. He never took for granted that anybody was very good or very bad. The best women possible liked him, and looked sorry and incredulous when they were informed by his enemies that he had no morals. He had never told any one that he was sad and bored. Nor had he ever thought it worth while to mention that he had indifferent health and knew what it was to suffer pain. If such personal points were ever approached by his friends they found that he did not dwell upon them. He had the air of not being much interested in himself.

For a long time he had felt no acute sensations of any kind; he had believed them to belong to youth and that was past. But that matter of David Bright's will had stirred him to the very depths. He spent solitary hours in cursing the departed hero, and people found him tiresome and taciturn in company.

At last he determined to meddle in Rose's concerns, and he went to see Mr. Murray, Junior, at his office. There ensued some pretty plain speaking as to the late hero between the two men. Edmund Grosse half drawled out far the worst comments of the two; he liked the lawyer and let himself speak freely. And although the visit was apparently wholly unproductive of other results, it was a decided relief to his feelings. Then he heard that Rose had come back to London, and he went to see her. It was about nine months since she had become a widow. She was alone in the big beautifully furnished drawing-room, which was just as of old. Except that a neat maid had opened the door, instead of a butler, he saw no change.

Rose looked a little nervous for a moment, and then frankly pleased to see him. Edmund always had a talent for seeming to be as natural in any house as if he were the husband or the brother or part of the furniture. Somehow, as Rose gave him tea and they settled into a chat, she felt as if he had been there very often lately, whereas in fact she had not seen him since David died, except at the memorial service. He began to tell her what visits he had paid, whom he had seen, the little gossip he expressed so well in his gentle, sleepy voice; and then he drew her on as to her own interests, her

charities, her work for the soldiers' wives. He said nothing more that day, but he dropped in again soon, and then again.

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At last one evening he observed quite quietly, in a pause in their talk: "So you live here on L800 a year?"

Rose did not feel annoyed, though she did not know why she was not angry.

"Yes, I can manage," she said simply.

"You can't tell yet; it's too soon." He got up out of his low chair near the fireplace, now filled with plants, and stood with his back against the chimney. "You know it's absurd," he said. Rose moved uneasily and was silent.

"It's absurd," he repeated, "there's another will somewhere. David would never have done that." He struck that note at the start, and cursed David all the deeper in the depths of his diplomatic soul. Rose looked at him gratefully, kindly.

"I think there is another will somewhere," she said, "but I am sure it will never be found. It's no use to think or talk of it, Edmund."

He fidgeted for a moment with the china on the chimney-piece.

"For 'auld lang syne,' Rose," he said in a very low voice, "and because you might possibly, just possibly, have made something of me if you had chosen, let me know a little more about it. I want to see what was in his last letter."

Rose flushed deeply. It was difficult to say why she yielded except that most people did yield to Grosse if he got them alone. She drew off the third finger of her left hand a very remarkable diamond ring and gave it to him. Then she took out of a drawer a faded photograph of a young, commonplace, open-faced officer, now framed in an exquisite stamped leather case, and handed that to him also. He saw that she hesitated.

"May I have the rest," he said very gently. Even her mother had never seen the piece of paper. No, she could not show that. Edmund did not insist further, and a moment later he seemed to have forgotten that she had not given him what he asked for.

"Did he often wear this ring?"

"Never. I never saw it till now, and I had never seen the photograph."

"It was taken in India," he commented, "and the ring has a date twenty years ago."

"I never noticed that," said Rose. She was feeling half consciously soothed and relieved as a child might feel comforted who had found a companion in a room that was haunted.

“Things from such a remote past,” he murmured abstractedly. “Did he explain in writing why he sent those things?”

“No, he said nothing about them, he only——” she paused. Edmund did not move, and in a few moments she gave him the paper. He ground his teeth as he read it, he grew white about the lips, but he said nothing. He was horribly disappointed—the scoundrel asked for forgiveness. Then he had not made another will. Edmund did not look round at Rose, but she was acutely present to his consciousness—the woman’s beauty, the child’s innocence, the suffering and the strength in her face. “As you would be forgiven!” That was a further insult,

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it seemed to him. To talk of Rose wanting forgiveness. Then a strange kind of sarcasm took hold of him. So it was; she had not been able to believe in himself; he, Edmund, had not been ideal in any sense. Therefore she had passed him by, and then a hero had come whom she had worshipped, and this was the end of it. Every word in the paper burnt into him. "Justice"—how dared he? "Made it as little painful as he could"—-it was insufferable, and the coward was beyond reach, had taken refuge whither human vengeance could not follow him.

He succeeded in leaving Rose's house without betraying his feelings, but he felt that no good had come of this attempt, so far at any rate. That night he slept badly, which he did pretty often, but he experienced an unusual sensation on waking. He felt as if he had been working hard and in vain all night at a problem, and he suddenly said to himself, "The ring, the photograph, and the paper were of course meant for the other woman, and she has got whatever was meant for Rose. Now if the thing that was meant for Rose was the will, Madame Danterre has got it now unless she has had the nerve to destroy it." He felt as if he had been an ass till this moment. Then he went to see Mr. Murray, Junior, who listened with profound attention until he had finished what he had to tell him.

"Lady Rose has allowed you to see the paper, then?" he said at last. "She has not even shown it to Lady Charlton. He asked her pardon," he mused, half to himself, "and said justice must be done. I am afraid, Sir Edmund, that that points in the same direction as our worst fears—that Madame Danterre was his wife."

"But he would not have written such a letter as that to Rose; it is impossible. 'Forgive as you too hope to be forgiven.' That sentence in connection with Lady Rose is positively grotesque, whereas it would be most fitting when addressed elsewhere."

Mr. Murray could not see the case in the same light as Edmund. He allowed the possibility of the scrap of paper and the ring having been sent to Rose by mistake, but he was not inclined to indulge in what seemed to him to be guesswork as to what conceivably had been intended to be sent to her in place of them.

"There is, too," he argued, "a quite possible interpretation of the words of that scrap of paper. It is possible that he was full of remorse for his treatment of Madame Danterre. Sometimes a man is haunted by wrong-doing in the past until it prevents his understanding the point of view of anybody but the victim of the old haunting sin. Remorse is very exclusive, Sir Edmund. In such a state of mind he would hardly think of Lady Rose enough to realise the bearing of his words. 'Forgive as you too hope to be forgiven' would be an appeal wrung out from him by sheer suffering. It is a possible cry from any human being to another. Then as to the ring and the photograph, we have no proof that he put them in the envelope. They may have been found on him and put

into the envelope by the same hand that addressed it. I quite grant you that those few words are extraordinary, but they can be explained. But even if it were obvious that they were intended for somebody else, you cannot deduce from that, that another letter, intended for Lady Rose and containing a will, was sent elsewhere."

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But Sir Edmund was obstinate. The piece of paper had been intended for Madame Danterre, together with the ring and the photograph—things belonging to Sir David's early life, to the days when he most probably loved this other woman; he even went so far as to maintain that the lady in Florence had given Sir David the ring.

"After all," said Mr. Murray, "what can you do? You could only raise hopes that won't be fulfilled."

"I think myself that my explanation would calm my cousin's mind; the possibility that she was not Sir David's wife is, I am convinced, the most painful part of the trial to her. I shall write it to her, but I shall also tell her that there is no hope whatever of proving what I believe to be the truth."

"None at all; do impress that upon her, Sir Edmund. We have nothing to begin upon. The officer who sent the paper to headquarters is dead; Sir David's own servant is dead; Sir David's will in favour of Madame Danterre has been published without even a protest."

"Lady Rose will not be inclined to raise the question."

"No, I believe that is true," said the lawyer; "Lady Rose Bright is a wise woman."

But Mr. Murray was annoyed to find that Edmund Grosse was far less wise, and that whatever he might promise to say to Rose he would not really be content to leave things alone. He intended to go to Florence and to get into touch with Madame Danterre. Such interference could do no good, and it might do harm.

"I won't alarm her," said Edmund, "believe me, she will have no reason to suppose that I am in Florence on her account. I am, in any case, going to the Italian lakes this autumn, and I have often been offered the loan of a flat overlooking the Arno. If the offer is still open I shall accept it. I have long wished to know that fascinating town a little better."

When Rose received the letter from Edmund it had the effect he had expected. It was simply calming, not exciting. Rose was even more anxious than the lawyer that nothing should be attempted in order to follow up her cousin's suggestion. But she could now let her imagination be comforted by Edmund's solution of the mystery, and let her fancy rest in the thought of a very different letter intended for herself. The words on that scrap of paper no longer burnt with such agony into her soul, and she no longer felt it a dreadful duty to wear the ring with its glorious stone so full of light, an object that was to her intensely repugnant. She would put it away, and with it all dark and morbid thoughts. She had a life to lead, thoughts to think, actions to do, and all that was in her own control must escape from the shadow of the past into a working daylight.

CHAPTER IV

THE WICKED WOMAN IN FLORENCE

Edmund Grosse's friend was delighted to put the flat in the Palazzo at his disposal. The weather was unusually warm for the autumn when Edmund arrived in Florence. He was glad to get there, and glad to get away from the gay group he had left in a beautiful villa on Lake Como; and probably they were glad to see him go.

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Edmund had indeed only stayed with them long enough to leave a very marked impression of low spirits and irritation. “What’s come to Grosse?” was asked by more than one guest of the hostess.

“I don’t know, but he really is impossible. It’s partly because of Billy—but I won’t condescend to explain that Billy proposed himself and I could not well refuse.”

Billy is the only one of this gay, quarrelsome little group that need be named here. It was really partly on his account that Edmund so quickly left them to their gossip alternating with happy phrases of joy in the beauty of mountains and lakes, and to their quarrels alternating with moments of love-making, so avowedly brief that only an artist could believe in its exquisite enjoyment. Neither Edmund nor Billy were really *habitues* of this Bohemian circle. They both belonged to a more conventional social atmosphere; they were at once above and below the rest of the party. The cause of antipathy to Billy on Sir Edmund’s part was a certain likeness in their lives—contrasting with a most marked dissimilarity of character.

Sir Edmund could not say that Billy was a fool or a snob, because Billy did nothing but lead a perfectly useless life as expensively as possible; and he did the same himself. He could not even say that Billy lived among fools and snobs, because many of Billy’s friends were his own friends too. He could not say that Billy had been a coward because he had not volunteered to fight in the Boer war, because Sir Edmund had not volunteered himself. He could not say that Billy employed the wrong tailor; it would show only gross ignorance or temper to say so. But just the things in which he felt himself superior, utterly different in fact from Billy, were the stupid, priggish things that no one boasts of. He read a good deal; he thought a good deal; he knew he might have had a future, and the bitterness of his heart lay in the fact that at fifteen years later in life than Billy he was still so completely a slave to all that Billy loved. Every detail of their lives seemed to add to the irritation. It was only the day he left London that he had discovered that Billy’s new motor was from the same maker as his own; in fact, except in colour, the motors were twins. This was the latest, and not even the least, cause of annoyance. For it betrayed what he was always trying to conceal from himself, that there appeared to be an actual rivalry between him and Billy, a petty, social, silly rivalry. Billy, of simpler make, a fresher, younger, more contented animal, thought little of all this, and was irritated by Sir Edmund’s assumption of superiority.

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But he had never found Grosse so bearish and difficult before this visit to Como. As a rule Edmund was suavity itself, but this time even his gift of gently, almost imperceptibly, making every woman feel him to be her admirer was failing. How often he had been the life of any party in any class of society, and that not by starting amusements, not by any power of initiation, but by a gift for making others feel pleased, first with themselves, and consequently with life. He could bring the gift to good use on a royal yacht, at a Bohemian supper party, at a schoolroom tea, or at a parish mothers' meeting. But now —and he owned that his liver was out of order—he was suffering from a general disgust with things. When still a young man in the Foreign Office he had succeeded to a large fortune, and it had seemed then thoroughly worth while to employ it for social ends and social joys. Long ago he had attained those ends, and long ago he had become bored with those joys; and yet he could not shake himself free from any of the habits of body or mind he had got into during those years. He could not be indifferent to any shades of failure or success. He watched the temperature of his popularity as acutely as many men watch their bodily symptoms. Even during those days at Como, though despising his company, he knew that he felt a distinct irritation in a preference for Billy on the part of a lady whom he had at one time honoured with his notice. In arriving where he was in the English social world, he had increased, not only the need for luxury of body, but the sensitiveness and acuteness of certain perceptions as to his fellow creatures, and these perceptions were not likely to slumber again.

Edmund was oppressed by several unpleasant thoughts as well as by the heat of the night on which he arrived in Florence. He decided to sleep out in the wide brick *loggia* of the flat, which was nearly at the top of the great building. There was nothing to distract his gloomy thoughts from himself, not even a defect in the dinner or in the broad couch of a bed from which he could look up between the brick pillars of the *loggia* at the naked stars. If he had been younger he would, in his sleepless hours, have owned to himself that he was suffering from "what men call love," but he could not believe easily that Edmund Grosse at forty was as silly as any boy of twenty. He pished and pshawed at the absurdity. He could not accept anything so simple and goody as his own story. That ever since Rose married he had put her out of his thought from very love and reverence for her seemed an absurd thing to say of a man of his record. Yet it was true; and all the more in consequence did the thought of Rose as a free woman derange his whole inner life now, while the thought of Rose insulted by the dead hand of the man she had married was gall and wormwood. What must Rose think of men? She had been so anxious to find a great and good man; and she had found

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David Bright, whose mistress was now enjoying his great wealth somewhere below in the old Tuscan capital. And how could Edmund venture to be the next man offered to her?—Edmund who had done nothing all these years, who had sunk with the opportunity of wealth; whose talents had been lost or misused. He seemed to see Rose kneeling at her prayers—the golden head bowed, the girlish figure bent. He could think of nothing in himself to distract her back to earth, poor beautiful child! Yet he had not nursed or petted or even welcomed the old passion of his boyhood. He wanted to be without it and its discomforting reproaches. It was too late to change anything or anybody. At forty how could he have a career, and what good would come of it? Yet his love for Rose was insistent on the necessity of making Rose's lover into a different man from the present Edmund Grosse. It was absurd and medieval to suppose that if he did some great or even moderately great work he could win her by doing it. It might be absurd, yet contrariwise he felt convinced that she would never take him as he was now.

So he wearied as he turned on the couch that became less and less comfortable, till he rose and, with a rug thrown over him, leant on the brick balustrade of the *loggia*. He stood looking at the stars in the dimness, not wholly unlike the figure of some old Roman noble in his toga, nor perhaps wholly unlike the figure of the unconverted Augustine, weary of himself and of all things.

But this remark only shows how the stars and the deep blue openings into the heavens, and the manifold suggestions of the towers of Dante's city, and the neighbourhood of Savonarola's cell, affect the imagination and call up comparisons by far too mighty. Edmund Grosse's weariness of evil is nothing but a sickly shadow of the weariness of the great imprisoned soul to whom an angel cried to take up and read aright the book of life. Grosse is in fact only a middle-aged man in pajamas with a travelling rug about his shoulders, with a sallow face, a sickly body, and a rather shallow soul. He will not go quite straight even in his love quest, and he cannot bring himself to believe how strongly that love has hold of him. He is cynical about the best part of himself and to-night only wishes that it would trouble him less.

"Damn it," he muttered at last, "I wish I had slept indoors—I am bored to death by those stars!"

Next day Grosse set about the work for which he had come to Florence. He called on two men whom he knew slightly, and found them at home, but neither of them had ever heard of Madame Danterre. Dawkins, his much-travelled servant, of course, was more successful, and by the evening was able to take Edmund in a carriage to see some fine old iron gates, and to drive round some enormous brick walls—enormous in height and in thickness.

The Villa was in a magnificent position, and the gardens, Dawkins told his master, were said to be beautiful. Madame Danterre had only just moved into it from a much smaller house in the same quarter.

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Edmund next drove to the nearest chemist, and there found out that Dr. Larrone was the name of Madame Danterre's medical man. He already knew the name of her lawyer from Mr. Murray, who had been in perfunctory communication with him during the years in which Sir David had paid a large allowance to Madame Danterre. But he knew that any direct attempt to see these men would probably be worse than useless. What he wished to do was to come across Madame Danterre socially, and with all the appearance of an accidental meeting. His two friends in Florence did their best for him, but they were before long driven to recommend Pietrino, a well-known detective, as the only person who could find out for Grosse in what houses it might be possible to meet Madame Danterre.

Grosse soon recognised the remarkable gifts of the Italian detective, and confided to him the whole case in all its apparent hopelessness. There was, indeed, a touch of kindred feeling between them, for both men had a certain pleasure in dealing with human beings—humanity was the material they loved to work upon. The detective was too wise to let his zeal for the wealthy Englishman outrun discretion. He did very little in the case, and brought back a distinct opinion that Grosse could, at present, do nothing but mischief by interference. Madame Danterre had always lived a very retired life, and was either a real invalid or a valetudinarian. Her great, her enormous accession of wealth had only been used apparently in the sacred cause of bodily health. She saw at most six people, including two doctors and her lawyer; and on rare occasions, some elderly man visiting Florence—a Frenchman maybe, or an Englishman—would seek her out. She never paid any visits, although she kept a splendid stable and took long drives almost daily. The detective was depressed, for he had really been fired by Grosse's view as to the will, and he had come to so favourable an opinion of Grosse's ability that he had wished greatly for an interview between the latter and Madame Danterre to come off.

Edmund was loth to leave Florence until one evening when he despaired, for the first time, of doing any good. It was the evening on which he succeeded in seeing Madame Danterre without the knowledge of that lady. The garden of the villa into which he so much wished to penetrate was walled about with those amazing masses of brickwork which point to a date when labour was cheap indeed. Edmund had more than once dawdled under the deep shadow of these shapeless masses of wall at the hour of the general siesta.

He felt more alert while most of the world was asleep, and he could study the defences of Madame Danterre undisturbed. A lost joy of boyhood was in his heart when he discovered a corner where the brickwork was partly crumbled away, and partly, evidently, broken by use. It looked as if a tiny loophole in the wall some fifteen feet from the ground had been used as an entrance to the forbidden garden by some small

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human body. That evening, an hour before sunset, he came back and looked longingly at the wall. The narrow road was as empty as it had been earlier in the day. Twice he tried in vain to climb as far as the loophole, but the third time, with trousers ruined and one hand bleeding, he succeeded in crawling on to the ledge below the opening so that he could look inside. He almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of his own pleasure in doing so. Some rich, heavy scent met him as he looked down, but, fresh from the gardens of Como, this garden looked to him both heavy and desolate—heavy in its great hedges broken by statuary in alcoves cut in the green, and desolate in its burnt turf and its trailing rose trees loaded with dead roses. His first glance had been downwards, then his look went further afield, and he knew why Madame Danterre had chosen the villa, for the view of Florence was superb. He had not enjoyed it for half a moment when he heard a slight noise in the garden. Yes, down the alley opposite to him there were approaching a lady and two men servants. He held his breath with surprise. Was this Madame Danterre? the rival of Rose, the real love of David Bright? What he saw was an incredibly wizened old woman who yet held herself with considerable grace and walked with quick, long steps on the burnt grass a little ahead of the attendants, one of whom carried a deck chair, while the other was laden with cushions and books. It was evident to the onlooker at the installation of Madame Danterre in the shady, open space where three alleys met, that everything to do with her person was carried out with the care and reverence befitting a religious ceremony; and there was almost a ludicrous degree of pride in her bearing and gestures. Edmund felt how amazingly some women have the power of making others accept them as a higher product of creation, until their most minute bodily wants seem to themselves and those about them to have a sacred importance. At last, when chair and mat and cushions and books had been carefully adjusted after much consideration, she was left alone.

For a few moments she read a paper-covered volume, and Edmund determined to creep away at once, when she suddenly got up and began walking again with long, quick steps, her train sweeping the grass as she came towards the great wall; and he drew back a little, although it was almost impossible that she should see him. Her gown, of a dark dove colour, floated softly; it had much lace about the throat on which shone a string of enormous pearls; and she wore long, grey gloves. Edmund, who was an authority on the subject, thought her exquisitely dressed, as a woman who feels herself of great importance will dress even when there is no one to see her. In the midst of the extraordinarily wizened face were great dark eyes full of expression, with a fierce brightness in them. It was as if an internal fire were burning up the dried and wizened features, and could only find an outlet through the eyes. Rapidly she had passed up and down, and sometimes as she came nearer the wall Edmund saw her flash angry glances, and sometimes sarcastic glances, while her lips moved rapidly, and her very small gloved hand clenched and unclenched.

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At last a noise in the deserted road behind him, the growing rumbling of a cart, made him think it safer to move, even at the risk of a little sound in doing so. He reached the ground safely before he could be seen, and proceeded to brush the brick-dust off the torn knees of his grey trousers.

He walked down the hill into the town with an air of finality, for he had determined to go back to England. He could not have analysed his impressions; he could not have accounted for his sense of impotence and defeat, but so it was. He had come across the personality of Madame Danterre, and he thereupon left her in possession of the field. But at the same time, before leaving Florence, he gave largely of the sinews of war to that able spy, the Italian detective, Pietrino.

CHAPTER V

"*Your mother's daughter*"

The surprising disposal of Sir David Bright's fortune was to have very important consequences in a quiet household among the Malcot hills, of the existence of which Sir Edmund Grosse and Lady Rose Bright were entirely unaware.

In a small wind-swept wood that appeared to be seeking shelter in the hollow under the great massive curve of a green hill, there stood one of those English country houses that must have been planned, built, and finished with the sole object of obtaining coolness and shade. The principal living rooms looked north, and the staircase and a minute study were the only spots that ever received any direct rays of the sun. All the rooms except this favoured little study had windows opening to the ground, and immediately outside grew the rich mossy turf that indicates a clay soil. The mistress of the house was not easily daunted by her surroundings, and she had impressed her cheerful, comfortable, and fairly cultured mind on all the rooms. Mrs. Carteret was the widow of a Colonel Carteret, who had retired from the army to farm his own acres, and take his place in local politics. It is needless to say that, while the politics had gained from the help of an upright and chivalrous, if narrow, mind, the acres had profited little from his attentions. When he died he left all he possessed absolutely to his widow, who was not prepared to find how very little that all had become. Mrs. Carteret took up the burden of the acres, dairy, gardens, and stable, with a sense of sanctified duty none the less heroic in sensation because she was doing all these things for her own profit. Her neighbours held her in proportionate respect; and, as she had a fine person, pleasant manners, and good connections, she kept, without the aid of wealth, a comfortable corner in the society of the county.

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It was not long after Colonel Carteret's death, and some thirteen years before the death of Sir David Bright, that the immediate neighbourhood became gradually conscious of the fact that Mrs. Carteret had adopted a little niece, the child of a soldier brother who had died in India. This child, from the first, made as little effect on her surroundings as it was possible for a child to do. Molly Dexter was small, thin, and sallow; her dark hair did not curl; and her grey eyes had a curious look that is not common, yet not very rare, in childhood. It is the look of one who waits for other circumstances and other people than those now present. I know nothing so discouraging in a child friend—or rather in a child acquaintance, for friendship is warned off by such eyes—as this particular look. Mrs. Carteret took her niece cheerfully in hand, commended the quiet of her ways, and gave credit to herself and open windows for a perceptible increase in the covering of flesh on the little bones, and a certain promise of firmness in the calves of the small legs. As to the rest: "Of course it was difficult at first," she said, "but now Molly is perfectly at home with me. Nurses never do understand children, and Mary used to excite her until she had fits of passion. But that is all past. She is quite a healthy and normal child now."

Molly was growing healthy, but whether she was normal or not is another point. It does not tend to make a child normal to change everything in life at the age of seven. Not one person, hardly one thing was the same to Molly since her father's death. The language of her *ayah* had until then been more familiar to her than any other language. The ayah's thoughts had been her thoughts. The East had had in charge the first years of Molly's dawning intelligence, and there seemed impressed, even on her tiny figure, something that told of patience, scorn, and reserve. And yet Mrs. Carteret was quite satisfied.

Once, indeed, the widow was puzzled. Molly had strayed away by herself, and could not be found for nearly two hours. Provided with two figs and several bits of biscuit, a half-crown and a shilling, she had started to walk through the deep, heavy lanes between the great hills, with the firm intention of taking ship to France. Mrs. Carteret treated the escapade kindly and firmly; not making too much of it, but giving such sufficient punishment as to prevent anything so silly happening again. But she had no suspicion of what really had happened. Molly had, in fact, started with the intention of finding her mother. It was two years since she had come to live with Mrs. Carteret, and, if the child had spoken her secret thought, she would have told you that throughout those two years she had been meaning to run away and find her mother. In that she would have fallen into an exaggeration not uncommon with some grown-up people. It had been only at moments far apart, or occasionally for quite a succession

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of nights in bed, that she had spent a brief space before falling asleep in dreaming of going to seek her mother. But whole months had passed without any such thought; and during these long interludes the healthy country scenes about her, and the common causes for smiles and tears in a child's life, filled her consciousness. Still, the undercurrent of the deeper life was there, and very small incidents were strong enough to bring it to the surface. Molly had short daily lessons from the clergyman's daughter, a young lady who also took a cheerful, airy view of the child, and said she would grow out of her little faults in time. In one of these lessons Molly learnt with surprising eagerness how to find France for herself on the map. That France was much nearer to England than to India, and how it was usual to cross the Channel were facts easily acquired. Molly was amazingly backward in her lessons, or she must have learnt these things before. When lessons were over and she went out into the garden, instead of running as usual she walked so slowly that Mrs. Carteret, while talking to the gardener, actually wondered what was in that child's mind. Molly was living through again the parting with the ayah. She could feel the intensely familiar touch of the soft, dark hand; she could see the adoring love of the dark eyes with their passionate anger at the separation. The woman had to be revenged on her enemies who were tearing the child from her. "They deceive you," she said. "The beautiful mother is not dead; she lives in France, not England; they will try to keep you from her, but the faithful child will find a way."

Molly unconsciously in her own mind had already begun to put these words into English, whereas a year before she would have kept to the ayah's own language. But in either language those words came to her as the last message from that other life of warmth and love and colour in which she had once been a queen. Indeed, every English child brought home from India is a sovereign dethroned. And the repetition of the ayah's last words gave utterance to a sense of wrong that Molly nourished against her present rulers and against the world in which she was not understood.

That same day Mrs. Carteret spoke sharply and with indignation because Molly had trodden purely by accident on the pug; and her aunt said that the one thing with which she had no patience was cruelty to animals—whereas the child was passionately fond of animals. Again, on that same day, Molly fell into a very particularly dirty little pond near the cowshed at the farm. Mary, the nurse, no doubt was the sufferer, and she said that she did not suppose that black nurses minded being covered with muck—how should they?—and she supposed she must be treated as if she were a negro herself, but time would show whether she were a black slave or an Englishwoman with a house of her own which she could have now if she liked for the asking. While Mary spoke she pushed and pulled, and, in general treated Molly's small person as something unpleasant, and to be kept at a distance. Once clean and dressed again, Molly sat down quite quietly to consider the ways and means of getting to France, with the result already told.

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Several years passed after that, in which Mrs. Carteret did by Molly, as by every one else, all the duties that were quite obviously evident to her, and did not go about seeking for any fanciful ones. And Molly grew up, sometimes happy, and sometimes not, saying sometimes the things she really meant when she was in a temper, and acquiescing in Mrs. Carteret's explanation that she had not meant them when she had regained her self-control.

Until Molly was between fifteen and sixteen, Mrs. Carteret was able to keep to her optimism as to their mutual relations.

"The child is, of course, very backward. I tried to think it was want of education, but I've come to see it's of no use to expect to make Molly an interesting or agreeable woman; and very plain, of course, she must be. But, you know, plenty of plain, uninteresting women have very fairly happy lives, and under the circumstances"—but there Mrs. Carteret stopped, and her guest, the wife of the vicar, knew no more of the circumstances than did the world at large.

But when Molly was about the age of fifteen she began to display more troublesome qualities, and a certain faculty for doing quite the wrong thing under a perverse appearance of attempting good works. There is nothing annoys a woman of Mrs. Carteret's stamp so much as good done in the wrong way. She had known for so many years exactly how to do good to the labourer, his family, and his widow, or to the vagrant passing by. It was really very tiresome to find that Molly, while walking in one of the lanes, had slipped off a new flannel petticoat in order to wrap up a gypsy's baby. And it might be allowed to be trying that when believing an old man of rather doubtful antecedents to be dying from exhaustion, Molly had herself sought whisky from the nearest inn. She had bought a whole bottle of whisky, though indeed, being seized with qualms, she had poured half the contents of the bottle into a ditch before going back to the cottage. And it was undoubtedly Mrs. Carteret's duty to protest when she found that Molly had held a baby with diphtheria folded closely in her arms while the mother fetched the doctor.

Can any one blame Mrs. Carteret for finding these doings a little trying? And it showed how freakish and contradictory Molly was in all her ways that she would never join nicely in school feasts, or harvest homes, or anything pleasant or cheerful. Nor did she make friends even with those she had worried over in times of sickness. She would risk some serious infection, or meddle, with her odd notions, day after day in a cottage; and then she would hardly nod to the convalescent boy or girl when she met them again in the lanes.

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There was no one to tell her aunt what new, strange instincts and aspirations were struggling to the light in Molly. A passionate pity for pain would seize on her and hold her in a grip until she had done some definite act to relieve it. But pity was either not akin to love in Molly, or her affections had been too starved to take root after the immediate impulse of mercy was passed. The girl was not popular in the village, although, unlike Mrs. Carteret, her poorer neighbours had a great idea of Molly's cleverness. Needless to say that when, after some unmeasured effort at relieving suffering, Molly would come home with a sense of joy she rarely knew after any other act, it hurt her to the quick and roused her deepest anger to find herself treated like a naughty, inconsiderate child. The storms between Mrs. Carteret and Molly were increasing in number and intensity, with outspoken wrath on one side, and a white heat of dumb, indignant resistance on the other. Then, happily, there came a change. Molly's education had been of the very slightest until she was nearly sixteen, when Mrs. Carteret told her to expect the arrival of a finishing governess. She also announced that a music master from the cathedral town would, in future, come over twice a week to give her lessons.

"It's not my doing," said Mrs. Carteret,—and meaning only to be candid she sounded very ungracious; and although she did not pay for these things, it was due to her urgent representations of their need that they had been provided. Molly supposed that all such financial arrangements were made for her by her father's lawyer, of whom she had heard Mrs. Carteret speak.

Throughout these years it had never occurred to Mrs. Carteret to doubt that Molly believed her mother to be dead, and she never for a moment supposed the child's silence on the subject to be ominous. Such silence did not show any special power of reserve; many children brought up like Molly will carefully conceal knowledge which they believe that those in authority over them suppose them not to possess. Perhaps in Molly's case there was an instinctive shrinking from exposing an ideal to scorn. Perhaps there was a wholly unconscious want of faith in the ideal itself, an ideal which had been built up upon one phrase. Yet the notion of the beautiful, exiled mother, so cruelly concealed from her child, was very precious, however insecurely founded. It must be concealed from other eyes by mists of incense, and honoured in the silence of the sanctuary.

The new governess, Miss Carew, was a very fair teacher, and she soon recognised the quality of her pupil's mind. Mrs. Carteret was possibly a little disappointed on finding that Miss Carew considered Molly to be very clever, as well as very ignorant. The widow was herself accustomed to feel superior to her own circle in literary attainments, —a sensation which she justified by an occasional reading of French memoirs and by always getting through at least two

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articles in each *Nineteenth Century*. It was a detail that she had never cared for poetry; Sir James Stephen, she knew, had also never cared to have ideas expressed in verse. But she felt a little dull when Miss Carew and Molly discussed Browning and Tennyson and De Musset. Miss Carew fired Molly with new thoughts and new ambitions in matters intellectual, but also in more mundane affairs. If it is possible to be in the world and not of it we have all of us also known people who are of the world though not in it; and Miss Carew was undoubtedly one of the latter. Her tongue babbled of beauties and courts, of manners, of wealth, and of chiffons, with the free idealism of an amateur, and this without intending to do more than enliven the dull daily walks through Malcot lanes.

Two years of this companionship rapidly developed Molly. She did not now merely condemn her aunt and her friends from pure ignorant dislike; she knew from other testimony that they were rather stupid, ignorant, badly-dressed, and provincial. But the chief change in her state of mind lay in her hopes for her own future. Miss Carew had pointed out that, if such a very large salary could be given for the governess, there must surely be plenty of money for Molly's disposal later on. Why should not Molly have a splendid and delightful life before her? And then poor Miss Carew would suppress a sigh at her own prospects in which the pupil never showed the least interest. It was before Miss Carew's second year of teaching had come to an end, and while Molly was rapidly enlarging her mental horizon, that the girl came to a very serious crisis in her life.

Occupied with her first joy in knowledge, and with dreams of future delights in the great world, she had not broken out into any very freakish act of benevolence for a long time. One night, when Mrs. Carteret and Miss Carew met at dinner time, they continued to wait in vain for Molly. The servants hunted for her, Mrs. Carteret called up the front stairs, and Miss Carew went as far as the little carpenter's shop opening from the greenhouse to find her. It was a dark night, and there was nothing that could have taken her out of doors, but that she was out could not be doubted. The gardener and coachman were sent for, and before ten o'clock the policeman in the village joined in the search, and yet nothing was heard of Molly. Mrs. Carteret became really frightened, and Miss Carew was surprised to see her betray so much feeling as almost to lose her self-control. She kept walking up and down, while odd spasmodic little sentences escaped from her every few minutes.

"How could I answer for it to John if his girl came to any harm?" she repeated several times.

She kept moving from room to room with a really scared expression. Once the governess overheard her exclaim with an intensely bitter accent, "Even her wretched mother would have taken more care of her!"

At that moment the door opened; Molly came quietly in, looking at them both with bright, defiant eyes. From her hat to the edge of her skirt she appeared to be one mass of light, brown mud; her right cheek was bleeding from a scratch, and the sleeve of her coat was torn open.

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“Where have you been to?” demanded Mrs. Carteret, in a voice that trembled from the reaction of fear to anger.

“I went for a walk, and I found a man lying half in the water in Brown-rushes pond; he had evidently fallen in drunk. I got him out after nearly falling in myself, and then I had to get some one to look after him. They took him in at Brown-rushes farm, and I found out who he was and went to tell his wife, who is ill, that he was quite safe. I stayed a little while with her, and then I came home. I have walked about twenty miles, and, as you can see, I have had several tumbles, and I am very tired.”

Molly’s voice had been very quiet, but very distinct, and her look and bearing were full of an unspoken defiance.

“And you never thought whether I should be frightened meanwhile?” said Mrs. Carteret.

“Frightened about me?” said Molly in astonishment.

“You had no thought for *my* anxiety—the strain on *my* nerves,” her aunt went on.

“I thought you might be angry, but I never for a moment thought you would be frightened.”

Miss Carew looked from one to the other in alarm and perplexity. She felt for them both, for the woman who had been startled by the extent of her fears, and was the more angry in consequence, and for Molly, who betrayed her utter want of belief in any kind of feeling on Mrs. Carteret’s part.

“If you do not care for my feelings, or, indeed, believe in them, I wish you would have some care for your own good name.” A moment’s pause followed these words, and then in a low voice, but quite distinct, came the conclusion, “You must remember that your mother’s daughter must be more careful than other girls.”

Molly’s cheeks, just now bright from the battle with the autumn wind, became as white as marble. There was no concealment possible; both women saw that the child realised the full import of the words, and that she knew they could read what was written on her face. There could be no possibility of keeping up appearances after such a moment. But Miss Carew moved forward, and flung her arms round Molly with a gesture of simple but complete womanliness. “You must have a hot bath at once,” she cried, “or you will catch your death of cold.”

“Perhaps it would be better if I did,” cried Molly in a voice fearful to her hearers in its stony hardness and hopelessness. “What does it matter?”

Miss Carew would have been less unhappy if the child had burst into any reproaches, however angry or unseemly; she wanted to hear her say that something was a lie, that

some one was a liar, but what was so awful to the ordinary little woman was to realise that Molly believed what had been said, or rather the awful implication of what had been said. The real horror was that Molly should come to such knowledge in such a way.

The girl made no effort to shake her off, and not the least response to her caress. With perfect dignity she went quietly up-stairs. With perfect dignity she let the governess and the housemaid do to her whatever they liked. They bathed Molly, rubbed her with lotions, poulticed her with mustard, gave her a hot drink, and all the time Miss Carew's heart ached at the impossibility of helping her in the very least.

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“Can I leave the door open between our rooms, in case you want anything in the night?” she faltered.

“Oh, yes; certainly.”

“May I kiss you?”

“Yes, of course.”

CHAPTER VI

MOLLY COMES OF AGE

For some time after that terrible night Molly never spoke to Mrs. Carteret unless it were absolutely necessary. It may be difficult to believe that no explanation was sought or given and after a time things seemed to be much as before. The silence of a brooding nature is a terrible thing; and it is more common in narrow, dull lives than in any other. Uneducated men and women in villages, or servants cramped together in one house, I have known to brood over some injury in an awful silence for twenty or thirty years. If Molly’s future life had been in Mrs. Carteret’s hands, the sense of wrong would have burrowed deeper and been even better hidden, but Molly, aided by Miss Carew, had convinced herself that liberty would come, without any fight for it, at twenty-one; so her view of the present was that it was a tiresome but inevitable waiting for real life.

Miss Carew, watching her anxiously, could never find out what she had thought since the night of the alarm; and if she had seen into her mind at any one moment alone, she would have been misled. For Molly’s imagination flew from one extreme to another. At first, indeed, that sentence, “Your mother’s daughter ought to be more careful than other girls,” had seemed simply a revelation of evil of which she could not doubt the truth. She saw in a flash why her mother had gone out of her life although still living. The whole possibility of shame and horror appeared to fit in with the facts of her secluded life with Mrs. Carteret. A morbid fear as to her own birth seized on the poor child’s mind, and might have destroyed the healthier aspect of life for her entirely; but happily Mrs. Carteret and the governess did think of this danger, and showed some skill in laying the phantom. Some photographs of John Dexter as a young man were brought out and shown to the governess in Molly’s presence, and her comments on the likeness to Molly were true and sounded spontaneous. Relieved of this horror the girl’s mind reacted to the hope that Mrs. Carteret had only spoken in temper and spite, grossly exaggerating some grievance against Molly’s mother. Then was the ideal restored to its pedestal, and expiatory offerings of sentiment of the most elaborate kind hung round the image of the ill-used and misunderstood, the beautiful, unattainable mother. If Miss Carew had seen into the reveries of her pupil at such a moment, she would hardly have believed how they alternated with the coldest fits of doubt and scepticism. Molly was dealing

with a self-made ideal that she needed to satisfy the hunger of her nature for love and worship. But it had no foundations, no support, and it was apt to vanish

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with a terrible completeness. Then she would feel quite alone and horribly ashamed; she would at moments think of herself as something degraded and to be shunned. Some natures would have simply sunk into a nervous state of depression, but Molly had great vitality and natural ambition. In her ideal moments she thought of devoting her life to her mother; and the ayah's words were still a text, "The faithful child will find a way." But in darker hours she defied the world that was against her.

Molly, having decided to make no effort at any change in her life until the emancipating age of twenty-one, determined to prepare herself as fully as possible for the future. Mrs. Carteret was quite willing to keep Miss Carew until her niece was nearly twenty, and by that time the girl had read a surprising amount, while her mind was not to be despised. She had also "come out" as far as a very sleepy neighbourhood made it possible for her to see any society. She had been to three balls, and a good many garden parties. No one found her very attractive in her manners, though her appearance had in it now something that arrested attention. She took her position in the small Carteret circle in virtue of a certain energy and force of will. Molly danced, and played tennis, and rode as well as any girl in those parts, but she did not hide a silent and, at present, rather childish scorn which was in her nature. Miss Carew left her with regret and with more affection than Molly gave her back, for the governess was proud of her, and felt in watching her the pleasures of professional success. Perhaps she put down too much of this success to her own skill, but it was true that, without Miss Carew, Molly would have been a very undeveloped young person. There was still one year after this parting before Molly would be free, and it seemed longer and slower as each day passed. One interest helped to make it endurable. A trained hospital nurse had been provided for the village, and Molly spent a great deal of time learning her craft. The nursing instinct was exceedingly strong and not easily put down, and, if Molly *must* interfere with sick people, it was as well, in Mrs. Carteret's opinion, that she should learn how to do it properly.

But the slow months rolled by at length, and the last year of bondage was finished.

The sun did its best to congratulate Molly on her twenty-first birthday. It shone in full glory on the great, green hills, and the blue shadows in the hollows were transparent with reflected gold. The sunlight trembled in the bare branches of the beeches and turned their grey trunks to silver.

Standing in the little study, Molly's whole figure seemed to expand in the sunshine. Her eyes sparkled, her lips parted, and she at once drank in and gave forth her delight.

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Some people might still agree with Mrs. Carteret that Molly was not beautiful. Still, it was an appearance that would always provoke discussion. Molly could not be overlooked, and when her mind and feelings were excited, then she gave a strange impression of intense vitality—not the pleasant overflow of animal spirits, but a suppressed, yet untamed, vitality of a more mental, more dangerous kind. Her movements were usually sudden, swift, and abrupt, yet there was in them all a singular amount of expression, and, if Molly's keen grey eyes and sensitive mouth did not convey the impression of a simple, or even of a kindly nature, they gave suggestions of light and longing, hunger and resolution.

To-day, the twenty-first birthday, was to be the first day of freedom, the last of shackles and dulness and commonplace. It was to be a day of speech and a day of revenge.

Molly was waiting now for Mrs. Carteret to come in and stand before her and hear all she meant to say about the long, unholy deception that had been put upon her. She was going to say good-bye now and be free. Molly's money would now be her own, she could take it away and share it with the deserted, misjudged mother. Nothing in all this was melodramatic; it would have been but natural if the facts had been as she supposed, only Molly made the little mistake of treating as facts her carefully built-up fancies, her long, childish story of her own life.

She was so absorbed that she hardly saw Mrs. Carteret come in and sit down in her square, substantial way in a large arm-chair. Molly, standing by the window knocking the tassel of the blind to and fro, was breathing quickly. The older woman looked through some papers in her hand, put some notes of orders for groceries on a table by her side, and flattened out a long letter on foreign paper on her knee. She looked at Molly a little nervously, with cold blue eyes over gold-rimmed spectacles reposing on her well-shaped nose, and began:

"Now that you are of age I must——"

But Molly interrupted her. In a very low voice, speaking quickly with little gasps of impatience at any hesitation in her own utterance,—

"Before you talk to me about the arrangements, I want to tell you that I have made up my mind to leave here at once. I know it will be a relief to you as well as to me. Any promise you made to my father is satisfied now, and you cannot wish to keep me here. You have always been ashamed of me, you have always disliked me, and you have always deceived me. I knew all this time that my mother was alive, and you never spoke of her except once and then it was to insult me as deeply as a girl can be insulted. If what you said were true—and I don't believe it"—her voice shook as she spoke—"there would be all the more reason why I should go to my poor mother. I want you to know, therefore, that with whatever money comes to me from my father, I shall go to my mother and try to make amends to her."

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Mrs. Carteret stared over her spectacles at Molly in absolute amazement. After fourteen years of very kind treatment, which had involved a great deal of trouble, this uninteresting, silent niece had revealed herself at last! Fourteen years devoted to the idealisation of the mother who had deserted her, and to positive hatred of the relation who had mothered her! Tears rose in the hard, blue eyes. Subtleties of feeling Anne Carteret did not know, but some affection for those who are near in blood and who live under the same roof had been a matter of course to her, and Molly had hurt her to the quick. However, it was natural that common-sense and justice should quickly assert themselves to show this idiotic girl the criminal absurdity of what she said. Mrs. Carteret was unconsciously hitting back as hard as she could as she answered in a tone of cheerful common-sense:

“As a matter of fact, the money you will receive will not be your own, but an allowance from your mother—a large allowance given on the condition that you do not live with her. Happily, it is so large that there will not be any necessity for you to live here.”

Mrs. Carteret held up the letter of thin foreign paper in a trembling hand, but she spoke in a perfectly calm voice:

“I was myself always against this mystery as to your mother, but I felt obliged to act by her wish in the matter. She insists that she still wishes it to be thought by the world at large that she is dead, but she agrees at last that you should know something about her. I told her that I could not allow you to come of age here and have a great deal of money at your disposal without your knowing that from your father you have only been left a fortune of two thousand pounds——”

Mrs. Carteret paused, and then, with a little snort, added, half to herself:

“The rest was all squandered away, and certainly not by his own doing.”

Then she resumed her business tone:

“More than this, I obtained from your mother leave to tell you that this very large allowance comes out of a fortune left to her quite recently by Sir David Bright. I have acted by the wishes of both your parents as far as I possibly could. As to my disliking you or being ashamed of you, such notions could only come out of a morbid imagination. In spite of your feelings towards me, I still wish to be your friend. I want your father’s daughter to stand well with the world. So that I am left to live here in peace undisturbed, I shall be glad to help you at any time.”

Mrs. Carteret’s feelings were concentrated on Molly’s conduct towards herself, but Molly’s consciousness was filled with the greatness of the blow that had just fallen. It seemed to her that she had only now for the first time lost her mother—her only ideal,

the object of all her better thoughts. That her enemy was justified was, indeed, just then of little importance. She turned a dazed face towards her aunt:

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“I ought to beg your pardon: I am sorry.”

“Oh, pray don’t take the trouble.”

Mrs. Carteret got out of the chair with emphatic dignity, and held out some papers.

“You had better read these. I will speak to you about them afterwards.”

She left the room absolutely satisfied with her own conduct. But, coming to a pause in the drawing-room, she remembered that she had made one mistake.

“How stupid of me to have left Jane Dawning’s letter among those papers.”

But she did not go back to fetch the letter from her cousin Lady Dawning; and she did not own to herself that that apparent negligence was her real revenge. Yet from that moment her feelings of self-satisfaction were uncomfortably disturbed.

Meanwhile, Molly was kneeling by the window in the study in floods of tears. Everything in her mind had lost its balance; and baffled, disheartened, and ashamed, she wept tears that brought no softness. She did not know it, but while to herself it seemed as if she were absorbed in weeping over her disillusionment, she was in fact deciding that, as her ideal had failed her, she would in future live only for herself, and get everything out of life that she could for her own satisfaction.

No one in the world cared for her, but she would not be defeated or crushed or forlorn. With an effort she sprang to her feet with one agile movement, and pushed her heavy hair back from her forehead with her long, thin fingers.

The colour had gone from her clear, dark skin for the moment, and her breathing was fast and uneven, but her face still showed her to be very young and very healthy. How differently the troubles of the mind are written in our faces when age has undermined the foundations and all momentary failure is a presage of a sure defeat. Molly showed her determination to be brave and calm by immediately setting herself to read the papers left for her by Mrs. Carteret.

One was in French, a long letter from a lawyer in Florence communicating Madame Danterre’s wishes to Mrs. Carteret. It stated that, owing to the painful circumstances of the case, his client chose to remain under her maiden name, and to reside in Florence. Mrs. Carteret was at liberty to inform Miss Dexter of this, but she did not wish it known to anybody else. Madame Danterre further asked Mrs. Carteret to make such arrangements as she thought fit for her daughter to see something of the world, either in London or by travelling, but she did not wish her to come to Florence. Otherwise the world was before her, and L3000 a year was at her disposal. Molly could hardly, it was implied, ask for more from a mother from whom she had been torn unjustly when she was an infant. The rest of the letter was entirely about business, giving all details as to

how the quarterly allowance would be paid. In conclusion was an enigmatic sentence to the effect that, by a tardy act of repentance, Sir David Bright

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had left Madame Danterre his fortune, and she wished her daughter to know that the large allowance she was able to make her was in consequence of this act of justice. Molly would have had no inkling of the meaning of this sentence if Mrs. Carteret had come back to claim the letter from Lady Dawning which she had unintentionally left among the lawyer's papers. But this last, a closely-written large sheet of note-paper, lay between the letter from the lawyer in Florence, and other papers from the family lawyer in London, anent the will of the late Colonel Dexter and its taking effect on his daughter's coming of age.

Molly turned carelessly from the question of L2000 and its interest at three and a half per cent. to the letter surmounted by a black initial and a coronet.

"My *dear Anne*,—

"I am not coming to stay in your neighbourhood as I had hoped. I should have been very glad to have had a talk with you about Molly, if it had been possible, for her dear father's sake. Indeed, I think you are far from exaggerating the difficulties of the case. You are very reluctant to take a house in London, and you say that if you did take one and gave up all your home duties you would not now have a circle of friends there who could be of any use to a girl of her age. I feel that very likely you would be glad if my daughter would undertake her, and you are quite right in thinking that she would like a girl to take into the world. But I must be frank with you, as I want to save you from pitfalls which I may be more able to foresee than you can in your secluded home. My dear, I know that dear old John died without a penny: why if he had had any fortune as a young man—but, alas! he had none—is it possible that, in a soldier's life, with, for a few years, a madly extravagant wife to help him, he could conceivably have saved a capital that can produce L3000 a year!"No, my dear Anne, the money is from her mother, and I must tell you that I've often wondered if that estimable lady is really dead at all. Then, you know, that I always kept up with John, and that I knew something about Sir David Bright. To conclude, Rose Bright is my cousin by marriage, and we are all dumbfounded at finding that she has been left L800 a year instead of twice as many thousands, and that the fortune has gone to a lady named Madame Danterre. It is so old a story that I don't think any one has read the conclusion aright except myself, and *parole d'honneur*, no one shall if I can help it. I am too fond of poor John's memory to want to hurt his child, only for the child's own sake I would not advise you to bring her up to London. I should keep her quietly with you, and trust to a man appearing on the scene—it's a thing you *can* trust to, where there is L3000 a year. I daresay I could send some one your way quite quietly. But don't bring John's girl to London, at any rate, just yet.

"I hope we may come within reach of you in the autumn. I should love to have a quiet day with you and to see Molly.

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“Ever yours affectionately,

“JANE DAWNING.”

“P.S.—By the way, is the L3000 sure to go on? If it is not, might it not be as well to put a good bit of it away?”

Thus in one short hour, Molly had been told that her mother was living but did not want her child; that the ideal of motherly love had in her own case been a complete fiction; that the mother of her imagination had never existed, and, immediately afterwards, she had been given a glimpse of the world’s view of her own position as a young person best concealed, or, at least, not brought too much forward.

Lastly, with the news of the money that at least meant freedom, she had gained, by a rapid intuition, a faint but unmistakable sense of discomfort as to the money itself.

It was not any scrupulous fear that it could be her duty to inquire whether Sir David Bright ought to have left his fortune to his widow! Probably Lady Rose had quite as much as many dowagers have to live on. But she had been forced to know that other people disapproved of Sir David’s will. It was not a fortune entered into with head erect and eyes proudly facing a friendly world. Still, Molly was not daunted: the combat with life was harder and quite different from what she had foreseen, but she had always looked on her future as a fight.

Presently she let the “letter from Jane” fall close to the chair in which her aunt had been sitting, and moved the chair till the paper was half hidden by the chintz frill of the cover. She meant Mrs. Carteret to think that she had not read it.

She then went out for a long walk and met her aunt at luncheon with a quietly respectful manner, a little more respectful than it had ever been before.

Later in the day Molly wrote to the family lawyer, and consulted him as to how to find a suitable lady with whom to stay in London. Mrs. Carteret read and passed the letter. Seeing that Molly was determined to go to London, she was anxious to help her as much as possible, without calling down upon herself such letters of advice as the one from Lady Dawning. It proved as difficult to find just the right thing in chaperones as it is usually difficult to find exactly the right thing in any form of humanity, and December and January passed in the search. But in the end all that was to be wished for seemed to be secured in the person of Mrs. Delaport Green, who was known to a former pupil of Miss Carew’s, and at length Molly went out of the rooms with the northern aspect, and drove through the wood that sheltered under the shoulder of the great green hill, with nothing about her to recall the child who had come in there for the first time fourteen years ago, except that she still had the look of one who waits for other circumstances and other people.

