Oliphant Margaret

At His Gates. Volume 1

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CHAPTER I

Mr and Mrs Robert Drummond lived in a pretty house in the Kensington district; a house, the very external aspect of which informed the passer-by who they were, or at least what the husband was. The house was embowered in its little garden; and in spring, with its lilacs and laburnums, looked like a great bouquet of bloom – as such houses often do. But built out from the house, and occupying a large slice of the garden at the side, was a long room, lighted with sky windows, and not by any means charming to look at outside, though the creepers, which had not long been planted, were beginning to climb upon the walls. It was connected with the house by a passage which acted as a conservatory, and was full of flowers; and everything had been done that could be done to render the new studio as beautiful in aspect as it was in meaning. But it was new, and had scarcely yet begun, as its proprietor said, to 'compose' with its surroundings. Robert Drummond, accordingly, was a painter, a painter producing, in the mean time, pictures of the class called *genre*; but intending to be historical, and to take to the highest school of art as soon as life and fame would

permit. He was a very good painter; his subjects were truly 'felt' and exquisitely manipulated; but there was no energy of emotion, no originality of genius about them. A great many people admired them very much; other painters lingered over them lovingly, with that true professional admiration of 'good work' which counteracts the jealousy of trade in every honest mind. They were very saleable articles, indeed, and had procured a considerable amount of prosperity for the young painter. It was almost certain that he would be made an Associate at the next vacancy, and an Academician in time. But with all this, he was well aware that he was no genius, and so was his wife.

The knowledge of this fact acted upon them in very different ways; but that its effect may be fully understood, the difference in their characters and training requires to be known. Robert Drummond had never been anything but a painter; attempts had been made in his youth to fix him to business, his father having been the senior clerk, much respected and utterly respectable, of a great City house; and the attempt might have been successful but that accident had thrown him among artists, a kind of society very captivating to a young man, especially when he has a certain command of a pencil. He threw himself into art, accordingly, with all his soul. He was the sort of man who would have thrown himself into anything with all his soul; not for success or reward, but out of an infinite satisfaction in doing good work, and seeing beautiful things grow under his hand. He was of a very sanguine mind, a mind which seldom accepted defeat, but which, with

instinctive unconscious wisdom, hesitated to dare the highest flights, and to put itself in conflict with those final powers which either vanquish a man or assure his triumph. Perhaps it was because there was some hidden possibility of wild despair and downfall in the man's mind, of which only himself was aware, that he was thus cautious of putting his final fortune to the touch. But the fact was that he painted his pictures contentedly, conscientiously, doing everything well, and satisfied with the perfection of his work as work, though he was not unaware of the absence from it of any spark of divinity. He did not say it in so many words, but the sentiment of his mind was this: – 'It is good work, work no man need be ashamed of. I am not a Raphael, alas! and I cannot help it. What is the good of being unhappy about a thing I cannot mend? I am doing my best; it is honest work, which I know I don't slight or do carelessly; and I can give her everything she wants except that. I should be too happy myself if she were but content.' But she was not content, and thus his happiness was brought down to the moderate pitch allowed to mortal bliss.

She was very different from her Robert. She had been a young lady of very good connections when she first met the rising young artist. I do not say that her connections were splendid, or that she made an absolute *mésalliance*, for that would be untrue. Her people, however, had been rich people for several generations. They had begun in merchandise, and by merchandise they had kept themselves up; but to have been rich from the time of your

great-grandfather, with never any downfall or even break in the wealth, has perhaps more effect on the mind than that pride which springs from family. Well-descended people are aware that every family now and then gets into trouble, and may even fall into poverty without sacrificing any of its pretensions. But well-off people have not that source of enlightenment. When they cease to be very well off, they lose the great point of eminence on which they have taken their stand; and, consequently, success is more absolutely necessary to them than it is to any other class in the community. Helen Burton besides was very proud, very ambitious, and possessed of that not unusual form of *amour propre* which claims distinction as a right – though she had not anything particular in herself to justify her claim. She had, or believed she had, an utter contempt for that money which was the foundation of her family pride; and she was, at the same time, too well endowed in mind, and too generous in temper, to be able to give herself up sincerely to worship of that rank, which, as their only perpetual superior, tantalizes the imagination of the plebeian rich, and thrusts itself constantly before them. Helen could have married the son of a poor lord, and become the Honourable Mrs Somebody, with her mother's blessing, had she so willed. But as her will took a totally different direction, she had defied and alienated her mother, who was also a woman of high spirit, and only some seventeen years older than her only child; the consequence was that when Mrs Burton found herself abandoned and left alone in the world, she married too, as truly

out of pique as a girl sometimes does when deserted by her lover; and at her death left everything she had to her husband and the two small babies, one of them younger than Helen's little Norah, whom she left behind. So that a little tragedy, of a kind not much noted by the world, had woven itself around the beginning of her married life. The mother's second marriage had not been a success, but was Helen to blame for that? Nobody said she was, no one around her; but sometimes in the silence of the night, when she alone was awake, and all her household slept so peacefully – Robert, good Robert, was not a success either, not such a man as she had hoped. She loved him sincerely, was grateful to him for his love, and for his constant regard to her wishes. But yet, in the depths of her heart, – no, not despised him, the expression is too strong, – but felt a minute shade of indignation mingled in her disappointment with him for not being a great genius. *Why* was he not a Raphael, a Titian? She had married him with the full understanding that he was such, that he would bring her sweet fame and distinction. And why had not he done it? Every time she looked at his pictures she found out the want of inspiration in them. She did not say anything. She was very kind, praising the pretty bits of detail, the wonderful perfection of painting; but Robert felt that he would rather have the President and all the Hanging Committee to pass judgment on his pictures than his wife. Her sense that he had somehow defrauded her by not mounting at once to the very height of his profession, seemed to endow her with a power of judgment a

