VIRGINIA WOOLF

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

It was a Sunday evening in October, and in common with many other young ladies of her class, Katharine Hilbery was pouring out tea. Perhaps a fifth part of her mind was thus occupied, and the remaining parts leapt over the little barrier of day which interposed between Monday morning and this rather subdued moment, and played with the things one does voluntarily and normally in the daylight. But although she was silent, she was evidently mistress of a situation which was familiar enough to her, and inclined to let it take its way for the six hundredth time, perhaps, without bringing into play any of her unoccupied faculties. A single glance was enough to show that Mrs. Hilbery was so rich in the gifts which make tea-parties of elderly distinguished people successful, that she scarcely needed any help from her daughter, provided that the tiresome business of teacups and bread and butter was discharged for her.

Considering that the little party had been seated round the tea-table for less than twenty minutes, the animation observable on their faces, and the amount of sound they were producing collectively, were very creditable to the hostess. It suddenly came into Katharine's mind that if some one opened the door at this moment he would think that they were enjoying themselves; he would think, "What an extremely nice house to come into!" and instinctively she laughed, and said something to increase the noise, for the credit of the house presumably, since she herself had not been feeling exhilarated. At the very same moment, rather to her amusement, the door was flung open, and a young man entered the room. Katharine, as she shook hands with him, asked him, in her own mind, "Now, do you think we're enjoying ourselves enormously?"… "Mr. Denham, mother," she said aloud, for she saw that her mother had forgotten his name.

That fact was perceptible to Mr. Denham also, and increased the awkwardness which inevitably attends the entrance of a stranger into a room full of people much at their ease, and all launched upon sentences. At the same time, it seemed to Mr. Denham as if a thousand softly padded doors had closed between him and the street outside. A fine mist, the etherealized essence of the fog, hung visibly in the wide and rather empty space of the drawing-room, all silver where the candles were grouped on the tea-table, and ruddy again in the firelight. With the omnibuses and cabs still running in his head, and his body still tingling with his quick walk along the streets and in and out of traffic and foot-passengers, this drawing-room seemed very remote and still; and the faces of the elderly people were mellowed, at some distance from each other, and had a bloom on them owing to the fact that the air in the drawing-room was thickened by blue grains of mist. Mr. Denham had come in as Mr. Fortescue, the eminent novelist, reached the middle of a very long sentence. He kept this suspended while the newcomer sat down, and Mrs. Hilbery deftly joined the severed parts by leaning towards him and remarking:

"Now, what would you do if you were married to an engineer, and had to live in Manchester, Mr. Denham?"

"Surely she could learn Persian," broke in a thin, elderly gentleman. "Is there no retired schoolmaster or man of letters in Manchester with whom she could read Persian?"

"A cousin of ours has married and gone to live in Manchester," Katharine explained. Mr. Denham muttered something, which was indeed all that was required of him, and the novelist went on where he had left off. Privately, Mr. Denham cursed himself very sharply for having exchanged the freedom of the street for this sophisticated drawing-room, where, among other disagreeables, he certainly would not appear at his best. He glanced round him, and saw that, save for Katharine, they

were all over forty, the only consolation being that Mr. Fortescue was a considerable celebrity, so that to-morrow one might be glad to have met him.

"Have you ever been to Manchester?" he asked Katharine.

"Never," she replied.

"Why do you object to it, then?"

Katharine stirred her tea, and seemed to speculate, so Denham thought, upon the duty of filling somebody else's cup, but she was really wondering how she was going to keep this strange young man in harmony with the rest. She observed that he was compressing his teacup, so that there was danger lest the thin china might cave inwards. She could see that he was nervous; one would expect a bony young man with his face slightly reddened by the wind, and his hair not altogether smooth, to be nervous in such a party. Further, he probably disliked this kind of thing, and had come out of curiosity, or because her father had invited him – anyhow, he would not be easily combined with the rest.

"I should think there would be no one to talk to in Manchester," she replied at random. Mr. Fortescue had been observing her for a moment or two, as novelists are inclined to observe, and at this remark he smiled, and made it the text for a little further speculation.

"In spite of a slight tendency to exaggeration, Katharine decidedly hits the mark," he said, and lying back in his chair, with his opaque contemplative eyes fixed on the ceiling, and the tips of his fingers pressed together, he depicted, first the horrors of the streets of Manchester, and then the bare, immense moors on the outskirts of the town, and then the scrubby little house in which the girl would live, and then the professors and the miserable young students devoted to the more strenuous works of our younger dramatists, who would visit her, and how her appearance would change by degrees, and how she would fly to London, and how Katharine would have to lead her about, as one leads an eager dog on a chain, past rows of clamorous butchers' shops, poor dear creature.

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue," exclaimed Mrs. Hilbery, as he finished, "I had just written to say how I envied her! I was thinking of the big gardens and the dear old ladies in mittens, who read nothing but the "Spectator," and snuff the candles. Have they ALL disappeared? I told her she would find the nice things of London without the horrid streets that depress one so."

"There is the University," said the thin gentleman, who had previously insisted upon the existence of people knowing Persian.

"I know there are moors there, because I read about them in a book the other day," said Katharine.

"I am grieved and amazed at the ignorance of my family," Mr. Hilbery remarked. He was an elderly man, with a pair of oval, hazel eyes which were rather bright for his time of life, and relieved the heaviness of his face. He played constantly with a little green stone attached to his watch-chain, thus displaying long and very sensitive fingers, and had a habit of moving his head hither and thither very quickly without altering the position of his large and rather corpulent body, so that he seemed to be providing himself incessantly with food for amusement and reflection with the least possible expenditure of energy. One might suppose that he had passed the time of life when his ambitions were personal, or that he had gratified them as far as he was likely to do, and now employed his considerable acuteness rather to observe and reflect than to attain any result.

Katharine, so Denham decided, while Mr. Fortescue built up another rounded structure of words, had a likeness to each of her parents, but these elements were rather oddly blended. She had the quick, impulsive movements of her mother, the lips parting often to speak, and closing again; and the dark oval eyes of her father brimming with light upon a basis of sadness, or, since she was too young to have acquired a sorrowful point of view, one might say that the basis was not sadness so much as a spirit given to contemplation and self-control. Judging by her hair, her coloring, and the shape of her features, she was striking, if not actually beautiful. Decision and composure stamped her, a combination of qualities that produced a very marked character, and one that was not calculated to

put a young man, who scarcely knew her, at his ease. For the rest, she was tall; her dress was of some quiet color, with old yellow-tinted lace for ornament, to which the spark of an ancient jewel gave its one red gleam. Denham noticed that, although silent, she kept sufficient control of the situation to answer immediately her mother appealed to her for help, and yet it was obvious to him that she attended only with the surface skin of her mind. It struck him that her position at the tea-table, among all these elderly people, was not without its difficulties, and he checked his inclination to find her, or her attitude, generally antipathetic to him. The talk had passed over Manchester, after dealing with it very generously.

"Would it be the Battle of Trafalgar or the Spanish Armada, Katharine?" her mother demanded.

"Trafalgar, mother."

"Trafalgar, of course! How stupid of me! Another cup of tea, with a thin slice of lemon in it, and then, dear Mr. Fortescue, please explain my absurd little puzzle. One can't help believing gentlemen with Roman noses, even if one meets them in omnibuses."

Mr. Hilbery here interposed so far as Denham was concerned, and talked a great deal of sense about the solicitors' profession, and the changes which he had seen in his lifetime. Indeed, Denham properly fell to his lot, owing to the fact that an article by Denham upon some legal matter, published by Mr. Hilbery in his Review, had brought them acquainted. But when a moment later Mrs. Sutton Bailey was announced, he turned to her, and Mr. Denham found himself sitting silent, rejecting possible things to say, beside Katharine, who was silent too. Being much about the same age and both under thirty, they were prohibited from the use of a great many convenient phrases which launch conversation into smooth waters. They were further silenced by Katharine's rather malicious determination not to help this young man, in whose upright and resolute bearing she detected something hostile to her surroundings, by any of the usual feminine amenities. They therefore sat silent, Denham controlling his desire to say something abrupt and explosive, which should shock her into life. But Mrs. Hilbery was immediately sensitive to any silence in the drawing-room, as of a dumb note in a sonorous scale, and leaning across the table she observed, in the curiously tentative detached manner which always gave her phrases the likeness of butterflies flaunting from one sunny spot to another, "D'you know, Mr. Denham, you remind me so much of dear Mr. Ruskin… Is it his tie, Katharine, or his hair, or the way he sits in his chair? Do tell me, Mr. Denham, are you an admirer of Ruskin? Some one, the other day, said to me, 'Oh, no, we don't read Ruskin, Mrs. Hilbery.' What DO you read, I wonder? – for you can't spend all your time going up in aeroplanes and burrowing into the bowels of the earth."

She looked benevolently at Denham, who said nothing articulate, and then at Katharine, who smiled but said nothing either, upon which Mrs. Hilbery seemed possessed by a brilliant idea, and exclaimed:

"I'm sure Mr. Denham would like to see our things, Katharine. I'm sure he's not like that dreadful young man, Mr. Ponting, who told me that he considered it our duty to live exclusively in the present. After all, what IS the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half, too, I should say," she added, turning to Mr. Fortescue.

Denham rose, half meaning to go, and thinking that he had seen all that there was to see, but Katharine rose at the same moment, and saying, "Perhaps you would like to see the pictures," led the way across the drawing-room to a smaller room opening out of it.

The smaller room was something like a chapel in a cathedral, or a grotto in a cave, for the booming sound of the traffic in the distance suggested the soft surge of waters, and the oval mirrors, with their silver surface, were like deep pools trembling beneath starlight. But the comparison to a religious temple of some kind was the more apt of the two, for the little room was crowded with relics.

As Katharine touched different spots, lights sprang here and there, and revealed a square mass of red-and-gold books, and then a long skirt in blue-and-white paint lustrous behind glass, and then a mahogany writing-table, with its orderly equipment, and, finally, a picture above the table, to which

special illumination was accorded. When Katharine had touched these last lights, she stood back, as much as to say, "There!" Denham found himself looked down upon by the eyes of the great poet, Richard Alardyce, and suffered a little shock which would have led him, had he been wearing a hat, to remove it. The eyes looked at him out of the mellow pinks and yellows of the paint with divine friendliness, which embraced him, and passed on to contemplate the entire world. The paint had so faded that very little but the beautiful large eyes were left, dark in the surrounding dimness.

Katharine waited as though for him to receive a full impression, and then she said:

"This is his writing-table. He used this pen," and she lifted a quill pen and laid it down again. The writing-table was splashed with old ink, and the pen disheveled in service. There lay the gigantic gold-rimmed spectacles, ready to his hand, and beneath the table was a pair of large, worn slippers, one of which Katharine picked up, remarking:

"I think my grandfather must have been at least twice as large as any one is nowadays. This," she went on, as if she knew what she had to say by heart, "is the original manuscript of the 'Ode to Winter.' The early poems are far less corrected than the later. Would you like to look at it?"

While Mr. Denham examined the manuscript, she glanced up at her grandfather, and, for the thousandth time, fell into a pleasant dreamy state in which she seemed to be the companion of those giant men, of their own lineage, at any rate, and the insignificant present moment was put to shame. That magnificent ghostly head on the canvas, surely, never beheld all the trivialities of a Sunday afternoon, and it did not seem to matter what she and this young man said to each other, for they were only small people.

"This is a copy of the first edition of the poems," she continued, without considering the fact that Mr. Denham was still occupied with the manuscript, "which contains several poems that have not been reprinted, as well as corrections." She paused for a minute, and then went on, as if these spaces had all been calculated.

"That lady in blue is my great-grandmother, by Millington. Here is my uncle's walking-stick – he was Sir Richard Warburton, you know, and rode with Havelock to the Relief of Lucknow. And then, let me see – oh, that's the original Alardyce, 1697, the founder of the family fortunes, with his wife. Some one gave us this bowl the other day because it has their crest and initials. We think it must have been given them to celebrate their silver wedding-day."

Here she stopped for a moment, wondering why it was that Mr. Denham said nothing. Her feeling that he was antagonistic to her, which had lapsed while she thought of her family possessions, returned so keenly that she stopped in the middle of her catalog and looked at him. Her mother, wishing to connect him reputably with the great dead, had compared him with Mr. Ruskin; and the comparison was in Katharine's mind, and led her to be more critical of the young man than was fair, for a young man paying a call in a tail-coat is in a different element altogether from a head seized at its climax of expressiveness, gazing immutably from behind a sheet of glass, which was all that remained to her of Mr. Ruskin. He had a singular face – a face built for swiftness and decision rather than for massive contemplation; the forehead broad, the nose long and formidable, the lips clean-shaven and at once dogged and sensitive, the cheeks lean, with a deeply running tide of red blood in them. His eyes, expressive now of the usual masculine impersonality and authority, might reveal more subtle emotions under favorable circumstances, for they were large, and of a clear, brown color; they seemed unexpectedly to hesitate and speculate; but Katharine only looked at him to wonder whether his face would not have come nearer the standard of her dead heroes if it had been adorned with side-whiskers. In his spare build and thin, though healthy, cheeks, she saw tokens of an angular and acrid soul. His voice, she noticed, had a slight vibrating or creaking sound in it, as he laid down the manuscript and said:

"You must be very proud of your family, Miss Hilbery."

"Yes, I am," Katharine answered, and she added, "Do you think there's anything wrong in that?"

"Wrong? How should it be wrong? It must be a bore, though, showing your things to visitors," he added reflectively.

"Not if the visitors like them."

"Isn't it difficult to live up to your ancestors?" he proceeded.

"I dare say I shouldn't try to write poetry," Katharine replied.

"No. And that's what I should hate. I couldn't bear my grandfather to cut me out. And, after all," Denham went on, glancing round him satirically, as Katharine thought, "it's not your grandfather only. You're cut out all the way round. I suppose you come of one of the most distinguished families in England. There are the Warburtons and the Mannings – and you're related to the Otways, aren't you? I read it all in some magazine," he added.

"The Otways are my cousins," Katharine replied.

"Well," said Denham, in a final tone of voice, as if his argument were proved.

"Well," said Katharine, "I don't see that you've proved anything."

Denham smiled, in a peculiarly provoking way. He was amused and gratified to find that he had the power to annoy his oblivious, supercilious hostess, if he could not impress her; though he would have preferred to impress her.

He sat silent, holding the precious little book of poems unopened in his hands, and Katharine watched him, the melancholy or contemplative expression deepening in her eyes as her annoyance faded. She appeared to be considering many things. She had forgotten her duties.

"Well," said Denham again, suddenly opening the little book of poems, as though he had said all that he meant to say or could, with propriety, say. He turned over the pages with great decision, as if he were judging the book in its entirety, the printing and paper and binding, as well as the poetry, and then, having satisfied himself of its good or bad quality, he placed it on the writing-table, and examined the malacca cane with the gold knob which had belonged to the soldier.

"But aren't you proud of your family?" Katharine demanded.

"No," said Denham. "We've never done anything to be proud of – unless you count paying one's bills a matter for pride."

"That sounds rather dull," Katharine remarked.

"You would think us horribly dull," Denham agreed.

"Yes, I might find you dull, but I don't think I should find you ridiculous," Katharine added, as if Denham had actually brought that charge against her family.

"No – because we're not in the least ridiculous. We're a respectable middle-class family, living at Highgate."

"We don't live at Highgate, but we're middle class too, I suppose."

Denham merely smiled, and replacing the malacca cane on the rack, he drew a sword from its ornamental sheath.

"That belonged to Clive, so we say," said Katharine, taking up her duties as hostess again automatically.

"Is it a lie?" Denham inquired.

"It's a family tradition. I don't know that we can prove it."

"You see, we don't have traditions in our family," said Denham.

"You sound very dull," Katharine remarked, for the second time.

"Merely middle class," Denham replied.

"You pay your bills, and you speak the truth. I don't see why you should despise us."

Mr. Denham carefully sheathed the sword which the Hilberys said belonged to Clive.

"I shouldn't like to be you; that's all I said," he replied, as if he were saying what he thought as accurately as he could.

"No, but one never would like to be any one else."

"I should. I should like to be lots of other people."

"Then why not us?" Katharine asked.

Denham looked at her as she sat in her grandfather's arm-chair, drawing her great-uncle's malacca cane smoothly through her fingers, while her background was made up equally of lustrous blue-and-white paint, and crimson books with gilt lines on them. The vitality and composure of her attitude, as of a bright-plumed bird poised easily before further flights, roused him to show her the limitations of her lot. So soon, so easily, would he be forgotten.

"You'll never know anything at first hand," he began, almost savagely. "It's all been done for you. You'll never know the pleasure of buying things after saving up for them, or reading books for the first time, or making discoveries."

"Go on," Katharine observed, as he paused, suddenly doubtful, when he heard his voice proclaiming aloud these facts, whether there was any truth in them.

"Of course, I don't know how you spend your time," he continued, a little stiffly, "but I suppose you have to show people round. You are writing a life of your grandfather, aren't you? And this kind of thing" – he nodded towards the other room, where they could hear bursts of cultivated laughter – "must take up a lot of time."

She looked at him expectantly, as if between them they were decorating a small figure of herself, and she saw him hesitating in the disposition of some bow or sash.

"You've got it very nearly right," she said, "but I only help my mother. I don't write myself."

"Do you do anything yourself?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I don't leave the house at ten and come back at six."

"I don't mean that."

Mr. Denham had recovered his self-control; he spoke with a quietness which made Katharine rather anxious that he should explain himself, but at the same time she wished to annoy him, to waft him away from her on some light current of ridicule or satire, as she was wont to do with these intermittent young men of her father's.

"Nobody ever does do anything worth doing nowadays," she remarked. "You see" – she tapped the volume of her grandfather's poems – "we don't even print as well as they did, and as for poets or painters or novelists – there are none; so, at any rate, I'm not singular."

"No, we haven't any great men," Denham replied. "I'm very glad that we haven't. I hate great men. The worship of greatness in the nineteenth century seems to me to explain the worthlessness of that generation."

Katharine opened her lips and drew in her breath, as if to reply with equal vigor, when the shutting of a door in the next room withdrew her attention, and they both became conscious that the voices, which had been rising and falling round the tea-table, had fallen silent; the light, even, seemed to have sunk lower. A moment later Mrs. Hilbery appeared in the doorway of the ante-room. She stood looking at them with a smile of expectancy on her face, as if a scene from the drama of the younger generation were being played for her benefit. She was a remarkable-looking woman, well advanced in the sixties, but owing to the lightness of her frame and the brightness of her eyes she seemed to have been wafted over the surface of the years without taking much harm in the passage. Her face was shrunken and aquiline, but any hint of sharpness was dispelled by the large blue eyes, at once sagacious and innocent, which seemed to regard the world with an enormous desire that it should behave itself nobly, and an entire confidence that it could do so, if it would only take the pains.

Certain lines on the broad forehead and about the lips might be taken to suggest that she had known moments of some difficulty and perplexity in the course of her career, but these had not destroyed her trustfulness, and she was clearly still prepared to give every one any number of fresh chances and the whole system the benefit of the doubt. She wore a great resemblance to her father, and suggested, as he did, the fresh airs and open spaces of a younger world.

"Well," she said, "how do you like our things, Mr. Denham?"

Mr. Denham rose, put his book down, opened his mouth, but said nothing, as Katharine observed, with some amusement.

Mrs. Hilbery handled the book he had laid down.

"There are some books that LIVE," she mused. "They are young with us, and they grow old with us. Are you fond of poetry, Mr. Denham? But what an absurd question to ask! The truth is, dear Mr. Fortescue has almost tired me out. He is so eloquent and so witty, so searching and so profound that, after half an hour or so, I feel inclined to turn out all the lights. But perhaps he'd be more wonderful than ever in the dark. What d'you think, Katharine? Shall we give a little party in complete darkness? There'd have to be bright rooms for the bores…"

Here Mr. Denham held out his hand.

"But we've any number of things to show you!" Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed, taking no notice of it. "Books, pictures, china, manuscripts, and the very chair that Mary Queen of Scots sat in when she heard of Darnley's murder. I must lie down for a little, and Katharine must change her dress (though she's wearing a very pretty one), but if you don't mind being left alone, supper will be at eight. I dare say you'll write a poem of your own while you're waiting. Ah, how I love the firelight! Doesn't our room look charming?"

She stepped back and bade them contemplate the empty drawing-room, with its rich, irregular lights, as the flames leapt and wavered.

"Dear things!" she exclaimed. "Dear chairs and tables! How like old friends they are – faithful, silent friends. Which reminds me, Katharine, little Mr. Anning is coming to-night, and Tite Street, and Cadogan Square… Do remember to get that drawing of your great-uncle glazed. Aunt Millicent remarked it last time she was here, and I know how it would hurt me to see MY father in a broken glass."

It was like tearing through a maze of diamond-glittering spiders' webs to say good-bye and escape, for at each movement Mrs. Hilbery remembered something further about the villainies of picture-framers or the delights of poetry, and at one time it seemed to the young man that he would be hypnotized into doing what she pretended to want him to do, for he could not suppose that she attached any value whatever to his presence. Katharine, however, made an opportunity for him to leave, and for that he was grateful to her, as one young person is grateful for the understanding of another.

CHAPTER II

The young man shut the door with a sharper slam than any visitor had used that afternoon, and walked up the street at a great pace, cutting the air with his walking-stick. He was glad to find himself outside that drawing-room, breathing raw fog, and in contact with unpolished people who only wanted their share of the pavement allowed them. He thought that if he had had Mr. or Mrs. or Miss Hilbery out here he would have made them, somehow, feel his superiority, for he was chafed by the memory of halting awkward sentences which had failed to give even the young woman with the sad, but inwardly ironical eyes a hint of his force. He tried to recall the actual words of his little outburst, and unconsciously supplemented them by so many words of greater expressiveness that the irritation of his failure was somewhat assuaged. Sudden stabs of the unmitigated truth assailed him now and then, for he was not inclined by nature to take a rosy view of his conduct, but what with the beat of his foot upon the pavement, and the glimpse which half-drawn curtains offered him of kitchens, dining-rooms, and drawing-rooms, illustrating with mute power different scenes from different lives, his own experience lost its sharpness.