CHAPTER VII

EDMUND GROSSE CONTINUES TO INTERFERE

Mr. Murray had had no belief in Sir Edmund Grosse's doings, and he indulged in the provoking air of "I told you so," when the latter, who had not been in London for several months, appeared at the office, and owned to the futility of his visit to Florence. Meanwhile, Mr. Murray had also carried on a fruitless enquiry in a different direction.

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“The General’s two most intimate friends were killed about two months after his death, and his servant died in the same action—probably before Sir David himself. I have tried to find out if he had any talk on his own affairs with friends on board ship going out, but it seems not. I can show you the list of those who went out with him.”

Sir Edmund knew something of most people and after studying the list he went to look up an old soldier friend at the Army and Navy Club. Indeed, for some weeks he was often to be seen there, and he was as attentive to Generals as an anxious parent seeking advancement in the Army for an only son. He soon became discouraged as to obtaining any information regarding David’s later years, but some gossip on his younger days he did glean. Nothing could have been better than David’s record; he seemed to have been a paragon of virtue.

“That’s what made it all the more strange that he should have fallen into the hands of Mrs. Johnny Dexter,” mused an old Colonel as he puffed at one of Grosse’s most admirable cigars. “Poor old David; he was wax in her hands for a few weeks, then he got fever and recovered from her and from it at the same time—he went home soon after. He’d have done anything for her at one moment.”

This Colonel might well have been flattered by Edmund’s attentions; but he gave little in return for them except what he said that day.

“Mrs. Johnny Dexter! Why, I’m sure I have known Dexters,” thought Edmund, as he strolled down Pall Mall after this conversation. He stopped to think, regardless of public observation. “Why, of course, that old bore Lady Dawning was a Miss Dexter. I’ll go and see her this very day.”

Lady Dawning was gratified at Sir Edmund’s visit, and was nearly as much surprised at seeing him as he was at finding himself in the handsome, heavily-furnished room in Princes Gate. Stout, over fifty, and clumsily wigged, it rarely enough happened to Lady Dawning to find not only a sympathetic listener but an eager inquirer into those romantic days when love’s young dream for her cousin Johnny Dexter was stifled by parental authority: “And it all ended in my becoming Lady Dawning.” A sigh of satisfaction concluded the episode of romance, and led the way back to the present day.

When Lady Dawning had advised Mrs. Carteret to keep poor dear Johnny’s girl quietly in the country, she had by no means intended to let any of her friends know anything about Molly. She had looked important and mysterious when people spoke of Sir David Bright’s amazing will, but she made a real sacrifice to Johnny’s memory by not divulging her knowledge of facts or her own conclusions from those facts. But the enjoyment of talking of her own romantic youth to Edmund had had a softening effect.

Sir Edmund appeared to be so very wise and safe.

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“Of course, it is only to you,” came first; and then, “It would be a relief to me to get the opinion of a man of the world; poor dear Anne Carteret consults me, and I really don’t know what to advise. Fancy! that woman allows the girl L3000 a year, and Anne Carteret would probably have acted on my advice and kept her quiet so that no one need know anything of the wretched story, but the girl won’t be quiet, and will come up to London, and it seems so unsafe, don’t you know? They are looking for a chaperone, as nothing will make Anne come herself. And if it all comes out it will be so unpleasant for poor dear Rose Bright to meet this girl all dressed up with her money; don’t you think so?”

Lady Dawning was now quite screaming with excitement, and very red in nose and chin. It would be a long time before she could be quite dull again. But Edmund was far too deeply interested to notice details.

They parted very cordially, and Lady Dawning promised to let him know if she heard from Anne Carteret, and, if possible, to pass on the name of the chaperone woman who was to take Molly into society.

“And so your *protegee* is to arrive to-night?” said Edmund Grosse.

“Yes, and I *am* so frightened;” and with a little laugh appreciative of herself in general, Mrs. Delaport Green held up a cup of China tea in a pretty little white hand belonging to an arm that curved and thickened from the wrist to the elbow in perfect lines.

Sir Edmund gave the arm the faintest glance of appreciation before it retreated into lace frills within its brown sleeve. Those lace frills were the only apparent extravagance in the simple frock in question, and simplicity was the chief note in this lady’s charming appearance.

“I don’t believe you are frightened, but probably she is frightened enough.”

“I know nothing whatever about her,” sighed the little woman, “and we are only doing it because we are so dreadfully hard up; my maid says that I shall soon not have a stitch to my back, and that would be so fearfully improper. At least”—she hesitated—“I am doing it because times are bad. Tim really knows nothing about it; I mean that he does not know that Miss Dexter is a ‘paying guest’, and it does sound horribly lower middle-class, doesn’t it? But I’m so afraid Tim won’t be able to go to Homburg this year, and he is eating and drinking so much already, and it’s only the beginning of April. What will happen if he can’t drink water and take exercise all this summer?”

“But I suppose you know her name?”

“I believe it is Molly Dexter. And do you think I should say ‘Molly’ at once—to-night, I mean?”

Sir Edmund did not answer this question.

“I used to know some Dexters years ago.”

“Yes, it is quite a good name, and Molly is of good family: she is a cousin of Lady Dawning, but she is an orphan. I think I must call her Molly at once,” and the little round eyes looked wistful and kindly.

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Sir Edmund was able from this to conclude rightly that Mrs. Delaport Green was not aware of the existence of Madame Danterre, and would have no suspicions as to the sources of the fortune that supplied Molly's large allowance. It had, in fact, been thought wiser not to offer explanations which had not been called for.

"It will be very tiresome for you," said Grosse. "You will have to amuse her, you know, and is she worth while?"

"Quite; she will pay—let me see—she will pay for the new motor, and she will go to my dressmaker and keep her in a good temper. But, of course, I shall have to make sacrifices and find her partners. I must try and not let my poor people miss me. They would miss me dreadfully, though I know you don't think so."

"And you don't even know what she is like?"

"Oh, yes, I do; I have seen her once, and she is oh! so interesting: olive skin, black, or almost black, hair, almond-shaped grey eyes—no, I don't mean almond-shaped, but really very curiously-shaped eyes, full of—let me see if I can tell you what they are full of—something that, in fact, makes you shiver and feel quite excited. But, do you know, she hardly speaks, and then in such a low voice. I'll tell you now, I'll tell you exactly what she reminds me of: do you know a picture in a very big gallery in Florence of a woman who committed some crime? It's by one of the pupils of one of the great masters; just try and think if you don't know what I mean. Oh, must you go? But won't you come again, and see how we get on, and how I bear up?"

When Molly did arrive, her dainty little hostess petted and patted her and called her "Molly" because she "could not help it."

"Oh, we will do the most delightful things, now that you have come; we must, of course, do balls and plays, and then we will have quite a quiet day in the country in the new motor, and we will take some very nice men with us. And then you won't mind sometimes coming to see people who are ill or poor or old?"

The little voice rose higher and higher in a sort of wail.

"It does cheer them up so to look in and out with a few flowers, and it need not take long."

"I don't mind people when they are really ill," said Molly, in her low voice, "but I like them best unconscious."

Mrs. Delaport Green stared for a moment; then she jumped up and ran forward with extended hands to greet a lady in a plain coat and skirt and an uncompromising hat.

“Oh, how kind of you to come, and how are you getting on? Molly dear, this is the lady who lives in horrid Hoxton taking care of my poor people I told you about. Do tell her what you really mean about liking people best when they are unconscious, and you will both forgive me if I write one tiny little note meanwhile?”

Molly gave some tea to the newcomer as if she had lived in the house for years, and drew her into a talk which soon allayed her rising fears as to whether her own time would have to be devoted to horrid Hoxton. By calm and tranquil questions she elicited the fact that Mrs. Delaport Green had visited the settlement once during the winter.

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“She comes as a sunbeam,” said the resident with obviously genuine admiration, “and, of course, with all the claims on her time, and her anxiety as to her husband’s health, we don’t wish her to come often. She is just the inspiration we want.”

The hostess having meanwhile asked four people to dinner, came rustling back, and, sitting on a low stool opposite the lady of the settlement, held one of her visitor’s large hands in both her own and patted it and asked questions about a number of poor people by name, and made love to her in many ways, until the latter, cheered and refreshed by the sunbeam, went out to seek the first of a series of ’busses between Chelsea and Hoxton.

Mrs. Delaport Green gave a little sigh.

“I must order the motor. The dear thing needn’t have come your very first night, need she? It makes me miserable to leave you, but I was engaged to this dinner before I knew that you existed even! Isn’t it odd to think of that?” Her voice was full of feeling.

“And you must be longing to go to your room. You won’t have to dine with Tim, because he is dining at his club. Promise me that you won’t let Tim bore you: he likes horrid fat people, so I don’t think he will; and are you sure you have got everything you want?”

Molly’s impressions of her new surroundings were written a few weeks later in a letter to Miss Carew.

> “MY DEAR CAREY,—
>
> “I have been here for three weeks, but I doubt if I shall stay three months.

“I am living with a very clever woman, and I am learning life fairly quickly and getting to know a number of people. But I am not sure if either of us thinks our bargain quite worth while, though we are too wise to decide in a hurry. There are great attractions: the house, the clothes, the food, the servants, are absolutely perfect; the only thing not quite up to the mark in taste is the husband. But she sees him very little, and I hardly exchange two words with him in the day, and his attitude towards us is that of a busy father towards his nursery. But I rather suspect that he gets his own way when he chooses. The servants work hard, and, I believe, honestly like her. The clergyman of the parish, a really striking person, is enthusiastic; so is her husband’s doctor, so are one religious duchess and two mundane countesses. I believe that it is impossible to enumerate the number and variety of the men who like her. There are just one or two people who pose her, and Sir Edmund Grosse is one. He snubs her, and so she makes up to him hard. I must tell you that I have got quite intimate with Sir Edmund. He is of a different school from most of the men I have seen. He pays absurd compliments very naturally and cleverly, rather my idea of a Frenchman, but he is much more candid all

the time. I shock people here if I simply say I don't like any one. If you want to say anything against anybody you must begin by saying—'Of

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course, he means awfully well,' and after that you may imply that he is the greatest scoundrel unhung. Sir Edmund is not at all ill-natured, and he can discuss people quite simply—not as if he wished to defend his own reputation for charity all the time. He won't allow that Adela Delaport Green is a humbug: he says she is simply a happy combination of extraordinary cleverness and stupidity, of simplicity and art. 'I believe she hardly ever has a consciously disingenuous moment,' he said to me last night. 'She likes clergymen and she likes great ladies, and she likes to make people like her. Of course, she is always designing; but she never stops to think, so that she doesn't know she is designing. She is an amazing mimic. Something in this room to-night made me think of Dorset House directly I came in, and I remembered that, of course, she was at the party there last night. She must have put the sofa and the palms in the middle of the room to-day. At dinner to-night she suddenly told me that she wished she had been born a Roman Catholic, and I could not think why until I remembered that a Princess had just become a Papist. She could never have liked the Inquisition, but she thought the Pope had such a dear, kind face. Now she will probably tremble on the verge of Rome until several Anglican bishops have asked their influential lady friends to keep her out of danger.'

"'And you don't call her a humbug?'

"'No; she is a child of nature, indulging her instincts without reflection. And please mark one thing, young lady; her models are all good women—very good women—and that's not a point to be overlooked.'"I told him—I could not help it—how funny she had been yesterday, talking of going to early church. 'I do love the little birds quite early,' she said, 'and one can see the changes of the season even in London, going every day, you know, and one feels so full of hope walking in the early morning fasting, and hope is next to charity, isn't it?—though, of course, not so great.'

"And she has been out in the shut motor exactly once in the early morning since I came up, and she knew that I knew it.

"However, Sir Edmund maintained that, at the moment, Adela quite believed she went out early every day, and I am not sure he is not right. But then, you see, Carey, that with her power of believing what she likes, and of intriguing without knowing it, I am not quite sure that she will last very well. She might get tired of me—quite believe I had done something which I had not done at all! And then the innocent little intrigues might become less amusing to me than to other people. However, I believe I am useful for the present, and the life here suits me on the whole. But I will report again soon if the symptoms become more unfavourable, and ask your opinion as to my plans for the season if the Delaport Green alliance breaks down before then.

"Yours affectionately,

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“MOLLY DEXTER.”

CHAPTER VIII

AT GROOMBRIDGE CASTLE

Mrs. Delaport Green counted it as a large asset in Molly’s favour that Sir Edmund Grosse was so attentive. Adela did not seriously mind Sir Edmund’s indifference to herself if he were only a constant visitor at her house, but she was far from understanding the motives that drew him there to see Molly. In fact, having decided, on the basis of his own theory of the conduct of Madame Danterre, that Molly had no right to any of the luxuries she enjoyed, he had been prepared to think of her as an unscrupulous and designing young woman. Somehow, from the moment he first saw her he felt all his prejudices to be confirmed. There was something in Molly which appeared to him to be a guilty consciousness that the wealth she enjoyed was ill-gotten. Miss Dexter, he thought, had by no means the bearing of a fresh ingenuous child who was innocently benefiting by the wickedness of another. The poor girl was, in fact, constantly wondering whether the people she met were hot partisans of Lady Rose Bright, or whether they knew of Madame Danterre’s existence, and if so, whether they had the further knowledge that Miss Molly Dexter was that lady’s daughter. They might, for either of these reasons, have some secret objection to herself. But she was skilful enough to hide the symptoms of these fears and suspicions from the men and women she usually came across in society, who only thought her reserve pride, and her occasional hesitations a little mysterious. From Sir Edmund she concealed less because she liked him much more, and he kindly interpreted her feelings of anxiety and discomfort to be those of guilt in a girl too young to be happy in criminal deceit. With his experience of life, and with his usually just perceptions, he ought to have known better; but there is some quality in a few men or women, intangible and yet unmistakable, which makes us instinctively suspect present, or foretell future, moral evil; and poor Molly was one of these. What it was, on the other hand, which made her trust Sir Edmund and drew her to him, it would need a subtle analysis of natural affinities to decide. No doubt it was greatly because he sought her that Molly liked him, but it was not only on that account. Nor was this only because Edmund was worldly wise, successful, and very gentle. There was a quality in the attraction that drew Molly to Edmund that cannot be put into words. It is the quality without which there has never been real tragedy in the relations of a woman to a man. In the first weeks in London this attraction hardly reached beyond the merest liking, and was a pleasant, sunny thing of innocent appearance.

Mrs. Delaport Green was, for a short time, of opinion that the problem of whether to prolong Molly’s visit or not would be settled for her by a quite new development. Then she doubted, and watched, and was puzzled.

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Why, she thought, should such a great person as Sir Edmund Grosse, who was certainly in no need of fortune-hunting, be so attentive to Molly if he did not really like her? At times she had a notion that he did not like her at all, but at other times surely he liked her more than he knew himself. He said that she was graceful, clever, and interesting; and the acute little onlooker had not the shadow of a doubt that he held these opinions, but why did she at moments think that he disliked Molly? Certainly the dislike, if dislike it were, did not prevent him from very constantly seeking her society. It was the only intimacy that Molly had formed since she had come up to London.

As Lent was drawing to a close, Mrs. Delaport Green became much occupied at the thought of how many services she wished to attend. “One does so wish one could be in several churches at once,” she murmured to a devout lady at an evening party. But, finding one of these churches to be excessively crowded on Palm Sunday, she had gone for a turn in the country in her motor with a friend, “as, after all, green fields, and a few early primroses make one realise, more than anything else in the world, the things one wishes one could think about quietly at such seasons.”

For Easter there were the happiest prospects, as she and Molly had been invited to stay at a delightful house “far from the madding crowd”—Groombridge Castle—with a group of dear friends.

Molly, knowing that “dear friends” with her hostess meant new and most desirable acquaintances, bought hats adorned with spring flowers and garments appropriate to the season with great satisfaction.

Their luggage, their bags, and their maid looked perfect on the day of departure, and Tim had gone off to Brighton in an excellent temper. Mrs. Delaport Green trod on air in pretty buckled shoes, and patted the toy terrier under her arm and felt as if all the society papers on the bookstall knew that they would soon have to tell whither she was going.

“I saw Sir Edmund Grosse’s servant just now,” she said to Molly with great satisfaction. “Very likely Sir Edmund is coming to Groombridge. Why does one always think that everybody going by the same train is coming with one? Did you tell him where we were going?”

“No, I don’t think so; I have hardly seen him for a week, and I thought he was going abroad for Easter.”

When the three hours’ journey was ended and the friends emerged on the platform, they were both glad to see Sir Edmund’s servant again and the luggage with his master’s name. There was a crowd of Easter holiday visitors, and Mrs. Delaport Green and Molly were some moments in making their way out of the station. When they were

seated in the carriage that was to take them to the Castle, Mrs. Delaport Green turned expectantly to the footman.

“Are we to wait for any one else?”

“No, ma’am; Lady Rose Bright and the two gentlemen have started in the other carriage.”

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They drove off.

“I am so glad it is Lady Rose Bright.” Molly hardly heard the words.

“I have so wished to know her,” Adela went on joyfully, “and she has had such an interesting story and so extraordinary.”

“Can I get away—can I go back?” thought Molly, and she leant forward and drew off her cloak as if she felt suffocated. “To meet her is just the one thing I can’t do. Oh, it is hard, it is horrible!”

“You see,” Adela continued, “she married Sir David Bright, who was three times her age, because he was very rich, and also, of course, because she loved him for having won the Victoria Cross, and then he died, and they found he had left all the money to some one he had liked better all the time. So there is a horrid woman with forty thousand a-year somewhere or other, and Rose Bright is almost starving and can’t afford to buy decent boots, and every one is devoted to her. I am rather surprised that she should come to Groombridge for a party, she has shut herself up so much; but it must be a year and a half at least since that wicked old General was killed, and he certainly didn’t deserve much mourning at *her* hands.”

As Adela’s little staccato voice went on, Molly stiffened and straightened and starched herself morally, not unaided by this facile description of the story in which she was so much involved. She would fight it out here and now; nothing should make her flinch; she would come up to time as calm and cool as if she were quite happy. And, after all, Sir Edmund Grosse would be there to help her.

It was not until the first of the two heavy handsome old-fashioned carriages, drawn by fine, sleek horses, was beginning to crawl up a very steep hill that its occupants began to take an interest in those who were following.

“Who is in the carriage behind us?” asked Sir Edmund of the young man usually called Billy, who was sitting opposite him, and whom he was never glad to meet.

“Mrs. Delaport Green and a girl I don’t know—very dark and thin.”

Edmund growled and fidgeted.

“Horrid vulgar little woman,” he muttered between his teeth, “pushes herself in everywhere, and I suppose she has got the heiress with her.”

“Don’t be so cross, Edmund,” said Lady Rose. “Who is the heiress?”

“Oh! a Miss Dickson—not Dickson—what is it? The money was all made in beer”—-which was really quite a futile little lie. “But that isn’t the name: the name is Dexter. The girl is handsome and untruthful and clever; let her alone.”

Rose perceived that he was seriously annoyed, and waited with a little curiosity to see the ladies in question.

As the two carriages crawled slowly up the zigzag road, climbing the long and steep hill, the occupants of both gazed at the towers of the Castle whenever they came in sight at a turn of the road, or at an opening in the mighty horse-chestnuts and beeches, but they spoke little about them. Those in the first carriage were too familiar with Groombridge and its history and the others were too ignorant of both to have much to say. Edmund Grosse gave expression to Rose’s thought at the sight of the familiar towers when he said:

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“Poor old Groombridge! it is hard not to have a son or even a nephew to leave it all to.”

“He likes the cousin very much,” said Rose.

“But isn’t Mark Molyneux going to be a priest?” said the young man, Billy, to Lady Rose. “I heard the other day that he is in one of the Roman seminaries—went there soon after he left Oxford.”

Edmund answered him.

“Groombridge told me he thought he would give that up. He said he believed it was a fancy that would not last.”

“He did very well at Oxford,” said Rose, “and the Groombridges are devoted to him. It is so good of them with all their old-world notions not to mind more his being a Roman Catholic.”

The talk was interrupted by the two men getting out to ease the horses on a steep part of the drive.

Rose’s own point of view that a young and earnest priest, even although, unfortunately, not an Anglican, might do much good in such a position as that of the master of Groombridge Castle, would certainly not have been understood by her two companions.

Meanwhile, in the second carriage, Molly was becoming more and more distracted from painful thoughts by the glory of the summer’s evening, and the historic interest of the Castle. She felt at first disinclined to disturb the unusual silence of the lady beside her. Certainly the principal tower of the Castle, in its dark red stone, looked uncommonly fine and commanding, and about it flew the martlets that “most breed and haunt” where the air is delicate.

The horse-chestnut leaves were breaking through their silver sheaths in points of delicate green, and daffodils and wild violets were thick in grass and ground ivy, while rabbits started away from within a few feet of the road.

But, although reluctant to break the silence, at last interest in the scene made Molly ask:

“Do you know the date?”

“Oh, Norman undoubtedly,” said Mrs. Delaport Green; “the round towers, you know. Round towers go back to almost any date.”

Molly was dissatisfied. “You don’t know what reign it was built in?”

“Some time soon after the Conqueror; I think Tim did tell me all about it. He looked it up in some book last night.”

As a matter of fact, the present Castle had been built under George III., and the towers would have betrayed the fact to more educated observers; while even Molly could see when they came close to the great mass of building that the windows and, indeed, all the decoration was of an inferior type of revived Gothic. But, however an architect might shake his head at Groombridge, it was really a striking building, massive and very well disposed, and in an astonishingly fine position, commanding an immense view of a great plain on nearly three sides, while to the east was stretched the rest of the range of splendidly-wooded hills on the westerly point of which it was situated. In the sweet, soft air many delicate trees and shrubs were developed as well as if they had been in quite a sheltered place.

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Lady Groombridge was giving tea to the first arrivals when Mrs. Delaport Green and Molly were shown into the big hall of the Castle.

“Let us come for a walk; we can slip out through this window,” murmured Sir Edmund, as he took her empty tea-cup from his cousin.

Rose began to move, but Lady Groombridge claimed her attention before she could escape.

“Do you know Mrs. Delaport Green and Miss Dexter?”

Rose, as she heard Molly’s name, found herself looking quite directly into very unexpected and very remarkable grey eyes with dark lashes. Her gentle but reserved greeting would have been particularly negative after Edmund’s warning as to both ladies, but she did not quite control a look of surprise and interest. There was a great light in Molly’s face as she saw the young and beautiful woman whom she had dreaded intensely to meet.

Rose was evidently unconscious of a certain gentle pride of bearing, but was fully conscious of a wish to be kindly and loving. In neither of these aspects—and they were revealed in a glance to Molly—did Rose attract her. But Molly’s look, which puzzled Rose, was as a flame of feeling, burning visibly through the features of the dark, healthy face, and finding its full expression in the eyes. The glory of the landscape she had just passed through, and the excitement of finding herself in such a building, added fuel to Molly’s feelings, and seemed to give a historic background to her meeting with her enemy. Some subtle and curious sympathy lit Rose’s face for a moment, and then she shrank a little as if she recoiled from a slight shock, and turning with a smile to Sir Edmund Grosse, she followed him down the great hall and out into a passage beyond. He had given Molly an intimate but rather careless nod before he turned away.

Edmund was quite silent as he walked out on the terrace, and seemed as absorbed as Rose in the view that lay below them. But it was with the scene he had just witnessed inside the Castle that his mind was filled. There had been something curiously dramatic in the meeting which he would have done a great deal to prevent. But, annoyed as he was, he could not help dwelling for a moment on the picture of the two with a certain artistic satisfaction. Rose, in her plain, almost poor, clinging black clothes was, as always, amazingly graceful; he felt, not for the first time, as if her every movement were music.

“But that girl is handsome. How she looked into Rose’s face, the amazing little devil!—-she is plucky.”

Then he caught himself up abruptly; it was no use to talk nonsense to himself. The point was how to keep these two apart and how short Mrs. Delaport Green's visit might be made.

"Unluckily Monday is a Bank holiday, but they shall not be asked to stay one hour after the 10.30 train on Tuesday if I have to take them away myself," he murmured. Meanwhile, it was a beautiful evening; there was a wonderful view, and Rose was here, and, for the moment, alone with him. She ran her fingers into the fair hair that was falling over her forehead, and pushed it back and her hat with it, so that the fresh spring air "may get right into my brain," she said, "and turn out London blacks."

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“The blacks don’t penetrate in your case,” said Edmund.

“I’m afraid they do,” she murmured, “but now I won’t think of them. Easter Eve and this place are enough to banish worries.”

“Our hostess contrives to have some worries here.”

“Ah! dear Mary, I know; she can’t help it; she has always been so very prosperous.”

“Oh, it’s prosperity, is it?” asked Edmund. He had turned from the view to look more directly at Rose.

“Yes, I know it does not have that effect on you, because you have a happier temperament.”

“But am I so very prosperous?” The tone was sad and slightly sarcastic.

“It is quite glorious: one seems to breathe in everything, don’t you know, and the smell of primroses; and it is so sweet to think that it is Easter Eve.”

Mrs. Delaport Green was coming forth on the terrace, preceded by these words in her clear staccato voice.

“Do you think,” said Rose very gently to Edmund, “that we might go down into the wood?”

Presently Molly fell behind Lady Groombridge and Mrs. Delaport Green as they walked along the terrace, and leant on the wall and looked at the view by herself.

The Castle stood on the last spur of a range of hills, and there was an abrupt descent between it and the next rounded hill-top. Covered with trees, the sharp little valley was full of shadow and mystery; and then beyond the great billowy tree-tops rose and fell for miles, until the brilliant early green of the larches and the dark hues of the many leafless branches, already ruddy with buds, became blue and at length purple in the distance.

This joy and glory of her mother earth nobody could grudge Molly, surely? But the very beauty of it all made her more weak; and tears rose in her eyes as she looked at the healing green.

“I am tired,” she thought; “and, after all, what harm can it do me to meet Lady Rose Bright? And if Sir Edmund Grosse was annoyed to see me here, what does it matter?”

Presently Lady Groombridge and her admiring guest came back to where Molly was standing. In the excitement of arrival and of meeting Lady Rose, and the little shock of Sir Edmund’s greeting, Molly had hardly taken stock of the mistress of the Castle. Lady

Groombridge was verging on old age, but ruddy and vigorous. She wore short skirts and thick boots, and tapped the gravel noisily with her stick. She had almost forgotten that she had ever been young and a beauty, and her conversation was usually in the tone of a harassed housekeeper, only that the range of subjects that worried her extended beyond servants and linen and jam into politics and the Church and the souls of men within a certain number of miles of Groombridge Castle.

She stood talking between Molly and Mrs. Delaport Green in a voice of some impatience as she scanned the landscape in search of Rose.

“Dear me, where has Rose gone to? and she knew how much I wanted to have a talk with her before dinner. And I wanted to tell her not to let our clergyman speak about incense and candles. He was more tiresome than usual after Rose was here last time.”

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Mrs. Delaport Green tried to interject some civil remarks, but Lady Groombridge paid not the slightest attention. The only visitors who interested her in the least were Rose and Edmund Grosse. She could hardly remember why she had invited Mrs. Delaport Green and Molly when she met them in London, and Billy was always Lord Groombridge's guest.

"Well, if Rose won't come out of the wood, I suppose we may as well come in, and perhaps you would like to see your room;" and, with an air of resignation, she led the way.

She stood in the middle of a gorgeously-upholstered room of the date of George IV., and looked fretfully round.

"Of course it is hideous, but I think if you have a good thing even of the worst date it is best to leave it alone;" and then, with a gleam of humour in her eye, she turned to Molly, "and whenever you feel your taste vitiated (or whatever they call it nowadays) in your room next door, you can always look out of the window, you know." And then, speaking to Mrs. Delaport Green:

"We have no light of any sort or kind, and no bathrooms, but there are plenty of candles, and I can't see why, with large hip baths and plenty of water, people can't keep clean. Yes, dinner is at 8.15 sharp; I hope you have everything you want; there is no bell into your maid's room, but the housemaid can always fetch your maid."

Then she ushered Molly into the next room and, after briefly pointing out its principal defects, she left her to rest her body and tire her mind on a hard but gorgeously-upholstered couch until it should be time to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER IX

A LITTLE MORE THAN KIND

Edmund Grosse felt more tolerant of Billy at Groombridge Castle than elsewhere. At Groombridge he was looked upon as a kindly weakness of Lord Groombridge's, who consulted him about the stables and enjoyed his jokes. This position certainly made him more attractive to Edmund, but he was not sorry that Billy, who seldom troubled a church, went there on Easter Sunday morning and left him in undisturbed possession of the terrace.

The sun was just strong enough to be delightful, and, with an interesting book and an admirable cigar, it ought to have been a goodly hour for Grosse. But the fact was that he had wished to walk to church with Rose, and he had quite hoped that if it were only for his soul's sake she would betray some wish for him to come. But if she didn't, he wouldn't. He knew quite well that she would be pleased if he went, but if she were so

silly and self-conscious as to be afraid of appearing to want his company—well and good; she should do without it.

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He had been disappointed and annoyed with Rose during their walk on the evening before. The simple, matter-of-fact way in which they had been jogging along in London was changed. At first, indeed, she had been natural enough, but then she had become silent for some moments, and afterwards had veered away from personal topics with a tiresome persistency. He half suspected the truth, that this was due to a careless word of his own which had betrayed how suddenly he had given up his intention to spend Easter on the Riviera. If she had jumped to the conclusion that this change was because Edmund had learnt at the eleventh hour that Rose would be at Groombridge, she had no right to be so quick-sighted. It was almost "Missish" of Rose, he told himself, to be so ready to think his heart in danger, and to be so unnecessarily tender of his feelings. She might wait for him to begin the attack before she began to build up fortifications.

He was at the height of his irritation against Rose, when the three other ladies came out on the terrace. Lady Groombridge instantly told Mrs. Delaport Green that she knew she wished to visit the dairy, and hustled her off through the garden. Edmund rose and smiled, with his peculiar, paternal admiration, at Molly, whose dark looks were at their very best set in the complete whiteness of her hat and dress. Then he glanced after the figures that were disappearing among the rose-bushes.

"The party is not in the least what your chaperone expected; indeed, we can hardly be dignified by the name of a party at all, but you see how happy she is. She even enjoyed dear old Groombridge's prosing last night, and she has been very happy in church, and now she is going to see the dairy. The only thing that troubles her is that Lady Groombridge has not allowed her to change her gown, and a well-regulated mind cannot enjoy her prayers and a visit to cows in the same gown. Now suppose," he looked at Molly with a lazy, friendly smile, "you put on a short skirt and come for a walk."

A little later they were walking through the woods on the hills beyond the Castle. Perhaps he intended that Rose, who had stayed to speak to the vicar, should find that he had not been waiting about for her return.

"I would give a good deal to possess the cheerful philosophy of Mrs. Delaport Green," he said, as, looking down through an opening in the trees, they could see that little woman with her skirts gracefully held up standing by while Lady Groombridge discoursed to the keeper of cows, who looked sleek and prosperous and a little sulky the while.

"You would be wise to learn some of it from her," Edmund went on. "Isn't this nice? Let us sit upon the ground, as it is dry, and feel how good everything is. You like this sort of thing, don't you?"

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Molly murmured “Yes,” and sat down on a mossy bank and looked up into the glorious blue sky and then at a tuft of large, pale primroses in the midst of dark ground ivy, then far down to the fields where a group of brown cows, rich in colour, stood lazily content by a blue stream that sparkled in the sunlight. Edmund was not hard-hearted, and Molly looked very young, and a pathetic trouble underlay the sense of pleasure in her face. There was no peace in Molly’s eyes, only the quick alternations of acute enjoyment and the revolt against pain and a child’s resentment at supposed blame.

Pleasure was uppermost at this moment, for so many slight, easy, human pleasures were new to her. She sat curved on the ground, with the ease and suppleness of a greyhound ready to spring, whereas Sir Edmund was forty and a little more stiff than his age warranted.

“But when you do enjoy yourself I imagine it’s worth a good many hours of our friend’s sunny existence. Oh, dear, dear!” For at that moment the dairy was a scene of some confusion; two enormous dogs from the Castle had bounded up to Lady Groombridge, barking outrageously, and one of them had covered her companion with mud.

“She is saying that it does not matter in the least, and that the gown is an old rag, but I’m sure it’s new on to-day, and it’s impossible to say how much has not been paid for it.”

Molly laughed; she felt as sure that Sir Edmund was right as if she could hear every word the little woman was saying.

“Well, *that* you will allow is humbug!”

“Yes, I think I will this time, and I believe, too, that the philosophy has collapsed. I’m sure she’s a mass of ruffled feathers, and her mind is full of things that she will hurl at the devoted head of her maid when she gets in. You can only really wound that type of woman to the quick by touching her clothes. There now, is that severe enough?”

“Why do we always talk of Mrs. Delaport Green?” asked Molly.

“Because she is on trial in your mind and you are not quite sure whether she suits.”

“I might go further and fare worse,” said Molly.

“Is there no one you would naturally go to?” asked Edmund.

“There is the aunt who brought me up, Mrs. Carteret, and I’d rather—” She paused. “There is nothing in this world I would not rather do than go back to her.”

Molly’s face was completely overcast; it was threatening and angry.

“Poor child!” said Edmund gently.

“I wonder,” said Molly, “if anybody used to say ‘poor child’ when I was small. There must have been some one who pitied an orphan, even in the cheerful, open-air system of Aunt Anne’s house, where no one ever thought of feelings, or fancies, or frights at night, or loneliness.”

Edmund looked at her with a sympathy that tried to conceal his curiosity.

“Was it possible,” he wondered, “that she really thought she was an orphan?”

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“It’s dreadful to think of a very lonely child,” he said.

“But some people have to be lonely all their lives,” said Molly.

Sir Edmund was touched. She had raised her head and looked at him with a pleading confidence. Then, with one swift movement, she was suddenly kneeling and tearing to pieces two or three primroses in succession.

“Some people have to say things that can never be really said, or else keep everything shut up.”

“Don’t you think they may make a mistake, and that the things can be said—” He hesitated; he did not want to press her unfairly into confidence; “to the right person?” he concluded rather lamely.

“Who is to find the right person?” said Molly bitterly; “the right person is easy to find for people who have just ordinary cares and difficulties, but the people who are in real difficulties don’t easily find the right person. I doubt if he or she exists myself!”

She turned to find Edmund Grosse looking at her with far too much meaning in his face; there was a degree and intensity of interest in his look that might be read in more than one way.

Molly blushed with the simplicity suited to seventeen rather than to twenty-one. She was very near to the first outpouring in her life, the torrent of her pent-up thoughts and feelings was pressing against the flood-gates. It seemed to her that she had never known true and real sympathy before she felt that look. She held out her hands towards him with a little unconscious gesture of appeal.

“I have had a strange life,” she said; “I am in very strange circumstances now.”

But Edmund suddenly got up, and before she could speak again a slight sound on the path showed her that some one was coming.

Rose, finding every one dispersed, had taken a walk by herself in the wood. She was glad to be alone; she felt the presence of God in the woods as very near and intimate. Her mind had one of those moments of complete rest and feeding on beautiful things which come to those who have known great mental suffering in their lives, and to whom the world is not giving its gaudy preoccupations. So, walking amidst the glory of spring lit by a spiritual sunshine, Rose came round a little stunted yew-tree to find Molly kneeling on the ground ivy, and Edmund standing by her. Molly rose in one movement to her full height, as if her legs possessed no jointed impediments, and a fiercely negative expression filled the grey eyes. Rose’s kind hand had unwittingly slammed the flood-gates in the moment they had opened; and Edmund, seeing that look, and feeling the air electric, suddenly reverted to a belief in Molly’s sense of guilt towards Rose.

For the fraction of a second Rose looked helplessly at Edmund, and then held out a little bunch of violets to Molly.

“Won’t you have these? There; they suit so well with your gown.”

With a quick and very gentle touch she put the violets into Molly’s belt, and smiled at her with the sunshine that was all about them.

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Molly looked a little dazed, and the “Thank you” of her clear low voice was mechanical.

“I was just coming for a few minutes’ walk in the wood.”

Rose’s voice was very rich in inflection, and now it sounded like a caress.

“But I wonder if it is late? I think I have forgotten the time, it is all so beautiful.”

She laid her hand for a moment on Molly’s arm.

“It is very late,” said Edmund with decision, but without consulting his watch on the point.

They all moved quickly, and while making their way back to the Castle Rose and Edmund talked of Lord and Lady Groombridge, and Molly walked silently beside them.

CHAPTER X

THE PET VICE

“May I come in?”

At the same moment the door was half opened, and Lady Groombridge, in a heavy, dark-coloured gown, made her way in, with the swish of a long, silk train. She half opened the door with an air of mystery, and she closed it softly while she held her flat silver candlestick in her hand as if she wished she could conceal it, yet the oil lamps were still burning in the gallery behind her. The appearance of the wish for concealment was merely the unconscious expression of her mental condition at the moment.

Two women looked up in surprise as she made this unconsciously dramatic entrance into her guest’s bedroom. Lady Rose was sitting in front of the uncurtained window in a loose, white dressing-gown, lifting a mass of her golden hair with her hair brush. She had been talking eagerly, but vaguely, before her hostess came in, in order to conceal the fact that she wished intensely to be allowed to go to bed.

Lady Rose made many such minor sacrifices on the altar of charity, and she was sorry for the tall, thin, mysterious girl who, at first almost impossibly stiff and cold, had volunteered a visit to her room to-night. It was only a very few who were ever asked to come into Rose’s room, and she had hastily covered the miniature of her dead husband in his uniform with her small fan before she admitted Molly.

By some strange impulse, Molly had attached herself to Rose during the rest of that Easter Sunday. Curiosity, admiration, or jealousy might have accounted for Molly’s doing this. To herself it seemed merely part of her determination to face the position

without fear or fancies. If Lady Rose found out later with whom she had spent those hours, at least she should not think that Molly had been embarrassed. Perhaps, too, Sir Edmund's efforts to keep them apart made her more anxious to be with her.

Having been kindly welcomed to Rose's room, Molly found herself slightly embarrassed; they seemed to have used up all common topics during the day, and Molly was certainly not prepared to be confidential.

The entrance of the hostess came as a relief. That lady, without glancing at Rose or Molly as she came into the middle of the room, banged the candlestick down on a small table, and then threw herself into an arm-chair, which gave a creak of sympathy in response to her loud sigh.

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“It is perfectly disgraceful!” she said, “and now I don’t really know what has happened. On Easter Sunday night, too!”

Molly had been standing by the window, looking out on the moonlit park. She now leaned further across the wide window-seat, so that her slight, sea-green silk-clad figure might not be obtrusive, and the dark keen face was turned away for the same purpose.

“That woman has actually,” Lady Groombridge went on, “been playing cards in the smoking-room on Easter Sunday night with Billy and those two boys. What Groombridge will say, I can’t conceive; it is perfectly disgraceful!”

“Have they been playing for much?”

“Oh, for anything, I suppose; and Edmund Grosse says that the boy from the Parsonage has lost any amount to Billy. They have fleeced him in the most disgraceful way.”

There was a long silence. Rose looked utterly distressed.

“If he had only refused to play,” she said at last, as if she wished to return in imagination to a happier state of things.

“It’s no use saying that now,” said Lady Groombridge, with an air of ineffable wisdom.

Molly Dexter bit her tiny evening handkerchief, and her grey eyes laughed at the moonlight.

“Well, Rose, I can’t say you are much comfort to me,” the hostess went on presently, with a dawn of humour on her countenance as she crossed one leg over the other.

“But, my dear, what can I say?”

The tall, white figure, brush in hand, rose and stood over the elderly woman in the chair. Rose had had the healthy development of a girlhood in the country, but her regular features were more deeply marked now and there were dark lines under her clear, blue eyes.

“Do you think,” said the hostess in a brooding way, “that Mrs. What’s-her-name Green would tell you how much he lost, Rose, if you went to her room? Of course, I can’t possibly ask her.”

“Oh no; she thinks me a goody-goody old frump.”

At the same moment another brush at the splendid hair betrayed a half-consciousness of the grace of her own movements.

“She wouldn’t say a word to me—she is much more likely to tell one of the men. Perhaps she will tell Edmund Grosse to-morrow; he is so easy to talk to.”

“But that’s no use for to-night, and Groombridge will be simply furious if I ask him to interfere without telling him how much it comes to. Billy won’t say a word.”

“I think,” said Rose very slowly, “that if we all go to bed now, we shall have some bright idea in the morning.”

Before this master-stroke of suggestion had reached Lady Groombridge’s brain, a very low voice came from the window.

“Would you like me to go and ask her?”

The hostess started; she had forgotten Miss Molly Dexter. A little dull blush rose to her forehead.

“Oh dear, I had forgotten you were there; but, after all, she is no relation of yours, and it isn’t your fault, you know. Could you—would you really not mind asking her?”

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“I don’t mind at all. Might I take your candle?”

“Of course,” said Lady Groombridge, “you won’t, don’t you know——”

“Say that you sent me?” The low, detached voice betrayed no sarcasm. She knew perfectly well that Lady Groombridge disliked being beholden to her at that moment. It was rather amusing to make her so.

For fifteen minutes after that the travelling clock by Lady Rose’s bed ticked loudly, and drowned the faint murmur of her prayers while she knelt at the *prie-dieu*.

Lady Groombridge knew Rose too well to be surprised. But she did not, like the young widow, pass the time in prayer; she was worried—even deeply so. She was of an anxious temperament, and she was really shocked at what had happened.

Molly did not come back with any air of mystery, but with a curiously negative look.

“Thirty-five pounds,” she said very quietly.

Lady Groombridge sat up, very wide awake.

“More than half his allowance for a whole year,” she said with conviction.

“Oh dear, dear,” said Lady Rose, rising as gracefully as a guardian angel from her *prie-dieu*.

Molly made no comment, although in her heart she was very angry with Mrs. Delaport Green. Her quick “Good-night” was very cordially returned by the other two.

“Now tell me something more about Miss Molly Dexter,” said Rose, sinking on to a tiny footstool at Lady Groombridge’s feet as soon as they were alone.

“I am ashamed to say that I know very little about her; I am simply furious with myself for having asked them at all. I don’t often yield to kind-hearted impulses, and I’m sure I’m punished enough this time.”

Lady Groombridge gave a snort.

“But who is she? Is she one of the Malcot Dexters?”

“Yes; I can tell you that much. She is the daughter of a John Dexter I used to know a little. He died many years ago, not very long after divorcing his wife, and this poor girl was brought up by an aunt, and Sir Edmund says she had a bad time of it. Then she made one of those odd arrangements people make nowadays, to be taken about by this Mrs. Delaport Green, and I met them at Aunt Emily’s, and, of course, I thought they

were all right and asked them to come here. After that I heard a little more about the girl from some one in London; I can't remember who it was now."

"Poor thing," said Rose; "she looks as if she had had a sad childhood. But what curious eyes; I find her looking through and through me."

"Yes; you have evidently got a marked attraction for her."

"Repulsion, I should have called it," said Rose, with her gentle laugh.

Lady Groombridge laughed too, and got up to go to bed.

"And what became of the mother?"

"She is living—" said the other; then she caught her sleeve in the table very clumsily, and was a moment or two disengaging the lace. "She is living," she then said rather slowly, "in Paris, I think it is, but this girl has never seen her."

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“How dreadful!”

“Yes. Good-night, Rose; do get to bed quickly,—a wise remark when it is I who have been keeping you up!”

Lady Groombridge, when she got to her own room, murmured to herself:

“I only stopped just in time. I nearly said Florence, and that is where the other wicked woman lives. It’s odd they should both live in Florence. But—how absurd, I’m half asleep—it would be much odder if there were not two wicked women in Florence.”

Sir Edmund was aware as soon as he took his seat by Molly at the breakfast-table that she knew why Lady Groombridge was pouring out tea with a dark countenance. He put a plate of omelette in his own place, and then asked if Molly needed anything. As she answered in the negative he murmured as he sat down:

“Mrs. Delaport Green is not down?”

“She has a furious toothache.”

Molly’s look answered his.

“I suppose there is no such thing as a dentist left in London on Easter Monday?”

No more was safe just then; but by common consent they moved out on to the terrace as soon as they had finished breakfast.

“It is too tiresome, too silly, too wrong,” said Molly.

“Yes; the pet vice should be left at home,” said Edmund. “Many of them do it because it’s fashionable, but this one must have it in the blood. I saw her begin to play, and she was a different creature when she touched the cards. What sort of repentence is there?”

“I found her crying last night like a child, but this morning I see she is going to brazen it out. But she wants to quarrel with me at once, so I don’t get much confidence.”

“But you don’t mind that?”

“Not in the least, only—” Molly sighed, but intimate as their tone was, she did not now feel any inclination to reveal her greater troubles.

“I don’t want to end up badly with my first venture, and I have nowhere else to go. For to-day I think she will talk of going to see the dentist until she finds out how she is treated here.”

“Oh! that will be all right for to-day,” said Edmund. “There are no possible trains on Bank holiday, and no motor. Let her get off early to-morrow.”

Molly had evidently sought his opinion as decisive, and she turned as if to go and repeat it to Mrs. Delaport Green.

“But what will you do yourself?” he asked very gently.

“I shall go away with her, and then—I wonder—” She hesitated, and looked full into his face. “Would you be shocked if I took a flat by myself? I don’t want to hunt for another Mrs. Delaport Green just now.”

Sir Edmund paused. It struck him for a moment as very tiresome that he should be falling into the position of counsellor and guide to this girl, while he had anything but her prosperity at heart. He looked at her, and there was in her attitude a pathetic confidence in his judgment.

“I don’t want,” she went on, holding her head very straight and looking away to the wooded hills, “I don’t want to do anything unconventional.”

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A deep blush overspread the dark face—a blush of shame and hesitation, for the words, “your mother’s daughter ought to be more careful than other girls,” so often in poor Molly’s mind, were repeated there now.

“If there were an old governess, or some one of that sort,” suggested Sir Edmund, with hesitation.

“Oh yes, yes!” cried Molly eagerly; “there is one, if I could only get her. Oh, thank you, yes! I wonder I did not think of that before.” And she gave a happy, youthful laugh at this solution.

“Is it some one you really care for?” asked Edmund, with growing interest.

“I don’t know about really caring”—Molly looked puzzled—“but she would do. There is one thing more I wanted to ask you. About the silly boy last night: whom does he owe the money to? I know nothing about bridge.”

“He owes it to Billy.”

Molly looked sorry.

“I thought, if it were to Mrs. Delaport Green——”

“You might have paid the money?” Edmund smiled kindly at her. “No, no, Miss Dexter, that will be all right.”

She turned from him, laughing, and went indoors to Mrs. Delaport Green’s room.

She found that lady writing letters, and the floor was scattered with them, six deep round the table. She put her hand to her face as Molly came in.

“There are no possible trains,” said Molly, “so I’m afraid you must bear it. Sir Edmund advises us to go by an early train to-morrow: he thinks to-day you would be better here, as there won’t be a dentist left in London.”

“I am very brave at bearing pain, fortunately,” was the answer, “and I am trying, even now, to get on with my letters. I think I shall go to Eastbourne to-morrow; there are always good dentists in those places. I love the churches there, and the air will brace my nerves. I might have gone to Brighton only Tim is there. Will you”—she paused a moment—“will you come to Eastbourne too?”

Mrs. Delaport Green was not disposed to have Molly with her. She was exceedingly annoyed at the *debacle* of her visit to Groombridge—a visit which she was describing in glowing terms in her letters to all her particular friends. It would be unpleasant to have

Molly's critical eyes upon her; she liked, and was accustomed to, people with a very different expression.

Molly, however, ignoring very patent hints with great calmness and firmness, told her that she intended to stay with her for just as long as it was necessary before finding some one to live with in a little flat in London. She felt the possibility, at first, of Mrs. Delaport Green's becoming insolent, but she was presently convinced that she had mastered the situation. They agreed to go to Eastbourne together next day, and then to look for a flat for Molly in London. The suggestion that Mrs. Delaport Green might help Molly to choose the furniture proved very soothing indeed.

Molly went down-stairs again to let Sir Edmund know they were not going to leave till next morning, and to find out if he had succeeded in speaking to Lady Groombridge.

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As she passed through the hall, she saw that he was sitting with Lady Rose by a window opening on to the terrace. She was passing on, being anxious not to interrupt them, but Rose held out her hand.

“I’ve hardly seen you this morning. Do come and sit with us.” And then, as Molly rather shyly sat down by her side on a low sofa, Lady Rose went on:

“I was just telling Sir Edmund a very beautiful thing that has happened, only it is very sad for dear Lord Groombridge and for her. They have only had the news this morning, but it is not a secret, and it is very wonderful. You know that this place was to go to a cousin, quite a young man, and they liked him very much. They did mind his being a Roman Catholic, but they were very good about it, and now he has written that he has actually been ordained a priest, and that he will not have the property or the Castle as he is going to be just an ordinary parish priest working amongst the poor. It is wonderful, isn’t it? They say the next brother is a very ordinary young man—not like this wonderful one—and so they are very much upset to-day, poor dears. They knew he was studying for the priesthood, but they did not realise that the time for his Ordination had really come.”

Molly murmured shyly something that sounded sympathetic, and then, looking at Sir Edmund, ventured to say:

“Mrs. Delaport Green would like to stay till the early train to-morrow. But have you seen Lady Groombridge?”

“Yes; it’s all right—or rather, it’s all wrong—but she won’t tell Groombridge to-day, and she will be quite fairly civil, I think.”

“And this news,” said Rose gently, “will make them both think less of that unfortunate affair last night.”

Molly rose and moved off with an unusually genial smile.

CHAPTER XI

THE THIN END OF A CLUE

Edmund Grosse later on in the morning strolled down to the stables. He had been there the day before, but he had still something to say to the stud-groom, an old friend of his, who had the highest respect for the baronet’s judgment.

Edmund loved a really well-kept stable, where hardly a straw escapes beyond the plaited edges, where the paint is renewed and washed to the highest possible pitch of

cleanliness, and where a perpetual whish of water and clanking of pails testify to a constant cleaning of cobblestone yard and flagged pavement.

In the middle of Groombridge Castle stable-yard there was an oval of perfect turf, and that was surrounded by soft, red gravel; then came alternate squares of pavement and cobble-stones, on to which opened the wide doors of coach-houses and stables and harness-rooms, and the back gate of the stud-groom's house.

An old, white-haired, ruddy-faced man standing on the red gravel smiled heartily when Sir Edmund appeared. The man was in plain clothes, with a very upright collar and a pearl horseshoe-pin in his tie; his figure was well-built, but showed unmistakably that his knees had been fixed in their present shape by constant riding.

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He touched his hat.

“How’s the mare to-day, Akers?” asked Sir Edmund.

“Nicely, nicely; it’s a splendid mash that, Sir Edmund. Old Hartley gave me the recipe for that. He was stud-groom here longer than I have been, in the old lord’s day. He had hoped to have had his son to follow him, but the lad got wild, and it couldn’t be.”

The old man sighed, and changed the conversation. “Will you come round again, sir?”

“Yes,” said Edmund; “I don’t mind if I do. But you’ve got a son of your own about the stable, haven’t you?” he asked, as they turned towards the other side of the yard.

“I had two, Sir Edmund,” was the brief and melancholy answer. “Jimmy’s here, but the lad I thought most on, he went and enlisted in the war, and he couldn’t settle down again after that. Jimmy, he’ll never rise to my place—it would not be fair, and I wouldn’t let his lordship give it a thought—but the other one might have done it.”

Sir Edmund felt some sympathy for the stay-at-home, whom he knew. “He seems a cheerful, steady fellow.”

“He’s steady enough, and he’s cheerful enough,” said his father, in a tone of great contempt; “but the other lad had talent—he had talent.”

Both men had paused in the interest of their talk.

“My eldest son, Thomas, of whom I’m speaking, went to the war in the same ship as General Sir David Bright, and there’s a thing I’d like to tell you about that, Sir Edmund. It never came into my head how curious a thing it was till yesterday—last night, I may say. Lady Rose Bright’s lady’s-maid come in with Lady Groombridge’s lady’s-maid to see my wife, and you’ll excuse me if I do repeat some woman’s gossip when you see why I do it. Well, the long and short of it was that it seems Lady Rose Bright has been left rather close as to fortune for a lady in her position, and the money’s all gone off elsewhere. Then the maid said, Sir Edmund—whether truly or not I don’t know, naturally—that there had been hopes that another will might be sent home from South Africa, but that nothing came of it. I felt, so to speak, puzzled while I was listening, and afterwards my wife says to me while we were alone, she says, ’Wasn’t it our Thomas when he was on board ship wrote that he had put his name to a paper for Sir David Bright?’—witnessing, you’ll understand she meant by that, sir—’and what’s become of that paper I should like to know,’ says she. So she up and went to her room and took out all Thomas’s letters, and sure enough it was true.”