hundred-fold more than was justified by her knowledge of art. She saw the want of any soul in them at the first glance, from under her half-closed eyelids – and it seemed to Robert that in her heart she said: 'Another pretty piece of mediocrity, a thing to sell, not to live – with no genius, no genius in it.' These were the words Robert seemed to himself to hear, but they were not the real words which, in her heart, Helen uttered. These were rather as follows: – 'It is just the same as the last. It is no better, no better. And now everybody says he is at his best. Oh! when his worst begins to come, what will become of us?' But she never said an uncivil word. She praised what she could, and she went her way languidly into the drawing-room. She had come down out of her sphere to give herself to him, and he had not repaid her as she expected. He had given her love – oh, yes; but not fame. She was Mrs Drummond only; she was not pointed out where she went as the wife of the great painter. 'Her husband is an artist' was all that anybody ever said.

The effect of this upon poor Robert, however, was much worse even than it was upon his wife. Some time elapsed, it is true, before he discovered it. It took him even years to make out what it was that shadowed his little household over and diminished its brightness. But gradually a sense of the absence of that sympathetic backing up which a man expects in his own house, and without which both men and women who have work to do are so apt to pine and faint, stole over him like a chill. When anything was said against his pictures outside, a gloom in

his wife's face would show him that worse was thought within. He had no domestic shield from adverse criticism. It was not kept in the outer circle of his mind, but was allowed to penetrate down to his heart, and envelop him in a heavy discouragement. Even applause did not exhilarate him. '*She* does not think I deserve it,' was what he would say to himself; and the sense of this criticism which never uttered a word weighed upon the poor fellow's soul. It made his hand unsteady many a day when his work depended on a firm touch – and blurred the colours before his eyes, and dulled his thoughts. Two or three times he made a spasmodic effort to break through his mediocrity, and then the critics (who were very well pleased on the whole with his mediocrity) shook their heads, and warned him against the sensational. But Helen neither approved nor condemned the change. To her it was all alike, always second-rate. She did her very best to applaud, but she could not brighten up into genuine admiration the blank composure in her eyes. What could she do? There was something to be said for her, as well as for him. She could not affect to admire what she felt to be commonplace. Nature had given her a good eye, and intense feeling had strengthened and corrected it. She saw all the weakness, the flatness, with fatal certainty. What, then, could she say? But poor Robert, though he was not a great artist, was the most tender-hearted, amiable, affectionate of men; and this mode of criticism stole the very heart out of him. There is no such want in the world as that want of backing up. It is the secret of weakness and failure, just as strong moral

support and sympathy is the very secret of strength. He stood steady and robust to the external eye, painting many pictures every year, getting very tolerable prices, keeping his household very comfortable, a man still under forty, healthy, cheerful, and vigorous; but all the time he was sapped at the foundations. He had lost his confidence in himself, and it was impossible to predict how he would have borne any sudden blow.

It was about this time that Mr Reginald Burton, a cousin of Helen's, who had once, it was supposed, desired to be something nearer to her, found out the house in Kensington, and began to pay them visits. The circumstances of her marriage had separated her from her own people. The elder among them had thought Helen unkind to her mother; the younger ones had felt that nothing had come of it to justify so romantic a story. So that when Reginald Burton met the pair in society it was the reopening of an altogether closed chapter of her life. Mr Burton was a man in the City in very extensive business. He was chairman of ever so many boards, and his name, at the head of one company or another, was never out of the newspapers. He had married since his cousin did, and had a very fine place in the country, and was more well off still than it was natural for the Burtons to be. Helen, who had never liked him very much, and had not even been grateful to him for loving her, received his visits now without enthusiasm; but Drummond, who was open-hearted like his kind, and who had no sort of jealousy about 'Helen's friends,' received him with a cordiality which seemed to

his wife much too effusive. She would not accept the invitation which Mrs Burton sent to pay a long visit to Dura, their country place; but she could not be less than civil to her cousin when he insisted upon calling, nor could she openly resist when he carried off her husband to City dinners, or unfolded to him the benefits of this or that new society. Drummond had done very well in his profession, notwithstanding Helen's dissatisfaction with his work; and also notwithstanding her dissatisfaction, she was a good housewife, doing her duty wisely. She had a hundred a year of her own, which Drummond had taken care to have settled upon herself; but since they had grown richer he had insisted upon letting this accumulate as 'a portion for Norah,' and the two had laid by something besides. For painter-folk it will be readily seen they were at the very height of comfort – a pretty house, one pretty child, a little reserve of money, slowly but pleasantly accumulating. And money, though it is an ignoble thing, has so much to do with happiness! Drummond, who had been quite content to think that there was a portion saving up for Norah, and to whom it had not occurred that his little capital could be made use of, and produce twenty and a hundred-fold, gradually grew interested, without being aware of it, in the proceedings of Mr Burton. He began to talk, half laughingly, half with intention, of the wonderful difference between the slowly-earned gains of labour and those dazzling results of speculation. 'These fellows seem simply to coin money,' he said, 'half in jest and whole in earnest;' 'everything they touch seems to become gold. It looks

incredible – ' and he wound up with a nervous laugh, in which there was some agitation. Helen had all a woman's conservatism on this point.

