

ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

VERA

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Vera

I

When the doctor had gone, and the two women from the village he had been waiting for were upstairs shut in with her dead father, Lucy went out into the garden and stood leaning on the gate staring at the sea.

Her father had died at nine o'clock that morning, and it was now twelve. The sun beat on her bare head; and the burnt-up grass along the top of the cliff, and the dusty road that passed the gate, and the glittering sea, and the few white clouds hanging in the sky, all blazed and glared in an extremity of silent, motionless heat and light.

Into this emptiness Lucy stared, motionless herself, as if she had been carved in stone. There was not a sail on the sea, nor a line of distant smoke from any steamer, neither was there once the flash of a bird's wing brushing across the sky. Movement seemed smitten rigid. Sound seemed to have gone to sleep.

Lucy stood staring at the sea, her face as empty of expression as the bright blank world before her. Her father had been dead three hours, and she felt nothing.

It was just a week since they had arrived in Cornwall, she and

he, full of hope, full of pleasure in the pretty little furnished house they had taken for August and September, full of confidence in the good the pure air was going to do him. But there had always been confidence; there had never been a moment during the long years of his fragility when confidence had even been questioned. He was delicate, and she had taken care of him. She had taken care of him and he had been delicate ever since she could remember. And ever since she could remember he had been everything in life to her. She had had no thought since she grew up for anybody but her father. There was no room for any other thought, so completely did he fill her heart. They had done everything together, shared everything together, dodged the winters together, settled in charming places, seen the same beautiful things, read the same books, talked, laughed, had friends,—heaps of friends; wherever they were her father seemed at once to have friends, adding them to the mass he had already. She had not been away from him a day for years; she had had no wish to go away. Where and with whom could she be so happy as with him? All the years were years of sunshine. There had been no winters; nothing but summer, summer, and sweet scents and soft skies, and patient understanding with her slowness—for he had the nimblest mind—and love. He was the most amusing companion to her, the most generous friend, the most illuminating guide, the most adoring father; and now he was dead, and she felt nothing.

Her father. Dead. For ever.

She said the words over to herself. They meant nothing.

She was going to be alone. Without him. Always.

She said the words over to herself. They meant nothing.

Up in that room with its windows wide open, shut away from her with the two village women, he was lying dead. He had smiled at her for the last time, said all he was ever going to say to her, called her the last of the sweet, half-teasing names he loved to invent for her. Why, only a few hours ago they were having breakfast together and planning what they would do that day. Why, only yesterday they drove together after tea towards the sunset, and he had seen, with his quick eyes that saw everything, some unusual grasses by the road-side, and had stopped and gathered them, excited to find such rare ones, and had taken them back with him to study, and had explained them to her and made her see profoundly interesting, important things in them, in these grasses which, till he touched them, had seemed just grasses. That is what he did with everything,—touched it into life and delight. The grasses lay in the dining-room now, waiting for him to work on them, spread out where he had put them on some blotting-paper in the window. She had seen them as she came through on her way to the garden; and she had seen, too, that the breakfast was still there, the breakfast they had had together, still as they had left it, forgotten by the servants in the surprise of death. He had fallen down as he got up from it. Dead. In an instant. No time for anything, for a cry, for a look. Gone. Finished. Wiped out.

What a beautiful day it was; and so hot. He loved heat. They were lucky in the weather....

Yes, there were sounds after all,—she suddenly noticed them; sounds from the room upstairs, a busy moving about of discreet footsteps, the splash of water, crockery being carefully set down. Presently the women would come and tell her everything was ready, and she could go back to him again. The women had tried to comfort her when they arrived; and so had the servants, and so had the doctor. Comfort her! And she felt nothing.

Lucy stared at the sea, thinking these things, examining the situation as a curious one but unconnected with herself, looking at it with a kind of cold comprehension. Her mind was quite clear. Every detail of what had happened was sharply before her. She knew everything, and she felt nothing,—like God, she said to herself; yes, exactly like God.

Footsteps came along the road, which was hidden by the garden's fringe of trees and bushes for fifty yards on either side of the gate, and presently a man passed between her eyes and the sea. She did not notice him, for she was noticing nothing but her thoughts, and he passed in front of her quite close, and was gone.

But he had seen her, and had stared hard at her for the brief instant it took to pass the gate. Her face and its expression had surprised him. He was not a very observant man, and at that moment was even less so than usual, for he was particularly and deeply absorbed in his own affairs; yet when he came suddenly on the motionless figure at the gate, with its wide-open eyes

that simply looked through him as he went by, unconscious, obviously, that any one was going by, his attention was surprised away from himself and almost he had stopped to examine the strange creature more closely. His code, however, prevented that, and he continued along the further fifty yards of bushes and trees that hid the other half of the garden from the road, but more slowly, slower and slower, till at the end of the garden where the road left it behind and went on very solitarily over the bare grass on the top of the cliffs, winding in and out with the ins and outs of the coast for as far as one could see, he hesitated, looked back, went on a yard or two, hesitated again, stopped and took off his hot hat and wiped his forehead, looked at the bare country and the long twisting glare of the road ahead, and then very slowly turned and went past the belt of bushes towards the gate again.

He said to himself as he went: 'My God, I'm so lonely. I can't stand it. I must speak to some one. I shall go off my head—'

For what had happened to this man—his name was Wemyss—was that public opinion was forcing him into retirement and inactivity at the very time when he most needed company and distraction. He had to go away by himself, he had to withdraw for at the very least a week from his ordinary life, from his house on the river where he had just begun his summer holiday, from his house in London where at least there were his clubs, because of this determination on the part of public opinion that he should for a space be alone with his sorrow. Alone with sorrow,—of all ghastly things for a man to be alone with! It was an outrage,

he felt, to condemn a man to that; it was the cruellest form of solitary confinement. He had come to Cornwall because it took a long time to get to, a whole day in the train there and a whole day in the train back, clipping the week, the minimum of time public opinion insisted on for respecting his bereavement, at both ends; but still that left five days of awful loneliness, of wandering about the cliffs by himself trying not to think, without a soul to speak to, without a thing to do. He couldn't play bridge because of public opinion. Everybody knew what had happened to him. It had been in all the papers. The moment he said his name they would know. It was so recent. Only last week....

No, he couldn't bear this, he must speak to some one. That girl,—with those strange eyes she wasn't just ordinary. She wouldn't mind letting him talk to her for a little, perhaps sit in the garden with her a little. She would understand.

Wemyss was like a child in his misery. He very nearly cried outright when he got to the gate and took off his hat, and the girl looked at him blankly just as if she still didn't see him and hadn't heard him when he said, 'Could you let me have a glass of water? I—it's so hot—'

He began to stammer because of her eyes. 'I—I'm horribly thirsty—the heat—'

He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He certainly looked very hot. His face was red and distressed, and his forehead dripped. He was all puckered, like an unhappy baby. And the girl looked so cool, so bloodlessly cool. Her hands,

folded on the top bar of the gate, looked more than cool, they looked cold; like hands in winter, shrunk and small with cold. She had bobbed hair, he noticed, so that it was impossible to tell how old she was, brown hair from which the sun was beating out bright lights; and her small face had no colour except those wide eyes fixed on his and the colour of her rather big mouth; but even her mouth seemed frozen.

'Would it be much bother—' began Wemyss again; and then his situation overwhelmed him.

'You would be doing a greater kindness than you know,' he said, his voice trembling with unhappiness, 'if you would let me come into the garden a minute and rest.'

At the sound of the genuine wretchedness in his voice Lucy's blank eyes became a little human. It got through to her consciousness that this distressed warm stranger was appealing to her for something.

'Are you so hot?' she asked, really seeing him for the first time.

'Yes, I'm hot,' said Wemyss. 'But it isn't that. I've had a misfortune—a terrible misfortune—'

He paused, overcome by the remembrance of it, by the unfairness of so much horror having overtaken him.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Lucy vaguely, still miles away from him, deep in indifference. 'Have you lost anything?'

'Good God, not that sort of misfortune!' cried Wemyss. 'Let me come in a minute—into the garden a minute—just to sit a minute with a human being. You would be doing a great

kindness. Because you're a stranger I can talk to you about it if you'll let me. Just because we're strangers I could talk. I haven't spoken to a soul but servants and official people since—since it happened. For two days I haven't spoken at all to a living soul—I shall go mad—'

His voice shook again with his unhappiness, with his astonishment at his unhappiness.

Lucy didn't think two days very long not to speak to anybody in, but there was something overwhelming about the strange man's evident affliction that roused her out of her apathy; not much,—she was still profoundly detached, observing from another world, as it were, this extreme heat and agitation, but at least she saw him now, she did with a faint curiosity consider him. He was like some elemental force in his directness. He had the quality of an irresistible natural phenomenon. But she did not move from her position at the gate, and her eyes continued, with the unwaveringness he thought so odd, to stare into his.

'I would gladly have let you come in,' she said, 'if you had come yesterday, but to-day my father died.'

Wemyss looked at her in astonishment. She had said it in as level and ordinary a voice as if she had been remarking, rather indifferently, on the weather.

Then he had a moment of insight. His own calamity had illuminated him. He who had never known pain, who had never let himself be worried, who had never let himself be approached in his life by a doubt, had for the last week lived in an atmosphere

of worry and pain, and of what, if he allowed himself to think, to become morbid, might well grow into a most unfair, tormenting doubt. He understood, as he would not have understood a week ago, what her whole attitude, her rigidity meant. He stared at her a moment while she stared straight back at him, and then his big warm hands dropped on to the cold ones folded on the top bar of the gate, and he said, holding them firmly though they made no attempt to move, 'So that's it. So that's why. Now I know.'

And then he added, with the simplicity his own situation was putting into everything he did, 'That settles it. We two stricken ones must talk together.'

And still covering her hands with one of his, with the other he unlatched the gate and walked in.

II

There was a seat under a mulberry tree on the little lawn, with its back to the house and the gaping windows, and Wemyss, spying it out, led Lucy to it as if she were a child, holding her by the hand.

She went with him indifferently. What did it matter whether she sat under the mulberry tree or stood at the gate? This convulsed stranger—was he real? Was anything real? Let him tell her whatever it was he wanted to tell her, and she would listen, and get him his glass of water, and then he would go his way and by that time the women would have finished upstairs and she could be with her father again.

'I'll fetch the water,' she said when they got to the seat.

'No. Sit down,' said Wemyss.

She sat down. So did he, letting her hand go. It dropped on the seat, palm upwards, between them.