Akers paused, and then very slowly extracted a fat pocket-book from his tight-fitting coat, and pulled out a letter beautifully written on thin paper. He held it with evident respect, and then, after a preparatory cough, he began to read:

“’I was sent for to-day, and taken up with another of our regiment to the state cabins by Sir David Bright’s servant, and asked to put my name to a paper as witness to Sir David Bright’s signature, and so I did.’”

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Akers stopped, and looked across his glasses at Sir Edmund.

“I don’t know if you will remember Sir David’s servant, Sir Edmund; he was killed in the same battle as Sir David was, poor fellow. A big man with red hair—a Scotchman—-you’d have known that as soon as he opened his mouth. He’d have chosen my boy from having known him here, in all probability.”

“Yes, yes,” said Grosse impatiently; “but how do you know that what he witnessed was a will?”

“Well, of course, I don’t know, Sir Edmund, and of course the boy didn’t know what was in the paper he witnessed; but the missus will have it that that paper was a will, and there’ll be no getting it out of her head that the right will has been lost. I was wondering about it when I see you come into the yard, and I thought I’d just let you see the lad’s letter. It could do no harm, and it might do good.”

Edmund had been absolutely silent during this narrative, with his eyes fixed on the stud-groom’s face.

“And where is Thomas now?” he asked, in a low voice.

“He’s in North India somewhere, Sir Edmund, but that is his poor mother’s trouble; we’ve not had a line from him these three months.”

“Oh, I’ll find him for you,” said Edmund, and he was just going to ask what regiment Thomas was in when they were disturbed by the appearance of Billy emerging from the hunters’ stable, and Edmund Grosse felt an unwarrantable contempt for a young man who dawdles away half the morning in the stable.

“Should I find you at six o’clock this evening?” he asked, in a low voice, of the stud-groom; and having been satisfied on that point, he strolled off and left Billy to talk of the horses.

Edmund Grosse felt for the moment as if the missing will were in his grasp, and he was quite sure now that he had never doubted its existence. What he had just heard was the very first thing approaching to evidence in favour of his own theory, which he had hitherto built up entirely on guess-work. Of course, the paper might have been some ordinary deed, some bit of business the General had forgotten to transact before starting. But, if so, he felt sure that it must have been business unknown to the brothers Murray, as they had discussed with Grosse every detail of Sir Edmund’s affairs. One thing was certain: it would be quite as difficult after this to drive out of Edmund Grosse’s head the belief that this paper was a will as it would be to drive it out of the head of Mrs. Akers.

Edmund was in excellent spirits at luncheon. In the afternoon he drove with Lady Groombridge and Rose and Molly to see a famous garden some eight miles off, the owners of which were away in the South. The original house to which the gardens belonged had been replaced by a modern one in Italian style at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was not interesting, and Lady Groombridge gave a sniff of contempt as she turned her back on it and her attention, and that of her friends, to the far more striking green walls beyond the wide terraced walk on the south side of the building.

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In the midst of ordinary English country scenery, these gardens had been set by a great Frenchman who had caught the strange secret of the romance of utterly formal hedges. He could make of them a fitting framework for the glories of a court, or for sylvan life in Merrie England. There were miles of hedges; not yew, hornbeam had been chosen for this green, tranquil country. At one spot many avenues of hedges met together as if by accident, or by some rhythmic movement; it was a minuet of Nature's dancing, grown into formal lines but not petrified—every detail, in fact, alive with green leaves. If you stood in the midst of this meeting of the ways, the country round outside, seen in vistas between the hedges, was curiously glorified, more especially on one side where the avenues were shortened. There one saw larger glimpses of fields and woods and bits of common-land that seemed wonderfully eloquent of freedom and simplicity, nature and husbandry. But if you had not seen those glimpses through the lines of strange, stately, regal dignity—the lines of those mighty hedges—you would not have been so startled by their charm. That was the triumph of the genius of Lenotre: he had seen that, framed in the sternest symbols of rule and order, one could get the freshest joy in the pictures of Nature's untouched handiwork. On the west side the avenues of hedges disappeared into distant vistas of wood, one only ending in a piece of most formal ornamental water. I don't know how it was, but it was difficult not to be infected by a curious sense of orgy, of human beings up to their tricks—love tricks, drinking and eating—perhaps murdering tricks—all done in some impish fantastic way, between those long hedges or behind them. If there were not something going on down one avenue you looked into, it was happening in another.

Somewhat of all this Edmund said to Molly as they strolled between the hedges which reached far above his head, but she felt that he was absent-minded while he did so. He had planned for himself a walk and a talk with Rose, but he had reckoned without his hostess, who had shown so unmistakably that she intended him to amuse Molly that it would have been discourteous to have done anything else. He had felt rather cross as he saw Lady Groombridge and Rose turn down one of the longest walks, one that seemed indeed to have no ending at all, with an air of finality, as if their *tete-a-tete* were to be as long as the path before them, and as secret as the hedges could keep it. He would never have come out driving with three women if he had not hoped to get a talk alone with Rose. He told himself that Rose's avoidance of him was becoming quite an affectation, and after all, he asked himself, what had he done to be treated like this?

"Why, if I were trying to make love to her she could not be more absurd! The only time after our first walk here that we have been alone she made Miss Dexter join us, and as the girl would not stay Rose found she must write letters."

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As soon as he had made up his mind that he would show Rose what nonsense it all was, he could and did—not without the zest of pique—turn his attention to Molly.

“Lady Groombridge doesn’t frame well here, does she?” he said, smiling. “Rather a shock at that date—the tweed skirt and the nailed boots and the felt hat.”

“Yes; but Lady Rose floats down between the hedges as if she had a long train, only she hasn’t,” laughed Molly. “The hem of her garment never touches the earth, as a matter of fact. I wonder how it is done.”

“You are right,” said Edmund; “and, do you know another thing about Rose?—whatever she wears she seems to be in white.”

“I know,” answered Molly. “I see what you mean.”

“It may be,” said Edmund, “because she always wore white as a young girl. I remember the day when David Bright first saw her she was in white.” Edmund had for a moment forgotten entirely why he should not have mentioned David Bright. If Molly could have read his mind at the next moment she would have seen that he was expressing a most fervent wish that he had never met her. How little he had gained, or was likely to gain, from her, and how stupid and tiresome, if not worse, was this appearance of friendship. He felt this much more strongly on account of the morning’s discovery, and he was determined to keep on neutral ground.

“Have you ever seen Versailles?” he asked.

“No; I have seen absolutely nothing out of England except India, when I was a small child.”

There it was again! He could not let her give him any confidences about India or anything else.

“Well, the hedges at Versailles don’t impress me half as much as these do, and yet these are not half so well known. There’s more of nature here, and they are not so self-contained. At Versailles the Court and its gardens were the world, and nature a tapestry hanging out for a horizon; here it is amazing how the frame leads one’s eyes to the great, beautiful world outside. I never saw meadows and woods look fairer than from here.”

They were silent; and in the silence Grosse heard shouting and then saw a huge dog dragging a chain, rushing along the avenue towards them, while louder shouts came from the opposite direction.

“We must run,” he said very quietly, “there’s something wrong with it;” and two men, still calling and waving their arms, appeared at the end nearest the house. Edmund took Molly by the arm, and they ran to meet the men.

“Get the lady over the kitchen-garden wall!” shouted one who held a gun, and as they came to the end of the hedge on their left they saw a wall at right angles to it about five feet high. Molly looked for any sort of footing in the bricks for one second, and then she felt Grosse lift her in his arms, and deposit her on the top of the wall. She rolled over on the other side into a strawberry bed in blossom. She heard a gun fired as she jumped to her feet, and a second shot followed.

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“He’s dead, sir,” she heard a voice say. “I’ll open the gate for the lady.”

And then a garden gate a few yards off was opened inward, and Molly walked to meet the man whom she supposed to be a head gardener. She thanked him and went through the gate, to find Edmund, with a very white face, leaning back on a stone bench built into the wall.

“The gentleman strained himself a bit,” said the gardener, in a tone of apology to Molly. “I can’t think how he come to break his chain”—he meant the dog this time. “I’ve said he ought to be shot long ago; now they’ll believe me. Why, he bit off the porter’s ear at the station when he first come, and he was half mad with rage to-day.”

“I’m all right,” said Edmund, with a kindly smile to the horribly distressed Molly. She went up to him with a gentle, tender anxiety on her face that betrayed a too strong feeling, only he was just faint enough not to notice it.

“It’s nothing, child,” he said in the fatherly tone that to Molly meant so far too much. “The merest rick. I forgot, in the hurry, to think how high I was lifting you, and I also forgot that there might be cucumber frames on the other side!”

“I wouldn’t have said ‘over the garden wall,’ sir, if there had been,” said the gardener with a smile, as he offered a glass of water that had been fetched by the other man, whose coat and gaiters proclaimed him unmistakably a keeper.

“A fine dog, poor fellow,” said Edmund to the latter.

The keeper shook his head. “I don’t deny it, sir, but there are fine lions and fine bears, too, sir, that are kept locked up in the Zooelogical Gardens.” Evidently the gardener and the keeper were of one opinion in this matter.

Presently Sir Edmund was so clearly all right that the men, after being tipped and having all their further offers of help refused, went away.

Edmund and Molly were left alone.

“How well you run!” he said, smiling.

“Yes; even without a ferocious dog behind me I can run fairly well,” she said. “But I wish you had let me get over that wall alone. And I wish they could have spared that splendid animal.”

“After all, he would have been shot whether we had been there or not,” said Edmund. “My only bad moment was listening for the crash of broken glass and thinking that you were cut to pieces.”

“You are sure that you have not hurt yourself?” Her grey eyes were large with anxiety.

Edmund, laughing, held up his hand, which was bleeding.

“I see I have sustained a serious injury of which I was not aware in the excitement of the crisis.”

Molly examined his hand with a professional air. Edmund let her wash it with her handkerchief dipped in the glass of water, and bind it with his own. Her touch was light and skilful, and it would have been absurd to refuse to let her do it. But, as holding his wrist she raised it a little higher to turn her bandage under it, her small, lithe, thin hand was close to his face, and he gave it the slightest kiss.

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Any girl who had been abroad would have taken it as little more than the merest politeness, but to Molly it came as a surprise. A glow of quick, deep joy rose within her; her cheeks did not blush, for this was a feeling too peaceful, too restful for blushes or any sort of discomfort.

“This young lady can run like a deerhound,” said Edmund, “and bandage like a surgeon.”

“But that’s about all she can do,” laughed Molly. “Ah! there”—she could not quite hide the regret in her voice—“there are Lady Groombridge and Lady Rose.”

CHAPTER XII

MOLLY’S NIGHT WATCH

That night Molly could write it on the tablets of her mind that she had passed a nearly perfect day. The evening had not promised to be as happy as the rest, but it had held a happy hour. Mrs. Delaport Green had made a masterly descent just in time for dinner. Molly smiled at the thought when alone in her room. A beautiful tea-gown had expressed the invalid, and was most becoming.

“Every one has been so kind, dear Lady Groombridge; really, it is a temptation to be ill in this house—everything so perfectly done.”

Lady Groombridge most distinctly grunted.

“Why is toothache so peculiarly hard to bear?” She turned to Edmund Grosse.

“It wants a good deal of philosophy certainly, especially when one’s face swells; but yours, fortunately, has not lost its usual outline.” And he gave her a complimentary little bow.

“Oh! there you are wrong,” cried the sufferer. “My face is very much swollen on one side.”

But she did not mention on which side the disfigurement was to be seen, and she ate an excellent dinner and talked very brightly to her host, who could not think why his wife had taken an evident dislike to the little woman. Edmund teased her several times, and would not let her settle down into her usual state of self-content, but after dinner she wisely took refuge with the merciful Rose.

Lady Groombridge meanwhile gave Molly a dose of good advice, kindly, if a little roughly, administered.

“I was pretty and an orphan myself, and it is not very easy work; then you have money, which makes it both better and worse. Be with wise people as much as you can; if they are a little dull it is worth while. If you take up with any bright, amusing woman you meet, you will find yourself more worried in the long run;” and she glanced significantly at Mrs. Delaport Green.

The obvious nature of the advice, of which this remark is a sample, did not spoil it. Sometimes it is a comfort to have the thing said to us that we quite see for ourselves. In to-day’s unwonted mood Molly was ready to receive very ordinary wisdom as golden.

And then Lady Groombridge discovered that Molly was musical, and the older woman loved music, finding in it some of the romance which was shut out by her own limitations and by a life of over great bustle and worry.

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So Molly found in her music expression for her joy in the spring, and her wistful, undefined sense of hope in life.

Lady Groombridge, sitting near her, listened almost hungrily, and asked for more. She was utterly sad to-night with the “might have been” of a childless woman. The news of the final sacrifice on the part of the heir to Groombridge, of all that meant so much to herself and her husband, had made so keen to her the sense of emptiness in their old age. And the music soothed her into a deeper feeling of submission that in reality underlay the outward unrest and discontent of to-day. Submission was, at one time, the most marked virtue of every class in our country, and it may be found sometimes in those who, having lost all other conscious religion, will still say, “He knows best,” revealing thereby the bed-rock of faith as the foundation of their lives. Lady Groombridge had not lost her religious beliefs, but she was more dutiful than devout, and did not herself often reflect on what strength duty depended.

And Molly, who knew nothing of submission, yet ministered to the older woman’s peace by her music. When the men came out, Lord Groombridge took a chair close to his wife’s as if to share in her pleasure, and Edmund moved out of Molly’s sight. She sometimes heard the voice of Rose or of Billy or of Mrs. Delaport Green, but not Sir Edmund’s, and she naturally thought he was listening, whereas part of the time he was reading a review. But as the ladies were going up to bed, he said, looking into the large, grey eyes:

“Who said she could do nothing but run like a deerhound and bandage like a surgeon? And now I find she can play like an artist. What next?”

And Molly, standing in her room, said to herself that it had been the happiest day of her life.

But a moment later the maid came in, and while helping to take off her dinner dress, told her mistress that the kitchenmaid in a room near hers was groaning horribly. It seemed that Lady Groombridge had given out some medicine, and Lady Rose had sent up her hot-water bottle and her spirit-lamp, and had advised that the bottle be constantly refilled during the night.

“But I’m sure, miss, she shouldn’t take that medicine. I took on myself to tell her not to till I’d spoken to you, and I’m sure I don’t know who is going to sit up filling bottles to-night. Lady Groombridge’s maid”—in a tone of deep respect—“isn’t one to be disturbed, and the scullerymaid won’t get to bed till one in the morning: this girl being ill it gives her double work.”

Molly instantly rose to the situation. She knew of better appliances than the softest hot-water bottles, and soon after her noiseless entrance into the housemaid’s attic the pain had been relieved. But, being a little afraid that the girl was threatened with

appendicitis, she knew that if that were the case the relief from the application she had used was only temporary. However, the patient rested longer than she expected. Molly sat by the open window, while behind her on the two narrow beds lay the sick girl and the now loudly-snoring scullerymaid, who had come up a little before twelve o'clock.

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“Not quite six hours’ sleep that girl will get to-night,” mused Molly, “and then downstairs again and two hours’ work before the cook comes down to scold her. What a life!”

But, after all, Molly had noticed the blush with which the girl had put a few violets in a little pot on the chimney-piece. Was it quite sure that Miss Dexter’s life would be happier than that of the snorer on the bed, who smiled once or twice in her noisy sleep?

“There is happiness in this world after all,” mused Molly, soothed by thoughts of the past day, by the stillness on the face of the earth, and by a certain rest that came to her with all acts of kindness—a certain lull to those activities of mind and instinct that constantly led her out of the paths of peace.

This was a sacred time of the night to Molly. It was associated in her mind with the best hours she had ever lived, hours of sick nursing and devotion, hours of real use and help. For months now she had been living entirely for herself, to fight her own battle and make her own way in a hostile world. She had had much excitement and even real pleasure. Her imagination had taken fire with the notion that she must assert herself or be crushed in the race of life. Heavy ordinary people would find it hard to understand Molly’s strange idealisation of the glories of the kingdom of this world which she meant to conquer. And if she were frustrated in her passion for worldly success, there were capacities in her which she as yet hardly suspected, but she did feel at times the stirrings of evil things, cruelty, revenge, and she hardly knew what else. How could people understand her? She shrank from understanding herself.

But to-night she knew the inspiration of another ideal; she recognised the possibility of aims in which self hardly counts. There had been indeed a stir in the minds of all at Groombridge when they knew of the final step taken by the heir. Molly, looking up at the great castle, on her homeward drive, with its massive towers and its most commanding position, had felt more and more impressed by an action on so big a scale. It was impossible to be at Groombridge and not to feel the great and noble opportunities its possession must give any remarkable man; and the man who could give up such opportunities must be a very remarkable man indeed. In Molly’s self-engrossed life it had something of the same effect as a great thunderstorm among mountains would have had in the physical order.

And to-night it came over her again, and she seemed to be listening to the echoes of a far vibrating sound. And might there not be happiness for Mark Molyneux? Might it not be happiness for herself to give up the wretched, uncomfortable fight that life so often seemed to be, and to let loose the Molly who could toil and go sleepless and be happy, if she could achieve any diminution of bodily pain in man or woman, child or beast?

The dawn lightened; one or two rabbits stirred in the bracken in the near park—this was peace. Then Molly smiled tenderly at the dawn. There might come another solution in which life would be unselfish without such acute sacrifice, and in which evil possibilities

would be starved for lack of temptation. And all that was good would grow in the sunshine.

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And the sleeping scullerymaid smiled also.

CHAPTER XIII

SIR DAVID'S MEMORY

Lady Rose Bright was faintly disturbed on Tuesday morning, and came into Lady Groombridge's sitting-room after Mrs. Delaport Green and Molly had left the castle too preoccupied to notice the tall figure of Grosse in a far window.

This room had happily escaped all Georgian gorgeousness of decoration, and the backs of the books, a fine eighteenth-century collection, stood flush to the walls. The long room was all white except for the books, the flowered chintz covers, some fine bronze statuettes, and a few bowls of roses.

Lady Rose moved mechanically towards the empty fire-place.

It was one thing to try not to dislike Miss Dexter, and to see her in a haze of Christian love; it was another to realise that, while she herself had slept most comfortably, Molly had not been to bed at all because the little kitchenmaid was in pain. Humility and appreciation were rising in Rose's mind, as half absently she gently raised a vase from the chimney-piece, and, turning to the light to examine its mark, saw Sir Edmund looking at her from his distant window.

A little, quite a little, flush came into her cheeks; not much deeper than the soft, healthy colour usual to them. She examined the china with more attention.

The tall figure moved slowly, lazily, down the room towards her, holding the *Times* in one hand.

"It's not Oriental," he said, "it's Lowestoft."

"Ah!" said Rose absently. She felt the eyes whose sadness had been apparent even to Mrs. Delaport Green looking her over with a quick scrutiny.

"Why, in your general scheme of benevolence, have you not thought it fit, during the last few days, to give me the chance of talking to you alone?" The tone was full of exasperation, but ironical too, as if he were faintly amused at himself for being exasperated.

"I don't know. Have I avoided being alone with you?" Rose had turned to the chimney-piece.

Edmund Grosse sank into a low chair, crossed his legs, and looked up at her defiantly, but with keen observation.

“It has been too absurd,” he said, “you have hardly spoken to me, and you know, of course, that I came here to see you. I meant to go to the Riviera until I heard that you were coming here.”

“But you have been quite happy, quite amused. There seemed no reason why I should interrupt. And you know, Edmund, they said that you came here every year.”

“Well, I didn’t come only to see you,” he said, “as you like it better that way. And now, it is about Miss Molly Dexter I want to speak to you.”

This time Rose gave a little ghost of a sigh, and looked at him with unutterable kindness. She was feeling that, after all, she had come second in his consciousness—-after Miss Dexter, whom she could not like, but who had sat up all night with the kitchenmaid.

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“Why about Miss Dexter? what can I have to do with her?” The tone was almost contemptuous—not quite, Rose was too kind.

“Do you remember that I went to Florence?”

“Yes; I did not want you to go.” There was at once a distinct note of distress in her voice. It was horribly painful to her to have to think of the things she tried so hard to bury away.

“No, but I went,” he said very gently; “and it was useless, as I knew it would be. But I want to tell you one thing which I have learnt, and which I think you ought to know, as it may be inconvenient if you do not. It is that Miss Dexter——” Rose interrupted him quickly.

“Is the daughter of the lady in Florence?” She gave a little hysterical laugh. He looked at her in astonishment.

“And that is why she dislikes me so much. Do you know, Edmund, I had a feeling from the moment I first saw her that there was something wrong between us. It gave me a horrible feeling, and then I asked Mary Groombridge about her, and she told me the poor girl’s story; only she said the mother lived in Paris. Of course Mary does not know, or she would never have asked us here together. But that is how I knew what you were going to say; and yet I had no notion of it till a moment ago, when it came to me in a flash. Only I wish I had known sooner!”

It was not common with Rose to say so much at a time, and there had been slight breaks and gaps in her voice, pathetic sounds to the listener. She seemed a little—just a little—out of breath with past sorrow and present pain. Edmund thought he would never come to know all the inflections in that voice.

“I wish I had known sooner. I am afraid I have not been kind to her.”

“And if you had known you would have cast your pearls at her feet,” he said, in tender anger. “Don’t make the mistake of being too kind to her, Rose. I want you to keep her at a distance. There is something all the more dangerous about her because she is distinctly attractive. She has primitive passions, and yet she is not melodramatic; it’s a dangerous species.”

It was amazing how easy it was to take a severe view of poor Molly after she had gone away, and how he believed what he said.

“She has never seen her mother?” asked Rose gently.

“No, but I am sure she knows about her mother,” the slowness in his voice was vindictive; “and that her mother knows what we don’t know about the will.”

“Edmund dear,” said Rose very earnestly, “do please leave that point alone; no good can come of it. I do assure you that no good, only harm, will come of it. It’s bad and unwholesome for us all—mother and you and me—to dwell on it. I do really wish you would leave it alone.”

Edmund frowned, though he liked that expression, “mother and you and me.”

“You needn’t think about it unless you wish to,” he answered.

“But I wish you wouldn’t!”

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“If I had banished it from my thoughts up till now, I could not leave it alone now, for I have a clue.”

“Oh, don’t, Edmund.”

“Well, it may come to nothing; only I’m glad that it makes one thing still more clear to me though it may go no further.”

He told her then of what the stud-groom had said, and ended by showing her the letter. Rose read it in silence, and then, still standing with her face turned away, she said in a very low voice:

“It is a comfort as far as it goes. But I knew it was so; he never meant things to be as they are—poor David! Edmund, it is of no use to think of it. Even if the paper then witnessed were the will, it is lost now and will never be found. I would rather—I would *really* rather not think too much about it.”

“No, no,” he answered soothingly, “don’t dear, don’t dwell on it.”

“I like,” she answered, “to dwell on the thought that David did think of me lovingly, and did not mean to leave me to any shame. I am sure he never meant to leave me poor, and to let me suffer all the publicity about that poor woman. I am sure he always meant to change the will in time, but, you see, all that mischief is done and can’t be undone. I mean the humiliation and the idea that she was in Florence all the time during our married life, and all the talk, and my having to meet this unfortunate girl who has his money. All of them think he was unfaithful to me, and nothing can put that right. Nothing—I mean nothing of this world—can put any of that right. And I can’t bear the idea of a quarrel and going to law with these people for money; it may be pride, but I simply can’t bear it.”

“But, don’t you see,” said Edmund, “that if we could prove there was another will, that would clear David’s reputation.”

“It won’t prevent people knowing that there was the first will and all about the poor woman in Florence.”

“No; but it will make people feel that he behaved properly in the end. It will alter their bad opinion of him.”

“But it will also make them go on thinking and talking of the scandal, and if it is left alone they will forget. People forget so soon, because there is always something new to talk about. He will just take his place among the heroes who died for their country, and the rest will be forgotten.”

Edmund looked at her quickly, as if taking stock of the delicate nature of the complex womanly materials he had to deal with, but her face was still averted.

“I think it’s hard on David.” He spoke as if yielding to her wish. “I do think it is hard. If he did make this will, and it is lost through chance or fraud, I think it is very hard that his last wishes should be disregarded, and his memory should suffer in all right-minded people’s opinions. Of course, it is for you to decide, but I own I should otherwise feel it wrong to leave a stone unturned if anything could be done to restore his good name.”

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He felt that Rose was terribly troubled, but he could not quite realise what it was to her to disturb her hardly-won peace of mind and calm of conscience.

“If it were not for the money!” she faltered. “I shall get to long for that money; so many people become horrid when they have a lawsuit about a fortune. It has always seemed to me that if the money is only for one’s self one might leave it alone, and then, after all, if we went to law and failed, things would be much worse than they were before.”

“Well,” said Edmund, slightly exasperated but controlling himself. “I don’t mean to do anything definite yet, but we ought to find out if we can make a case of it. We can always stop in time if we can’t get what we want, but it’s worth while to try. It is not merely the money—the less you dwell on that the better. Seriously, I think it would be very wrong that, through any fastidiousness of yours, David’s memory should not be cleared if it is possible to clear it.”

The last shot had this time reached the mark. After a few minutes’ silence Rose said in a very low voice:

“But then, what can I do about it?” He felt that she was hurt, but he knew he had gained his point.

“I don’t think you can do anything at this moment but allow me a free hand; I could not do what is necessary without your permission and your trust—and, presently, let me compare notes with you freely. I know what your judgment is worth when you can get rid of those scruples.”

“Very well.”

But still she did not turn round. Indeed, the wounds in her mind were too deep and too fresh to make the subject give her anything but quivering pain. It was impossible that Edmund should suspect half of what she felt. He naturally concluded that much of her present suffering showed how unconquerably Rose’s love for Sir David had outlived the strain put on it. To Rose it would have been much simpler if it had been so. But in fact part of the trial to Rose was the doubt of her own past love, and of her own present loyalty. Had she ever truly loved David while he was still her hero “*sans peur et sans reproche*,” could that love have been killed at all? So much anxiety to be sure of having forgiven, so much self-reproach for the failure of her marriage, such an acute, overwhelming sense of shame, and such shrinking from all that was ugly and low, were intermixed and confused in poor Rose’s mind that it was no wonder even Edmund, with all his tact and his tenderness, blundered at times.

They were quite silent for some moments. Edmund wanted to see her face but he could not. Presently she looked into the glass over the chimney-piece, and in the glass he saw with remorse a little tear about to fall.

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“I think I’ve caught cold,” she murmured to herself. Producing a tiny handkerchief she seemed to apply it to her nose, and so caught that one little tear. Her movements were wonderfully graceful, but the man looking at her did not think of that. What he thought was:—How exactly she was herself and no one else. How could she have that child’s simplicity of hers, and her amazing power of seeing through a stone wall? How could she be a saint and have all a woman’s faults? How could she live half in another world and yet with all her absurd unworldliness be so eminently a woman of this one? She was twenty-six, but she knew what many women of fifty never learn; she was twenty-six, yet she was more innocent than many a child of thirteen. What a contrast to Molly’s crude ignorance and hankering after success!

All the time he looked at her in silence and she did not seem to realise it. She put her handkerchief into her belt and took it out again; she touched her hair, seeing in the glass that it was untidy. Then she sat down on a low stool, and her soft, fluffy black draperies fell round her. She pressed her elbows on her knees, and sank her face in her hands. She might have been alone; he was not quite sure she was not praying. There were some moments of silence. At last she moved, raised her head, and looked him gently full in the face.

“And you—you never talk about yourself,” she said, with a thrill in her voice that he had known so long. “I always talk so much of myself when I am alone with you.”

“No,” he said, with a touch of lazy anger, “I’m not worth talking about, not worth thinking of, and you know it!”

For a moment she flushed.

“You always have abused yourself.”

“Because I know what’s in your thoughts, and when I am with you I can’t help expressing them—there!” he concluded defiantly, and crossed and uncrossed his legs again.

“Edmund, that isn’t one bit, one little bit true. But I do wish you were happier.”

“Yes, of course,” he went on sardonically, “you know that too. You know that I loathe and detest life—that I hate the morning because it begins a new day. Oh, I am bored to extinction, you know all that, you most exasperating woman. I hate”—he suddenly seemed to see that he was giving her pain, and the next words were muttered to himself—“no, I love the pity in your eyes.”

The graceful figure sitting there trembled a little, and the white hands covered the eyes again.

“But,” he went on quickly in a louder voice, “the pity’s no good. You might as well expect me to command an army to-morrow, or become an efficient Prime Minister, or an Archbishop of Canterbury, or a Roman Catholic Cardinal, or anything else that is impossible, as become the sort of man you would like me to be. You know so perfectly well,” he laughed, “how rotten I am; you are astonished if you find me do any sort of good—you can’t help it, how can you, when it’s just and true? Do you know I sometimes have had absurd dreams of what I might have been if you had not been so terribly clear-sighted. You stood in your white frock under the old mulberry tree—your first long skirt—and you saw that I was no good, and you were perfectly right, but, after all, what is your life to be now?”

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Rose got up from the stool and rested one hand on the marble mantelpiece. She needed some help, some physical support.

“Edmund,” she said, “I don’t think I dwell much on the future; I leave all in God’s hands. I have been through a good deal now, you must not expect too much of me.” She paused. “But what you have said to me about yourself is nonsense; I wish you would not talk like that. You are only forty. You are very clever, very rich, you have the right sort of ambition although you won’t say so, and you are, oh! so kind. Couldn’t you do something, have some real interest?” He growled inarticulately. “Is it of no use to ask you just to think it over?”

“None whatever,” he said firmly and cheerfully.

The gong sounded in the hall for luncheon.

BOOK II

CHAPTER XIV

MOLLY IN THE SEASON

“Still together?”

“Yes; and it has not turned out so badly as might be expected.”

“I thought you were to have had a flat with a dear old governess?”

“I could not get Miss Carew, the governess in question, and Adela Delaport Green pressed me to stay with her for the season.”

“It does credit to the amiability of both,” said Edmund.

“I don’t know about that,” answered Molly, “we both knew what we wanted, and that we could not easily get it unless we combined, and so we combined.”

“But was it quite easy to get over the slight friction at Groombridge?”

“Oh, yes; directly we got away Adela was all right. She felt stifled by the atmosphere, and she recovered as soon as she got home.”

Edmund would have been less surprised at the tone of this last remark if he had seen Lady Groombridge’s exceedingly offhand way of greeting Molly this same evening. That great lady, having expected to find that Molly had, acting on her advice, abandoned Mrs.

Delaport Green, was quite disappointed in the girl when she met them still together in London, and so she extended her frigidity to both of them.

“And you are enjoying yourself?” Edmund went on. “Come, let us sit behind those palms. You look as if things were going smoothly.”

“It is delightful.”

Molly cast her grey eyes over the moving groups that were strolling about the ballroom, and over the lights and flowers and the band preparing to begin again, and then looked up into Edmund’s face. It was a slow, luxurious movement, fitted to the rather unusually developed face and expression. Most debutantes are crude in their enjoyment, but Molly was beginning London at twenty-one, not at eighteen, and circumstances made her more mature than her actual experience of society warranted. Yet it seemed to Edmund that the untamed element in her was the more striking from the contrast. Molly accepted social delights and social conventions as a young and gentle tigress might enjoy the soft turf of an English lawn.

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The defiance in her tone when she alluded to Groombridge faded now.

“I have six balls in the next four nights, and one opera, and we are going to Ascot, then back to London, then to Cowes, and, after that, I am going to the Italian Lakes and to Switzerland, and wherever I like.”

“Is Mrs. Delaport Green so very unselfish?”

“Oh, no; I am only going to stay with Adela till the end of the season, and then I am going abroad with two girls who are quite delightful, and in October the flat and the governess are to come into existence.”

“Yes; everything—everything perfect,” murmured Grosse, looking at her with an expression that included her own appearance in the “everything perfect.” Then, dropping his restless eyeglass, he went on.

“And you are never bored?”

“Never for one single moment.”

“Amazing! and what is more amazing is that possibly you never will be bored.”

“Am I to die young then?” asked Molly.

“Not necessarily, but I believe you will enjoy too keenly, and probably suffer too keenly to be bored.”

“Did you ever enjoy very keenly?” asked Molly, with timid interest.

“Didn’t I!” cried Grosse, with unusual animation; “until the last seven or eight years I enjoyed myself hugely, but——”

“Why did it stop?” asked Molly, her large eyes straining with eagerness.

“You look like a child who must know the end of the story at once. Do you always get so eager when you are told a story? Mine is dreadfully dull. While I had plenty of work to do, and something to look forward to, I was amused, but then——”

“Then what?”

“Well, then I became rich, and I’ve been dawdling about ever since. At first I enjoyed it, but now I’m bored to extinction.”

“I can understand,” said Molly, “when anything becomes quite easy it doesn’t seem worth while to do it. But isn’t there anything difficult you want to do?”

“Yes,” said Edmund, “there are two things; one is plainly impossible, and the other is not hopeful, and neither of them prevents my feeling bored, for unfortunately neither of them gives me enough to do.”

“Couldn’t you work more at them?” asked Molly, with much sympathy.

“No,” he said, as if talking to himself, “no one has the power to make a woman change her nature, and the other matter needs an expert. Good Heavens!” he stopped short, in astonishment at himself.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Molly, while a deep flush of colour rose in her dark cheeks.

“You must be a witch,” he said lightly; “you make me say things I don’t in the least mean to say, and that I have never said to anyone else. And here is a distracted partner, Edgar Tonmore, coming to reproach you.”

“Our dance is nearly over, Miss Dexter,” said a young, fresh voice, and a most pleasing specimen of well-built and well-trained manhood stood before them. “I have been looking for you everywhere.”

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Molly and Edmund rose.

He stood where they left him watching her whirl
past. It was as he had suspected; she had the gift of perfect movement.

And Molly, as she danced past, glanced towards the tall, loose figure, dignified with all its carelessness and with some curious trick of distinction and indifference in its bearing, and twice she caught tired eyes looking very earnestly at her.

“Good Heavens! I was talking of Rose to that girl, and of my efforts to get at her mother’s money, and I never speak of either to mortal man. What made me do it?”

Slowly he turned away and left the ballroom and the house, declining with a wave of the hand various appeals to stay, and found himself in the street.

“Sympathies and affinities be hanged!” He said it aloud. “She isn’t even really beautiful, and I’ll be hanged, too, if I’ll talk to her any more.”

But, alack for Molly, he did talk to her on almost every occasion on which they met. It was from no conscious lack of royalty to Rose; it was largely because he was so full of her and her affairs that he would in an assembly of indifferent people drift towards one who was in any way connected with those affairs. Then one word or two, the merest “how d’ye do?” seemed to develop instantly into talk, and shortly the talk turned to intimate things. And for him Molly was always at her best. Many people did not like her, yet admired her, and admitted her into their houses half unwillingly. Her speech was not often kindly, and there was an element of defiance even in her quietness, for her unmistakable social ease was distinctly negative. Molly was rich and dressed well, and Mrs. Delaport Green was a very clever woman, whose blunders were rare and whose pet vice was not unfashionable. There was nothing in this life to soften and ripen the best side of Molly. But Edmund drew out whatever she had in her that was gentle and kindly.

It does not need the experience of many London seasons in order to realise that it is a condition of things in which many of the faculties of our nature are suspended. It is not as a Puritan moralist might put it, that the atmosphere of a whirlpool of carnal vice chokes higher things, for the amusements may be perfectly innocent. Only for a time the people who are engaged in them don’t happen to think, or to pity, or to pray, or to condemn, or often, I believe, to love, though it may seem absurd to say so. It may, therefore, be called a rest cure for aspirations and higher ambitions and anxieties and all the nobler discontents. To Molly it was youth and fun and brightness and forgetfulness. There was no leisure to be morbid, no occasion to be bitter or combative. The game of life was too bright and smooth, above all too incessant not to suffice.

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Mrs. Delaport Green might be outside the circle in which Lady Groombridge disported herself with more dignity than gaiety, but she had the *entree* to some houses almost as good, if not as exclusive, and she had also a large number of acquaintances who entertained systematically and extravagantly. That the Delaport Greens were very rich, or lived as if they were very rich, had from the first surprised the "paying guest." Lately it had become evident to her that if Adela had not been addicted to cards, Molly would never have been established in her house. She had found out by now that Mr. Delaport Green was a man of very good repute in the financial world as being distinctly successful on the Stock Exchange. He struck Molly as a sturdy type of Englishman, rather determined on complete independence, and liking to pay his way in a large free fashion. She rather wondered at his having consented to the plan of the "paying guest," but he seemed quite genial when he came across her and inquired with sympathy after her amusements, and evidently wished that she should enjoy herself.

Many girls whose position was undoubtedly secure, whom no one disliked and everybody was willing to amuse, had a much less amusing summer than Molly. And Edmund Grosse, most unconsciously to himself, was a leading figure in the warm dream of delight in which Molly lived from the middle of May till the end of June. They did not meet often at dances, but at stiffer functions, at the Opera, and also twice in the country—once on the river on a Sunday afternoon, and once for a whole week-end party, which last days deserve to be treated in more detail.

The group who met under the deep shade of some historic cedars, on a hot Saturday afternoon, to spend together a Saturday to Monday with a notably pleasant host and hostess, had carried with them the electric atmosphere of the season that so fascinated Molly's inexperience, to perfume it further with the June roses and light it with the romance of summer moonlight. Of the party were Molly and her chaperone and Sir Edmund Grosse.

By this time Mrs. Delaport Green had made up her mind that Molly had decidedly better become Lady Grosse, and she felt that it would be a pleasing and honourable conclusion to the season if the engagement were announced before she and Molly parted. She had fleeced Molly very considerably, but she wanted her to have her money's worth, and go away content.

It would take long to carry conviction as to the actual good and the possibility of further good there was in Mrs. Delaport Green. Out of reach of certain temptations she might have been quoted as a positive model of goodness and unselfish brightness. If her imitative gift had found only the highest models, she might have been a happy nun, or a quiet, stay-at-home wife and mother. But she was tossed into a social whirlpool where her instincts and her ambitions and her perceptions were all confused, and out of the depths of her little spoiled soul, had crawled a vice—probably hereditary—which might otherwise have slept. It was fast becoming known that Molly's chaperone was a thorough gambler.

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Sir Edmund Grosse was not unwilling to dawdle under the shade of an old wall with Mrs. Delaport Green that Saturday evening in the country.

“I feel terribly responsible,” she said, in her thin eager little voice; “I am sure that boy is going to propose to my protege!”

“What boy?” asked Edmund, in a tone of indifference.

“Edgar Tonmore.”

“Is Edgar here, then?”

“Oh, no; it won’t be at once. He has gone to Scotland, but he will be back before we leave London.”

“Really he is an excellent fellow. I don’t see why you should be anxious.”

“But Molly is an orphan,” she said plaintively, eyeing him quickly as she spoke.

“Even so, orphans marry and live happily ever after.”

“But I’m not sure she will live happily.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think she cares for him.”

“Then I suppose she will refuse.”

“But people so often make mistakes. I don’t think dear Molly knows her own mind, and it is so natural that she should not confide in me as I am in her mother’s place.”

“Leave things alone. Edgar will find out if she likes him or not.”

“Will he? oh well, it’s a comfort that you take that view.” And she then changed the topic, being of opinion that nothing more could be done with it. But no doubt the effect produced in Edmund was an increase of interest in Molly’s affairs. It would be exceedingly tiresome if she should marry this attractive but penniless boy, as he knew him to be, under the impression that she possessed enough money for them both.

Edmund had only that morning received certain intelligence of the whereabouts of young Akers, the son of the old stud-groom.

From Florence had come the information that Madame Danterre was supposed to be in failing health, and that she had been seldom seen to drive out of her secluded grounds this summer, whereas last year she used to go long distances in her old-fashioned

English carriage in the evenings. Thus it became a matter of thrilling interest whether the great fortune would pass to Molly before any evidence could be produced of the existence of the last will in which he so firmly believed.

“I believe the old sinner knows all about it, even if she hasn’t got it,” Grosse murmured to himself.

Finally he concluded that it would be better if Molly married money and not poverty, and did not smile on the penniless Edgar Tonmore. Therefore, finding himself alone with her during church time next morning, he thought no harm of trying to put a little spoke in the wheel to prevent that affair going too easily. But first he asked her why she did not go to church.

“I might say, why don’t you go yourself?” said Molly, “but I don’t mind telling you that I hardly ever do go.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Molly was leaning back in a low chair under the shadow of the cedars, as still as if she would never move again, as still as the greyhound that was lying by her. “I hate going to church. None of it seems beautiful to me as it does to Adela. My aunt used to say that we were not fortunate in our clergyman, but personally I don’t like any clergymen. I am anti-clerical like a Frenchwoman.”

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“Have you any French blood?”

“Yes; my mother was French.”

“But you do good works; I remember how you nursed the kitchenmaid at Groombridge.”

“I like to stop pain, but not because it is a good work. I can’t stand all the fuss about good works and committees, and nonsense about loving the poor. It’s a way rich people have to make themselves feel comfortable. Don’t you think so?”

“No, I don’t. I know people who make themselves exceedingly uncomfortable because they give away half what they possess.”

“Really,” said Molly, a little contemptuously. She knew that he was thinking of Rose Bright. “My opinion is that doing good works means to bustle about trying to get as much of other people’s money to give away as you can, without giving any yourself.”

Edmund did not like to suggest that this opinion might be the result of special experiences gained while living in the house of Mrs. Delaport Green.

“If,” Molly went on, evidently glad to relieve her mind on the subject, “you got the money to pay your unfortunate dressmaker, there would be some justice in that. But,” she suddenly sat up and her eyes shot fire at Edmund, “to fuss at a bazaar to show your kindness of heart while you know you are not going to pay the woman who made the very gown you have on, is perfectly sickening.”

“It is atrocious,” said Grosse, who wanted to change the subject. But this was effected by the most unexpected apparition of Mr. Delaport Green, whom they had both supposed to be refreshing himself by the sea at Brighton.

Mr. Delaport Green was dressed in very light grey, with a white waistcoat. His figure was curious, as it extended in parts so far in front of the rest that it gave the impression that you must pass your eyes over a great deal of substance in the foreground before you could see the face. Then again, the nose was so predominant that it checked any attempt to realise the eyes and forehead, while the cheeks were baggy and the skin unwholesome.

Edmund Grosse had only seen him on two occasions when he dined at his house, and he had liked him at once. There was something markedly masculine about him; he knew life, and had made up his mind as to his own part in it without delusions and without whining. He would have preferred to have been slim and handsome, and to have known the ways of the social world from his youth, but there were plenty of other things to be interested in, and he was not averse to the power which follows on wealth. He was a self-made Englishman, with nothing of the Jew about him, either for good or evil. But no apparition could have been more surprising to the two as he came slowly

over the grass to meet them. Molly saw at once that Adela's husband was exceedingly annoyed, probably exceedingly angry, and although she had always felt his capacity for being very angry, she had never seen him in that condition before.

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“I came down in the motor to get a short talk on business with Miss Dexter,” he explained, “but I am sorry to disturb a more amusing conversation.”

Edmund, of course, after that left them alone, and walked off by himself.

Molly looked all her astonishment at Adela’s “Tim.”

“Miss Dexter,” he said very slowly, “I was given to understand when you came to us in the winter that you were a young lady wanting a home and some amusement in London. I thought it kindly in my wife to wish to have you with her, and, as she is young and a good deal alone” (Molly looked the other way at this assertion), “I thought it would be for the advantage of both. But I had no notion that there was any question of payment in the case, and I must now ask you to tell me exactly what you have paid to Mrs. Delaport Green since first you made her acquaintance.”

Molly was not entirely astonished at discovering that Adela’s husband had known nothing whatever of Adela’s financial arrangements with herself. But she was so angry at this proof of what she had up to now only faintly suspected, that it was not very difficult to make her tell all that she knew of her share in Adela’s expenses, only that knowledge proved to be of a very vague kind. Molly had kept no accounts, and had the vaguest notion of what her bills included. One thing she intended to conceal (but Mr. Delaport Green managed to make her confide even that) was the fact that she had given L100 to his wife’s dressmaker. He made no comment of any sort, only firmly and quietly insisted on Molly giving him all the items she could. Then he got up and said—

“Good-bye for the present; I want to get back in time for lunch.”

And he walked away, making one or two notes in a little book he held in his hand as to the cheque that Molly should find waiting for her next day.

Molly, left alone on the bench, did not at the first moment dwell on the thought of how far this talk with her host would affect her own plans. She could only think of the man himself. She had been for many weeks in his house, and had never done more than “exchange the weather” with him, or occasionally suffer gladly the little jokes and puns to which he was addicted. She had written to Miss Carew that his attitude towards Adela and herself was that of a busy man towards his nursery. Since that how little she had thought about him! And now she felt the strength in him, not weakened, but lit up with a kind of pathos. He might have been a true friend to any man or woman. He was really fond of Adela Delaport Green, and that position in itself was tragic enough. It was plain to Molly, although nothing had been breathed on the subject that morning, that Tim would not find it hard to forgive his Adela. Adela would pass almost scot-free from well-merited punishment; and yet her husband was strong enough to have punished effectively where he deemed it necessary. Molly was puzzled because she was without a clue to

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the mystery. The fact was that Tim had no wish to punish effectively. As long as Adela passed untouched by one sin, as long as he felt sure of one great virtue in her life, all such details as much gambling, much selfishness, absurd extravagance, could be easily forgiven. Molly herself would be fairly dealt with and set aside; the “paying guest” was an indignity that he would soon forget. He would have been entirely indifferent to the impression of regretful interest that he had made upon her.

That night Edmund Grosse was Molly’s confidant as to the second, and evidently final, rupture between herself and Mrs. Delaport Green that had taken place in the afternoon. He could not but be kind and sympathetic as to her difficulties. It was, no doubt, very blind of him not to see that she was too quickly convinced of the wisdom of his advice, far too anxious to act as seemed well in his opinion. It never dawned on his imagination for a moment that the most serious part of the loss of the end of the season to Molly was the loss of his society during that time.

They strolled in the moonlight between the cedars and under the great wall with its alternate “ebon and ivory” of darkest evergreen growths and masses of white climbing roses, Molly’s white gown rustling a little in the stillness. And Molly discovered with joy that he was trying to set her mind against marriage with Edgar Tonmore. If he only knew how little danger there was of that! And under Edmund’s influence she decided to offer herself for a visit of two or three weeks to Mrs. Carteret, in the old and much disliked home of her childhood. It would look right; it would give a certain dignity to her position after the breakdown of the Delaport Green alliance, and it was always a great mistake to break with natural connections. So far Edmund Grosse; and in Molly’s mind it ran something like this: “He wants me to stand well with the world, and I will do this, intolerable as it is, to please him. He likes to think that I have some nice relations, and so I must try to be friendly with Aunt Anne Carteret, though that is the hardest part. And he wants me to get away from Edgar Tonmore, and I would go away from so many more people if he wished it.”

The evening passed into night, and Edmund was walking alone under the wall, dreaming of Rose.

All this foolish gambling, quarrelsome, small world of men and women made such a foil to her image. Molly and her mother, the Delaport Greens, and many others were grouped in his mind as he purled the smoke disdainfully from his cigar. Something in Molly’s walk by his side just now had made him see again the old woman with her quick, alert movements in the garden at Florence; after all they were cut from the same piece, the old wicked woman and the slight, dark girl with the curious eyes. Molly must not be trusted; she must be suspected all the more because of her attractions in the moments of dangerous gentleness. And with a certain simplicity Edmund looked again at the

moon above him, all the more glorious because secret and dark things were moving stealthily under the trees in the lower world.

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And Molly was kneeling on her low window-seat, looking out at the same moon in a mood of joy that was transmuted half consciously into prayer by the alchemy of pure love.

CHAPTER XV

A POOR MAN'S DEATH

Early in October, Molly and Miss Carew took up their abode in a flat with quite large rooms and a pleasing view of Hyde Park.

August and September had been two of the healthiest and most normal months that Molly had ever spent or was likely ever to spend again. The weeks between the rupture with the Delaport Greens and the journey to Switzerland had been trying, although it was undoubtedly much pleasanter to be Mrs. Carteret's guest than it had ever been to be a permanent inmate of her house.

Molly—thought Mrs. Carteret—was restless, not inclined to morbid thoughts, and more gentle than of yore, but more nervous and fanciful.

It was not until after a fortnight abroad, after the revelation of mountains realised for the first time, that Molly had the courage to say to herself that she had been a fool during the visit to Aunt Anne. Was it in the least likely that a man of Edmund Grosse's kind would act romantically or hastily? Of course not. She had been as foolish as Mrs. Browning's little Effie in dreaming that a lover might come riding over the Malcot hills on a July evening.

The girls with whom Molly had travelled were of a healthy, intellectual type, and Molly, under their influence, had grown to feel the worth of the higher side of Nature's gifts. And so, vigorous in mind and body, she had come to London in October, so she said, to study music.

Miss Carew was a little disappointed when Molly expressed lofty indifference as to who had yet come to London. But that indifference did not last long when her friends of the season began to find her out. Then Miss Carew surprised Molly by her excessive nervousness and shyness of new acquaintances. "Carey" had always professed to love society, and had always been very carefully dressed in the fashion of the moment. But, as a civilian may idealise warfare and be well read in tactics, and yet be unequal to the emergency when war actually raises its grisly head, so it was with poor Miss Carew. She simply collapsed when Molly's worldly friends, as she called them with envious admiration, swept into the room, garnished with wonderful hats and fashionable furs. She had none of a Frenchwoman's gift for ignoring social differences, and she had the uneasy pride that is rare in a Celt, although she had all a Celt's taste for refinement and

show and glitter. Miss Carew sat more and more stiffly at the tea-table, until she confided frankly to Molly—

“My dear, I am too old, and I am simply in the way. It is just too late in my life, you see, after all the years of governess work. Of course, if my beloved father had lived, I should never have been a governess. But as it is, I think I need not appear when you have visitors, except now and then.”

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Molly acquiesced after enough protest, chiefly because she had begun to wonder if it would be quite easy to have an occasional *tete-a-tete* with men friends without having to suggest to Miss Carew to retire gracefully. She had that morning heard that Sir Edmund Grosse was in London, but she had no reason, she told herself, to suppose that he knew where she was.

Meanwhile, she was exceedingly angry at finding that Adela Delaport Green was giving her version of her relations with Molly in the season to all her particular friends. Molly could not find out details, but she more than suspected that the fact of her being Madame Danterre's daughter made up part of Adela's story, although she could not imagine how she came to know who her mother was.

Molly would probably have brooded to a morbid degree over these angry suspicions, but that another side of life was soon pressed upon her, a new source of human interest, in the dying husband of a charwoman.

This woman, Mrs. Moloney, had cleaned out the flat before Molly and Miss Carew took possession.

High up in a small room in a block of workmen's buildings in West Kensington, Pat Moloney lay dying. He and his wife had been thriftless and uncertain, they drifted into marriage, drifted in and out of work, and, having watched their children grow up with some affection and a good deal of neglect, had now seen them drift away, some back to the old country, and some to the Colonies.

Mrs. Moloney counted on her fingers to remember their number and their ages, and spoke with almost more realisation of the personalities of three little beings that had died in infancy than of the living men and women and their children.

Moloney was far too ill by the time Molly Dexter came to see him to speak of anything distinctly. Three years ago he had fallen from a ladder and had refused to go into the hospital, in which decision he had been supported by his wife, who "didn't hold" with those institutions. A kindly, rough, clever young doctor had since treated him for growing pain and discomfort, and had prophesied evil from the first. Pat kept about and, when genuinely too ill for regular work, took odd jobs and drifted more and more into public houses. He had never been a thorough drunkard, and had been free from other vices, though lazy and self-indulgent. But pain and leisure led more and more to the stimulants that were poison in his condition. At last a chill mercifully hastened matters, and Pat, suffering less than he had for some months past, was nearing his end in semi-consciousness. Molly Dexter then descended on the Moloneys in one of her almost irresistible cravings to relieve suffering.