'It *is* incredible, you may be sure,' she said. 'How can they invent money? Some one will have to pay for it somewhere;' which was a sentence of profound wisdom, much deeper than she thought.

'So one would say,' said Drummond, still laughing; 'but nobody seems to suffer. By Jove! as much as – not to say I, who am one of the rank and file – but as Welby or Hartwell Home get for one of their best pictures, your cousin will clear in five minutes, without taking the slightest trouble. When one sees it, one feels hugely tempted' – he added, looking at her. He was one of those men who like to carry their people's sympathy with them. He wanted not acquiescence simply, but approval; and notwithstanding that he was very well used to the absence of it, sought it still. She would not – could not, perhaps – enter warmly into the subject of his pictures; but here was a new matter. He looked up at her with a certain longing – ready, poor fellow, to plunge into anything if she would but approve.

'I hope you won't let yourself be tempted to anything, Robert, that you don't see the end of,' she said; but so gently that her husband's heart rose.

'Trust me for that,' he said joyously, 'and you shall have the first fruits, my darling. I have not as fine a house for you as your cousin can give to his wife, but for all that – '

'For all that,' she said, laughing, 'I would not change with Mrs Reginald Burton. I am not tempted by the fine house.'

'I have thought how we can make this one a great deal better,' he said, as he stooped to kiss her before he went out. He looked back upon her fondly as he left the room, and said to himself that if he wished for gain it was for her sake – his beautiful Helen! He had painted her furtively over and over again, though she never would sit to him. A certain shadow of her was in all his pictures, showing with more or less distinctness according as he loved or did not love his temporary heroine: but he knew that when this was pointed out to her she did not like it. She was anxious that everybody should know she did not sit to him. She was very indignant at the idea that a painter's wife might serve her husband as a model. 'Why should a painter's profession, which ought to be one of the noblest in the world, be obtruded upon the outer world at every step?' she said. But yet as he was a painter, every inch of him, his eye caught the *pose* of her head as she moved, and made a mental note of it. And yet she was not, strictly speaking, a beautiful woman. She was not the large Juno, who is our present type of beauty; she was not blazing with colour – red, and white, and golden – like the Rubens-heroines of the studio; nor was she of the low-browed, sleepy-eyed, sensuous, classic type. She was rather colourless on the contrary. Her hair was olive brown, which is so harmonious with a pale complexion; her eyes hazel-grey; her colour evanescent, coming and going, and rarely at any time more than a rose tint; her very lips, though beautifully

formed, were only rose – not scarlet – and her figure was slight and deficient in 'grand curves.' Her great characteristic was what the French call *distinction*; a quality to which in point of truth she had no claim – for Helen, it must be remembered, was no long-descended lady. She was the produce of three generations of money, and a race which could be called nothing but Philistine; and from whence came her highbred look, her fanciful pride, her unrealisable ambition, it would be difficult to say.

She went over the house with a little sigh after Robert was gone, professedly in the ordinary way of a housewife's duty, but really with reference to his last words. Yes, the house might be made a great deal better. The drawing-room was a very pretty one – quite enough for all their wants – but the dining-room was occupied by Drummond as his studio, according to an arrangement very common among painters. This, it will be perceived, was before the day of the new studio. The dining-room was thus occupied, and a smaller room, such as in most suburban houses is appropriated generally to the often scanty books of the family, was the eating-room of the Drummonds. It was one of those things which made Helen's pride wince – a very petty subject for pride, you will say – but, then, pride is not above petty things; and it wounded her to be obliged to say apologetically to her cousin – 'The real dining-room of the house is Mr Drummond's studio. We content ourselves with this in the mean time.' 'Oh, yes; I see; of course he must want space and light,' Reginald Burton had replied with patronising

complacency, and a recollection of his own banqueting-hall at Dura. How Helen hated him at that moment, and how much aggravated she felt with poor Robert smiling opposite to her, and feeling quite comfortable on the subject! 'We painters are troublesome things,' he even said, as if it was a thing to smile at. Helen went and looked in at the studio on this particular morning, and made a rapid calculation how it could be 'made better.' It would have to be improved off the face of the earth, in the first place, as a studio; and then carpeted, and tabled, and mirrored, and ornamented to suit its new destination. It would take a good deal of money to do it, but that was not the first consideration. The thing was, where was Robert to go? She, for her part, would have been reconciled to it easily, could he have made up his mind to have a studio apart from the house, and come home when his work was done. That would be an advantage in every way. It would secure that in the evening, at least, his profession should be banished. He would have to spend the evening as gentlemen usually do, yawning his head off if he pleased, but not professional for ever. It would no longer be possible for him to put on an old coat, and steal away into that atmosphere of paint, and moon over his effects, as he loved to do now. He liked Helen to go with him, and she did so often, and was tried almost beyond her strength by his affectionate lingerings over the canvas, which, in her soul, she felt would never be any better, and his appeals to her to suggest and to approve. Nothing would teach him not to appeal to her. Though he divined what she felt, though it had

eaten into his very life, yet still he would try again. Perhaps this time she might like it better – perhaps —