'It's strange our coming across each other like this,' he said, looking at her while she looked indifferently straight in front of her at the sun on the grass beyond the shade of the mulberry tree, at a mass of huge fuchsia bushes a little way off. 'I've been going through hell—and so must you have been. Good God, what hell! Do you mind if I tell you? You'll understand because of your own—'

Lucy didn't mind. She didn't mind anything. She merely

vaguely wondered that he should think she had been going through hell. Hell and her darling father; how quaint it sounded. She began to suspect that she was asleep. All this wasn't really happening. Her father wasn't dead. Presently the housemaid would come in with the hot water and wake her to the usual cheerful day. The man sitting beside her,—he seemed rather vivid for a dream, it was true; so detailed, with his flushed face and the perspiration on his forehead, besides the feel of his big warm hand a moment ago and the small puffs of heat that came from his clothes when he moved. But it was so unlikely ... everything that had happened since breakfast was so *unlikely*. This man, too, would resolve himself soon into just something she had had for dinner last night, and she would tell her father about her dream at breakfast, and they would laugh.

She stirred uneasily. It wasn't a dream. It was real.

'The story is unbelievably horrible,' Wemyss was saying in a high aggrievement, looking at her little head with the straight cut hair, and her grave profile. How old was she? Eighteen? Twenty-eight? Impossible to tell exactly with hair cut like that, but young anyhow compared to him; very young perhaps compared to him who was well over forty, and so much scarred, so deeply scarred, by this terrible thing that had happened to him.

'It's so horrible that I wouldn't talk about it if you were going to mind,' he went on, 'but you can't mind because you're a stranger, and it may help you with your own trouble, because whatever you may suffer I'm suffering much worse, so then you'll see yours isn't

so bad. And besides I must talk to some one I should go mad—'

This was certainly a dream, thought Lucy. Things didn't happen like this when one was awake,—grotesque things.

She turned her head and looked at him. No, it wasn't a dream. No dream could be so solid as the man beside her. What was he saying?

He was saying in a tormented voice that he was Wemyss.

'You are Wemyss,' she repeated gravely.

It made no impression on her. She didn't mind his being Wemyss.

'I'm the Wemyss the newspapers were full of last week,' he said, seeing that the name left her unmoved. 'My God,' he went on, again wiping his forehead, but as fast as he wiped it more beads burst out, 'those posters to see one's own name staring at one everywhere on posters!'

'Why was your name on posters?' said Lucy.

She didn't want to know; she asked mechanically, her ear attentive only to the sounds from the open windows of the room upstairs.

'Don't you read newspapers here?' was his answer.

'I don't think we do,' she said, listening. 'We've been settling in. I don't think we've remembered to order any newspapers yet.'

A look of some, at any rate, relief from the pressure he was evidently struggling under came into Wemyss's face. 'Then I can tell you the real version,' he said, 'without you're being already filled up with the monstrous suggestions that were made at the

inquest. As though I hadn't suffered enough as it was! As though it hadn't been terrible enough already—'

'The inquest?' repeated Lucy.

Again she turned her head and looked at him. 'Has your trouble anything to do with death?'

'Why, you don't suppose anything else would reduce me to the state I'm in?'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said; and into her eyes and into her voice came a different expression, something living, something gentle. 'I hope it wasn't anybody you—loved?'

'It was my wife,' said Wemyss.

He got up quickly, so near was he to crying at the thought of it, at the thought of all he had endured, and turned his back on her and began stripping the leaves off the branches above his head.

Lucy watched him, leaning forward a little on both hands. 'Tell me about it,' she said presently, very gently.

He came back and dropped down heavily beside her again, and with many interjections of astonishment that such a ghastly calamity could have happened to him, to him who till now had never—

'Yes,' said Lucy, comprehendingly and gravely, 'yes—I know—'

—had never had anything to do with—well, with calamities, he told her the story.

They had gone down, he and his wife, as they did every 25th of July, for the summer to their house on the river, and he had been

looking forward to a glorious time of peaceful doing nothing after months of London, just lying about in a punt and reading and smoking and resting—London was an awful place for tiring one out—and they hadn't been there twenty-four hours before his wife—before his wife—

The remembrance of it was too grievous to him. He couldn't go on.

'Was she—very ill?' asked Lucy gently, to give him time to recover. 'I think that would almost be better. One would be a little at least one would be a little prepared—'

'She wasn't ill at all,' cried Wemyss. 'She just—died.'

'Oh like father!' exclaimed Lucy, roused now altogether. It was she now who laid her hand on his.

Wemyss seized it between both his, and went on quickly.

He was writing letters, he said, in the library at his table in the window where he could see the terrace and the garden and the river; they had had tea together only an hour before; there was a flagged terrace along that side of the house, the side the library was on and all the principal rooms; and all of a sudden there was a great flash of shadow between him and the light; come and gone instantaneously; and instantaneously then there was a thud; he would never forget it, that thud; and there outside his window on the flags—

'Oh don't—oh don't—' gasped Lucy.

'It was my wife,' Wemyss hurried on, not able now to stop, looking at Lucy while he talked with eyes of amazed horror.

'Fallen out of the top room of the house her sitting-room because of the view—it was in a straight line with the library window—she dropped past my window like a stone—she was smashed—smashed—'

'Oh, don't—oh—'

'Now can you wonder at the state I'm in?' he cried. 'Can you wonder if I'm nearly off my head? And forced to be by myself—forced into retirement for what the world considers a proper period of mourning, with nothing to think of but that ghastly inquest.'

He hurt her hand, he gripped it so hard.

'If you hadn't let me come and talk to you,' he said, 'I believe I'd have pitched myself over the cliff there this afternoon and made an end of it.'

'But how—but why—how could she fall?' whispered Lucy, to whom poor Wemyss's misfortune seemed more frightful than anything she had ever heard of.

She hung on his words, her eyes on his face, her lips parted, her whole body an agony of sympathy. Life—how terrible it was, and how unsuspected. One went on and on, never dreaming of the sudden dreadful day when the coverings were going to be dropped and one would see it was death after all, that it had been death all the time, death pretending, death waiting. Her father, so full of love and interests and plans,—gone, finished, brushed away as if he no more mattered than some insect one unseeingly treads on as one walks; and this man's wife, dead in an instant,

dead so far more cruelly, so horribly....

'I had often told her to be careful of that window,' Wemyss answered in a voice that almost sounded like anger; but all the time his tone had been one of high anger at the wanton, outrageous cruelty of fate. 'It was a very low one, and the floor was slippery. Oak. Every floor in my house is polished oak. I had them put in myself. She must have been leaning out and her feet slipped away behind her. That would make her fall head foremost—'

'Oh—oh—' said Lucy, shrinking. What could she do, what could she say to help him, to soften at least these dreadful memories?

'And then,' Wemyss went on after a moment, as unaware as Lucy was that she was tremblingly stroking his hand, 'at the inquest, as though it hadn't all been awful enough for me already, the jury must actually get wrangling about the cause of death.'

'The cause of death?' echoed Lucy. 'But—she fell.'

'Whether it were an accident or done on purpose.'

'Done on—?'

'Suicide.'

'Oh—'

She drew in her breath quickly.

'But—it wasn't?'

'How could it be? She was my wife, without a care in the world, everything done for her, no troubles, nothing on her mind, nothing wrong with her health. We had been married fifteen

years, and I was devoted to her—devoted to her.'

He banged his knee with his free hand. His voice was full of indignant tears.

'Then why did the jury—'

'My wife had a fool of a maid—I never could stand that woman—and it was something she said at the inquest, some invention or other about what my wife had said to her. You know what servants are. It upset some of the jury. You know juries are made up of anybody and everybody—butcher, baker, and candle-stick-maker—quite uneducated most of them, quite at the mercy of any suggestion. And so instead of a verdict of death by misadventure, which would have been the right one, it was an open verdict.'

'Oh, how terrible—how terrible for you,' breathed Lucy, her eyes on his, her mouth twitching with sympathy.

'You'd have seen all about it if you had read the papers last week,' said Wemyss, more quietly. It had done him good to get it out and talked over.

He looked down at her upturned face with its horror-stricken eyes and twitching mouth. 'Now tell me about yourself,' he said, touched with compunction; nothing that had happened to her could be so horrible as what had happened to him, still she too was newly smitten, they had met on a common ground of disaster, Death himself had been their introducer.

'Is life all—only death?' she breathed, her horror-stricken eyes on his.

Before he could answer—and what was there to answer to such a question except that of course it wasn't, and he and she were just victims of a monstrous special unfairness,—he certainly was; her father had probably died as fathers did, in the usual way in his bed—before he could answer, the two women came out of the house, and with small discreet steps proceeded down the path to the gate. The sun flooded their spare figures and their decent black clothes, clothes kept for these occasions as a mark of respectful sympathy.

One of them saw Lucy under the mulberry tree and hesitated, and then came across the grass to her with the mincing steps of tact.

'Here's somebody coming to speak to you,' said Wemyss, for Lucy was sitting with her back to the path.

She started and looked round.

The woman approached hesitatingly, her head on one side, her hands folded, her face pulled into a little smile intended to convey encouragement and pity.

'The gentleman's quite ready, miss,' she said softly.

III

All that day and all the next day Wemyss was Lucy's tower of strength and rock of refuge. He did everything that had to be done of the business part of death—that extra wantonness of misery thrown in so grimly to finish off the crushing of a mourner who is alone. It is true the doctor was kind and ready to help, but he was a complete stranger; she had never seen him till he was fetched that dreadful morning; and he had other things to see to besides her affairs,—his own patients, scattered widely over a lonely countryside. Wemyss had nothing to see to. He could concentrate entirely on Lucy. And he was her friend, linked to her so strangely and so strongly by death. She felt she had known him for ever. She felt that since the beginning of time she and he had been advancing hand in hand towards just this place, towards just this house and garden, towards just this year, this August, this moment of existence.

Wemyss dropped quite naturally into the place a near male relative would have been in if there had been a near male relative within reach; and his relief at having something to do, something practical and immediate, was so immense that never were funeral arrangements made with greater zeal and energy,—really one might almost say with greater gusto. Fresh from the horrors of those other funeral arrangements, clouded as they had been by the silences of friends and the averted looks of neighbours

—all owing to the idiotic jurors and their hesitations, and the vindictiveness of that woman because, he concluded, he had refused to raise her wages the previous month—what he was arranging now was so simple and straightforward that it positively was a pleasure. There were no anxieties, there were no worries, and there was a grateful little girl. After each fruitful visit to the undertaker, and he paid several in his zeal, he came back to Lucy and she was grateful; and she was not only grateful, but very obviously glad to get him back.