His own experience underwent a curious change. His speed slackened, his head sank a little towards his breast, and the lamplight shone now and again upon a face grown strangely tranquil. His thought was so absorbing that when it became necessary to verify the name of a street, he looked at it for a time before he read it; when he came to a crossing, he seemed to have to reassure himself by two or three taps, such as a blind man gives, upon the curb; and, reaching the Underground station, he blinked in the bright circle of light, glanced at his watch, decided that he might still indulge himself in darkness, and walked straight on.

And yet the thought was the thought with which he had started. He was still thinking about the people in the house which he had left; but instead of remembering, with whatever accuracy he could, their looks and sayings, he had consciously taken leave of the literal truth. A turn of the street, a firelit room, something monumental in the procession of the lamp-posts, who shall say what accident of light or shape had suddenly changed the prospect within his mind, and led him to murmur aloud:

"She'll do… Yes, Katharine Hilbery'll do… I'll take Katharine Hilbery."

As soon as he had said this, his pace slackened, his head fell, his eyes became fixed. The desire to justify himself, which had been so urgent, ceased to torment him, and, as if released from constraint, so that they worked without friction or bidding, his faculties leapt forward and fixed, as a matter of course, upon the form of Katharine Hilbery. It was marvellous how much they found to feed upon, considering the destructive nature of Denham's criticism in her presence. The charm, which he had tried to disown, when under the effect of it, the beauty, the character, the aloofness, which he had been determined not to feel, now possessed him wholly; and when, as happened by the nature of things, he had exhausted his memory, he went on with his imagination. He was conscious of what he was about, for in thus dwelling upon Miss Hilbery's qualities, he showed a kind of method, as if he required this vision of her for a particular purpose. He increased her height, he darkened her hair; but physically there was not much to change in her. His most daring liberty was taken with her mind, which, for reasons of his own, he desired to be exalted and infallible, and of such independence that it was only in the case of Ralph Denham that it swerved from its high, swift flight, but where he was concerned, though fastidious at first, she finally swooped from her eminence to crown him with her approval. These delicious details, however, were to be worked out in all their ramifications at his leisure; the main point was that Katharine Hilbery would do; she would do for weeks, perhaps for months. In taking her he had provided himself with something the lack of which had left a bare place in his mind for a considerable time. He gave a sigh of satisfaction; his consciousness of his actual position somewhere in the neighborhood of Knightsbridge returned to him, and he was soon speeding in the train towards Highgate.

Although thus supported by the knowledge of his new possession of considerable value, he was not proof against the familiar thoughts which the suburban streets and the damp shrubs growing in front gardens and the absurd names painted in white upon the gates of those gardens suggested to him. His walk was uphill, and his mind dwelt gloomily upon the house which he approached, where he would find six or seven brothers and sisters, a widowed mother, and, probably, some aunt or uncle sitting down to an unpleasant meal under a very bright light. Should he put in force the threat which, two weeks ago, some such gathering had wrung from him – the terrible threat that if visitors came on Sunday he should dine alone in his room? A glance in the direction of Miss Hilbery determined him to make his stand this very night, and accordingly, having let himself in, having verified the presence of Uncle Joseph by means of a bowler hat and a very large umbrella, he gave his orders to the maid, and went upstairs to his room.

He went up a great many flights of stairs, and he noticed, as he had very seldom noticed, how the carpet became steadily shabbier, until it ceased altogether, how the walls were discolored, sometimes by cascades of damp, and sometimes by the outlines of picture-frames since removed, how the paper flapped loose at the corners, and a great flake of plaster had fallen from the ceiling. The room itself was a cheerless one to return to at this inauspicious hour. A flattened sofa would, later in the evening, become a bed; one of the tables concealed a washing apparatus; his clothes and boots were disagreeably mixed with books which bore the gilt of college arms; and, for decoration, there hung upon the wall photographs of bridges and cathedrals and large, unprepossessing groups of insufficiently clothed young men, sitting in rows one above another upon stone steps. There was a look of meanness and shabbiness in the furniture and curtains, and nowhere any sign of luxury or even of a cultivated taste, unless the cheap classics in the book-case were a sign of an effort in that direction. The only object that threw any light upon the character of the room's owner was a large perch, placed in the window to catch the air and sun, upon which a tame and, apparently, decrepit rook hopped dryly from side to side. The bird, encouraged by a scratch behind the ear, settled upon Denham's shoulder. He lit his gas-fire and settled down in gloomy patience to await his dinner. After sitting thus for some minutes a small girl popped her head in to say,

"Mother says, aren't you coming down, Ralph? Uncle Joseph – "

"They're to bring my dinner up here," said Ralph, peremptorily; whereupon she vanished, leaving the door ajar in her haste to be gone. After Denham had waited some minutes, in the course of which neither he nor the rook took their eyes off the fire, he muttered a curse, ran downstairs, intercepted the parlor-maid, and cut himself a slice of bread and cold meat. As he did so, the dining-room door sprang open, a voice exclaimed "Ralph!" but Ralph paid no attention to the voice, and made off upstairs with his plate. He set it down in a chair opposite him, and ate with a ferocity that was due partly to anger and partly to hunger. His mother, then, was determined not to respect his wishes; he was a person of no importance in his own family; he was sent for and treated as a child. He reflected, with a growing sense of injury, that almost every one of his actions since opening the door of his room had been won from the grasp of the family system. By rights, he should have been sitting downstairs in the drawing-room describing his afternoon's adventures, or listening to the afternoon's adventures of other people; the room itself, the gas-fire, the arm-chair – all had been fought for; the wretched bird, with half its feathers out and one leg lamed by a cat, had been rescued under protest; but what his family most resented, he reflected, was his wish for privacy. To dine alone, or to sit alone after dinner, was flat rebellion, to be fought with every weapon of underhand stealth or of open appeal. Which did he dislike most – deception or tears? But, at any rate, they could not rob him of his thoughts; they could not make him say where he had been or whom he had seen. That was his own affair; that, indeed, was a step entirely in the right direction, and, lighting his pipe, and cutting up the remains of his meal for the benefit of the rook, Ralph calmed his rather excessive irritation and settled down to think over his prospects.

This particular afternoon was a step in the right direction, because it was part of his plan to get to know people beyond the family circuit, just as it was part of his plan to learn German this autumn, and to review legal books for Mr. Hilbery's "Critical Review." He had always made plans since he was a small boy; for poverty, and the fact that he was the eldest son of a large family, had given him the habit of thinking of spring and summer, autumn and winter, as so many stages in a prolonged campaign. Although he was still under thirty, this forecasting habit had marked two semicircular lines above his eyebrows, which threatened, at this moment, to crease into their wonted shapes. But instead of settling down to think, he rose, took a small piece of cardboard marked in large letters with the word OUT, and hung it upon the handle of his door. This done, he sharpened a pencil, lit a reading-lamp and opened his book. But still he hesitated to take his seat. He scratched the rook, he walked to the window; he parted the curtains, and looked down upon the city which lay, hazily luminous, beneath him. He looked across the vapors in the direction of Chelsea; looked fixedly for a moment, and then returned to his chair. But the whole thickness of some learned counsel's treatise upon Torts did not screen him satisfactorily. Through the pages he saw a drawing-room, very empty and spacious; he heard low voices, he saw women's figures, he could even smell the scent of the cedar log which flamed in the grate. His mind relaxed its tension, and seemed to be giving out now what it had taken in unconsciously at the time. He could remember Mr. Fortescue's exact words, and the rolling emphasis with which he delivered them, and he began to repeat what Mr. Fortescue had said, in Mr. Fortescue's own manner, about Manchester. His mind then began to wander about the house, and he wondered whether there were other rooms like the drawing-room, and he thought, inconsequently, how beautiful the bathroom must be, and how leisurely it was – the life of these well-kept people, who were, no doubt, still sitting in the same room, only they had changed their clothes, and little Mr. Anning was there, and the aunt who would mind if the glass of her father's picture was broken. Miss Hilbery had changed her dress ("although she's wearing such a pretty one," he heard her mother say), and she was talking to Mr. Anning, who was well over forty, and bald into the bargain, about books. How peaceful and spacious it was; and the peace possessed him so completely that his muscles slackened, his book drooped from his hand, and he forgot that the hour of work was wasting minute by minute.

He was roused by a creak upon the stair. With a guilty start he composed himself, frowned and looked intently at the fifty-sixth page of his volume. A step paused outside his door, and he knew that the person, whoever it might be, was considering the placard, and debating whether to honor its decree or not. Certainly, policy advised him to sit still in autocratic silence, for no custom can take root in a family unless every breach of it is punished severely for the first six months or so. But Ralph was conscious of a distinct wish to be interrupted, and his disappointment was perceptible when he heard the creaking sound rather farther down the stairs, as if his visitor had decided to withdraw. He rose, opened the door with unnecessary abruptness, and waited on the landing. The person stopped simultaneously half a flight downstairs.

"Ralph?" said a voice, inquiringly.

"Joan?"

"I was coming up, but I saw your notice."

"Well, come along in, then." He concealed his desire beneath a tone as grudging as he could make it.

Joan came in, but she was careful to show, by standing upright with one hand upon the mantelpiece, that she was only there for a definite purpose, which discharged, she would go.

She was older than Ralph by some three or four years. Her face was round but worn, and expressed that tolerant but anxious good humor which is the special attribute of elder sisters in large families. Her pleasant brown eyes resembled Ralph's, save in expression, for whereas he seemed to look straightly and keenly at one object, she appeared to be in the habit of considering everything

from many different points of view. This made her appear his elder by more years than existed in fact between them. Her gaze rested for a moment or two upon the rook. She then said, without any preface:

"It's about Charles and Uncle John's offer… Mother's been talking to me. She says she can't afford to pay for him after this term. She says she'll have to ask for an overdraft as it is."

"That's simply not true," said Ralph.

"No. I thought not. But she won't believe me when I say it."

Ralph, as if he could foresee the length of this familiar argument, drew up a chair for his sister and sat down himself.

"I'm not interrupting?" she inquired.

Ralph shook his head, and for a time they sat silent. The lines curved themselves in semicircles above their eyes.

"She doesn't understand that one's got to take risks," he observed, finally.

"I believe mother would take risks if she knew that Charles was the sort of boy to profit by it."

"He's got brains, hasn't he?" said Ralph. His tone had taken on that shade of pugnacity which suggested to his sister that some personal grievance drove him to take the line he did. She wondered what it might be, but at once recalled her mind, and assented.

"In some ways he's fearfully backward, though, compared with what you were at his age. And he's difficult at home, too. He makes Molly slave for him."

Ralph made a sound which belittled this particular argument. It was plain to Joan that she had struck one of her brother's perverse moods, and he was going to oppose whatever his mother said. He called her "she," which was a proof of it. She sighed involuntarily, and the sigh annoyed Ralph, and he exclaimed with irritation:

"It's pretty hard lines to stick a boy into an office at seventeen!"

"Nobody WANTS to stick him into an office," she said.

She, too, was becoming annoyed. She had spent the whole of the afternoon discussing wearisome details of education and expense with her mother, and she had come to her brother for help, encouraged, rather irrationally, to expect help by the fact that he had been out somewhere, she didn't know and didn't mean to ask where, all the afternoon.

Ralph was fond of his sister, and her irritation made him think how unfair it was that all these burdens should be laid on her shoulders.

"The truth is," he observed gloomily, "that I ought to have accepted Uncle John's offer. I should have been making six hundred a year by this time."

"I don't think that for a moment," Joan replied quickly, repenting of her annoyance. "The question, to my mind, is, whether we couldn't cut down our expenses in some way."

"A smaller house?"

"Fewer servants, perhaps."

Neither brother nor sister spoke with much conviction, and after reflecting for a moment what these proposed reforms in a strictly economical household meant, Ralph announced very decidedly:

"It's out of the question."

It was out of the question that she should put any more household work upon herself. No, the hardship must fall on him, for he was determined that his family should have as many chances of distinguishing themselves as other families had – as the Hilberys had, for example. He believed secretly and rather defiantly, for it was a fact not capable of proof, that there was something very remarkable about his family.

"If mother won't run risks – "

"You really can't expect her to sell out again."

"She ought to look upon it as an investment; but if she won't, we must find some other way, that's all."

A threat was contained in this sentence, and Joan knew, without asking, what the threat was. In the course of his professional life, which now extended over six or seven years, Ralph had saved, perhaps, three or four hundred pounds. Considering the sacrifices he had made in order to put by this sum it always amazed Joan to find that he used it to gamble with, buying shares and selling them again, increasing it sometimes, sometimes diminishing it, and always running the risk of losing every penny of it in a day's disaster. But although she wondered, she could not help loving him the better for his odd combination of Spartan self-control and what appeared to her romantic and childish folly. Ralph interested her more than any one else in the world, and she often broke off in the middle of one of these economic discussions, in spite of their gravity, to consider some fresh aspect of his character.

"I think you'd be foolish to risk your money on poor old Charles," she observed. "Fond as I am of him, he doesn't seem to me exactly brilliant… Besides, why should you be sacrificed?"

"My dear Joan," Ralph exclaimed, stretching himself out with a gesture of impatience, "don't you see that we've all got to be sacrificed? What's the use of denying it? What's the use of struggling against it? So it always has been, so it always will be. We've got no money and we never shall have any money. We shall just turn round in the mill every day of our lives until we drop and die, worn out, as most people do, when one comes to think of it."

Joan looked at him, opened her lips as if to speak, and closed them again. Then she said, very tentatively:

"Aren't you happy, Ralph?"

"No. Are you? Perhaps I'm as happy as most people, though. God knows whether I'm happy or not. What is happiness?"

He glanced with half a smile, in spite of his gloomy irritation, at his sister. She looked, as usual, as if she were weighing one thing with another, and balancing them together before she made up her mind.

"Happiness," she remarked at length enigmatically, rather as if she were sampling the word, and then she paused. She paused for a considerable space, as if she were considering happiness in all its bearings. "Hilda was here to-day," she suddenly resumed, as if they had never mentioned happiness. "She brought Bobbie – he's a fine boy now." Ralph observed, with an amusement that had a tinge of irony in it, that she was now going to sidle away quickly from this dangerous approach to intimacy on to topics of general and family interest. Nevertheless, he reflected, she was the only one of his family with whom he found it possible to discuss happiness, although he might very well have discussed happiness with Miss Hilbery at their first meeting. He looked critically at Joan, and wished that she did not look so provincial or suburban in her high green dress with the faded trimming, so patient, and almost resigned. He began to wish to tell her about the Hilberys in order to abuse them, for in the miniature battle which so often rages between two quickly following impressions of life, the life of the Hilberys was getting the better of the life of the Denhams in his mind, and he wanted to assure himself that there was some quality in which Joan infinitely surpassed Miss Hilbery. He should have felt that his own sister was more original, and had greater vitality than Miss Hilbery had; but his main impression of Katharine now was of a person of great vitality and composure; and at the moment he could not perceive what poor dear Joan had gained from the fact that she was the granddaughter of a man who kept a shop, and herself earned her own living. The infinite dreariness and sordidness of their life oppressed him in spite of his fundamental belief that, as a family, they were somehow remarkable.

"Shall you talk to mother?" Joan inquired. "Because, you see, the thing's got to be settled, one way or another. Charles must write to Uncle John if he's going there."

Ralph sighed impatiently.

"I suppose it doesn't much matter either way," he exclaimed. "He's doomed to misery in the long run."

A slight flush came into Joan's cheek.

"You know you're talking nonsense," she said. "It doesn't hurt any one to have to earn their own living. I'm very glad I have to earn mine."

Ralph was pleased that she should feel this, and wished her to continue, but he went on, perversely enough.

"Isn't that only because you've forgotten how to enjoy yourself? You never have time for anything decent – "

"As for instance?"

"Well, going for walks, or music, or books, or seeing interesting people. You never do anything that's really worth doing any more than I do."

"I always think you could make this room much nicer, if you liked," she observed.

"What does it matter what sort of room I have when I'm forced to spend all the best years of my life drawing up deeds in an office?"

"You said two days ago that you found the law so interesting."

"So it is if one could afford to know anything about it."

("That's Herbert only just going to bed now," Joan interposed, as a door on the landing slammed vigorously. "And then he won't get up in the morning.")

Ralph looked at the ceiling, and shut his lips closely together. Why, he wondered, could Joan never for one moment detach her mind from the details of domestic life? It seemed to him that she was getting more and more enmeshed in them, and capable of shorter and less frequent flights into the outer world, and yet she was only thirty-three.

"D'you ever pay calls now?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't often have the time. Why do you ask?"

"It might be a good thing, to get to know new people, that's all."

"Poor Ralph!" said Joan suddenly, with a smile. "You think your sister's getting very old and very dull – that's it, isn't it?"

"I don't think anything of the kind," he said stoutly, but he flushed. "But you lead a dog's life, Joan. When you're not working in an office, you're worrying over the rest of us. And I'm not much good to you, I'm afraid."

Joan rose, and stood for a moment warming her hands, and, apparently, meditating as to whether she should say anything more or not. A feeling of great intimacy united the brother and sister, and the semicircular lines above their eyebrows disappeared. No, there was nothing more to be said on either side. Joan brushed her brother's head with her hand as she passed him, murmured good night, and left the room. For some minutes after she had gone Ralph lay quiescent, resting his head on his hand, but gradually his eyes filled with thought, and the line reappeared on his brow, as the pleasant impression of companionship and ancient sympathy waned, and he was left to think on alone.

After a time he opened his book, and read on steadily, glancing once or twice at his watch, as if he had set himself a task to be accomplished in a certain measure of time. Now and then he heard voices in the house, and the closing of bedroom doors, which showed that the building, at the top of which he sat, was inhabited in every one of its cells. When midnight struck, Ralph shut his book, and with a candle in his hand, descended to the ground floor, to ascertain that all lights were extinct and all doors locked. It was a threadbare, well-worn house that he thus examined, as if the inmates had grazed down all luxuriance and plenty to the verge of decency; and in the night, bereft of life, bare places and ancient blemishes were unpleasantly visible. Katharine Hilbery, he thought, would condemn it off-hand.

CHAPTER III

Denham had accused Katharine Hilbery of belonging to one of the most distinguished families in England, and if any one will take the trouble to consult Mr. Galton's "Hereditary Genius," he will find that this assertion is not far from the truth. The Alardyces, the Hilberys, the Millingtons, and the Otways seem to prove that intellect is a possession which can be tossed from one member of a certain group to another almost indefinitely, and with apparent certainty that the brilliant gift will be safely caught and held by nine out of ten of the privileged race. They had been conspicuous judges and admirals, lawyers and servants of the State for some years before the richness of the soil culminated in the rarest flower that any family can boast, a great writer, a poet eminent among the poets of England, a Richard Alardyce; and having produced him, they proved once more the amazing virtues of their race by proceeding unconcernedly again with their usual task of breeding distinguished men. They had sailed with Sir John Franklin to the North Pole, and ridden with Havelock to the Relief of Lucknow, and when they were not lighthouses firmly based on rock for the guidance of their generation, they were steady, serviceable candles, illuminating the ordinary chambers of daily life. Whatever profession you looked at, there was a Warburton or an Alardyce, a Millington or a Hilbery somewhere in authority and prominence.

It may be said, indeed, that English society being what it is, no very great merit is required, once you bear a well-known name, to put you into a position where it is easier on the whole to be eminent than obscure. And if this is true of the sons, even the daughters, even in the nineteenth century, are apt to become people of importance – philanthropists and educationalists if they are spinsters, and the wives of distinguished men if they marry. It is true that there were several lamentable exceptions to this rule in the Alardyce group, which seems to indicate that the cadets of such houses go more rapidly to the bad than the children of ordinary fathers and mothers, as if it were somehow a relief to them. But, on the whole, in these first years of the twentieth century, the Alardyces and their relations were keeping their heads well above water. One finds them at the tops of professions, with letters after their names; they sit in luxurious public offices, with private secretaries attached to them; they write solid books in dark covers, issued by the presses of the two great universities, and when one of them dies the chances are that another of them writes his biography.

Now the source of this nobility was, of course, the poet, and his immediate descendants, therefore, were invested with greater luster than the collateral branches. Mrs. Hilbery, in virtue of her position as the only child of the poet, was spiritually the head of the family, and Katharine, her daughter, had some superior rank among all the cousins and connections, the more so because she was an only child. The Alardyces had married and intermarried, and their offspring were generally profuse, and had a way of meeting regularly in each other's houses for meals and family celebrations which had acquired a semi-sacred character, and were as regularly observed as days of feasting and fasting in the Church.

In times gone by, Mrs. Hilbery had known all the poets, all the novelists, all the beautiful women and distinguished men of her time. These being now either dead or secluded in their infirm glory, she made her house a meeting-place for her own relations, to whom she would lament the passing of the great days of the nineteenth century, when every department of letters and art was represented in England by two or three illustrious names. Where are their successors? she would ask, and the absence of any poet or painter or novelist of the true caliber at the present day was a text upon which she liked to ruminate, in a sunset mood of benignant reminiscence, which it would have been hard to disturb had there been need. But she was far from visiting their inferiority upon the younger generation. She welcomed them very heartily to her house, told them her stories, gave them sovereigns and ices and good advice, and weaved round them romances which had generally no likeness to the truth.

The quality of her birth oozed into Katharine's consciousness from a dozen different sources as soon as she was able to perceive anything. Above her nursery fireplace hung a photograph of her grandfather's tomb in Poets' Corner, and she was told in one of those moments of grown-up confidence which are so tremendously impressive to the child's mind, that he was buried there because he was a "good and great man." Later, on an anniversary, she was taken by her mother through the fog in a hansom cab, and given a large bunch of bright, sweet-scented flowers to lay upon his tomb. The candles in the church, the singing and the booming of the organ, were all, she thought, in his honor. Again and again she was brought down into the drawing-room to receive the blessing of some awful distinguished old man, who sat, even to her childish eye, somewhat apart, all gathered together and clutching a stick, unlike an ordinary visitor in her father's own arm-chair, and her father himself was there, unlike himself, too, a little excited and very polite. These formidable old creatures used to take her in their arms, look very keenly in her eyes, and then to bless her, and tell her that she must mind and be a good girl, or detect a look in her face something like Richard's as a small boy. That drew down upon her her mother's fervent embrace, and she was sent back to the nursery very proud, and with a mysterious sense of an important and unexplained state of things, which time, by degrees, unveiled to her.