'If he would only have his studio out of doors,' Helen reflected. She was too sure of him to be checked by the thought that his heart might perhaps learn to live out of doors too as well as his pictures, did she succeed in driving them out. No such doubt ever crossed her mind. He loved her, and nobody else, she knew. His mind had never admitted another idea but hers. She was a woman who would have scorned to be jealous in any circumstances – but she had no temptation to be jealous. He was only a moderate painter. He would never be as splendid as Titian, with a prince to pick up his pencil – which is what Helen's semi-Philistine pride would have prized. But he loved her so as no man had ever surpassed. She knew that, and was vaguely pleased by it; yet not as she might have been had there ever been any doubt about the matter. She was utterly sure of him, and it did not excite her one way or another. But his words had put a little gentle agitation in her mind. She put down her calculation on paper when she went back to the drawing-room after her morning occupations were over, and called Norah to her music. Sideboard so much, old carved oak, to please him, though for herself she thought it gloomy; curtains, for these luxuries he had not admitted to spoil his light; a much larger carpet – she made her list with some pleasure while Norah played her scales. And that was the day on which the painter's commercial career began.

CHAPTER II

Drummond's first speculations were very successful, as is so often the case with the innocent and ignorant dabbler in commercial gambling. Mr Burton instructed him what to do with his little capital, and he did it. He knew nothing about business, and was docile to the point of servility to his disinterested friend, who smiled at his two thousand pounds, and regarded it with amused condescension. Two thousand pounds! It meant comfort, ease of mind, moral strength, to Drummond. It made him feel that in the contingency of a bad year, or a long illness, or any of the perils to which men and artists are liable, he would still be safe, and that his wife and child would not suffer; but to the rich City man it was a bagatelle scarcely worth thinking of. When he really consented to employ his mind about it, he made such use of it as astonished and delighted the innocent painter. All that his simple imagination had ever dreamed seemed likely to be carried out. This was indeed money-making he felt – Trade spelt with a very big capital, and meaning something much more splendid than anything he had hitherto dreamt of. But then he could not have done it by himself or without instruction. Burton could not have been more at a loss in Drummond's studio than he would have felt in his friend's counting-house. Mr Burton was 'a merchant;' a vague term which nevertheless satisfied the painter's mind. He was understood to be one of the partners in Rivers's

bank, but his own business was quite independent of that. Money was the material he dealt in – his stock-in-trade. He understood the Funds as a doctor understands a patient whose pulse he feels every day. He could divine when they were going to rise and when they were going to fall. And there were other ways in which his knowledge told still more wonderfully. He knew when a new invention, a new manufacture, was going to be popular, by some extraordinary magic which Drummond could not understand. He would catch a speculation of this sort at its tide, and take his profit from it, and bound off again uninjured before the current began to fall. In all these matters he was knowing beyond most men; and he lent to his cousin's husband all the benefit of his experience. For several years Drummond went on adding to his store in a manner so simple and delightful, that his old way of making money, the mode by which months of labour went to the acquisition of a few hundred pounds, looked almost laughable to him. He continued it because he was fond of his art, and loved her for herself alone; but he did it with a sort of banter, smiling at the folly of it, as an enlightened old lady might look at her spinning-wheel. The use of it? Well, as for that, the new ways of spinning were better and cheaper; but still not for the use, but for the pleasure of it! – So Drummond clung to his profession, and worked almost as hard at it as ever. And in the additional ease of his circumstances, not needing to hurry anything for an exhibition, or sacrifice any part of his design for the fancy of a buyer, he certainly painted better than usual, and was made an

Associate, to the general satisfaction of his brethren. These were the happy days in which the studio was built. It was connected with the house, as I have said, by a conservatory, a warm, glass-covered, fragrant, balmy place, bright with flowers. 'There must always be violets, and there must always be colour!' he had said to the nurseryman who supplied and kept his fairy palace in order, after the fashion of London. And if ever there was a flowery way contrived into the thorny haunts of art it was this. It would perhaps be rash to say that this was the happy time of Drummond's married life, for they had always been happy, with only that one drawback of Helen's dissatisfaction with her husband's work. They had loved each other always, and their union had been most true and full. But the effect of wealth was mollifying, as it so often is. Prosperity has been railed at much, as dangerous and deadening to the higher being; but prosperity increases amiability and smooths down asperities as nothing else can. It did not remove that one undisclosed and untellable grievance which prevented Mrs Drummond's life from attaining perfection, but it took away ever so many little points of irritation which aggravated that. She got, for one thing, the dining-room she wanted – a prosaic matter, yet one which Helen considered important – and she got, what she had not bargained for, that pretty conservatory, and a bunch of violets every day – a lover-like gift which pleased her. Things, in short, went very well with them at this period of their existence. Her discontents were more lulled to sleep than they had ever been before. She still saw the

absence of any divine meaning in her husband's pictures; but she saw it with gentler eyes. The pictures did not seem so entirely his sole standing-ground. If he could not grow absolutely illustrious by that or any personal means of acquiring fame, he might still hold his own in the world by other means. Helen sighed over her Titian-dream, but to a great extent she gave it up. Greatness was not to be; but comfort and even luxury were probable. Her old conditions of life seemed to be coming back to her. It was not what she had dreamed of; but yet it was better to have mediocrity with ease and modest riches, and pleasant surroundings, than mediocrity without those alleviations. To do her justice, had her husband been a great unsuccessful genius, in whom she had thoroughly believed, she would have borne privation proudly and with a certain triumph. But that not being so, she returned to her old starting-ground with a sigh that was not altogether painful, saying to herself that she must learn to be content with what she had, and not long for what she could not have.