Ordinary human nature when not in pain was often too repugnant to Molly for her to be able to do good works in company with other people. She was, as she had told

Edmund Grosse, a born anti-clerical, and she scorned philanthropists; so her best moods had to work themselves out alone and without direction. Nor was she likely to spoil the recipients of her attentions, partly from the strength of her character, partly because the poor know instinctively whether they are merely the objects on which to vent a restless longing to relieve pain, or whether they are loved for themselves.

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Molly, in the village at home, had always made the expression of gratitude impossible, but she constantly added ingratitude as a large item in the account she kept running, in her darker hours, against the human race.

Late on a wet and windy October evening she went to undertake the nursing of Pat Moloney for the first part of the night. She had been visiting him constantly for several weeks, and actually nursing him for three days.

“Has the doctor been?”

“Yes, miss” (in a very loud whisper); “he says Pat is awful bad; he left a paper for you.”

Molly Dexter walked across the small, bare room and took a paper of directions from the chimney-piece, and then stood looking at the old man’s heavy figure on the bed. He was lying on his side, his face turned to the wall.

“You had better rest in the back room while I am here,” she said.

“I couldn’t, indeed I couldn’t, miss, him being like that; you mustn’t ask me to. Besides, I’ve been round and asked the priest to come, and so I couldn’t take my things off. I’ll just have some tea and a drop of whisky in it, and I can keep going all the night, it’s more than likely he’ll die at the dawn.”

Molly eyed the woman with supreme contempt.

“It isn’t at all certain that he’s going to die, he’ll make a good fight yet if you will give him a chance.”

Mrs. Moloney looked deeply offended. It had been all very well to be guided by a lady at the beginning of the illness, but now it was very different. She felt half consciously that science had done its worst, and bigger questions than temperatures and drugs were at issue.

“A priest now,” said Molly, in a whisper of intense scorn, “would kill him at once.”

Mrs. Moloney did not condescend to reply. She had propped a poor little crucifix, a black cross, with a chipped white figure on it, against a jam pot on a shelf under the window, and she had borrowed two candlesticks with coloured candles from a labourer’s wife on the floor beneath. The window had been shut, so that the wind should not blow down these objects.

Molly looked at the man on the bed and sniffed.

“He must have air—” the whisper was a snort.

At that moment there was a knock on the outer door. On the iron outer stairs was standing the priest.

“It’s just the curate,” said Mrs. Moloney, looking out of the window; and then she disappeared into the tiny passage.

Molly stood defiantly, her figure drawn to its full height. She felt that she knew exactly the kind of Irish curate who was coming in to disturb, and probably kill, the unhappy man on the bed. Well, she should make a fight for this poor, crushed life; she would stand between the horrible tyranny and superstition that lit those pink candles, and that would rouse a man to make his poor wretched conscience unhappy and frighten him to death. “If there is a hell,” she muttered, “it must be ready to punish such brutality as that.”

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Mrs. Moloney opened the door as wide as possible, and the priest came in. Miss Dexter looked at him in amazement; how, and where had she seen him before?

He went straight to the bed and looked at the man in silence, while Molly looked at him. He was about middle height, with very dark hair and eyes, a small, well-formed head, and a very good forehead. It was not until he turned to Mrs. Moloney that Molly understood why she had fancied that she had seen him before. She was sure now that she had seen his photograph, but, although she was certain of having seen it, she could not remember when or where she had done so.

“Can’t you open the window, Mrs. Moloney?”

“It’s the only place to make into an altar, father?”

“Oh, never mind that yet; I will manage.”

Molly stepped forward; whatever he was going to do, it should not be done without a protest.

“The doctor’s orders are that he is not to be disturbed.”

The priest did not seem aware of the exceedingly unpleasant expression on Molly’s countenance.

“It would be a great mistake to wake him, of course,” he said; and then, “Do you suppose he will sleep for long?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion”; the uttermost degree of scorn was conveyed in those few words.

Mrs. Moloney suppressed a sob.

“He’s not been to the Sacraments for three years,” she murmured.

The priest leant over the bed and looked intently at the dying man.

Mrs. Moloney opened the window and put the crucifix and candlesticks in a corner on the dirty floor.

“It might kill him to wake him now,” murmured Molly.

“Yes, that is just the difficulty.” The young man was speaking more to himself than to her.

“Difficulty!” thought Molly with scorn. “Fiddlesticks!”

The silence was unbroken for some moments. The fresh autumn air blew into the room. A sandy coloured cat came from under the bed, looked at them, and then rubbed her arched back against the unsteady leg of the only table, which was laden with bottles and basins, finally retired into a further corner, and upset and broke one of the pink candles that belonged to the neighbour.

But Mrs. Moloney never took her eyes off the priest's pale face.

"I'll wait until he wakes," he said to her, "but is there anywhere else I could go? It's not good to crowd up this room."

"That's intended to remove me," thought Molly, "but it won't succeed."

Mrs. Moloney moved into the little back room, and pulled forward a chair. When the priest was seated she shut the door behind her and whispered to him—

"Father, you'll not let his soul slip through your fingers, will you, father dear? Just because of the poor lady who knows no better!"

"Who is she? She is not like the district visitors I've seen about in the parish."

"No, indeed; she is a lady, and I've done some work for her, and she would not be satisfied when she heard Moloney was ill but she must come herself, and yesterday, not to grudge her her due, father, the doctor said if he pulled through that I owed her his life. Well, that's proved a mistake, anyhow, but she's after spoiling his last chance, and he's not been the good man he was once, father."

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“Yes, Mrs. Moloney, you must watch him carefully, and here I am if there is any change. I’m sure that lady is an excellent nurse, and we mustn’t let any chance slip of keeping him alive, must we?”

She shook her head; this was only an English curate, still he must be obeyed.

Molly was profoundly irritated by Mrs. Moloney’s proceeding to make a cup of tea for the priest, but he was grateful for it, as he had been out at tea-time, and had come to the Moloneys’ instead of eating his dinner. He opened the window of the tiny room as far as it would go, and read his Office by the light of the tallow candle. That finished, he sat still and began to wonder about the lady with the olive complexion and the strange, grey eyes.

“I felt as if I should frizzle up in the fire of her wrath,” he thought with a smile.

He took his rosary and was half through it when the door opened and Molly came in. She shut it noiselessly, and then spoke in her usual unmoved, impersonal voice.

“The new medicine is not having any effect; the temperature has gone up; the doctor said if it did so now it was a hopeless case. I must rouse him in an hour to give him another dose and take the temperature again. After that, if it is as high as I expect it to be, you can do anything you like to him.”

As she said the last words, she went back into the other room.

The hour passed slowly, and she came again and let the priest know in almost the same words that he was free to act as he pleased. Then she added abruptly—

“Do you mind telling me your name?”

“My name? Molyneux.”

“Then are you any relation of Lord Groombridge?”

“I am his cousin.”

“I have been at Groombridge.” But the priest felt that the tone was not in the least more friendly.

“Moloney won’t suffer now,” she went on, turning towards the door, “and I think he will be conscious for a time.”

Molly was giving up her self-imposed charge; she wanted to be off. With the need for help no longer an attraction, Moloney had almost ceased to interest her; he would remain only as part of the darker background of her mind, as a dim figure among many

in the dim coloured atmosphere of revolt and bitterness in which her thoughts on human life would move when she had no labour for her hands. He was another of those who suffered so uselessly, a mere half animal who had to do the rough work of the world, and then was dropped into the great charnel house of unmeaning death. As soon as the man began to show signs, faint signs of perception, she left the priest by his bedside and went back into the inner room to put on the cloak she had left there. And then she hesitated.

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What would go on in the next room? She was anxious now to know more about it, because she had caught so strange a look on Father Molyneux's face. If he had only known this man before she could have understood it. But how could there be this passion of affection, this intensity of feeling, for a total stranger, a rough brutal-looking fellow who was no longer in pain, who would probably die easily enough, and probably be no great loss to those he left? She had seen a strange intensity of reverence in the way the young man had touched the wreck upon the bed. She had known thrills of curious joy herself when relieving physical agony; was it something like that which filled the whole personality and bearing of the priest?

She began to feel that she could not go away; she wanted to see this thing out. It was something entirely new to her.

Low voices murmured in the next room; she hesitated now to pass through, she might be intruding at too sacred a moment. She believed that the priest was hearing the dying man's confession. She had a half contemptuous dislike of this feeling of mystery and privacy. She felt she had been foolish not to go away at once. But she did not move for nearly half an hour, and then the door opened, and the man's wife came in and started back.

"I'm sure I thought you had gone, miss." Her manner was much more cordial than it had been before. She was tearful and excited. "I want to raise him a bit higher, and there's a cloak here. He is going off fast now, but he was quite himself when I left him with the father to make his confession; he looked his old self and the good man he was for many a year—and God Almighty knows he has suffered enough these last years to change him, poor soul."

Molly went back with her to the sick bed and helped her to raise the dying man. The dawn came in feebly now, and made the guttering candle dimmer. Death was all that was written on the grey face, and the body laboured for breath. The flicker of light in the mind, that had been roused, perhaps, by those rites which had passed in her absence, had faded; there was not the faintest sign of intelligence in the eyes now; the hands were cold and would never be warm again. The sandy cat had crept away into the other room; and outside the great town was alive again, the vast crowds were astir, each of whom was just one day nearer to death. There was nothing but horror, stale, common horror, in it all for Molly. But, kneeling as upright as a marble figure, and his whole face full of a joy that seemed quite human, quite natural, Father Molyneux was reading prayers, and there was a curious note of triumph in the clear tones. At first she did not heed the words; then they thrust themselves upon her, and her eyes fastened on the dying, meaningless face, the very prey of death, in a kind of stupefaction at the words spoken to him.

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“I commend thee to Almighty God, dearest brother, and commend thee to Him whose creature thou art; that, when thou shalt have paid the debt of humanity by death, thou mayest return to the Maker, Who formed thee of the dust of the earth. As thy soul goeth forth from the body, may the bright company of angels meet thee; may the judicial senate of Apostles greet thee; may the triumphant army of white-robed Martyrs come out to welcome thee; may the band of glowing Confessors, crowned with lilies, encircle thee; may the choir of Virgins, singing jubilees, receive thee; and the embrace of a blessed repose fold thee in the bosom of the Patriarchs; mild and festive may the aspect of Jesus Christ appear to thee, and may He award thee a place among them that stand before Him for ever.”

And so it went on; some of it appealing to her more, some less; some passages almost repulsive. But her imagination had caught on to the vast outlines of the prayer—the enormous nature of the claims made on behalf of the dying labourer.

Was it Pat Moloney who was to pass out of this darkness to “gaze with blessed eyes on the vision of Truth”? What a tremendous assertion made with such intensity of confidence! What a curious pageantry, too, so magnificent in its simplicity, was ordered, almost in tones of command, by the Church Militant for the reception of the charge she was giving up. The triumphant army of Martyrs was to come out to meet him; the Confessors were to “encircle him”; Michael was “to receive him as Prince of the armies of Heaven.” Peter, Paul, John were to be in attendance. Nor in the rich strain was there any false ring of praise, or any attempt to veil the weakness of humanity. “Rejoice his soul, O Lord, with Thy Presence, and remember not the iniquities and excesses which, through the violence of anger or the heat of evil passion, he hath at any time committed. For, although he hath sinned, he hath not denied the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, but hath believed and hath had a zeal for God, and hath faithfully adored the Creator of all things.”

Was it an immense, an appalling impertinence—this great drama? Was it a mere mockery of the impotence and darkness of man’s life? Would the priest say all this at the death-bed of the drunken beggar, of the voluptuous tyrant, of the woman who had been too hard or too weak in the bonds of the flesh? Was it a last great delusion, a last panacea given by the Church to those who had consented to bandage their eyes and crook their knees in childish obedience? Vaguely in her mind there flitted half phrases of the humanitarian, the materialist, the agnostic. It seemed as if their views of the wreck on the bed pressed upon all her consciousness. But, just as they had never succeeded in silencing the voice of that great drama of faith and prayer through the ages, so she could not dull to her own consciousness the strange, spiritual vitality that poured out in this triumphant call to the powers on high to come forth in all their glory to receive the inestimable treasure of the redeemed soul of Pat Moloney.

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CHAPTER XVI

MOLLY'S LETTER TO HER MOTHER

There followed after that night a quite new experience for Molly. It was the upheaval of an utterly uncultivated side of her nature. She was astonished to find that she had religious instincts, and that, instead of feeling that these instincts were foolish and irrational—a lower part of her nature,—they now seemed quite curiously rational and established in possession of her faculties. Her mind seemed more satisfied than it had ever been before. She did not know in what she believed, but she felt a different view of life in which men seemed less utterly mean, and women less of hypocrites. Externally it worked something in this way.

The day on which Pat Moloney died at dawn she could not rest so much as she intended, to make up for the short night. She wrote one or two brief notes begging to be let off engagements, and told the servants to say she was not at home. She could not keep quite still, and she did not want to go out. Gradually, as the day wore on, she worked herself into more and more excitement. Her imagination pictured what might be the outcome of such a view of life and death as seemed to have taken hold of her. In her usual moods she would have thought with sarcasm that such were the symptoms of "conversion" in a revivalist. But now there was no critical faculty awake for cynicism; the critical faculty was full of a solemn kind of joy. Next there came, after some hours of a sort of surprise at this sudden and vehement sense of uplifting, the wish for action and for sacrifice. Her mind returned to the concrete, and the circumstances of her life. And then there came a most unwelcome thought. If Molly wanted to sacrifice herself indeed, and wished to do some real good about which there could be no self-delusion, was there not one duty quite obviously in her path, her duty as a child? Had she ever made any attempt to help the forlorn woman in Florence? Perhaps Madame Danterre's assertion, when Molly came of age, that she did not want to see Molly, was only an attempt to find out whether Molly really wished to come to her mother. From the day on which her ideal of her mother had been completely shattered Molly had shrunk from even thinking of her. She now shivered with repugnance, but she was almost glad to feel how repugnant this duty might be, much as a medieval penitent might have rejoiced in his own repugnance to the leprous wounds he was resolved to dress as an expiation for sin. It did not strike her, as it never struck the noble penitents in the Middle Ages, that it might be very trying to the object of these expiatory actions. She felt at the moment that it must be a comfort to her mother to receive all the love and devotion that she would offer her. And there was real heroism in the letter that Molly proceeded to write to Madame Danterre. For she knew that if her offer were accepted she risked the loss of all that at present made life very dear, both in what she already enjoyed, and in the hope that was hidden in her heart.

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Molly had pride enough to shrink utterly from the connection with her mother, and her girl's innocence shrank, too, with quick sensitiveness from what might be before her. How strange now appeared the dreams of her childhood, the idealisation of the young and beautiful mother!

The letter was short, but very earnest, and had all the ring of truth in it. She could not but think that any mother would respond to it, and, for herself, after sending it there could be no looking back. Once the letter was posted to the lawyer to be forwarded to Madame Danterre, a huge weight seemed to be lifted from Molly's mind. That night she met Edmund Grosse at dinner. He had never seen her so bright and good-looking, and he found he had many questions to ask as to the summer abroad.

For several weeks Molly received no answer from Florence, but during that time she did not repent her hasty action. And during those weeks her interest in religion grew stronger. Just as she had been unable to work with philanthropists, she was ready now to take her religion alone. She felt kinder to the world at large, but she did not at first feel any need of human help or human company. She went sometimes to a service at Westminster Abbey, sometimes to St. Paul's, sometimes to the Oratory, and two or three times to the church in West Kensington in which Father Molyneux was assistant parish priest. On the whole she liked this last much the best. Indeed, she was so much attracted by his sermons that she went to call upon him late one afternoon.

The visitor was shown into a rather bare parlour, and Father Molyneux soon came in. He was a good deal interested in seeing her there. He had never been more snubbed in his life than by this lady on their first meeting, and he had been much surprised at seeing her in the church soon afterwards. She was plainly dressed, though at an expense he would never have imagined to be possible, and she appeared a little softer than when he had seen her last. She looked at him rather hard, not with the look that puzzled Rose Bright; it was a look of sympathy and of inquiry.

"I have had curious experiences since we met," she said, "and I want to understand them better. Have you—has anybody been praying for me?"

"I have said Mass for you twice since poor Moloney died," he said.

"I thought there was some sort of influence," she murmured. "That night I was tired and excited and worried, and foolishly prejudiced. Somehow the prayers you read for Pat Moloney, the whole attitude of your Church in those prayers, caught my breath. I imagine it was something like the effect of a revivalist preacher on a Welsh miner." She paused. Father Molyneux was full of interest, and did not conceal it.

"I can't tell," he said. "Of course, it may have been——"

“Nerves,” interrupted Molly so decidedly that he laughed; it was not in the least what he had meant to say.

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“But,” she went on, with an air of impartial diagnosis, “it has lasted. I have been very happy. I understand now what is meant by religion. I understand what you felt about that man’s soul. I understand, when you are preaching, that intense sense of worth-whileness. I understand the religious sense, the religious attitude. It makes everything worth while because of love. It does not explain all the puzzles. It does not answer questions, it swallows them up alive. It makes everything so big, and at the same time so small, because there are infinite things too. Then it insists on reality; I see now it must insist on dogma for fear of unreality. Renan was quite wrong in that great sentence of his: ’Il ne faut rien dire de limitee en face de l’infini.’ The infinite is a fog to us if there are no outlines in our conception of it. Don’t you think so?”

There was a light in her face no one had ever seen there before.

“And the only outlines that can satisfy us are the outlines of a Personality. As a rule I have always disliked individuals. I know you are surprised. Of course, you are just the other way; you have a touch of genius, a gift for being conscious of personalities, of being attracted to them. Now I have never liked people; in fact, I’ve hated most of them. But since this religious experience I have known”—her voice dropped; it had been a little loud—“I have known that I want a friend, and can have one.”

The priest was astonished by Molly. He had never met any one like her before. Her self-confidence was curious, and her eloquence was so sudden and abounding that his own words seemed to leave him. She was in a moment as silent as she had been talkative, her eyes cast down on the floor. Then she looked at him with an almost imperious questioning in her eyes.

“You have said so much that I expected to say myself,” he said, with a faint sense of humour, “and you have not asked me a single question.”

Molly laughed “Tell me,” she said, “I am right; it is all true? I *do* understand religious experience, the religious sense at last, don’t I?”

“Shall I tell you what I miss in it?” he said, suppressing any further comment on her amazing assertion. “I mean in all you have said. And, oddly enough, the Welsh miner would have had it. I mean that, seeing Our Lord as the One Friend of your life, you should also see that you have resisted and betrayed and offended Him during that life which He gave you.”

“No: I have not thought much about that side of things” said Molly “I have been too happy.”

“You would be far happier if you did.”

“But what have I done?” said Molly, almost in a tone of injured respectability.

“Well, you have hated people—or, at least” (in a tone of apology), “you said so just now.”

“Oh! yes; it’s quite true. I am a great hater and an uncertain one. I never know who it is going to be, or when it will come.”

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“But you know you have been commanded to love them.”

“Yes; but only as much as I love myself, and I quite particularly dislike myself.”

“You’ve no right to—none whatever.”

“And why not?”

“Because God made you in His own image and likeness. You can’t get out of it. But, you know, I don’t believe one word you say. I met you showing love to the poor.”

“No, indeed,” said Molly indignantly, “I did not love Pat Moloney. I wish you would believe what I say. I hate my mother; I hate the aunt who brought me up; I hate crowds of people. I don’t hate one man because I want him to fall in love with me, but if he doesn’t do that soon, I shall hate him too. I feel friendly towards you now, but I don’t know how soon I may hate you. At least,” she paused, and a gentle look came into her face, “I had all these hatreds up to a few weeks ago; now they are comparatively dormant.”

Again the flood of her words seemed to check him, but he tried:

“I believe it then; I will take all you say as true. I think you are fairly convincing. Well, then, how do you suppose you can be united to Infinite Love, Infinite Mercy, Infinite Purity? God is not merely good, He is Goodness. Until you feel that His Presence would burn and destroy and annihilate your unworthiness, you have no sense of the joys of His Friendship. You stand now looking up to Him and choosing Him as your Friend, whereas you must lie prostrate in the dust and wait to be chosen. When you have done that He will raise you, and the Heavens will ring with the joy of the great spirits who never fell, and who are almost envious of the sinner doing Penance.”

Molly bent her head low. “I see,” she murmured, “mine have been merely the guesses of an amateur; it is useless—I don’t understand.”

“It isn’t, indeed it isn’t,” he said quietly. “It is the introduction. The King is sending His heralds. Some are drawn to Him by the sense of their own sinfulness, others, as you are, by a glimpse of His beauty.”

Molly was not angry, only disappointed. The very habit of a life of reserve must have brought some sense of disappointment in the result. She did not mind being told that she must lie in the dust; the abnegation was not abhorrent; she knew that love in itself sometimes demanded humiliation. But she felt sad and discouraged. She had seemed to have conquered a kingdom. Without exactly being proud of them, she had felt her religious experiences to be very remarkable, and now she saw that they only pointed to a very long road, hard to walk on. She got up quickly and was near the door before he was.

“Will you come and see me?” she said, and she gave him her card. “If you can, send me a postcard beforehand that I may not miss you. Good-bye.”

He opened the front door for her and her carriage was waiting.

“The third time you have been late for dinner this week,” observed the Father Rector. “Have some mutton?”

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“Thanks,” said the young man; “I wish I could learn the gentle art of sending people away without offending them.”

“They didn’t include that in the curriculum at Oxford?” The tone was not quite kind; neither was the snort with which the remark was concluded. It was no sauce to the lumpy, greasy mutton that Mark was struggling to eat. Suddenly he caught the eye of the second curate, Father Marny, who had conceived a great affection for him, and he smiled merrily with a school-boy’s sense of mischief.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BLIND CANON

In a small room in a small house in a small street in Chelsea, Father Molyneux was sitting with a friend. There were a few beautiful things in the room, and a few well-bound books; but they had a dusty, uncared for look about them. It teased the young priest to see a medicine bottle and a half-washed medicine glass standing on a bracket with an exquisite statuette of the Madonna. The present occupier of these lodgings had had very true artistic perceptions before he had become blind.

Mark Molyneux had just been reading to him for an hour, and he now put down the book. The old man smacked his lips with enjoyment. The author was new to him, but he had won his admiration at the first reading.

“What people call his paradoxes,” he said, “is his almost despairing attempt at making people pay attention; he has to shout to men who are too hurried to stop. The danger is that, as time goes on, he will only be able to think in contrasts and to pursue contradictions.”

The speaker paused, and then, his white fingers groped a little as if he were feeling after something. His voice was rich and low. Then he kept still, and waited with a curious look of acquired patience. At last, the younger man began.

“I want to ask your advice, or rather, I want to tell you something I have decided on.”

“And you only want me to agree,” laughed Canon Nicholls, and the blind face seemed full of perception.

“Well, I think you will.” The boyish voice was bright and keen. “I’ve come to tell you that I want to be a monk.”

“Tut, tut,” said Canon Nicholls, and then they both laughed together. “Since when?” he asked a moment later.

“It has been coming by degrees,” said Mark, in a low voice. “I want to be altogether for God.”

“And why can’t you be that now?”

“It’s too confusing,” he said; “half the day I am amused or worried or tired. I’ve got next to no spiritual life.”

Canon Nicholls did not help him to say more.

“I can’t be regular in anything, and now there’s the preaching.”

“What’s the matter with that?”

“Who was it who said that a popular preacher could not save his soul?
Father Rector says that it’s very bad for me that I crowd up the church.
He is evidently anxious about me.”

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“How kind!”

“Then, since I’ve been preaching, such odd people come to see me.”

“I know,” said the Canon, “there’s a fringe of the semi-insane round all churches; they used to lie in wait for me once.”

“Then I simply love society. I’ve been to hear such interesting people talk at several houses lately. I go a good deal to Miss Dexter.”

“Miss Molly Dexter.”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t do that; she’s a minx. She is the girl who stayed with that kind little woman, Mrs. Delaport Green, who sometimes comes to see me.”

“You see,” Mark went on eagerly, “I’m doing no good like this. So I have made up my mind to try and be a Carthusian.”

His face lit up now with the same intense delight. “It’s such a splendid life! Fancy! No more humbug, and flattery, and insincerity. ’Vous ne jouerez plus la comedie,’ an old monk said to me. Wouldn’t it be splendid? Think of the stillness, and then the singing of the Office while the world is asleep, like the little birds at dawn. It would be simply and entirely to live for God!”

“I do believe in a personal devil,” muttered Canon Nicholls to himself, and Mark stared at him. “Now listen,” he said. “There is a young man who has a vocation to the priesthood, and he comes under obedience to work in London. That is, to live in the thick of sin, of suffering, of folly and madness. If it were acknowledged that the place was full of cholera or smallpox it would be simple enough. But the place is thick with disguises. The worst cases don’t seem in the least ill; the stench of the plague is a sweet smell, and the confusion is thicker because there are angels and demons in the same clothes, living in the same houses, doing the same actions, saying almost the same things. In every Babylon there have been these things, but this is about the biggest. And the most harmless of the sounds, the hum of daily work, is loud and continuous enough to dull and wear the senses. So confused and perplexed is the young man that he doesn’t know when he has done good or done harm; being young, compliments appeal to him very seriously; being young, he takes too many people’s opinions; and, being young, he generalises and if, for instance, I tell him not to go often to the house of a capricious woman of uncertain temper, he probably resolves at once never to lunch in an agreeable house again. Meanwhile, above this muddle, this tragicomedy, he sees the distant hills glowing with light; so, without waiting for orders, he leaves the people crying to him for help and turns tail and runs away! And what only

the skill of a personal devil could achieve, he thinks in his heart that he is choosing a harder fight, a more self-denying life."

"But I could help those people more by my prayers."

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“Granted, if it were God’s will that you should lead the life of contemplation, but I don’t believe it is. I don’t see what right you’ve got to believe it is. As to not living altogether for God here, that’s His affair. Mind you, I don’t undervalue the difficulties, and it’s uncommon hard to human nature. Don’t think too much of other people’s opinions; I know you feel a bit out of it with the priests about you. They are rough to young men like you—it’s jealousy, if they only knew it. Jealousy is the fault of the best men, because they never suspect themselves of it. If they saw it, they would fight it. Face facts. You have some gifts; you will be much humbler if you thank God for them instead of trying to think you haven’t got them. And be quite particularly nice to the growler sort of priest; he’s had a hard time and, lived a hard life; much harder than the life of a monk. Mind you respect his scars.”

He talked on, partly to give Mark time; he saw he had given him a shock.

“Mind,” he said, “there is sometimes an acute personal temptation, but you’ve not got that now. You’ve got a sort of perception of what it might be. It won’t be unbearable.” He crossed his legs and put the long, white fingers into each other. “But I’m old now, and it’s my experience that the mischief for all priests is to let society be their fun. It ought to be a duty, and a very tiresome duty too. Take your amusements in any other way, and go out to lunch in the same state of mind as you visit a hospital. Do you think the best women, whether Protestant or Catholic, think society their fun? They may like it or not, but it is a serious duty to them.”

Mark sprang up suddenly. “I can’t stand this!” he said. “You go on talking, and I want to be a Carthusian, and I will be one.” He laughed; his voice was troubled and the clear joy of his face was clouded.

Canon Nicholls felt in his pocket for a snuff-box, and brought it out. “Go along, if you can’t stand it. And don’t come back till you’ve seen through the devil’s trick. I don’t mind what I bet that you won’t run away.”

Left alone, Canon Nicholls covered his blind eyes with his hands and heaved a deep sigh.

The man who had just left him was the object of his keenest affection, the apple of those blind eyes that craved to look upon his face. But his love was not blind, and he felt the danger there lay in the seeming perfectness of the young man. Mark’s nature was gloriously sweet and abounding in the higher gifts; his love of God had the awe of a little child, and his love of men had the tenderness of a shepherd towards his lost sheep. Mark had loved life and learning, had revelled in Oxford, and would, in one sense, be an undergraduate all his days. He had known dreams of ambition, and visions of success in working for his country. Then gently—not with any shock—had come the vocation to the priesthood, and so tenderly had the tendrils that attached him to a man’s life in the world been loosened, that the process hardly seemed to have hurt

any of the sensitive sympathies and interests he had always enjoyed. Even in the matter of giving up great possessions, all had come so gradually as to seem most natural and least strained.

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Long before the Groombridges could be brought to believe that the brilliant and favourite young cousin had rejected all that they could leave him, it had become a matter of course to the rest of the family and their friends that Mark Molyneux would be a priest, and give up the property to the younger brother.

When the outer world took up the matter, Father Molyneux always made people feel as if allusions to his renunciation of Groombridge were simply quite out of taste, and nothing out of taste seemed in keeping with anything connected with him. It was all so simple to Mark, and so perfect to Canon Nicholls, that the latter almost dreaded this very perfection as unlikely, and unbefitting the “second-rate” planet in which it was his lot to live. And to confirm this almost superstitious feeling of a man who had lived to know where the jolts and jars of life cause the acutest suffering to the idealist, had come this fresh aspiration of Mark’s after a life more completely perfect in itself. Strong instincts were entirely in accord with the older man’s sober judgment of the situation. And yet he wished it could be otherwise. He had no opinion of the world that Mark wanted to give up. He would most willingly have shut any cloister door between that world and his cherished son in the spirit. It was with no light heart that he wanted him to face all the roughness of human goodness, all the blinding confusion of its infirmities, all the cruelty of its vices. The old man’s own service in his last years was but to stand and wait, but, even so, he was too often oppressed by the small things that fill up empty hours, small uncharitablenesses, small vanities, small irritations. Was it not a comfort at such moments to believe that in another world we should know human nature in others and in ourselves without any cause for repugnance and without any ground for fear?

CHAPTER XVIII

MADAME DANTERRE’S ANSWER

At last there came a letter to Molly from her mother.

“CARISSIMA,—

“I thank you for your most kind intentions. I too have at times thought of seeing you. But I am now far too ill, and I have no attention to spare from my unceasing efforts to keep well. I can assure you that two doctors and two nurses spend their time and skill on the struggle. I may, they tell me, live many years yet if I am not troubled and disturbed. I had, by nature, strong maternal instincts; it was your father’s knowledge of that side of my character which made his conduct in taking you from me almost criminal in its cruelty. You must have had a most tiresome childhood with his sister, and probably you gave her a great deal of trouble. Your letter affected me with several moments of suffocation, and the doctors and nurses are of opinion that I must not risk any more maternal emotions. My poor wants are now very expensive. I am obliged to have

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everything that is out of season, and one *chef* for my vegetables alone. Have you ever turned your attention to vegetable diet? Doctor Larrone, whom I thoroughly confide in, sees no reason why life should not be indefinitely prolonged if the right—absolutely the right—food is always given. I am sending you a little brochure he has written on the subject.“I hope that your allowance is sufficient for your comfort. I should like you to have asparagus at every meal, and I trust, my dear child, that you will never become a *devote*. It is an extraordinary waste of the tissues.

“As we are not likely to correspond again, I should like you to know that I have made a will bequeathing to you the fortune which was left me, as an act of reparation, by Sir David Bright.

“I wonder why an Englishman, Sir Edmund Grosse, has made so many attempts at seeing me? Do you know anything of him? I risk much in the effort to write this letter to assure you of my love.

“YOUR DEVOTED MOTHER.

“P.S.—There is no need to answer the question as to Sir Edmund Grosse.”

Molly was so intensely disgusted with the miserable old woman’s letter that her first inclination was to burn it at once. She was kneeling before the fire with that intention when Sir Edmund Grosse was announced. She thrust the paper into her pocket, and realised in a flash how astonishing it was that Sir Edmund should have tried to see Madame Danterre. The only explanation that occurred to her at the moment was that he had tried to see her mother because of his interest in herself. She did not know that he had not been in Florence since he had known her. But what could have started him in the notion that Miss Dexter was Madame Danterre’s child? And did he know it for certain now? That was what she would like to find out.

Molly had on a pale green tea-gown, which fell into a succession of almost classic folds with each rapid characteristic movement. The charm of her face was enormously increased by its greater softness of expression. Although she could not help wishing to please him, even in a moment full of other emotion, she did not know how much there was to make her successful to-day. She did not realise her own physical and moral development during the past months.

Edmund’s manner was unconsciously caressing. He had come, he told himself—and it was the third time he had called at the flat,—simply because he wanted to keep in touch, to get any information he could. And he had heard rumours from Florence that Madame Danterre was becoming steadily weaker and more unable to make any effort.

“A man told me the other day that this was the best-furnished flat in London, and, by Jove! I rather think he was right.”

“I never believe in the man who told you things, he is far too apposite; I think his name is Harris.”

Edmund smiled at the fire.

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“Who was the attractive little priest I met here the other day?” he asked.

“Little! He is as tall as you are.”

“Still, one thinks of him as *un bon petit pretre*, doesn’t one? But who is he?”

“Father Molyneux.”

“Not Groombridge’s cousin?”

“Yes, the same.”

“I wonder if he repents of his folly now? I didn’t think he looked particularly cheerful!”

“Didn’t you?” said Molly. “Well, I think he is the happiest person I know! But we never do agree about people, do we?”

“About a few we do, but it’s much more amusing to talk about ourselves, isn’t it?”

“Much more. What do you want me to tell you about myself this time?”

Edmund looked at her with sleepy eyes and perceived that something had changed. “I should like to know what you think about me?” he said gently.

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Molly, and she gave a tiny sigh. “No, for some reason or other you want to know something which I have settled to tell you.”

Her manner alarmed and excited him. As a matter of honourable dealing he felt that he ought to give her pause. “Are you sure you are wise?” he said.

“I’m not sure, but that’s my own affair, and it will be a relief. I would rather you knew what you want to know, though why you want to know”—her eyes were searching him —“I can’t tell.”

Sir Edmund Grosse almost told her that he did not want to know.

“You want to know for certain that my mother is living in Florence under the name of Madame Danterre—the Madame Danterre you have tried to see there. And further, you want to know how much I have ever seen of her.”

“Oh, please!” cried Edmund, “I don’t indeed wish you to tell me all this.”

“You do, and so I shall answer the questions. I have never seen her in my life. But these last few weeks I have thought I ought to try, so I wrote and offered to go to her, and I have this evening had the first letter she has ever written to me. In this letter”—-

she drew it half out of her pocket—“she declines to see me, and she exhorts me to a vegetable diet.”

There was a moment in which her face looked the embodiment of sarcasm, then something gentler came athwart it. He had never come so near to liking her before. He could no longer think of her as all the more dangerous on account of her attractions; she was a suffering, cruelly-treated woman. It is dangerous to see too much of one’s enemies: Edmund was growing much softer.

“But why,” she went on with quiet dignity, “did you try so hard to break through her seclusion?”

It was a dreadful question—a question impossible to answer. He was silent; then he said—

“Dear lady, I told you I did not want you to satisfy what you supposed to be my wish for knowledge, and I am very sorry that now, at least, I cannot tell you why I wished to see Madame Danterre.”

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Naturally, it never struck him for a moment that Molly might think it was for her sake that he had tried to see her mother, as he had not known of her existence when he was in Florence. But his reticence made her incline much more to that idea. She almost blushed in the firelight. Edmund was feeling baffled and sorry. If there were another will—and he still maintained that there was another—certainly Miss Dexter knew nothing about it. He had wronged her; and after all what reasonable grounds had there been for his suspicions as to her guilt?

“I suppose,” he thought, “Rose is right, and will-hunting is demoralising, or ‘not healthy,’ as she calls it.”

But he had been too long silent.

“It is very hard on you to get such a letter,” he said, with a ring of true sympathy in his voice and more expression than usual in his face. “I wish I had not come in and disturbed you; I wish you had a woman friend here instead.”

“I don’t,” said Molly quickly. “Don’t go yet. I can say as little as I like with you, and then I’m going to church to hear the *bon petit pretre* preach.”

“He will lure you to Rome.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well, I think there’s a good deal to be said for Rome.”

“Don’t you mind people joining it?” she asked, a little eagerly.

“No, I like it better than Ritualism.”

“But Lady Rose is a Ritualist.”

“I believe you will find angels few and far between in any religion.”

“It must be nice to be an angel,” mused Molly.

He had risen to go; he thought he might still find Rose at home and he wanted to speak to her, yet he was in no hurry to be gone.

“Don’t give me an excuse for compliments; I warn you, you will repent it if you do,” he said warmly; and then, after a little hesitation which might well have been mistaken for an effort at self-command in a moment of emotion, he added in a low voice—

“May I come and see you again very soon?”

As Molly gave him her hand he looked at her with wistful apology for having wronged her in his thoughts, for having intruded into her secrets. There was more pity in his eyes than he knew at the moment. He bent his head after that, and with the foreign fashion he sometimes fell into, and which Molly had known before, gently kissed her hand. The quick kindly action was the expression of his wish to make amends.

Molly stood quite still after he had gone away, as motionless as a living figure could stand, her grey eyes dilated and full of light. Would he could have seen her! But if he had, would he have understood what love meant in a heart that had never before been opened by any great human affection? No love of father, mother, sister, or brother had ever laid a claim on Molly. The whole kingdom of her affections had been standing empty and ready, and now the hour of fulfilment was near.

“He will come again very soon,” she whispered to herself. And then she put her hand to her lips and kissed it where it had been kissed a moment before, but with a devotion and reverence and gentleness that made the last kiss a tragic contrast.

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Presently, happier than she had ever been in her life before, Molly went out to hear Mark Molyneux preach on sanctifying our common actions.

“No position is so hard” he said in his peroration, “no circumstances are so difficult, no duties so conflicting, no temptations so mighty, as not to be the means to lead us to God if we seek to do His will.”

But the words seemed in no way appropriate to Molly’s mind, which was wholly occupied in a wordless song of thanksgiving.

CHAPTER XIX

LADY ROSE’S SCRUPLE

As Edmund Grosse was shown up-stairs to Lady Rose Bright, he passed a young clergyman coming down. He found Rose standing with a worried look in the middle of the room.

“Edmund! how nice,” she said gently.

“What has that fellow been worrying you about?”

“It isn’t his fault, poor man,” said Rose, “only it’s so sad. He has had at last to close his little orphanage. You see, we used to give him L100 a year, and after David died I had to write and tell him that I couldn’t go on, and it has been a hard struggle for him since that. I don’t think he meant it, but when he came and saw this house”—she waved her hands round the very striking furniture of the room—“I think he wondered, or perhaps it was my fancy. You see, Edmund, I don’t know how it is, but I’ve overdrawn again. What do you think it can be? The housekeeping comes to so little; I have only four servants, and——”

She paused, and there were tears in her eyes. She was wondering where the orphans would go to. It was not like Rose to give way like this and to have out her troubles at once. The fact was that she was finding how much harder it is to help in good works without money than with. If she had started without money it would have been different, but to try to work with people who used to find her large subscriptions a very great help and now had to do without them, was depressing. She had to make constant efforts to believe that they were all just the same to her as they had been in the past.

“How much did you give that youth instead of the L100?”

“Only ten, Edmund.” There was a note of pleading in her voice.

“And you will have dinner up here on a tray as there is no fire in the dining-room?”

“Well, what does it matter?”

“And how much will there be to eat on the tray?”

“Oh! much more than I can possibly eat.”

“Because it will be some nasty warmed-up stuff washed down by tea. It’s of no use trying to deceive me: I’ve heard that the cook is seventeen, and an orphan herself.”

“But what will those other orphans have for dinner?”

“Now, Rose, will you listen to common sense. How many orphans has that sandy-faced cleric on his hands?”

“There were only four left.”

“Then I’ll get those four disposed of somehow, if you will do something I want you to do.”

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“What is it? But, Edmund, you know you have done too much for my poor works already; I can’t let you.”

“Never mind, if you will do what I want.”

“What is it?”

“Come right away in the yacht, you and your mother, and we’ll go wherever you like.”

Joy sprang into her face, but then he saw doubt, and he knew with a deep pang what the doubt meant. He wished to move, oh! so carefully now, or he would lose all the ground he had lately gained.

“What scruples have you now?” he asked laughing. “What a genius you have for them! Look here, Rose, it’s common sense; you want a change, you can let the house up to Easter. Besides, you know what it would do for your mother; see what she thinks.”

“It’s all so quick,” gasped Rose, laughing.

“Well, then, don’t settle at once if you like; but not one penny for those poor dear little orphans if you don’t come. And now, I want to say something else quick, because the tray with the chops and the cheese and the tea will all be getting greasy if I don’t get out of the way. Do you know I think I was very hard on that Miss Dexter. I remember I solemnly warned you not to have to do with her. You were quite right: it is not healthy to think so much of that will; it poisons the mind. I am quite sure that poor thing is not to blame.”

His tone was curiously eager, it seemed to Rose; and then he began discussing Miss Dexter, and said he thought that at moments she was beautiful. Presently he remembered the tray that was coming, and saw that the hour was half-past seven, and hurried away. She fancied that she missed in his “Good-night” the sort of gentle affectionateness he had shown her so freely of late.

She went up to her room to prepare for the meal he had disparaged so much, looking tired. She smiled rather sadly when she had to own to herself that the tray of supper was almost exactly what Edmund had foretold. She dismissed it as soon as she could, and then drew a chair up to the fire and took up a book. But it soon dropped on to her knee. She had been trying not to give way to depression all that day. But it was very difficult. There seemed to be so little object in life. She felt as if everything had got into a fog; there was no one at home to whom her going and coming mattered any more than the meals mattered. And, meanwhile, she was being sucked into a world of committees and sub-committees. She had thought that, as she could no longer give money, she would give her time and her work; so, when asked, she had joined many things just because she was asked, and she was a little hazy as to the objects of some

of them. Having been afraid that she would not have enough to do, she found now that she had already more than she could manage. And everything seemed so difficult. During the past week she had twice taken the wrong bus, and come home very wet and tired. Another day she had taken the wrong train when coming back from South London,

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and had found herself at Baker Street instead of Sloane Square. These things tried her beyond reason with the sense of loneliness, of incapacity, of uncertainty. Then she had thought that, with very quiet black clothes, she could go anywhere, but her mother had discovered that she sometimes came back from the Girls' Club in Bermondsey as late as ten o'clock at night, and there had been a fuss. Rose had forgotten the fact that she was very fair and very good to look at; she found, half-consciously, that her beauty had its drawbacks. There did not seem to be any reason why she should spare her strength in any way. So, a little wan and tremulous, she appeared at the early morning service, and then, after walking back in any weather, there was a dull little breakfast, and soon after that she got to work. Every post brought begging letters in crowds, and these hurt her dreadfully. It was her wish to live for God and the poor, and every day she had to write: "Lady Rose Bright much regrets that she is quite unable," *etc*., *etc*. Then, after those, she would begin another trial—begging letters to her rich friends to help her poor ones, or letters trying to get interest and influence. The difficulties and the confusion of life in the modern Babylon weighed on Rose in something of the same way that they tried Mark Molyneux. It seemed to her that it must be safe and right to be doing so many disagreeable things and to be very tired, too tired to enjoy pleasures when they came her way. Constantly, one person was trying to throw pleasures in her way; one person reminded old friends that Rose was in town; one person suggested that Rose Bright, although she did not go to parties, might come in to hear some great musician at a friend's house; one person wanted to know her opinion on the last book; one person tried to find out when he could take her anywhere in his motor. And this very morning Rose had asked herself if this one friend ought to be allowed to do all these things? Was she sure that she was quite fair to Edmund Grosse?

It had been a day of fears and scruples. She had been unnerved when the clergyman had called just to let her realise that the withdrawal of her subscription had, in the end, meant the collapse of his little orphanage; and when she was breaking down under this, Edmund had come in, and how soothed and comforted she had felt by his presence! And then the joy of his proposal as to the yacht! Her pulses beat with delight; she felt a positive hunger for blue skies, blue water, blue shores; a longing to get away from cares and muddles and badly-done jobs and being misunderstood. Was it not horribly selfish, horribly cowardly? Was it not the longing to stifle the sounds of pain, to shut her eyes to the gloom of the misery about her, to shut her mind to the effort to understand what was of practical good, and what was merely quack in the remedies offered? Still, she realised to-night that she must get some sort of rest; that part of all this gloom was physical. She would understand and feel things more rightly if she went away for a bit.

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But could she, ought she, to go away on Edmund's yacht?

Could Rose honestly feel quite sure that all his kindness meant nothing more? She had never since she was eighteen, and wearing her first long skirt, heard from him any word that need mean more than cousinly affection. He had contrived after that Easter visit to Groombridge to make her feel that she had been foolish and self-conscious in trying not to be alone with him. For many months now she had felt absolutely at her ease in his company. It seemed to be only to-day that this thought had come back to trouble her. She did not want to be disturbed with such notions; they would spoil their friendship. And he could not be feeling like that; he was always so cool, so untroubled. Why to-night, just as he was waiting to know if she would come on the yacht or not, he had talked much more warmly of Miss Dexter than seemed quite natural! Faintly she felt that it might be good for him if they went on the yacht, she and her mother. They would be better for Edmund than some of the people he might otherwise ask; he was not always wise as to his lady friends. And it would be so good for Lady Charlton, and so good, too, for those four orphans. And where should they go? It did not matter much where they went if they only gained light and colour and rest. The artist was strong in Rose at that moment. She looked at one or two old guide-books till it was bed-time. Then, the last thing at night, a strange gust of thought came upon her just after her prayers.

Could she, would she, ever marry again? She knelt on at the *priedieu* with her fair head bowed, and then there came over her a strong sense of the impossibility of it. The shock she had had was too great, too lasting in its effects. She did not know it was that, she did not tell herself that once humiliated, once misled, she could not trust again. She did not say that the past married life which she had made so full of duty, so full of reverence as almost to deceive herself while she lived it, had been desecrated, polluted and had made her shrink unutterably from another married life.

A young widow, sometimes, when drawing near to a second marriage, suddenly realises it to be impossible because the past asserts its tyrannous claim upon her heart. What had appeared to be a dead past is found to be both alive and powerful. But with Rose it was not simply her heart; it was her nature as a woman that refused. That nature had been hurt to the very quick, humbled and brought low once. Surely it was enough!

CHAPTER XX

THE HEIRESS OF MADAME DANTERRE

For about a week after the evening on which she had received her mother's letter and Edmund Grosse had been to see her, Molly Dexter stayed at home from four o'clock till seven o'clock and wore beautiful tea-gowns. She had a very small list of people to whom she was always at home written on a slate, but one by one they had been

reduced in number. Now there were five—Father Molyneux, who never came except by appointment; Sir Edmund Grosse; and three ladies who happened to be abroad for the winter.

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The week was from a Friday to a Thursday, and on the Thursday several things happened to Molly. It was a brilliant day, and although those evenings from four till seven when nobody came were sorely trying, she was in very good spirits. A friend coming out of church the day before had told her that she had met Sir Edmund Grosse at a country house.

“He said such pretty things about you,” purred the speaker, a nice newly “come out” girl who admired Molly very much.

But the main point to Molly had been the fact that Edmund had been away from London. Surely he would come directly now! She seemed to hear, constantly ringing in her ears, the voice in which he had asked if he might “come again very soon.”

Thursday had been a good day altogether, for Molly had skated at Prince’s and come home with a beautiful complexion to be “At Home” to the privileged from four till seven. She got out of her motor, and was walking to the lift when it came whizzing down from above, and the little friend who had said the nice things yesterday stepped out of it, looking very bright.

“Oh, Miss Dexter,” she said, “may I come up again and tell you my good news?” Molly took her kindly by the arm and drew her into the lift again, and they went up. But she hoped the girl would not stay. She wanted to be quite alone, so that if anybody came who mattered very much they would not be disturbed.

“Well, what’s the good news?”

Molly looked brilliant as she stood smiling in the middle of the room.

“Well, it isn’t a bit settled yet, but I met Sir Edmund Grosse at luncheon, and he asked me if mother would let me go on his yacht to Cairo. Lady Rose Bright is going and Lady Charlton, and he said they all wanted something very young indeed to go with them, so they thought I’d better come, and his nephew Jimmy, too. Wasn’t it *awfully* kind of him?”

Molly turned and poked the fire.

“When do they go?” she asked.

“Sir Edmund starts to-morrow, but Lady Rose and Lady Charlton will follow in about ten days. They will join the yacht at Marseilles, and I should go with them. Do you think mother will let me go, Miss Dexter?”

Miss Dexter looked down.

“Why should your mother object?” she said.

“But it’s so sudden.”

“Yes, it’s very sudden,” said Molly, in a low voice.

“I can hardly keep quiet; I don’t know how to get through the time till six o’clock, and mother can’t be at home till then.”

Molly turned back into the room; her face was very white. There were white dents in her nostrils, and there was a bitter smile on her lips. Whatever she might have said was stopped in the utterance. The parlourmaid had come into the room, and now, coming up to Molly, said in a low voice:

“There is a gentleman asking if Miss Dexter will see him on important business; he says he is a doctor, and that he has come from Italy.”

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Molly frowned.

“What is his name?”

“It sounded like Laccaroni, ma’am.”

“Show him up.”

“Well, I’m off,” said the young visitor, and, still entirely absorbed in her own affairs, she took Molly’s limp hand and left the room.

A spare man with a pale face and rather good eyes was announced as “Dr. Laccaroni.” “Larrone,” he corrected gently. He carried a small old tin despatch box, and looked extremely dusty.

“I am the bearer of sad tidings,” he said in English, with a fair accent, in a dry staccato voice. “It was better not to telegraph, as I was to come at once.”

“You attended my mother?”

“Yes, until two nights ago. That was the end.”

“Did she suffer?”

“For a few hours, yes; and there was also some brain excitement—delirium. In an interval that appeared to be lucid (but I was not quite sure) she told me to come to you, mademoiselle, quite as soon as she was dead, and she gave me money and this little box to bring to you. She said more than once, ‘It shall be her own affair.’ The key is in this sealed envelope. Afterwards twice she spoke to me: ’Don’t forget,’ and then the rest was raving. But the last two hours were peace.”

“And where is my mother to be buried?”

“Madame will be cremated, and her ashes placed in an urn in the garden, mademoiselle, in a fine mausoleum, with just her name, ‘Justine,’ and the dates—no more. Madame told me that these were her wishes.”

“Do you know what is in this box?”

“Not at all, and I incline to think there may be nothing: the mind was quite confused. And yet I could only calm her by promising to come at once, and so I came, and if mademoiselle will permit I should like to retire to my hotel.”

“Can I be of any use to you?”

“Not at all: the money for the journey was more than enough.”

Molly was left alone, and she gave orders that no one, without exception, was to be admitted. Then she walked up and down the room in a condition of semi-conscious pain.

At first it seemed as if Dr. Larrone’s intelligence had not reached her brain at all. The only clear thing in her mind at that moment was the thought that Edmund was going away at once with Lady Rose Bright. The disappointment was in proportion to the wild hopes of the last week, only Molly had not quite owned to herself how intensely she had looked forward to his next coming. It was true he might still come and see her before he started, but if he came it could not be what she had meant it to be. If he had meant what Molly dreamed of, could he have gone off suddenly on this yachting expedition? She knew the yachting was not thought of when she had seen him, for he told her then that he meant to stay in London for some weeks. But as her thoughts grew clearer, what was most horrible to Molly was a gradual dawning of common daylight into the romance she had

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been living in for months. For, looking back now, she could not feel sure that any of her views of Edmund's feelings towards herself had been true. It was a tearing at her heart's most precious feelings to be forced to common sense, to see the past in the matter-of-fact way in which it might appear to other people. And yet, Adela Delaport Green had expected him to propose even in the season, but then, what might not the Adela Delaport Greens of life suspect and expect without the slightest foundation? Could Molly herself say firmly and without delusion that Edmund had treated her badly? How she wished she could! She would rather think that he had been charmed away by hostile influence, or even that he had deliberately played with her than feel it all to have been her own vain fancy! It was agony to her to feel that she had without any excuse, set up an idol in her sacred places, and woven about him all the dreams and loves of her youth. It must be remembered not only that it was the first time that Molly had loved in the ordinary sense of the word, but it was absolutely the first time that she had ever felt any deep affection for any human being whatever. And now a great sense of abandonment was on her; the old feeling of isolation, of being cast out, that she had had all her life, was frightfully strong. Edmund had left her; he had deceived her, played with her, she told herself, deluded her; and now her mother's death brought home all the horror, the disgrace, which that mother's life had been for Molly. An outcast whom no one cared for, no one loved, no one wanted. The new gentleness of the past weeks, the new softness, all the high and sacred thoughts that had seemed to have taken possession of her inner life, were gone at this moment. Her feeling now was that, if she were made to suffer, she could at least make others suffer too.