There were always visitors – uncles and aunts and cousins "from India," to be reverenced for their relationship alone, and others of the solitary and formidable class, whom she was enjoined by her parents to "remember all your life." By these means, and from hearing constant talk of great men and their works, her earliest conceptions of the world included an august circle of beings to whom she gave the names of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, and so on, who were, for some reason, much more nearly akin to the Hilberys than to other people. They made a kind of boundary to her vision of life, and played a considerable part in determining her scale of good and bad in her own small affairs. Her descent from one of these gods was no surprise to her, but matter for satisfaction, until, as the years wore on, the privileges of her lot were taken for granted, and certain drawbacks made themselves very manifest. Perhaps it is a little depressing to inherit not lands but an example of intellectual and spiritual virtue; perhaps the conclusiveness of a great ancestor is a little discouraging to those who run the risk of comparison with him. It seems as if, having flowered so splendidly, nothing now remained possible but a steady growth of good, green stalk and leaf. For these reasons, and for others, Katharine had her moments of despondency. The glorious past, in which men and women grew to unexampled size, intruded too much upon the present, and dwarfed it too consistently, to be altogether encouraging to one forced to make her experiment in living when the great age was dead.

She was drawn to dwell upon these matters more than was natural, in the first place owing to her mother's absorption in them, and in the second because a great part of her time was spent in imagination with the dead, since she was helping her mother to produce a life of the great poet. When Katharine was seventeen or eighteen – that is to say, some ten years ago – her mother had enthusiastically announced that now, with a daughter to help her, the biography would soon be published. Notices to this effect found their way into the literary papers, and for some time Katharine worked with a sense of great pride and achievement.

Lately, however, it had seemed to her that they were making no way at all, and this was the more tantalizing because no one with the ghost of a literary temperament could doubt but that they had materials for one of the greatest biographies that has ever been written. Shelves and boxes bulged with the precious stuff. The most private lives of the most interesting people lay furled in yellow bundles of close-written manuscript. In addition to this Mrs. Hilbery had in her own head as bright a vision of that time as now remained to the living, and could give those flashes and thrills to the old words which gave them almost the substance of flesh. She had no difficulty in writing, and covered a page every morning as instinctively as a thrush sings, but nevertheless, with all this to urge and inspire, and the most devout intention to accomplish the work, the book still remained unwritten. Papers accumulated

without much furthering their task, and in dull moments Katharine had her doubts whether they would ever produce anything at all fit to lay before the public. Where did the difficulty lie? Not in their materials, alas! nor in their ambitions, but in something more profound, in her own inaptitude, and above all, in her mother's temperament. Katharine would calculate that she had never known her write for more than ten minutes at a time. Ideas came to her chiefly when she was in motion. She liked to perambulate the room with a duster in her hand, with which she stopped to polish the backs of already lustrous books, musing and romancing as she did so. Suddenly the right phrase or the penetrating point of view would suggest itself, and she would drop her duster and write ecstatically for a few breathless moments; and then the mood would pass away, and the duster would be sought for, and the old books polished again. These spells of inspiration never burnt steadily, but flickered over the gigantic mass of the subject as capriciously as a will-o'-the-wisp, lighting now on this point, now on that. It was as much as Katharine could do to keep the pages of her mother's manuscript in order, but to sort them so that the sixteenth year of Richard Alardyce's life succeeded the fifteenth was beyond her skill. And yet they were so brilliant, these paragraphs, so nobly phrased, so lightning-like in their illumination, that the dead seemed to crowd the very room. Read continuously, they produced a sort of vertigo, and set her asking herself in despair what on earth she was to do with them? Her mother refused, also, to face the radical questions of what to leave in and what to leave out. She could not decide how far the public was to be told the truth about the poet's separation from his wife. She drafted passages to suit either case, and then liked each so well that she could not decide upon the rejection of either.

But the book must be written. It was a duty that they owed the world, and to Katharine, at least, it meant more than that, for if they could not between them get this one book accomplished they had no right to their privileged position. Their increment became yearly more and more unearned. Besides, it must be established indisputably that her grandfather was a very great man.

By the time she was twenty-seven, these thoughts had become very familiar to her. They trod their way through her mind as she sat opposite her mother of a morning at a table heaped with bundles of old letters and well supplied with pencils, scissors, bottles of gum, india-rubber bands, large envelopes, and other appliances for the manufacture of books. Shortly before Ralph Denham's visit, Katharine had resolved to try the effect of strict rules upon her mother's habits of literary composition. They were to be seated at their tables every morning at ten o'clock, with a clean-swept morning of empty, secluded hours before them. They were to keep their eyes fast upon the paper, and nothing was to tempt them to speech, save at the stroke of the hour when ten minutes for relaxation were to be allowed them. If these rules were observed for a year, she made out on a sheet of paper that the completion of the book was certain, and she laid her scheme before her mother with a feeling that much of the task was already accomplished. Mrs. Hilbery examined the sheet of paper very carefully. Then she clapped her hands and exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Well done, Katharine! What a wonderful head for business you've got! Now I shall keep this before me, and every day I shall make a little mark in my pocketbook, and on the last day of all – let me think, what shall we do to celebrate the last day of all? If it weren't the winter we could take a jaunt to Italy. They say Switzerland's very lovely in the snow, except for the cold. But, as you say, the great thing is to finish the book. Now let me see – "

When they inspected her manuscripts, which Katharine had put in order, they found a state of things well calculated to dash their spirits, if they had not just resolved on reform. They found, to begin with, a great variety of very imposing paragraphs with which the biography was to open; many of these, it is true, were unfinished, and resembled triumphal arches standing upon one leg, but, as Mrs. Hilbery observed, they could be patched up in ten minutes, if she gave her mind to it. Next, there was an account of the ancient home of the Alardyces, or rather, of spring in Suffolk, which was very beautifully written, although not essential to the story. However, Katharine had put together a string of names and dates, so that the poet was capably brought into the world, and his ninth year

was reached without further mishap. After that, Mrs. Hilbery wished, for sentimental reasons, to introduce the recollections of a very fluent old lady, who had been brought up in the same village, but these Katharine decided must go. It might be advisable to introduce here a sketch of contemporary poetry contributed by Mr. Hilbery, and thus terse and learned and altogether out of keeping with the rest, but Mrs. Hilbery was of opinion that it was too bare, and made one feel altogether like a good little girl in a lecture-room, which was not at all in keeping with her father. It was put on one side. Now came the period of his early manhood, when various affairs of the heart must either be concealed or revealed; here again Mrs. Hilbery was of two minds, and a thick packet of manuscript was shelved for further consideration.

Several years were now altogether omitted, because Mrs. Hilbery had found something distasteful to her in that period, and had preferred to dwell upon her own recollections as a child. After this, it seemed to Katharine that the book became a wild dance of will-o'-the-wisps, without form or continuity, without coherence even, or any attempt to make a narrative. Here were twenty pages upon her grandfather's taste in hats, an essay upon contemporary china, a long account of a summer day's expedition into the country, when they had missed their train, together with fragmentary visions of all sorts of famous men and women, which seemed to be partly imaginary and partly authentic. There were, moreover, thousands of letters, and a mass of faithful recollections contributed by old friends, which had grown yellow now in their envelopes, but must be placed somewhere, or their feelings would be hurt. So many volumes had been written about the poet since his death that she had also to dispose of a great number of misstatements, which involved minute researches and much correspondence. Sometimes Katharine brooded, half crushed, among her papers; sometimes she felt that it was necessary for her very existence that she should free herself from the past; at others, that the past had completely displaced the present, which, when one resumed life after a morning among the dead, proved to be of an utterly thin and inferior composition.

The worst of it was that she had no aptitude for literature. She did not like phrases. She had even some natural antipathy to that process of self-examination, that perpetual effort to understand one's own feeling, and express it beautifully, fitly, or energetically in language, which constituted so great a part of her mother's existence. She was, on the contrary, inclined to be silent; she shrank from expressing herself even in talk, let alone in writing. As this disposition was highly convenient in a family much given to the manufacture of phrases, and seemed to argue a corresponding capacity for action, she was, from her childhood even, put in charge of household affairs. She had the reputation, which nothing in her manner contradicted, of being the most practical of people. Ordering meals, directing servants, paying bills, and so contriving that every clock ticked more or less accurately in time, and a number of vases were always full of fresh flowers was supposed to be a natural endowment of hers, and, indeed, Mrs. Hilbery often observed that it was poetry the wrong side out. From a very early age, too, she had to exert herself in another capacity; she had to counsel and help and generally sustain her mother. Mrs. Hilbery would have been perfectly well able to sustain herself if the world had been what the world is not. She was beautifully adapted for life in another planet. But the natural genius she had for conducting affairs there was of no real use to her here. Her watch, for example, was a constant source of surprise to her, and at the age of sixty-five she was still amazed at the ascendancy which rules and reasons exerted over the lives of other people. She had never learnt her lesson, and had constantly to be punished for her ignorance. But as that ignorance was combined with a fine natural insight which saw deep whenever it saw at all, it was not possible to write Mrs. Hilbery off among the dunces; on the contrary, she had a way of seeming the wisest person in the room. But, on the whole, she found it very necessary to seek support in her daughter.

Katharine, thus, was a member of a very great profession which has, as yet, no title and very little recognition, although the labor of mill and factory is, perhaps, no more severe and the results of less benefit to the world. She lived at home. She did it very well, too. Any one coming to the house in Cheyne Walk felt that here was an orderly place, shapely, controlled – a place where life had been

trained to show to the best advantage, and, though composed of different elements, made to appear harmonious and with a character of its own. Perhaps it was the chief triumph of Katharine's art that Mrs. Hilbery's character predominated. She and Mr. Hilbery appeared to be a rich background for her mother's more striking qualities.

Silence being, thus, both natural to her and imposed upon her, the only other remark that her mother's friends were in the habit of making about it was that it was neither a stupid silence nor an indifferent silence. But to what quality it owed its character, since character of some sort it had, no one troubled themselves to inquire. It was understood that she was helping her mother to produce a great book. She was known to manage the household. She was certainly beautiful. That accounted for her satisfactorily. But it would have been a surprise, not only to other people but to Katharine herself, if some magic watch could have taken count of the moments spent in an entirely different occupation from her ostensible one. Sitting with faded papers before her, she took part in a series of scenes such as the taming of wild ponies upon the American prairies, or the conduct of a vast ship in a hurricane round a black promontory of rock, or in others more peaceful, but marked by her complete emancipation from her present surroundings and, needless to say, by her surpassing ability in her new vocation. When she was rid of the pretense of paper and pen, phrase-making and biography, she turned her attention in a more legitimate direction, though, strangely enough, she would rather have confessed her wildest dreams of hurricane and prairie than the fact that, upstairs, alone in her room, she rose early in the morning or sat up late at night to… work at mathematics. No force on earth would have made her confess that. Her actions when thus engaged were furtive and secretive, like those of some nocturnal animal. Steps had only to sound on the staircase, and she slipped her paper between the leaves of a great Greek dictionary which she had purloined from her father's room for this purpose. It was only at night, indeed, that she felt secure enough from surprise to concentrate her mind to the utmost.

Perhaps the unwomanly nature of the science made her instinctively wish to conceal her love of it. But the more profound reason was that in her mind mathematics were directly opposed to literature. She would not have cared to confess how infinitely she preferred the exactitude, the star-like impersonality, of figures to the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose. There was something a little unseemly in thus opposing the tradition of her family; something that made her feel wrong-headed, and thus more than ever disposed to shut her desires away from view and cherish them with extraordinary fondness. Again and again she was thinking of some problem when she should have been thinking of her grandfather. Waking from these trances, she would see that her mother, too, had lapsed into some dream almost as visionary as her own, for the people who played their parts in it had long been numbered among the dead. But, seeing her own state mirrored in her mother's face, Katharine would shake herself awake with a sense of irritation. Her mother was the last person she wished to resemble, much though she admired her. Her common sense would assert itself almost brutally, and Mrs. Hilbery, looking at her with her odd sidelong glance, that was half malicious and half tender, would liken her to "your wicked old Uncle Judge Peter, who used to be heard delivering sentence of death in the bathroom. Thank Heaven, Katharine, I've not a drop of HIM in me!"

CHAPTER IV

At about nine o'clock at night, on every alternate Wednesday, Miss Mary Datchet made the same resolve, that she would never again lend her rooms for any purposes whatsoever. Being, as they were, rather large and conveniently situated in a street mostly dedicated to offices off the Strand, people who wished to meet, either for purposes of enjoyment, or to discuss art, or to reform the State, had a way of suggesting that Mary had better be asked to lend them her rooms. She always met the request with the same frown of well-simulated annoyance, which presently dissolved in a kind of half-humorous, half-surly shrug, as of a large dog tormented by children who shakes his ears. She would lend her room, but only on condition that all the arrangements were made by her. This fortnightly meeting of a society for the free discussion of everything entailed a great deal of moving, and pulling, and ranging of furniture against the wall, and placing of breakable and precious things in safe places. Miss Datchet was quite capable of lifting a kitchen table on her back, if need were, for although well-proportioned and dressed becomingly, she had the appearance of unusual strength and determination.

She was some twenty-five years of age, but looked older because she earned, or intended to earn, her own living, and had already lost the look of the irresponsible spectator, and taken on that of the private in the army of workers. Her gestures seemed to have a certain purpose, the muscles round eyes and lips were set rather firmly, as though the senses had undergone some discipline, and were held ready for a call on them. She had contracted two faint lines between her eyebrows, not from anxiety but from thought, and it was quite evident that all the feminine instincts of pleasing, soothing, and charming were crossed by others in no way peculiar to her sex. For the rest she was brown-eyed, a little clumsy in movement, and suggested country birth and a descent from respectable hard-working ancestors, who had been men of faith and integrity rather than doubters or fanatics.

At the end of a fairly hard day's work it was certainly something of an effort to clear one's room, to pull the mattress off one's bed, and lay it on the floor, to fill a pitcher with cold coffee, and to sweep a long table clear for plates and cups and saucers, with pyramids of little pink biscuits between them; but when these alterations were effected, Mary felt a lightness of spirit come to her, as if she had put off the stout stuff of her working hours and slipped over her entire being some vesture of thin, bright silk. She knelt before the fire and looked out into the room. The light fell softly, but with clear radiance, through shades of yellow and blue paper, and the room, which was set with one or two sofas resembling grassy mounds in their lack of shape, looked unusually large and quiet. Mary was led to think of the heights of a Sussex down, and the swelling green circle of some camp of ancient warriors. The moonlight would be falling there so peacefully now, and she could fancy the rough pathway of silver upon the wrinkled skin of the sea.

"And here we are," she said, half aloud, half satirically, yet with evident pride, "talking about art."

She pulled a basket containing balls of differently colored wools and a pair of stockings which needed darning towards her, and began to set her fingers to work; while her mind, reflecting the lassitude of her body, went on perversely, conjuring up visions of solitude and quiet, and she pictured herself laying aside her knitting and walking out on to the down, and hearing nothing but the sheep cropping the grass close to the roots, while the shadows of the little trees moved very slightly this way and that in the moonlight, as the breeze went through them. But she was perfectly conscious of her present situation, and derived some pleasure from the reflection that she could rejoice equally in solitude, and in the presence of the many very different people who were now making their way, by divers paths, across London to the spot where she was sitting.

As she ran her needle in and out of the wool, she thought of the various stages in her own life which made her present position seem the culmination of successive miracles. She thought of her clerical father in his country parsonage, and of her mother's death, and of her own determination to

obtain education, and of her college life, which had merged, not so very long ago, in the wonderful maze of London, which still seemed to her, in spite of her constitutional level-headedness, like a vast electric light, casting radiance upon the myriads of men and women who crowded round it. And here she was at the very center of it all, that center which was constantly in the minds of people in remote Canadian forests and on the plains of India, when their thoughts turned to England. The nine mellow strokes, by which she was now apprised of the hour, were a message from the great clock at Westminster itself. As the last of them died away, there was a firm knocking on her own door, and she rose and opened it. She returned to the room, with a look of steady pleasure in her eyes, and she was talking to Ralph Denham, who followed her.

"Alone?" he said, as if he were pleasantly surprised by that fact.

"I am sometimes alone," she replied.

"But you expect a great many people," he added, looking round him. "It's like a room on the stage. Who is it to-night?"

"William Rodney, upon the Elizabethan use of metaphor. I expect a good solid paper, with plenty of quotations from the classics."

Ralph warmed his hands at the fire, which was flapping bravely in the grate, while Mary took up her stocking again.

"I suppose you are the only woman in London who darns her own stockings," he observed.

"I'm only one of a great many thousands really," she replied, "though I must admit that I was thinking myself very remarkable when you came in. And now that you're here I don't think myself remarkable at all. How horrid of you! But I'm afraid you're much more remarkable than I am. You've done much more than I've done."

"If that's your standard, you've nothing to be proud of," said Ralph grimly.

"Well, I must reflect with Emerson that it's being and not doing that matters," she continued.

"Emerson?" Ralph exclaimed, with derision. "You don't mean to say you read Emerson?"

"Perhaps it wasn't Emerson; but why shouldn't I read Emerson?" she asked, with a tinge of anxiety.

"There's no reason that I know of. It's the combination that's odd – books and stockings. The combination is very odd." But it seemed to recommend itself to him. Mary gave a little laugh, expressive of happiness, and the particular stitches that she was now putting into her work appeared to her to be done with singular grace and felicity. She held out the stocking and looked at it approvingly.

"You always say that," she said. "I assure you it's a common 'combination,' as you call it, in the houses of the clergy. The only thing that's odd about me is that I enjoy them both – Emerson and the stocking."

A knock was heard, and Ralph exclaimed:

"Damn those people! I wish they weren't coming!"

"It's only Mr. Turner, on the floor below," said Mary, and she felt grateful to Mr. Turner for having alarmed Ralph, and for having given a false alarm.

"Will there be a crowd?" Ralph asked, after a pause.

"There'll be the Morrises and the Crashaws, and Dick Osborne, and Septimus, and all that set. Katharine Hilbery is coming, by the way, so William Rodney told me."

"Katharine Hilbery!" Ralph exclaimed.

"You know her?" Mary asked, with some surprise.

"I went to a tea-party at her house."

Mary pressed him to tell her all about it, and Ralph was not at all unwilling to exhibit proofs of the extent of his knowledge. He described the scene with certain additions and exaggerations which interested Mary very much.

"But, in spite of what you say, I do admire her," she said. "I've only seen her once or twice, but she seems to me to be what one calls a 'personality.'"

"I didn't mean to abuse her. I only felt that she wasn't very sympathetic to me."

"They say she's going to marry that queer creature Rodney."

"Marry Rodney? Then she must be more deluded than I thought her."

"Now that's my door, all right," Mary exclaimed, carefully putting her wools away, as a succession of knocks reverberated unnecessarily, accompanied by a sound of people stamping their feet and laughing. A moment later the room was full of young men and women, who came in with a peculiar look of expectation, exclaimed "Oh!" when they saw Denham, and then stood still, gaping rather foolishly.

The room very soon contained between twenty and thirty people, who found seats for the most part upon the floor, occupying the mattresses, and hunching themselves together into triangular shapes. They were all young and some of them seemed to make a protest by their hair and dress, and something somber and truculent in the expression of their faces, against the more normal type, who would have passed unnoticed in an omnibus or an underground railway. It was notable that the talk was confined to groups, and was, at first, entirely spasmodic in character, and muttered in undertones as if the speakers were suspicious of their fellow-guests.

Katharine Hilbery came in rather late, and took up a position on the floor, with her back against the wall. She looked round quickly, recognized about half a dozen people, to whom she nodded, but failed to see Ralph, or, if so, had already forgotten to attach any name to him. But in a second these heterogeneous elements were all united by the voice of Mr. Rodney, who suddenly strode up to the table, and began very rapidly in high-strained tones:

"In undertaking to speak of the Elizabethan use of metaphor in poetry – "

All the different heads swung slightly or steadied themselves into a position in which they could gaze straight at the speaker's face, and the same rather solemn expression was visible on all of them. But, at the same time, even the faces that were most exposed to view, and therefore most tautly under control, disclosed a sudden impulsive tremor which, unless directly checked, would have developed into an outburst of laughter. The first sight of Mr. Rodney was irresistibly ludicrous. He was very red in the face, whether from the cool November night or nervousness, and every movement, from the way he wrung his hands to the way he jerked his head to right and left, as though a vision drew him now to the door, now to the window, bespoke his horrible discomfort under the stare of so many eyes. He was scrupulously well dressed, and a pearl in the center of his tie seemed to give him a touch of aristocratic opulence. But the rather prominent eyes and the impulsive stammering manner, which seemed to indicate a torrent of ideas intermittently pressing for utterance and always checked in their course by a clutch of nervousness, drew no pity, as in the case of a more imposing personage, but a desire to laugh, which was, however, entirely lacking in malice. Mr. Rodney was evidently so painfully conscious of the oddity of his appearance, and his very redness and the starts to which his body was liable gave such proof of his own discomfort, that there was something endearing in this ridiculous susceptibility, although most people would probably have echoed Denham's private exclamation, "Fancy marrying a creature like that!"

His paper was carefully written out, but in spite of this precaution Mr. Rodney managed to turn over two sheets instead of one, to choose the wrong sentence where two were written together, and to discover his own handwriting suddenly illegible. When he found himself possessed of a coherent passage, he shook it at his audience almost aggressively, and then fumbled for another. After a distressing search a fresh discovery would be made, and produced in the same way, until, by means of repeated attacks, he had stirred his audience to a degree of animation quite remarkable in these gatherings. Whether they were stirred by his enthusiasm for poetry or by the contortions which a human being was going through for their benefit, it would be hard to say. At length Mr. Rodney sat down impulsively in the middle of a sentence, and, after a pause of bewilderment, the audience expressed its relief at being able to laugh aloud in a decided outburst of applause.

Mr. Rodney acknowledged this with a wild glance round him, and, instead of waiting to answer questions, he jumped up, thrust himself through the seated bodies into the corner where Katharine was sitting, and exclaimed, very audibly:

"Well, Katharine, I hope I've made a big enough fool of myself even for you! It was terrible! terrible! terrible!"

"Hush! You must answer their questions," Katharine whispered, desiring, at all costs, to keep him quiet. Oddly enough, when the speaker was no longer in front of them, there seemed to be much that was suggestive in what he had said. At any rate, a pale-faced young man with sad eyes was already on his feet, delivering an accurately worded speech with perfect composure. William Rodney listened with a curious lifting of his upper lip, although his face was still quivering slightly with emotion.

"Idiot!" he whispered. "He's misunderstood every word I said!"