Thus they were happier, more hopeful, more at their ease. They went more into society, and received more frequent visits from their friends. The new studio made many social pleasures possible that had not been possible. Of itself it implied a certain rise in the world. It gave grace and completeness to their little house. Nobody could say any longer that it was half a house and half a workshop, as Helen, under her breath, in her impatience, had sometimes declared it to be. The workshop phase was over, the era of self-denial gone – and yet Robert was not driven from

the art he loved, nor prevented from putting on his old coat and stealing away in the evenings to visit the mistress who was dearer to him than anything else except his wife.

This was the state of affairs when the painter one day entered Helen's drawing-room in a state of considerable excitement. He was full of a new scheme, greater than anything he had as yet been engaged in. Rivers's bank, which was half as old as London, which held as high repute as the Bank of England, which was the favourite depository of everybody's money, from ministers of state down to dressmakers, was going to undergo a revolution. The Riverses themselves had all died out, except, indeed, the head of the house, who was now Lord Rivers, and had no more than a nominal connection with the establishment which had been the means of bringing him to his present high estate. The other partners had gradually got immersed in other business. Mr Burton, for instance, confessed frankly that he had not time to attend to the affairs of the bank, and the others were in a similar condition: – they had come in as secondaries, and they found themselves principals, and it was too much for them. They had accordingly decided to make Rivers's a joint-stock bank. This was the great news that Drummond brought home to his wife. 'I will put everything we have into it,' he said in his enthusiasm, 'unless you object, Helen. We can never have such another chance. Most speculations have a doubtful element in them. But this is not at all doubtful. There is an enormous business ready made to our hands, and all the traditions of success and the best

names in the City to head our list – for of course the old partners hold shares, and will be made directors of the new company – And – you will laugh, Helen, but for you and the child I feel able to brave anything – I am to be a director too.'

'You!' cried Helen, with a surprise which had some mixture of dismay. 'But you don't know anything about business. You can't even – '

'Reckon up my own accounts,' said the painter placidly – 'quite true; but you see it is a great deal easier to calculate on a large scale than on a small scale. I assure you I understand the banking system – at least, I shall when I have given my mind to it. I shouldn't mind even,' he said laughing, 'making an effort to learn the multiplication table. Norah might teach me. Besides, to speak seriously, it doesn't matter in the least: there are clerks and a manager to do all that, and other directors that know all about it, and I shall learn in time.'

'But, then, why be a director at all?' said Helen. She said this more from a woman's natural hesitation at the thought of change, than from any dislike of the idea; for she belonged to the race from which directors come by nature. Poor Drummond could not give any very good reason why he desired this distinction; but he looked very wise, and set before her with gravity all the privileges involved.

'It brings something in,' he said, 'either in the way of salary, or special profits, or something. Ask your cousin. I don't pretend to know very much about it. But I assure you he is very great upon

the advantages involved. He says it will be the making of me. It gives position and influence and all that – '

'To a painter!' said Helen: and in her heart she groaned. Her dream came back like a mist, and wove itself about her head. What distinction would it have given to Raphael or to Titian, or even to Gainsborough or Sir Joshua Reynolds, to be made directors of a bank? She groaned in her heart, and then she came back to herself, and caught her husband's eyes looking at her with that grieved and wondering look, half aware of the disappointment he had caused her, humbled, sorry, suspicious, yet almost indignant, the look with which he had sometimes regarded her from among his pictures in the day when art reigned alone over his life. Helen came abruptly to herself when she met that glance, and said hurriedly, 'It cannot change your position much, Robert, in our world.'

'No,' he said, with a glance of sudden brightness in his eyes which she did not understand; 'but, my darling, our world may expand. I should like you to be something more than a poor painter's wife, Helen – you who might be a princess! I should not have ventured to marry you if I had not hoped to make you a kind of princess; but you don't believe I can; do you?' Here he paused, and, she thought, regarded her with a wistful look, asking her to contradict him. But how could she contradict him? It was true. The wife of a pleasant mediocre painter, Associate, or in time Academician – that was all. Not a thorough lady of art such as – such as – Such as whom? Poor Andrea's Lucrezia, who ruined

him? That was the only painter's wife that occurred to Helen.

'Dear Robert,' she said earnestly, 'never mind me: so long as I have you and Norah, I care very little about princesses. We are very well and very happy as we are. I think you should be careful, and consider well before you make any change.'

But by this time the brightness that had been hanging about him came back again like a gleam of sunshine. He kissed her with a joyous laugh. 'You are only a woman,' he said, 'after all. You don't understand what it is to be a British director. Fancy marching into the bank with a lordly stride, and remembering the days when one was thankful to have a balance of five pounds to one's credit! You don't see the fun of it, Helen; and the best of the whole is that an R.A. on the board of directors will be an advantage, Burton says. Why, heaven knows. I suppose he thinks it will conciliate the profession. We painters, you see, are known to have so much money floating about! But anyhow, he thinks an R.A. – '

'But, Robert! you are not an R.A.'

'Not yet. I forgot to tell you,' he added, lowering his voice, and putting on a sudden look of gravity, which was half real, half innocently hypocritical. 'Old Welby died last night.'