He saw she didn't like it when he went away, off along the top of the cliff on his various business visits, purpose in each step, a different being from the indignantly miserable person who had dragged about that very cliff killing time such a little while before; he could see she didn't like it. She knew he had to go, she was grateful and immensely expressive of her gratitude—Wemyss thought he had never met any one so expressively grateful—that he should so diligently go, but she didn't like it. He saw she didn't like it; he saw that she clung to him; and it pleased him.

'Don't be long,' she murmured each time, looking at him with eyes of entreaty; and when he got back, and stood before her again mopping his forehead, having triumphantly advanced the funeral arrangements another stage, a faint colour came into her face and she had the relieved eyes of a child who has been left alone in the dark and sees its mother coming in with a candle. Vera usedn't to look like that. Vera had accepted everything he

did for her as a matter of course.

Naturally he wasn't going to let the poor little girl sleep alone in that house with a dead body, and the strange servants who had been hired together with the house and knew nothing either about her or her father probably getting restive as night drew on, and as likely as not bolting to the village; so he fetched his things from the primitive hotel down in the cove about seven o'clock and announced his intention of sleeping on the drawing-room sofa. He had lunched with her, and had had tea with her, and now was going to dine with her. What she would have done without him Wemyss couldn't think.

He felt he was being delicate and tactful in this about the drawing-room sofa. He might fairly have claimed the spare-room bed; but he wasn't going to take any advantage, not the smallest, of the poor little girl's situation. The servants, who supposed him to be a relation and had supposed him to be that from the first moment they saw him, big and middle-aged, holding the young lady's hand under the mulberry tree, were surprised at having to make up a bed in the drawing-room when there were two spare-rooms with beds already in them upstairs, but did so obediently, vaguely imagining it had something to do with watchfulness and French windows; and Lucy, when he told her he was going to stay the night, was so grateful, so really thankful, that her eyes, red from the waves of grief that had engulfed her at intervals during the afternoon—ever since, that is, the sight of her dead father lying so remote from her, so wrapped, it seemed, in a deep,

absorbed attentiveness, had unfrozen her and swept her away into a sea of passionate weeping—filled again with tears.

'Oh,' she murmured, 'how *good* you are—'

It was Wemyss who had done all the thinking for her, and in the spare moments between his visits to the undertaker about the arrangements, and to the doctor about the certificate, and to the vicar about the burial, had telegraphed to her only existing relative, an aunt, had sent the obituary notice to *The Times*, and had even reminded her that she had on a blue frock and asked if she hadn't better put on a black one; and now this last instance of his thoughtfulness overwhelmed her.

She had been dreading the night, hardly daring to think of it so much did she dread it; and each time he had gone away on his errands, through her heart crept the thought of what it would be like when dusk came and he went away for the last time and she would be alone, all alone in the silent house, and upstairs that strange, wonderful, absorbed thing that used to be her father, and whatever happened to her, whatever awful horror overcame her in the night, whatever danger, he wouldn't hear, he wouldn't know, he would still lie there content, content....

'How *good* you are!' she said to Wemyss, her red eyes filling. 'What would I have done without you?'

'But what would I have done without *you*?' he answered; and they stared at each other, astonished at the nature of the bond between them, at its closeness, at the way it seemed almost miraculously to have been arranged that they should meet on the

crest of despair and save each other.

Till long after the stars were out they sat together on the edge of the cliff, Wemyss smoking while he talked, in a voice subdued by the night and the silence and the occasion, of his life and of the regular healthy calm with which it had proceeded till a week ago. Why this calm should have been interrupted, and so cruelly, he couldn't imagine. It wasn't as if he had deserved it. He didn't know that a man could ever be justified in saying he had done good, but he, Wemyss, could at least fairly say that he hadn't done any one any harm.

'Oh, but you have done good,' said Lucy, her voice, too, dropped into more than ordinary gentleness by the night, the silence, and the occasion; besides which it vibrated with feeling, it was lovely with seriousness, with simple conviction. 'Always, always I know that you've been doing good,' she said, 'being kind. I can't imagine you anything else but a help to people and a comfort.'

And Wemyss said, Well, he had done his best and tried, and no man could say more, but judging from what—well, what people had said to him, it hadn't been much of a success sometimes, and often and often he had been hurt, deeply hurt, by being misunderstood.

And Lucy said, How was it possible to misunderstand him, to misunderstand any one so transparently good, so evidently kind?

And Wemyss said, Yes, one would think he was easy enough to understand; he was a very natural, simple sort of person, who

had only all his life asked for peace and quiet. It wasn't much to ask. Vera—

'Who is Vera?' asked Lucy.

'My wife.'

'Ah, don't,' said Lucy earnestly, taking his hand very gently in hers. 'Don't talk of that to-night please don't let yourself think of it. If I could only, only find the words that would comfort you—'

And Wemyss said that she didn't need words, that just her being there, being with him, letting him help her, and her not having been mixed up with anything before in his life, was enough.

'Aren't we like two children,' he said, his voice, like hers, deepened by feeling, 'two scared, unhappy children, clinging to each other alone in the dark.'

So they talked on in subdued voices as people do who are in some holy place, sitting close together, looking out at the starlit sea, darkness and coolness gathering round them, and the grass smelling sweetly after the hot day, and the little waves, such a long way down, lapping lazily along the shingle, till Wemyss said it must be long past bedtime, and she, poor girl, must badly need rest.

'How old are you?' he asked suddenly, turning to her and scrutinising the delicate faint outline of her face against the night.

'Twenty-two,' said Lucy.

'You might just as easily be twelve,' he said, 'except for the sorts of things you say.'

'It's my hair,' said Lucy. 'My father liked—he liked—'

'Don't,' said Wemyss, in his turn taking her hand. 'Don't cry again. Don't cry any more to-night. Come—we'll go in. It's time you were in bed.'

And he helped her up, and when they got into the light of the hall he saw that she had, this time, successfully strangled her tears.

'Good-night,' she said, when he had lit her candle for her, 'good-night, and—God bless you.'

'God bless *you*' said Wemyss solemnly, holding her hand in his great warm grip.

'He has,' said Lucy. 'Indeed He has already, in sending me you.' And she smiled up at him.

For the first time since he had known her—and he too had the feeling that he had known her ever since he could remember—he saw her smile, and the difference it made to her marred, stained face surprised him.

'Do that again,' he said, staring at her, still holding her hand.

'Do what?' asked Lucy.

'Smile,' said Wemyss.

Then she laughed; but the sound of it in the silent, brooding house was shocking.

'Oh,' she gasped, stopping short, hanging her head appalled by what it had sounded like.

'Remember you're to go to sleep and not think of anything,' Wemyss ordered as she went slowly upstairs.

And she did fall asleep at once, exhausted but protected, like some desolate baby that had cried itself sick and now had found its mother.

IV

All this, however, came to an end next day when towards evening Miss Entwhistle, Lucy's aunt, arrived.

Wemyss retired to his hotel again and did not reappear till next morning, giving Lucy time to explain him; but either the aunt was inattentive, as she well might be under the circumstances in which she found herself so suddenly, so lamentably placed, or Lucy's explanations were vague, for Miss Entwhistle took Wemyss for a friend of her dear Jim's, one of her dear, dear brother's many friends, and accepted his services as natural and himself with emotion, warmth, and reminiscences.

Wemyss immediately became her rock as well as Lucy's, and she in her turn clung to him. Where he had been clung to by one he was now clung to by two, which put an end to talk alone with Lucy. He did not see Lucy alone again once before the funeral, but at least, owing to Miss Entwhistle's inability to do without him, he didn't have to spend any more solitary hours. Except breakfast, he had all his meals up in the little house on the cliff, and in the evenings smoked his pipe under the mulberry tree till bedtime sent him away, while Miss Entwhistle in the darkness gently and solemnly reminisced, and Lucy sat silent, as close to him as she could get.

The funeral was hurried on by the doctor's advice, but even so the short notice and the long distance did not prevent James

Entwhistle's friends from coming to it. The small church down in the cove was packed; the small hotel bulged with concerned, grave-faced people. Wemyss, who had done everything and been everything, disappeared in this crowd. Nobody noticed him. None of James Entwhistle's friends happened—luckily, he felt, with last week's newspapers still fresh in the public mind—to be his. For twenty-four hours he was swept entirely away from Lucy by this surge of mourners, and at the service in the church could only catch a distant glimpse, from his seat by the door, of her bowed head in the front pew.

He felt very lonely again. He wouldn't have stayed in the church a minute, for he objected with a healthy impatience to the ceremonies of death, if it hadn't been that he regarded himself as the stage-manager, so to speak, of these particular ceremonies, and that it was in a peculiarly intimate sense his funeral. He took a pride in it. Considering the shortness of the time it really was a remarkable achievement, the way he had done it, the smooth way the whole thing was going. But to-morrow,—what would happen to-morrow, when all these people had gone away again? Would they take Lucy and the aunt with them? Would the house up there be shut, and he, Wemyss, left alone again with his bitter, miserable recollections? He wouldn't, of course, stay on in that place if Lucy were to go, but wherever he went there would be emptiness without her, without her gratefulness, and gentleness, and clinging. Comforting and being comforted,—that is what he and she had been doing to each other for four days, and he

couldn't but believe she would feel the same emptiness without him that he knew he was going to feel without her.

In the dark under the mulberry tree, while her aunt talked softly and sadly of the past, Wemyss had sometimes laid his hand on Lucy's, and she had never taken hers away. They had sat there, content and comforted to be hand in hand. She had the trust in him, he felt, of a child; the confidence, and the knowledge that she was safe. He was proud and touched to know it, and it warmed him through and through to see how her face lit up whenever he appeared. Vera's face hadn't done that. Vera had never understood him, not with fifteen years to do it in, as this girl had in half a day. And the way Vera had died,—it was no use mincing matters when it came to one's own thoughts, and it had been all of a piece with her life: the disregard for others and of anything said to her for her own good, the determination to do what suited her, to lean out of dangerous windows if she wished to, for instance, not to take the least trouble, the least thought.... Imagine bringing such horror on him, such unforgettable horror, besides worries and unhappiness without end, by deliberately disregarding his warnings, his orders indeed, about that window. Wemyss did feel that if one looked at the thing dispassionately it would be difficult to find indifference to the wishes and feelings of others going further.

Sitting in the church during the funeral service, his arms folded on his chest and his mouth grim with these thoughts, he suddenly caught sight of Lucy's face. The priest was coming

down the aisle in front of the coffin on the way out to the grave, and Lucy and her aunt were following first behind it.

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay....

The priest's sad, disillusioned voice recited the beautiful words as he walked, the afternoon sun from the west window and the open west door pouring on his face and on the faces of the procession that seemed all black and white,—black clothes, white faces.