She had thrown off her furs in walking up and down, and they had fallen on to the box which Dr. Larrone had brought. Presently they slipped to the floor, and showed the small, black tin despatch box.

Molly broke the seal of the envelope, took out the key, and opened the box, half mechanically and half as seeking a distraction.

Inside she found two or three packets of old yellow letters, a few faded photographs, and a tiny gold watch and chain; and underneath these things a large registered envelope addressed to Madame Danterre.

Molly was not acutely excited about this box. She knew that her mother's will would be at the lawyer's. She had no anxiety on this point, but there is always a strange thrill in touching such things as the dead have kept secret. Even if they have bid us do it, it seems too bold.

Molly shrank from what that box might contain, what history of the past it might have to tell, but she did not think it would touch her own life. Therefore, thinking more of her own sorrow than anything else, Molly drew two papers out of the registered envelope,

and then shrank back helplessly in her chair. She had just seen that the larger of the two enclosures was a long letter beginning: “Dearest Rose.” She hesitated, but only for a moment, and then went on reading.

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“I trust and hope that if I die in to-morrow’s battle this will reach you safely. I have really no fear whatever of the battle, and after it is over I shall have a good opportunity of putting this paper into a lawyer’s hands at Capetown.”

Then she hastily dropped the letter and took up a small paper that had been in the same envelope. A glance at this showed that it was the “last will and testament of Sir David Bright.”

It was evidently not drawn up by a lawyer, but it seemed complete and had the two signatures of witnesses; Lord Groombridge and Sir Edmund Grosse were named as executors. It was dated on board ship only a few weeks before Sir David Bright died.

At first Molly was simply bewildered. She read, as if stupefied, the perfectly simple language in which Sir David had bequeathed all and everything he possessed to his wife, Lady Rose Bright, subject to an annual allowance of L1000 to Madame Danterre during her life-time. It was so brief and simple that, if Molly had not known how simple a will could be, she might have half doubted its legality. As it was she was not aware of the special facilities in the matter of will-making that are allowed to soldiers and sailors when on active service. The absolutely amazing thing was that the paper should have been in Madame Danterre’s possession.

Molly turned to the letter, and read it with absorbed attention.

The General wrote on the eve of the battle, without the least anxiety as to the next day. But he already surmised the vast proportions that the war might assume, and he intended to send the enclosed will with this letter to the care of a lawyer in Capetown for fear of eventualities. Then, next day, as Molly knew, he had been killed.

But Molly did not know that to the brother officer who had been with him in his last moments Sir David had confided two plain envelopes, and had told him to send the first —a blue one—to his wife, and the second—a white one—to Madame Danterre, faintly murmuring the names and addresses in his dying voice. The same officer was himself killed a week later. If he had lived and had learned the disposal of Sir David’s fortune, it might possibly have occurred to him that he had put the addresses on the wrong letters. But he was sure at the time that Sir David’s last words had been: “Remember, the white one for my wife.” And perhaps he was right, for it is not uncommon for a man even in the full possession of all his faculties (which Sir David was not) to make a mistake just because of his intense anxiety to avoid making it. As it was, knowing nothing whatever of the circumstances, the will and the letter seemed to Molly to come out of a mysterious void.

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To any one with an unbiassed mind who was able to study it as a human document, the letter would have been pathetic enough. It was the revelation, the outpouring of what a man had suffered in silence for many long years. It seemed at moments hardly rational. The sort of unreasonable nervous terror in it was extraordinary. Molly read most of the real story in the letter, but not quite all. There had been a terrible sense of a spoilt life and of a horrible weakness always coming between him and happiness. The shadow of Madame Danterre had darkened his youth; a time of folly—and so little pleasure in that folly, he moaned—had been succeeded by an actual tyranny. The claim that she was his wife had begun early after her divorce from Mr. Dexter, and it seemed extraordinary that he had not denied it at once. David Bright had been taken ill with acute fever in Mrs. Dexter's house almost immediately after that event. Mrs. Dexter declared that he had gone through the form of marriage with her before witnesses, and she declared also that she had in her possession the certificate of marriage. The date she gave for the marriage was during the days when he had been down with the fever, and he never could remember what had happened.

"God knows," he wrote, "how I searched my memory hour by hour, day by day, but the blank was absolute. I don't to this hour know what passed during those days."

While still feeble from illness he had given her all the money he could spare, and for years the blackmail had continued. Then, at last, after he had been a year in England, the worm had turned.

"I dared her to do her worst. I declared, what I am absolutely convinced to have been the case, that the marriage certificate she had shown me was a forgery, and I concluded that if she proved the marriage by forgery and perjury, I should institute proceedings for divorce on the grounds of her subsequent life. I got no answer, and for three years there was total silence. Then came a letter from a friend saying that Madame Danterre, who had taken her maiden name, was dying and wished me to know that she forgave me." With this note had been sent to him a diamond ring he had given her in the first days of her influence over him. He sent it back, but months later he got it again, returned by the Post Office authorities, as no one of the name he had written to could be found.

Then came a solemn declaration that he had never doubted of Madame Danterre's death.

"I thought that to have spoilt my youth was enough; but she was yet to destroy my best years. Ah! Rose," he wrote, "if I had loved you less it would have been more bearable. I met you; I worshipped you; won you. Then, after a brief dream of joy, the cloud came down, and my evil genius was upon me. I don't think you were in love with me, my beloved, but it would have come even after you had found out what a commonplace fellow it was whom you thought a hero; it would have come. You must have loved me

out of the full flow of your own nature if I had not been driven to cowardice and deception."

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Evidently Madame Danterre had had a kind of almost uncanny power of terrifying the soldier. He had been a good man when she first met him, and he had been a good man after that short time of mad infatuation. He was by nature and training almost passionately respectable; he was at length happily married; but this horror of an evil incident in the past had got such a hold on his nerves that when he met Madame Danterre (whom he had believed to be dead) coming out of a theatre in London, the hero of the Victoria Cross, of three other campaigns, perhaps the bravest man in England, fainted when he saw her. Without doubt it was the publication of Mr. John Steele's will leaving his enormous fortune to Sir David Bright that had resuscitated Madame Danterre.

From the moment of that shock David Bright had probably never been entirely sane on the subject. The resurrection of Madame Danterre had seemed to him preternatural and fateful. The woman had become to him something more or something less than human, something impervious to attack that could not be dealt with in any ordinary way.

From that time there had grown up an invisible barrier between him and his wife. He found himself making silly excuses for being out at quite natural times. He found himself getting afraid of her, and building up defences, growing reserved and absurdly dignified, trying to cling to the pedestal of the elderly soldier as he could not be a companion.

Madame Danterre had gone back to Florence, fat with blackmail, and then had begun a steady course of persecution.

Step by step he had sunk lower down, knowing that he was weakening his own case most miserably if it should ever become public. Nothing satisfied her, although she received two thousand a year regularly, until the will was drawn up, which left everything to her except an allowance of L800 a year to Rose.

Once a year for three years Madame Danterre had visited London, and had generally contrived that Sir David should be conscious of the look in her astonishing eyes, which Sir Edmund had likened to extinct volcanoes, at some theatre, or in the park, once at least every season. Evidently that look had never failed. It touched the exposed nerve in his mind—exposed ever since the time of illness and strain when he was young and helpless in India. It was evident that he had felt that any agony was bearable to shield Rose from the suffering of a public scandal. If he could only have brought himself to consult one of the Murrays something might have been done. As it was, he had recourse to subterfuge. He assured Madame Danterre annually, in answer to her insisting on the point, that no other will had ever been signed by him, but he always carried a will with him ready to be signed. There was much of self-pity perhaps in the letter, there was the plaint of a wrecked life, but there was still more of real delicate feeling for Rose, of intense anxiety to shield her, of poignant

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regret for “what might have been” in their home life. The man had been of a wholesome nature; his great physical courage was part of a good fellow’s construction. But he had been taught to worship a good name, an unsullied reputation, and to love things of good repute too much, perhaps, for the sake of their repute, as he could not venture to risk the shadow for the reality. The effect of reading Sir David’s last letter to Rose on an unbiassed reader of a humane turn of mind would have been an intensity of pity, and a sigh at the sadness of life on this planet.

Molly was passionately biassed, and as much of Sir David’s story as reached her through the letter was to her simply a sickening revelation from a cowardly traitor of his own treason through life, and even up to the hour of death. Her mother had been basely deceived; for his sake she had been divorced, and he had denied the marriage that followed. Of course, it was a marriage, or he would never have been so frightened. Then her mother, thus deserted, young and weak, had gone astray, and he had defended himself by threatening divorce if she proclaimed herself his wife. Every word of the history was interpreted on the same lines. And then, last of all, this will was sent to her mother. Was it a tardy repentance? Had he, perhaps when too weak for more, asked some one to send it to Madame Danterre that she might destroy it? If so, why had she not destroyed it? Why, if it might honourably have been destroyed, send to Molly now a will that, if proved, would make her an absolute pauper? In plain figures Molly’s fortune could not be less than L20,000 a year if that paper did not exist, and would be under L80 a year if it were valid.

Molly next seized on one of the old packets of letters in trembling hope of some further light being thrown on the situation, but in them was evidence impossible to deny that her mother had invented the whole story of the marriage. Why Madame Danterre had not destroyed these letters was a further mystery, except that, time after time, it has been proved that people have carefully preserved evidence of their own crimes. Fighting against it, almost crying out in agonised protest, Molly was forced to realise the slow persevering cunning and unflinching cruelty with which her mother had pursued her victim. It was an ugly story for any girl to read if the woman had had no connection with her. It seemed to cut away from Molly all shreds of self-respect as she read it. She felt that the daughter of such a woman must have a heritage of evil in her nature.

The packet of old letters finished, there was yet something more to find. Next came a packet of prescriptions and some receipts from shops. Under these were the faded photographs of several men and women of whom she knew nothing. Lastly, there was half a letter written to Molly dated in August and left unfinished and without a signature:

“CARISSIMA:

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“I am far from well, but I believe Dr. Larrone has found out the cause and will soon put things right again. If you ever hear anything about me from Dr. Larrone you can put entire confidence in him. I have found out now why Sir Edmund Grosse has tried to see me. He is possessed with the absurd idea that I have no right to Sir David Bright’s fortune, although he does not venture to call in question the validity of the will which left that fortune to me. Dr. Larrone has certain proof that Grosse employs a detective here to watch this house. I have also heard that he is in love with poor David’s widow, and hence I suppose this *trop de zele* on her behalf. As he cannot get at me he is likely to try to become intimate with you, so I warn you to avoid him now and in future.”

That was all.

Molly sat staring vacantly in front of her, almost unconscious of her surroundings from the intensity of pain. Each item in the horror of the situation told on her separately, but in no sequence—with no coherence. Shame, “hopes early blighted, love scorned,” kindness proved treason, the prospect of complete and dishonourable poverty, a poverty which would enrich her foes. And all this was mixed in her mind with the dreadful words from the old letters that seemed to be shouted at her.

Miss Carew, coming in at dinner-time, was horror-struck by what she saw. Molly was sitting on the floor surrounded by letters and papers, moaning and biting her hand. The gong sounded, the parlourmaid announced dinner, and Molly gathered up her papers, locked them in the box, fastened the key on to her chain—all in complete silence—and got up from the floor. She then walked straight into the dining-room in her large hat and outdoor clothes without speaking.

And without a word the terrified Miss Carew went with her, and tried to eat her dinner.

Molly ate a very little of each thing that was offered to her, taking a few mouthfuls voraciously, and then quite suddenly, as she was offered a dish of forced asparagus, she went into peal after peal of ringing, resounding laughter. “I should like you to have asparagus at every meal,” she said, and then again came peal after peal—each a quite distinct sound. It was dreadful to hear, and Miss Carew and the servant were terrified. It was the laughter, not of a maniac, not of pure unreasoning hysteria, not quite of a lost soul. It suggested these elements, perhaps, but it was chiefly a nervous convulsion at an overpowering perception of the irony in the heart of things.

The hysterical fit lasted long enough for Miss Carew to insist on a doctor, and Molly did not resist. When he came she implored him to give her a strong sleeping-draught. She kept Miss Carew and the maid fussing about her, in a terror of being alone, until the draught was at last sent in by a dilatory chemist. She then hurried them away, drank the medicine, and set herself to go to sleep. The draught acted soon, as Miss Carew learnt by listening at the door and hearing the deep, regular breathing. But the effects passed off, and Molly sat up absolutely awake at one o’clock in the morning. She lay

down again and tried to force herself to sleep by sheer will power, but she soon realised the awful impotence of desire in forcing sleep.

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At last, horror of her own intensely alert faculties, blinded by darkness, made her turn up the light. Instantly the sight of the familiar room seemed unbearable, and she turned it down again. But again the darkness was quite intolerable, and seemed to have a hideous life of its own which held in it presences of evil. At one moment she breathed in the air of the winter's night, shivering with cold; at the next she was stifled for want of breath. So the light by the bed was turned on again, and to get a little further from it Molly got up and slowly and carefully put on her stockings and fur slippers, then opened a cupboard and took out a magnificent fur cloak and wrapped herself in it. Then suddenly one aspect of the position became concrete to her imagination. She knew that the cloak was bought with ill-gotten money. Her enormous allowance after she came of age, even the expenses of her education—Miss Carew's salary among other things—had been won by fraud. And now, oh! why, why had not her miserable mother spoken the truth when she got the will, or why had she not destroyed it? Why had she left it to Molly to put right all this long, long imposture, and to reveal to the world the story of her mother's crime? It seemed to Molly as if she were looking on at some other girl's life, and as if she were considering it from an external point of view. The sleeping-draught had, no doubt, excited still further the terrible agitation of her nerves, and ideas came to her as if they had no connection with her own personality.

Wicked old woman, dying in Florence! How cruel those words were: "Let it be her own affair"! Her last act to send those papers to the poor girl she had deserted as a baby, and refused even to see as a woman. "Let it be her own affair." Her own affair to choose actual poverty and a terrible publicity as to the past instead of a great fortune and silence as to her mother's guilt. "Let it be her own affair" to enrich her enemies, to give a fortune to the woman who would scorn her! Would the man who had pretended to be her friend, and who had been pursuing her mother with detectives all the time, would he some day talk pityingly of her with his wife, and say she "had really behaved very well, poor thing"?

Suddenly Molly stopped, full of horror at a new thought. Oh! she must make things safe and sure, or—good God!—what might not her mother's daughter be tempted to do? A deep blush spread over her face and neck. She moved hastily to the door, and in a moment she was in Miss Carew's room.

"I want to speak to you; I want to tell you something," said Molly, turning up the electric light as she spoke.

Miss Carew was startled out of a sweet sleep, and her first thought was the one which haunted her whenever she was awakened at an untimely hour. Her carefully-curled fringe was lying in the dressing-table drawer, and Molly had never seen her without it!

"Yes, yes; in one moment," she answered fussily. "I will come to your room in one minute."

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Molly felt checked, and there had been something strange and unfamiliar in Miss Carew's face. Suddenly she felt what it would be to tell Miss Carew the truth—Miss Carew, who was now her dependent, receiving from her L100 a year, would be shocked and startled out of her senses, and might not take these horrible revelations at all kindly. It would, anyhow, be such a reversal of their mutual positions as Molly could not face. And by the time the chestnut hair tinged with grey had been pinned a little crooked on Miss Carew's head, and she had knocked timidly at Molly's door, she was startled and offended by the impatient, overbearing tone of the voice that asked her to "go back to bed and not to bother; it was nothing that mattered."

The night had got on further than Molly knew by that time, and she was relieved to hear it strike four o'clock. She was astonished at noticing that, while she had been walking up and down, up and down her room, she had never heard the clock strike two or three. The fact of having spoken to Miss Carew had brought her for the moment out of the inferno of the last few hours, and the time from four o'clock to six was less utterly miserable because worse had gone before it.

At six she called the housemaid, and kept her fussing about the room, lighting the fire, and getting tea, so as not to be alone again. At eight o'clock she sent for coffee and eggs, and the coffee had to be made twice before she was satisfied with it. Then she suddenly said she felt much better, and, having dressed much more quickly than usual, she went out.

Molly had determined to confide the position to Father Molyneux. When she got to the church in Kensington it was only to find that Father Molyneux had gone away for some days.

That evening the doctor was again summoned, and told Miss Carew that he had now no doubt that Miss Dexter was suffering from influenza, with acute cerebral excitement, and the case was decidedly anxious.

"He might have found out that it was influenza last night," said Miss Carew indignantly, "and I even told him the housemaid had just had influenza! Molly simply caught it from her, as I always thought she would."

BOOK III

CHAPTER XXI

AN INTERLUDE OF HAPPINESS

An interlude of happiness, six weeks of almost uninterrupted enjoyment, followed for Rose after she went on board Sir Edmund's yacht.

Edmund Grosse had most distinctly made up his mind that during those weeks he would not betray any ulterior motive whatever. They were all to be amused and to be happy. There is no knowing when an interlude of happiness will come in life; it is not enough to make out perfect plans, the best fail us. But sometimes, quite unforeseen, when all the weather signs are contrary, there come intervals of sunshine in our hearts, in spite of any circumstances and the

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most uninteresting surroundings. Harmony is proclaimed for a little while, and we wonder why things were black before, and have to remember that they will be black again. But when such a truce to pain falls in the happiest setting, and the most glorious scenery, then rejoice and be glad, it is a real truce of God. So did Rose night by night rejoice without trembling. It wanted much skill on Edmund's part to ward off any scruples, any moments of consciousness. He showed great self-command, surprising self-discipline in carrying out his tactics. There were moments when their talk had slid into great intimacy, when they were close together in heart and in mind, and he slipped back into the commonplace only just in time. There were moments, especially on the return journey, when he could hardly hide his sense of how gracious and delicious was her presence, how acute her instincts, how quaintly and attractively simple her mind, how big her spiritual outlook. But before she could have more than a suspicion of his thoughts Edmund would make any consciousness seem absurd by a comment on the doings of the very young people on board.

"The child does look happy," he said in his laziest voice one evening when he knew his look had been bent for a rashly long moment on Rose. "Happy and pretty," he murmured to himself, and he watched his youngest guest with earnestness. Then he sat down near Rose on a low deck-chair, and put away the glasses he held in his pocket. "I'm not sure I don't get as much pleasure out of the hazy world I see about me as you long-sighted people do; the colours are marvellous." Rose looked at him in surprise.

"But Edmund, don't you see more than haze?"

"Oh, yes, I can see a foreground, and then the rest melts away. I don't know what is meant by a middle distance—that's why I can't shoot."

Rose sat up with an eager look on her face. "I never knew that; I only thought you did not care for shooting."

There was a silence of several minutes, and neither looked at the other. At last Edmund rose and went to the side of the boat and looked over at the water, and then, turning half-way towards her, said: "Why does it startle you so much?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"But you do know perfectly well."

"Indeed, Edmund." Her face was flushed and her voice a little tremulous.

"You shall tell me." He spoke more imperiously than he knew.

“I can’t, indeed I can’t.”

“No,” he said; “it would be a difficult thing to say, I admit.”

“Couldn’t we read something?” said Rose.

“No, no use at all. I am going to tell you why you are so glad I am short-sighted.”

“But I am not glad.”

“I repeat that you are, and this is the reason why.”

“You shall not say it,” said Rose, now more and more distressed and embarrassed.

“It’s because you never knew before why I did not volunteer for the war, that is why you are so glad.” “Yes,” he thought in anger, “she has had this thing against me all the time; it is one of the defences she has set up.” But he was hurt all the same—hurt and angry; he wanted to punish her. “So all the time you have thought this of me?”

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“No, indeed, indeed, Edmund, it wasn’t that. I never meant that; I knew you were never that, do believe me.”

“Well, if I do believe you so far, what did you think?”

Rose let her book lie on her knee and leant over it with her hands clasped. “I thought that perhaps,” she faltered, “you had been too long in the habit of doing nothing much, and that you had grown a little lazy—at least, I didn’t really think so, but that idea has struck me.”

She came and stood by him. “Oh, Edmund, why do you make me say things when I don’t want to, when I hate saying them, when they are not really true at all.” She was deeply moved, and he felt that in one sense she was in his power. He gave a bitter sigh.

“Can I make you say whatever I like?” Her face flushed and a different look, one of fear he thought, came into her troubled eyes. “Then say after me, ’I am very sorry I did not understand by intuition that you were too blind to shoot the Boers, and that I was so silly as to think for a moment that you had ever wasted your time or been the least little bit lazy.’”

“No, I won’t say anything at all”—she held out both hands to him—“except what the children say, ’let us just go on with the game and pretend that that part never happened.’”

And though Rose was still embarrassed, still inclined to fear she had hurt him, what might have been a little cloud was pierced by sunshine. “How ridiculously glad she is that I’m not a coward!” He, too, in spite of annoyance, felt more hopeful than he had been for a long time.

At Genoa they got long delayed letters and papers. In one of these a short paragraph announced the death of Madame Danterre. “It is believed,” were the concluding words, “that she has left her large fortune to her daughter, Miss Mary Dexter.” That was the first reminder to Rose that the interlude of mere enjoyment was almost over. She was not going to repine; it had been very good. Coming on board after reading this with a quiet patient look, a look habitual to her during the last two years, but which had faded under the sunshine of happy days, Rose saw Edmund Grosse standing alone in the stern of the boat with a number of letters in his left hand pressed against his leg, looking fixedly at the water. The yacht was already standing out to sea, but Edmund had not glanced a farewell at beautiful and yet prosperous Genoa, a city that no modern materialism can degrade. Like a young bride of the sea, she is decked by things old and things new, and her marble palaces do not appear to be insulted by the jostling of modern commerce. All things are kept fresh and pure on that wonderful coast. Something had happened, of that Rose was sure; but what?

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Edmund did not look puzzled; he was deciding no knotty question at this moment. Nor did he look simply unhappy: she knew his expression when in sorrow and when in physical pain or mere disgust. He looked intensely preoccupied and very firm. Perhaps, she fancied, he too had a deep sense of that passing of life, of something akin in the swift movement of the water passing the yacht and the swift movement of life passing by the individual man. Was he, perhaps, feeling how life was going for him and for Rose, and by the simple fact of its passing on while they were standing passive their lives would be fixed apart?—passing, apart from what might have been of joy, of peace, of company along the road? There are moments when, even without the stimulus of passion, human beings have a sort of guess at the possibilities of helping one another, of giving strength, and gaining sweetness, that are slipping by. There are many degrees of regret, between that of ships that pass in the night, and that of those who have voyaged long together. There are passages of pleasure sympathy, and passages of sympathy in fight, and passages of mutual succour, and passages of intercourse when incapacity to help has in itself revealed the intensity of good-will in the watcher. But whenever the heart has been fuller than its words, and the will has been deeper than its actions, there is this beauty of regret. There has been a wealth of love greater than could be given or received—not the love of passion, but the love of the little children of the human race for one another. This regret is too grave to belong to comedy, and too happy to belong to tragedy. Rose's heart was full with this sorrow, if it be a real sorrow. These are the sorrows of hearts that are too great for the occasions of life, whereas the pain is far more common of the hearts that are not big enough for what life gives them of opportunity.

Rose was oppressed by feelings she could not analyse, a sense of possibilities of what might have been after these perfect weeks together. But her feelings were dreamy; she had no sense of concrete alternative; she did not now—he had been too skilful—expect Edmund to ask her, nor did she wish him to ask her, to draw quite close to him. She only felt at the end of this interlude they had spent together a suspicion of the infinite reach of the soul, and the soul not rebelling against its bonds, but conscious of them while awaiting freedom.

> "Only I discern infinite passion and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn."

Such were the moments when a man might be pardoned if he called Rose's beauty angelic—angelic of the type of Perugino's pictured angels, a figure just treading on the earth enough to keep up appearances, but whose very skirts float buoyantly in the fresh atmosphere of eternity. They stood a few paces apart, Rose with her look bent vaguely towards the shore, Edmund, still reading his letters, apparently unaware of her presence. He was thus able to take a long exposure sun-picture of the white figure on a sensitive memory that would prove but too retentive of the impression.

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But he had to speak at last. “Is it you?”

Edmund thought he spoke as usual, but there was a depth of pain and of tenderness revealed in the face that usually betrayed so little. He held out his hand unconsciously and then drew it back half closed, and looked again at the flowing water. It was a moment of temptation, when love was fighting against itself. Then, with the same half movement of the hand towards her:

“I have had a bolt from the blue, Rose. That man, Hewitt, whom I trusted as I would myself, has absconded. It is thought he has been playing wildly with my money, and that this crisis in South America has been the last blow. I shan’t know yet if I am ruined completely or not.”

“Oh, Edmund, how dreadful!”

“Don’t pity me, dear, it’s not worth while. It only means that one of the unemployed will get to work at last. That is, if he can find a job. But I must hurry home at once and leave you to follow. If I put back into Genoa now I can leave by the night express. And you and your mother had better go on to Marseilles in the yacht after you have dropped me.”

CHAPTER XXII

SOMETHING LIKE EVIDENCE

Mr. Murray Junior’s step sounded heavy, and his head was a little more bent than usual, as he passed down the passage into his sanctum. The snow, turning to rain and then reasserting itself and insisting that it would be snow, was dreary enough already when the fog set in firmly and without compromise. There was a good fire in the sanctum; the electric light was on, and the clean sheet of blotting-paper, fresh every morning, lay on the table.

But Mr. Murray, Junior, was struggling for a few moments to realize where he was, for his mind was in such different surroundings. In his thoughts it was June—not June sweltering in London, but June gone mad with roses in a tiny Surrey garden; and with true realism his memory chose just one rose-tree out of them all, which best implied the glory of the others. And one branch of this tree was bent down by a girl’s hand; her arm, from which a cotton sleeve had fallen back, was wonderfully white, and the roses wonderfully red.

And the office boy, slowly pulling off one damp, well-made boot and then the other over the gouty toes, was the only person who noticed that “the governor” was awfully down in the mouth.

But no one knew that in Mr. Murray Junior's pocket was a letter from a great specialist, who had seen Mr. Murray Junior's wife the day before,—and what that letter said has nothing to do with this story.

Sir Edmund called about mid-day, and noticed nothing unusual in the heavy face; only it struck him that Murray was looking old, and he wondered on which side of seventy the lawyer might be.

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Grosse's visit was the first real distraction the older man had that day. It was impossible for the solicitor not to be interested in the probability that Edmund Grosse had lost a great fortune. The affair teemed with professional interest, and then he liked the man himself. He had a taste for the type, for the man who knows how to cut a figure in the great world without being vulgar or ostentatious. He liked Edmund's manner, his tact, his gift for putting people at their ease. Rumour said that the baronet had shown pluck since the news had come, and had behaved handsomely to underlings. Most men become agitated, irritable, and even cruel when driven into such a position.

It never entered into Murray's imagination to appear to know that Edmund had any cause for care: he was not his solicitor, and he knew that his visitor had not come about his own affairs. But he could not conceal an added degree of respect, and liking even, under the impenetrable manner which hid his own aching sense of close personal suffering. Grosse answered the firm hand-grip with a kindly smile.

"I only heard of Madame Danterre's death when I got to Genoa on our return journey."

"And she died just before you left London," said Murray.

"Yes; I must have overlooked the paper in which it was announced, although I thought I read up all arrears of news whenever we went into port. I wonder no one mentioned it in Cairo; there were several people there who seemed posted up in Lady Rose's affairs. What do you know about Madame Danterre's will?"

"Very little but rumour; nothing is published. Miss Dexter was too ill to attend to business until about two weeks ago; she only saw her lawyer at the end of January. Anyhow, Madame Danterre having died abroad makes delays in this sort of business. But I have been wanting to see you," he said.

Something in his manner made Grosse ask him if he had news.

"Nothing very definite, but things are moving in your direction; and something small, but solid, is the fact that old Akers's son, and the other private, Stock, who witnessed some deed or other for Sir David, are coming home. The regiment is on its way back in the *Jumna*."

Edmund, watching the strong, heavy face, could see that this interested him less than something else as yet unexpressed.

Murray leant back in the round office chair, and crossed his legs in the well of the massive table before him. Edmund bent forward, his face sunburnt and healthy after the weeks on the yacht, but the eyes seemed tired.

"I don't know that it comes to much," Murray went on slowly, "but three days after Madame Danterre's death a foreigner asked to see me who refused to give his name to

my clerk. I had him shown in, and thought him a superior man—not, perhaps, a gentleman, but a man with brains. He asked in rather queer English whether I would object to giving him all the information I could, without

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betraying confidence, as to Sir David Bright and his wife. I thought for a moment that he was your Florentine detective, but then I reflected that the detective would have no object in disguising himself from me as he knew that you trusted me entirely. I told my visitor that he might ask me any questions he liked, and I can assure you he placed his shots with great skill. He wanted first to know if there had been any scandal connected with their married life, in order, of course, to find out why Sir David had not left his money to Lady Rose; and whether no one had been disposed to dispute the will. I let him see that the affair had been a nine days' wonder here, and I gave him some notion of my own opinion of Madame Danterre. He did not give himself away, and I thought he had some honest reason for anxiety in the matter. Well! he left without letting me know his name or address, but there is no doubt that he is Dr. Larrone. I wrote at once to your detective, Pietrino, in Florence, and a letter from him crossed mine saying that Dr. Larrone had left Florence within a few hours of Madame Danterre's death, and that, by her desire, he had taken a small box to Miss Dexter. There was evidently a certain sense of mystery and excitement among the nurses and servants as to the box and the sudden journey. It seems that Madame Larrone was angry at his taking this sudden journey, and said to a friend that she only 'hoped he wouldn't get his fingers burnt by meddling in other people's affairs.'

"Then Pietrino, in answering my letter, said that my description was certainly the description of Larrone. He says the doctor is exceedingly upright and sensitive as to his professional honour, and has been known to refuse a legacy from a patient because he thought it ought not to have been left out of the family. Since that, Pietrino has written that Larrone is taking a long holiday, and that people are wondering if he will have any scruples as to the large legacy that is said to have been left to him by Madame Danterre. So it is pretty clear who my reticent visitor was. Now, I don't know that we gain much from that so far, but I think it may mean that Larrone could, if he would, tell some interesting details. I will give you all Pietrino's letters, but I should just like to run on with my own impressions from them first. It seems that, since Madame Danterre's death, there has been a good deal of wild talk against her in Florence, which was kept down by self-interest as long as she was living and an excellent paying-machine. You will see, when you read the gossip, that very little is to the point. But, on the other hand, Pietrino has valuable information from one of the nurses. She is a young woman who is disappointed, as she has had no legacy; evidently Madame Danterre intended to add her name in the last codicil, but somehow failed to do so. This woman is sure that Madame Danterre had an evil conscience as to her wealth. She also said that she was always morbidly anxious as

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to a small box. Once, when the nurse had reassured her by showing her the box, which was kept in a little bureau by the bed, she said, with an odd smile: 'If I believed in the devil I should be very glad that I can pay him back all he lent me when I don't want it any more.' At another time she asked for the box and took out some papers, and told the nurse to light a candle close to her as she was going to burn some old letters. Then she began to read a long, long letter, and as she read, she became more and more angry until she had a sudden attack of the heart. The nurse swept the papers into the box and locked it up, knowing that she could do nothing to soothe the patient while they were lying about. That night the doctors thought Madame Danterre would die, but she rallied. She did not speak of the papers again until some days later. The nurse described how, one evening, when she thought her sleeping, she was surprised to find her great eyes fixed on the candle in a sconce near the bed. 'The candle was burnt half way down, but the paper was not burnt at all,' the nurse heard her whisper; 'I shall not do it now. I cannot be expected to settle such questions while I am ill. After all, I have always given her a full share; she can destroy it herself if she likes, or she can give it all up to that woman—it shall be her own affair.'

"She did not seem to know that she had been speaking aloud, and she muttered a little more to herself and then slept.

"The nurse heard no further allusion to the box for weeks. She said the old woman was using all her fine vitality and her iron will in fighting death. Then came the last change, and her torpid calm turned into violent excitement. While she thought herself alone with Dr. Larrone she implored him to take the box to England the moment she died, and put it into her daughter's hands. 'No one knows it matters,' she said more than once. But when she found that he did not wish to go, and said it was impossible for him to go at once, her entreaties were terrible. 'She had always had her own way, and she had it to the end,' was the nurse's comment.

"Dr Larrone, coming out of the room, realised that the nurse must have known what passed, and told her he was glad she was there. He put a box on a table with a little bang of impatience.

"'It's delirium, delusion, madness!' he said, 'but I've given my word. I never hated a job more; she wouldn't have the morphia till I had taken my oath I would go as soon as she was dead.'"

Grosse was absorbed by the pictures feebly conveyed through the nurse's words, through the detective's letters, through the English lawyer's translation and summary. He could supply what was missing. He had seen Madame Danterre. He could so well imagine the frightful force of the woman, a tyrant to the very last moment. He could guess, too, at the reaction of those about her when once she was dead, and they were

quite out of her reach. There is always a reaction when feebler personalities have to fill the space left by a tyrant. He could realise the buzz of gossip, and the sense of courage with which servants and tradesmen would make wild, impossible stories of her wicked life. He came back from these thoughts with a certain shock when he found Murray saying:

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“I can’t say there is anything approaching to proof. But supposing, just for the sake of supposing, that you were right in your wild guess as to the will, then we should next go on to suppose that the real will was in the box conveyed by Dr. Larrone to Miss Dexter.”

Edmund’s face was very dark, but he did not speak for some moments.

“No,” he said, “she is incapable of such a crime. She would have given it up at once.”

“At once?” Murray said. “Miss Dexter was too ill to do anything at once. She was down with influenza, of which she very nearly died, but she pulled through, and then went away for a month. She only got back to London two weeks ago. Her affairs are in the hands of a very respectable firm. We know them, and they began this business with her a very short time before she came up. Now Sir Edmund, think it well over. You may be right in your opinion of this young lady, but just fancy the position. There is a fortune of at least L20,000 a year on the one hand, and on the other, absolute poverty. For do you suppose that, if it were in the last will which Akers and Stock witnessed on board ship, and there were any provision in it for Madame Danterre, Sir David Bright would have left capital absolutely in her possession? No: the probability is—I am, of course, always supposing your original notion to be true—that the girl has this choice of immense wealth practically unquestioned by the world which has settled down to the fact that Sir David left his money to Madame Danterre; or, on the other hand, extreme poverty (she inherited some L2,000 from her father) and public disgrace. Mind you, she would have to announce that her mother was a criminal, and she would, in this just and high-minded world of ours, pass under a cloud herself. A few, only a very few, would in the least appreciate her conduct.”

Sir Edmund was miserably uncomfortable, intensely averse to the results of what he had done. In drawing his mesh of righteous intrigue round the mother he had never realised this situation. For the moment he wished himself well out of it all.

“There is one other point,” he said. “Are we quite sure that Dr. Larrone did not know what was in the box? Is it not just possible that something was taken out of it before it was given to Miss Dexter? He must have known there was a large legacy to himself; it was against his interests that Madame Danterre’s will should be set aside. Also, it would not be a very comfortable situation for him if it turned out that he had been the intimate friend and highly-paid physician of a criminal.”

“That last motive fits the character of the man, according to Pietrino, better than the first,” said Mr. Murray. “Well, we must see; we must wait and see whether he accepts his legacy. But before that must come the publication of Madame Danterre’s will.”

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Edmund drove back from the city absorbed in the thought of Molly, in comparing his different impressions of her at different stages of their acquaintance. He had spoken so firmly and undoubtingly to Murray. His first thought had been one of simple indignation, and yet—But no! he remembered her simplicity in speaking of her mother's letter; he could see her now with the gentle, pathetic look on her face as she told him of her offering to go out to the wicked old woman, and how her poor little advance had been rejected.

Edmund had thought it one of the advantages of the expedition on the yacht that it would make it impossible for many weeks to call again at Molly's flat. He had often before felt uncomfortable and annoyed with himself when he had been too friendly with Molly. Not that he felt her attraction to be a temptation to disloyalty to Rose. He knew he was incurable in his devotion to his love. But he did feel it mean to enjoy this pleasant, philosopher-and-guide attitude, towards the daughter of Madame Danterre. That Molly could hold any delusion about his feelings had never dawned on his imagination as a possibility until the night when she confided in him her forlorn attempt at doing a daughter's duty. He had never liked her so well; never so entirely dissociated her from her mother, and from all possibilities of evil.

And now the situation was changed; now there was this hazy mass of suspicion revealed in Florence, and this most detestable story of Larrone and the box.

How differently things looked when it was a question of suspecting of a crime the woman he had seen in the Florentine garden, and of that same suspicion regarding poor little graceful, original, Molly Dexter!

Within two or three days Edmund became still more immersed in business. He began to realise his own ignorance as to his own affairs, and he went through the slow torture of understanding how blindly he had left everything in his solicitor's hands. He was beginning to face actual poverty as inevitable, when he heard from Mr. Murray that Madame Danterre's will was proved in London, and that her daughter was her sole heir.

"The income cannot be less than L20,000 a year, and the whole fortune is entirely at Miss Dexter's disposal," wrote Mr. Murray without any comment whatever.

Edmund was not sorry that Rose and her mother were staying on in Paris. They would escape the first outburst of gossip as to the further history of Sir David Bright's fortune. Nor was he sorry that they should also miss the growing rumours as to the disappearance of the fortune of Sir Edmund Grosse. Of Rose herself he dared not let himself think; but every evil conclusion which he had to face as to his own future, every undoubted loss that was discovered in the inquiry which was being carried on, seemed as a heavy door shut between him and the hopes of those last days on the yacht.

CHAPTER XXIII

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THE USES OF DELIRIUM

“Don’t you think I might get up and sit by the window and look at the sea, Carey?”

Miss Carew hesitated, and then summoned the nurse.

“Miss Dexter was to have one whole day in bed after the journey.”

The nurse, looking into Molly’s eager eyes, compromised for one half hour, in which Miss Dexter might lie on the sofa in a fur cloak.

It was a big sofa befitting the largest bedroom in the hotel, and Molly lay back on its cushions with the peculiar physical satisfaction of weakness, resting after very slight efforts. Yesterday she had been too exhausted for enjoyment, but this afternoon her sensations were delightful.

The short afternoon light was ruddy on the glorious brown sails of the fishing-boats, and drew out all their magnificent contrast to the blue water. But the sun still sparkled garishly on the crest of the waves, and the milder glow of the sunset had not begun.

Weakness was sheltered and at rest within, while without was the immense movement of wind and water, and the passing smile of the sun on the great, unshackled forces of winter. Molly’s rest was like a child’s security in the arms of a kindly giant. Her mind had been absorbed by illness—an illness that had had her completely in grip, the first serious illness she had ever known. There had been a struggle in the depths of her life’s forces such as she had never imagined; but now life had conquered, and she was at rest. In that time there had been awful delirium: horrible things, guilty and hideous, had clung about her, all round her. One wicked presence especially had taken a strange form, a face without a body, and yet it had hands—it must have had hands because the horror of it was that it constantly opened the doors of the different cupboards, but most often the door of the big wardrobe, and looked out, and that although Molly had had the wardrobe locked and the key put under her pillow. And this face was very like Molly’s, and the question she had to settle was whether this face was her mother’s or her own. At times she reasoned—and the logical process was so deadly tiring—that it must be her mother, for she could not be Molly herself being so unkind to herself; whereas, if the face had had any pity for her it might have been herself looking at herself. But was that not nonsense? There was surely a touch of hysteria in that. Did the face really come out of her own brain? And if so, from what part of her brain? She felt sure there was a sort of empty attic, a large one, in the top part of her right brain, it felt hollow, quite terribly hollow. Probably the face came out of that. But then, how did it get inside the wardrobe? and once inside the wardrobe, how did it get out again when Molly really had the key?

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She longed to speak to Miss Carew about this, but Miss Carew never could follow a chain of reasoning. The nurse was more sensible, but she thought that reasoning was too tiring for Molly—so silly! If only she could be allowed to explain it all quietly and reasonably! And oh! why did they leave her alone? She hated to be left alone, and she was sure she told them so; and yet they went away. And then she began to work her brain again as soon as the was alone, and she would be happy for a few minutes with a new plan for shutting the face into the large empty attic in her right brain and locking the door, when quite suddenly the face opened the door of the wardrobe with its loose hands and looked out again and jeered at her.

Even now, lying resting, and looking at the sun, Molly was glad that there was no hanging wardrobe in the room; only one full of shelves. She would certainly not use the same room when she went back to London. She would only be in that flat for a short time, as she must now take a big house.

As her eyes rested on the sails and the water, and were filled with the joy of colour, she had a sort of delicious idea of her new house. It should be very beautiful, most exquisite, quite unlike anybody else's house; it should be Molly's own special triumph. It must have the glamour of an old London house, its dignity, its sense of a past. It should have for decoration gloriously subdued gilding and colour, and old pictures, which Molly could afford to buy.

"And"—she smiled to herself—"as long as it is a house in the air it shall have a great outlook on the sea and the sunset." The fancy that had been so cruel in her sickness was a sycophant now that life was victorious; it flattered and caressed and soothed her now.

Within a few days two theories were growing in the background of her consciousness, not acknowledged or questioned while they took possession. They took turns to make themselves gradually, very gradually, and imperceptibly familiar to her. The first was founded on the idea that she had been very ill a little sooner than was supposed, and that she had imagined a great deal that was torturing and absurd as to her mother's papers. She had been delirious that evening, and, what was still more important, she was actually very hazy now as to what she had seen and read of the contents of that box.

"I can't remember if that's true," she could honestly say to herself when some fact of the horrible story came forward and claimed attention. Once she caught herself thinking how very common it was for people to forget entirely what had happened just before or during an illness. For instance, Sir David Bright had never been able to remember what happened on the day on which Madame Danterre declared he had married her. But how did Molly know that? And suddenly she said to herself that she could not remember; perhaps she had fancied that, too.

At another time she began almost to think that she had imagined the black box altogether. Was it square or oblong? and how shallow was it? Sometimes while she was ill she had seen a black box as big as a house; sometimes it was a little tiny cash box.

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Meanwhile, under cover of so many uncertainties, the other theory was getting a firm footing. It was simply that the fact of the will being sent to her mother was undoubted proof of Sir David's having repented of having made it. If Sir David had not sent her this will, who had? It was absurd and romantic to suppose that her mother had carried on an intrigue in South Africa in order to get possession of this will. That might have done in a chapter of Dumas, or have been imagined in delirium, but it was not possible in real life. The only puzzle was—and the theory must be able to meet all the facts of the case—why had he not destroyed the will himself? The probability was that he had not been able to do so at the last moment. When dying he must have repented of the last will just too late to destroy it. She could quite imagine his asking a friend, almost with his last words, to send Madame Danterre the papers. It would look more natural than his asking the friend to destroy them. And then the officer would have addressed the papers, of course not reading them. And thus the theory comfortably wrapped up another fact, namely, that the registered envelope had not been addressed by the hand that had written its contents. Finally, all that the theory did for the will, it did also for the letter to Rose, for the two things evidently stood or fell together. So the theories grew and prospered without interfering with each other as Molly's health and strength returned, except that the delirium theory insisted at times on the other theory being purely hypothetical; as, for instance, it had to be "Even supposing I was not delirious, and the will had been there, it is still evident that——"

Molly's recovery did not get on without a drawback, and the day on which the lawyer came down to see her she was genuinely very unwell. She seemed hardly able to understand business. She was ready to leave all responsibility to him in a way that certainly saved much trouble, but he hardly liked to see her quite so passive.

After he left, Miss Carew found her looking faint and ill.

"He must think me a fool," she said, in a weak voice. "I have left everything on his shoulders, poor man. I'm afraid if he is asked about me, as he's a Scotchman he will say I am 'just an innocent'! I really ought not to have seen him to-day."

But in a few days she was better, and the house agent found her quite business-like. The said house agent had come down with one secret object in his heart. It was now nine months since the bankruptcy of a too well-known nobleman had thrown a splendid old house on the market. It had been in the hands of all the chief agents in London, and they had hardly had a bite for it. Even millionaires were shy of it so far, the fact being that the house was more beautiful than comfortable, the bedrooms having been thought of less importance than the effectiveness of the first floor. Then, perhaps, it was a little gloomy, though artists maintained that its share of gloom only enhanced its charm.

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After mentioning several uninteresting mansions, the agent observed that, of course, there was Westmoreland House still going, and Molly's eyes flashed. She had been at the great sale at Westmoreland House; she had been absolutely fascinated by the great well staircase and by the music-room, by the square reception-rooms, and above all by the gallery with its perfection of light moulding, a room of glass and gold, but so spiritualised, so subdued and reticent and dignified, that ghosts might live there undisturbed.

Molly trembled with eagerness as she asked the vital questions of cost, of repairs, of rates and taxes. Yes, it was possible—undoubtedly possible. There was a very large sum of money in a bank in Florence which possibly Madame Danterre had accumulated there with a view to a sudden emergency. Molly's lawyer had not been certain of the amount, but he had mentioned a sum larger than the price of Westmoreland House.

By the time Molly was fit to go back to London, and while the theories just described were still in possession of her mind, Westmoreland House was bought. Molly said it was a great relief to get it settled.

"One feels more settled altogether," she said to Miss Carew, "when a big question like that is done with."

She strolled with Miss Carew on the smooth sand by the water's edge on the last evening before leaving, and looked up at the white cliffs growing bright in the light of the sunset.

"It has been very restful," she said. "I am almost sorry to go."

"Then why not stay a little longer, my dear?"

"Oh, no, Carey! it would soon become quite intolerable; it isn't real life, only a pause; and now, Carey, I am going to live!"

The sun presently set lower and more grey than they had expected; the wind felt sharper, and Molly shivered. Nature was unbearable without its gilding.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. DELAPORT GREEN IN THE ASCENDANT

Mrs. Delaport Green had been to Egypt for the winter, and came back, refreshed as a giant, for life in London. She was really glad to see Tim, who was unfeignedly pleased to see her, and they spent quite an hour in the pleasantest chat. Of course he had not much news to give of his wife's acquaintances as he did not live among them, but one item of information interested her extremely.

“Miss Dexter has bought Westmoreland House in Park Lane!”

Mrs. Delaport Green’s eyes sparkled with excitement and the green light of envy, and she determined to call on Molly at once. Happily there had been no open quarrel, which only showed how wise it was to forget injuries, for certainly the girl had been most disgracefully rude.

Molly’s new abode stood back from the street, and had usually an immensely dignified air of quiet, but there was a good deal of noise and bustle going on when Adela reached the door. Several large pieces of furniture, a picture, and a heavy clock, might have been obstacles enough to keep out most visitors, but Adela persevered, and the dusty and worried porter said that Molly was at home before he had a moment for reflection.

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Adela advanced with outstretched hands to greet her “dear friend” as she was shown into a large drawing-room on the first floor.

Molly was standing in the middle of the room with an immense hat on, and a long cloak that woke instant enthusiasm in the soul of her visitor. There was perhaps, even to Adela something too emphatic, too striking, too splendid altogether in the total effect of the tall, slim figure. She had never thought that Molly would turn out half so handsome, but she saw now that she had only needed a little making-up. While thinking these things she was chattering eagerly.

“How are you? I was so sorry to hear you had been ill, but now you look simply splendid! I have had a wonderful winter. I feel as if I had laid in quite a stock of calm and rest from the desert, as if no little thing could worry me after my long draught—of the desert, you know! Well! one must get into harness again.” She gave a little sigh. “But to think of your having Westmoreland House! How everybody wondered last season what was to become of it! and what furniture, oh! what an exquisite cabinet! You certainly have wonderful taste.” Molly did not interrupt her visitor to explain that the said cabinet had belonged to Madame Danterre. “I adore that style; I do so wish Tim would give me a cabinet like that for my birthday. I really think he might.”

She was so accustomed to Molly’s silences that it was some time before she realised that this one was ominous. She might have seen that that young lady was looking over her head, or out of the window, or anywhere but at her. Suddenly it struck her that not a sound interrupted her own voice, and she began to perceive the absurd airs that Molly was giving herself. Prompted by the devil she, therefore, instantly proceeded to say:

“When we were at Cairo Sir Edmund Grosse came for a few days with Lady Rose Bright.”

“From the yacht?” said Molly, speaking for the first time.

“Yes; they said in Cairo that the engagement would be announced as soon as they got back to England. And really my dear, everyone agreed that without grudging you her money, one can’t help being glad that that dear woman should be rich again!”

It was about as sharp a two-edged thrust as could have been delivered, and Molly’s *distrait* air and undue magnificence melted under it.

“No one could be more glad than I am,” she said, with a quiet reserve of manner; and after that she was quite friendly, and took Adela all over the house, and pressed her to stay to tea, and that little lady felt instinctively that Molly was afraid of her, and smacked her rosy lips with the foretaste of the amusements she intended to enjoy in this magnificent house.

While they were having tea, Molly, leaning back, said quietly:

“I see from what you said before we went over the house that you have not heard that Sir Edmund Grosse is ruined?”

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Mrs. Delaport Green gave a little shriek of excitement.

“He trusted all his affairs to a scoundrel, and this is the result.” Molly’s tone was still negative.

“Well, that does seem a shame!”

“I don’t know; if a man will neglect his affairs he must take the consequence.”

“Oh! but I do think it is hard; he used his money so well.”

“Did he?” Molly raised her eyebrows.

“Well, he was a perfect host, and was so awfully good-natured, don’t you know?”

In the real interest in the news, Adela had, for the moment, forgotten that Molly might be especially interested in anything concerning Edmund Grosse. She was reminded by the low, thundery voice in which Molly began to speak quite suddenly, as if her patience had been tried too far.

“You are just like all the others! It’s enough to make one a radical to listen to it. After all, what good has Sir Edmund Grosse done with his money? He gave dinners that ruined people’s livers—I suppose that was good for the doctors! He gave diamonds to actresses, and I suppose that was for the good of art. He has never done a stroke of work; he has wallowed in luxury, and now his friends almost cry out against Providence because he will have to earn his bread. Probably several hundreds a year will be left, and many men would be thankful for that. Then other people say it is such a pity that now he cannot marry Lady Rose Bright. They have the effrontery to say that to me, as if L800 a year were not enough for them to marry on if they cared for each other!”

All this tirade seemed to Adela the very natural outpouring of jealousy, and, as she fully intended to be an intimate friend of Molly’s she sympathised and agreed, and agreed and sympathised till she fairly, roused Molly’s sense of the ludicrous.

“I don’t mean,” Molly said, half angry and half amused, “that I shall spend my money so very much better;—I quite mean to have my fling. Only I do so hate all this cant.”

At last Adela departed, crying out that she had promised to be in Hoxton an hour ago, and Molly was left alone. It was too late to go to the shops, she reflected, and she sank back into a deep chair with a frown on her white forehead.

What did it matter to her if they were engaged or not? It made no sort of difference. She was not going to allow her peace of mind to be upset on their account; she had done with that sentimental nonsense long ago. Her illness had made a great space between her present self and the Molly who had been so foolishly upset by the

discovery of Edmund Grosse's treachery. Curiously enough Molly had never doubted of that treachery, although it was one of the horrors that had come out of the doubtful, and probably mythical, tin box.

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By the way, there was a little pile of tin boxes in a small unfurnished room upstairs, next to Molly's bedroom, of which she kept the key. She had had no time to look at them yet. Some of them came from Florence, and two or three from her own flat. They were of all shapes and sizes, and piled one on another. But from the moment when Molly turned that very ordinary key in the lock of the unfurnished dressing-room she never let her thoughts dwell for long on the possible delusions of delirium. Her mind had entered into another phase in which it was of supreme importance to think only of the details of each day as they came before her.