Then there was a little pause. They were not glad that old Welby was dead. A serious shade came over both their faces for the moment – the homage, partly natural, partly conventional, that human nature pays to death. And then they clasped each other's hands in mutual congratulation. The vacant place would

come to Drummond in the course of nature. He was known to be the first on the list of Associates. Thus he had obtained the highest honours of his profession, and it was this and not the bank directorship which had filled him with triumph. His wife's coldness, however, checked his delight. His profession and the public adjudged the honour to him; but Helen had not adjudged it. If the prize had been hers to bestow, she would not have given it to him. This made his heart contract even in the moment of his triumph. But yet he was triumphant. To him it was the highest honour in the world.

'Poor old Welby!' he said. 'He was a great painter; and now that he is dead, he will be better understood. He was fifty before he entered the Academy,' the painter continued, with half-conscious self-glorification. 'He was a long time making his way.'

'And you are more than ten years younger,' said Helen. Surely that might have changed her opinion if anything could. 'Robert, are you to be put upon this bank because you are an R.A.?'

'And for my business talents generally,' he said, with a laugh. His spirits were too high to be subdued. He would not hear reason, nor, indeed, anything except the confused delightful chatter about his new elevation, in which the fumes of happiness get vent. He plunged into an immediate revelation of what he would do in his new capacity. 'It will be odd if one can't make the Hanging Committee a little more reasonable,' he said. 'I shall set my face against that hideous habit of filling up "the line" with dozens of bad pictures because the men have R.A. at their names.

Do you remember, Helen, that year when I was hung up at the ceiling? It nearly broke my heart. It was the year before we were married.'

'They were your enemies then,' said Helen, with some visionary remnant of the old indignation which she had felt about that base outrage before she was Robert Drummond's wife. She had not begun to criticise him then – to weigh his pictures and find them wanting; and she could still remember her disgust and hatred of the Hanging Committee of that year. Now no Hanging Committee could do any harm. It had changed its opinion and applauded the painter, but she – had changed her opinion too. Then this artist-pair did as many such people do. By way of celebrating the occasion they went away to the country, and spent the rest of the day like a pair of lovers. Little Norah, who was too small to be carried off on such short notice, was left at home with her governess, but the father and mother went away to enjoy the bright summer day, and each other, and the event which had crowned them with glory. Even Helen's heart was moved with a certain thrill of satisfaction when it occurred to her that some one was pointing her husband out as 'Drummond the painter – the new R.A.' He had won his blue ribbon, and won it honestly, and nobody in England, nobody in the world, was above him in his own profession. He was as good as a Duke, or even superior, for a Duke (poor wretch!) cannot help himself, whereas a painter achieves his own distinction. Helen let this new softness steal into her soul. She even felt that when she looked at the pictures

next time they would have a light in them which she had not yet been able to perceive. And the bank, though it was so much more important, sank altogether into the background, while the two rowed down the river in the summer evening, with a golden cloud of pleasure and glory around them. They had gone to Richmond, where so many happy people go to realise their gladness. And were the pair of lovers new betrothed, who crossed their path now and then without seeing them, more blessed than the elder pair? 'I wonder if they will be as happy ten years hence?' Helen said, smiling at them with that mingling of sweet regret and superiority with which we gaze at the reflection of a happiness we have had in our day. 'Yes,' said the painter, 'if she is as sweet to him as my wife has been to me.' What more could a woman want to make her glad? If Helen had not been very happy in his love, it would have made her heart sick to think of all her failures towards him; but she was very happy; and happiness is indulgent not only to its friends, but even to itself.

CHAPTER III

Mr Burton, however, was soon restored to pre-eminence in the affairs of the Drummonds. The very next day he dined with them, and entered on the whole question. The glory which the painter had achieved was his own affair, and consequently its interest was soon exhausted to his friend, who, for his part, had a subject of his own, of which the interest was inexhaustible. Mr Burton was very explanatory, in his genial, mercantile way. He made it clear even to Helen, who was not above the level of ordinary womankind in her understanding of business. He had no difficulty in convincing her that Robert Drummond, R.A., would be an addition to the list of directors; but it was harder to make the reasons apparent why 'Rivers's' should change its character. If it was so firmly established, so profitable, and so popular, why should the partners desire to share their good fortune with others? Mrs Drummond asked. Her husband laughed with the confidence of a man who knew all about it, at the simplicity of such a question, but Mr Burton, on the contrary, took the greatest pains to explain all. He pointed out to her all the advantages of 'new blood.' The bank was doing well, and making enormous profits; but still it might do better with more energetic management. Mr Burton described and deplored pathetically his own over-burdened condition. Sometimes he was detained in the City while the guests at a state dinner-party awaited him at home. His

carriage had waited for him for two hours together at the railway, while he was busy in town, toiling over the arrears of work at Rivers's. 'We have a jewel of a manager,' he said, 'or we never could get on at all. You know Golden, Drummond? There never was such a fellow for work – and a head as clear as steel; never forgets anything; never lets an opportunity slip him. But for him, we never could have got on so long in this way. But every man's strength has its limits. And we must have "new blood."'

Thus Helen gradually came to an understanding of the whole, or at least thought she did. At all events, she understood about the 'new blood.' Her own Robert was new blood of the most valuable kind. His name would be important, for the business of 'Rivers's' was to a considerable extent a private business. And his good sense and industry would be important too.

'Talk about business talent,' Mr Burton said; 'business talent means good sense and prudence. It means the capacity to see what ought to be done, and the spirit to do it; and if you add to this discretion enough not to go too far, you have everything a man of business needs. Of course, all technical knowledge has to be acquired, but that is easily done.'