The whitest face was Lucy's, and when Wemyss saw the look on it his mouth relaxed and his heart went soft within him, and he came impulsively out of the shadow and joined her, boldly walking on her other side at the head of the procession, and standing beside her at the grave; and at the awful moment when the first earth was dropped on to the coffin he drew her hand, before everybody, through his arm and held it there tight.

Nobody was surprised at his standing there with her like that. It was taken quite for granted. He was evidently a relation of poor Jim's. Nor was anybody surprised when Wemyss, not letting her go again, took her home up the cliff, her arm in his just as though he were the chief mourner, the aunt following with some one else.

He didn't speak to her or disturb her with any claims on her attention, partly because the path was very steep and he wasn't used to cliffs, but also because of his feeling that he and she, isolated together by their sorrows, understood without any words.

And when they reached the house, the first to reach it from the church just as if, he couldn't help thinking, they were coming back from their wedding, he told her in his firmest voice to go straight up to her room and lie down, and she obeyed with the sweet obedience of perfect trust.

'Who is that?' asked the man who was helping Miss Entwhistle up the cliff.

'Oh, a *very* old friend of darling Jim's,' she sobbed,—she had been sobbing without stopping from the first words of the burial service, and was quite unable to leave off. 'Mr.—Mr.—We—We—Wemyss—'

'Wemyss? I don't remember coming across him with Jim.'

'Oh, one of his—his *oldest*—f—fr—friends,' sobbed poor Miss Entwhistle, got completely out of control.

Wemyss, continuing in his rôle of chief mourner, was the only person who was asked to spend the evening up at the bereaved house.

'I don't wonder,' said Miss Entwhistle to him at dinner, still with tears in her voice, 'at my dear brother's devotion to you. You have been the greatest help, the greatest comfort—'

And neither Wemyss nor Lucy felt equal to explanation.

What did it matter? Lucy, fatigued by emotions, her mind bruised by the violent demands that had been made on it the last four days, sat drooping at the table, and merely thought that if her father had known Wemyss it would certainly have been true that he was devoted to him. He hadn't known him; he had missed

him by—yes, by just three hours; and this wonderful friend of hers was the very first good thing that she and her father hadn't shared. And Wemyss's attitude was simply that if people insist on jumping at conclusions, why, let them. He couldn't anyhow begin to expound himself in the middle of a meal, with a parlourmaid handing dishes round and listening.

But there was an awkward little moment when Miss Entwhistle tearfully wondered—she was eating blanc-mange, the last of a series of cold and pallid dishes with which the imaginative cook, a woman of Celtic origin, had expressed her respectful appreciation of the occasion—whether when the will was read it wouldn't be found that Jim had appointed Mr. Wemyss poor Lucy's guardian.

'I am—dear me, how very hard it is to remember to say I was—my dear brother's only relative. We belong—belonged—to an exiguous family, and naturally I'm no longer as young as I was. There is only—was only—a year between Jim and me, and at any moment I may be—'

Here Miss Entwhistle was interrupted by a sob, and had to put down her spoon.

'—taken,' she finished after a moment, during which the other two sat silent.

'When this happens,' she went on presently, a little recovered, 'poor Lucy will be without any one, unless Jim thought of this and has appointed a guardian. You, Mr. Wemyss, I hope and expect.'

Neither Lucy nor Wemyss spoke. There was the parlourmaid

hovering, and one couldn't anyhow go into explanations now which ought to have been made four days ago.

A dead-white cheese was handed round,—something local probably, for it wasn't any form of cheese with which Wemyss was acquainted, and the meal ended with cups of intensely black cold coffee. And all these carefully thought-out expressions of the cook's sympathy were lost on the three, who noticed nothing; certainly they noticed nothing in the way the cook had intended. Wemyss was privately a little put out by the coffee being cold. He had eaten all the other clammy things patiently, but a man likes his after-dinner coffee hot, and it was new in his experience to have it served cold. He did notice this, and was surprised that neither of his companions appeared to. But there,—women were notoriously insensitive to food; on this point the best of them were unintelligent, and the worst of them were impossible. Vera had been awful about it; he had had to do all the ordering of the meals himself at last, and also the engaging of the cooks.

He got up from the table to open the door for the ladies feeling inwardly chilled, feeling, as he put it to himself, slabby inside; and, left alone with a dish of black plums and some sinister-looking wine in a decanter, which he avoided because when he took hold of it ice clinked, he rang the bell as unobtrusively as he could and asked the parlourmaid in a subdued voice, the French window to the garden being open and in the garden being Lucy and her aunt, whether there were such a thing in the house as a whisky and soda.

The parlourmaid, who was a nice-looking girl and much more at home, as she herself was the first to admit, with gentlemen than with ladies, brought it him, and inquired how he had liked the dinner.

'Not at all,' said Wemyss, whose mind on that point was clear.

'No sir,' said the parlourmaid, nodding sympathetically. 'No sir.'

She then explained in a discreet whisper, also with one eye on the open window, how the dinner hadn't been an ordinary dinner and it wasn't expected that it should be enjoyed, but it was the cook's tribute to her late master's burial day,—a master they had only known a week, sad to say, but to whom they had both taken a great fancy, he being so pleasant-spoken and all for giving no trouble.

Wemyss listened, sipping the comforting drink and smoking a cigar.

Very different, said the parlourmaid, who seemed glad to talk, would the dinner have been if the cook hadn't liked the poor gentleman. Why, in one place where she and the cook were together, and the lady was taken just as the cook would have given notice if she hadn't been because she was such a very dishonest and unpunctual lady, besides not knowing her place—no lady, of course, and never was—when she was taken, not sudden like this poor gentleman but bit by bit, on the day of her funeral the cook sent up a dinner you'd never think of,—she was like that, all fancy. Lucky it was that the family didn't read

between the lines, for it began with fried soles—

The parlourmaid paused, her eye anxiously on the window. Wemyss sat staring at her.

'Did you say fried soles?' he asked, staring at her.

'Yes sir. Fried soles. I didn't see anything in that either at first. It's how you spell it makes the difference, Cook said. And the next course was'—her voice dropped almost to inaudibleness—'devilled bones.'

Wemyss hadn't so much as smiled for nearly a fortnight, and now to his horror, for what could it possibly sound like to the two mourners on the lawn, he gave a sudden dreadful roar of laughter. He could hear it sounding hideous himself.

The noise he made horrified the parlourmaid as much as it did him. She flew to the window and shut it. Wemyss, in his effort to strangle the horrid thing, choked and coughed, his table-napkin up to his face, his body contorted. He was very red, and the parlourmaid watched him in terror. He had seemed at first to be laughing, though what Uncle Wemyss (thus did he figure in the conversations of the kitchen) could see to laugh at in the cook's way of getting her own back, the parlourmaid, whose flesh had crept when she first heard the story, couldn't understand; but presently she feared he wasn't laughing at all but was being, in some very robust way, ill. Dread seized her, deaths being on her mind, lest perhaps here in the chair, so convulsively struggling behind a table-napkin, were the beginnings of yet another corpse. Having flown to shut the window she now flew to open it, and

ran out panic-stricken into the garden to fetch the ladies.

This cured Wemyss. He got up quickly, leaving his half-smoked cigar and his half-drunk whisky, and followed her out just in time to meet Lucy and her aunt hurrying across the lawn towards the dining-room window.

'I choked,' he said, wiping his eyes, which indeed were very wet.

'Choked?' repeated Miss Entwhistle anxiously. 'We heard a most strange noise—'

'That was me choking,' said Wemyss. 'It's all right—it's nothing at all,' he added to Lucy, who was looking at him with a face of extreme concern.

But he felt now that he had had about as much of the death and funeral atmosphere as he could stand. Reaction had set in, and his reactions were strong. He wanted to get away from woe, to be with normal, cheerful people again, to have done with conditions in which a laugh was the most improper of sounds. Here he was, being held down by the head, he felt, in a black swamp,—first that ghastly business of Vera's, and now this woebegone family.

Sudden and violent was Wemyss's reaction, let loose by the parlourmaid's story. Miss Entwhistle's swollen eyes annoyed him. Even Lucy's pathetic face made him impatient. It was against nature, all this. It shouldn't be allowed to go on, it oughtn't to be encouraged. Heaven alone knew how much he had suffered, how much more he had suffered than the Entwhistles with their perfectly normal sorrow, and if he could feel it was high time now

to think of other things surely the Entwhistles could. He was tired of funerals. He had carried this one through really brilliantly from start to finish, but now it was over and done with, and he wished to get back to naturalness. Death seemed to him highly unnatural. The mere fact that it only happened once to everybody showed how exceptional it was, thought Wemyss, thoroughly disgusted with it. Why couldn't he and the Entwhistles go off somewhere to-morrow, away from this place altogether, go abroad for a bit, to somewhere cheerful, where nobody knew them and nobody would expect them to go about with long faces all day? Ostend, for instance? His mood of sympathy and gentleness had for the moment quite gone. He was indignant that there should be circumstances under which a man felt as guilty over a laugh as over a crime. A natural person like himself looked at things wholesomely. It was healthy and proper to forget horrors, to dismiss them from one's mind. If convention, that offspring of cruelty and hypocrisy, insisted that one's misfortunes should be well rubbed in, that one should be forced to smart under them, and that the more one was seen to wince the more one was regarded as behaving creditably,—if convention insisted on this, and it did insist, as Wemyss had been experiencing himself since Vera's accident, why then it ought to be defied. He had found he couldn't defy it by himself, and came away solitary and wretched in accordance with what it expected, but he felt quite different now that he had Lucy and her aunt as trusting friends who looked up to him, who had no doubts of him and

no criticisms. Health of mind had come back to him,—his own natural wholesomeness, which had never deserted him in his life till this shocking business of Vera's.

'I'd like to have some sensible talk with you,' he said, looking down at the two small black figures and solemn tired faces that were growing dim and wraith-like in the failing light of the garden.

'With me or with Lucy?' asked Miss Entwhistle.

By this time they both hung on his possible wishes, and watched him with the devout attentiveness of a pair of dogs.

'With you and with Lucy,' said Wemyss, smiling at the upturned faces. He felt very conscious of being the male, of being in command.

It was the first time he had called her Lucy. To Miss Entwhistle it seemed a matter of course, but Lucy herself flushed with pleasure, and again had the feeling of being taken care of and safe. Sad as she was at the end of that sad day, she still was able to notice how nice her very ordinary name sounded in this kind man's voice. She wondered what his own name was, and hoped it was something worthy of him,—not Albert, for instance.

'Shall we go into the drawing-room?' asked Miss Entwhistle.

'Why not to the mulberry tree?' said Wemyss, who naturally wished to hold Lucy's little hand if possible, and could only do that in the dark.