"Well then, answer him," Katharine whispered back.

"No, I shan't! They'd only laugh at me. Why did I let you persuade me that these sort of people care for literature?" he continued.

There was much to be said both for and against Mr. Rodney's paper. It had been crammed with assertions that such-and-such passages, taken liberally from English, French, and Italian, are the supreme pearls of literature. Further, he was fond of using metaphors which, compounded in the study, were apt to sound either cramped or out of place as he delivered them in fragments. Literature was a fresh garland of spring flowers, he said, in which yew-berries and the purple nightshade mingled with the various tints of the anemone; and somehow or other this garland encircled marble brows. He had read very badly some very beautiful quotations. But through his manner and his confusion of language there had emerged some passion of feeling which, as he spoke, formed in the majority of the audience a little picture or an idea which each now was eager to give expression to. Most of the people there proposed to spend their lives in the practice either of writing or painting, and merely by looking at them it could be seen that, as they listened to Mr. Purvis first, and then to Mr. Greenhalgh, they were seeing something done by these gentlemen to a possession which they thought to be their own. One person after another rose, and, as with an ill-balanced axe, attempted to hew out his conception of art a little more clearly, and sat down with the feeling that, for some reason which he could not grasp, his strokes had gone awry. As they sat down they turned almost invariably to the person sitting next them, and rectified and continued what they had just said in public. Before long, therefore, the groups on the mattresses and the groups on the chairs were all in communication with each other, and Mary Datchet, who had begun to darn stockings again, stooped down and remarked to Ralph:

"That was what I call a first-rate paper."

Both of them instinctively turned their eyes in the direction of the reader of the paper. He was lying back against the wall, with his eyes apparently shut, and his chin sunk upon his collar. Katharine was turning over the pages of his manuscript as if she were looking for some passage that had particularly struck her, and had a difficulty in finding it.

"Let's go and tell him how much we liked it," said Mary, thus suggesting an action which Ralph was anxious to take, though without her he would have been too proud to do it, for he suspected that he had more interest in Katharine than she had in him.

"That was a very interesting paper," Mary began, without any shyness, seating herself on the floor opposite to Rodney and Katharine. "Will you lend me the manuscript to read in peace?"

Rodney, who had opened his eyes on their approach, regarded her for a moment in suspicious silence.

"Do you say that merely to disguise the fact of my ridiculous failure?" he asked.

Katharine looked up from her reading with a smile.

"He says he doesn't mind what we think of him," she remarked. "He says we don't care a rap for art of any kind."

"I asked her to pity me, and she teases me!" Rodney exclaimed.

"I don't intend to pity you, Mr. Rodney," Mary remarked, kindly, but firmly. "When a paper's a failure, nobody says anything, whereas now, just listen to them!"

The sound, which filled the room, with its hurry of short syllables, its sudden pauses, and its sudden attacks, might be compared to some animal hubbub, frantic and inarticulate.

"D'you think that's all about my paper?" Rodney inquired, after a moment's attention, with a distinct brightening of expression.

"Of course it is," said Mary. "It was a very suggestive paper."

She turned to Denham for confirmation, and he corroborated her.

"It's the ten minutes after a paper is read that proves whether it's been a success or not," he said. "If I were you, Rodney, I should be very pleased with myself."

This commendation seemed to comfort Mr. Rodney completely, and he began to bethink him of all the passages in his paper which deserved to be called "suggestive."

"Did you agree at all, Denham, with what I said about Shakespeare's later use of imagery? I'm afraid I didn't altogether make my meaning plain."

Here he gathered himself together, and by means of a series of frog-like jerks, succeeded in bringing himself close to Denham.

Denham answered him with the brevity which is the result of having another sentence in the mind to be addressed to another person. He wished to say to Katharine: "Did you remember to get that picture glazed before your aunt came to dinner?" but, besides having to answer Rodney, he was not sure that the remark, with its assertion of intimacy, would not strike Katharine as impertinent. She was listening to what some one in another group was saying. Rodney, meanwhile, was talking about the Elizabethan dramatists.

He was a curious-looking man since, upon first sight, especially if he chanced to be talking with animation, he appeared, in some way, ridiculous; but, next moment, in repose, his face, with its large nose, thin cheeks and lips expressing the utmost sensibility, somehow recalled a Roman head bound with laurel, cut upon a circle of semi-transparent reddish stone. It had dignity and character. By profession a clerk in a Government office, he was one of those martyred spirits to whom literature is at once a source of divine joy and of almost intolerable irritation. Not content to rest in their love of it, they must attempt to practise it themselves, and they are generally endowed with very little facility in composition. They condemn whatever they produce. Moreover, the violence of their feelings is such that they seldom meet with adequate sympathy, and being rendered very sensitive by their cultivated perceptions, suffer constant slights both to their own persons and to the thing they worship. But Rodney could never resist making trial of the sympathies of any one who seemed favorably disposed, and Denham's praise had stimulated his very susceptible vanity.

"You remember the passage just before the death of the Duchess?" he continued, edging still closer to Denham, and adjusting his elbow and knee in an incredibly angular combination. Here, Katharine, who had been cut off by these maneuvers from all communication with the outer world, rose, and seated herself upon the window-sill, where she was joined by Mary Datchet. The two young women could thus survey the whole party. Denham looked after them, and made as if he were tearing handfuls of grass up by the roots from the carpet. But as it fell in accurately with his conception of life that all one's desires were bound to be frustrated, he concentrated his mind upon literature, and determined, philosophically, to get what he could out of that.

Katharine was pleasantly excited. A variety of courses was open to her. She knew several people slightly, and at any moment one of them might rise from the floor and come and speak to her; on the other hand, she might select somebody for herself, or she might strike into Rodney's discourse, to which she was intermittently attentive. She was conscious of Mary's body beside her, but, at the same time, the consciousness of being both of them women made it unnecessary to speak to her. But Mary, feeling, as she had said, that Katharine was a "personality," wished so much to speak to her that in a few moments she did.

"They're exactly like a flock of sheep, aren't they?" she said, referring to the noise that rose from the scattered bodies beneath her.

Katharine turned and smiled.

"I wonder what they're making such a noise about?" she said.

"The Elizabethans, I suppose."

"No, I don't think it's got anything to do with the Elizabethans. There! Didn't you hear them say, 'Insurance Bill'?"

"I wonder why men always talk about politics?" Mary speculated. "I suppose, if we had votes, we should, too."

"I dare say we should. And you spend your life in getting us votes, don't you?"

"I do," said Mary, stoutly. "From ten to six every day I'm at it."

Katharine looked at Ralph Denham, who was now pounding his way through the metaphysics of metaphor with Rodney, and was reminded of his talk that Sunday afternoon. She connected him vaguely with Mary.

"I suppose you're one of the people who think we should all have professions," she said, rather distantly, as if feeling her way among the phantoms of an unknown world.

"Oh dear no," said Mary at once.

"Well, I think I do," Katharine continued, with half a sigh. "You will always be able to say that you've done something, whereas, in a crowd like this, I feel rather melancholy."

"In a crowd? Why in a crowd?" Mary asked, deepening the two lines between her eyes, and hoisting herself nearer to Katharine upon the window-sill.

"Don't you see how many different things these people care about? And I want to beat them down – I only mean," she corrected herself, "that I want to assert myself, and it's difficult, if one hasn't a profession."

Mary smiled, thinking that to beat people down was a process that should present no difficulty to Miss Katharine Hilbery. They knew each other so slightly that the beginning of intimacy, which Katharine seemed to initiate by talking about herself, had something solemn in it, and they were silent, as if to decide whether to proceed or not. They tested the ground.

"Ah, but I want to trample upon their prostrate bodies!" Katharine announced, a moment later, with a laugh, as if at the train of thought which had led her to this conclusion.

"One doesn't necessarily trample upon people's bodies because one runs an office," Mary remarked.

"No. Perhaps not," Katharine replied. The conversation lapsed, and Mary saw Katharine looking out into the room rather moodily with closed lips, the desire to talk about herself or to initiate a friendship having, apparently, left her. Mary was struck by her capacity for being thus easily silent, and occupied with her own thoughts. It was a habit that spoke of loneliness and a mind thinking for itself. When Katharine remained silent Mary was slightly embarrassed.

"Yes, they're very like sheep," she repeated, foolishly.

"And yet they are very clever – at least," Katharine added, "I suppose they have all read Webster."

"Surely you don't think that a proof of cleverness? I've read Webster, I've read Ben Jonson, but I don't think myself clever – not exactly, at least."

"I think you must be very clever," Katharine observed.

"Why? Because I run an office?"

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking how you live alone in this room, and have parties."

Mary reflected for a second.

"It means, chiefly, a power of being disagreeable to one's own family, I think. I have that, perhaps. I didn't want to live at home, and I told my father. He didn't like it… But then I have a sister, and you haven't, have you?"

"No, I haven't any sisters."

"You are writing a life of your grandfather?" Mary pursued.

Katharine seemed instantly to be confronted by some familiar thought from which she wished to escape. She replied, "Yes, I am helping my mother," in such a way that Mary felt herself baffled, and put back again into the position in which she had been at the beginning of their talk. It seemed to her that Katharine possessed a curious power of drawing near and receding, which sent alternate emotions through her far more quickly than was usual, and kept her in a condition of curious alertness. Desiring to classify her, Mary bethought her of the convenient term "egoist."

"She's an egoist," she said to herself, and stored that word up to give to Ralph one day when, as it would certainly fall out, they were discussing Miss Hilbery.

"Heavens, what a mess there'll be to-morrow morning!" Katharine exclaimed. "I hope you don't sleep in this room, Miss Datchet?"

Mary laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" Katharine demanded.

"I won't tell you."

"Let me guess. You were laughing because you thought I'd changed the conversation?"

"No."

"Because you think – " She paused.

"If you want to know, I was laughing at the way you said Miss Datchet."

"Mary, then. Mary, Mary, Mary."

So saying, Katharine drew back the curtain in order, perhaps, to conceal the momentary flush of pleasure which is caused by coming perceptibly nearer to another person.

"Mary Datchet," said Mary. "It's not such an imposing name as Katharine Hilbery, I'm afraid."

They both looked out of the window, first up at the hard silver moon, stationary among a hurry of little grey-blue clouds, and then down upon the roofs of London, with all their upright chimneys, and then below them at the empty moonlit pavement of the street, upon which the joint of each paving-stone was clearly marked out. Mary then saw Katharine raise her eyes again to the moon, with a contemplative look in them, as though she were setting that moon against the moon of other nights, held in memory. Some one in the room behind them made a joke about star-gazing, which destroyed their pleasure in it, and they looked back into the room again.

Ralph had been watching for this moment, and he instantly produced his sentence.

"I wonder, Miss Hilbery, whether you remembered to get that picture glazed?" His voice showed that the question was one that had been prepared.

"Oh, you idiot!" Mary exclaimed, very nearly aloud, with a sense that Ralph had said something very stupid. So, after three lessons in Latin grammar, one might correct a fellow student, whose knowledge did not embrace the ablative of "mensa."

"Picture – what picture?" Katharine asked. "Oh, at home, you mean – that Sunday afternoon. Was it the day Mr. Fortescue came? Yes, I think I remembered it."

The three of them stood for a moment awkwardly silent, and then Mary left them in order to see that the great pitcher of coffee was properly handled, for beneath all her education she preserved the anxieties of one who owns china.

Ralph could think of nothing further to say; but could one have stripped off his mask of flesh, one would have seen that his will-power was rigidly set upon a single object – that Miss Hilbery should obey him. He wished her to stay there until, by some measures not yet apparent to him, he had conquered her interest. These states of mind transmit themselves very often without the use of language, and it was evident to Katharine that this young man had fixed his mind upon her. She instantly recalled her first impressions of him, and saw herself again proffering family relics. She reverted to the state of mind in which he had left her that Sunday afternoon. She supposed that he judged her very severely. She argued naturally that, if this were the case, the burden of the

conversation should rest with him. But she submitted so far as to stand perfectly still, her eyes upon the opposite wall, and her lips very nearly closed, though the desire to laugh stirred them slightly.

"You know the names of the stars, I suppose?" Denham remarked, and from the tone of his voice one might have thought that he grudged Katharine the knowledge he attributed to her.

She kept her voice steady with some difficulty.

"I know how to find the Pole star if I'm lost."

"I don't suppose that often happens to you."

"No. Nothing interesting ever happens to me," she said.

"I think you make a system of saying disagreeable things, Miss Hilbery," he broke out, again going further than he meant to. "I suppose it's one of the characteristics of your class. They never talk seriously to their inferiors."

Whether it was that they were meeting on neutral ground to-night, or whether the carelessness of an old grey coat that Denham wore gave an ease to his bearing that he lacked in conventional dress, Katharine certainly felt no impulse to consider him outside the particular set in which she lived.

"In what sense are you my inferior?" she asked, looking at him gravely, as though honestly searching for his meaning. The look gave him great pleasure. For the first time he felt himself on perfectly equal terms with a woman whom he wished to think well of him, although he could not have explained why her opinion of him mattered one way or another. Perhaps, after all, he only wanted to have something of her to take home to think about. But he was not destined to profit by his advantage.

"I don't think I understand what you mean," Katharine repeated, and then she was obliged to stop and answer some one who wished to know whether she would buy a ticket for an opera from them, at a reduction. Indeed, the temper of the meeting was now unfavorable to separate conversation; it had become rather debauched and hilarious, and people who scarcely knew each other were making use of Christian names with apparent cordiality, and had reached that kind of gay tolerance and general friendliness which human beings in England only attain after sitting together for three hours or so, and the first cold blast in the air of the street freezes them into isolation once more. Cloaks were being flung round the shoulders, hats swiftly pinned to the head; and Denham had the mortification of seeing Katharine helped to prepare herself by the ridiculous Rodney. It was not the convention of the meeting to say good-bye, or necessarily even to nod to the person with whom one was talking; but, nevertheless, Denham was disappointed by the completeness with which Katharine parted from him, without any attempt to finish her sentence. She left with Rodney.

CHAPTER V

Denham had no conscious intention of following Katharine, but, seeing her depart, he took his hat and ran rather more quickly down the stairs than he would have done if Katharine had not been in front of him. He overtook a friend of his, by name Harry Sandys, who was going the same way, and they walked together a few paces behind Katharine and Rodney.

The night was very still, and on such nights, when the traffic thins away, the walker becomes conscious of the moon in the street, as if the curtains of the sky had been drawn apart, and the heaven lay bare, as it does in the country. The air was softly cool, so that people who had been sitting talking in a crowd found it pleasant to walk a little before deciding to stop an omnibus or encounter light again in an underground railway. Sandys, who was a barrister with a philosophic tendency, took out his pipe, lit it, murmured "hum" and "ha," and was silent. The couple in front of them kept their distance accurately, and appeared, so far as Denham could judge by the way they turned towards each other, to be talking very constantly. He observed that when a pedestrian going the opposite way forced them to part they came together again directly afterwards. Without intending to watch them he never quite lost sight of the yellow scarf twisted round Katharine's head, or the light overcoat which made Rodney look fashionable among the crowd. At the Strand he supposed that they would separate, but instead they crossed the road, and took their way down one of the narrow passages which lead through ancient courts to the river. Among the crowd of people in the big thoroughfares Rodney seemed merely to be lending Katharine his escort, but now, when passengers were rare and the footsteps of the couple were distinctly heard in the silence, Denham could not help picturing to himself some change in their conversation. The effect of the light and shadow, which seemed to increase their height, was to make them mysterious and significant, so that Denham had no feeling of irritation with Katharine, but rather a half-dreamy acquiescence in the course of the world. Yes, she did very well to dream about – but Sandys had suddenly begun to talk. He was a solitary man who had made his friends at college and always addressed them as if they were still undergraduates arguing in his room, though many months or even years had passed in some cases between the last sentence and the present one. The method was a little singular, but very restful, for it seemed to ignore completely all accidents of human life, and to span very deep abysses with a few simple words.

On this occasion he began, while they waited for a minute on the edge of the Strand:

"I hear that Bennett has given up his theory of truth."

Denham returned a suitable answer, and he proceeded to explain how this decision had been arrived at, and what changes it involved in the philosophy which they both accepted. Meanwhile Katharine and Rodney drew further ahead, and Denham kept, if that is the right expression for an involuntary action, one filament of his mind upon them, while with the rest of his intelligence he sought to understand what Sandys was saying.

As they passed through the courts thus talking, Sandys laid the tip of his stick upon one of the stones forming a time-worn arch, and struck it meditatively two or three times in order to illustrate something very obscure about the complex nature of one's apprehension of facts. During the pause which this necessitated, Katharine and Rodney turned the corner and disappeared. For a moment Denham stopped involuntarily in his sentence, and continued it with a sense of having lost something.

Unconscious that they were observed, Katharine and Rodney had come out on the Embankment. When they had crossed the road, Rodney slapped his hand upon the stone parapet above the river and exclaimed:

"I promise I won't say another word about it, Katharine! But do stop a minute and look at the moon upon the water."

Katharine paused, looked up and down the river, and snuffed the air.

"I'm sure one can smell the sea, with the wind blowing this way," she said.

They stood silent for a few moments while the river shifted in its bed, and the silver and red lights which were laid upon it were torn by the current and joined together again. Very far off up the river a steamer hooted with its hollow voice of unspeakable melancholy, as if from the heart of lonely mist-shrouded voyagings.

"Ah!" Rodney cried, striking his hand once more upon the balustrade, "why can't one say how beautiful it all is? Why am I condemned for ever, Katharine, to feel what I can't express? And the things I can give there's no use in my giving. Trust me, Katharine," he added hastily, "I won't speak of it again. But in the presence of beauty – look at the iridescence round the moon! – one feels – one feels – Perhaps if you married me – I'm half a poet, you see, and I can't pretend not to feel what I do feel. If I could write – ah, that would be another matter. I shouldn't bother you to marry me then, Katharine."

He spoke these disconnected sentences rather abruptly, with his eyes alternately upon the moon and upon the stream.

"But for me I suppose you would recommend marriage?" said Katharine, with her eyes fixed on the moon.

"Certainly I should. Not for you only, but for all women. Why, you're nothing at all without it; you're only half alive; using only half your faculties; you must feel that for yourself. That is why – " Here he stopped himself, and they began to walk slowly along the Embankment, the moon fronting them.

"With how sad steps she climbs the sky,
How silently and with how wan a face,"

Rodney quoted.

"I've been told a great many unpleasant things about myself to-night," Katharine stated, without attending to him. "Mr. Denham seems to think it his mission to lecture me, though I hardly know him. By the way, William, you know him; tell me, what is he like?"

William drew a deep sigh.

"We may lecture you till we're blue in the face – "

"Yes – but what's he like?"

"And we write sonnets to your eyebrows, you cruel practical creature. Denham?" he added, as Katharine remained silent. "A good fellow, I should think. He cares, naturally, for the right sort of things, I expect. But you mustn't marry him, though. He scolded you, did he – what did he say?"

"What happens with Mr. Denham is this: He comes to tea. I do all I can to put him at his ease. He merely sits and scowls at me. Then I show him our manuscripts. At this he becomes really angry, and tells me I've no business to call myself a middle-class woman. So we part in a huff; and next time we meet, which was to-night, he walks straight up to me, and says, 'Go to the Devil!' That's the sort of behavior my mother complains of. I want to know, what does it mean?"

She paused and, slackening her steps, looked at the lighted train drawing itself smoothly over Hungerford Bridge.

"It means, I should say, that he finds you chilly and unsympathetic."

Katharine laughed with round, separate notes of genuine amusement.

"It's time I jumped into a cab and hid myself in my own house," she exclaimed.

"Would your mother object to my being seen with you? No one could possibly recognize us, could they?" Rodney inquired, with some solicitude.

Katharine looked at him, and perceiving that his solicitude was genuine, she laughed again, but with an ironical note in her laughter.

"You may laugh, Katharine, but I can tell you that if any of your friends saw us together at this time of night they would talk about it, and I should find that very disagreeable. But why do you laugh?"

"I don't know. Because you're such a queer mixture, I think. You're half poet and half old maid."

"I know I always seem to you highly ridiculous. But I can't help having inherited certain traditions and trying to put them into practice."

"Nonsense, William. You may come of the oldest family in Devonshire, but that's no reason why you should mind being seen alone with me on the Embankment."

"I'm ten years older than you are, Katharine, and I know more of the world than you do."

"Very well. Leave me and go home."

Rodney looked back over his shoulder and perceived that they were being followed at a short distance by a taxicab, which evidently awaited his summons. Katharine saw it, too, and exclaimed:

"Don't call that cab for me, William. I shall walk."

"Nonsense, Katharine; you'll do nothing of the kind. It's nearly twelve o'clock, and we've walked too far as it is."

Katharine laughed and walked on so quickly that both Rodney and the taxicab had to increase their pace to keep up with her.

"Now, William," she said, "if people see me racing along the Embankment like this they WILL talk. You had far better say good-night, if you don't want people to talk."

At this William beckoned, with a despotic gesture, to the cab with one hand, and with the other he brought Katharine to a standstill.

"Don't let the man see us struggling, for God's sake!" he murmured. Katharine stood for a moment quite still.

"There's more of the old maid in you than the poet," she observed briefly.

William shut the door sharply, gave the address to the driver, and turned away, lifting his hat punctiliously high in farewell to the invisible lady.

He looked back after the cab twice, suspiciously, half expecting that she would stop it and dismount; but it bore her swiftly on, and was soon out of sight. William felt in the mood for a short soliloquy of indignation, for Katharine had contrived to exasperate him in more ways than one.

"Of all the unreasonable, inconsiderate creatures I've ever known, she's the worst!" he exclaimed to himself, striding back along the Embankment. "Heaven forbid that I should ever make a fool of myself with her again. Why, I'd sooner marry the daughter of my landlady than Katharine Hilbery! She'd leave me not a moment's peace – and she'd never understand me – never, never, never!"

Uttered aloud and with vehemence so that the stars of Heaven might hear, for there was no human being at hand, these sentiments sounded satisfactorily irrefutable. Rodney quieted down, and walked on in silence, until he perceived some one approaching him, who had something, either in his walk or his dress, which proclaimed that he was one of William's acquaintances before it was possible to tell which of them he was. It was Denham who, having parted from Sandys at the bottom of his staircase, was now walking to the Tube at Charing Cross, deep in the thoughts which his talk with Sandys had suggested. He had forgotten the meeting at Mary Datchet's rooms, he had forgotten Rodney, and metaphors and Elizabethan drama, and could have sworn that he had forgotten Katharine Hilbery, too, although that was more disputable. His mind was scaling the highest pinnacles of its alps, where there was only starlight and the untrodden snow. He cast strange eyes upon Rodney, as they encountered each other beneath a lamp-post.