CHAPTER XXV

MOLLY AT COURT

If any of us, going to dress quietly in an ordinary bedroom, were told: "It is the last time you will have just that amount of comfort, that degree of luxury, to which you have been accustomed; it is the last time you will have your evening clothes put out for you; the last time your things will be brushed; the last time hot water will be brought to your room; the last time that your dressing-gown will have come out of the cupboard without your taking it out"—we might have an odd mixture of sensations. We might be very sad—ridiculously sad—and yet have a sense of being braced, a whiff of open air in the mental atmosphere.

Edmund Grosse did not expect in future to draw his own hot water, or put out his own dressing-gown, but he did know that he had come to the last night of having a valet of his own, the last night in which the perfect Dawkins, who had been with him ten years, would do him perfect bodily service. Everything to-night was done in the most punctilious manner, and it seemed appropriate that this last night should be a full-dress affair.

Sir Edmund was going to Court (the first Court held in May), and his deputy lieutenant's uniform was laid on the bed. Edmund might not have taken the trouble to go, but a kindly message from a very high place as to his troubles had made him feel it a more gracious response to do so. The valet was a trifle distant, if any shade of manner could have been detected in his deferential attitude towards his master. Dawkins was not pleased with Sir Edmund; he felt that his ten years of service had been based on a delusion; he had not intended to be valet to a ruined man. Happily he had been careful. He had not trusted blindly to Providence, and, with a rich result from enormous wages and perquisites, and an excellent character, he could face the world with his head high, whereas Sir Edmund—well, Sir Edmund's position was very different. Sir Edmund had let himself be deceived outrageously, and what was the result?

Edmund was as particular as usual about every detail of his appearance. It would have been an education to a young valet to have seen the ruined man dressed that evening.

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Next day Dawkins was to leave, and the day after that the flat was to be the scene of a small sale. The chief valuables, a few good pictures, and some very rare china, had already gone to Christie's. The delicate *pate* of his beloved vases had seemed to respond to the lingering farewell touch of the connoisseur's fingers. Edmund was trying to secure for some of them homes where he might sometimes visit them, and one or two of his lady friends were persuading their husbands that these things ought to be bought for love of poor Edmund Grosse. Edmund was quite ready to press a little on friendship of this sort, being fully conscious of its quality and its duration. For the next few weeks he would be welcomed with enthusiasm—and next year?

But all the same there was that subconscious sense of bracing air—something like the sense of climax in reaching a Northern station on a very hot day. We may be very hot, perhaps, at Carlisle or Edinburgh, but it is not the climate of Surrey.

Edmund mounted the stairs at Buckingham Palace with a certain unconscious dignity which melted into genial amusement at the sight of a pretty woman near him evidently whispering advice to a fair *debutante*. The girl was not eighteen, and her whole figure expressed acute discomfort.

"Keep your veil out of the way," her mother warned her.

"I've had two dreadful pulls already; I'm sure my feathers are quite crooked. Oh! mother, there's Sir Edmund Grosse; he will tell me whether they are crooked. You never know."

"I could see if you would let me get in front of you," murmured her mother.

"But you can't possibly in this crowd. Oh! how d'ye do, Sir Edmund; have I kept my veil straight?"

"Charming," said Edmund, with a low bow. The child really looked very pretty, though rather like a little dairymaid dressed up for fun, and her long gloves slipped far enough from the shoulders to show some splendidly red arms.

"Charming," he said again in a half-teasing voice. "Only I don't approve of such late hours for children."

It amused him that this was one of the presentations that would be most noted in the papers, and this funny, jolly little girl would probably gain a good deal of knowledge and lose a great deal more of charm in the next three months.

Walking by the mother and daughter, he had come close to the open doors of a long gallery, and stood for a moment to take in the picture. It was not new to him, but perhaps he felt inclined to the attitude of an onlooker to-night, and there was something in this attitude slightly aloof and independent. Brilliant was the one word for the scene;

a little hard, perhaps, in colouring, and the women in their plumes and veils were too uniform to be artistic. There was too much gold, too much red silk, too many women in the long rows waiting with more or less impatience or nervousness to get through with it. The scene

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had an almost crude simplicity of insistence on fine feathers and gilding the obvious pride of life. Yet he saw the little fair country girl near him look awe-struck, and he understood it. For a fresh imagination, or for one that has, for some reason, a fresh sensitiveness of perception, the great gallery, the wealth of fair women, the scattered men in uniform, the solemn waiting for entrance into the royal presence, were enough. And there really is a certain force in the too gaudy setting. It blares like a trumpet. It crushes the quiet and the repose of life. It shines in the eye defiantly and suddenly, and at last it captures the mind and makes the breath come quickly, for, like no other and more perfect setting to life, it makes us think of death. It is too bald an assertion of the world and all its works and all its pomps, not to challenge a rebuke from the grisly tyrant.

Edmund had not analysed these impressions, but he was still under their power when he turned to let others pass, for the crowd was thickening. And as he did so, a little space was opened by three or four ladies turning round to secure places for some friends on the long seats against the walls.

Across this space he saw a woman, whom, for a moment only, he did not recognise. It was a tall figure in white satin with a train of cloth of silver thrown over her arm. There was nothing of the nervous *debutante* in the attitude, nor was there the half-truculent self-assertion of the modern girl. When people talked afterwards of her gown and her jewels, Edmund only remembered the splendour of her pearls, and when he mentioned them, a woman added that the train had been lined with lace of untold value. What he felt at the time was the enormous triumph of the eyes. Grey eyes, full of light, full of pride. He did not ask himself what was the excuse for this “haughty bearing,” and the old phrase, which has now sunk from court manners into penny novelettes, was the only phrase that seemed quite a true one.

Why did she stand so completely alone? It made no difference to this sense of loneliness that she received warm greetings in the crowd, or that Lady Dawning was fidgeting and maternal. Evidently (and he was amused at the combination) she was going to present her cousin, John Dexter’s daughter. Did she remember now how she had advised Mrs. Carteret to hide Molly from the public eye?

But Molly’s figure was always to remain in his mind thus triumphant without absurdity, and thus alone in a crowd. The blackness of her hair had a strange force from the white transparent veil flowing over it, and a flush of deep colour was in the dark skin. Edmund had several moments in which to look at her and to realise that Molly was walking in a dream of greatness. The little country girl he had seen just now had been brought up to hear kindly jokes about Courts and their ways; not so Molly. To her it was all intensely serious and intensely exciting. Could he have known the chief cause of the intense emotion that filled Molly’s slight figure with a feverish vitality would he have believed that she was happy? And yet she was, for no pirate king running his brig under the very

nose of a man-of-war ever had more of the quintessence of the sense of adventure than Molly had, as Lady Dawning led her, the heiress of the year, into the long gallery.

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For one moment she saw Edmund Grosse, and she looked him full in the face very gravely. She did not pretend not to know him; she let him see the entirely genuine contempt she felt for him, and she meant him to understand that she would never know him again.

CHAPTER XXVI

EDMUND IS NO LONGER BORED

As the season went on Edmund Grosse did not understand himself. Everything had gone against him, his fortune had melted, his easy-going luxurious life was at an end. He had no delusions; he knew perfectly well the value of money in his world. His position in that world was gone in fact, if not quite in seeming. The sort of conversation that went on about him in his own circles had the sympathy, but would soon have also the finality, of a funeral oration. There would soon be a tone of reminiscence in those who spoke of him. It would be as if they said gently: "Oh, yes! dear old Grosse, we knew him well at one time, don't you know; it's a sad story." He could have told you not only the words, but even the inflection of the voices of his friends in discussing his affairs. He did not mean that there were no kindly faithful hearts among them. Several might emerge as kind, as friendly as ever. But the monster of human society would behave as it always does in self-defence. It would shake itself, dislodge Edmund from its back, and then say quite kindly that it was a sad pity that he had fallen off. Every organism must reject what it can no longer assimilate, and a rich society by the law of its being rejects a poor man.

And yet the idea that poor Grosse must be half crushed, horribly cut up and done for, was not in the least true. This was what he did not understand himself. It is well known that some people bear great trials almost lightly who take small ones very heavily. Grosse certainly rose to the occasion. But that a great trial had aroused great courage was not the whole explanation by any means. Curiously enough ill-fortune with drastic severity had done for him what he had impotently wished to do for himself. It had made impossible the life which, in his heart, he had despised; it absolutely forced him to use powers of which he was perfectly conscious, and which had been rusting simply for want of employment. It is doubtful whether he could have roused himself for any other motive whatever. Certainly love of Rose had been unable to do it. The will might seem to will what he wished to do, but the effort to will strongly enough was absent. Now all the soft, padded things between him and the depths of life had been struck away at one rude blow; he *must* swim or sink. And so he began to swim, and the exercise restored his circulation and braced his whole being.

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It was not, perhaps, heroic exertion that he was roused into making. But it wanted courage in a man of Edmund's age to begin to work for six hours or more a day at journalism. He also produced two articles on foreign politics for the reviews, which made a considerable impression. It was important now that Edmund had read and watched, and, even more important, listened very attentively to what busier men than himself had to say during twenty years of life spent in the world. Years afterwards, when Grosse had in the second half of his life done as much work as many men would think a good record for their whole lives, people were surprised to read his age in the obituary notices. They had rightly dated the beginning of his career from his first appearance as an authority on foreign politics, but they had not realised that Grosse had begun to work only in the midstream of life. Many brilliant springs are delusive in their promise, but rarely is there such achievement after an unprofitable youth.

Love is not the whole life of a man, but, in spite of new activities, in spite of a renewed sense of self-respect, Edmund had time and space enough for much pain in his heart.

Rose was still in Paris taking care of her mother, who was very unwell. Edmund had hinted at the possibility of going over to see them at Easter, but the suggestion had met with no encouragement. He had felt rebuffed, and was in no mood to be smoothed or melted by Rose's written sympathy. He was, no doubt, harder as well as stronger than before his financial troubles. He let Rose see that he could stand on his feet, and was not disposed to whine. Meanwhile Molly had provoked him to single combat. The decided cut she gave him at the Court was not to be permitted; he was too old a hand to allow anything so crude. He meant to be at her parties; he meant to keep in touch; indeed he meant to see this thing out.

"Sir Edmund, will you take Miss Dexter in to dinner?"

Edmund looked fairly surprised and very respectful as Mrs. Delaport Green spoke to him. Molly's bearing was, he could see, defiant, but she was clearly quite conscious of having to submit and anxious to do nothing absurd.

They ate their soup in silence, for Molly's other neighbour had shown an unflattering eagerness to be absorbed by the lady he had taken down. Edmund turned to her with exactly his old shade of manner, very paternal, intimate and gentle.

"And you are not bored yet?"

Molly could have sworn deep and long had it been possible.

"No; why should I be?"

She stared at him for a moment indifferently, as at a stranger, but he could see the nervous movement of her fingers as she crumbed her bread.

“It is more likely,” he answered, “that I should remember what I allude to than that you should. We once had a talk about being bored. I said I had never been bored while I was poor. Now I am poor again, so I naturally remember, and, as you are trying the experience of being very rich, I should really like to know if you are bored yet.”

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Molly might have kept silent, but she did not want Adela, who was certainly watching them, to think her embarrassed.

“I suppose every one has moments of being bored.”

Edmund leant back and turned round so as to allow of his looking fully at her. He muttered to himself: “Young, beautiful, wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice—and bored! What flattering unction that is to the soul of a ruined man.”

In spite of her anger, her indignation, her hurt pride, Molly was softened. She writhed under the caress of his voice; it had power still.

“Are you not bored any more?” She spoke unwillingly.

“No,” he said, “suffering does not bore; discomfort does not bore; knowledge of your fellow-creatures does not bore. But, of course, I am tasting the pleasures of novelty. And I have not disappeared yet. I think a boarding-house in Bloomsbury may prove boring. How prettily our hostess will pity me, then. But I don’t think I shall meet you here at dinner, and have the comfort of seeing for myself that you, too, are bored.”

Molly felt that he was putting her hopelessly in the wrong. She was the one bitterly aggrieved and deeply injured. But he made her feel as if coldness on her part would be just the conduct of any rich heartless woman to a ruined man.

“I calculate,” he said, “on about fifty more good dinners which I shall not pay for, and then, of course, I shall think myself well fed at my own expense in an Italian cafe somewhere. I think Italian, don’t you? Dinner at two shillings! There is an air of *spagghetti* and onions that conceals the nature or age of the meat; and the coffee is amazingly good. One might be able to find one with a clean cloth.”

Most of these remarks were made almost to himself.

“You know it isn’t true,” Molly said angrily; “you know you will get a good post. Men like you are always given things.”

Edmund helped himself very carefully to exactly the right amount of melted butter. “Don’t you eat asparagus?” he interjected, and, without waiting for an answer, went on:

“I thought so too, but I can’t hear of a job. There are too many of the unemployed just now. However, no doubt, as you say, I shall soon be made absolute ruler of some province twice the size of England.”

He laughed and smoothed his moustache with one hand.

“Down with dull care, Miss Dexter; let us make a pact never to be bored—in Bloomsbury, or West Africa, or Park Lane. I suppose you found a great deal to do to that dear old house?”

After that their other neighbours claimed them both; but during dessert Molly, against her will, lost hold of the talk on her right, and had to listen to Edmund again.

“I hear that you have got the old Florentine looking-glasses from my sale.”

“I don’t think they were from your sale,” said Molly hastily.

“Well, Perks told me so.”

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“Perks never told me,” muttered Molly.

“I should think they must suit the house to perfection. Where have you put them?”

“In the small dining-room.”

“Yes; they must do admirably there. I should like to see them again.” He looked at her with a faintly sarcastic smile. She knew what he intended her to say, and, against her will, she said hastily:

“Won’t you come and see them?”

“With great pleasure.”

Molly saw that Adela had risen, and sprang up and turned away in one sudden movement. She was very angry with him for forcing her to say that, and she could not conceive what had made her yield.

“‘The teeth that bite; the claws that scratch,’” he thought to himself, “but safely chained up—and the movements are beautiful.” He stood looking after her.

“I did as you told me,” said the hostess, pausing for a moment as she followed her guests to the door. “If Molly blames me, shall I say that you asked to take her in?”

“Say just what you like; I trust you entirely.” He did not attempt to speak to Molly after dinner, or when they met again at a ball that same night. All her burning wish to snub him could not be gratified. He seemed not to know shat she was still in the room. But she knew instinctively that he watched her, and she was not sorry he should see her in the crowd, and be witness, however unwillingly, to her position in the world he knew so well. It added to the sense of intoxication that often possessed her now. “Be drunken,” says Baudelaire, “be drunken with wine, with poetry, with virtue, with what you will, only be drunken.” And that Molly could be drunken with flattery, with luxury, with movement, with music, with a sense of danger that gave a strong and subtle flavour to her pleasures, was the explanation (and the only one) of how she bore the hours of reaction, of the nausea experienced by that spiritual nature of hers which she had been so surprised to discover. It was not the half-shrinking, half-defiant Molly Edmund had talked to in the woods of Groombridge, whom he watched now. That Molly was gone, and he regretted her.

CHAPTER XXVII

MOLLY’S APPEAL

Edmund, it seemed, was in no hurry to see his Florentine looking-glasses again. Ten days passed before he called on Molly, and on the eleventh day Mr. Murray, Junior, wrote to say that he had some fresh and important intelligence to give him, and asked if Sir Edmund would call, not at his office, but at his own house.

Edmund flung the letter down impatiently. The situation was really a very trying one. He did not believe—he could not and would not believe—that Molly was carrying on a gigantic fraud. Murray was a lawyer, and did not know Miss Dexter; his suspicions were inhuman and absurd. From the day on which she had spoken to him about her mother's reply to her offer to go to Florence,

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Edmund had in his masculine way ranged her once for all among good and nice women. He had felt touched and guilty at a suspicion that he had been to blame in playing his paternal *role* too zealously. Until then he had at times had hard thoughts of her; after that time he was a little ashamed of himself, and he believed in her simplicity and goodness. He was sorry and disappointed now that she was making quite so much effect in this London world. There was something disquieting in Molly's success, and he could appraise better than any one what a remarkable success it was. But he felt that she was going the pace, and he would not have liked his daughter to go the pace, unmarried and at twenty-two. She needed friendship and advice. But the pinch came from the fact that the wealth he could have advised her to use wisely ought to be Rose's, and that he was resolved, in the depths of his soul, to regain that wealth for his cousin—for that "*belle dame sans merci*" who wrote him such pretty letters about his troubles.

Edmund put Murray's letter in his pocket, and immediately went out. He was living in a small, but clean, lodging in Fulham, kept by a former housemaid and a former footman of his own, now Mr. and Mrs. Tart, kindly souls who were proud to receive him. He gave no trouble, and the preparation of his coffee and boiled egg was all the cooking he had done for him. Mrs. Tart would have felt strangely upset had she known that the said coffee and egg were, on some days, his only food till tea-time; she was under the impression that he lunched at his club when not engaged to friends. Both she and Mr. Tart took immense pains with his clothes, and he would rather have been well valeted than eat luxurious luncheons every day.

He went out at once after getting Murray's letter, because he wanted to call on Molly before he heard any more of the important intelligence.

Molly was alone when he was announced. She had told the butler she was "not at home," but somehow the man decided to show Sir Edmund up because he saw that he wished to be shown up. Edmund had always had an odd influence below stairs, partly because he never forgot a servant's face.

Molly coloured deeply when she saw her visitor. She was annoyed to think that he would make her talk against her will—and they would not be interrupted. She could have used strong language to the butler, but she did not dare tell him that she would now see visitors. It would look to Edmund as if she were afraid of a *tete-a-tete*.

Almost as soon as he was in the room she had an impression that he was quite at home, curiously at his ease.

"I am glad the house is so little changed. I came to my first dance here. You have done wonderfully well, and all on the old lines. A friend told me it was the hugest success."

A remembrance of past jokes as to Edmund's second-hand compliments and his friend "Mr. Harris" came into Molly's mind, but she only felt angry at the remembrance.

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He talked on about the pictures and the furniture until she became more natural. It was impossible not to be interested in her work, and the decoration and furnishing of the whole house was her own doing, not that of any hireling adviser. Then, too, he knew its history, and she became keenly interested. She had at times a strong feeling of the past life still in possession of the house, into which her own strangely fated life had intruded. She wanted, half-consciously, to know if her guilty secret was a desecration or only a continuance of something that had gone before.

Suddenly she leant forward with the crude simplicity he was glad to see again.

“Have there been any wicked people here?” Her voice was low and young.

“‘All houses in which men have lived and died are haunted houses,’” he quoted. “It’s not very cynical to suppose that there has been sin and sorrow here before now.”

“I think,” said Molly quickly, “there was a wicked woman who used the little dining-room; perhaps she was only a guest. I don’t think she went upstairs often.”

“Perhaps she came in with my looking-glasses,” suggested Edmund. “I have often wished I could see what they have seen.”

Molly was now quite off her guard.

Edmund rose and examined some china on a table near him.

“Why are you so displeased with me?” he said, without any change of voice.

Molly sprang to her feet, careless whether her unguarded vehemence might betray her to his observation.

“I shall not answer that question,” she said; but he knew that she would answer it.

“You cut me at the Court; you were displeased at having to sit by me at dinner; you have pretended not to see me at least four times since then, and your butler showed me up by mistake.”

Molly had moved away from him to the window. She knew she must speak or her conduct would look too like wounded love—a thing quite unbearable. She knew, too, that his influence would make her speak, and, besides that, something in her cried for the relief of speech. She needed a fight although she did not know it; an open fight with an enemy she could see would distract her from the incessant fight with an enemy she did not see.

“You are a strange man!” she cried, holding the curtain behind her lightly as she turned towards him. “You could make friends with me so that all the world might see you, and

meanwhile, at the very same time, you were paying a low Italian scoundrel to produce lies against my sick and lonely mother! You could watch me and get out of me all you wanted to know because I was ignorant of the world. You could use the horrible influence you had gained over me by your experience of many women, to manage me as you liked. You told me not to marry Edgar Tonmore for some reason of your own; you told me to go and stay with my aunt; you came to see me one night in London, and wormed out of me my relations with my unfortunate mother. With all your knowledge of the world, with all your experience, did you never think I might come to find you out?"

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Molly paused for a moment. She held herself erect, her white gown crushed against the rich, dark curtain, her great eyes searching the trees in the park below as if she sought there for the soul of her enemy. She did not know that she pulled hard at the curtain behind her with both hands; it could not have held out much longer, strong though it was.

“No; you knew life too well not to know that you might be found out, but the truth was that you did not care. It was so little a thing to you that, when you saw that I knew the truth, you could go on just the same, quite unabashed. You could force yourself on me by playing on your poverty; you, who had tried to ruin my mother! Well, she is out of your reach, and perhaps you have shifted your foul suspicions on to me. Perhaps it is from me you hope to get the fortune that you mean to share. You drive me mad! I say things I don’t want to say; you force me to lower myself, but——” She turned now and faced Edmund, who watched her, himself absolutely motionless. “Now that you have forced yourself on me again you shall answer me. Do you believe that I, Molly Dexter, have concealed or abetted in concealing or destroying any will in favour of Lady Rose Bright?”

There is a moment when passion is astonishingly inventive. Molly had had no intention of saying anything of the kind, but the heat of passion had produced a stroke of policy that no colder moment could have produced. She was suddenly dumb with astonishment at her own words, and she dimly recognised that this represented a distinct crisis in her own mind. Passion and excitement had dissipated the last mists of self-deception.

Edmund waited till there could be no faint suspicion of his trying to interrupt her, and then said from his heart, in a voice she had never heard from him before:

“No, I swear to you I don’t.”

Molly had been deeply flushed. At these words she turned very white, and her hands let go the curtains. She put them out before her and seemed to grope her way to a stiff, high-backed chair near to her. She sat down in it and clasped her hands to her forehead.

“Now you must hear me,” said Edmund. “I don’t say I am blameless: in part of this I have done wrong, but not as wrong as you think. I must tell you my story; although perhaps it may seem blacker as I tell it, even to myself.”

He sat down and bent forward a little.

“When I was young I fell in love with my cousin. She has been and always will be the one woman in the world to me. She did not, does not, never will, return my feelings. She married, and before very long I was convinced she was not happy, although she

only half realised it herself. She is capable of stifling her powers of perception. Then David Bright died and left her in poverty. His will was a scandal, and the horror did not only smirch his good name, it reached to hers. I can't and won't try to tell you what I suffered, or

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how I determined to fight this hideous wrong. I went to Florence; I tried to see Madame Danterre; I engaged the detective—all before I knew of your existence. I came back to London and discovered that your father, John Dexter, had divorced his wife on account of David Bright. Still I did not know anything of you. Then, through Lady Dawning I found you out, and I made friends with Mrs. Delaport Green in order to see more of you. Was there anything wrong in that? You did not know your mother; you did not, presumably, care very deeply about her. It was doubtful if you knew of her existence. Soon the detective in Florence faded in my mind; he discovered nothing, but I retained him in case of any change. Was I obliged, because I liked you, to give up the cause? I never found out, I never tried to find out from you anything that bore on the case. You must remember that I stopped you once in the wood at Groombridge when you wanted to tell me more about yourself, and that I again warned you when you wished to tell me about your mother's letter to you. As to Edgar Tonmore, I knew that he was penniless, and I thought it quite possible that you might, in the end, be penniless too. It was for your own sake I wished you to make a richer marriage. For I believed—I still believe—-that David Bright made a last will when going out to Africa; I believed, and still believe, that by an accident that will was not sent to Lady Rose. I thought then that your mother had, in some way, become possessed of the will, and I thought it more than likely that, when dying, she would make reparation by leaving the money where it ought to be. I meant—may I say so?—to prove myself your friend, then, if you should allow it. I know I kept in touch with you partly from curiosity as well as from natural attraction. But, if I acted for the sake of another, I acted for you also. Would it have been better or worse for you to have been friends with us if my suspicions of your mother's conduct had proved true? But believe me, Miss Dexter, I never for one moment could have thought of you with any taint of suspicion. It is horrible to me to have it suggested."

He rose as he finished speaking, and came nearer to her.

"That you, with your youth and your innocence and your candour!—child, the very idea is impossible. I have known men and women too well to fall into such an absurdity. Send me away, if you like; I won't intrude my friendship upon you, but look up now and let me see that you do not think this gross thing of me."

Molly raised a white face and looked into his—looked into eyes that had not at all times and in all places been sincere, but were sincere now. A great rush of warm feeling came over her; a great sore seemed healed, and then she looked at him with hungry entreaty, as if a soul, shorn of all beauty, hungry, ragged, filthy, were asking help from another. But the moment of danger, the moment of salvation passed away.

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We confess our sins to God because He knows them already, and we ask for forgiveness where we know we shall be forgiven.

Indeed, Molly knew almost at once that she had gained another motive for silence. She could not risk the loss of Edmund's good thought of her; she cared for him too much—-he had defended himself too well.

Edmund saw that she could not speak. He left her, let himself out of the house, and, forgetful of the fact that he could not possibly afford a hansom, jumped into one and drove to Mr. Murray's house.

He had recovered his usual calmness by the time he had to speak.

"I have your note," he said, "and I came in consequence."

"Yes," said the lawyer; "I wanted to tell you——"

"Wait a moment. Do you think you need tell me? You see, my share in the thing really came to an end when I could not finance it. I have several reasons now why I should like to let it alone."

Murray was astonished. It was Sir Edmund who had started the whole thing, whose wild guess at the outset was becoming more and more likely to be proved true. It was he who had spent a quantity of money over the investigation for years past. The man of business knew how to provoke speech by silence, and so he remained silent.

"Does further action depend in any way on me?" asked Edmund at last, without, however, offering the explanation the other wanted.

"No," said Murray quite civilly, but his manner was dry. "I don't see that it does. I think we can get on for the present."

As he spoke the door opened, and the parlourmaid showed in a tall, handsome woman in a nurse's dress.

Murray looked from her to Sir Edmund.

"I had wanted you to hear what Nurse Edith had to tell us, but after what you have said ——"

"Yes," said Edmund; "I will leave you and I will write to you to-night."

CHAPTER XXVIII

DINNER AT TWO SHILLINGS

Edmund Grosse was in great moral and great physical discomfort that evening. He dined, actually for the first time, in just such an Italian cafe as he had described to Molly. After climbing up a very narrow, dirty staircase, the hot air heavy with smells, he had emerged into a small back and front room holding some half-dozen tables, at each of which four people could be seated. Through the open windows the noises of the street below came into collision with the clatter of plates and knives and forks. The heat was intense, the cloths were not clean, neither were the hands of the two waiters who rushed about with a certain litheness and facility of motion unlike any Englishman.

Edmund sat down wearily at a table as near the window as possible, and at which several people had been dining, perhaps well, but certainly not tidily.

“Hunger alone,” he thought, “could make this possible,” when, looking up, he caught the face of a young man at a further table, full of enjoyment, ordering “spargetty” and half a bottle of “grayves,” with a cockney twang, and an unutterable air of latter-day culture.

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“Mutton chops, cheese, and ale fed your forefathers,” reflected Grosse.

“What will you have, sir?” in a foreign accent.

“Oh! anything; just what comes for the two shilling dinner—no, not *hors d’oeuvres*; yes, soup.”

Edmund had turned with ill-restrained disgust from the sardines, tomatoes, and other oily horrors. But there was no denying the qualities of the soup: the most experienced and cultivated palate and stomach must be soothed by it, and in a moment of greater cheerfulness Edmund turned his attention to three young men close to him who were talking French. Their hands were clean and their collars, but poverty was writ large on their spare faces and well-brushed clothes. One was olive-complexioned, one quite fair, but with olive tints in the shadows round the eyes, and the third grey, old, and purple-cheeked from shaving. They ate little, but they talked much. The talked of literature and art with fierce dogmatism, and they seemed frequently on the verge of a quarrel, but the storm each time sank quite suddenly without the least consciousness of the danger passed. They looked at the food as critics, and acknowledged it to be eatable, with the faint air of an exile’s sadness.

Edmund wished to think that he was amused by their talk, but the distraction did not last. His thoughts would have their way, and he was soon trying to defend his defence of himself to Molly. All he said had seemed so obviously true as the words poured out, but there had been fatal reservations. He had spoken as if all suspicions, all proceedings as to discovering the will were past. He had felt he had no right to give away secrets that were not his own. But had he not produced a false impression? What would Molly have thought of him as he passionately rejected the notion of suspecting her if she had seen the letter from Murray in his pocket? It was true that he no longer financed any of the proceedings against her, but they had all been set on foot by him. He was in the plot that was thickening, and he had won the confidence of the victim! He had no doubt that Molly was innocent, and he was ashamed of the pitiful confidence he had read in her eyes when he left her. But he still believed that her mother had been guilty, and that Molly’s wealth was the result of that guilt. It was true that he wanted to be her friend, but it was also true that he would rejoice if Rose came into her own and the gross injustice were righted. But, after all, what absolute evidence had they got, as yet, as to the contents of this last will, or what proof even of its existence? He felt almost glad for the fraction of a moment that Molly might remain the gorgeous mistress of the old house in Park Lane uninjured by anything he had done against her. “How absurd,” he thought, “how drivelling! The fact is that girl impressed me enough to-day, to make me see myself from her point of view, or what would be her point of view if she knew all!”

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He refused coffee—the cab fare had prevented that. He quite emptied his pocket, gave the waiter sixpence, and, rising, strolled across the floor of the small room exactly the same man to the outward eye he had been for years past. But before he reached the door he caught the glance of a little, round, elderly woman at a table close to him, and he stopped. She had a faded, showy bonnet, and she carried her worn clothes with an air. He recognised the companion and friend of a famous prima donna whom he had not seen for years.

“You’ve forgotten me, but I’ve not forgotten you.”

It was a cherry, Irish voice.

“I get coffee and a roll, and you have the *diner a prix fixe*. And you have given me a champagne supper in your day! Well! and how are you?”

“Nicely, thank you, Miss O’Meara; you see I have not forgotten!” Then in a lower voice, “But I thought the Signora left you money?”

“She did, bless her; but it was here one day and gone the next! Good-night, and good luck to you,” she laughed.

The little duenna of a dead genius evidently did not want him to stay, and he felt his way down the pitch dark stairs, and emerged on the street. A very small, brown hand was held out for a penny, and for the first time in his life he refused a street beggar with real regret.

“‘Here one moment, and gone the next,’” he muttered, looking down the brilliantly lighted street to where the motors, carriages, and cabs crowded round the doors of a great theatre. “It’s the history of the whole show in a nutshell.”

If Sir Edmund was troubled at the thought that Molly believed in him, Molly was infinitely more troubled at his belief in her.

After he left her she went to her room. She had to dine out and she must get some rest first. As in most of the late eighteenth century houses in London, the bedrooms had been sacrificed to the rooms below. But Molly had the one very large room that looked over the park. She threw herself down on a wide sofa close to the silk-curtained bed. The sun glinted still on the silver backs of the brushes and teased her eyes, and she got up and drew down the blinds. The dressing-table was large and its glass top was covered with a great weight of old gilt bottles and boxes.

Miss Carew had once been amused by the comment of a young manicurist who, after expressing enthusiastic admiration of the table, had concluded with the words:

“But what I often say to myself is that it’s only so much more to leave in the end.”

But Molly had not laughed when the words were repeated; they gave expression to a feeling with which she sometimes looked at many things besides her dressing-table—-they might all prove only so much more to leave in the end!

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She sank exhausted again onto the sofa. Why had he come? Why could he not leave her alone? Did she want his friendship, his pity, his confidence? Why look at her so kindly when he must know how he hurt her? She had felt such joy when she saw that he believed in her. The idea that she was still innocent and unblemished in his eyes was just for the moment an unutterable relief. An unutterable relief, too, it had felt at the moment, to be able to accept his defence of himself. That he was still lovable, and that he had no dark thoughts of her, had been such joy, but only a passing joy. Had he not told her in horribly plain speech that he loved Lady Rose, and would love her to the end? All this, which was so vital to Molly, was but an episode in a friendship that was a detail in his life!

But now, alone, trying to see clearly through the confusion, how unbearable it had been to hear him say, “That you with your youth and your innocence and your candour....” He had thought it too horrible to suspect her, and by that confidence he made her load of guilt almost unendurable.

She could not go on like this, could not live like this. The silence was far more unbearable now that a human voice had broken into it, a voice she loved repudiating with indignant scorn the possibility of suspecting her! She must go somewhere, she must speak to some one. But at this moment it was also evident that she must dress for dinner.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RELIEF OF SPEECH

There is quite commonly a peculiar glow of sunshine just before a storm, a brightness so obviously unreliable that we are torn between enjoyment and anxiety. I have known no greater revelation of Nature’s glories, even in a sunset hour, than in one of these moments of glow before the darkness of storm. And in a man’s life there is sometimes an episode so bright, so full of promise, that we feel its perfection to be the measure of its instability.

Such a moment had come to Mark Molyneux. The time of depression and trial, the time when a vague sense of danger and a vague sense of aspiration had made him turn his eyes towards the cloister, had ended in his taking his work more and more earnestly and becoming surprisingly successful in his dealings with both rich and poor.

It seemed during the past winter that Mark would carry all before him; he had come into close contact with the poor, and in the circle in which his personal influence could be felt there was a real movement of religious earnestness and moral reform. There was a noticeable glow of zeal in the other curates and in the parish workers, who, with one or two exceptions, were enthusiastic in their devotion to him personally and to his notions

of work. Even after Easter several of the recently-cured drunkards were persevering, and other notoriously bad characters seemed determined to show that the first shoots of their awakened moral life were not merely what gardeners call “flowering shoots,” but steady growths giving promise of sound wood.

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Mark's sermons were becoming more and more the rage, and people were heard to say that he was the only Catholic preacher in London, excepting perhaps one or two Jesuit Fathers; while he had also the tribute of attention from the press, which he particularly disliked.

Meanwhile, the old rector was still gruff and still proffered snubs which were gratefully received, for Mark was genuinely anxious not to be misled by the atmosphere of praise and affection in which he was living.

Nothing warned him of impending danger (to use a phrase of old-fashioned romance) when he was told that Miss Dexter was asking to see him. He had not seen her for a long time, and was quite glad that she should come.

He looked young, eager, and happy as he came quickly into the parlour, but after a few minutes the simple warmth of his manner changed into a more negative politeness. There was something so gorgeous in Molly's appearance, and so very strange in her face, that even a man who had seen less of the world than is obtained in a year on the mission in London, could not fail to be somewhat puzzled.

Molly hardly spoke for some moments, and silence was apparently inevitable. Then she burst out, without preparation, in a wild, incoherent way, with her whole life's story. The story of a child deserted by her mother, neglected by her father, taken from the ayah who was the only person who had ever loved her, and sent like a parcel to the care of a hard and selfish aunt who was ashamed of her. It might have been horribly pathetic only that it was impossible that so much egotism and bitterness should not choke the sympathy of the listener. But as the story came to Molly's twenty-first year, the strange, bitter self-defence (she had not yet explained why she should defend herself at all to Father Molyneux), all the unpleasing moral side of the story became merged in the sense of its dramatic qualities.

Molly had never told it to anyone before now, and, indeed, she had not realised several features of the case until quite lately. She told well the disillusion as to her mother, her own single-handed fight with life, the double sense of shame as to her mother's past, and her own ambiguous position. She told him how she felt at first meeting Rose Bright, of her own sense of sailing under false colours, and she actually explained, in her strange pleading for a favourable judgment, how everything that happened had naturally hardened her heart and made her feel as if she had been born an outcast. Lastly, she told how Sir Edmund Grosse had pursued her mother with detectives, and, as she had for a time believed, had pursued herself with the hypocritical appearance of friendship. She had been wrong, it seemed now, in judging him so harshly, but it had hurt terribly at the time.

Through all this Mark was struggling against the repulsion that threatened to drown the sympathy he wanted to give her. But he had, naturally, not the faintest suspicion as to

what was coming or that Molly was confiding in him a story of her own wrong-doing. He was absolutely confounded when she went on, still in the tone of passionate self-defence, to tell how she had found the will leaving the whole of Sir David's fortune to Lady Rose. He simply stared at Molly when she said:

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“Who could suppose for a single moment that I should be obliged, on account of a scrap of paper which was evidently sent to my mother for her to dispose of as she liked, to become a pauper and to give a fortune to Lady Rose Bright?”

But although he was too astounded for speech, and his face showed strange, stern lines, it was now that there awoke in his heart the passionate longing to help her; he saw now her whole story in the most pathetic light, from the little child deserted by her mother, to the woman scorned and suffering, left by the same mother in such a gruesome temptation. The greatness of the sin provoked the passionate longing to save her. The man who had given up Groombridge Castle and all it entailed had not one harsh thought for the woman who had fallen into crime to avoid the poverty he had chosen for his own portion.

“It’s a hard, hard case,” he murmured, to Molly’s surprise.

She had been so occupied in her own outpouring that she had hardly thought of him at first, except as a human outlet for her story made safe by the fact that he was a priest. But when he had betrayed his silent but most eloquent amazement, she had suddenly realised what the effect of her confidences might be on such a man, and half expected anathemas to thunder over her head.

Then he tried to find out whether there was any kind of hope that the will had, in fact, been sent to her mother to be at her disposal. But suddenly Molly, who had herself suggested this idea, rent it to pieces and brought out the whole case against her mother (and, consequently, against herself) with a fierce logic of attack.

This was more like the Molly whom he had known before, and Mark felt the atmosphere a little clearer. Having left not the faintest shadow of a defence for her own action, she suddenly became silent. After some moments she leant forward.

“Do you know,” she said, in a tone so low that he only just caught the words, “I see now what must have happened. It is strange that I never thought of it before. I see it now quite clearly. Of course the will and the letter were wrongly addressed, and probably some letter to my mother was sent to Lady Rose.”

“That does not follow,” said Father Molyneux.

“But it’s not unlikely,” argued Molly. “It is more probable that the two letters should be put into the wrong envelopes than that one should be addressed to the wrong person. It’s a mistake that is made every day, only the results are usually of less consequence. It must have been curious reading for my mother—that letter about herself to Lady Rose Bright.”

“It is so difficult,” said Mark, feeling his way cautiously, “to be sure of not acting on fancied facts when there are so few to go upon. Do you suppose that the detective in Florence had any definite plan of action given to him by his employer? For just supposing that your guess is right, they may have got some clue to what happened in the letter that was sent by mistake to Lady Rose. Have you no notion at all whether they may not now have got some evidence to prove that there was another will?”

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Molly shook her head.

“Do you think,” she said, “they would have been quiet all this time if there had been any real evidence at all? It is three years since Sir David died, and six months since my mother died.”

She did not notice how Mark started at this information. Had Miss Dexter, then, been in possession of this letter to Lady Rose and the last will for six months?

“You were not sent these papers at once?” he ventured to ask.

“Yes; Dr. Larrone, who attended my mother, brought them to me. He left Florence two hours after she died.”

Another silence followed.

“It seems to me that a great deal might be done by a private arrangement. Probably their case is not strong enough, or likely to be strong enough, for them to push it through. It should be arranged that you should receive the L1000 a year that Sir David intended to give your mother.”

Molly laughed scornfully.

“I’d rather beg my bread than be their pensioner. No, no; you entirely mistake the situation. I shall have no dealings with them at all—no nonsense about arbitration or private arrangements. I won’t give them any opportunity of feeling generous. It must”—she spoke very slowly and looked at him fiercely—“with me it must be all or nothing, and”—she got up suddenly and began smoothing her gloves over her wrists—-“and as I don’t choose to starve it must be all. But if I can’t go through with it (which is quite possible) I shall throw up the sponge and get out of this world as quickly as possible.”

“If you have made up your mind,” said Mark sternly, “to defy God, in Whom I know that you believe, to defy the laws of man, whose punishment *may* come, whereas His punishment must come, why have you told me all this?”

“I had to tell some one; I was suffocating. You don’t know”—she stood looking out of the window a strange expression of hunger and loneliness succeeding the fierceness of a few moments before—“you don’t know what it is to have in your own mind a long, long story about yourself that has never been told. To have been lonely and hardly treated and deceived and spurned, and never to have put your own case to any one human being! To have cried from childhood till twenty-two, knowing that nobody really cared! There comes a time when you would rather say the worst of yourself than keep silence. To accuse yourself is the natural thing; silence is the unnatural thing.”

“Good God!” said Mark, rising, “don’t stop there. If you must accuse yourself, pass judgment also. Class yourself where you have chosen with your eyes open to stand. Would you allow any amount of provocation and unhappiness to excuse a systematic fraud? Do you think that the thief brought up to sin has less or more excuse than you have? Are you the only person who has known a lonely childhood? Can you tell me here in this room that God never showed you what love really is? He has never left you alone, and you wish in vain now that He would leave you alone. For your present life is so unbearable that you feel that you may choose death rather than go on with it.”

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“I shall pay heavily for the relief of speech if I am to have a sermon preached all to myself,” said Molly insolently. “I was speaking of the need of human love; I was speaking of all I had suffered, and it is easy for you to retort upon me that I might have had Divine Love only that I chose to reject it. Tell me, were you brought up without a mother’s love?”

“No; I had—I have a mother who loves me almost too much.”

“Have you known real loneliness?”

“I believe every man and woman has known that the soul is alone.”

Molly shook her head.

“That is a mood; mine was a permanent state. Have you ever known what it is to see God’s will on one side, and all possibilities of human happiness, glory, success, and pleasure, opposed to it?”

The young man blushed deeply.

“Yes, I have.”

Molly was checked.

“I forgot,” she answered; “but still you don’t understand. You were an intimate friend of God when He asked you for the sacrifice, whereas I—I had only an inkling, a suspicion of that Love. Besides, you were not asked to give all your possessions to your enemies! No; too much has been asked of me.”

“Can too much be asked where all has been given?” asked Father Molyneux.

“That is an old point for a sermon,” said Molly wearily. “You don’t understand; you are of no use to me. Good-bye! I don’t think I shall come again.”

CHAPTER XXX

THE BIRTH OF A SLANDER

After that visit to Father Molyneux the devil seems to have entered into Molly. It was a devil of fear and, consequently, of cruelty. What she did to harm him was at first unpremeditated, and it must be allowed that she had not at the moment the means of knowing how fearful a harm such words as hers could do. She said them too when terror had driven her to any distraction, and when wine had further excited her imagination. Still it would not be surprising to find that many who might have forgiven

her for a long, protracted fraud, would blot her out of their own private book of life for the mean cruelty of one sentence.

Not many hours had passed after the visit before Molly was furious with herself for her consummate folly in giving herself away to the young priest, who might even think it a duty to reveal what she said.

She had once told Mark that she might soon come to hate him, as hatred came most easily to her. There was now quite cause enough for this hatred to come into being. Molly had two chief reasons for it. First, she was in his power to a dangerous extent and he might ruin her if he chose; secondly, she was afraid of his influence—chiefly of the influence of his prayers—and she dreaded still more that he should persuade her to ruin herself.

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One evening Molly had been with Mrs. Delaport Green and two young men to a play. It was a play that represented a kind of female "Raffles"—a thief in the highest ranks of society, and the lady Raffles had black hair. The lady stole diamonds, and fascinated detectives, and even beguiled the ruffianly burglar who had wanted the diamonds for himself. It was a far-fetched comparison indeed, but it worried and excited Molly to the last degree. They went back to supper at Miss Dexter's house, and there one more lady and another man joined them. They sat at a gorgeous little supper at a round table in the small dining-room, Mrs. Delaport Green opposite Molly, and Lady Sophia Snaggs, a spirited, cheery Irishwoman, separated from the hostess by Billy, with whom the latter had always, in the past weeks, been ready to discuss the poverty and the failings of Sir Edmund Grosse. Of the other two men, one was elderly, bald, greedy, fat and witty, and the other was a soldier, spare, red and rather silent but extremely popular for some happy combination of qualities and excellent manners. It would seem hardly worth while to say even this little about them, only that it proved of some importance that the few people who heard Molly's words that night, and certainly repeated them afterwards, had unfortunately rather different and rather wide opportunities of making them known.

The Florentine looking-glasses that once belonged to Sir Edmund Grosse, with their wondrous wreaths of painted flowers, looked down from three sides of the room and reflected the pretty women and their gowns, the old silver, the rare glass, and the flowers. They were probably refreshed by the exquisite taste of the little banquet that might recall the first reflection of their youth. Morally there was a rift within the lute among the guests, for Molly betrayed that Adela had got on her nerves. Lady Sophia Snaggs poured easy conversation on the troubled waters, but at last the catastrophe could not be averted.

At a moment when the others were silent Adela was talking.

"Yes; I went to hear him preach, and it is so beautiful, you know. Crowds; the church was packed, and many people cried. You *should* go. And then one feels how real it is for him to preach against the world, because he gave up so much."

Molly drained her glass of champagne and leant across.

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Father Molyneux."

"I thought so."

"Have you heard him preach?" asked Lady Sophy.

"I used to, but I never go now." She again leant forward and spoke this time with unconcealed irritation. "Adela, I don't go now because I know too much about him."

There was immediate sensation.

Molly slowly lit a cigarette. Even then she did not know what she was going to say, but she had determined on the spur of the moment, and chiefly from sheer terror, to put Mark out of court if she possibly could.

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“He is a humbug,” she proclaimed in her low, incisive tone.

“Oh! come now,” said Billy. “A man who gave up Groombridge—extraordinary silly thing to do, but he is not a humbug!”

Molly turned on him.

“Yes, he is. He knows he made a great mistake and he would undo it if he could.”

“Molly, it can’t be true!” cried Adela almost tearfully. “If you had only heard him preach last Sunday you couldn’t say such hasty, unkind, horrid things!”

“It is true,” said Molly.

“Our hostess is pleased to be mysterious,” said the fat man, and “you know,” turning to Mrs. Delaport Green, “it’s very likely that he is sorry he made such a sacrifice, but I don’t think that prevents its having been a noble action at the time.”

“Or makes him a humbug now,” said the soldier. “I believe he is an uncommonly nice fellow.”

“Oh! she means something else,” said Lady Sophia, looking at Molly with curiosity. “What is it you have against him?”

Molly felt the table to be against her, and it added to her nervous irritability. She was not in any sense drunk, and the drugs she took were in safe doses at present; yet she was to a certain degree influenced both by the champagne she had just taken, and the injection she had given herself when she came in from the theatre.

“You will none of you repeat what I am going to say?”

“I probably shall,” said the big guest, “unless it is excessively interesting; otherwise I never remember what is a secret and what isn’t.”

But Molly did not heed him.

“Well,” she said, “it is a fact that Father Molyneux would give up the Roman Church to-morrow if a very intimate friend of mine, who could give him as much wealth as he has lost, would agree to marry him after he ceased to be a priest!”

“Oh! how dreadfully disappointing!” cried Adela.

“Why shouldn’t he?” said Billy.

“It seems a come-down,” said the fat man; and the soldier said nothing.

“Stuff and nonsense,” said Lady Sophia firmly. “Somebody has been humbugging you, Molly.”

But being a lady who liked peace better than warfare, she now went on to say that she had had no notion how late it was until this moment, and that she really must be off. Her farewell was quite friendly, but Molly’s was cold.

The departure of Lady Sophia made a welcome break, and, in spite of the hostess being silent and out of temper, the men managed to divert the conversation into less serious topics. But they were not likely to forget what Molly had impressed upon their minds by the strange vehemence with which she had emphasised her accusations.

“She meant herself, I suppose?” asked Billy, when leaving the house with his stout fellow guest. “Do you believe it?”

“It was very curious, very curious indeed. Do you know I rather doubt if she wholly and entirely believed it herself.”

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Billy was puzzled for a moment, thinking that some difficult mental problem had been offered for his digestion.

“Oh, I see,” he said, as he opened his own door with his latch-key. “He only meant that she was telling a lie; I suspect he is right too.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE NURSING OF A SLANDER

Meanwhile, in shadowy corners of Westmoreland House, Miss Carew lived a monotonous but anxious life. For days together she hardly saw Molly, and then perhaps she would be called into the big bed-room for a long talk, or rather, to listen to a long monologue in which Molly gave vent to views and feelings on men and things.

Molly’s cynicism was increasing constantly, and she now hardly ever allowed that anybody did anything for a good motive. She had moods in which she poured scandal into Miss Carew’s half excited and curious mind, piling on her account of the wickedness and the baseness of the people she knew intimately, of the sharks who pursued her money, and, most of all, she showered her scorn on the men who wanted to marry her.

Listening to her Miss Carew almost believed that all the men Molly met were *divorces*, or notoriously lived bad lives, and hardly veiled their intention to continue to do the same after obtaining her hand and her money.

Molly would lie on a sofa, in a gorgeous kind of *deshabille* which cost almost as much as Miss Carew spent on her clothes in the whole year, and apparently take delight in scaring her by these hideous revelations. She was so strange in her wild kind of eloquence, and it was so impossible to believe all she said, that the doubt more than once occurred to Miss Carew whether it might be a case of the use of drugs. The extraordinary personal indulgence of luxury was unlike anything the older woman had ever come across. Then there was no system, nothing business-like about Molly as there often is in women of the modern world. Miss Carew dimly suspected that any society of human beings expects some self-discipline, and some sacrifice to ordinary rules. As it was she wondered how long Molly’s neglect of small duties and her frequent insolence would be condoned.

All this, which had been coming on gradually, was positively nauseous to the middle-aged Englishwoman whose nerves were suffering from the strain, and she came to feel that it would be impossible to endure it much longer. It would be easier to drudge and trudge with girls in the schoolroom for a smaller salary than to endure life with Molly if she were to develop further this kind of temper.

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For months now Miss Carew had lived under a great strain. From the evening when she had found Molly sitting on the floor with the tin box open before her, and old, yellow letters lying on the ground about it, she had been almost constantly uneasy. She could not forget the sight of Molly crouching like a tramp in the midst of the warm, comfortable room, biting her right hand in a horrible physical convulsion. It was of no use to try to think that Molly's condition that night was entirely the result of illness, or that the loss of her unknown mother had upset her to that degree or at all in that way. The character of Molly's mental state was quite, quite different from the qualities that come of grief or sickness. Then had followed the very anxious nursing, during which all other thoughts had been swallowed up in immediate anxiety and responsibility.

During Molly's convalescence, in the quiet days by the sea-side, Miss Carew began to reflect on a kind of coherent unity in the delirious talk she had listened to during the worst days of the illness. And she also noticed that Molly, by furtive little jokes and sudden, irrelevant questions, was trying to find out what Miss Carew had heard her say. Then it became evident that Molly attributed all the excitement of that night to her subsequent illness—only once, and that very calmly, alluding to the fact of her mother's death.

Miss Carew had no wish to penetrate the mystery of the black box and the faded letters. She had a sort of instinctive horror of the subject, but she could not but watch the fate of the box when they came back to the flat. Molly paid no attention to it whatever, and said in a natural tone:

"I shall send my father's dispatch box and sword-case and my own dispatch boxes in a cab. Would you mind taking them and having them put in the little room next to my bed-room?"

But in the end Molly had taken them herself, as she thought Miss Carew had a slight cold. Miss Carew always had a certain dislike to the door of the little room next to Molly's, which had evidently been once used for a powder closet. She did not even know if the door were locked or not, and she never touched the handle. She had an uncanny horror of passing the door, at least so she said afterwards; probably in retrospect she came to exaggerate her feelings as to these things.

She was puzzled and confused: her health was not good, and her faculties were dimmed. It was probably the strain of living with Molly whom she could no longer control or guide, and who was so evidently in dire need of some one to do both. She felt dreadfully burdened with responsibility, both as to the things she did understand and the things she did not understand. What she could not understand was a sense of moral darkness, like a great, looming grey cloud, sometimes simply dark and heavy, and at other times a cloud electric with coming danger. She felt as if burdened with a secret which she longed

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to impart, only that she did not know what it was. At times it was as if she carried some monstrous thing on her back, whilst she could only see its dark, shapeless shadow. Her self-confidence was going, and her culture was so useless. What good was it to her now to know really well the writings of Burke, or Macaulay—nay, of Racine and Pascal? She had never been religious since her childhood, but in these long, solitary days in the great house that grew more and more gloomy as she passed about it when Molly was out, she began to feel new needs and to seek for old helps.