So they sat there as they had sat other nights, Wemyss in the

middle, and Lucy's hand, when it got dark enough, held close and comfortingly in his.

'This little girl,' he began, 'must get the roses back into her cheeks.'

'Indeed, indeed she must,' agreed Miss Entwhistle, a catch in her voice at the mere reminder of the absence of Lucy's roses, and consequently of what had driven them away.

'How do you propose to set about it?' asked Wemyss.

'Time,' gulped Miss Entwhistle.

'Time?'

'And patience. We must wait we must both wait p-patiently till time has s-softened—'

She hastily pulled out her handkerchief.

'No, no,' said Wemyss, 'I don't at all agree. It isn't natural, it isn't reasonable to prolong sorrow. You'll forgive plain words, Miss Entwhistle, but I don't know any others, and I say it isn't right to wallow—yes, wallow—in sorrow. Far from being patient one should be impatient. One shouldn't wait resignedly for time to help one, one should up and take time by the forelock. In cases of this kind, and believe me I know what I'm talking about—it was here that his hand, the one on the further side from Miss Entwhistle, descended gently on Lucy's, and she made a little movement closer up to him—it is due to oneself to refuse to be knocked out. Courage, spirit, is what one must aim at,—setting an example.'

Ah, how wonderful he was, thought Lucy; so big, so brave,

so simple, and so tragically recently himself the victim of the most awful of catastrophes. There was something burly about his very talk. Her darling father and his friends had talked quite differently. Their talk used to seem as if it ran about the room like liquid fire, it was so quick and shining; often it was quite beyond her till her father afterwards, when she asked him, explained it, put it more simply for her, eager as he always was that she should share and understand. She could understand every word of Wemyss's. When he spoke she hadn't to strain, to listen with all her might; she hardly had to think at all. She found this immensely reposeful in her present state.

'Yes,' murmured Miss Entwhistle into her handkerchief, 'yes—you're quite right, Mr. Wemyss—one ought—it would be more—more heroic. But then if one—if one has loved some one very tenderly—as I did my dear brother—and Lucy her most precious father—'

She broke off and wiped her eyes.

'Perhaps,' she finished, 'you haven't ever loved anybody very—very particularly and lost them.'

'Oh,' breathed Lucy at that, and moved still closer to him.

Wemyss was deeply injured. Why should Miss Entwhistle suppose he had never particularly loved anybody? He seemed, on looking back, to have loved a great deal. Certainly he had loved Vera with the utmost devotion till she herself wore it down. He indignantly asked himself what this maiden lady could know of love.

But there was Lucy's little hand, so clinging, so understanding, nestling in his. It soothed him.

There was a pause. Then he said, very gravely, 'My wife died only a fortnight ago.'

Miss Entwhistle was crushed. 'Ah,' she cried, 'but you must forgive me—'

V

Nevertheless he was not able to persuade her to join him, with Lucy, in a trip abroad. She was tirelessly concerned to do and say everything she could that showed her deep sympathy with him in his loss—he had told her nothing beyond the bare fact, and she was not one to read about inquests—and her deep sense of obligation to him that he, labouring under so great a burden of sorrow of his own, should have helped them with such devotion and unselfishness in theirs; but she wouldn't go abroad. She was going, she said, to her little house in London with Lucy.

'What, in August?' exclaimed Wemyss.

Yes, they would be quiet there, and indeed they were both worn out and only wished for solitude.

'Then why not stay here?' asked Wemyss, who now considered Lucy's aunt selfish. 'This is solitary enough, in all conscience.'

No, they neither of them felt they could bear to stay in that house. Lucy must go to the place least connected in her mind with her father. Indeed, indeed it was best. She did so understand and appreciate Mr. Wemyss's wonderful and unselfish motives in suggesting the continent, but she and Lucy were in that state when the idea of an hotel and waiters and a band was simply impossible to them, and all they wished was to creep into the quiet and privacy of their own nest,—'Like wounded birds,' said poor Miss Entwhistle, looking up at him with much the piteous

expression of a dog lifting an injured paw.

'It's very bad for Lucy to be encouraged to think she's a wounded bird,' said Wemyss, controlling his disappointment as best he could.

'You must come and see us in London and help us to feel heroic,' said Miss Entwhistle, with a watery smile.

'But I can come and see you much better and easier if you're here,' persisted Wemyss.

Miss Entwhistle, however, though watery, was determined. She refused to stay where she so conveniently was, and Wemyss now considered Lucy's aunt obstinate as well as selfish. Also he thought her very ungrateful. She had made use of him, and now was going to leave him, without apparently giving him a thought, in the lurch.

He was having a good deal of Miss Entwhistle, because during the two days that came after the funeral Lucy was practically invisible, engaged in collecting and packing her father's belongings. Wemyss hung about the garden, not knowing when these activities mightn't suddenly cease and not wishing to miss her if she did come out, and Miss Entwhistle, who couldn't help Lucy in this—no one could help her in the heart-breaking work—naturally joined him.

He found these two days long. Miss Entwhistle felt there was a great bond between herself and him, and Wemyss felt there wasn't. When she said there was he had difficulty in not contradicting her. Not only, Miss Entwhistle felt, and also

explained, was there the bond of their dear Jim, whom both she and Mr. Wemyss had so much loved, but there was this communion of sorrow,—the loss of his wife, the loss of her brother, within the same fortnight.

Wemyss shut his mouth tight at this and said nothing.

How natural for her, feeling so sorry for him, feeling so grateful to him, when from a window during those two days she beheld him sitting solitary beneath the mulberry tree, to go down and sit there with him; how natural that, when he got up, made restless, she supposed, by his memories, and began to pace the lawn, she should get up and sympathetically pace it too. She could not let this kind, tender-hearted man—he must be that, or Jim wouldn't have been fond of him, besides she had seen it for herself in the way he had helped her and Lucy—she could not let him be alone with his sad thoughts. And he had a double burden of sad thoughts, a double loss to bear, for he had lost her dear brother as well as his poor wife.

All Entwhistles were compassionate, and as she and Wemyss sat together or together paced, she kept up a flow of gentle loving-kindness. Wemyss smoked his pipe in practically unbroken silence. This was his way when he was holding on to himself. Miss Entwhistle of course didn't know he was holding on to himself, and taking his silence for the inarticulateness of deep unhappiness was so much touched that she would have done anything for him, anything that might bring this poor, kind, suffering fellow-creature comfort—except go to Ostend. From

that dreadful suggestion she continued to shudder away; nor, though he tried again, even after all arrangements for leaving Cornwall had been made, would she be persuaded to stay where she was.

Therefore Wemyss was forced to conclude that she was obstinate as well as selfish; and if it hadn't been for the brief moments at meals when Lucy appeared, and through her unhappiness—what she was doing was obviously depressing her very much—smiled faintly at him and always went and sat as near him as she could, he would have found these two days intolerable.

How atrocious, he thought, while he smoked in silence and held on to himself, that Lucy should be taken away from him by a mere maiden lady, an aunt, an unmarried aunt,—weakest and most negligible, surely, of all relatives. How atrocious that such a person should have any right to come between him and Lucy, to say she wouldn't do this, that, or the other that Wemyss proposed, and thus possess the power to make him unhappy. Miss Entwhistle was so little that he could have brushed her aside with the back of one hand; yet here again the strong monster public opinion stepped in and forced him to acquiesce in any plan she chose to make for Lucy, however desolate it left him, merely because she stood to her in the anæmic relationship of aunt.

During two mortal days, as he waited about in that garden so grievously infested by Miss Entwhistle, sounds of boxes being moved and drawers being opened and shut came through the windows, but except at meals there was no Lucy. He could have

borne it if he hadn't known they were the very last days he would be with her, but as things were it seemed cruel that he should be left like that to be miserable. Why should he be left like that to be miserable, just because of a lot of clothes and papers? he asked himself; and he felt he was getting thoroughly tired of Jim.

'Haven't you done yet?' he said at tea on the second afternoon of this sorting out and packing, when Lucy got up to go indoors again, leaving him with Miss Entwhistle, even before he had finished his second cup of tea.

'You've no idea what a lot there is,' she said, her voice sounding worn out; and she lingered a moment, her hand on the back of her aunt's chair. 'Father brought all his notes with him, and heaps and heaps of letters from people he was consulting, and I'm trying to get them straight—get them as he would have wished—'

Miss Entwhistle put up her hand and stroked Lucy's arm.

'If you weren't in this hurry to go away you'd have had more time and done it comfortably,' said Wemyss.

'Oh, but I don't want more time,' said Lucy quickly.

'Lucy means she couldn't bear it drawn out,' said Miss Entwhistle, leaning her thin cheek against Lucy's sleeve. 'These things—they tear one's heart. And nobody can help her. She has to go through with it alone.' And she drew Lucy's face down to hers and held it there a moment, gently stroking it, the tears brimming up again in the eyes of both.

Always tears, thought Wemyss. Yes, and there always would

be tears as long as that aunt had hold of Lucy. She was the arch-wallower, he told himself, filling his pipe in silence after Lucy had gone in.

He got up and went out at the gate and crossed the road and stood staring at the evening sea. Should he hear steps coming after him and Miss Entwhistle were to follow him even beyond the garden, he would proceed without looking round down to the cove and to the inn, where she must needs leave him alone. He had had enough. That Miss Entwhistle should explain to him what Lucy meant, he considered to be the last straw of her behaviour. Barging in, he said indignantly to himself; barging in when nobody had asked her opinion or explanation of anything. And she had stroked Lucy's face as though Lucy and her face and everything about her belonged to her, merely because she happened to be her aunt. Fancy explaining to him what Lucy really meant, taking upon herself the functions of interpreter, of go-between, when for a whole day and a half before she appeared on the scene—and she had only appeared on it at all thanks to his telegram—Lucy and he had been in the closest fellowship, the closest communion....

Well, things couldn't go on like this. He was not the man to be dominated by a relative. If he had lived in those sensible ancient days when people behaved wholesomely, he would have flung Lucy over his shoulder and walked off with her to Ostend or Paris and laughed at such insects as aunts. He couldn't do that unfortunately, though where the harm would be in two mourners

like himself and Lucy going together in search of relief he must say he was unable to see. Why should they be condemned to search for relief separately? Their sorrows, surely, would be their chaperone, especially his sorrow. Nobody would object to Lucy's nursing him, supposing he were dangerously ill; why should she not be equally beyond the reach of tongues if she nursed the bitter wounds of his spirit?