"Ha!" Rodney exclaimed.

If he had been in full possession of his mind, Denham would probably have passed on with a salutation. But the shock of the interruption made him stand still, and before he knew what he was doing, he had turned and was walking with Rodney in obedience to Rodney's invitation to come to his rooms and have something to drink. Denham had no wish to drink with Rodney, but he followed him passively enough. Rodney was gratified by this obedience. He felt inclined to be communicative with this silent man, who possessed so obviously all the good masculine qualities in which Katharine now seemed lamentably deficient.

"You do well, Denham," he began impulsively, "to have nothing to do with young women. I offer you my experience – if one trusts them one invariably has cause to repent. Not that I have any reason at this moment," he added hastily, "to complain of them. It's a subject that crops up now and again for no particular reason. Miss Datchet, I dare say, is one of the exceptions. Do you like Miss Datchet?"

These remarks indicated clearly enough that Rodney's nerves were in a state of irritation, and Denham speedily woke to the situation of the world as it had been one hour ago. He had last seen Rodney walking with Katharine. He could not help regretting the eagerness with which his mind returned to these interests, and fretted him with the old trivial anxieties. He sank in his own esteem. Reason bade him break from Rodney, who clearly tended to become confidential, before he had utterly lost touch with the problems of high philosophy. He looked along the road, and marked a lamp-post at a distance of some hundred yards, and decided that he would part from Rodney when they reached this point.

"Yes, I like Mary; I don't see how one could help liking her," he remarked cautiously, with his eye on the lamp-post.

"Ah, Denham, you're so different from me. You never give yourself away. I watched you this evening with Katharine Hilbery. My instinct is to trust the person I'm talking to. That's why I'm always being taken in, I suppose."

Denham seemed to be pondering this statement of Rodney's, but, as a matter of fact, he was hardly conscious of Rodney and his revelations, and was only concerned to make him mention Katharine again before they reached the lamp-post.

"Who's taken you in now?" he asked. "Katharine Hilbery?"

Rodney stopped and once more began beating a kind of rhythm, as if he were marking a phrase in a symphony, upon the smooth stone balustrade of the Embankment.

"Katharine Hilbery," he repeated, with a curious little chuckle. "No, Denham, I have no illusions about that young woman. I think I made that plain to her to-night. But don't run away with a false impression," he continued eagerly, turning and linking his arm through Denham's, as though to prevent him from escaping; and, thus compelled, Denham passed the monitory lamp-post, to which, in passing, he breathed an excuse, for how could he break away when Rodney's arm was actually linked in his? "You must not think that I have any bitterness against her – far from it. It's not altogether her fault, poor girl. She lives, you know, one of those odious, self-centered lives – at least, I think them odious for a woman – feeding her wits upon everything, having control of everything, getting far too much her own way at home – spoilt, in a sense, feeling that every one is at her feet, and so not realizing how she hurts – that is, how rudely she behaves to people who haven't all her advantages. Still, to do her justice, she's no fool," he added, as if to warn Denham not to take any liberties. "She has taste. She has sense. She can understand you when you talk to her. But she's a woman, and there's an end of it," he added, with another little chuckle, and dropped Denham's arm.

"And did you tell her all this to-night?" Denham asked.

"Oh dear me, no. I should never think of telling Katharine the truth about herself. That wouldn't do at all. One has to be in an attitude of adoration in order to get on with Katharine.

"Now I've learnt that she's refused to marry him why don't I go home?" Denham thought to himself. But he went on walking beside Rodney, and for a time they did not speak, though Rodney hummed snatches of a tune out of an opera by Mozart. A feeling of contempt and liking combine very naturally in the mind of one to whom another has just spoken unpremeditatedly, revealing rather more of his private feelings than he intended to reveal. Denham began to wonder what sort of person Rodney was, and at the same time Rodney began to think about Denham.

"You're a slave like me, I suppose?" he asked.

"A solicitor, yes."

"I sometimes wonder why we don't chuck it. Why don't you emigrate, Denham? I should have thought that would suit you."

"I've a family."

"I'm often on the point of going myself. And then I know I couldn't live without this" – and he waved his hand towards the City of London, which wore, at this moment, the appearance of a town cut out of gray-blue cardboard, and pasted flat against the sky, which was of a deeper blue.

"There are one or two people I'm fond of, and there's a little good music, and a few pictures, now and then – just enough to keep one dangling about here. Ah, but I couldn't live with savages! Are you fond of books? Music? Pictures? D'you care at all for first editions? I've got a few nice things up here, things I pick up cheap, for I can't afford to give what they ask."

They had reached a small court of high eighteenth-century houses, in one of which Rodney had his rooms. They climbed a very steep staircase, through whose uncurtained windows the moonlight fell, illuminating the banisters with their twisted pillars, and the piles of plates set on the window-sills, and jars half-full of milk. Rodney's rooms were small, but the sitting-room window looked out into a courtyard, with its flagged pavement, and its single tree, and across to the flat red-brick fronts of the opposite houses, which would not have surprised Dr. Johnson, if he had come out of his grave for a turn in the moonlight. Rodney lit his lamp, pulled his curtains, offered Denham a chair, and, flinging the manuscript of his paper on the Elizabethan use of Metaphor on to the table, exclaimed:

"Oh dear me, what a waste of time! But it's over now, and so we may think no more about it."

He then busied himself very dexterously in lighting a fire, producing glasses, whisky, a cake, and cups and saucers. He put on a faded crimson dressing-gown, and a pair of red slippers, and advanced to Denham with a tumbler in one hand and a well-burnished book in the other.

"The Baskerville Congreve," said Rodney, offering it to his guest. "I couldn't read him in a cheap edition."

When he was seen thus among his books and his valuables, amiably anxious to make his visitor comfortable, and moving about with something of the dexterity and grace of a Persian cat, Denham relaxed his critical attitude, and felt more at home with Rodney than he would have done with many men better known to him. Rodney's room was the room of a person who cherishes a great many personal tastes, guarding them from the rough blasts of the public with scrupulous attention. His papers and his books rose in jagged mounds on table and floor, round which he skirted with nervous care lest his dressing-gown might disarrange them ever so slightly. On a chair stood a stack of photographs of statues and pictures, which it was his habit to exhibit, one by one, for the space of a day or two. The books on his shelves were as orderly as regiments of soldiers, and the backs of them shone like so many bronze beetle-wings; though, if you took one from its place you saw a shabbier volume behind it, since space was limited. An oval Venetian mirror stood above the fireplace, and reflected duskily in its spotted depths the faint yellow and crimson of a jarful of tulips which stood among the letters and pipes and cigarettes upon the mantelpiece. A small piano occupied a corner of the room, with the score of "Don Giovanni" open upon the bracket.

"Well, Rodney," said Denham, as he filled his pipe and looked about him, "this is all very nice and comfortable."

Rodney turned his head half round and smiled, with the pride of a proprietor, and then prevented himself from smiling.

"Tolerable," he muttered.

"But I dare say it's just as well that you have to earn your own living."

"If you mean that I shouldn't do anything good with leisure if I had it, I dare say you're right. But I should be ten times as happy with my whole day to spend as I liked."

"I doubt that," Denham replied.

They sat silent, and the smoke from their pipes joined amicably in a blue vapor above their heads.

"I could spend three hours every day reading Shakespeare," Rodney remarked. "And there's music and pictures, let alone the society of the people one likes."

"You'd be bored to death in a year's time."

"Oh, I grant you I should be bored if I did nothing. But I should write plays."

"H'm!"

"I should write plays," he repeated. "I've written three-quarters of one already, and I'm only waiting for a holiday to finish it. And it's not bad – no, some of it's really rather nice."

The question arose in Denham's mind whether he should ask to see this play, as, no doubt, he was expected to do. He looked rather stealthily at Rodney, who was tapping the coal nervously with a poker, and quivering almost physically, so Denham thought, with desire to talk about this play of his, and vanity unrequited and urgent. He seemed very much at Denham's mercy, and Denham could not help liking him, partly on that account.

"Well… will you let me see the play?" Denham asked, and Rodney looked immediately appeased, but, nevertheless, he sat silent for a moment, holding the poker perfectly upright in the air, regarding it with his rather prominent eyes, and opening his lips and shutting them again.

"Do you really care for this kind of thing?" he asked at length, in a different tone of voice from that in which he had been speaking. And, without waiting for an answer, he went on, rather querulously: "Very few people care for poetry. I dare say it bores you."

"Perhaps," Denham remarked.

"Well, I'll lend it you," Rodney announced, putting down the poker.

As he moved to fetch the play, Denham stretched a hand to the bookcase beside him, and took down the first volume which his fingers touched. It happened to be a small and very lovely edition of Sir Thomas Browne, containing the "Urn Burial," the "Hydriotaphia," and the "Garden of Cyrus," and, opening it at a passage which he knew very nearly by heart, Denham began to read and, for some time, continued to read.

Rodney resumed his seat, with his manuscript on his knee, and from time to time he glanced at Denham, and then joined his finger-tips and crossed his thin legs over the fender, as if he experienced a good deal of pleasure. At length Denham shut the book, and stood, with his back to the fireplace, occasionally making an inarticulate humming sound which seemed to refer to Sir Thomas Browne. He put his hat on his head, and stood over Rodney, who still lay stretched back in his chair, with his toes within the fender.

"I shall look in again some time," Denham remarked, upon which Rodney held up his hand, containing his manuscript, without saying anything except – "If you like."

Denham took the manuscript and went. Two days later he was much surprised to find a thin parcel on his breakfast-plate, which, on being opened, revealed the very copy of Sir Thomas Browne which he had studied so intently in Rodney's rooms. From sheer laziness he returned no thanks, but he thought of Rodney from time to time with interest, disconnecting him from Katharine, and meant to go round one evening and smoke a pipe with him. It pleased Rodney thus to give away whatever his friends genuinely admired. His library was constantly being diminished.

CHAPTER VI

Of all the hours of an ordinary working week-day, which are the pleasantest to look forward to and to look back upon? If a single instance is of use in framing a theory, it may be said that the minutes between nine-twenty-five and nine-thirty in the morning had a singular charm for Mary Datchet. She spent them in a very enviable frame of mind; her contentment was almost unalloyed. High in the air as her flat was, some beams from the morning sun reached her even in November, striking straight at curtain, chair, and carpet, and painting there three bright, true spaces of green, blue, and purple, upon which the eye rested with a pleasure which gave physical warmth to the body.

There were few mornings when Mary did not look up, as she bent to lace her boots, and as she followed the yellow rod from curtain to breakfast-table she usually breathed some sigh of thankfulness that her life provided her with such moments of pure enjoyment. She was robbing no one of anything, and yet, to get so much pleasure from simple things, such as eating one's breakfast alone in a room which had nice colors in it, clean from the skirting of the boards to the corners of the ceiling, seemed to suit her so thoroughly that she used at first to hunt about for some one to apologize to, or for some flaw in the situation. She had now been six months in London, and she could find no flaw, but that, as she invariably concluded by the time her boots were laced, was solely and entirely due to the fact that she had her work. Every day, as she stood with her dispatch-box in her hand at the door of her flat, and gave one look back into the room to see that everything was straight before she left, she said to herself that she was very glad that she was going to leave it all, that to have sat there all day long, in the enjoyment of leisure, would have been intolerable.

Out in the street she liked to think herself one of the workers who, at this hour, take their way in rapid single file along all the broad pavements of the city, with their heads slightly lowered, as if all their effort were to follow each other as closely as might be; so that Mary used to figure to herself a straight rabbit-run worn by their unswerving feet upon the pavement. But she liked to pretend that she was indistinguishable from the rest, and that when a wet day drove her to the Underground or omnibus, she gave and took her share of crowd and wet with clerks and typists and commercial men, and shared with them the serious business of winding-up the world to tick for another four-and-twenty hours.

Thus thinking, on the particular morning in question, she made her away across Lincoln's Inn Fields and up Kingsway, and so through Southampton Row until she reached her office in Russell Square. Now and then she would pause and look into the window of some bookseller or flower shop, where, at this early hour, the goods were being arranged, and empty gaps behind the plate glass revealed a state of undress. Mary felt kindly disposed towards the shopkeepers, and hoped that they would trick the midday public into purchasing, for at this hour of the morning she ranged herself entirely on the side of the shopkeepers and bank clerks, and regarded all who slept late and had money to spend as her enemy and natural prey. And directly she had crossed the road at Holborn, her thoughts all came naturally and regularly to roost upon her work, and she forgot that she was, properly speaking, an amateur worker, whose services were unpaid, and could hardly be said to wind the world up for its daily task, since the world, so far, had shown very little desire to take the boons which Mary's society for woman's suffrage had offered it.

She was thinking all the way up Southampton Row of notepaper and foolscap, and how an economy in the use of paper might be effected (without, of course, hurting Mrs. Seal's feelings), for she was certain that the great organizers always pounce, to begin with, upon trifles like these, and build up their triumphant reforms upon a basis of absolute solidity; and, without acknowledging it for a moment, Mary Datchet was determined to be a great organizer, and had already doomed her society to reconstruction of the most radical kind. Once or twice lately, it is true, she had started, broad awake, before turning into Russell Square, and denounced herself rather sharply for being

already in a groove, capable, that is, of thinking the same thoughts every morning at the same hour, so that the chestnut-colored brick of the Russell Square houses had some curious connection with her thoughts about office economy, and served also as a sign that she should get into trim for meeting Mr. Clacton, or Mrs. Seal, or whoever might be beforehand with her at the office. Having no religious belief, she was the more conscientious about her life, examining her position from time to time very seriously, and nothing annoyed her more than to find one of these bad habits nibbling away unheeded at the precious substance. What was the good, after all, of being a woman if one didn't keep fresh, and cram one's life with all sorts of views and experiments? Thus she always gave herself a little shake, as she turned the corner, and, as often as not, reached her own door whistling a snatch of a Somersetshire ballad.

The suffrage office was at the top of one of the large Russell Square houses, which had once been lived in by a great city merchant and his family, and was now let out in slices to a number of societies which displayed assorted initials upon doors of ground glass, and kept, each of them, a typewriter which clicked busily all day long. The old house, with its great stone staircase, echoed hollowly to the sound of typewriters and of errand-boys from ten to six. The noise of different typewriters already at work, disseminating their views upon the protection of native races, or the value of cereals as foodstuffs, quickened Mary's steps, and she always ran up the last flight of steps which led to her own landing, at whatever hour she came, so as to get her typewriter to take its place in competition with the rest.

She sat herself down to her letters, and very soon all these speculations were forgotten, and the two lines drew themselves between her eyebrows, as the contents of the letters, the office furniture, and the sounds of activity in the next room gradually asserted their sway upon her. By eleven o'clock the atmosphere of concentration was running so strongly in one direction that any thought of a different order could hardly have survived its birth more than a moment or so. The task which lay before her was to organize a series of entertainments, the profits of which were to benefit the society, which drooped for want of funds. It was her first attempt at organization on a large scale, and she meant to achieve something remarkable. She meant to use the cumbrous machine to pick out this, that, and the other interesting person from the muddle of the world, and to set them for a week in a pattern which must catch the eyes of Cabinet Ministers, and the eyes once caught, the old arguments were to be delivered with unexampled originality. Such was the scheme as a whole; and in contemplation of it she would become quite flushed and excited, and have to remind herself of all the details that intervened between her and success.

The door would open, and Mr. Clacton would come in to search for a certain leaflet buried beneath a pyramid of leaflets. He was a thin, sandy-haired man of about thirty-five, spoke with a Cockney accent, and had about him a frugal look, as if nature had not dealt generously with him in any way, which, naturally, prevented him from dealing generously with other people. When he had found his leaflet, and offered a few jocular hints upon keeping papers in order, the typewriting would stop abruptly, and Mrs. Seal would burst into the room with a letter which needed explanation in her hand. This was a more serious interruption than the other, because she never knew exactly what she wanted, and half a dozen requests would bolt from her, no one of which was clearly stated. Dressed in plum-colored velveteen, with short, gray hair, and a face that seemed permanently flushed with philanthropic enthusiasm, she was always in a hurry, and always in some disorder. She wore two crucifixes, which got themselves entangled in a heavy gold chain upon her breast, and seemed to Mary expressive of her mental ambiguity. Only her vast enthusiasm and her worship of Miss Markham, one of the pioneers of the society, kept her in her place, for which she had no sound qualification.

So the morning wore on, and the pile of letters grew, and Mary felt, at last, that she was the center ganglion of a very fine network of nerves which fell over England, and one of these days, when she touched the heart of the system, would begin feeling and rushing together and emitting their

splendid blaze of revolutionary fireworks – for some such metaphor represents what she felt about her work, when her brain had been heated by three hours of application.

Shortly before one o'clock Mr. Clacton and Mrs. Seal desisted from their labors, and the old joke about luncheon, which came out regularly at this hour, was repeated with scarcely any variation of words. Mr. Clacton patronized a vegetarian restaurant; Mrs. Seal brought sandwiches, which she ate beneath the plane-trees in Russell Square; while Mary generally went to a gaudy establishment, upholstered in red plush, near by, where, much to the vegetarian's disapproval, you could buy steak, two inches thick, or a roast section of fowl, swimming in a pewter dish.

"The bare branches against the sky do one so much GOOD," Mrs. Seal asserted, looking out into the Square.

"But one can't lunch off trees, Sally," said Mary.

"I confess I don't know how you manage it, Miss Datchet," Mr. Clacton remarked. "I should sleep all the afternoon, I know, if I took a heavy meal in the middle of the day."

"What's the very latest thing in literature?" Mary asked, good-humoredly pointing to the yellow-covered volume beneath Mr. Clacton's arm, for he invariably read some new French author at lunch-time, or squeezed in a visit to a picture gallery, balancing his social work with an ardent culture of which he was secretly proud, as Mary had very soon divined.

So they parted and Mary walked away, wondering if they guessed that she really wanted to get away from them, and supposing that they had not quite reached that degree of subtlety. She bought herself an evening paper, which she read as she ate, looking over the top of it again and again at the queer people who were buying cakes or imparting their secrets, until some young woman whom she knew came in, and she called out, "Eleanor, come and sit by me," and they finished their lunch together, parting on the strip of pavement among the different lines of traffic with a pleasant feeling that they were stepping once more into their separate places in the great and eternally moving pattern of human life.

But, instead of going straight back to the office to-day, Mary turned into the British Museum, and strolled down the gallery with the shapes of stone until she found an empty seat directly beneath the gaze of the Elgin marbles. She looked at them, and seemed, as usual, borne up on some wave of exaltation and emotion, by which her life at once became solemn and beautiful – an impression which was due as much, perhaps, to the solitude and chill and silence of the gallery as to the actual beauty of the statues. One must suppose, at least, that her emotions were not purely esthetic, because, after she had gazed at the Ulysses for a minute or two, she began to think about Ralph Denham. So secure did she feel with these silent shapes that she almost yielded to an impulse to say "I am in love with you" aloud. The presence of this immense and enduring beauty made her almost alarmingly conscious of her desire, and at the same time proud of a feeling which did not display anything like the same proportions when she was going about her daily work.

She repressed her impulse to speak aloud, and rose and wandered about rather aimlessly among the statues until she found herself in another gallery devoted to engraved obelisks and winged Assyrian bulls, and her emotion took another turn. She began to picture herself traveling with Ralph in a land where these monsters were couchant in the sand. "For," she thought to herself, as she gazed fixedly at some information printed behind a piece of glass, "the wonderful thing about you is that you're ready for anything; you're not in the least conventional, like most clever men."

And she conjured up a scene of herself on a camel's back, in the desert, while Ralph commanded a whole tribe of natives.

"That is what you can do," she went on, moving on to the next statue. "You always make people do what you want."

A glow spread over her spirit, and filled her eyes with brightness. Nevertheless, before she left the Museum she was very far from saying, even in the privacy of her own mind, "I am in love with you," and that sentence might very well never have framed itself. She was, indeed, rather annoyed

with herself for having allowed such an ill-considered breach of her reserve, weakening her powers of resistance, she felt, should this impulse return again. For, as she walked along the street to her office, the force of all her customary objections to being in love with any one overcame her. She did not want to marry at all. It seemed to her that there was something amateurish in bringing love into touch with a perfectly straightforward friendship, such as hers was with Ralph, which, for two years now, had based itself upon common interests in impersonal topics, such as the housing of the poor, or the taxation of land values.

But the afternoon spirit differed intrinsically from the morning spirit. Mary found herself watching the flight of a bird, or making drawings of the branches of the plane-trees upon her blotting-paper. People came in to see Mr. Clacton on business, and a seductive smell of cigarette smoke issued from his room. Mrs. Seal wandered about with newspaper cuttings, which seemed to her either "quite splendid" or "really too bad for words." She used to paste these into books, or send them to her friends, having first drawn a broad bar in blue pencil down the margin, a proceeding which signified equally and indistinguishably the depths of her reprobation or the heights of her approval.

About four o'clock on that same afternoon Katharine Hilbery was walking up Kingsway. The question of tea presented itself. The street lamps were being lit already, and as she stood still for a moment beneath one of them, she tried to think of some neighboring drawing-room where there would be firelight and talk congenial to her mood. That mood, owing to the spinning traffic and the evening veil of unreality, was ill-adapted to her home surroundings. Perhaps, on the whole, a shop was the best place in which to preserve this queer sense of heightened existence. At the same time she wished to talk. Remembering Mary Datchet and her repeated invitations, she crossed the road, turned into Russell Square, and peered about, seeking for numbers with a sense of adventure that was out of all proportion to the deed itself. She found herself in a dimly lighted hall, unguarded by a porter, and pushed open the first swing door. But the office-boy had never heard of Miss Datchet. Did she belong to the S.R.F.R.? Katharine shook her head with a smile of dismay. A voice from within shouted, "No. The S.G.S. – top floor."

Katharine mounted past innumerable glass doors, with initials on them, and became steadily more and more doubtful of the wisdom of her venture. At the top she paused for a moment to breathe and collect herself. She heard the typewriter and formal professional voices inside, not belonging, she thought, to any one she had ever spoken to. She touched the bell, and the door was opened almost immediately by Mary herself. Her face had to change its expression entirely when she saw Katharine.