Molly was sometimes struck by the change in her companion. Miss Carew seemed to have grown so futile, so incoherent and funny, unlike the Miss Carew who had been her finishing governess not many years ago.

The sight of Carey's troubled, mottled face began to irritate Molly to an unbearable degree.

"Why not have a treatment for eczema and have done with it? You used to have quite a clear skin," she cried, in brutal irritation one morning.

"Oh! it's nerves—merely nerves," said poor Miss Carew apologetically.

"Then have a treatment for nerves," cried Molly furiously. "It is too ridiculous to have blotches on your face because I have a bad temper!"

It was the night after the little supper party at which the slander was born that Molly said this rude thing, and then abruptly left the drawing-room to join a hairdresser who was waiting upstairs. Almost immediately afterwards Adela Delaport Green was standing over the stiff chair on which Miss Carew was sitting, very limp in figure, and holding a damp handkerchief to her face.

"How d'ye do? They told me Molly was here," she said in a disappointed voice, and her eyes ranged round the room with the alertness of a sportswoman.

Adela had come with a purpose; she had come there to right the wrong and to force Molly to tell the truth.

"She was here a moment ago. She has just gone up to the hairdresser," said Miss Carew as she got up, quickly restoring the damp handkerchief to her pocket and composing her countenance, not without a certain dignity. She liked Adela, who was always friendly and civil whenever they met.

That little lady threw herself pettishly into a deep chair.

“So tiresome when I haven’t a minute to spare, and I suppose he will keep her nearly an hour?”

“Can I take a message?”

“Oh! no, thanks, dear Miss Carew, don’t go up all those horrid steep steps. Do rest and entertain me a little. I am sure you feel these hot days terribly.”

“I find it very cool and quiet here,” said Miss Carew, a little sadly.

“I’m afraid it’s lonely,” cried Adela.

“Well! I oughtn’t to grumble about that.”

“No, you never do grumble, I know; but I feel sometimes that you must be tired and anxious, placed, as you are, as the only thing instead of a mother to poor, dear Molly!”

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The fierce, quick envy betrayed in that “poor, dear Molly” did not reach Miss Carew’s brain, and a little sympathy was very soothing.

“Now, could any fortune stand this sort of thing?” asked Adela.

The companion shook her head sadly, but would not speak.

“You know that she has bought Sir Edmund Grosse’s old yacht? And that she is taking one of the best deer forests in the Highlands? And is it true that she is thinking of buying Portlands?”

“Oh, yes!” sighed Miss Carew. “There is some new scheme every day.”

“She has everything the world can give,” said Adela sharply. “But, you know,” she went on, “people won’t go on standing her manners as they do now, even if she can pay her amazing way! Do you know that her cousin, Lady Dawning, declares she won’t have anything more to do with her? Not that that matters very much; old Lady Dawning hardly counts, now that Molly has really great people as her friends, only little leaks let in the water by degrees.”

A pause, and then suddenly:

“Do you know Father Molyneux?”

“Yes,” said Miss Carew, who was glad to change the subject. “He is very charming.”

“I didn’t know he was a friend of Molly’s.”

“Oh! didn’t you? She took a great fancy to him last autumn; he used to come to luncheon.”

“Did he come often?”

“Oh! I think so, but I don’t remember exactly.”

“And has he been coming here lately?”

“I really don’t know. I have my meals by myself now; the hours were so irregular, and I am too old and dull for Molly’s friends. I know she went to see him a few days ago, and she came back looking agitated. I was rather glad—I thought it would be good for her, but I fear it was not. She has been more excited, I think, these two or three days. Her nerves are really quite overwrought; she allows herself no quiet. Yes; she was very much excited after seeing Father Molyneux.”

Miss Carew was talking more to herself than to Adela.

“I thought perhaps he had pressed her to become a Roman Catholic; certainly he upset her in some way.”

Adela’s small eyes were like sharp points as she looked at the older woman.

Then was it really true? Oh! no; surely not. But then, what else could he have said to upset Molly?

At that moment Molly’s maid came into the room.

“Miss Dexter has only just heard that you were here, madam. She is very sorry you have been waiting. She wished me to say that she is obliged to go immediately to a sale at Christie’s, and would you be able to go with her?”

Adela declined, perceiving that Molly was in no mind for a private talk, and having parted affectionately from Miss Carew, went her way to have a chat with Lady Dawning.

In the afternoon she met several of her Roman Catholic acquaintances at a charity performance in a well-known garden, and she pumped all those she could decoy in turn into a *tete-a-tete* as to Father Molyneux. She was in reality devoured with the wish to know the truth. She had her own thin but genuine share of ideality, and she had been more impressed by Mark’s renouncement of Groombridge Castle than by anything she had met with before.

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But gradually, as she hunted the story, she gave him up, not because of any evidence of any kind, but because she did not find him regarded as anything very wonderful. She had need of the enthusiasms of others to make an atmosphere for her own ideals, and almost by chance she had not met anyone much interested in the young preacher. Then she had dim backwaters of anti-Popery in her mind, and they helped the reaction. She had come out, lance in rest, to defend the victim of calumny; in a very few days she had thrown him over, and was explaining pathetically to anybody who would listen that she had had a shock to her faith in humanity. And the story, starting by describing her own state of mind and being almost entirely subjective, ended in bringing home to her listeners with peculiar force the objective facts as asserted by Molly. Catholics, she found, when she came to this advanced state of propagation, were aghast at her story. They did not believe it, but they were excessively annoyed, and were, for the most part, inclined to think that Mark could not have been entirely prudent. But non-Catholics were, naturally, more credulous.

A calumny is a quick and gross feeder. It has a thousand different ways of assimilating things “light as air,” or things dull from the ennui which produced them, or things prickly with envy, or slushy, green things born of unconscious jealousy, or unpleasant things born of false pieties, or hard views born of tired experience, or worldly products of incredulity, or directly evil suggestions, or the repulsions of satiated sensuality, or the bitter fruits of melancholia, or the foreshadowings of insanity, or the mere dislike of the lower moralities for the higher, or the uneasiness felt by the ordinary in the presence of the rare, or the revolt felt by the conventional against holier bonds, or the prattle of curiosity, or the roughness of mere vitality, or the fusion of minds at a low level.

This particular calumny was well watered and manured with all these by-products of human life, and it grew to full size and height with a rapidity that could not have been attained under less favourable conditions.

BOOK IV

CHAPTER XXXII

ROSE SUMMONED TO LONDON

Rose was back in London the second week in July, summoned back rather imperiously by Mr. Murray, Junior. The house had been shut up since the departure of her tenants at Whitsuntide, and she had hoped not to reopen it until the autumn. She had intended to go directly to her mother’s home in the country as soon as they could leave Paris. It was becoming a question whether it would be a greater risk for Lady Charlton to endure the heat in Paris or the fatigues of the long journey. Mr. Murray’s letter decided them to move. Rose must go, and her mother would not stay behind alone. Lady Charlton

decided to pay a month's visit to her youngest daughter in Scotland, as Rose might be kept in London.

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It was a disappointment. The house in London would be nearly as stuffy as Paris. Rose disliked the season and was in no mood for the stale echoes of its dying excitements. She would not tell her friends that she was back; she would keep as quiet as she had been in Paris.

The first morning, after early service and breakfast, she went to the library to wait for the lawyer's visit. It was the only room in which to receive him; the dining-room, and drawing-room, and the little boudoir upstairs, were not opened. Rose was inclined to leave them as they were, with the furniture in brown wrappers, for the present; but she would rather have seen Mr. Murray in any room but the library.

The morning sun was full on the windows that opened to the rather dreary garden at the back. She wondered why Mr. Murray had written so urgently, and why Edmund Grosse had not written for several weeks. Up to now they had done all this horrid business between them, and she had only had occasional reports from her cousin. Now she must face the subject with the lawyer himself. She was puzzled to account for the change in the situation.

At the exact moment he had mentioned, Mr. Murray's tall person with its heavy, bent head appeared in the library. As they greeted they were both conscious that it was in this same room, seated at the wide writing-table still in the same place, and still bearing the large photograph of Sir David Bright, where he had first told her of the strange dispositions of her husband's will. He remembered vividly her look then—undaunted and confident—as she had gently but firmly asserted that there must be another will. But had she not also said it would never be found?

But the present occupied the lawyer much more than the past. He was eager and a little triumphant in his story of the progress of the case, and did not notice that the sweet face opposite to him became more and more white as he went on. He told her all he had told Sir Edmund when he first got back from the yacht; he told of the mysterious visit he had received from Dr. Larrone, and how he could prove from the letters of the Florentine detective that Madame Danterre had sent the doctor to England to take a certain small, black box to Miss Dexter.

Then he paused.

"I told Sir Edmund how our Florentine detective, Pietrino, had made friends with one of the nurses, and that she described Madame Danterre ordering the box to be opened and having a seizure—a heart attack—while the letters were spread out on her bed. Nurse Edith said then that she had put them back in a hurry and locked the box, and that it had not been reopened by Madame Danterre. Some weeks later when she was near her end, Madame Danterre had a scene with Dr. Larrone which ended in his consenting to take the box to London as soon as she was dead, but the nurse was sure

that the doctor was told nothing as to the contents of the box. That was as much as we knew up to Easter, and while

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waiting for the arrival of Akers, and Stock, the other private who had witnessed the signature. They got here in Easter week, and I saw them with Sir Edmund, and we both cross-questioned them closely. Akers's evidence is beyond suspicion, and is perfectly supported by that of Stock. He described all that happened at the witnessing of the General's signature most circumstantially, but, of course, he knew nothing of the contents of the paper. But now I have more important evidence than any we have had so far, and the extraordinary thing is that Sir Edmund does not wish to hear it. I cannot understand why!"

Rose remained silent. She was looking fixedly at a paper-knife which she held in her hand.

It suddenly struck the lawyer as a flash of most embarrassing light that possibly there was some complication of a dangerous and tender kind between Sir Edmund and his cousin. He could not dwell on such a notion now—it might be absolute nonsense, but it made him go on hastily:

"I have had a visit from Nurse Edith, and as Pietrino suspected, she knows much more than she would allow to him. I think she was waiting to see if money would be offered for her information, but Pietrino would not fall into the risk of buying evidence. He waited; she was watched until she came to London, and she had not been here twenty-four hours before she came to me. She declares now that, as she was gathering up the papers, she had seen that the long letter Madame Danterre had been reading when she had the attack of faintness was written to some one called Rose. She knew it was that letter which had done the mischief. She slipped it into her pocket when she put the rest away. I believe it was naughty curiosity, but she wishes us to think that she knew the whole scandal about the General's will, and did what she did from a sense of justice. When off duty she took the paper to her room, and when she opened it she found the will inside it. In her excitement she called the housemaid, an Englishwoman with whom she had made friends, and she copied the will while they were together, and the names of Akers and Stock—of whom she could not possibly have heard—are in her copy. I have seen that copy, Lady Rose, and——" He paused and glanced at her for a moment, and then his eyes sought the trees in the garden even as they had done when he had made that other and awful announcement on the day of the memorial service to Sir David. Rose flushed a little, and her breathing came quickly, but she made no sign of impatience.

"Sir David left the whole of his fortune to you subject to an annual payment of a thousand a-year to Madame Danterre during her lifetime."

Complete silence followed. Lady Rose either could not or would not speak. Out of the pale, distinguished slightly worn face the eyes looked at Mr. Murray with no surprise.

Had she not always said that she did not believe the iniquitous will Mr. Murray had brought her to be the true one, but had she not also maintained that the true will would never be found? She did not say so to Mr. Murray, but in fact she shrank from making too sure of Nurse Edith's evidence. She had so long forbidden herself to believe in the return of worldly fortune or to wish for it.

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Mr. Murray coughed. No words of congratulation seemed available. At last he went on:

“Nurse Edith says she did not read the letter which was with the will. Directly she went on duty in the morning, and while Madame Danterre was asleep she put the papers back in the black box and the key of the box in its usual place in a little bag on a table standing close by the head of the bed. It was, as I have said, this same box which was put into Dr. Larrone’s care before he started on his mysterious journey to see Miss Dexter. Now our position is very strong. We have evidence of the witnessing of a paper by two men. We have the copy of the will made by the nurse and witnessed by the housemaid, and it bears the signatures of those two men. Then you must remember that, in a case of this kind, the court is much more likely to set aside a will leaving property away from the family than if the will in dispute had been an ordinary one in favour of his relations.”

“Oh! it is horrible—too horrible!” cried Rose. “There must be some mistake. That young girl I met at Groombridge! Even if the poor mother were really wicked, that girl cannot have carried it on!”

Rose had leant her elbows on the table, and clasped her white hands tightly and then covered her face with them for a moment.

“I can’t believe it. I feel there is some terrible mistake, and we might ruin this girl’s life. It would be ill-gotten, unblest wealth.”

The lawyer noted with surprise that these two—Sir Edmund and Lady Rose—were not more anxious for wealth, rather less so, since both had known comparative poverty.

“I don’t believe anyone is the better for living on fraud, Lady Rose, and I don’t believe you have any right to drop the case. You have to think of Sir David’s good name and of his wishes. The will you are suffering from was a portentous wrong.”

Rose trembled. Had she not felt it the most awful, the most portentous wrong? Had it not burnt deep miserable wounds in her soul? The whole horror of the desecration of her married life had been revealed to her in this room by this man. Did she need that he should tell her what that misery had been? The words he had used then were as well known to her as the words he had used to-day.

Rose said after a longer pause, and with slight hesitation:

“And Sir Edmund does not know what Nurse Edith told you? He has not seen the copy of the will?”

“No; I wanted him to, but he refused to hear any more on the subject. I cannot understand it at all.” He spoke with considerable irritation, his big forehead contracted with a deep frown. “Sir Edmund, after making the guess on which the whole thing has

turned, after discovering Akers and Stock, after spending large sums in the necessary work——”

“Has he spent much money?” Rose flushed deeply.

But Mr. Murray, who usually had more tact, was now too full of his grievance to pause.

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“He spent money as long as he could, and now takes no more interest in the matter on the ground that he can no longer be of any use. Why, it was his judgment we wanted, his perceptions; no one could be of more use than Sir Edmund!”

“And who is paying the expenses now?”

“Ah! that is the reason why I wished to see you as soon as possible. I felt that I could not, without your approval, continue as we are now. The last cheque from Sir Edmund covered all expenses to the end of the year. I have advanced what has been necessary since then, and if you really wish the thing dropped, that is entirely my own affair. But I do most earnestly hope that you will not do anything so wrong. I feel very strongly my responsibility towards Sir David’s memory in this matter.”

“I feel,” said Rose, but her manner was irresolute, “that the scandal has been forgotten by now; things come and go so fast. He will be remembered only as a great soldier who died for his country.”

“It may be forgotten,” said Mr. Murray in a stern voice she had never heard before. “It may be forgotten in a society which is always needing some new sensation and is always well supplied. But there is a less fluctuating public opinion. We men of business keep a clearer view of character, and we know better how through all classes there is a verdict passed on men that does not pass away in a season. Do you think, madam, that when men treasure a good name it is the gossip of a London season they regard? No; it is the thoughts of other good men in which they wish to live. It is the sympathy of the good that a good man has a right to. I believe in a future life, but I don’t imagine I know whether in another world they rejoice or suffer pain by anything that affects their good name here. But I do know, Lady Rose, that deep in our nature is the sense of duty to their memory, and I cannot believe that such an instinct is without meaning or without some actual bearing on departed souls. I don’t expect Sir David to visit me in dreams, but I do expect to feel a deep and reasonable self-reproach if I do not try to clear his name.”

The heavy features of the solicitor had worked with a good deal of emotion. The thought, the words “departed souls,” were no mere words to him in these summer days while Mrs. Murray, Junior, was supposed to be doing well after an operation in a nursing home, and the doctors were inclined to speak of next month’s progress and on that of the month after that, and to be silent as to any dates far ahead. In his professional hours he did not dwell on these things, but it was the actual spiritual conditions of the life he and his wife were leading that gave a strange force to his words.

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“She never loved him,” thought Mr. Murray as he looked out of the window. He was on the same side of the writing-table that he had been on when he had first told her of the deep insult offered to her by Sir David. He did not realise now the intensity of the contempt he had felt then for the departed General as he looked at his photograph. It was intolerable, he had thought then, that a man should have those large, full eyes, that straight, manly look and bearing, who had gone to his grave having deliberately planned that his dead hand should so deeply wound a defenceless woman, and that woman his sweet, young wife. Murray’s mind was so full now of relief at the idea that Sir David had done his best at the last, that in his relief he almost forgot that, in a woman’s mind the main fact might still be that there had been a Madame Danterre in the case!

But Rose now, as when he had first told her of Madame Danterre’s existence, was seeking with a single eye to find the truth. It had seemed to her then a moral impossibility to believe that her husband had meant to leave this horrible insult to their married life. David had been incapable of anything so monstrous; he had not in his character even the courage of such a crime.

But now the key to the situation, according to Mr. Murray, was Molly; and Rose again brought to bear all that she had of perception, of experience, of instinct, to see her way clearly. She was silent; then at last she looked up.

“Mr. Murray, Miss Dexter could not commit such a crime. Why, I know her; I spent some days in a country house with her. I know her quite well, and I don’t like her very much, but she really can’t have done anything of the kind, and therefore, the case won’t be proved. I am sure it won’t. And if it fails only harm will be done to David’s memory, not good.”

“That is what Sir Edmund said, but believe me, Lady Rose, you have neither of you anything to go upon. You think it impossible, but you don’t either of you see the immense force of the temptation. Some crimes may need a villainous nature. This, if you could see it truly, only needs one that is human under temptation, ignorant of danger, and ambitious.”

“But then, was that why Edmund would have nothing more to do with the case?” thought Rose.

The look of clear, earnest, searching in Rose’s eyes was clouded by a frown.

The clock struck twelve. Mr. Murray rose.

“I am half an hour late for an appointment. Lady Rose, forgive me; I am an old man, and maybe I take a harsh view of what passes before me. But there is nothing, let me tell you, that alarms me more in the present day than the way in which men and women lose their sense of duty in their sense of sentimental sympathy.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

BROWN HOLLAND COVERS

That afternoon Rose was standing by the window in the drawing-room when she became conscious that her gown was quite hot in the burning sun, and, undoubtedly, its soft, grey tone would fade. She drew back and pulled down the blinds.

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It was not the first time she had put off her black, for, in the Paris heat, it had become intolerable, and she had certainly enjoyed her visit to an inexpensive but excellent dressmaker, who had produced this grey gown with all its determined simplicity.

Rose looked round at the drawing-room now. The furniture in holland covers was stacked in the middle of the room; the pictures were wrapped in brown paper with large and rather unnecessary white labels printed with “Glass” in red letters. The fire-irons were dressed in something that looked like Jaeger and the tassels of the blinds hung in yellow cambric bags. Rose smiled a little as she recalled how strange and strong an impression a room in such a state had made on her in her childhood. The drawing-room in her London home had seemed incomparably more attractive then than at any other time. Lady Charlton had once brought Rose up to see a dentist on a bright, autumn day. She had not been much hurt, but it was a great comfort when the visit was over. She and her mother had dinner on two large mutton chops, and some apricot tartlets from a pastry-cook, things ordered by Lady Charlton with a view to giving as little trouble as possible to two able-bodied women who were living on board wages, and both of whom were, in private life, excellent cooks. Lady Charlton was anxious, too, not to give trouble by sending messages, having quite forgotten that there was also a boy who lived in the house. So, after lunch, she had gone out to find a cab for herself, and had left Rose to rest with a book on the big morocco sofa in the dining-room.

Rose had found her way to the drawing-room, and she could see now the half-open shutter and the rich light of the autumn sun turning all the dust of the air to gold in one big shaft of light. The child had never seen the house when the family was away before, and with awestruck, mysterious joy, she had lifted corners of covers and peered under chairs and recognised legs of tables and footstools. Then she had stood up and taken a comprehensive view of the whole of this world of mountains and valleys, precipices and familiar little home corners, all covered in brown holland, like sand instead of grass, all golden lights and soft shadows.

What had there been so very exciting in it—an excitement she could still recall as keenly now? Was it the greatness of the revolution, or surprise at the new order of things? It was such a startling interruption of all the usual relations between the furniture of the house and its human beings. A great London house wrapped up in the old way spoke more of the old order its influence, its importance, than did the house when inhabited, and out of its curl papers. Nothing could speak more of law and order and care, and the “proper” condition of things, and the self-respect of housemaids, the passing effectiveness of sweeps, and the unobtrusive attentiveness of carpenters! But to the child there had been a glorious sense of loneliness and licence as she danced up and down the broad vacant spaces and jumped over the rolls of Turkey carpets.

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Rose envied that child now, with an envy that she hoped was not bitter. It is not because we knew no sorrows in our childhood that we would fain recall it. It is because we now so seldom know one whole hour of its licensed freedom, its absolute liberty in spite of bonds.

A loud door-bell, as it seemed to Rose, sounded through the house as she closed the shutter she had opened when she came in. She knew whose ring it must be, and came quietly downstairs with a little frown.

Edmund Grosse had been shown into the library. The room looked east, and was now deliciously cool after the street. The dark blinds were half-way down, and a little pretence at a breeze was coming in over the burnt turf of the back garden.

Edmund's manner as he met her was as usual, but tinged perhaps with a little irony—-very little, but just a flavour of it mingled with the immense friendliness and the wish to serve and help her.

Rose was, to his surprise, almost shy as she came into the room, but in another moment she was herself.

"Mamma has borne the journey splendidly. I've had an excellent account in a long telegram this morning."

But while she told him of their journey and of their life in Paris, a rather piteous look came into the blue eyes. Was she not to hear any of Edmund's own news? Was she not to be allowed to show any sympathy? She might not say how she had been thinking of him, dreaming of how nobly he had met his troubles, praying for him in Notre Dame des Victories. She saw at once that she must not; there was something changed. It was too odd, but she was afraid of him. She shook herself and determined not to be silly. She would venture to say what she wished.

"Are things——" she began, but her voice trembled a little as, raising her head, she saw that he was watching her. "Are things as bad as you feared?"

He at once looked out of the window.

"Quite as bad as possible. I am just holding out till I can get some work. Long ago, soon after I left the Foreign Office, I was asked to do some informal work in Egypt; they wanted a semi-official go-between for a time. I wish I had not refused then; I have been an ass throughout. If I had even done occasional jobs they would have had some excuses for putting me in somewhere now on the ground of my having had experience. I have just written two articles on an Indian question, for I know that part of the world as well as anybody over here, and they may lead to something. Meanwhile, I am very well,

so don't waste sympathy on me, I am lodging with the Tarts, where everything is in apple-pie order."

"Oh, I am glad you are with those nice Tarts!" cried Rose, with genuine womanly relief, that in another class of life would have found form and expression in some such remark as that she knew Mary Tart would keep things clean and comfortable, and would do the airing thoroughly.

Edmund's voice alone had made sympathy impossible, but he was a little annoyed at the cheerful tone of Rose's words about the Tarts. It was unlikely that she could have satisfied him in any way by speech or by silence as to his own affairs. But why was she so very well dressed? He had got so accustomed to her in soft, shabby black that he was not sure if he liked this Paris frock; the simplicity of it was too clever.

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There was silence, and Rose rearranged a bowl of roses her sister had sent her from the country. She chose out a copper-coloured bud and held it towards him, and a certain pleading would creep into her manner as she did so.

Edmund smiled. She was really always the same quite hopeless mixture of soft and hard elements.

“Have you seen Mr. Murray, Junior?” he asked.

“Yes; he came this morning, and I can’t conceive what to do. At last I got so dazed with thinking that this afternoon I have tried to forget all about it.”

“That will hardly get things settled,” said Edmund, rather drily.

Tears came into her eyes, and were forced back by an effort of will. Then she told him quite quietly of Nurse Edith’s evidence.

“You mean,” he explained, “that there is a copy of the real will leaving everything to you. I can hardly believe it. In fact, I find it harder to believe than when I first guessed at the truth. I suppose it is an effect on the nerves, but now that we are actually proved right I am simply bewildered. It seems almost too good to be true.”

Rose was also, it seemed, more dazed than triumphant. He felt it very strange that she had not told him the great news as soon as he came into the room.

“What made you say that you could not conceive what to do? There can be no doubt now.” He spoke quickly and incisively.

“I cannot see,” she said at last, “what is right. Mr. Murray is very positive, and absolutely insists that it is my duty to allow the thing to go on.”

“Of course,” Edmund interjected.

“But then, if he is mistaken! He really believes that Miss Dexter received the will from Dr. Larrone and has suppressed it.”

Edmund got up suddenly, and looked down on her with what she felt to be a stern attention.

“And that,” she concluded, looking bravely into the grave eyes bent on her, “I absolutely decline to believe!”

“Of course,” said Grosse abruptly, “it’s out of the question. It’s just like a solicitor—fits his puzzle neatly together and is quite satisfied without seeing the gross absurdity of

supposing that such a girl could carry on a huge fraud. A perfectly innocent, fresh, candid girl, brought up in a respectable English country house—the thing is ridiculous!"

He spoke with great feeling; he was more moved than she had seen him for a long time past, perhaps that was why she felt her own enthusiasm for Molly's innocence just a little damped. He sat down again as abruptly as he had risen.

"But it would be madness to drop the whole affair. This evidence of Nurse Edith's is really conclusive; and the only thing I can see to be said on the other side would be that David might have sent the will to Madame Danterre to give her the option of destroying it. But there is just another possibility, which Murray won't even consider, that Larrone destroyed the will on the journey."

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“Do you know,” said Rose, with a smile, “I believe it’s conceivable that it is in the box, but that she has never opened the box at all! I believe a girl might shrink so much from reading that woman’s papers that she might not even open the box.”

“No one but a woman would have thought of such a possibility, but I daresay you are right.”

He looked at her more gently, with more pleasure, and she instantly felt brighter.

“Then don’t you think it would be possible to get at some plan, some arrangement with her? It seems to me,” she went on earnestly, “that we ought to try to do it privately. Perhaps we might offer her the allowance that would have been made to her mother. If she could be convinced herself that the fortune is not really hers she might give it up without all the horrid shame and publicity of a trial.”

“Yes, but the scandal was public, and you have to think of David’s good name.”

“Yes; but then you see, Edmund, the true will would be proved publicly, and the explanation of the delay would be that it had not been found before.”

“She would have to expose her wretched mother.”

“Not more than the trial would expose her; whether we won the case or lost it, Madame Danterre must be exposed. But if I am right how could it be done?”

“I think I had better do it myself,” said Edmund. “I could see Miss Dexter. I really think I could do it, feeling my way, of course.”

Rose did not answer. She locked her fingers tightly together as something inarticulate and shapeless struggled in her mind and in her heart. She had no right, no claim, she thought earnestly, trying to keep calm and at peace in her innermost soul. But she did not then or afterwards allow to herself what she meant by “right” or by “claim.”

She looked up a moment later with a bright smile.

“Yes,” she said, “you would be the best—far the best. Miss Dexter would feel more at her ease with you than with me or anyone I can think of.”

“Of course, I must consult Murray first,” said Edmund, absorbed in the thought of the proposed interview. “I ought to go now; I have an appointment at the Foreign Office—-probably as futile as any of my efforts hitherto when looking for work.”

He spoke the last words rather to himself than to his cousin, and then left her alone. He did not question as he walked through the streets across the park whether he had been as full of sympathy to Rose as he had ever been; he was far too much accustomed to

his own constancy to question it now. But somehow his consciousness of Rose's presence had not been as apparent as usual. No half ironic, half tender comments on her attitude at this crisis had escaped him. He had been more business-like than usual, and, man-like, he did not know it.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WRATH OF A FRIEND

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Canon Nicholls had had a hard fight with a naturally hot temper, and his servant would have given him a very fair character on that point if he had been applied to. But there came a stifling July morning when nothing could please him. He had been out to dinner the night before, and it was the man's opinion that he had "eaten something too good for him." He had been to church early, and had come back without the light in his face he usually brought with him, as if the radiance from the sanctuary lamp loved to linger on the blind face. He was difficult all the rest of the morning, and the kind, patient woman who read aloud to him and wrote his letters became nervous and diffident, thinking it was her own fault.

In the afternoon he usually took a stroll with his servant for guide, and then had a doze, after which he went to Benediction at a neighbouring convent. But to-day he settled into his arm-chair, and said he meant to stay there, and that he wanted nothing, and (with more emphasis) nobody.

He was, in truth, greatly disturbed in his mind. He had heard things he did not like to hear of Mark Molyneux. He had been quite prepared for some jealousy and some criticism of the young man he loved. Nobody charms everybody, and if anybody charms many bodies, then the rest of the bodies, who are not charmed, become surprised and critical, if not hostile. It is so among all sets of human beings: the Canon was no acrid critic of religious persons, only he had always found them to be quite human.

The immediate cause of the acute trouble the Canon was going through to-day had been a visit of the day before from Mrs. Delaport Green. Adela, who, as he had once told Mark, sometimes looked in for a few minutes, was under the impression that she very often called on the old blind priest, and often mentioned her little attempts to cheer him up with great complacence, especially to her Roman Catholic friends, as if she were a constant ray of light in his darkness. She had not seen him since her return from Cairo, but her first words were:

"I was so sorry not to be able to come last week," spoken with the air of a weekly visitor.

But the Canon thought it so kind of her to come at all that he was no critic of details in her regard.

She had cantered with a light hand over all sorts of subjects,—Westminster Cathedral, the reunion of Churches, her own Catholic tendencies, her charities, the newest play (which she described well), and her anxiety because her husband ate too much. Then, at last, she lighted on Mark's sermons.

Canon Nicholls spoke with reserve of Mark; he was shy of betraying his own affection for him.

“Yes; it is young eloquence, fresh and quite genuine,” he said in response to Adela’s enthusiasm.

“It sounds so very real,” said Adela, with a sigh. “One couldn’t imagine, you know, that he could have any doubts, or that he could be sorry, or disappointed, or anything of that sort—and yet——”

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“And yet, what?” asked the Canon.

“And yet—well, I know I am foolish, and I do idealise people and make up heroes—I know I do! It is such a pleasure to admire people, isn’t it? And after he gave up being heir to Groombridge Castle! I was staying there when poor, dear Lord Groombridge got the news of his ordination, and it was all so sad and so beautiful, and now I can’t bear to think that Father Molyneux is sorry already that he gave it all up.”

“Sorry that he gave it up—!”

Adela gave a little jump in her chair. It made her so nervous to see a blind man excited. But curiosity was strong within her.

“I am afraid it is quite true; a friend of mine who knows him quite well, told me.”

“Told you *what*?”

“That he was unhappy, and has doubts or troubles of some kind. I didn’t understand what exactly, but she knows that he will give it all up—the vows and all that, I mean—if ——”

“If what?”

Adela was not really wanting in courage.

“If a certain very rich woman would marry him. It seems such a come-down, so very dull and dreadful, doesn’t it?”

“You know all that’s a lie!”

“Well, it was all told to me.”

“But you knew there was not a word of truth in it, only you wanted to see how I would take it. And I thought you were a kind-hearted woman! How blind I am!”

Adela was galled to the quick. A quarrel, a scolding, would have been tolerable, and perhaps exciting, but this naive disappointment in herself, this judgment from the man to whom she had been so good, was too much!

“I thought it was much more kind to let you know what everybody is saying, that you might help him. I am very sorry I have made a mistake, and that I must be going now. It is much later than I thought.”

“Must you?” There was the faintest sarcasm in the very polite tone of the Canon’s voice.

Nor had this conversation been all; for out at dinner that night the Canon had been worried with much the same story from a totally different quarter. It was after the ladies had left the dining-room, and the gossip had been rougher.

He gave all his thoughts to brooding over the matter next day. Mark could not have managed well—must have done or said something stupid, and made enemies, he reflected gloomily.

Canon Nicholls had been young once, and almost as popular a preacher as Mark, and he did not underrate the difficulties. But it was his firm persuasion that, with tact and common-sense they were by no means insurmountable. What really distressed the old man was that perhaps Mark had been right in thinking that he personally could not surmount them. And it was Canon Nicholls's doing that he was not by this time a novice in a Carthusian Monastery! Therefore the Canon's soul was heavy with anxiety as to whether he had made a great mistake.

"He must be a fool, or else it's just possible that he has got an uncommonly clever enemy." The last thought revived the old man a little, and he received his tea without any of the demonstrations of disgust he had shown on drinking his coffee at breakfast.

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Presently the subject of his thoughts came upon the scene, and the visitor saw at once that his old friend was unlike himself. The Canon was exceedingly alert from the moment Mark came into the room, trying to catch up the faintest indication, in his voice or movements, as to whether he were in good or low spirits; he almost thought he heard a quick sigh as Mark sat down. He could not see that Mark was undeniably thinner and paler than he had been only a few weeks ago, and that his eyes looked even more bright and keen in consequence.

“Take some tea,” said the Canon; and then, when he had given him time to drink his tea, he turned on him abruptly.

“I’ve heard some lies about you, and I’m going to tell you what they are.”

“Perhaps it’s better to be ignorant.”

“No, it’s not, now why did you incite young men to Socialism in South London?”

“Good heavens!” said Mark. “Well, you shall catch it for that. I will read you every word of that paper; not a line of anything else shall you hear till you’ve been obliged to give your ‘nihil obstat’ to ’True and False Socialism,’ by your humble servant.”

“But that’s not the worst that’s said of you.”

“Oh, no! I know that.”

Perhaps if Canon Nicholls could have seen the strained look on the young face he could have understood. As it was, he believed him to be taking the matter too lightly.

“When I was young,” he said, “I thought it my own fault if I made enemies, and you know where there is a great deal of smoke there has generally been some fire.”

“Then you mean to say,” answered Mark, in a voice that was hard from the effort at self-control, “that you think it is my fault that lies are told against me, although you *do* call them lies?”

“Frankly, I think you must have been careless,” said the old man, leaning forward and grasping the arm of his chair. “I think you must have had too much disregard for appearances.”

He paused, and there was a silence of several moments, while the ticking of the clock was quite loud in the little room.

“Unless this is the doing of an enemy,” said Canon Nicholls.

“I do not know that it is an enemy,” said Mark, “but I know there is some one who is excessively angry and excessively afraid because I know a secret of great importance.”

“And that person is a woman, I suppose?”

“I cannot answer that,” said Mark. He was standing now with one elbow on the end of the chimney-piece, and his head resting on his right hand, looking down at the worn rug at his feet.

“Will you tell me exactly what it is they do say?” said Mark, still speaking with an effort at cheerfulness that aggravated the nervous state of Canon Nicholls.

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And there followed another silence, during which Father Molyneux realised to himself with fear and almost horror that he was nearly having a quarrel with the friend he loved so much, and on whose kindness he had always counted, and whose wisdom had so often been his guide. He was suffering already almost more than he owned to himself, and he had come into the room of the holy, blind old man as to a place of refuge. It gave him a sick feeling of misery and helplessness that there seemed in the midst of his other troubles the possibility of a quarrel with Canon Nicholls. This at least he must prevent; and so, leaning forward, he said very gently:

“Do tell me a little bit more of what you mean? I know you are speaking as my friend, and, believe me, I am not ungrateful. I am sure there is a definite story against me. I wish you would call a spade a spade quite openly.”

“They have got hold of a story that you are tired of poverty and the priesthood, and so on, and that you will give it all up if you can persuade a certain very rich woman to marry you.”

“That is definite enough.” Mark was struggling to speak without bitterness. “And, for a moment, you thought——?” he could not finish the sentence.

“Good God! not for a fraction of a second. How can you?”

“Oh! forgive me, forgive me; I didn’t mean it.”

Mark knelt down by the chair, tears were flowing from the blind eyes. Canon Nicholls belonged to a generation whose emotions were kept under stern control; the tears would have come more naturally from Mark. There was a strange contrast between the academic figure of the old man in its reserved and negative bearing, seriously annoyed with himself for betraying the suffering he was enduring, and yet unable to check the flow of tears, and the eager, unreserved, sympathetic attitude of the younger man. After a few moments of silence Mark rose and began to speak in low, quick accents——

“It is a secret which is doing infinite harm to a soul made for good things, and yet it is a secret which I can tell no one, not even you—at least, so I am convinced. But it is a secret by which people are suffering. The result is that I cannot deal with this calumny as I should deal with it if I were free; and I believe that I have not got to the worst of it yet. I see what it must lead to.”

He looked down wistfully for a moment, and then went on:

“Last year I had a dream that was full of joy and peace, and that seemed to me God’s Will; but, through you, I came to see that I must give it up, and I threw myself into the life here with all my heart. And now, just when I had begun to feel that I was really doing a little good, now that I have got friends among the poor whom I love to see and help, I

shall be sent away more or less under a cloud. I shall lose friends whom I love, and whom it had seemed to me that I was called to help even at the risk of my own soul. However, there it is. If I am not to be a Carthusian, if I am not to work for sinners in London, I suppose some other sphere of action will be found for me. I must leave it to Him Who knows best."

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Canon Nicholls bent forward, and held out his long, white hands with an eager gesture, as though he were wrestling with his infirmity in his great longing to gain an outlook which would enable him to read a little further into the souls of men.

“I cannot explain more definitely. It is a case of fighting for a soul, or rather fighting with a soul against the devil in a terrible crisis. I don’t know what to compare it to. Perhaps it is like performing a surgical operation while the patient is scratching your eyes out. If I can leave my own point of view out of sight for the present I can be of use, but I must let the scratching out of my eyes go on.”

Mark went to the church early that evening, as it was his turn to be in the confessional. One or two people came to confession, and then the church seemed to be empty. He knelt down to his prayers and soon became absorbed. To-night he was oppressed in a new way by the sins, the temptations, and the unutterable weakness of man; his failures; his uselessness. Nothing else in Art had ever impressed him so much as the figure of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. That beautiful figure, with all the freshness of its primal grace, stretching out its arms from a new-born world towards the infinite Creator, had expressed, with extraordinary pathos, the weakness, the failure, almost the non-existence of what is finite. “I Am Who Am” thundered Almighty Power, and how little, how helpless, was man!

And then, as Mark, weary with the misery of human life, almost repined at the littleness of it all, he felt rebuked. Could anything be little that was so loved of God? If the primal truth, if Purity Itself and Love Itself could make so amazing a courtship of the human soul, how dared anyone despise what was so honoured of the King? No, under all the self-seeking, the impure motives, the horrid cruelties of life, he must never lose sight of the delicate loveliness, the pathetic aspiration, the exquisite powers of love that are never completely extinguished. He must see with God’s eyes, if he were to do God’s work. And in the thought that it was, after all, God’s work and not his own, Mark found comfort. He had come into the church feeling the burden on his shoulders very hard to bear, and now he made the discovery that it was not he who was carrying it at all; he only appeared to have it laid upon him while Another bore it for him.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CONDEMNATION OF MARK

Two excellent and cheerful old persons were engaged in conversation on the subject of Father Molyneux. The Vicar-General of the diocese, a Monsignor of the higher, or pontifical rank, had called to see the Rector of Mark’s church, and had already rapidly discussed other matters of varying importance when he said, leaning back in an old and faded leather chair:

“What’s all this about young Molyneux?”

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Both men were fairly advanced in years and old for their age, for they had both worked hard and constantly for many years on the mission. They had to be up early and to bed late, with the short night frequently interrupted by sick calls, and on a Sunday morning they had always fasted till one o'clock, and usually preached two or even three times on the same day. They had never known for very many years what it was to be without serious anxiety on the matter of finance. Their lives had been models of amazing regularity and self-control. Their recreations consisted chiefly in dining with each other at mid-day on Mondays, and spending the afternoon with whist and music. Probably, too, they had dined with a leading parishioner once or twice in the week.

In politics they were mildly Liberal, more warmly Home Rulers, but they put above all the interests of the Church. They were, too, fierce partisans on the controversies about Church music, and had a zeal for the beauty and order of their respective churches that was admirable in its minuteness and its perseverance. They both had a large circle of friends with whom they rejoiced at annual festivities at their Colleges, and with whom they habitually and freely censured their immediate authorities. Those who were warmest in their devotion to the Vatican were often the most inclined to make a scapegoat of a mere bishop. But now one of these two old friends had been made Vicar-General of the diocese, and it was likely that the Rector would speak to him with less than his usual freedom. Lastly, both men had that air of complete knowledge of life which comes with the habits of a circle of people who know each other intimately. And neither of them realised in the least that the minds of the educated laity were a shut book to them.

"Well," said the Rector, and after puffing at his pipe he went on, "we can hardly get into the church for the crowd, and I am going to put up a notice to ask ladies to wear small hats—toques; isn't that what they call them?"

"I heard him once," said the Vicar-General, "and, to tell the truth, it didn't seem up to much."

"Words," said the Rector; "it's Oxford all over. There must be a new word for everything. Why, he preached on Our Lady the other day, and I declare I don't think there were three sentences I'd ever heard before! And on Our Lady, too! A man must be gone on novelty who wants to find anything new to say about Our Lady."

"It doesn't warm me up a bit, that sort of thing," said the Vicar-General. "I like to hear the things I've heard all my life."

"Of course," responded the other, "but you won't get that from our popular preachers, I can tell you," and he laughed with some sarcasm.

"Is he making converts?"

“Too many, far too many; that’s just what I complain of. We shall have a nice name for relapses here if it goes on like this.”

Both men paused.

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“You’ve nothing more to complain of?” asked the Monsignor.

“No—no—” The second “no” was drawn out to its full length. “Of course, he’s unpunctual, and he’s often late for dinner. I don’t know where he gets his dinner at all sometimes. And there are always ladies coming to see him. If there are two in the parlour and another in the dining-room, and a young man on the stairs, it’s for ever Father Molyneux they are asking for. And, of course, he has too much money given him for the poor, and we have double the beggars we had last year.”

“But,” said the other, “you know there’s more being said than all that. There’s an unpleasant story, and it’s about that I want to ask you. Well—the same sort of thing as poor Nobbs; you’ll remember Nobbs?”

“Remember Nobbs! Why, I was curate with him when I first left the seminary. Now, there was a preacher, if you like! But it turned his head completely. Poor, wretched Nobbs! It’s a dangerous thing to preach too well, I’m certain of that.”

“Well, it’s a danger you and I have been spared,” said the Monsignor, and they both laughed heartily.

Then they got back to the point.

“Well,” said the Rector, “there’s a lady comes here sometimes who spoke to me about this the other day. It seems she went to see John Nicholls, and the poor old blind fellow bit her head off, but she thought she ought to tell somebody who might put a stop to the talk, and so she came to me. There’s some woman, a very rich Protestant, who gives out openly that she is waiting till Molyneux announces that he doesn’t believe in the Church, and then they will marry and go to America. Then, another day Jim Dixon came along, and a friend of his had heard the tale from some Army man at his Club. It’s exactly the way things went on about Nobbs, you know, beginning with talk like that. Really, if it wasn’t for having seen Nobbs go down hill I shouldn’t think anything of it. Young Molyneux is all straight so far, but so was Nobbs straight at first.”

“A priest shouldn’t be talked about,” said the Monsignor.

“Of course not,” said the Rector.

“He has started too young,” the Monsignor went on, not unkindly; “it’s all come on in such a hurry; he ought to have had a country mission first. But my predecessor thought he’d be so safe with you.”

“But how can I help it?” asked the other hotly; “I’m sure I’ve done my best! You can ask him if I haven’t warned him from his very first sermon that he’d be a popular preacher. I’ve even tried to teach him to preach. I’ve lent him Challoner, and Hay, and Wiseman, and tried to get him out of his Oxford notions, but he’s no sooner in the pulpit than he’s

off at a hard gallop—three hundred words to a minute, and such words!—'vitality,' 'personality,' 'development,' 'recrudescence,' 'mentality'—the Lord knows what! And there they sit and gaze at him with their mouths open drinking it in as if they'd been starved! No, no; it won't be my fault if he turns out another Nobbs—poor, miserable old Nobbs! Now his really were sermons!"

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“Well,” said the other, in a business-like tone, “I am inclined to think it would be best for him to take a country mission for a few years. I’ve no doubt he is on the square now, and that will give him time to quiet down a bit. He’ll be an older and a wiser man after that, and he could do some sound, theological reading. Lord Lofton has been asking for a chaplain, and we must send him a gentleman. I could tell him that Molyneux had been a little overworked in London, and if he goes down to the Towers at the end of July, no one will suppose he is leaving for good, eh?”

“Very well,” answered the Rector; “I don’t want anything said against him, you know. I’ve had many a curate not half as ready to work as this man.”

“No, no; I quite understand. Well, I’ll write to him in the course of the week. And now about this point of plain chant?” And both men forgot the existence of Mark as they waxed hot on melodious questions.

I can’t believe that Jonathan loved David more than the second curate had come to love Mark Molyneux in their work together. It is good to bear the yoke in youth, and it is very good to have a hero worship for your yoke fellow. Father Jack Marny was a young Kelt, blue-eyed, straight-limbed, fair-haired, and very fair of soul. He would have told any sympathetic listener that he owed everything to Mark—zeal for souls, habits of self-denial, a new view of life, even enjoyment of pictures and of Browning, as well as interest in social science. All this was gross exaggeration, but in him it was quite truthful, for he really thought so. He had the run of Mark’s room, and they took turns to smoke in each other’s bedrooms, so as to take turns in bearing the rector’s observations on the smell of smoke on the upstairs landing. Father Marny had a subscription at Mudie’s—his only extravagance—and he always ordered the books he thought Mark wished for, and Mark always ordered from the London library the books he thought would most interest Jack. Father Marny revelled in secret in the thought of all that might have belonged to Mark, and he possessed, of course most carefully concealed, a wonderful old print he had picked up on a counter, of Groombridge Castle, exalting the round towers to a preposterous height, while in the foreground strolled ladies in vast hoops, and some animals intended apparently for either cows or sheep according to the fancy of the purchaser.

But what each of the curates loved best was the goodness he discerned in the other, and the more intimate they became the more goodness they discerned. The very genuinely good see good, and provoke good by seeing it, and reflect it back again, as two looking-glasses opposite to each other repeat each other’s light *ad infinitum*.

It was a Monday, and the rector had gone out to dinner, and the two young men were smoking in the general sitting-room. Father Marny was looking over the accounts of a boot club, and objurating the handwriting of the lady who kept them. Mark was in the absolutely passive state to which some hard-working people can reduce themselves; he had hardly the energy to smoke. A loud knock produced no effect upon him.

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“Lazy brute!” murmured Father Marny, in his affectionate, clear voice, “can’t even fetch the letters.” And a moment later he went for them himself, and having flung a dozen letters over his companion’s shoulder, went back to the accounts.

Ten minutes later he looked up, and gave a little start. He was quick to see any change in Mark, and he did not like his attitude. He did not know till that moment how anxious he had been as to the possibility of some change. He moved quickly forward and stood in front of the deep chair in which Mark was sitting, leaning forward with his eyes fixed on the carpet.

“Bad news?” he asked abruptly.

“Bad enough,” said Mark, and, very slowly raising his head, he gave a smile that was the worst part of all the look on his face. Jack Marny put one hand on his shoulder, and a woman’s touch could not have been lighter.

“It’s not——?” he said, and then stopped.

“Yes, it is,” Mark answered. “I am to be a domestic chaplain to that pious old ass, Lord Lofton. It seems I need quiet for study—quiet to rot in! My God! is that how I am to work for souls?”

It was, perhaps, better for Mark that Jack Marny broke down completely at the news, for, by the time he had been forced into telling his friend that it was preposterous to suppose that any man was necessary for God’s work, and that if they had faith at all they must believe that God allowed this to happen, light began to dawn in his own mind. But he was almost frightened at the passionate resentment of the Kelt; he saw there was serious danger of some outbreak on his part against the authorities.

“They won’t catch me staying here after you are gone!”

“Much good that would do me,” said Mark. “I should get all the blame.”

“They must learn that we are not slaves!” thundered the curate, his fair face absolutely black with wrath.

“We are God’s slaves,” said Mark, in a low voice, and then there was silence between them for the space of half an hour.

The door opened and a shrill voice cried out, “There’s Tom Turner at the door asking for Father Mark,” and the door was banged to again.

Tom Turner was the very flower of Mark’s converts to a good life.

Father Marny groaned at the name.

“Let me see him,” he said. “Go out and get a walk.”

“I’d rather see him; I don’t know how much oftener——”

The sentence was not finished. He had left the room in two strides.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MENE THEKEL PHARES

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The more Edmund reflected on the matter the more difficult he found it to decide what steps to take in order to approach Molly. In the first impulse he had thought only that here was the chance of serving her, of proving her friend in difficulty, which he had particularly wished for. It would make reparation for the past—a past he keenly defended in his own mind as he had defended it to Molly herself, but yet a past that he would wish to make fully satisfactory by reparation for what he would not confess to have been blameworthy. But when he tried to realise exactly what he should have to tell Molly it seemed impossible. For how could he meet her questions; her indignant protests? She would become more and more indignant at the plot that had been carried on against her, a plot which Edmund had started and had carried on until quite lately, and which had also until quite lately been entirely financed by him. Even if he baffled her questions, his consciousness of the facts would make it too desperately difficult a task for him to assume the *role* of Molly's disinterested friend now, although in truth he felt as such, and would have done and suffered much to help her.

Edmund had by nature a considerable sympathy with success, with pluck, with men or women who did things well. There are so many bunglers in life, so few efficient characters, and he felt Molly to be entirely efficient. Even the over-emphasis of wealth in the setting of her life had been effective; it fitted too well into what the modern world wanted to be out of proportion. A thing that succeeded so very well could hardly be bad form. Hesitation, weakness, would have made it vulgar; hesitation and weakness in past days had often made vulgar emphasis on rank and power, but in the hands of the strong such emphasis had always been effective and fitting. There was a kind of artistic regret in Edmund's mind at the thought that this excellent comedy of life as played by Molly should be destroyed. And he had come to think it certainly would be destroyed.

One last piece of evidence had convinced him more than any other.

Nurse Edith had a taste for the dramatic, and enjoyed gradual developments. Therefore she had kept back as a *bonne bouche*, to be served up as an apparent after-thought, a certain half sheet of paper which she had preserved carefully in her pocket-book since the night on which she had made the copy of Sir David Bright's will. It was the actual postscript to Sir David's long letter to Rose; the long letter Nurse Edith had put back in the box and which had remained there untouched until Molly had taken it out. The postscript would not be missed, and might be useful. It was only a few lines to this effect:

"P.S.—I think it better that you should know that I am sending a few words to Madame Danterre to tell her briefly that justice must be done. Also, in case anyone, in spite of my precautions to conceal it, is aware that I possessed the very remarkable diamond ring I mention in this letter, and asks you about it, I wish you to know that I am sending it direct to Madam Danterre in my letter to her. May God forgive me, and, by His Grace, may you do likewise."

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The sight of David's handwriting, the astonishing verification of his own first surmise, the vivid memory of Rose unwillingly showing him the letter and the ring and the photograph she supposed to have been intended for herself, had a very powerful effect on Edmund Grosse. The whole story was so clear, so well connected, it seemed impossible to doubt it. Yet he believed in Molly's innocence without an effort. What was there to prove that Madame Danterre had not destroyed the will after Nurse Edith copied it? She had the key and the box within reach, and the dying, again and again, have shown incalculable strength—far greater than was needed in order to get at the will and burn it while a nurse was absent or asleep.

Again, it was to Larrone's interest to destroy that will. They had only Pietrino's persuasion of Larrone's integrity to set against the possibility of his having opened the box on his long journey to England, against the possibility of his having read the will, and destroyed it, before he gave the box to Molly. He would have seen at once not only that his own legacy would be lost, but, what might have more influence with him, he must have seen what a doubtful position he must hold in public opinion if this came to light. He had been the chief friend and adviser of Madame Danterre, who had paid him lavishly for his medical services from her first coming to Florence, and who had made no secret of the legacy he was to receive at her death. He had been with her at the last, and was now actually carrying on her gigantic fraud by taking the box to her daughter. Would it not have been a great temptation to him to destroy the will while he had no fear of discovery rather than put the matter in Molly's hands? Lastly came Rose's subtle feminine suggestion that the will might be in the box but that Molly had never opened it. Some instinct, some secret fear of painful revelations, might easily have made her shrink from any disclosures as to her mother's past. Rose was so often right, and the obvious suggestion, that such a shrinking from knowledge would have been natural to Rose and unnatural to Molly, did not occur to the male mind, always inclined to think of women as mostly alike.