He heard steps coming down the garden path to the gate. There, he thought, was the aunt again, searching for him, and he stood squarely and firmly with his back to the road, smoking his pipe and staring at the sea. If he heard the gate open and she dared to come through it he would instantly walk away. In the garden he had to endure being joined by her, because there he was in the position of guest; but let her try to join him on the King's highway!

Nobody opened the gate, however, and, as he heard no retreating footsteps either, after a minute he began to want to look round. He struggled against this wish, because the moment Miss Entwhistle caught his eye she would come out to him, he felt sure. But Wemyss was not much good at struggling against his wishes,—he usually met with defeat; and after briefly doing so on this occasion he did look round. And what a good thing he did, for it was Lucy.

There she was, leaning on the gate just as she had been that first morning, but this time her eyes instead of being wide and blank were watching him with a deep and touching interest.

He got across the road in one stride. 'Lucy!' he exclaimed. 'You? Why didn't you call me? We've wasted half an hour—'

'About two minutes,' she said, smiling up at him as he, on the other side of the gate, folded both her hands in his just as he had done that first morning; and the relief it was to Wemyss to see her again alone, to see that smile of trust and—surely—content in getting back to him!

Then her face went grave again. 'I've finished father's things now,' she said, 'and so I came to look for you.'

'Lucy, how can you leave me,' was Wemyss's answer to that, his voice vibrating, 'how can you go away from me to-morrow and hand me over again to the torments—yes, torments, I was in before?'

'But I have to go,' she said, distressed. 'And you mustn't say that. You mustn't let yourself be like that again. You won't be, I know—you're so brave and strong.'

'Not without you. I'm nothing without you,' said Wemyss; and his eyes, as he searched hers, were full of tears.

At this Lucy flushed, and then, staring at him, her face went slowly white. These words of his, the way he said them, reminded her—oh no, it wasn't possible; he and she stood in a relationship to each other like none, she was sure, that had ever yet been. It was an intimacy arrived at at a bound, with no preliminary steps. It was a holy thing, based on mutual grief, protected from everything ordinary by the great wings of Death. He was her wonderful friend, big in his simplicity, all care for her and

goodness, a very rock of refuge and shelter in the wilderness she had been flung into when he found her. And that he, bleeding as he was himself from the lacerations of the violent rending asunder from his wife to whom he had been, as he had told her, devoted, that he should—oh no, it wasn't possible; and she hung her head, shocked at her thoughts. For the way he had said those words, and the words themselves had reminded her—no, she could hardly bear to think it, but they *had* reminded her of the last time she had been proposed to. The man—he was a young man; she had never been proposed to by any one even approximately Wemyss's age—had said almost exactly that: Without you I am nothing. And just in that same deep, vibrating voice.

How dreadful thoughts could be, Lucy said to herself, overcome that such a one at such a moment should thrust itself into her mind. Hateful of her, hateful....

She hung her head in shame; and Wemyss, looking down at the little bobbed head with its bright, thick young hair bent over their folded hands as though it were saying its prayers,—Wemyss, not having his pipe in his mouth to protect him and help him to hold on to himself, for he had hastily stuffed it in his pocket, all alight as it was, when he saw her at the gate, and there at that moment it was burning holes,—Wemyss, after a brief struggle with his wishes, in which as usual he was defeated, stooped and began to kiss Lucy's hair. And having begun, he continued.

She was horrified. At the first kiss she started as if she had been hit, and then, clinging to the gate, she stood without

moving, without being able to think or lift her head, in the same attitude bowed over his and her own hands, while this astonishing thing was being done to her hair. Death all round them, death pervading every corner of their lives, death in its blackest shape brooding over him, and—kisses. Her mind, if anything so gentle could be said to be in anything that sounds so loud, was in an uproar. She had had the complete, guileless trust in him of a child for a tender and sympathetic friend,—a friend, not a father, though he was old enough to be her father, because in a father, however much hidden by sweet comradeship as it had been in hers, there always at the back of everything was, after all, authority. And it had been even more than the trust of a child in its friend: it had been the trust of a child in a fellow-child hit by the same punishment,—a simple fellowship, a wordless understanding.

She hung on to the gate while her thoughts flew about in confusion within her. These kisses—and his wife just dead—and dead so terribly—how long would she have to stand there with this going on—she couldn't lift up her head, for then she felt it would only get worse—she couldn't turn and run into the house, because he was holding her hands. He oughtn't to have—oh, he oughtn't to have—it wasn't fair....

Then—what was he saying? She heard him say, in an absolutely broken voice, laying his head on hers, 'We two poor things—we two poor things'—and then he said and did nothing more, but kept his head like that, and presently, thick though her

hair was, through it came wetness.

At that Lucy's thoughts suddenly stopped flying about and were quite still. Her heart went to wax within her, melted again into pity, into a great flood of pitiful understanding. The dreadfulness of lonely grief.... Was there anything in the world so blackly desolate as to be left alone in grief? This poor broken fellow-creature—and she herself, so lost, so lost in loneliness—they were two half-drowned things, clinging together in a shipwreck—how could she let him go, leave him to himself—how could she be let go, left to herself....

'Lucy,' he said, 'look at me—'

She lifted her head. He loosed her hands, and put his arms round her shoulders.

'Look at me,' he said; for though she had lifted her head she hadn't lifted her eyes.

She looked at him. Tears were on his face. When she saw them her mouth began to quiver and twitch. She couldn't bear that.

'Lucy—' he said again.

She shut her eyes. 'Yes'—she breathed, 'yes.' And with one hand she felt along up his coat till she reached his face, and shakingly tried to brush away its tears.

VI

After that, for the moment anyhow, it was all over with Lucy. She was engulfed. Wemyss kissed her shut eyes, he kissed her parted lips, he kissed her dear, delightful bobbed hair. His tears dried up; or rather, wiped away by her little blind, shaking hand, there were no more of them. Death for Wemyss was indeed at that moment swallowed up in victory. Instantly he passed from one mood to the other, and when she finally did open her eyes at his orders and look at him, she saw bending over her a face she hardly recognised, for she had not yet seen him happy. Happy! How could he be happy, as happy as that all in a moment? She stared at him, and even through her confusion, her bewilderment, was frankly amazed.

Then the thought crept into her mind that it was she who had done this, it was she who had transformed him, and her stare softened into a gaze almost of awe, with something of the look in it of a young mother when she first sees her new-born baby. 'So that is what it is like,' the young mother whispers to herself in a sort of holy surprise, 'and I have made it, and it is mine'; and so, gazing at this new, effulgent Wemyss, did Lucy say to herself with the same feeling of wonder, of awe at her own handiwork, 'So that is what he is like.'

Wemyss's face was indeed one great beam. He simply at that moment couldn't remember that he had ever been miserable. He

seemed to have his arms round Love itself; for never did any one look more like the very embodiment of his idea of love than Lucy then as she gazed up at him, so tender, so resistless. But there were even more wonderful moments after dinner in the darkening garden, while Miss Entwhistle was upstairs packing ready to start by the early train next morning, and they hadn't got the gate between them, and Lucy of her own accord laid her cheek against his coat, nestling her head into it as though there indeed she knew that she was safe.

'My baby—my baby,' Wemyss murmured, in an ecstasy of passionate protectiveness, in his turn flooded by maternal feeling. 'You shall never cry again never, never.'

It irked him that their engagement—Lucy demurred at first to the word engagement, but Wemyss, holding her tight in his arms, said he would very much like to know, then, by what word she would describe her position at that moment—it irked him that it had to be a secret. He wanted instantly to shout out to the whole world his glory and his pride. But this under the tragic circumstances of their mourning was even to Wemyss clearly impossible. Generally he brushed aside the word impossible if it tried to come between him and the smallest of his wishes, but that inquest was still too vividly in his mind, and the faces of his so-called friends. What the faces of his so-called friends would look like if he, before Vera had been dead a fortnight, should approach them with the news of his engagement even Wemyss, a person not greatly imaginative, could picture. And

Lucy, quite overwhelmed, first by his tears and then by his joy, no longer could judge anything. She no longer knew whether it were very awful to be love-making in the middle of death, or whether it were, as Wemyss said, the natural glorious self-assertiveness of life. She knew nothing any more except that he and she, shipwrecked, had saved each other, and that for the moment nothing was required of her, no exertion, nothing at all, except to sit passive with her head on his breast, while he called her his baby and softly, wonderfully, kissed her closed eyes. She couldn't think; she needn't think; oh, she was tired—and this was rest.

But after he had gone that night, and all the next day in the train without him, and for the first few days in London, misgivings laid hold of her.

That she should be being made love to, be engaged, as Wemyss insisted, within a week of her father's death, could not, she thought, be called anything worse than possibly and at the outside an irrelevance. It did no harm to her father's dear memory; it in no way encroached on her adoration of him. He would have been the first to be pleased that she should have found comfort. But what worried her was that Everard—Wemyss's Christian name was Everard—should be able to think of such things as love and more marriage when his wife had just died so awfully, and he on the very spot, and he the first to rush out and see....

She found that the moment she was away from him she couldn't get over this. It went round and round in her head as a

thing she was unable, by herself, to understand. While she was with him he overpowered her into a torpor, into a shutting of her eyes and her thoughts, into just giving herself up, after the shocks and agonies of the week, to the blessedness of a soothed and caressed semi-consciousness; and it was only when his first letters began to come, such simple, adoring letters, taking the situation just as it was, just as life and death between them had offered it, untroubled by questioning, undimmed by doubt, with no looking backward but with a touching, thankful acceptance of the present, that she gradually settled down into that placidity which was at once the relief and the astonishment of her aunt. And his letters were so easy to understand. They were so restfully empty of the difficult thoughts and subtle, half-said things her father used to write and all his friends. His very handwriting was the round, slow handwriting of a boy. Lucy had loved him before; but now she fell in love with him, and it was because of his letters.

VII

Miss Entwhistle lived in a slim little house in Eaton Terrace. It was one of those little London houses where you go in and there's a dining-room, and you go up and there's a drawing-room, and you go up again and there's a bedroom and a dressing-room, and you go up yet more and there's a maid's room and a bathroom, and then that's all. For one person it was just enough; for two it was difficult. It was so difficult that Miss Entwhistle had never had any one stay with her before, and the dressing-room had to be cleared out of all her clothes and toques, which then had nowhere to go to and became objects that you met at night hanging over banisters or perched with an odd air of dashingness on the ends of the bath, before Lucy could go in.

But no Entwhistle ever minded things like that. No trouble seemed to any of them too great to take for a friend; while as for one's own dear niece, if only she could have been induced to take the real bedroom and let her aunt, who knew the dressing-room's ways, sleep there instead, that aunt—on such liberal principles was this family constructed—would have been perfectly happy.