"You!" she exclaimed. "We thought you were the printer." Still holding the door open, she called back, "No, Mr. Clacton, it's not Penningtons. I should ring them up again – double three double eight, Central. Well, this is a surprise. Come in," she added. "You're just in time for tea."

The light of relief shone in Mary's eyes. The boredom of the afternoon was dissipated at once, and she was glad that Katharine had found them in a momentary press of activity, owing to the failure of the printer to send back certain proofs.

The unshaded electric light shining upon the table covered with papers dazed Katharine for a moment. After the confusion of her twilight walk, and her random thoughts, life in this small room appeared extremely concentrated and bright. She turned instinctively to look out of the window, which was uncurtained, but Mary immediately recalled her.

"It was very clever of you to find your way," she said, and Katharine wondered, as she stood there, feeling, for the moment, entirely detached and unabsorbed, why she had come. She looked, indeed, to Mary's eyes strangely out of place in the office. Her figure in the long cloak, which took deep folds, and her face, which was composed into a mask of sensitive apprehension, disturbed Mary for a moment with a sense of the presence of some one who was of another world, and, therefore, subversive of her world. She became immediately anxious that Katharine should be impressed by the importance of her world, and hoped that neither Mrs. Seal nor Mr. Clacton would appear until the impression of importance had been received. But in this she was disappointed. Mrs. Seal burst into

the room holding a kettle in her hand, which she set upon the stove, and then, with inefficient haste, she set light to the gas, which flared up, exploded, and went out.

"Always the way, always the way," she muttered. "Kit Markham is the only person who knows how to deal with the thing."

Mary had to go to her help, and together they spread the table, and apologized for the disparity between the cups and the plainness of the food.

"If we had known Miss Hilbery was coming, we should have bought a cake," said Mary, upon which Mrs. Seal looked at Katharine for the first time, suspiciously, because she was a person who needed cake.

Here Mr. Clacton opened the door, and came in, holding a typewritten letter in his hand, which he was reading aloud.

"Salford's affiliated," he said.

"Well done, Salford!" Mrs. Seal exclaimed enthusiastically, thumping the teapot which she held upon the table, in token of applause.

"Yes, these provincial centers seem to be coming into line at last," said Mr. Clacton, and then Mary introduced him to Miss Hilbery, and he asked her, in a very formal manner, if she were interested "in our work."

"And the proofs still not come?" said Mrs. Seal, putting both her elbows on the table, and propping her chin on her hands, as Mary began to pour out tea. "It's too bad – too bad. At this rate we shall miss the country post. Which reminds me, Mr. Clacton, don't you think we should circularize the provinces with Partridge's last speech? What? You've not read it? Oh, it's the best thing they've had in the House this Session. Even the Prime Minister – "

But Mary cut her short.

"We don't allow shop at tea, Sally," she said firmly. "We fine her a penny each time she forgets, and the fines go to buying a plum cake," she explained, seeking to draw Katharine into the community. She had given up all hope of impressing her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Mrs. Seal apologized. "It's my misfortune to be an enthusiast," she said, turning to Katharine. "My father's daughter could hardly be anything else. I think I've been on as many committees as most people. Waifs and Strays, Rescue Work, Church Work, C. O. S. – local branch – besides the usual civic duties which fall to one as a householder. But I've given them all up for our work here, and I don't regret it for a second," she added. "This is the root question, I feel; until women have votes – "

"It'll be sixpence, at least, Sally," said Mary, bringing her fist down on the table. "And we're all sick to death of women and their votes."

Mrs. Seal looked for a moment as though she could hardly believe her ears, and made a deprecating "tut-tut-tut" in her throat, looking alternately at Katharine and Mary, and shaking her head as she did so. Then she remarked, rather confidentially to Katharine, with a little nod in Mary's direction:

"She's doing more for the cause than any of us. She's giving her youth – for, alas! when I was young there were domestic circumstances – " she sighed, and stopped short.

Mr. Clacton hastily reverted to the joke about luncheon, and explained how Mrs. Seal fed on a bag of biscuits under the trees, whatever the weather might be, rather, Katharine thought, as though Mrs. Seal were a pet dog who had convenient tricks.

"Yes, I took my little bag into the square," said Mrs. Seal, with the self-conscious guilt of a child owning some fault to its elders. "It was really very sustaining, and the bare boughs against the sky do one so much GOOD. But I shall have to give up going into the square," she proceeded, wrinkling her forehead. "The injustice of it! Why should I have a beautiful square all to myself, when poor women who need rest have nowhere at all to sit?" She looked fiercely at Katharine, giving her short locks a little shake. "It's dreadful what a tyrant one still is, in spite of all one's efforts. One tries to lead a decent

life, but one can't. Of course, directly one thinks of it, one sees that ALL squares should be open to EVERY ONE. Is there any society with that object, Mr. Clacton? If not, there should be, surely."

"A most excellent object," said Mr. Clacton in his professional manner. "At the same time, one must deplore the ramification of organizations, Mrs. Seal. So much excellent effort thrown away, not to speak of pounds, shillings, and pence. Now how many organizations of a philanthropic nature do you suppose there are in the City of London itself, Miss Hilbery?" he added, screwing his mouth into a queer little smile, as if to show that the question had its frivolous side.

Katharine smiled, too. Her unlikeness to the rest of them had, by this time, penetrated to Mr. Clacton, who was not naturally observant, and he was wondering who she was; this same unlikeness had subtly stimulated Mrs. Seal to try and make a convert of her. Mary, too, looked at her almost as if she begged her to make things easy. For Katharine had shown no disposition to make things easy. She had scarcely spoken, and her silence, though grave and even thoughtful, seemed to Mary the silence of one who criticizes.

"Well, there are more in this house than I'd any notion of," she said. "On the ground floor you protect natives, on the next you emigrate women and tell people to eat nuts – "

"Why do you say that 'we' do these things?" Mary interposed, rather sharply. "We're not responsible for all the cranks who choose to lodge in the same house with us."

Mr. Clacton cleared his throat and looked at each of the young ladies in turn. He was a good deal struck by the appearance and manner of Miss Hilbery, which seemed to him to place her among those cultivated and luxurious people of whom he used to dream. Mary, on the other hand, was more of his own sort, and a little too much inclined to order him about. He picked up crumbs of dry biscuit and put them into his mouth with incredible rapidity.

"You don't belong to our society, then?" said Mrs. Seal.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," said Katharine, with such ready candor that Mrs. Seal was nonplussed, and stared at her with a puzzled expression, as if she could not classify her among the varieties of human beings known to her.

"But surely," she began.

"Mrs. Seal is an enthusiast in these matters," said Mr. Clacton, almost apologetically. "We have to remind her sometimes that others have a right to their views even if they differ from our own… "Punch" has a very funny picture this week, about a Suffragist and an agricultural laborer. Have you seen this week's "Punch," Miss Datchet?"

Mary laughed, and said "No."

Mr. Clacton then told them the substance of the joke, which, however, depended a good deal for its success upon the expression which the artist had put into the people's faces. Mrs. Seal sat all the time perfectly grave. Directly he had done speaking she burst out:

"But surely, if you care about the welfare of your sex at all, you must wish them to have the vote?"

"I never said I didn't wish them to have the vote," Katharine protested.

"Then why aren't you a member of our society?" Mrs. Seal demanded.

Katharine stirred her spoon round and round, stared into the swirl of the tea, and remained silent. Mr. Clacton, meanwhile, framed a question which, after a moment's hesitation, he put to Katharine.

"Are you in any way related, I wonder, to the poet Alardyce? His daughter, I believe, married a Mr. Hilbery."

"Yes; I'm the poet's granddaughter," said Katharine, with a little sigh, after a pause; and for a moment they were all silent.

"The poet's granddaughter!" Mrs. Seal repeated, half to herself, with a shake of her head, as if that explained what was otherwise inexplicable.

The light kindled in Mr. Clacton's eye.

"Ah, indeed. That interests me very much," he said. "I owe a great debt to your grandfather, Miss Hilbery. At one time I could have repeated the greater part of him by heart. But one gets out of the way of reading poetry, unfortunately. You don't remember him, I suppose?"

A sharp rap at the door made Katharine's answer inaudible. Mrs. Seal looked up with renewed hope in her eyes, and exclaiming:

"The proofs at last!" ran to open the door. "Oh, it's only Mr. Denham!" she cried, without any attempt to conceal her disappointment. Ralph, Katharine supposed, was a frequent visitor, for the only person he thought it necessary to greet was herself, and Mary at once explained the strange fact of her being there by saying:

"Katharine has come to see how one runs an office."

Ralph felt himself stiffen uncomfortably, as he said:

"I hope Mary hasn't persuaded you that she knows how to run an office?"

"What, doesn't she?" said Katharine, looking from one to the other.

At these remarks Mrs. Seal began to exhibit signs of discomposure, which displayed themselves by a tossing movement of her head, and, as Ralph took a letter from his pocket, and placed his finger upon a certain sentence, she forestalled him by exclaiming in confusion:

"Now, I know what you're going to say, Mr. Denham! But it was the day Kit Markham was here, and she upsets one so – with her wonderful vitality, always thinking of something new that we ought to be doing and aren't – and I was conscious at the time that my dates were mixed. It had nothing to do with Mary at all, I assure you."

"My dear Sally, don't apologize," said Mary, laughing. "Men are such pedants – they don't know what things matter, and what things don't."

"Now, Denham, speak up for our sex," said Mr. Clacton in a jocular manner, indeed, but like most insignificant men he was very quick to resent being found fault with by a woman, in argument with whom he was fond of calling himself "a mere man." He wished, however, to enter into a literary conservation with Miss Hilbery, and thus let the matter drop.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you, Miss Hilbery," he said, "that the French, with all their wealth of illustrious names, have no poet who can compare with your grandfather? Let me see. There's Chenier and Hugo and Alfred de Musset – wonderful men, but, at the same time, there's a richness, a freshness about Alardyce – "

Here the telephone bell rang, and he had to absent himself with a smile and a bow which signified that, although literature is delightful, it is not work. Mrs. Seal rose at the same time, but remained hovering over the table, delivering herself of a tirade against party government. "For if I were to tell you what I know of back-stairs intrigue, and what can be done by the power of the purse, you wouldn't credit me, Mr. Denham, you wouldn't, indeed. Which is why I feel that the only work for my father's daughter – for he was one of the pioneers, Mr. Denham, and on his tombstone I had that verse from the Psalms put, about the sowers and the seed… And what wouldn't I give that he should be alive now, seeing what we're going to see – " but reflecting that the glories of the future depended in part upon the activity of her typewriter, she bobbed her head, and hurried back to the seclusion of her little room, from which immediately issued sounds of enthusiastic, but obviously erratic, composition.

Mary made it clear at once, by starting a fresh topic of general interest, that though she saw the humor of her colleague, she did not intend to have her laughed at.

"The standard of morality seems to me frightfully low," she observed reflectively, pouring out a second cup of tea, "especially among women who aren't well educated. They don't see that small things matter, and that's where the leakage begins, and then we find ourselves in difficulties – I very nearly lost my temper yesterday," she went on, looking at Ralph with a little smile, as though he knew what happened when she lost her temper. "It makes me very angry when people tell me lies – doesn't it make you angry?" she asked Katharine.

"But considering that every one tells lies," Katharine remarked, looking about the room to see where she had put down her umbrella and her parcel, for there was an intimacy in the way in which Mary and Ralph addressed each other which made her wish to leave them. Mary, on the other hand, was anxious, superficially at least, that Katharine should stay and so fortify her in her determination not to be in love with Ralph.

Ralph, while lifting his cup from his lips to the table, had made up his mind that if Miss Hilbery left, he would go with her.

"I don't think that I tell lies, and I don't think that Ralph tells lies, do you, Ralph?" Mary continued.

Katharine laughed, with more gayety, as it seemed to Mary, than she could properly account for. What was she laughing at? At them, presumably. Katharine had risen, and was glancing hither and thither, at the presses and the cupboards, and all the machinery of the office, as if she included them all in her rather malicious amusement, which caused Mary to keep her eyes on her straightly and rather fiercely, as if she were a gay-plumed, mischievous bird, who might light on the topmost bough and pick off the ruddiest cherry, without any warning. Two women less like each other could scarcely be imagined, Ralph thought, looking from one to the other. Next moment, he too, rose, and nodding to Mary, as Katharine said good-bye, opened the door for her, and followed her out.

Mary sat still and made no attempt to prevent them from going. For a second or two after the door had shut on them her eyes rested on the door with a straightforward fierceness in which, for a moment, a certain degree of bewilderment seemed to enter; but, after a brief hesitation, she put down her cup and proceeded to clear away the tea-things.

The impulse which had driven Ralph to take this action was the result of a very swift little piece of reasoning, and thus, perhaps, was not quite so much of an impulse as it seemed. It passed through his mind that if he missed this chance of talking to Katharine, he would have to face an enraged ghost, when he was alone in his room again, demanding an explanation of his cowardly indecision. It was better, on the whole, to risk present discomfiture than to waste an evening bandying excuses and constructing impossible scenes with this uncompromising section of himself. For ever since he had visited the Hilberys he had been much at the mercy of a phantom Katharine, who came to him when he sat alone, and answered him as he would have her answer, and was always beside him to crown those varying triumphs which were transacted almost every night, in imaginary scenes, as he walked through the lamplit streets home from the office. To walk with Katharine in the flesh would either feed that phantom with fresh food, which, as all who nourish dreams are aware, is a process that becomes necessary from time to time, or refine it to such a degree of thinness that it was scarcely serviceable any longer; and that, too, is sometimes a welcome change to a dreamer. And all the time Ralph was well aware that the bulk of Katharine was not represented in his dreams at all, so that when he met her he was bewildered by the fact that she had nothing to do with his dream of her.

When, on reaching the street, Katharine found that Mr. Denham proceeded to keep pace by her side, she was surprised and, perhaps, a little annoyed. She, too, had her margin of imagination, and to-night her activity in this obscure region of the mind required solitude. If she had had her way, she would have walked very fast down the Tottenham Court Road, and then sprung into a cab and raced swiftly home. The view she had had of the inside of an office was of the nature of a dream to her. Shut off up there, she compared Mrs. Seal, and Mary Datchet, and Mr. Clacton to enchanted people in a bewitched tower, with the spiders' webs looping across the corners of the room, and all the tools of the necromancer's craft at hand; for so aloof and unreal and apart from the normal world did they seem to her, in the house of innumerable typewriters, murmuring their incantations and concocting their drugs, and flinging their frail spiders' webs over the torrent of life which rushed down the streets outside.

She may have been conscious that there was some exaggeration in this fancy of hers, for she certainly did not wish to share it with Ralph. To him, she supposed, Mary Datchet, composing leaflets

for Cabinet Ministers among her typewriters, represented all that was interesting and genuine; and, accordingly, she shut them both out from all share in the crowded street, with its pendant necklace of lamps, its lighted windows, and its throng of men and women, which exhilarated her to such an extent that she very nearly forgot her companion. She walked very fast, and the effect of people passing in the opposite direction was to produce a queer dizziness both in her head and in Ralph's, which set their bodies far apart. But she did her duty by her companion almost unconsciously.

"Mary Datchet does that sort of work very well… She's responsible for it, I suppose?"

"Yes. The others don't help at all… Has she made a convert of you?"

"Oh no. That is, I'm a convert already."

"But she hasn't persuaded you to work for them?"

"Oh dear no – that wouldn't do at all."

So they walked on down the Tottenham Court Road, parting and coming together again, and Ralph felt much as though he were addressing the summit of a poplar in a high gale of wind.

"Suppose we get on to that omnibus?" he suggested.

Katharine acquiesced, and they climbed up, and found themselves alone on top of it.

"But which way are you going?" Katharine asked, waking a little from the trance into which movement among moving things had thrown her.

"I'm going to the Temple," Ralph replied, inventing a destination on the spur of the moment. He felt the change come over her as they sat down and the omnibus began to move forward. He imagined her contemplating the avenue in front of them with those honest sad eyes which seemed to set him at such a distance from them. But the breeze was blowing in their faces; it lifted her hat for a second, and she drew out a pin and stuck it in again, – a little action which seemed, for some reason, to make her rather more fallible. Ah, if only her hat would blow off, and leave her altogether disheveled, accepting it from his hands!

"This is like Venice," she observed, raising her hand. "The motor-cars, I mean, shooting about so quickly, with their lights."

"I've never seen Venice," he replied. "I keep that and some other things for my old age."

"What are the other things?" she asked.

"There's Venice and India and, I think, Dante, too."

She laughed.

"Think of providing for one's old age! And would you refuse to see Venice if you had the chance?"

Instead of answering her, he wondered whether he should tell her something that was quite true about himself; and as he wondered, he told her.

"I've planned out my life in sections ever since I was a child, to make it last longer. You see, I'm always afraid that I'm missing something – "

"And so am I!" Katharine exclaimed. "But, after all," she added, "why should you miss anything?"

"Why? Because I'm poor, for one thing," Ralph rejoined. "You, I suppose, can have Venice and India and Dante every day of your life."

She said nothing for a moment, but rested one hand, which was bare of glove, upon the rail in front of her, meditating upon a variety of things, of which one was that this strange young man pronounced Dante as she was used to hearing it pronounced, and another, that he had, most unexpectedly, a feeling about life that was familiar to her. Perhaps, then, he was the sort of person she might take an interest in, if she came to know him better, and as she had placed him among those whom she would never want to know better, this was enough to make her silent. She hastily recalled her first view of him, in the little room where the relics were kept, and ran a bar through half her impressions, as one cancels a badly written sentence, having found the right one.

"But to know that one might have things doesn't alter the fact that one hasn't got them," she said, in some confusion. "How could I go to India, for example? Besides," she began impulsively, and stopped herself. Here the conductor came round, and interrupted them. Ralph waited for her to resume her sentence, but she said no more.

"I have a message to give your father," he remarked. "Perhaps you would give it him, or I could come – "

"Yes, do come," Katharine replied.

"Still, I don't see why you shouldn't go to India," Ralph began, in order to keep her from rising, as she threatened to do.

But she got up in spite of him, and said good-bye with her usual air of decision, and left him with a quickness which Ralph connected now with all her movements. He looked down and saw her standing on the pavement edge, an alert, commanding figure, which waited its season to cross, and then walked boldly and swiftly to the other side. That gesture and action would be added to the picture he had of her, but at present the real woman completely routed the phantom one.

CHAPTER VII

"And little Augustus Pelham said to me, 'It's the younger generation knocking at the door,' and I said to him, 'Oh, but the younger generation comes in without knocking, Mr. Pelham.' Such a feeble little joke, wasn't it, but down it went into his notebook all the same."

"Let us congratulate ourselves that we shall be in the grave before that work is published," said Mr. Hilbery.

The elderly couple were waiting for the dinner-bell to ring and for their daughter to come into the room. Their arm-chairs were drawn up on either side of the fire, and each sat in the same slightly crouched position, looking into the coals, with the expressions of people who have had their share of experiences and wait, rather passively, for something to happen. Mr. Hilbery now gave all his attention to a piece of coal which had fallen out of the grate, and to selecting a favorable position for it among the lumps that were burning already. Mrs. Hilbery watched him in silence, and the smile changed on her lips as if her mind still played with the events of the afternoon.

When Mr. Hilbery had accomplished his task, he resumed his crouching position again, and began to toy with the little green stone attached to his watch-chain. His deep, oval-shaped eyes were fixed upon the flames, but behind the superficial glaze seemed to brood an observant and whimsical spirit, which kept the brown of the eye still unusually vivid. But a look of indolence, the result of skepticism or of a taste too fastidious to be satisfied by the prizes and conclusions so easily within his grasp, lent him an expression almost of melancholy. After sitting thus for a time, he seemed to reach some point in his thinking which demonstrated its futility, upon which he sighed and stretched his hand for a book lying on the table by his side.

Directly the door opened he closed the book, and the eyes of father and mother both rested on Katharine as she came towards them. The sight seemed at once to give them a motive which they had not had before. To them she appeared, as she walked towards them in her light evening dress, extremely young, and the sight of her refreshed them, were it only because her youth and ignorance made their knowledge of the world of some value.

"The only excuse for you, Katharine, is that dinner is still later than you are," said Mr. Hilbery, putting down his spectacles.

"I don't mind her being late when the result is so charming," said Mrs. Hilbery, looking with pride at her daughter. "Still, I don't know that I LIKE your being out so late, Katharine," she continued. "You took a cab, I hope?"

Here dinner was announced, and Mr. Hilbery formally led his wife downstairs on his arm. They were all dressed for dinner, and, indeed, the prettiness of the dinner-table merited that compliment. There was no cloth upon the table, and the china made regular circles of deep blue upon the shining brown wood. In the middle there was a bowl of tawny red and yellow chrysanthemums, and one of pure white, so fresh that the narrow petals were curved backwards into a firm white ball. From the surrounding walls the heads of three famous Victorian writers surveyed this entertainment, and slips of paper pasted beneath them testified in the great man's own handwriting that he was yours sincerely or affectionately or for ever. The father and daughter would have been quite content, apparently, to eat their dinner in silence, or with a few cryptic remarks expressed in a shorthand which could not be understood by the servants. But silence depressed Mrs. Hilbery, and far from minding the presence of maids, she would often address herself to them, and was never altogether unconscious of their approval or disapproval of her remarks. In the first place she called them to witness that the room was darker than usual, and had all the lights turned on.

"That's more cheerful," she exclaimed. "D'you know, Katharine, that ridiculous goose came to tea with me? Oh, how I wanted you! He tried to make epigrams all the time, and I got so nervous, expecting them, you know, that I spilt the tea – and he made an epigram about that!"

"Which ridiculous goose?" Katharine asked her father.

"Only one of my geese, happily, makes epigrams – Augustus Pelham, of course," said Mrs. Hilbery.

"I'm not sorry that I was out," said Katharine.

"Poor Augustus!" Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed. "But we're all too hard on him. Remember how devoted he is to his tiresome old mother."

"That's only because she is his mother. Any one connected with himself – "

"No, no, Katharine – that's too bad. That's – what's the word I mean, Trevor, something long and Latin – the sort of word you and Katharine know – "

Mr. Hilbery suggested "cynical."