At the same time he was really unwilling to relinquish the *role* of intermediary. His thoughts had hardly left the subject since the hour of his talk with Rose, and it was especially absorbing on the day on which Molly was to give a party, to which he was invited—and invited to meet royalty. He decided that he must that evening ask his hostess to give him an appointment for a private talk.

Edmund arrived late at Westmoreland House when the party was in full swing. He paused a moment on the wide marble steps of the well staircase as he saw a familiar face coming across the hall. It was the English Ambassador in Madrid, just arrived home on leave, as Edmund knew. He was a handsome grey-haired man of thin, nervous figure, and he sprang lightly to meet his old friend and put his hand on his arm.

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“Grosse!” he cried, “well met.” And then, in low, quick tones he added: “What am I going to see at the top of this ascent? This amazing young woman! What does it mean, eh? I knew the wicked old mother. Tell me, was she really married to David Bright all the time? Was it Enoch Arden the other way up? But we must go on,” for other late arrivals were joining them. When they reached the landing the two men stood aside for a moment, for they saw that it was too late for them to be announced. Royalty was going in to supper.

A line of couples was crossing the nearest room, from one within. The great square drawing-room was lit entirely by candles in the sconces that were part of the permanent decoration. But the many lights hardly penetrated into the great depths of the pictures let into the walls. These big, dark canvases by some forgotten Italian of the school of Veronese, gave the room something of the rich gloom of a Venetian palace. Beyond a few stacks of lilies in the corners, Molly had done nothing to relieve its solemn dignity. As she came across it from the opposite corner, the depths of the old pictures were the background to her white figure.

She was bending her head towards the Prince who was taking her down—a tall, fair man with blue eyes and a heavy jaw. Then as she came near the doorway she raised her head and saw Edmund. There was a strange, soft light in her eyes as she looked at him. It was the touch of soul needed to give completeness to her magnificence as a human being. The white girlish figure in that room fitted the past as well as the present. The great women of the past had been splendidly young too, whereas we keep our girls as children, comparatively speaking.

Molly had that combination of youth and experience which gives a special character to beauty. There was no detailed love of fashion in her gorgeous simplicity of attire; there was rather something subtly in keeping with the house itself.

The Prince turned to speak to the Ambassador, and the little procession stopped.

Edmund was more artistic in taste than in temperament, and he was not imaginative. But he could not enjoy the full satisfaction of his fastidious tastes to-night, nor had he his usual facility for speech. He could not bring himself to utter one word to Molly. They stood for that moment close together, looking at each other in a silence that was electric. No wonder that Molly thought his incapacity to speak a wonderful thing; others, too, noticed it.

“What a bearing that girl has! What movement!” cried the Ambassador, as, after greeting the first few couples who passed him, he drew Grosse to a corner and looked at him curiously. But Edmund seemed moonstruck. Then, in a perfunctory voice, he said slowly.

“What is the writing in that picture?”

“Mene Thekel Phares,” said his friend. “My dear Grosse! surely you know a picture of the ‘Fall of Babylon’ when you see it? Now let us go where we shall not be interrupted. Tell me all about this girl with the amazing bearing and big eyes, whom princes delight to honour, and Duchesses to dine with! How did she get dear Rose Bright’s money?”

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Edmund had never disliked a question more.

“I’ll tell you all I know,” he said unblushingly, “but not to-night, old fellow. It would take too long.”

And to his joy a countess and a beauty seized upon the terribly curious diplomatist and made him take her down to supper. And they agreed while they supped exquisitely that the real job dear old Grosse ought to be given was that of husband to their hostess.

“But then there is poor Rose Bright.”

“Lady Rose Bright would not have him when he was rich,” he objected. “No; this will do very nicely. If I am not mistaken (and I’m pretty well read in human eyes), the lady is willing.”

After supper there was dancing. Edmund did not dance. He stood in a corner, his tall form a little bent, merely watching, and presently he turned away. He had made up his mind. He would not try to speak to Molly to-night, and he would not ask her for a talk.

She was dancing as he left the room, and he turned half mechanically to watch her. It was always an exquisite pleasure to see her dance. He left her with a curious sense of farewell in his mind. Fate was coming fast, he knew; he could not doubt that for a moment. He was not the man to avert it. No one could avert it. It was part of the tragedy that, pity her as he might, he could not really wish to avert it. He would give no warning. Some other hand must write “Mene Thekel Phares” on the wall of her palace of pleasure and success.

Edmund Grosse declined the task.

Molly danced on in the long gallery between its walls of mirrors and their infinite repetitions of twinkling candles and dancing figures pleasantly confused to the eye by the delicate wreaths of gold foliage that divided their panes. In the immeasurable depths of those reflections the nearest objects melted by endless repetition into dim distances, and the present dancing figures might seem to melt into a far past where men and women were dancing also.

Gallery within gallery in that mirrored world, with very little effort of imagination, might become peopled by different generations. As the figures receded in space so they receded in time. Groups of human beings, with all the subtle ease of a decadent civilisation, ceded their place to groups of men and women who moved with more slowness and dignity in the middle distance of those endless reflections. And looking down those avenues of gilded foliage into that fancied past, the old cry might well rise to the lips: “What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue!”

But, whether in the foreground of to-day, or in the secrets that the mirrors held of a century before, or in the indistinguishable mist of their greatest depths, wherever the imagination roamed, it found in every group of human beings a woman who was young and beautiful, and yet it could come back to the dancing figure of Molly without any shock of disappointment or disdain.

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“But it is daylight!” cried two young men who paused breathless with their partners by the high narrow windows, at the end of the gallery, and they threw back the shutters. The growing dawn mingled with the lights of the decreasing candles, with the infinite repetitions of the mirror, with the soft music of the last valse.

And Molly bore the light perfectly, as the chorus of praise and thanks and “good-nights” of the late stayers echoed round her.

“Not ‘good-night’ but ‘good-bye,’” said a very young girl, looking up at Molly with facile tears rising in her blue eyes. “We go away to-morrow, and this perfect night is the last!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

MARK ENTERS INTO TEMPTATION

The more he realised Molly’s danger, the more he believed in her innocence—the more anxious Edmund became to find a suitable envoy to approach her from the enemy’s side, and one who, if possible, would understand his position.

Like most men who have a repugnance to clerical influence he had a great idea of its power, and a perfect readiness to make use of it. He was delighted when he remembered having met Mark Molyneux at Molly’s house. The meeting had not been quite a success, but this he did not remember. Edmund’s half-sleepy easy manner had been more cordial, but not quite so good as usual. He was just too conscious of the strangeness of the fact that Edmund Grosse should be talking with a “bon petit cure.” He knew Father Molyneux to be Groombridge’s cousin, and to have been considered a man of unusual promise at Oxford, but, all the same, whatever he had been, he was a priest now, and Grosse had never quite made up his mind as to his own manner to a priest. He was so practised in dealing with other people, but not with ecclesiastics. He did not in the least realise that the slight condescension and uncertainty in his manner, with all his effort at cordiality, was the outcome of a rather deeply-seated antagonism to the claims he conceived all priests to make, in their hearts, on the souls of men. I have known a man, not altogether unlike Edmund Grosse, to cross the street in London rather than pass a priest on the same pavement. Grosse would not have been so foolish as that, but still, it was not surprising that the two men did not get on particularly well. All that Edmund now remembered of this chance meeting was Molly’s evidently deep interest in the young priest, and he recalled her saying at the time when she had been much moved by her mother’s cruel letter, that she was going to hear Father Molyneux preach that evening. From the avowedly anti-clerical Molly, that meant much.

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Edmund knew nothing of the recent talk about Mark, although Mrs. Delaport Green had tried to sigh out some insinuations on the subject in talking to him. Perhaps he was a less receptive listener than of yore, when he had more empty spaces in his mind than he had this year. He received, indeed, a faint impression that Mrs. Delaport Green was sentimentalising over some disappointment she was suffering under acutely with regard to the popular preacher, and had felt her motive to be curiosity to gain information from himself on some point of which he knew nothing. But if he had been more attentive he might have gained enough information to make him hesitate to involve poor Mark in Molly's affairs.

Almost as soon as he had thought of consulting Mark, he proposed the notion to Rose, who was enthusiastic in its support.

It is not necessary to give his letter to Father Molyneux, which had to be long and careful, and was written after consultation with Mr. Murray.

Mr. Murray was quite in favour of an informal interview, and disposed to agree in the choice of Father Molyneux as ambassador. "I am not afraid of your letting Miss Dexter know the strength of our case," he said. "Father Molyneux must judge for himself how far it is wise to frighten Miss Dexter for her own sake. He is, as I understand, to try to persuade her to produce the will, and I suppose he will assume that she does not know of its existence among her mother's papers. This would save her pride, and you might come to terms if she would produce it. If you fail, the next course would be for me to insist on an interview, and to carry things with a high hand. I should say, in effect: 'We are aware that Sir David Bright made a will on his way to Africa, and we can prove that it was sent by mistake to your mother, because we have a witness who saw it in her box. It was in her box when it was handed to Dr. Larrone, and it has been traced, therefore, into your hands. We have a copy of it which we can produce if you have destroyed the original, and, if you have not done so, we can get an order of the court compelling you to produce it. You cannot deny the fact that the will was sent to Madame Danterre by mistake, for you have the letter which accompanied it, and we have the postscript to the letter taken from the box by a witness whom we are prepared to call. Will you produce the box in which, no doubt, the will has escaped your notice, or shall we get the order of the court? The will has, as I have said, been traced into your hands.' I doubt if any woman (at all events one such as you describe Miss Dexter) would resist, and no solicitor whom she consulted, and to whom she told the truth, would advise her to do so —no respectable solicitor, that is to say, and no prudent one."

When Edmund showed Rose his letter to Father Mark she had only one criticism to make. She felt that Edmund took too easily for granted that the priest would be ready to put his finger into so very hot a pie. Father Mark must be appealed to more earnestly to come to the rescue, and less as if it were quite obvious that he would be ready to do so as part of his natural business in life. Edmund agreed to add some sentences at her suggestion.

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It is important to realise Mark's state of mind, at the time when this strong, additional trial was to come upon him.

With the full approval of his friend, Canon Nicholls, Mark decided not to take the decree of banishment from London without remonstrance. He was not astonished at the result of the talk against him. That his one great enemy should have poisoned the wells so easily was not very surprising. He could not help knowing that the very keenness and ardour of his friends had produced prejudice against him. There was, among the religious circles in London, a perhaps healthy suspicion of hero worship for popular preachers, and of any indiscreet zeal. The great Religious Orders knew how to deal with life, and it was safer to have an enthusiasm for an Order than for an individual. Seculars were the right people for daily routine and work among the poor, but for a young secular priest to become a bright, particular star was unusual and alarming.

Jealousy is the fault of the best men because it eludes their most vigilant examinations, and, while their energy is taken up with visible enemies, it dresses itself in a complete and dignified disguise and comes out either as discretion or zeal or a love of humility.

Mark saw all this less clearly than did the blind Canon, but he realised it enough not to be surprised at the quick growth of the seed Molly had sown in well-prepared ground.

But the blow he did not expect came from his own rector. He went to him, thinking he would back him up in his efforts to get an explanation of this sudden order, and he was told, between pinches of snuff, that he had much better do as he was bid without making a fuss, and that he was being sent to an excellent berth, which was exactly what he needed. The rector was sorry to lose him certainly, but he thought it was the best possible arrangement for himself. There was something of grunts and sniffs between the short phrases that did not soften them. Mark became speechless with hurt feeling.

It became clearly evident to Canon Nicholls that the rector and one or two of the older priests who had wind of the matter could not see why there should be any fuss about it. Young Molyneux was under no cloud; why should he behave as if it were a disgrace to be chaplain to poor old Lord Lofton? Was he crying out because London would be in such a bad way without him? What the Canon could not get them to see was the effect on public opinion. To send Mark away now was to advertise backbiting until it might become a real scandal. They could not see beyond their own immediate circle; if all the priests knew he was really a good fellow they thought that quite enough. They had a horror of a man making himself talked of outside, but they had no notion of giving him the chance to right himself with the outside world. It was much better that he should go away and be forgotten.

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Canon Nicholls had always been of opinion that the secular clergy in England were more hardly treated than the regulars. They were expected to have the absolute detachment of monks, without the support that a Religious Order gives to its subjects. They were given the standards of the cloister in the seminary, and then tumbled out into life in the world. No one in authority seemed anxious not to discourage a young secular priest. To be regular and punctual, to avoid rows, and to keep out of debt were the virtues that naturally appealed to the approval of a harassed bishop. But a zeal that put a man forward and brought him into public notice was likely to be troublesome, and such men were seldom very good at accounts. The type of young man which Mark resembled, according to the priests who discussed the question, was not a popular one among them. As a type it had not been found to wash well.

Canon Nicholls was not popular among them for other reasons, but chiefly because of a biting tongue. He would let his talk flow without tact or diplomacy on these questions, and often did far more harm than good, in consequence. He fairly stormed to one or two of his visitors at the absurdity of hiding a man away because of unjust slander. It was the very moment in which he ought to be brought forward and supported in every way. The fact was that the man was to be sacrificed to the supposed good of the Church, only no one would say so candidly. Whereas, in reality, by justice to the man the Church would be saved from a scandal!

Mark was outwardly very calm, but he was changed. His friends said that his vitality and earnestness were bound to suffer in the struggle for self-repression. His sermons were becoming mechanical tasks and the confessional a weariness. He made his protest, as Canon Nicholls wished, but after the talk with his rector he knew it was useless. He wrapped himself in silence, even with Father Jack Marny. He began, half consciously, to be more self-indulgent in details and the only subject on which he ever showed animation was a projected holiday in Switzerland. He once alluded to the possibility of going to Groombridge for the shooting.

At first he had not allowed Father Marny to take any of his now painful work among the people he was so soon to leave, but, after a week or two, he acquiesced. What was the use when he was to leave them for good and all? It were better they should learn at once to get on without him. Father Marny, in passionate sympathy, was ready to work himself to death and acknowledge no fatigue. It was easy to conceal fatigue or anything else from Mark in his preoccupied state of mind. He showed no interest when Lord Lofton wrote him a most warmly and tactfully expressed letter of welcome, in which he told the coming chaplain that he must not suppose there was not work in plenty to be done for souls in the country.

“Humbugging old men and women who want pensions and soup and blankets!” Mark said with unusual irritation, as he flung the letter to his friend.

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But to the curate Mark was as much above criticism as a martyr at the foot of the gallows.

Strangely enough, the first break into this moral fog that was settling down in his spiritual world was, of all unlikely things, the letter from Edmund Grosse.

When he got Edmund's letter Mark was sulking—there is no other word for it—over his answer to Lord Lofton, which ought to have gone several days ago. Of course he was bound by his mission oath to go where he was placed, but the authorities might at least have waited to hear from him before handing him over as if he were a parcel or a Jesuit. He read Edmund's cramped writing with a little difficulty, and then threw the three sheets it covered on to the table with a bang, and jumped up.

"Dash it!" he cried, "this is rather too much."

He did not stop to think that Edmund could not have been so idiotic as to write that letter if he had known of the state of the case between him and Miss Dexter. It only seemed at the moment that it was another instance of cruelty and utter unfairness, part of the same treatment he was receiving, which expected a man to be a plaster saint with no thought for himself, no natural feelings, no sense of his own reputation! First of all he was to be buried, torn from his friends, from his work for souls, from the joy of the Good Shepherd seeking the lost sheep. He was to lose all he loved and for which he had given up his life, his career, his position, and, for the first time, he enumerated among his sacrifices the possession of Groombridge. Then he blushed for shame—also for the first time. How little *that* had been, compared to what he had to do now! What had he to do now? And here the Little Master made his great mistake. He came out of the fog and shadow, he came into the light because he thought it was safe now.

What had Mark to do that was so much harder? To submit to authority and forgive its blunders. He hesitated for a moment; he almost thought it was that. Then came the light, and he saw the real crux. What he had to do was to forgive Molly Dexter. He was startled by the revelation, as men are startled who have been in love without knowing it. He had been nursing hatred and revenge without knowing it, for, until he had become bitter at the treatment of the authorities, he had felt no anger against Molly. She had simply been the patient who would scratch out the eyes of the surgeon. He was surprised into a quiet analysis of the discovery, and then his thoughts stood quite still. It was only necessary for a noble soul to *see* such a temptation for him to *fight* it. But he passed back from that to the whole of the wrath and hurt feeling that he recognised too. He was angry with those in authority who expected him to behave like a saint; he had been angry vaguely with Sir Edmund Grosse, but more with circumstances that also demanded of him that he should behave like a saint and do the very worst thing for himself and confirm the calumny against him by acting as Molly's confidential friend! But he could not be equally angry at the same time with Miss Dexter, with his own authorities, with Edmund Grosse, and with circumstances. One injury alone might have

been different, but taken together they suggested a plot and intention. Whose plot? Whose intention?

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And the answer was thundered and yet whispered through his consciousness. Is was God's plot, God's Will, God's demand, that he should do the impossible and behave like a saint!

Mark had said easily enough in the first noble instinct of bearing his blow well: "We are God's slaves." But that first light had gradually been obscured. He had not felt then that the impossible was demanded of him. He had come to feel it, and to feel it without remembering that man's helplessness was God's opportunity. Had he forgotten, erased from the tablets of his mind and heart, all he had loved and trusted most? Now all was terribly clear. Augustine, in a decadent, delicate age, had not minced matters, and had insisted that all hope must be placed in Him Who would not spare the scourge. "Oftentimes," he had cried, "does our Tamer bring forth His scourge too." Mark took down the old, worn book.

"In Him let us place our hope, and until we are tamed and tamed thoroughly—that is, are perfected—let us bear our Tamer.... Whereas, when thou art tamed, God reserveth for thee an inheritance which is God Himself.... For God will then be *all in all*; neither will there be any unhappiness to exercise us, but happiness alone to feed us.... What multiplicity of things soever thou seekest here, He alone will be Himself all these things to thee.

"Unto this hope is man tamed, and shall his Tamer then be deemed intolerable? Unto this hope is man tamed, and shall he murmur against his beneficient Tamer, if He chance to use the scourge?...

"Whether, therefore, Thou dealest softly with us that we be not wearied in the way, or chastisest us that we wander not from the way, *Thou art become our refuge, O Lord*."

As Mark read, the pain of too great light was softened to him. What had been hard, white light, glowed more rosy until it flushed his horizon with full glory.

It wanted a small space in time, but a mighty change in the spirit, before Mark read Edmund's letter with a keen wish to enter into its full meaning, and judge it wisely. Having come to himself, he was, as ever, ready to give that self away. He was full of a strange energy; he smiled to feel that the strokes of the lash were unfelt, while consciousness was lost in love. This was God's anaesthetic. But it thrilled the soul with vitality, and in no sense but the absence of pain did it suspend the faculties. He had no doubt, no hesitation, as to what he must do. He would go to Molly, he must see her at once, but not a word should pass his lips of what Edmund wanted him to say. Not a moment must be lost. Who might not betray her danger and destroy her opportunity? Molly must be brought to do this thing of herself without any admixture of fear, without any aim or object but to sacrifice all for what was right. He yearned with utter simplicity that this might be her way out. Let her do it for herself. Let her do it of herself, thought

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Mark—not because she is afraid, not because her vast possessions appear the least insecure. And the action would be far more noble just because, at the moment of renunciation, the world would, for the first time, suspect her guilt. To Mark it seemed now the crowning touch of mercy that the criminal should be allowed to drink deep of the chalice. "Her own affair"—that was what the dying mother had said of the unfortunate child to whom she offered so gross a temptation.

And in the depths of his mind there was the conviction that it was a particular truth as to this individual soul, that not only would the heroic be the only antagonist to the base, but that some such moral revolution alone could be the beginning of cleansing of what had become foul, and the driving out of the noxious and the vile.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NO SHADOW OF A CLOUD

It was in the evening, and Edmund was waiting in Rose's drawing-room until she should come back from a meeting of one of her charitable committees.

He was walking up and down the room with a face at once very grave and very alert. Even his carriage during the last few weeks had seemed to Rose to have gained in firmness and dignity, and perhaps she was right. Nor had she failed to notice that one or two small, straight pieces of grey hair could now be seen near the temples. He looked a little older, a little more brisk, a little more firm, and distinctly more cheerful since his reverses. It is no paradox to speak of cheerfulness in sorrow, or to say that the whole nature may be happier in grief than in the days of apparent pleasure. It is not only in those who have acquired deep religious peace that this may be true, for even in gaining energy and a balance in natural action, there may be happiness amidst pain.

Rose came in without seeing that anyone was in the room, and gave a start when she saw the tall figure by the window. The evening light showed him a little grey, a little worn in appearance, a little more openly kindly in the dark eyes. Something that she had fancied dim and clouded lately—only once or twice, not always—now shone in his face with its full brightness.

"Has anything happened, Edmund? Have you come to tell me anything?"

He came across the room to her and took her hand in silence, and then said:

"You look tired. Have you had tea?"

“Oh, never mind tea,” she answered. “Do tell me! Seriously, something has happened?”

“It is nothing of any consequence—nothing that need disturb you in the least. It is only about my own stupid affairs, and, on the whole, it is very good news. I have just come from the Foreign Office, and they have told me there that I am to have that job in India, and that the sooner I am ready to start the better.”

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As he spoke he turned from her with a sudden, quick hurt in his heart. It was, after all, only of great importance to himself. He knew she would be kindly glad that he had got the post he wanted. Had she not always urged him to some real work? Had she not pressed him again and again during the last four years, consciously and unconsciously, to bring out all his talents and to do a man's work in a man's way? So she would be simply glad, and she would wave him "God speed," and would, no doubt, pray for him at those innumerable services she attended, and write to him long, gentle, feminine letters full of details about all sorts of matters, good or indifferent, and she would ask about his health and press him to take care of himself and tell him of any word that was spoken kindly of him here in England. And she would somehow manage to know, or think she knew, that he was doing great things in the East. And so, no doubt, in the two years in which he was away there would be no apparent break in this very dear intimacy. But what, in reality, would he know of her inmost feelings, of her loneliness, of her sufferings, of any repentance that might come to her, any softening towards himself? He seemed to see all of the two years that were to come in a flash as he stood silent on one side of the neglected tea-table, and Rose stood silent, turning away from him on the other.

When he raised his eyes, he almost felt a surprise that the figure, a little turned away from him, was not dressed in a plain, white frock, and that the shadows and the flickering sunlight making its way through the mulberry leaves were not still upon her; for that was how, through life and in eternity, Rose would be present in the mind of her lover.

Time had gone; it seemed now as nothing. Whatever changes had come between, he felt as if he saw in the averted face that same expression of sorrowful denial and gentle resistance that had baffled him now for over twelve years. It was still that his soul asked something of this other purer, gentler, more unworldly, more loving soul, which she, with all her beneficence would not give him. He did no think of the impracticability of any question of marriage; he did not think in any definite sense of their relations as man and woman. At other times he had known so frequently just the overpowering wish for the possession of the woman he loved best, but now she stood to him as the history of his moral existence here below, and he felt as if, in missing her, he should miss the object and crown of his life.

At last silence became intolerable. He moved as though he wanted to speak and could not, and then he said huskily, almost gruffly:

"It is not 'good-bye' to-day, of course," and then he laughed at the feebleness of his own words.

Rose turned to him at that, and he was not really surprised to see that the tears were flowing rapidly over her cheeks—tears so large that they splashed like big raindrops on the white hands which were clasped as they hung before her. But that made it no

easier. He thought very little of those tears; he felt even a little bitter at their apparent bitterness. He hardened at the sight of those tears; they made him feel that he could leave her with more dignity, more firmness in his own mind, than he had ever thought would be possible.

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“Vous pleurez et vous etes roi?” He hardly knew that he had muttered the words as he so often muttered a quotation to himself. But Rose did not hear them. She was too preoccupied with her own thoughts and feelings to notice him closely. Ah! if she had but known before what it would be to lose him! She was horrified as she felt her self-control failing her, and an enormous agony entering into possession of all her faculties. She was so startled, so amazed at this revelation of herself. If she had felt less, she would have thought more for him. She did not think for a moment what that silent standing by her side meant for him. She knew at last the selfishness of passion. She wanted him as she had never wanted anyone or anything before. She could only think of the craving of her own heart, the extraordinary trouble that possessed it. Those who have had a passing acquaintance with love, those who have sown brief passages of love thoughts over their early youth, can form no notion of what that first surrender meant to Rose. “Too late!” cried the tyrant love, the only tyrant that can carry conviction by its mere fiat to the innermost recesses of a nature. “Too late!—it might have been, but not now; it is all your own doing; you made him suffer once; you are the only one to suffer now. You are crying now the easy tears of a child, but there are years and years before you when the tears will not come, call for them as you may; they cannot go on coming from a broken heart. They flow away out of the fissures, and then the dryness and barrenness of daily misery will not let them come again.”

“He never cared as I do,” thought Rose; “he does not know what it is!”

She called her persecutor “it”; she shrank from its name even now with an unutterable embarrassment. When she did turn to Edmund it was more as if to confide to him what she was suffering from someone else; it was so habitual to her to turn to him. What was the use? what was the use? How could she use him against himself? No, no; she must, she must control herself. She must not tell him; she must let him go quite quietly now; she must make no appeal to the past; he was too generous—she did not want his generosity. She put her hands to her forehead and pushed the hair backwards.

“I’m not well, I think,” she said; “the room at the meeting was stuffy. I—I didn’t quite understand what you said—I’m glad.”

She sank on to a chair, and then got up again.

“I’m glad you’ve got what you wanted, but I’m startled—no, I mean I’m not quite well. I don’t think I can talk to-day—I don’t understand—I——”

She stood almost with her back to him then.

He was so amazed at her words that he could not speak at all. This was not sweetness, kindness, pity; this was something else, something different; it was almost a shock!

“I am so silly,” she said, with a most absurd attempt at a natural voice, “I think I must ——” Her figure swayed a little.

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Edmund watched her with utter amazement. All his knowledge of women was at fault, and that child in the white frock—where was she? Where was that sense of his soul's history and its failure, its mystic tragedy, just now? Gone, quite gone, for he knew now that that long tragedy was ended. But Rose did not know it.

He moved, half consciously, a few feet towards the door.

"Rose," he said, in a very low voice, "if it has come at last, don't deny it! I have waited patiently, God knows! but I don't want it now unless it is true. For Heaven's sake do nothing in mere pity!"

"But it has come, Edmund; it has come!" she interrupted him, so quickly that he had barely time to reach her before she came to him.

And yet it had been many years in coming—so many years that he could hardly believe it now; could hardly believe that the white hands he had watched so often trembled with delight as they caressed him; could hardly believe that the fair face was radiant with joy when he, Edmund, ventured to kiss her; could hardly believe that it was of her own wish and will that she leant against him now!

"I ought not to have said it was the stuffy room, ought I?"

It was the sweetest, youngest laugh she had ever given. Then she looked up at the ceiling where the sun flickered a little.

"Edmund, it is better than if I had known under the mulberry tree. Tell me you forgive me all I have done wrong. I could not," she gasped a little, "have loved you then as I do now, because I had known no sorrow then."

And Edmund told her that she was forgiven. But one sin she confessed gave him, I fear, unmixed delight; she was so dreadfully afraid that she had lately been a little jealous!

Strange—very strange and unfathomable—is the heart of man. It did not even occur to him as the wildest scruple to be at all afraid that he had been lately a little, ever so little, less occupied with the thought of her. No shadow of a cloud rested on the great output of a strong man's deep affection.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"WITHOUT CONDITION OR COMPROMISE"

It was on the same evening that Mark succeeded in seeing Molly. He had failed the day before, but at the second attempt he succeeded.

It was the first time he had entered Westmoreland House, and he had never, even in the autumn weeks when Miss Dexter had been most cordial to him, tried to see her except by her own invitation. Altogether the position now was as embarrassing as it is possible to conceive. He had been her confidant as to a crime for which the law sees no kind of palliative, no possible grounds for mercy. As he greeted her it wanted little imaginative power to feel the dramatic elements in the picture. Molly was standing in the middle of the great drawing-room dressed in something very white and very beautiful. At any other moment

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he must have been impressed by the subdued splendour of the room, and the grace and youth of the dominating figure in the midst. Mark was too absorbed to-day in the spiritual drama which he must now force to its conclusion to realise that he had also come to threaten the destruction of Molly's material world and all the glory thereof. He had, too, so far forgotten himself, that the mischief Molly had wrought against him had faded into the background of his consciousness. His absorbing anxiety lay in the extreme difficulty of his task. It would need an angel from Heaven, gifted too with great knowledge of human nature, to accomplish what he meant to attempt. First he would throw everything into the desperate endeavour to make her give up the will simply and entirely from the highest motives. But what possibility was there of success? Why should he hope that, just because he called and asked her for it, she would give up all that for which she had sold her soul? He could not feel that he was a prophet sent by God from whose lips would fall such inspired words that the iron frost would thaw and the great depths of her nature be broken up. In fact, he felt singularly uninspired, and very much embarrassed. And when he had tried the impossible (he said to himself), and had given her the last chance of going back on this ugly fraud from nobler motives than that of fear, and had failed—he must then enter on the next stage and must merge the priest's office in that of the ambassador. He must bring home to her that what she clung to was already lost, and that nothing but shame and disgrace lay before her. He had the case, as presented by Sir Edmund's letter in all its convicting simplicity, clearly in his mind—quite as clearly as the facts of Molly's own confession to himself. It would not be difficult to crush the criminal, to make her see the hopeless horror of the trial that must follow unless she consented to a compromise. But it was the completeness of her defeat that he dreaded the most; it was for that last stage of his plan that he was gathering unconsciously all his nerve-power together. He seemed to hear with ominous distinctness her words at their last meeting: "If I can't go through with it (which is quite possible) I shall throw up the sponge and get out of this world as soon as I can." That had been spoken without any sort of fear of detection, without the least suspicion that she would have no choice in the matter of giving up her ill-gotten wealth. What he dreaded unutterably was the despair that must overpower her as he developed the long chain of evidence against her. As he came into her presence, overwhelmed with these thoughts, he was also anxiously recalling two mental notes. He must make her clearly understand that he had not betrayed her by one word or hint to Sir Edmund Grosse or any living human being; and secondly, he thought it very important to impress upon her that Sir Edmund and Lady Rose were of opinion that Larrone

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had suppressed the will or that Molly had never opened the box which contained it—-were, in fact, of any or every opinion except that Molly was guilty of crime. For the rest he could, at this eleventh hour, hardly see anything clearly, and as he shook hands with Miss Dexter an unutterable longing to escape came over him. Molly's greeting was haughty—almost rude—but that seemed to him natural and inevitable. He made some comment on a political event which she did not pretend to answer, and then as if speech were almost impossible, he actually murmured that the weather was very hot.

Then he became silent and remained so. For quite a minute neither spoke.

Molly was not naturally silent, naturally restrained. She moved uneasily about the room; she lit a cigarette, and threw it away again. At last she stood in front of him.

"What made you come to-day?" she asked.

Her large restless eyes looked full of anger as she spoke.

"I came to-day partly because I am going away very soon, so I thought that it might be ——" He hesitated.

"But where are you going?" Molly asked abruptly.

"I am to take a chaplaincy at Lord Lofton's."

"And your preaching?" cried Molly in astonishment.

"Is not wanted," said Mark.

"And your poor?"

"Can get on without me."

"You are to be buried in the country?" she cried in indignation; "you are to leave all the people you are helping? But what a horrible shame! What,"—she suddenly turned away as a thought struck her—"what can be the reason?"

"It seems," he said very quietly, "that I have been foolish; people are talking, things are said against me, and things should not be said against a priest. But I did not come here to talk about myself. I came here——" He paused.

Molly sat down close to the empty fireplace, and was bending over it, her very thin figure curiously twisted, and one foot twitching nervously.

“You are going away,” she said suddenly, “and it is my doing. I did not know I was doing that; it felt as if hitting at you were the only way to defend myself. Good God! I shall have a lot to answer for!”

She did not turn round; she crouched lower on the low chair and shuddered.

“And you,” she went on in a low voice, “you want to save my soul! I have always been afraid you would get the best of it, and now I have destroyed your life’s work. Did you know it was I who was talking against you?”

“I did.”

“And that I have said everything I dared to say against you ever since I told you my secret?”

“Yes; more or less I knew.”

“Why didn’t you tell your authorities the truth long ago?”

“How could I?”

Molly made no answer. She got up in silence and took a key from her pocket and moved toward a small bureau between the windows. She unlocked the lower drawer and took out a packet of papers, and in the middle of this packet was an envelope in which lay the key of the room upstairs. Her movements were slow but unhesitating, and when she left the room Mark had not the slightest idea of what she would do. If he had seen her face as she slowly mounted the great well staircase he might have understood.

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How simple it all was. She reached the top of the many steps with little loss of breath; she turned to the right into the dark passage that led to her own room, passed her own door, and put the key in the lock of the one next to it. She knew so exactly which box she sought, though she had never seen it since the day when Dr. Larrone brought it to her. Although she had actually come in the cab that brought the small boxes from the flat, she had succeeded in not recognising that one among the number heaped up together. She knew exactly where it stood now, and how many things had been piled above the boxes from the flat with seeming carelessness, but by her orders.

The shutters were closed, but she could have found that box in inky darkness, and now a ray from between the chinks fell upon it. She did not think now of how often she had told herself that she did not know what the box was like. Now it seemed to have been the only box she had ever known in her life. The cases on the top of it were heavy, and Molly had to strain herself to move them, but she was very strong, and every reserve of muscular power was called out unconsciously to meet her need. She did not know that her hands were covered with dust, and that blood was breaking through a scratch over the right thumb made by a jagged nail.

When she came back into the drawing-room, Father Molyneux was sitting with his back towards her, looking with unseeing eyes into the trees of the park. She moved towards him and held out a long envelope.

“Take it away,” she said, “If I have ruined your life, you have ruined mine.”

She moved with uncertain steps to the chimney-piece, leant upon it, and, turning round, looked wildly at the envelope in his hands.

“Why didn’t you come for it before?” she asked him.

Mark could not answer. He was absolutely astonished at what had happened. He could hardly believe that he held in his hand a thing of such momentous importance. He had nerved himself for a great fight, but he had not known what he should say, how he should act, and then—amazing fact—a few minutes after he came into the room, and without his having even asked for it, the will was put into his hands! Nothing had been said of conditions or compromise; she only asked the amazing question why he had not come for it *before*!

“You were right,” she mused, “right to leave me alone. I wonder, do you remember the words that have haunted me this summer?—Browning’s words about the guilty man in the duel:

> ’Let him live his life out,
> Life will try his nerves.’

It has tried my nerves unbearably; I could not go on, I have not the strength. I might have had a glorious time if I had been a little stronger. As it is, it's not worth while."

It is impossible to convey the heavy dreariness of outlook conveyed by her voice and manner. There seemed no higher moral quality in it all.

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“Half a dozen times I have nearly sent for you. But”—she did not shudder now, or make the restless movements he had noticed when he first came in: Molly had regained the stillness which follows after storms—“as soon as you are gone I shall be longing to have it back again. Men have done worse things than I have for thirty thousand a year! It won’t be easy to be a pauper; I think it would be easier to kill myself.”

She was silent again, and Mark could not find one word that he was not afraid to say—-one word that might not quench the smoking flax.

“I had to give it to you without waiting to talk of the future, or I might not have given it at all. But I should be glad if the case could be so arranged that my mother’s name and my own should not be dragged in the mud. It is only an appeal for mercy—nothing else.” Her voice trembled almost into silence.

“I think that is all safe,” said Mark. “I think if you will leave it all in my hands I can get better conditions for you than you suppose now. They will be only too glad.”

“But I gave it to you without conditions.” Her manner for the moment was that of a child seeking reassurance.

“Thank God! you did,” he cried, with an irrepressible burst of sympathy.

“It’s not much for a thief to have done, is it? But now I should like to do it all properly. Tell me; ought I to come away from here to-day, and give everything I have here to Lady Rose? If I ought, I will!”

“No, certainly not,” said Mark. “I have been asked to offer you liberal conditions if you would agree to a compromise. I said they had come to quite the wrong person. No, no, don’t think I told them. They have fresh evidence that there was a will, and they believe they know that important papers were brought to you by Dr. Larrone when your mother died.”

“And you came to frighten me with this?” There was a touch of reproach in her tone.

“No, I came, hoping you would give me the paper, as you have done, without knowing this.”

Evidently this news impressed Molly deeply, but she did not want to discuss it. Presently she said:

“I am glad you came in time before I was frightened. How you have wanted to make me save my soul! You have helped me very much, but I cannot save my soul.”

“But God can,” said Mark.

“You see,” she went on, “I never know what I am going to do—going to be—next. Imagine my being a thief! It seems now almost incredible. And I don’t know what may come next.”

For a second she looked at him with wild terror in her eyes.

“Think how many years I have before me. How can I hope that I——?”

“You will do great, great good,” said Mark, with emotion.

She shook her head.

“David committed a worse sin than yours.”

Molly smiled, a little, incredulous, grey smile, for a moment.

“I may be good to-day. I may be full of peace and joy even to-night—but to-morrow? You told me once that I should only know true joy if I had been humbled in the dust. I am low enough now, but the comfort has not come yet, and, even if God comforts me, it won’t last. I shall still be I, and life is so long.”

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“You must trust Him—you must indeed. He will find a solution. You are exhausted now with the victory you have gained. Rest now, and then do the good things you have done before. Trust in the higher side of your character; God gave it to you. Believe me, He has called you to great things.”

As he spoke she covered her face with her hands, and a deep blush of shame rose from her neck to her forehead, visible through the thin, white fingers.

“I suppose He will find a way out. As I can’t understand how you have cared so much to save my soul, I suppose I can understand His love still less. Must you go? You will pray for me, I know.”

She held out her hand with a look of generous appeal to his forgiveness.

“God bless you!” he said, with complete sympathy, and then he went away to seek an interview with Sir Edmund Grosse.

Molly sank down on a low seat by the window. Then she went slowly upstairs, dragging her feet a little from fatigue, and took out of the tin box the packet of very old letters. She burned them one by one, with a match for each, kneeling in front of the empty fireplace in her bed-room. They told the story of her mother’s attempt to persuade Sir David of their marriage during his illness in India. It was not a pretty story—one of deceit and intrigue. It should disappear now.

Then she sat down in a deep chair in the window. She stayed very still, curled up against the cushion behind her, her eyes fixed on the ground. She was hardly conscious of thought; she was trying to recall things Mark had said, murmuring them over to herself. She was trying not to sink into the depths of humiliation and despair. It was a blind clinging to a vague hope for better things, with a certain torpor of all her faculties.

Then gradually things in the vague gloom became definite to her. “No,” she said to them with entreaty, “not to-night. My life is only just dead. I am tired by the shock—it was so sudden—only let me rest till morning, and in the morning I will try to face it.”

She had, it seemed, quite settled this point; the present and the future were to be left; a pause was absolutely necessary. Then followed quickly the sharp pang of a fresh thought. It was not in her power to make things pause. She could not make a truce by calling it a truce. If she did not realise things now and act now herself, others would come upon the scene. Even to-night Sir Edmund Grosse might know. She shivered. Perhaps he was being told now. It would be insufferable to endure his kindness prompted by Rose’s generous forgiveness. But ought she to find anything unbearable? Was she going to revolt at the very outset? She was not trained in spiritual matters, but it seemed to her that any revolt would betray a want of reality in her reparation, and in

this great change of feeling she wanted above all things to be real. She tried to face what must come next. How could she hand

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over Westmoreland House? It could not be done as quietly as she had handed that letter to Father Mark. The house had been bought with the great lump sum Madame Danterre had accumulated in Florence—much of that money had been put in the bank before Sir David died. Perhaps if they were ready to come to terms, as Father Mark had said, an arrangement would be suggested in which Molly would not be expected to refund what she had spent, and would have the possession of Westmoreland House and its contents. The sale would realise enough to save her from actual want, and yet she would not be receiving a pension from Lady Rose. Her mind got out of gear and flashed through these thoughts until, unable to check it in any way, she burst into tears. She felt the self-deception of such plans with physical pain. What was that money in the bank at Florence but blackmail gathered in during Sir David's life? "Why cannot I be straight even now?" she whispered. She was still sitting on the couch with one leg drawn up under her, gazing intently at the ground. No, the only money she possessed was L2000 invested at 31/2 per cent. "L70 a year—that is less than I have given Carey, or the cook, or the butler."

The fact was that while her heart and soul had gone forward in dumb pain in utter darkness with the single aim of undoing the sin done, the mind still lagged and reasoned. This is a peculiar agony, and Molly had to drink of that agony.

Gradually and mercilessly her reason told her that an arrangement with Lady Rose, the appearance of having the right of possession in Westmoreland House, the readiness of all concerned to bury the story, and the possession of a fair income, would make it possible to live in her own class quietly but, if tactfully, with a good repute. Then the thought of any kind of compromise became intolerable to her, and she realised that it was a fancy picture, not a real temptation.

To pretend that Westmoreland House was her own she could not do, but what was the alternative? Dragging poverty and shame, and with no opportunity for hiding what had passed, for living it down. Even if she did the impossible to her pride and consented to receive a good allowance from Lady Rose, it would not be at all the same in the world's view as the dignified income that could be raised from Westmoreland House, and from her mother's jewels and furniture. Her fingers unconsciously touched the pearls round her neck. Surely she need not speculate as to how her mother obtained the magnificent jewels which she had worn up to the end? Then more light came—hard and cold, but clear. If Molly had been innocent these things might have been so, but Molly had committed a fraud on a great scale. It would be by the mercy of the injured that she would be spared the rigours of the law. It was by the supreme mercy of God that she had had the chance of making the sacrifice before it was forced from her. And could she shrink

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from mere ordinary poverty, from a life such as the vast majority of men and women are living on this earth? She did not really shrink in her will. It was only a mechanical movement of thought from one point to another. Was it much punishment for what she had done to be very poor? Would it not be better to be unclassed—to live among people who help each other much because they have little to give? Would it not be the way to do what Father Mark had said she should try to do—those good things she had done before? She could nurse, she could watch, she was able to do with little sleep. She would be very humble with the sick and suffering now. And it would not surely be wrong to go and find such a life far away from where she had sinned? She began to wonder if she need stay and live through all the complications of the coming days. Must it be the right thing to stay because it was the most unbearable? She thought not. There are times when recklessness is the only safety. If she did not burn her ships now she could not tell what temptations might come. But she would not let it be among her motives that thus she would thereby escape unbearable pity from Lady Rose and the far sterner magnanimity of Edmund Grosse. She would act simply; she would ask Rose a favour; she would ask her to provide for Miss Carew.

Half consciously again her hands went to her throat. She unclasped the pearl necklace that Edmund had seen on Madame Danterre's withered neck in the garden at Florence. She slipped off four large rings, and then gathered up a few jewels that lay about. "One ought not to leave valuables about," she thought, and she did not know that she added "after a death."

If Miss Carew had been in the room she would probably not have understood that anything special was going on. Molly moved quietly about, collecting together on a little table by the cupboard, rings, brooches, buckles, watches—anything of much value. She sought and found the key of the little safe in the wardrobe and put away these objects with the large jewel cases already inside it. She also put with them her cheque book and her banker's book. A very small cheque book on a different bank where the interest of the L2000 had not been drawn on for six months, she put down on her writing table. Then she looked round the room. Was there nothing there really her own, and that she cared to keep either for its own sake or because it had belonged to someone she had loved? An awful sense of loneliness swept over her as she looked round and could think of nothing. Each beautiful thing on walls or tables that she looked at seemed repulsive in its turn, for it had either belonged to Madame Danterre or been bought with her money. There was not so much as a letter which she cared ever to see again. She had burnt Edmund's few notes when she first came to Westmoreland House.

She had once met a woman who had lost everything in a fire. "I have everything new," she wailed, "nothing that I ever had before—not a photograph, not a prayer-book, nor

an old letter. I don't feel that I am the same person." The words came back now. "Not the same person," and suddenly a sense of relief began to dawn upon her.

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"Alone to land upon that shore
With not one thing that we have known before."

Oh, the immensity of such a mercy! That hymn had made her shiver as a child; how different it seemed now! Molly knelt down by the couch, and her shoulders trembled as a tempest of feeling came over her. Criminals hardened by long lives of fraud have been known to be happier after being found out—simply because the strain was over. They had destroyed their moral sense. Molly's conscience was alive, though torn, bleeding, and debased. She could not be happy as they were, but yet there was the lifting of the weight as of a great mountain rolled away. She was afraid of the immense sense of relief that now seemed coming upon her. Could she really become free of the horrible Molly of the last months—this noxious, vile, lying, thieving woman? What an awful strain that woman had lived in! She had told Mark that what frightened her was the thought that she would still be herself. She longed now to cut away everything that had belonged to her. Might she not by God's grace, in poverty and hard work, with everything around her quite different from the past, might she not quite do to death the Molly who had lived in Westmoreland House? The cry was more passionate than spiritual perhaps, but the longing had its power to help. She rose and again moved quietly about the room of the dead, bad woman, which must be left in order for the new owners. She put some things together—what was necessary for a night or two—and felt almost glad that she had a comb and brush she had not yet used. There was a bag with cheap fittings Mrs. Carteret had given her as a girl, which would hold all she needed. And then she remembered that she had something she would like to take away; it was a nurse's apron, and in its pocket a nurse's case of small instruments. They were what she used when nursing with the district nurse in the village at home. Then she sat down and wrote a cheque and a note, and proceeded to take them downstairs. The cheque was for L30 out of the little Dexter cheque book, and the note was an abrupt little line to tell a friend that she could not dine out that night. She "did not feel up to it" was the only excuse given, and a furious hostess declared that Miss Dexter had become perfectly insufferable. She seemed to think that she could do exactly as she chose because she was absurdly rich.

The butler was able to give Molly L30 in notes and cash, and it was his opinion that she wanted the money for playing cards that night. Molly crept upstairs again with a foreign Bradshaw in her hand. She looked out the train for the night boat to Dieppe. It left Charing Cross at 9.45. She had chosen Dieppe for the first stage of her journey—of which she knew not the further direction—for two reasons. The first was because she knew that she ought to stay within reach if it were necessary for her to do business with her own or Lady Rose's

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solicitors. She was determined not to give any trouble she could avoid giving, in the business of handing over that which had never belonged to her. At this time of year the journey to Dieppe would be no difficulty, and she wanted to go there rather than to Boulogne or any other French port, because she had the address of a very cheap and clean *pension* in which Miss Carew had passed some weeks before coming to live with Molly in London. From that *pension* Molly could write the letters she felt physically incapable of writing to-night. The only note she determined to write at once was to Carey, asking her to remain at Westmoreland House and to tell the servants that Miss Dexter had gone abroad. She told her that she had gone to the *pension* at Dieppe, but earnestly insisted that she should not follow her. She begged her to do nothing before getting a letter that she would write to her at once on arriving at Dieppe. She also asked her to keep the key of the safe which she enclosed in her letter. Molly sealed the letter, and then felt some hesitation as to when and how to give it to Miss Carew. She finally decided to send it by a messenger boy from the station when it would be too late for Miss Carew to follow her, and when it would still be in time to prevent any astonishment at her not returning home that night.

Miss Carew, thinking that Molly had gone out to dinner, came into her bed-room to look for a book. The night was hot and oppressive, but no one had raised the blinds since the sun had set, and the room was so dark that she did not at once see Molly. She started nervously, half expecting one of Molly's impatient and rude exclamations on being disturbed, and, with an apology, was going away when Molly said gently:

"Stay a minute, Carey; I'm not going to dine out to-night."

"But there is no dinner ordered, and I have just had supper. I am going out this evening to see a friend."

"Never mind," Molly interrupted, "I can't eat anything. I am going out for a drive in a hansom in the cool. Would you mind saying that I shall not want the motor?"

"My dear! are you not well?"

"Not very." And suddenly Miss Carew began to read the great change in her face. "It has none of it been very good for me, Carey; you have been quite right. This house and all was a mistake. You have never said it, but I have seen it in your eyes. And it has not even been in quite good taste for me to make such a splash—you thought that too. I'm going to stop it all now, dear, and probably the house will be sold; it's been an unblest sort of thing."

Miss Carew stared. The tone was so different from any she had ever heard in Molly's voice; it was very gentle, but exhausted, as if she had been through an acute crisis in an illness.

"Carey dear, you have always been so kind to me, and I have been very unkind to you. You will have to know things that will make you hate and despise me to-morrow. But would you mind giving me one kiss to-night?"

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Miss Carew was very nervous at this request, but happily all the best side of her was roused by something in Molly that, in spite of a vast difference, recalled the Molly of seven years ago when she had first seen her. It was a real kiss—a kind of pact between them.

“I wonder if she will ever wish to do the same again!” thought Molly.

Then Miss Carew left her and she called the maid, who brought at her bidding a long black cloak and a small black toque—insignificant compared to anything else of Molly’s.

The mistress of Westmoreland House drove away in a hansom, with a bag in her hand, at twenty minutes past seven.

There is a small house with a little chapel attached to it in a road in Chelsea where some Frenchwomen, who were exiled from their own country, have come to dwell. It is built on Sir Thomas More’s garden, and it possesses within its boundaries the mulberry tree under which the chancellor was sitting when they came to fetch him to the Tower. It is a poor little house with very poor inmates, and a poor little chapel. But in that chapel night and day, without a moment’s break, are to be found two figures (when there are not more) dressed in plain brown habits and black veils. And on the altar there is always a crowd of lighted candles, in spite of the poverty of the chapel. It is a very small chapel and oddly shaped. The length of the little building is from north to south, and the altar is to the east. There are but few benches, but they run the full length of the building. Strange things are known by these women, who never go farther than the small garden at the back, of the life of the town about them. Some men and more women get accustomed to coming daily into the chapel with its unceasing exposition, and to love its silence and its atmosphere of rest and peace. Some never make themselves known; others sometimes ask to see a nun, and thus gradually these recluses come to know memorable secrets in human lives.

Molly had often been there in the weeks which she had afterwards called “my short fit of religious emotion.” She chose to go there to-night, to spend there her last hour in London.

The little chapel was fairly cool, and through a door very near the altar, open to the garden, came the scent of mignonette on the air. Besides the motionless figures at the altar-rail there was no one else in the chapel.

At eight o’clock two small brown figures came in and knelt bowed down in the middle of the sanctuary. The two who had finished their watch rose and knelt by the side of those who relieved guard. Then the four rose together, and the two newcomers took up their station, and the others left them. And the incessant oblation of those lives went on. What a vast moral space lay between their lives and Molly’s! What a contrast!

Molly had had no home, but they had given up their homes for this. Molly had pined in vain for human love; they had turned away from it. Molly had rebelled against all restraints; they had chosen these bonds. Molly had sinned, against even the world's code, for love of the world; and they had rejected even the best the world could give.

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Was it unjust, unfair that the boon they asked for in return was given to them?

If, on the one hand, Molly had inherited evil tendencies and had fallen on evil circumstances, does it seem strange that she could share in good as well as in evil?

It is easy to take scandal at Molly's inherited legacy of evil tendencies. It is easy to take scandal at the facility of her forgiveness. The two stumbling-blocks are in reality the two aspects of one truth, that no human being stands alone and that each gains or suffers with or by his fellows.

The sinless women pleaded for sinners in a glorious human imitation of the Divine pleading. And the exuberant vitality poured by the Conqueror of death into the human race, flowing strongly through that tiny chapel, had carried the little, thin, stagnant stream of Molly's soul into the great flood of grace that purifies by sorrow and by love.

Molly knelt in one of the back benches with her eyes fixed on the monstrance, in a very agony of sorrow and self-abasement. I would not if I could analyse that penitence. Happily as life goes on we shrink more, not less, from raising even the most reverent gaze on the secret places of the soul. We do not know in what form, if in any form at all, and not rather, in a light without words, the Divine Peace reached her. Was it, "Go in peace, thy sins are forgiven thee?" Or was it perhaps, "This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise?" We cannot tell. Only the lay-sister who saw Molly go out with the little black bag in her hand said afterwards that the lady had seemed happy.

THE END.

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