Lucy, of course, only smiled at that suggestion, and inserted herself neatly into the dressing-room, and the first weeks of their mourning, which Miss Entwhistle had dreaded for them both, proceeded to flow by with a calm, an unruffledness, that could best be described by the word placid.

In that small house, unless the inhabitants were accommodating and adaptable, daily life would be a trial. Miss Entwhistle well knew Lucy would give no trouble that she could help, but their both being in such trouble themselves would, at such close quarters, she had been afraid, inevitably keep their sorrow raw by sheer rubbing against each other.

To her surprise and great relief nothing of the sort happened. There seemed to be no rawness to rub. Not only Lucy didn't fret—her white face and heavy eyes of the days in Cornwall had gone—but she was almost from the first placid. Just on leaving Cornwall, and for a day or two after, she was a little *bouleversée*, and had a curious kind of timidity in her manner to her aunt, and crept rather than walked about the house, but this gradually disappeared; and if Miss Entwhistle hadn't known her, hadn't known of her terrible loss, she would have said that here was some one who was quietly happy. It was subdued, but there it was, as if she had some private source of confidence and warmth. Had she by any chance got religion? wondered her aunt, who herself had never had it, and neither had Jim, and neither had any Entwhistles she had ever heard of. She dismissed that. It was too unlikely for one of their breed. But even the frequent necessary visits to the house in Bloomsbury she and her father had lived in so long didn't quite blot out the odd effect Lucy produced of being somehow inwardly secure. Presently, when these sad settlings up were done with, and the books and furniture stored, and the house handed over to the landlord, and she no longer had

to go to it and be among its memories, her face became what it used to be,—delicately coloured, softly rounded, ready to light up at a word, at a look.

Miss Entwhistle was puzzled. This serenity of the one who was, after all, chief mourner, made her feel it would be ridiculous if she outdid Lucy in grief. If Lucy could pull herself together so marvellously—and she supposed it must be that, it must be that she was heroically pulling herself together—she for her part wouldn't be behindhand. Her darling Jim's memory should be honoured, then, like this: she would bless God for him, bless God that she had had him, and in a high thankfulness continue cheerfully on her way.

Such were some of Miss Entwhistle's reflections and conclusions as she considered Lucy. She seemed to have no thought of the future,—again to her aunt's surprise and relief, who had been afraid she would very soon begin to worry about what she was to do next. She never talked of it; she never apparently thought of it. She seemed to be—yes, that was the word, decided Miss Entwhistle observing her—resting. But resting on what? A second time Miss Entwhistle dismissed the idea of religion. Impossible, she thought, that Jim's girl,—yet it did look very like religion.

There was, it appeared, enough money left scraped together by Jim for Lucy in case of his death to produce about two hundred pounds a year. This wasn't much; but Lucy apparently didn't give it a thought. Probably she didn't realise what it meant, thought

her aunt, because of her life with her father having been so easy, surrounded by all those necessities for an invalid which were, in fact, to ordinary people luxuries. No one had been appointed her guardian. There was no mention of Mr. Wemyss in the will. It was a very short will, leaving everything to Lucy. This, as far as it went, was admirable, thought Miss Entwhistle, but unfortunately there was hardly anything to leave. Except books; thousands of books, and the old charming furniture of the Bloomsbury house. Well, Lucy should live with her for as long as she could endure the dressing-room, and perhaps they might take a house together a little less tiny, though Miss Entwhistle had lived in the one she was in for so long that it wouldn't be very easy for her to leave it.

Meanwhile the first weeks of mourning slid by in an increasing serenity, with London empty and no one to intrude on what became presently distinctly recognisable as happiness. She and Lucy agreed so perfectly. And they weren't altogether alone either, for Mr. Wemyss came regularly twice a week, coming on the same days, and appearing so punctually on the stroke of five that at last she began to set her clocks by him.

He, too, poor man, seemed to be pulling himself together. He had none of the air of the recently bereaved, either in his features or his clothes. Not that he wore coloured ties or anything like that, but he certainly didn't produce an effect of blackness. His trousers, she observed, were grey; and not a particularly dark grey either. Well, perhaps it was no longer the fashion, thought Miss Entwhistle, eyeing these trousers with some doubt, to be very

unhappy. But she couldn't help thinking there ought to be a band on his left arm to counteract the impression of light-heartedness in his legs; a crape band, no matter how narrow, or a band of black anything, not necessarily crape, such as she was sure it was usual in these circumstances to wear.

However, whatever she felt about his legs she welcomed him with the utmost cordiality, mindful of his kindness to them down in Cornwall and of how she had clung to him there as her rock; and she soon got to remember the way he liked his tea, and had the biggest chair placed comfortably ready for him—the chairs were neither very big nor numerous in her spare little drawing-room—and did all she could in the way of hospitality and pleasant conversation. But the more she saw of him, and the more she heard of his talk, the more she wondered at Jim.

Mr. Wemyss was most good-natured, and she was sure, and as she knew from experience, was most kind and thoughtful; but the things he said were so very unlike the things Jim said, and his way of looking at things was so very unlike Jim's way. Not that there wasn't room in the world for everybody, Miss Entwhistle reminded herself, sitting at her tea-table observing Wemyss, who looked particularly big and prosperous in her small frugal room, and no doubt one star differed from another in glory; still, she did wonder at Jim. And if Mr. Wemyss could bear the loss of his wife to the extent of grey trousers, how was it he couldn't bear Jim's name so much as mentioned? Whenever the talk got on to Jim—it couldn't be kept off him in a circle composed of his daughter

and his sister and his friend—she noticed that Mr. Wemyss went silent. She would have taken this for excess of sensibility and the sign of a deep capacity for faithful devotion if it hadn't been for those trousers. Faced by them, it perplexed her.

While Miss Entwhistle was thinking like this and observing Wemyss, who never observed her at all after a first moment of surprise that she should look and behave so differently from the liquid lady of the cottage in Cornwall, that she should sit so straight and move so briskly, he and Lucy were, though present in the body, absent in love. Round them was drawn that magic circle through which nobody and nothing can penetrate, and within it they sat hand in hand and safe. Lucy's whole heart was his. He only had to come into the room for her to feel content. There was a naturalness, a bigness about his way of looking at things that made intricate, tormenting feelings shrink away in his presence ashamed. Quite apart from her love for him, her gratitude, her longing that he should go on now being happy and forget his awful tragedy, he was so very comfortable. She had never met any one so comfortable to lean on mentally. Bodily, on the few occasions on which her aunt was out of the room, he was comfortable too; he reminded her of the very nicest of sofas,—expensive ones, all cushions. But mentally he was more than comfortable, he was positively luxurious. Such perfect rest, listening to his talk. No thinking needed. Things according to him were either so, or so. With her father things had never been either so, or so; and one had had to frown, and concentrate, and make efforts to follow

and understand his distinctions, his infinitely numerous, delicate, difficult distinctions. Everard's plain division of everything into two categories only, snow-white and jet-black, was as reposeful as the Roman church. She hadn't got to strain or worry, she had only to surrender. And to what love, to what safety! At night she couldn't go to bed for thinking of how happy she was. She would sit quite still in the little dressing-room, her hands in her lap, and a proverb she had read somewhere running in her head:

When God shuts the door He opens the window.

Not for a moment, hardly, had she been left alone to suffer. Instantly, almost, Everard had come into her life and saved her. Lucy had indeed, as her aunt had twice suspected, got religion, but her religion was Wemyss. Ah, how she loved him! And every night she slept with his last letter under her pillow on the side of her heart.

As for Wemyss, if Lucy couldn't get over having got him he couldn't get over having got Lucy. He hadn't had such happiness as this, of this quality of tenderness, of goodness, in his life before. What he had felt for Vera had not at any time, he was sure, even at the beginning, been like this. While for the last few years—oh, well. Wemyss, when he found himself thinking of Vera, pulled up short. He declined to think of her now. She had filled his thoughts enough lately, and how terribly. His little angel Lucy had healed that wound, and there was no use in thinking of

an old wound; nobody healthy ever did that. He had explained to Lucy, who at first had been a little morbid, how wrong it is, how really wicked, besides being intensely stupid, not to get over things. Life, he had said, is for the living; let the dead have death. The present is the only real possession a man has, whatever clever people may say; and the wise man, who is also the natural man of simple healthy instincts and a proper natural shrinking from death and disease, does not allow the past, which after all anyhow is done for, to intrude upon, much less spoil, the present. That is what, he explained, the past will always do if it can. The only safe way to deal with it is to forget it.

'But I don't want to forget mine,' Lucy had said at that, opening her eyes, which as usual had been shut, because the commas of Wemyss's talk with her when they chanced to be alone were his soothing, soporific kisses dropped gently on her closed eyelids. 'Father—'

'Oh, you may remember yours,' he had answered, smiling tenderly down at the head lying on his breast. 'It's such a little one. But you'll see when you're older if your Everard wasn't right.'

To Wemyss in his new happiness it seemed that Vera had belonged to another life altogether, an elderly, stale life from which, being healthy-minded, he had managed to unstick himself and to emerge born again all new and fresh and fitted for the present. She was forty when she died. She had started life five years younger than he was, but had quickly caught him up and passed him, and had ended, he felt, by being considerably his

senior. And here was Lucy, only twenty-two anyhow, and looking like twelve. The contrast never ceased to delight him, to fill him with pride. And how pretty she was, now that she had left off crying. He adored her bobbed hair that gave her the appearance of a child or a very young boy, and he adored the little delicate lines of her nose and nostrils, and her rather big, kind mouth that so easily smiled, and her sweet eyes, the colour of Love-in-a-Mist. Not that he set any store by prettiness, he told himself; all he asked in a woman was devotion. But her being pretty would make it only the more exciting when the moment came to show her to his friends, to show his little girl to those friends who had dared slink away from him after Vera's death, and say, 'Look here—look at this perfect little thing—*she* believes in me all right!'

VIII

London being empty, Wemyss had it all his own way. No one else was there to cut him out, as his expression was. Lucy had many letters with offers of every kind of help from her father's friends, but naturally she needed no help and had no wish to see anybody in her present condition of secret contentment, and she replied to them with thanks and vague expressions of hope that later on they might all meet. One young man—he was the one who often proposed to her—wasn't to be put off like that, and journeyed all the way from Scotland, so great was his devotion, and found out from the caretaker of the Bloomsbury house that she was living with her aunt, and called at Eaton Terrace. But that afternoon Lucy and Miss Entwhistle were taking the air in a car Wemyss had hired, and at the very moment the young man was being turned away from the Eaton Terrace door Lucy was being rowed about the river at Hampton Court—very slowly, because of how soon Wemyss got hot—and her aunt, leaning on the stone parapet at the end of the Palace gardens, was observing her. It was a good thing the young man wasn't observing her too, for it wouldn't have made him happy.