"Well, that'll do. I don't believe in sending girls to college, but I should teach them that sort of thing. It makes one feel so dignified, bringing out these little allusions, and passing on gracefully to the next topic. But I don't know what's come over me – I actually had to ask Augustus the name of the lady Hamlet was in love with, as you were out, Katharine, and Heaven knows what he mayn't put down about me in his diary."

"I wish," Katharine started, with great impetuosity, and checked herself. Her mother always stirred her to feel and think quickly, and then she remembered that her father was there, listening with attention.

"What is it you wish?" he asked, as she paused.

He often surprised her, thus, into telling him what she had not meant to tell him; and then they argued, while Mrs. Hilbery went on with her own thoughts.

"I wish mother wasn't famous. I was out at tea, and they would talk to me about poetry."

"Thinking you must be poetical, I see – and aren't you?"

"Who's been talking to you about poetry, Katharine?" Mrs. Hilbery demanded, and Katharine was committed to giving her parents an account of her visit to the Suffrage office.

"They have an office at the top of one of the old houses in Russell Square. I never saw such queer-looking people. And the man discovered I was related to the poet, and talked to me about poetry. Even Mary Datchet seems different in that atmosphere."

"Yes, the office atmosphere is very bad for the soul," said Mr. Hilbery.

"I don't remember any offices in Russell Square in the old days, when Mamma lived there," Mrs. Hilbery mused, "and I can't fancy turning one of those noble great rooms into a stuffy little Suffrage office. Still, if the clerks read poetry there must be something nice about them."

"No, because they don't read it as we read it," Katharine insisted.

"But it's nice to think of them reading your grandfather, and not filling up those dreadful little forms all day long," Mrs. Hilbery persisted, her notion of office life being derived from some chance view of a scene behind the counter at her bank, as she slipped the sovereigns into her purse.

"At any rate, they haven't made a convert of Katharine, which was what I was afraid of," Mr. Hilbery remarked.

"Oh no," said Katharine very decidedly, "I wouldn't work with them for anything."

"It's curious," Mr. Hilbery continued, agreeing with his daughter, "how the sight of one's fellow-enthusiasts always chokes one off. They show up the faults of one's cause so much more plainly than one's antagonists. One can be enthusiastic in one's study, but directly one comes into touch with the people who agree with one, all the glamor goes. So I've always found," and he proceeded to tell them, as he peeled his apple, how he committed himself once, in his youthful days, to make a speech at a political meeting, and went there ablaze with enthusiasm for the ideals of his own side; but while his leaders spoke, he became gradually converted to the other way of thinking, if thinking it could be called, and had to feign illness in order to avoid making a fool of himself – an experience which had sickened him of public meetings.

Katharine listened and felt as she generally did when her father, and to some extent her mother, described their feelings, that she quite understood and agreed with them, but, at the same time, saw something which they did not see, and always felt some disappointment when they fell short of her vision, as they always did. The plates succeeded each other swiftly and noiselessly in front of her, and the table was decked for dessert, and as the talk murmured on in familiar grooves, she sat there, rather like a judge, listening to her parents, who did, indeed, feel it very pleasant when they made her laugh.

Daily life in a house where there are young and old is full of curious little ceremonies and pieties, which are discharged quite punctually, though the meaning of them is obscure, and a mystery has come to brood over them which lends even a superstitious charm to their performance. Such was the nightly ceremony of the cigar and the glass of port, which were placed on the right hand and on the left hand of Mr. Hilbery, and simultaneously Mrs. Hilbery and Katharine left the room. All the years they had lived together they had never seen Mr. Hilbery smoke his cigar or drink his port, and they would have felt it unseemly if, by chance, they had surprised him as he sat there. These short, but clearly marked, periods of separation between the sexes were always used for an intimate postscript to what had been said at dinner, the sense of being women together coming out most strongly when the male sex was, as if by some religious rite, secluded from the female. Katharine knew by heart the sort of mood that possessed her as she walked upstairs to the drawing-room, her mother's arm in hers; and she could anticipate the pleasure with which, when she had turned on the lights, they both regarded the drawing-room, fresh swept and set in order for the last section of the day, with the red parrots swinging on the chintz curtains, and the arm-chairs warming in the blaze. Mrs. Hilbery stood over the fire, with one foot on the fender, and her skirts slightly raised.

"Oh, Katharine," she exclaimed, "how you've made me think of Mamma and the old days in Russell Square! I can see the chandeliers, and the green silk of the piano, and Mamma sitting in her cashmere shawl by the window, singing till the little ragamuffin boys outside stopped to listen. Papa sent me in with a bunch of violets while he waited round the corner. It must have been a summer evening. That was before things were hopeless…"

As she spoke an expression of regret, which must have come frequently to cause the lines which now grew deep round the lips and eyes, settled on her face. The poet's marriage had not been a happy one. He had left his wife, and after some years of a rather reckless existence, she had died, before her time. This disaster had led to great irregularities of education, and, indeed, Mrs. Hilbery might be said to have escaped education altogether. But she had been her father's companion at the season when he wrote the finest of his poems. She had sat on his knee in taverns and other haunts of drunken poets, and it was for her sake, so people said, that he had cured himself of his dissipation, and become the irreproachable literary character that the world knows, whose inspiration had deserted him. As Mrs. Hilbery grew old she thought more and more of the past, and this ancient disaster seemed at times almost to prey upon her mind, as if she could not pass out of life herself without laying the ghost of her parent's sorrow to rest.

Katharine wished to comfort her mother, but it was difficult to do this satisfactorily when the facts themselves were so much of a legend. The house in Russell Square, for example, with its noble rooms, and the magnolia-tree in the garden, and the sweet-voiced piano, and the sound of feet coming down the corridors, and other properties of size and romance – had they any existence? Yet why should Mrs. Alardyce live all alone in this gigantic mansion, and, if she did not live alone, with whom did she live? For its own sake, Katharine rather liked this tragic story, and would have been glad to hear the details of it, and to have been able to discuss them frankly. But this it became less and less possible to do, for though Mrs. Hilbery was constantly reverting to the story, it was always in this tentative and restless fashion, as though by a touch here and there she could set things straight which had been crooked these sixty years. Perhaps, indeed, she no longer knew what the truth was.

"If they'd lived now," she concluded, "I feel it wouldn't have happened. People aren't so set upon tragedy as they were then. If my father had been able to go round the world, or if she'd had a

rest cure, everything would have come right. But what could I do? And then they had bad friends, both of them, who made mischief. Ah, Katharine, when you marry, be quite, quite sure that you love your husband!"

The tears stood in Mrs. Hilbery's eyes.

While comforting her, Katharine thought to herself, "Now this is what Mary Datchet and Mr. Denham don't understand. This is the sort of position I'm always getting into. How simple it must be to live as they do!" for all the evening she had been comparing her home and her father and mother with the Suffrage office and the people there.

"But, Katharine," Mrs. Hilbery continued, with one of her sudden changes of mood, "though, Heaven knows, I don't want to see you married, surely if ever a man loved a woman, William loves you. And it's a nice, rich-sounding name too – Katharine Rodney, which, unfortunately, doesn't mean that he's got any money, because he hasn't."

The alteration of her name annoyed Katharine, and she observed, rather sharply, that she didn't want to marry any one.

"It's very dull that you can only marry one husband, certainly," Mrs. Hilbery reflected. "I always wish that you could marry everybody who wants to marry you. Perhaps they'll come to that in time, but meanwhile I confess that dear William – " But here Mr. Hilbery came in, and the more solid part of the evening began. This consisted in the reading aloud by Katharine from some prose work or other, while her mother knitted scarves intermittently on a little circular frame, and her father read the newspaper, not so attentively but that he could comment humorously now and again upon the fortunes of the hero and the heroine. The Hilberys subscribed to a library, which delivered books on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Katharine did her best to interest her parents in the works of living and highly respectable authors; but Mrs. Hilbery was perturbed by the very look of the light, gold-wreathed volumes, and would make little faces as if she tasted something bitter as the reading went on; while Mr. Hilbery would treat the moderns with a curious elaborate banter such as one might apply to the antics of a promising child. So this evening, after five pages or so of one of these masters, Mrs. Hilbery protested that it was all too clever and cheap and nasty for words.

"Please, Katharine, read us something REAL."

Katharine had to go to the bookcase and choose a portly volume in sleek, yellow calf, which had directly a sedative effect upon both her parents. But the delivery of the evening post broke in upon the periods of Henry Fielding, and Katharine found that her letters needed all her attention.

CHAPTER VIII

She took her letters up to her room with her, having persuaded her mother to go to bed directly Mr. Hilbery left them, for so long as she sat in the same room as her mother, Mrs. Hilbery might, at any moment, ask for a sight of the post. A very hasty glance through many sheets had shown Katharine that, by some coincidence, her attention had to be directed to many different anxieties simultaneously. In the first place, Rodney had written a very full account of his state of mind, which was illustrated by a sonnet, and he demanded a reconsideration of their position, which agitated Katharine more than she liked. Then there were two letters which had to be laid side by side and compared before she could make out the truth of their story, and even when she knew the facts she could not decide what to make of them; and finally she had to reflect upon a great many pages from a cousin who found himself in financial difficulties, which forced him to the uncongenial occupation of teaching the young ladies of Bungay to play upon the violin.

But the two letters which each told the same story differently were the chief source of her perplexity. She was really rather shocked to find it definitely established that her own second cousin, Cyril Alardyce, had lived for the last four years with a woman who was not his wife, who had borne him two children, and was now about to bear him another. This state of things had been discovered by Mrs. Milvain, her aunt Celia, a zealous inquirer into such matters, whose letter was also under consideration. Cyril, she said, must be made to marry the woman at once; and Cyril, rightly or wrongly, was indignant with such interference with his affairs, and would not own that he had any cause to be ashamed of himself. Had he any cause to be ashamed of himself, Katharine wondered; and she turned to her aunt again.

"Remember," she wrote, in her profuse, emphatic statement, "that he bears your grandfather's name, and so will the child that is to be born. The poor boy is not so much to blame as the woman who deluded him, thinking him a gentleman, which he IS, and having money, which he has NOT."

"What would Ralph Denham say to this?" thought Katharine, beginning to pace up and down her bedroom. She twitched aside the curtains, so that, on turning, she was faced by darkness, and looking out, could just distinguish the branches of a plane-tree and the yellow lights of some one else's windows.

"What would Mary Datchet and Ralph Denham say?" she reflected, pausing by the window, which, as the night was warm, she raised, in order to feel the air upon her face, and to lose herself in the nothingness of night. But with the air the distant humming sound of far-off crowded thoroughfares was admitted to the room. The incessant and tumultuous hum of the distant traffic seemed, as she stood there, to represent the thick texture of her life, for her life was so hemmed in with the progress of other lives that the sound of its own advance was inaudible. People like Ralph and Mary, she thought, had it all their own way, and an empty space before them, and, as she envied them, she cast her mind out to imagine an empty land where all this petty intercourse of men and women, this life made up of the dense crossings and entanglements of men and women, had no existence whatever. Even now, alone, at night, looking out into the shapeless mass of London, she was forced to remember that there was one point and here another with which she had some connection. William Rodney, at this very moment, was seated in a minute speck of light somewhere to the east of her, and his mind was occupied, not with his book, but with her. She wished that no one in the whole world would think of her. However, there was no way of escaping from one's fellow-beings, she concluded, and shut the window with a sigh, and returned once more to her letters.

She could not doubt but that William's letter was the most genuine she had yet received from him. He had come to the conclusion that he could not live without her, he wrote. He believed that he knew her, and could give her happiness, and that their marriage would be unlike other marriages. Nor was the sonnet, in spite of its accomplishment, lacking in passion, and Katharine, as she read the

pages through again, could see in what direction her feelings ought to flow, supposing they revealed themselves. She would come to feel a humorous sort of tenderness for him, a zealous care for his susceptibilities, and, after all, she considered, thinking of her father and mother, what is love?

Naturally, with her face, position, and background, she had experience of young men who wished to marry her, and made protestations of love, but, perhaps because she did not return the feeling, it remained something of a pageant to her. Not having experience of it herself, her mind had unconsciously occupied itself for some years in dressing up an image of love, and the marriage that was the outcome of love, and the man who inspired love, which naturally dwarfed any examples that came her way. Easily, and without correction by reason, her imagination made pictures, superb backgrounds casting a rich though phantom light upon the facts in the foreground. Splendid as the waters that drop with resounding thunder from high ledges of rock, and plunge downwards into the blue depths of night, was the presence of love she dreamt, drawing into it every drop of the force of life, and dashing them all asunder in the superb catastrophe in which everything was surrendered, and nothing might be reclaimed. The man, too, was some magnanimous hero, riding a great horse by the shore of the sea. They rode through forests together, they galloped by the rim of the sea. But waking, she was able to contemplate a perfectly loveless marriage, as the thing one did actually in real life, for possibly the people who dream thus are those who do the most prosaic things.

At this moment she was much inclined to sit on into the night, spinning her light fabric of thoughts until she tired of their futility, and went to her mathematics; but, as she knew very well, it was necessary that she should see her father before he went to bed. The case of Cyril Alardyce must be discussed, her mother's illusions and the rights of the family attended to. Being vague herself as to what all this amounted to, she had to take counsel with her father. She took her letters in her hand and went downstairs. It was past eleven, and the clocks had come into their reign, the grandfather's clock in the hall ticking in competition with the small clock on the landing. Mr. Hilbery's study ran out behind the rest of the house, on the ground floor, and was a very silent, subterranean place, the sun in daytime casting a mere abstract of light through a skylight upon his books and the large table, with its spread of white papers, now illumined by a green reading-lamp. Here Mr. Hilbery sat editing his review, or placing together documents by means of which it could be proved that Shelley had written "of" instead of "and," or that the inn in which Byron had slept was called the "Nag's Head" and not the "Turkish Knight," or that the Christian name of Keats's uncle had been John rather than Richard, for he knew more minute details about these poets than any man in England, probably, and was preparing an edition of Shelley which scrupulously observed the poet's system of punctuation. He saw the humor of these researches, but that did not prevent him from carrying them out with the utmost scrupulosity.

He was lying back comfortably in a deep arm-chair smoking a cigar, and ruminating the fruitful question as to whether Coleridge had wished to marry Dorothy Wordsworth, and what, if he had done so, would have been the consequences to him in particular, and to literature in general. When Katharine came in he reflected that he knew what she had come for, and he made a pencil note before he spoke to her. Having done this, he saw that she was reading, and he watched her for a moment without saying anything. She was reading "Isabella and the Pot of Basil," and her mind was full of the Italian hills and the blue daylight, and the hedges set with little rosettes of red and white roses. Feeling that her father waited for her, she sighed and said, shutting her book:

"I've had a letter from Aunt Celia about Cyril, father… It seems to be true – about his marriage. What are we to do?"

"Cyril seems to have been behaving in a very foolish manner," said Mr. Hilbery, in his pleasant and deliberate tones.

Katharine found some difficulty in carrying on the conversation, while her father balanced his finger-tips so judiciously, and seemed to reserve so many of his thoughts for himself.

"He's about done for himself, I should say," he continued. Without saying anything, he took Katharine's letters out of her hand, adjusted his eyeglasses, and read them through.

At length he said "Humph!" and gave the letters back to her.

"Mother knows nothing about it," Katharine remarked. "Will you tell her?"

"I shall tell your mother. But I shall tell her that there is nothing whatever for us to do."

"But the marriage?" Katharine asked, with some diffidence.

Mr. Hilbery said nothing, and stared into the fire.

"What in the name of conscience did he do it for?" he speculated at last, rather to himself than to her.

Katharine had begun to read her aunt's letter over again, and she now quoted a sentence. "Ibsen and Butler… He has sent me a letter full of quotations – nonsense, though clever nonsense."

"Well, if the younger generation want to carry on its life on those lines, it's none of our affair," he remarked.

"But isn't it our affair, perhaps, to make them get married?" Katharine asked rather wearily.

"Why the dickens should they apply to me?" her father demanded with sudden irritation.

"Only as the head of the family – "

"But I'm not the head of the family. Alfred's the head of the family. Let them apply to Alfred," said Mr. Hilbery, relapsing again into his arm-chair. Katharine was aware that she had touched a sensitive spot, however, in mentioning the family.

"I think, perhaps, the best thing would be for me to go and see them," she observed.

"I won't have you going anywhere near them," Mr. Hilbery replied with unwonted decision and authority. "Indeed, I don't understand why they've dragged you into the business at all – I don't see that it's got anything to do with you."

"I've always been friends with Cyril," Katharine observed.

"But did he ever tell you anything about this?" Mr. Hilbery asked rather sharply.

Katharine shook her head. She was, indeed, a good deal hurt that Cyril had not confided in her – did he think, as Ralph Denham or Mary Datchet might think, that she was, for some reason, unsympathetic – hostile even?

"As to your mother," said Mr. Hilbery, after a pause, in which he seemed to be considering the color of the flames, "you had better tell her the facts. She'd better know the facts before every one begins to talk about it, though why Aunt Celia thinks it necessary to come, I'm sure I don't know. And the less talk there is the better."

Granting the assumption that gentlemen of sixty who are highly cultivated, and have had much experience of life, probably think of many things which they do not say, Katharine could not help feeling rather puzzled by her father's attitude, as she went back to her room. What a distance he was from it all! How superficially he smoothed these events into a semblance of decency which harmonized with his own view of life! He never wondered what Cyril had felt, nor did the hidden aspects of the case tempt him to examine into them. He merely seemed to realize, rather languidly, that Cyril had behaved in a way which was foolish, because other people did not behave in that way. He seemed to be looking through a telescope at little figures hundreds of miles in the distance.

Her selfish anxiety not to have to tell Mrs. Hilbery what had happened made her follow her father into the hall after breakfast the next morning in order to question him.

"Have you told mother?" she asked. Her manner to her father was almost stern, and she seemed to hold endless depths of reflection in the dark of her eyes.

Mr. Hilbery sighed.

"My dear child, it went out of my head." He smoothed his silk hat energetically, and at once affected an air of hurry. "I'll send a note round from the office… I'm late this morning, and I've any amount of proofs to get through."

"That wouldn't do at all," Katharine said decidedly. "She must be told – you or I must tell her. We ought to have told her at first."

Mr. Hilbery had now placed his hat on his head, and his hand was on the door-knob. An expression which Katharine knew well from her childhood, when he asked her to shield him in some neglect of duty, came into his eyes; malice, humor, and irresponsibility were blended in it. He nodded his head to and fro significantly, opened the door with an adroit movement, and stepped out with a lightness unexpected at his age. He waved his hand once to his daughter, and was gone. Left alone, Katharine could not help laughing to find herself cheated as usual in domestic bargainings with her father, and left to do the disagreeable work which belonged, by rights, to him.

CHAPTER IX

Katharine disliked telling her mother about Cyril's misbehavior quite as much as her father did, and for much the same reasons. They both shrank, nervously, as people fear the report of a gun on the stage, from all that would have to be said on this occasion. Katharine, moreover, was unable to decide what she thought of Cyril's misbehavior. As usual, she saw something which her father and mother did not see, and the effect of that something was to suspend Cyril's behavior in her mind without any qualification at all. They would think whether it was good or bad; to her it was merely a thing that had happened.

When Katharine reached the study, Mrs. Hilbery had already dipped her pen in the ink.

"Katharine," she said, lifting it in the air, "I've just made out such a queer, strange thing about your grandfather. I'm three years and six months older than he was when he died. I couldn't very well have been his mother, but I might have been his elder sister, and that seems to me such a pleasant fancy. I'm going to start quite fresh this morning, and get a lot done."

She began her sentence, at any rate, and Katharine sat down at her own table, untied the bundle of old letters upon which she was working, smoothed them out absent-mindedly, and began to decipher the faded script. In a minute she looked across at her mother, to judge her mood. Peace and happiness had relaxed every muscle in her face; her lips were parted very slightly, and her breath came in smooth, controlled inspirations like those of a child who is surrounding itself with a building of bricks, and increasing in ecstasy as each brick is placed in position. So Mrs. Hilbery was raising round her the skies and trees of the past with every stroke of her pen, and recalling the voices of the dead. Quiet as the room was, and undisturbed by the sounds of the present moment, Katharine could fancy that here was a deep pool of past time, and that she and her mother were bathed in the light of sixty years ago. What could the present give, she wondered, to compare with the rich crowd of gifts bestowed by the past? Here was a Thursday morning in process of manufacture; each second was minted fresh by the clock upon the mantelpiece. She strained her ears and could just hear, far off, the hoot of a motor-car and the rush of wheels coming nearer and dying away again, and the voices of men crying old iron and vegetables in one of the poorer streets at the back of the house. Rooms, of course, accumulate their suggestions, and any room in which one has been used to carry on any particular occupation gives off memories of moods, of ideas, of postures that have been seen in it; so that to attempt any different kind of work there is almost impossible.

Katharine was unconsciously affected, each time she entered her mother's room, by all these influences, which had had their birth years ago, when she was a child, and had something sweet and solemn about them, and connected themselves with early memories of the cavernous glooms and sonorous echoes of the Abbey where her grandfather lay buried. All the books and pictures, even the chairs and tables, had belonged to him, or had reference to him; even the china dogs on the mantelpiece and the little shepherdesses with their sheep had been bought by him for a penny a piece from a man who used to stand with a tray of toys in Kensington High Street, as Katharine had often heard her mother tell. Often she had sat in this room, with her mind fixed so firmly on those vanished figures that she could almost see the muscles round their eyes and lips, and had given to each his own voice, with its tricks of accent, and his coat and his cravat. Often she had seemed to herself to be moving among them, an invisible ghost among the living, better acquainted with them than with her own friends, because she knew their secrets and possessed a divine foreknowledge of their destiny. They had been so unhappy, such muddlers, so wrong-headed, it seemed to her. She could have told them what to do, and what not to do. It was a melancholy fact that they would pay no heed to her, and were bound to come to grief in their own antiquated way. Their behavior was often grotesquely irrational; their conventions monstrously absurd; and yet, as she brooded upon them, she felt so closely attached to them that it was useless to try to pass judgment upon them. She very nearly

lost consciousness that she was a separate being, with a future of her own. On a morning of slight depression, such as this, she would try to find some sort of clue to the muddle which their old letters presented; some reason which seemed to make it worth while to them; some aim which they kept steadily in view – but she was interrupted.

Mrs. Hilbery had risen from her table, and was standing looking out of the window at a string of barges swimming up the river.