'But is Robert so accomplished as all this?' Helen said, opening her eyes. She would not, for all England, have disclosed to her cousin that Robert, in her eyes, was anything less than perfect. She would not, for her life, have had him know that her husband was not the first of painters and of men; but yet an exclamation of wonder burst from her. She was not herself so

sure of his clear-sightedness and discretion. And when Robert laughed with a mixture of vanity and amusement at the high character imagined for him, Helen flushed also with something between anger and shame.

'Your own profession is a different thing,' she said hastily. 'You have been trained for that. But to be an R.A. does not make you a man of business – and painting is your profession, Robert. More will be expected from you now, instead of less.'

'But we are not going to interfere with his time, my dear Helen,' said her cousin cheerfully. 'A meeting of directors once a week or so – a consultation when we meet – his advice, which we can always come to ask. Bless my soul, we are not going to sweep up a great painter for our small concern. No, no; you may make yourself quite easy. In the mean time Drummond is not to give us much more than the benefit of his name.'

'And all his money,' Helen said to herself as she withdrew to the drawing-room, where her little Norah awaited her. His money had increased considerably since this new era in their lives began. It was something worth having now – something that would make the little girl an heiress in a humble way. And he was going to risk it all. She went into the conservatory in the twilight and walked up and down and pondered – wondering if it was wise to do it; wondering if some new danger was about to swallow them up. Her reasonings, however, were wholly founded upon matters quite distinct from the real question. She discussed it with herself, just as her husband would discuss

it with himself, in a way common to women, and painters, and other unbusiness-like persons, on every ground but the real one. First, he had followed Reginald Burton's advice in all his speculations, and had gained. Would it be honourable for him to give up following his advice now, especially in a matter which he had so much at heart? Secondly, by every means in his power, Reginald Burton took occasion to throw in *her* face (Helen's) the glories and splendour of his wife, and of the home he had given her, and all her high estate. Helen herself was conscious of having refused these glories and advantages. She had chosen to be Robert Drummond's wife, and thrown aside the other; but still the mention of Mrs Burton and her luxuries had a certain stinging and stimulating effect upon her. She scorned, and yet would have been pleased to emulate that splendour. The account of it put her out of patience with her own humility, notwithstanding that she took pride in that humility, and felt it more consistent with the real dignity of her position than any splendour. And then, thirdly, the thought would come in that even the magic title of R.A. had not thrown any celestial light into Robert's pictures. That very morning she had stood for half an hour, while he was out, in front of the last, which still stood on his easel, and tried to reason herself into love of it. It was a picture which ought to have been great. It was Francesca and Paolo, in the story, reading together at the crisis of their fate. The glow and ardour of suppressed passion had somehow toned down in Drummond's hands to a gentle light. There was a sunset warmth of colour about the pair, which stood

in place of that fiercer illumination; and all the maze of love and madness, all the passion and misery and delight, all the terror of fate involved, and shadow of the dark, awful world beyond, had sunk into a tender picture of a pair of lovers, innocent and sweet. Helen had stood before it with a mixture of discouragement and longing impossible to put into words. Oh, if she could but breathe upon it, and breathe in the lacking soul! Oh, if she could but reflect into Drummond's eyes the passion of humiliation and impatience and love which was in her own! But she could not. As Helen paced up and down the pretty ornamented space, all sweet with flowers, which her husband's love had made for her, this picture rose before her like a ghost. He who painted it was an R.A. It was exquisitely painted – a very miracle of colour and manipulation. There was not a detail which could be improved, nor a line which was out of drawing. He would never do anything better, never, never! Then why should he go on trying, proving, over and over, how much he could, and how much he could not do? Better, far better, to throw it aside for ever, to grow rich, to make himself a name in another way.

Thus Helen reasoned in the vehemence of her thoughts. She was calm until she came to this point. She thought she was very calm, reasonable to the highest pitch, in everything; and yet the blood began to boil and course through her veins as she pursued the subject. Sometimes she walked as far as the door of the studio, and pausing to look in, saw that picture glimmering on the easel, and all the unframed canvases about upon the walls.

Many of them were sketches of herself, made from memory, for she never would sit – studies of her in her different dresses, in different characters, according as her husband's fond fancy represented her to himself. She could not see them for the darkness, but she saw them all in her heart. Was that all he could do? Not glorify her by his greatness, but render her the feeble homage of this perpetual, ineffectual adoration. Why was not he like the other painters; like – Her memory failed her for an example; of all the great painters she could think of only Rubens' bacchanalian beauties and that Lucrezia would come to her mind. It was about the time of Mr Browning's poem, that revelation of Andrea del Sarto, which elucidates the man like a very ray from heaven. She was not very fond of poetry, nor anything of a critic; but the poem had seized upon her, partly because of her intense feeling on the subject. Sometimes she felt as if she herself was Andrea – not Robert, for Robert had none of that heart-rending sense of failure. Was she Lucrezia rather, the wife that goaded him into misery? No, no! she could not so condemn herself. When her thoughts reached this point she forsook the studio and the conservatory, and rushed back to the drawing-room, where little Norah, with her head pressed close against the window to take advantage of the last glimmer of light, was reading a book of fairy tales. Great painters had not wives. Those others – Leonardo, and Angelo, and the young Urbinese – had none of them wives. Was that the reason? But not to be as great as Michel Angelo, not to win the highest honours of art, would Robert