'What is Mr. Wemyss?' asked Miss Entwhistle unexpectedly that evening, just as they were going to bed.

Lucy was taken aback. Her aunt hadn't asked a question or said a thing about him up to then, except general comments on

his kindness and good-nature.

'What is Mr. Wemyss?' she repeated stupidly; for she was not only taken aback, but also, she discovered, she had no idea. It had never occurred to her even to wonder what he was, much less to ask. She had been, as it were, asleep the whole time in a perfect contentment on his breast.

'Yes. What is he besides being a widower?' said Miss Entwhistle. 'We know he's that, but it is hardly a profession.'

'I—don't think I know,' said Lucy, looking and feeling very stupid.

'Oh well, perhaps he isn't anything,' said her aunt kissing her good-night. 'Except punctual,' she added, smiling, pausing a moment at her bedroom door.

And two or three days later, when Wemyss had again hired a car to take them for an outing to Windsor, while she and Lucy were tidying themselves for tea in the ladies' room of the hotel she turned from the looking-glass in the act of pinning back some hair loosened by motoring, and in spite of having a hairpin in her mouth said, again suddenly, 'What did Mrs. Wemyss die of?'

This unnerved Lucy. If she had stared stupidly at her aunt at the other question she stared aghast at her at this one.

'What did she die of?' she repeated, flushing.

'Yes. What illness was it?' asked her aunt, continuing to pin.

'It—wasn't an illness,' said Lucy helplessly.

'Not an illness?'

'I—believe it was an accident.'

'An accident?' said Miss Entwhistle, taking the hairpin out of her mouth and in her turn staring. 'What sort of an accident?'

'I think a rather serious one,' said Lucy, completely unnerved.

How could she bear to tell that dreadful story, the knowledge of which seemed somehow so intimately to bind her and Everard together with a sacred, terrible tie?

At that her aunt remarked that an accident resulting in death would usually be described as serious, and asked what its nature, apart from its seriousness, had been; and Lucy, driven into a corner, feeling instinctively that her aunt, who had already once or twice expressed what she said was her surprised admiration for Mr. Wemyss's heroic way of bearing his bereavement, might be too admiringly surprised altogether if she knew how tragically much he really had to bear, and might begin to inquire into the reasons of this heroism, took refuge in saying what she now saw she ought to have begun by saying, even though it wasn't true, that she didn't know.

'Ah,' said her aunt. 'Well—poor man. It's wonderful how he bears things.' And again in her mind's eye, and with an increased doubt, she saw the grey trousers.

That day at tea Wemyss, with the simple naturalness Lucy found so restful, the almost bald way he had of talking frankly about things more sophisticated people wouldn't have mentioned, began telling them of the last time he had been at Windsor.

It was the summer before, he said, and he and his wife—

at this Miss Entwhistle became attentive—had motored down one Sunday to lunch in that very room, and it had been so much crowded, and the crowding had been so monstrously mismanaged, that positively they had had to go away without having had lunch at all.

'Positively without having had any lunch at all,' repeated Wemyss, looking at them with a face full of astonished aggrivement at the mere recollection.

'Ah,' said Miss Entwhistle, leaning across to him, 'don't let us revive sad memories.'

Wemyss stared at her. Good heavens, he thought, did she think he was talking about Vera? Any one with a grain of sense would know he was only talking about the lunch he hadn't had.

He turned impatiently to Lucy, and addressed his next remark to her. But in another moment there was her aunt again.

'Mr. Wemyss,' she said, 'I've been dying to ask you—'

Again he was forced to attend. The pure air and rapid motion of the motoring intended to revive and brace his little love were apparently reviving and bracing his little love's aunt as well, for lately he had been unable to avoid noticing a tendency on her part to assert herself. During his first eight visits to Eaton Terrace—that made four weeks since his coming back to London and six since the funeral in Cornwall—he had hardly known she was in the room; except, of course, that she *was* in the room, completely hindering his courting. During those eight visits his first impression of her remained undisturbed in

his mind: she was a wailing creature who had hung round him in Cornwall in a constant state of tears. Down there she had behaved exactly like the traditional foolish woman when there is a death about,—no common sense, no grit, crying if you looked at her, and keeping up a continual dismal recital of the virtues of the departed. Also she had been obstinate; and she had, besides, shown unmistakable signs of selfishness. When he paid his first call in Eaton Terrace he did notice that she had considerably, indeed completely, dried up, and was therefore to that extent improved, but she still remained for him just Lucy's aunt,—somebody who poured out the tea, and who unfortunately hardly ever went out of the room; a necessary, though luckily a transitory, evil. But now it was gradually being borne in on him that she really existed, on her own account, independently. She asserted herself. Even when she wasn't saying anything—and often she said hardly a word during an entire outing—she still somehow asserted herself.

And here she was asserting herself very much indeed, and positively asking him across a tea-table which was undoubtedly for the moment his, asking him straight out what, if anything, he did in the way of a trade, profession or occupation.

She was his guest, and he regarded it as less than seemly for a guest to ask a host what he did. Not that he wouldn't gladly have told her if it had come from him of his own accord. Surely a man has a right, he thought, to his own accord. At all times Wemyss disliked being asked questions. Even the most innocent, ordinary

question appeared to him to be an encroachment on the right he surely had to be let alone.

Lucy's aunt between sips of tea—his tea—pretended, pleasantly it is true, and clothing what could be nothing but idle curiosity in words that were not disagreeable, that she was dying to know what he was. She could see for herself, she said, smiling down at the leg nearest her, that he wasn't a bishop, she was sure he wasn't either a painter, musician or writer, but she wouldn't be in the least surprised if he were to tell her he was an admiral.

Wemyss thought this intelligent of the aunt. He had no objection to being taken for an admiral; they were an honest, breezy lot.

Placated, he informed her that he was on the Stock Exchange. 'Ah,' nodded Miss Entwhistle, looking wise because on this subject she so completely wasn't, the Stock Exchange being an institution whose nature and operations were alien to anything the Entwhistles were familiar with; 'ah yes. Quite. Bulls and bears. Now I come to look at it, you have the Stock Exchange eye.'

'Foolish woman,' thought Wemyss, who for some reason didn't like being told before Lucy that he had the Stock Exchange eye; and he dismissed her impatiently from his mind and concentrated on his little love, asking himself while he did so how short he could, with any sort of propriety, cut this unpleasant time of restricted courting, of never being able to go anywhere with her unless her tiresome aunt came too.

Nearly two months now since both those deaths; surely Lucy's

aunt might soon be told now of the engagement. It was after this outing that he began in his letters, and in the few moments he and she were alone, to urge Lucy to tell her aunt. Nobody else need know, he wrote; it could go on being kept secret from the world; but the convenience of her aunt's knowing was so obvious,—think of how she would then keep out of the way, think of how she would leave them to themselves, anyhow indoors, anyhow in the house in Eaton Terrace.

Lucy, however, was reluctant. She demurred. She wrote begging him to be patient. She said that every week that passed would make their engagement less a thing that need surprise. She said that at present it would take too much explaining, and she wasn't sure that even at the end of the explanation her aunt would understand.

Wemyss wrote back brushing this aside. He said her aunt would have to understand, and if she didn't what did it matter so long as she knew? The great thing was that she should know. Then, he said, she would leave them alone together, instead of for ever sticking; and his little love must see how splendid it would be for him to come and spend happy hours with her quite alone. What was an aunt after all? he asked. What could she possibly be, compared to Lucy's own Everard? Besides, he disliked secrecy, he said. No honest man could stand an atmosphere of concealment. His little girl must make up her mind to tell her aunt, and believe that her Everard knew best; or, if she preferred it, he would tell her himself.

Lucy didn't prefer it, and was beginning to feel worried, because as the days went on Wemyss grew more and more persistent the more he became bored by Miss Entwhistle's development of an independent and inquiring mind, and she hated having to refuse or even to defer doing anything he asked, when her aunt one morning at breakfast, in the very middle of apparent complete serene absorption in her bacon, looked up suddenly over the coffee-pot and said, 'How long had your father known Mr. Wemyss?'

This settled things. Lucy felt she could bear no more of these shocks. A clean breast was the only thing left for her.

'Aunt Dot,' she stammered—Miss Entwhistle's Christian name was Dorothy,—'I'd like—I've got—I want to tell you—'

'After breakfast,' said Miss Entwhistle briskly. 'We shall need lots of time, and to be undisturbed. We'll go up into the drawing-room.'

And immediately she began talking about other things.

Was it possible, thought Lucy, her eyes carefully on her toast and butter, that Aunt Dot suspected?

IX

It was not only possible, but the fact. Aunt Dot had suspected, only she hadn't suspected anything like all that was presently imparted to her, and she found great difficulty in assimilating it. And two hours later Lucy, standing in the middle of the drawing-room, was still passionately saying to her, and saying it for perhaps the tenth time, 'But don't you *see*? It's just *because* what happened to him was so awful. It's nature asserting itself. If he couldn't be engaged now, if he couldn't reach up out of such a pit of blackness and get into touch with living things again and somebody who sympathises and—is fond of him, he would die, die or go mad; and oh, what's the *use* to the world of somebody good and fine being left to die or go mad? Aunt Dot, what's the *use*?'

And her aunt, sitting in her customary chair by the fireplace, continued to assimilate with difficulty. Also her face was puckered into folds of distress. She was seriously upset.

Lucy, looking at her, felt a kind of despair that she wasn't being able to make her aunt, whom she loved, see what she saw, understand what she understood, and so be, as she was, filled with confidence and happiness. Not that she was happy at that moment; she, too, was seriously upset, her face flushed, her eyes bright with effort to get Wemyss as she knew him, as he so simply was, through into her aunt's consciousness.

She had made her clean breast with a completeness that had included the confession that she did know what Mrs. Wemyss's accident had been, and she had described it. Her aunt was painfully shocked. Anything so horrible as that hadn't entered her mind. To fall past the very window her husband was sitting at ... it seemed to her dreadful that Lucy should be mixed up in it, and mixed up so instantly on the death of her of her natural protector, —of her two natural protectors, for hadn't Mrs. Wemyss as long as she existed also been one? She was bewildered, and couldn't understand the violent reactions that Lucy appeared to look upon as so natural in Wemyss. She would have concluded that she didn't understand because she was too old, because she was out of touch with the elasticities of the younger generation, but Wemyss must be very nearly as old as herself. Certainly he was of the same generation; and yet behold him, within a fortnight of his wife's most shocking death, able to forget her, able to fall in love—

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