Katharine watched her. Suddenly Mrs. Hilbery turned abruptly, and exclaimed:

"I really believe I'm bewitched! I only want three sentences, you see, something quite straightforward and commonplace, and I can't find 'em."

She began to pace up and down the room, snatching up her duster; but she was too much annoyed to find any relief, as yet, in polishing the backs of books.

"Besides," she said, giving the sheet she had written to Katharine, "I don't believe this'll do. Did your grandfather ever visit the Hebrides, Katharine?" She looked in a strangely beseeching way at her daughter. "My mind got running on the Hebrides, and I couldn't help writing a little description of them. Perhaps it would do at the beginning of a chapter. Chapters often begin quite differently from the way they go on, you know." Katharine read what her mother had written. She might have been a schoolmaster criticizing a child's essay. Her face gave Mrs. Hilbery, who watched it anxiously, no ground for hope.

"It's very beautiful," she stated, "but, you see, mother, we ought to go from point to point – "

"Oh, I know," Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed. "And that's just what I can't do. Things keep coming into my head. It isn't that I don't know everything and feel everything (who did know him, if I didn't?), but I can't put it down, you see. There's a kind of blind spot," she said, touching her forehead, "there. And when I can't sleep o' nights, I fancy I shall die without having done it."

From exultation she had passed to the depths of depression which the imagination of her death aroused. The depression communicated itself to Katharine. How impotent they were, fiddling about all day long with papers! And the clock was striking eleven and nothing done! She watched her mother, now rummaging in a great brass-bound box which stood by her table, but she did not go to her help. Of course, Katharine reflected, her mother had now lost some paper, and they would waste the rest of the morning looking for it. She cast her eyes down in irritation, and read again her mother's musical sentences about the silver gulls, and the roots of little pink flowers washed by pellucid streams, and the blue mists of hyacinths, until she was struck by her mother's silence. She raised her eyes. Mrs. Hilbery had emptied a portfolio containing old photographs over her table, and was looking from one to another.

"Surely, Katharine," she said, "the men were far handsomer in those days than they are now, in spite of their odious whiskers? Look at old John Graham, in his white waistcoat – look at Uncle Harley. That's Peter the manservant, I suppose. Uncle John brought him back from India."

Katharine looked at her mother, but did not stir or answer. She had suddenly become very angry, with a rage which their relationship made silent, and therefore doubly powerful and critical. She felt all the unfairness of the claim which her mother tacitly made to her time and sympathy, and what Mrs. Hilbery took, Katharine thought bitterly, she wasted. Then, in a flash, she remembered that she had still to tell her about Cyril's misbehavior. Her anger immediately dissipated itself; it broke like some wave that has gathered itself high above the rest; the waters were resumed into the sea again, and Katharine felt once more full of peace and solicitude, and anxious only that her mother should be protected from pain. She crossed the room instinctively, and sat on the arm of her mother's chair. Mrs. Hilbery leant her head against her daughter's body.

"What is nobler," she mused, turning over the photographs, "than to be a woman to whom every one turns, in sorrow or difficulty? How have the young women of your generation improved upon that, Katharine? I can see them now, sweeping over the lawns at Melbury House, in their flounces and furbelows, so calm and stately and imperial (and the monkey and the little black dwarf following

behind), as if nothing mattered in the world but to be beautiful and kind. But they did more than we do, I sometimes think. They WERE, and that's better than doing. They seem to me like ships, like majestic ships, holding on their way, not shoving or pushing, not fretted by little things, as we are, but taking their way, like ships with white sails."

Katharine tried to interrupt this discourse, but the opportunity did not come, and she could not forbear to turn over the pages of the album in which the old photographs were stored. The faces of these men and women shone forth wonderfully after the hubbub of living faces, and seemed, as her mother had said, to wear a marvelous dignity and calm, as if they had ruled their kingdoms justly and deserved great love. Some were of almost incredible beauty, others were ugly enough in a forcible way, but none were dull or bored or insignificant. The superb stiff folds of the crinolines suited the women; the cloaks and hats of the gentlemen seemed full of character. Once more Katharine felt the serene air all round her, and seemed far off to hear the solemn beating of the sea upon the shore. But she knew that she must join the present on to this past.

Mrs. Hilbery was rambling on, from story to story.

"That's Janie Mannering," she said, pointing to a superb, white-haired dame, whose satin robes seemed strung with pearls. "I must have told you how she found her cook drunk under the kitchen table when the Empress was coming to dinner, and tucked up her velvet sleeves (she always dressed like an Empress herself), cooked the whole meal, and appeared in the drawing-room as if she'd been sleeping on a bank of roses all day. She could do anything with her hands – they all could – make a cottage or embroider a petticoat.

"And that's Queenie Colquhoun," she went on, turning the pages, "who took her coffin out with her to Jamaica, packed with lovely shawls and bonnets, because you couldn't get coffins in Jamaica, and she had a horror of dying there (as she did), and being devoured by the white ants. And there's Sabine, the loveliest of them all; ah! it was like a star rising when she came into the room. And that's Miriam, in her coachman's cloak, with all the little capes on, and she wore great top-boots underneath. You young people may say you're unconventional, but you're nothing compared with her."

Turning the page, she came upon the picture of a very masculine, handsome lady, whose head the photographer had adorned with an imperial crown.

"Ah, you wretch!" Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed, "what a wicked old despot you were, in your day! How we all bowed down before you! 'Maggie,' she used to say, 'if it hadn't been for me, where would you be now?' And it was true; she brought them together, you know. She said to my father, 'Marry her,' and he did; and she said to poor little Clara, 'Fall down and worship him,' and she did; but she got up again, of course. What else could one expect? She was a mere child – eighteen – and half dead with fright, too. But that old tyrant never repented. She used to say that she had given them three perfect months, and no one had a right to more; and I sometimes think, Katharine, that's true, you know. It's more than most of us have, only we have to pretend, which was a thing neither of them could ever do. I fancy," Mrs. Hilbery mused, "that there was a kind of sincerity in those days between men and women which, with all your outspokenness, you haven't got."

Katharine again tried to interrupt. But Mrs. Hilbery had been gathering impetus from her recollections, and was now in high spirits.

"They must have been good friends at heart," she resumed, "because she used to sing his songs. Ah, how did it go?" and Mrs. Hilbery, who had a very sweet voice, trolled out a famous lyric of her father's which had been set to an absurdly and charmingly sentimental air by some early Victorian composer.

"It's the vitality of them!" she concluded, striking her fist against the table. "That's what we haven't got! We're virtuous, we're earnest, we go to meetings, we pay the poor their wages, but we don't live as they lived. As often as not, my father wasn't in bed three nights out of the seven, but always fresh as paint in the morning. I hear him now, come singing up the stairs to the nursery, and tossing

the loaf for breakfast on his sword-stick, and then off we went for a day's pleasuring – Richmond, Hampton Court, the Surrey Hills. Why shouldn't we go, Katharine? It's going to be a fine day."

At this moment, just as Mrs. Hilbery was examining the weather from the window, there was a knock at the door. A slight, elderly lady came in, and was saluted by Katharine, with very evident dismay, as "Aunt Celia!" She was dismayed because she guessed why Aunt Celia had come. It was certainly in order to discuss the case of Cyril and the woman who was not his wife, and owing to her procrastination Mrs. Hilbery was quite unprepared. Who could be more unprepared? Here she was, suggesting that all three of them should go on a jaunt to Blackfriars to inspect the site of Shakespeare's theater, for the weather was hardly settled enough for the country.

To this proposal Mrs. Milvain listened with a patient smile, which indicated that for many years she had accepted such eccentricities in her sister-in-law with bland philosophy. Katharine took up her position at some distance, standing with her foot on the fender, as though by so doing she could get a better view of the matter. But, in spite of her aunt's presence, how unreal the whole question of Cyril and his morality appeared! The difficulty, it now seemed, was not to break the news gently to Mrs. Hilbery, but to make her understand it. How was one to lasso her mind, and tether it to this minute, unimportant spot? A matter-of-fact statement seemed best.

"I think Aunt Celia has come to talk about Cyril, mother," she said rather brutally. "Aunt Celia has discovered that Cyril is married. He has a wife and children."

"No, he is NOT married," Mrs. Milvain interposed, in low tones, addressing herself to Mrs. Hilbery. "He has two children, and another on the way."

Mrs. Hilbery looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"We thought it better to wait until it was proved before we told you," Katharine added.

"But I met Cyril only a fortnight ago at the National Gallery!" Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed. "I don't believe a word of it," and she tossed her head with a smile on her lips at Mrs. Milvain, as though she could quite understand her mistake, which was a very natural mistake, in the case of a childless woman, whose husband was something very dull in the Board of Trade.

"I didn't WISH to believe it, Maggie," said Mrs. Milvain. "For a long time I COULDN'T believe it. But now I've seen, and I HAVE to believe it."

"Katharine," Mrs. Hilbery demanded, "does your father know of this?"

Katharine nodded.

"Cyril married!" Mrs. Hilbery repeated. "And never telling us a word, though we've had him in our house since he was a child – noble William's son! I can't believe my ears!"

Feeling that the burden of proof was laid upon her, Mrs. Milvain now proceeded with her story. She was elderly and fragile, but her childlessness seemed always to impose these painful duties on her, and to revere the family, and to keep it in repair, had now become the chief object of her life. She told her story in a low, spasmodic, and somewhat broken voice.

"I have suspected for some time that he was not happy. There were new lines on his face. So I went to his rooms, when I knew he was engaged at the poor men's college. He lectures there – Roman law, you know, or it may be Greek. The landlady said Mr. Alardyce only slept there about once a fortnight now. He looked so ill, she said. She had seen him with a young person. I suspected something directly. I went to his room, and there was an envelope on the mantelpiece, and a letter with an address in Seton Street, off the Kennington Road."

Mrs. Hilbery fidgeted rather restlessly, and hummed fragments of her tune, as if to interrupt.

"I went to Seton Street," Aunt Celia continued firmly. "A very low place – lodging-houses, you know, with canaries in the window. Number seven just like all the others. I rang, I knocked; no one came. I went down the area. I am certain I saw some one inside – children – a cradle. But no reply – no reply." She sighed, and looked straight in front of her with a glazed expression in her half-veiled blue eyes.

"I stood in the street," she resumed, "in case I could catch a sight of one of them. It seemed a very long time. There were rough men singing in the public-house round the corner. At last the door opened, and some one – it must have been the woman herself – came right past me. There was only the pillar-box between us."

"And what did she look like?" Mrs. Hilbery demanded.

"One could see how the poor boy had been deluded," was all that Mrs. Milvain vouchsafed by way of description.

"Poor thing!" Mrs. Hilbery exclaimed.

"Poor Cyril!" Mrs. Milvain said, laying a slight emphasis upon Cyril.

"But they've got nothing to live upon," Mrs. Hilbery continued. "If he'd come to us like a man," she went on, "and said, 'I've been a fool,' one would have pitied him; one would have tried to help him. There's nothing so disgraceful after all – But he's been going about all these years, pretending, letting one take it for granted, that he was single. And the poor deserted little wife – "

"She is NOT his wife," Aunt Celia interrupted.

"I've never heard anything so detestable!" Mrs. Hilbery wound up, striking her fist on the arm of her chair. As she realized the facts she became thoroughly disgusted, although, perhaps, she was more hurt by the concealment of the sin than by the sin itself. She looked splendidly roused and indignant; and Katharine felt an immense relief and pride in her mother. It was plain that her indignation was very genuine, and that her mind was as perfectly focused upon the facts as any one could wish – more so, by a long way, than Aunt Celia's mind, which seemed to be timidly circling, with a morbid pleasure, in these unpleasant shades. She and her mother together would take the situation in hand, visit Cyril, and see the whole thing through.

"We must realize Cyril's point of view first," she said, speaking directly to her mother, as if to a contemporary, but before the words were out of her mouth, there was more confusion outside, and Cousin Caroline, Mrs. Hilbery's maiden cousin, entered the room. Although she was by birth an Alardyce, and Aunt Celia a Hilbery, the complexities of the family relationship were such that each was at once first and second cousin to the other, and thus aunt and cousin to the culprit Cyril, so that his misbehavior was almost as much Cousin Caroline's affair as Aunt Celia's. Cousin Caroline was a lady of very imposing height and circumference, but in spite of her size and her handsome trappings, there was something exposed and unsheltered in her expression, as if for many summers her thin red skin and hooked nose and reduplication of chins, so much resembling the profile of a cockatoo, had been bared to the weather; she was, indeed, a single lady; but she had, it was the habit to say, "made a life for herself," and was thus entitled to be heard with respect.

"This unhappy business," she began, out of breath as she was. "If the train had not gone out of the station just as I arrived, I should have been with you before. Celia has doubtless told you. You will agree with me, Maggie. He must be made to marry her at once for the sake of the children – "

"But does he refuse to marry her?" Mrs. Hilbery inquired, with a return of her bewilderment.

"He has written an absurd perverted letter, all quotations," Cousin Caroline puffed. "He thinks he's doing a very fine thing, where we only see the folly of it… The girl's every bit as infatuated as he is – for which I blame him."

"She entangled him," Aunt Celia intervened, with a very curious smoothness of intonation, which seemed to convey a vision of threads weaving and interweaving a close, white mesh round their victim.

"It's no use going into the rights and wrongs of the affair now, Celia," said Cousin Caroline with some acerbity, for she believed herself the only practical one of the family, and regretted that, owing to the slowness of the kitchen clock, Mrs. Milvain had already confused poor dear Maggie with her own incomplete version of the facts. "The mischief's done, and very ugly mischief too. Are we to allow the third child to be born out of wedlock? (I am sorry to have to say these things before you, Katharine.) He will bear your name, Maggie – your father's name, remember."

"But let us hope it will be a girl," said Mrs. Hilbery.

Katharine, who had been looking at her mother constantly, while the chatter of tongues held sway, perceived that the look of straightforward indignation had already vanished; her mother was evidently casting about in her mind for some method of escape, or bright spot, or sudden illumination which should show to the satisfaction of everybody that all had happened, miraculously but incontestably, for the best.

"It's detestable – quite detestable!" she repeated, but in tones of no great assurance; and then her face lit up with a smile which, tentative at first, soon became almost assured. "Nowadays, people don't think so badly of these things as they used to do," she began. "It will be horribly uncomfortable for them sometimes, but if they are brave, clever children, as they will be, I dare say it'll make remarkable people of them in the end. Robert Browning used to say that every great man has Jewish blood in him, and we must try to look at it in that light. And, after all, Cyril has acted on principle. One may disagree with his principle, but, at least, one can respect it – like the French Revolution, or Cromwell cutting the King's head off. Some of the most terrible things in history have been done on principle," she concluded.

"I'm afraid I take a very different view of principle," Cousin Caroline remarked tartly.

"Principle!" Aunt Celia repeated, with an air of deprecating such a word in such a connection. "I will go to-morrow and see him," she added.

"But why should you take these disagreeable things upon yourself, Celia?" Mrs. Hilbery interposed, and Cousin Caroline thereupon protested with some further plan involving sacrifice of herself.

Growing weary of it all, Katharine turned to the window, and stood among the folds of the curtain, pressing close to the window-pane, and gazing disconsolately at the river much in the attitude of a child depressed by the meaningless talk of its elders. She was much disappointed in her mother – and in herself too. The little tug which she gave to the blind, letting it fly up to the top with a snap, signified her annoyance. She was very angry, and yet impotent to give expression to her anger, or know with whom she was angry. How they talked and moralized and made up stories to suit their own version of the becoming, and secretly praised their own devotion and tact! No; they had their dwelling in a mist, she decided; hundreds of miles away – away from what? "Perhaps it would be better if I married William," she thought suddenly, and the thought appeared to loom through the mist like solid ground. She stood there, thinking of her own destiny, and the elder ladies talked on, until they had talked themselves into a decision to ask the young woman to luncheon, and tell her, very friendlily, how such behavior appeared to women like themselves, who knew the world. And then Mrs. Hilbery was struck by a better idea.

CHAPTER X

Messrs. Grateley and Hooper, the solicitors in whose firm Ralph Denham was clerk, had their office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and there Ralph Denham appeared every morning very punctually at ten o'clock. His punctuality, together with other qualities, marked him out among the clerks for success, and indeed it would have been safe to wager that in ten years' time or so one would find him at the head of his profession, had it not been for a peculiarity which sometimes seemed to make everything about him uncertain and perilous. His sister Joan had already been disturbed by his love of gambling with his savings. Scrutinizing him constantly with the eye of affection, she had become aware of a curious perversity in his temperament which caused her much anxiety, and would have caused her still more if she had not recognized the germs of it in her own nature. She could fancy Ralph suddenly sacrificing his entire career for some fantastic imagination; some cause or idea or even (so her fancy ran) for some woman seen from a railway train, hanging up clothes in a back yard. When he had found this beauty or this cause, no force, she knew, would avail to restrain him from pursuit of it. She suspected the East also, and always fidgeted herself when she saw him with a book of Indian travels in his hand, as though he were sucking contagion from the page. On the other hand, no common love affair, had there been such a thing, would have caused her a moment's uneasiness where Ralph was concerned. He was destined in her fancy for something splendid in the way of success or failure, she knew not which.

And yet nobody could have worked harder or done better in all the recognized stages of a young man's life than Ralph had done, and Joan had to gather materials for her fears from trifles in her brother's behavior which would have escaped any other eye. It was natural that she should be anxious. Life had been so arduous for all of them from the start that she could not help dreading any sudden relaxation of his grasp upon what he held, though, as she knew from inspection of her own life, such sudden impulse to let go and make away from the discipline and the drudgery was sometimes almost irresistible. But with Ralph, if he broke away, she knew that it would be only to put himself under harsher constraint; she figured him toiling through sandy deserts under a tropical sun to find the source of some river or the haunt of some fly; she figured him living by the labor of his hands in some city slum, the victim of one of those terrible theories of right and wrong which were current at the time; she figured him prisoner for life in the house of a woman who had seduced him by her misfortunes. Half proudly, and wholly anxiously, she framed such thoughts, as they sat, late at night, talking together over the gas-stove in Ralph's bedroom.

It is likely that Ralph would not have recognized his own dream of a future in the forecasts which disturbed his sister's peace of mind. Certainly, if any one of them had been put before him he would have rejected it with a laugh, as the sort of life that held no attractions for him. He could not have said how it was that he had put these absurd notions into his sister's head. Indeed, he prided himself upon being well broken into a life of hard work, about which he had no sort of illusions. His vision of his own future, unlike many such forecasts, could have been made public at any moment without a blush; he attributed to himself a strong brain, and conferred on himself a seat in the House of Commons at the age of fifty, a moderate fortune, and, with luck, an unimportant office in a Liberal Government. There was nothing extravagant in a forecast of that kind, and certainly nothing dishonorable. Nevertheless, as his sister guessed, it needed all Ralph's strength of will, together with the pressure of circumstances, to keep his feet moving in the path which led that way. It needed, in particular, a constant repetition of a phrase to the effect that he shared the common fate, found it best of all, and wished for no other; and by repeating such phrases he acquired punctuality and habits of work, and could very plausibly demonstrate that to be a clerk in a solicitor's office was the best of all possible lives, and that other ambitions were vain.

But, like all beliefs not genuinely held, this one depended very much upon the amount of acceptance it received from other people, and in private, when the pressure of public opinion was removed, Ralph let himself swing very rapidly away from his actual circumstances upon strange voyages which, indeed, he would have been ashamed to describe. In these dreams, of course, he figured in noble and romantic parts, but self-glorification was not the only motive of them. They gave outlet to some spirit which found no work to do in real life, for, with the pessimism which his lot forced upon him, Ralph had made up his mind that there was no use for what, contemptuously enough, he called dreams, in the world which we inhabit. It sometimes seemed to him that this spirit was the most valuable possession he had; he thought that by means of it he could set flowering waste tracts of the earth, cure many ills, or raise up beauty where none now existed; it was, too, a fierce and potent spirit which would devour the dusty books and parchments on the office wall with one lick of its tongue, and leave him in a minute standing in nakedness, if he gave way to it. His endeavor, for many years, had been to control the spirit, and at the age of twenty-nine he thought he could pride himself upon a life rigidly divided into the hours of work and those of dreams; the two lived side by side without harming each other. As a matter of fact, this effort at discipline had been helped by the interests of a difficult profession, but the old conclusion to which Ralph had come when he left college still held sway in his mind, and tinged his views with the melancholy belief that life for most people compels the exercise of the lower gifts and wastes the precious ones, until it forces us to agree that there is little virtue, as well as little profit, in what once seemed to us the noblest part of our inheritance.

Denham was not altogether popular either in his office or among his family. He was too positive, at this stage of his career, as to what was right and what wrong, too proud of his self-control, and, as is natural in the case of persons not altogether happy or well suited in their conditions, too apt to prove the folly of contentment, if he found any one who confessed to that weakness. In the office his rather ostentatious efficiency annoyed those who took their own work more lightly, and, if they foretold his advancement, it was not altogether sympathetically. Indeed, he appeared to be rather a hard and self-sufficient young man, with a queer temper, and manners that were uncompromisingly abrupt, who was consumed with a desire to get on in the world, which was natural, these critics thought, in a man of no means, but not engaging.

The young men in the office had a perfect right to these opinions, because Denham showed no particular desire for their friendship. He liked them well enough, but shut them up in that compartment of life which was devoted to work. Hitherto, indeed, he had found little difficulty in arranging his life as methodically as he arranged his expenditure, but about this time he began to encounter experiences which were not so easy to classify. Mary Datchet had begun this confusion two years ago by bursting into laughter at some remark of his, almost the first time they met. She could not explain why it was. She thought him quite astonishingly odd. When he knew her well enough to tell her how he spent Monday and Wednesday and Saturday, she was still more amused; she laughed till he laughed, too, without knowing why. It seemed to her very odd that he should know as much about breeding bulldogs as any man in England; that he had a collection of wild flowers found near London; and his weekly visit to old Miss Trotter at Ealing, who was an authority upon the science of Heraldry, never failed to excite her laughter. She wanted to know everything, even the kind of cake which the old lady supplied on these occasions; and their summer excursions to churches in the neighborhood of London for the purpose of taking rubbings of the brasses became most important festivals, from the interest she took in them. In six months she knew more about his odd friends and hobbies than his own brothers and sisters knew, after living with him all his life; and Ralph found this very pleasant, though disordering, for his own view of himself had always been profoundly serious.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.