give up his wife and his child. Therefore was it not best that he should give up being a painter, and become a commercial man instead, and grow rich! Helen sat down in the gathering darkness and looked at the three windows glimmering with their mist of white curtains, and little Norah curled up on the carpet, with her white face and her brown curls relieved against the light. Some faint sounds came in soft as summer and evening made them, through the long casement, which was open, and with it a scent of mignonette, and of the fresh earth in the flower-beds, refreshed by watering and dew. Sometimes the voices of her husband and cousin from the adjoining room would reach her ear; but where she was all was silent, nothing to disturb her thoughts. No, he would never do better. He had won his crown. Helen was proud and glad that he had won it; but in her heart did not consent. He had won and he had not won. His victory was because he had caught the *banal* fancy of the public, and pleased his brethren by his beautiful work; but he had failed because – because – Why had he failed? Because he was not Raphael or Leonardo – nor even that poor Andrea – but only Robert Drummond, painting his pictures not out of any inspiration within him, but for money and fame. He had gained these as men who seek them frankly so often seem to do. But it was better, far better, that he should make money now, by legitimate means, without pursuing a profession in which he never could be great.

These were not like a wife's reasonings; but they were Helen's, though she was loyal to her husband as ever woman was. She

would have liked so much better to worship his works and himself, as most women do; and that would have done him good more than anything else in earth or heaven. But she could not. It was her hard fate that made her eye so keen and so true. It felt like infidelity to him, to come to such a conclusion in his own house, with his kind voice sounding in her ear. But so it was, and she could not make it different, do what she would. He was so pleased when he found she did not oppose his desires, so grateful to her, so strongly convinced that she was yielding her own pleasure to his, that his thanks were both lavish and tender. When their visitor had left them, and they were alone, he poured out his gratitude like a lover. 'I know you are giving in to me,' he said, 'my love, my self-forgetting Helen! It is like you. You always have given up your pleasure to mine. Am I a brute to accept it, and take my own way?'

'I am not making any sacrifice, Robert. Don't thank me, please. It is because I think you have judged right, and this is best.'

'And you think I am so blind and stupid not to see why you say that,' he said in his enthusiasm. 'Helen, I often wonder what providence was thinking of to give you only such a poor fellow as I am. I wish I was something better for your sake, something more like you; but I have not a wish or a hope in the world, my darling, except for you. If I want to be rich, Helen, it is only for you. You know that, at least.'

'And for Norah,' she said, smiling.

'For Norah, but most for Norah's mother, who trusted me when I was nobody, and gave me herself when I had little chance of being either rich or great,' said Drummond. He said it, poor fellow, with a swelling of his heart. His new dignity had for the moment delivered him even from the chill of his wife's unexpressed indifference to his work. With a certain trustful simplicity, which it would have been impossible to call vanity, he accepted the verdict of his profession – even though he had doubts himself as to his own eminence, they must know. He had won the greatness he wanted most, he had acquired a distinction which could not but vanquish his own doubts and hers. And as he was now, he would not change positions with any man in England. He was great, and please God, for Helen's sake, he would be rich too. He put his arm round his wife and drew her into the open conservatory. The moon was up, and shone down upon them, lighting up with a wan and spiritual light the colourless silent flowers. It was curious to see them, with all their leaves silvered, and all their identity gone, yet pouring forth their sweet scents silently, no one noting them. 'How sweet it is here,' said the painter, drawing a long breath in his happiness. It was a moment that lived in his mind, and remained with him, as moments do which are specially happy, detaching themselves from the common tenor of life with all the more distinctness that they are so few.

'Yes, it is the place I love best,' said Helen, whose heart was touched too, 'because you made it for me, Robert. The rest is

ordinary and comfortable, but this is different. It is your sonnet to me, like that we were reading of – like Raphael's sonnet and Dante's angel.' This she said with a little soft enthusiasm, which perhaps went beyond the magnitude of the fact. But then she was compunctious about her sins towards him; and his fondness, and the moonlight, and the breath of the flowers, moved her, and the celestial fumes of Mr Browning's book of poetry had gone to Helen's head, as the other influences went to her heart.

'My darling! it will be hard upon me if I don't give you better yet,' he said. And then with a change in his voice – cheerful, yet slightly deprecating, 'Come and have a look at "Francesca,"' he said.

It was taking an unfair advantage of her; but she could not refuse him at such a moment. He went back to the drawing-room for the lamp, and returned carrying it, drawing flecks of colour round him from all the flowers as he passed flashing the light on them. Helen felt her own portrait look at her reproachfully as she went in with reluctant steps following him, wondering what she could say. It made her heart sick to look at his pet picture, in its beauty and feebleness; but he approached it lovingly, with a heart full of satisfaction and content. He held up the lamp in his hand, though it was heavy, that the softened light might fall just where it ought, and indicated to her the very spot where she ought to stand to have the full advantage of all its beauties. 'I don't think there is much to find fault with in the composition,' he said, looking at it fondly. 'Give me your honest opinion, Helen. Do you think it

would be improved by a little heightening of those lights?'

Helen gazed at it with confused eyes and an aching heart. It was his diploma picture, the one by which most probably he would be known best to posterity, and she said to herself that he, a painter, ought to know better than she did. But that reflection did not affect her feelings. Her impulse was to snatch the lamp from his hand, and say, 'Dear Robert, dearest husband, come and make money, come and be a banker, or sweep a crossing, and let Francesca alone for ever!' But she could not say that. What she did say faltering was – 'You must know so much better than I do, Robert; but I think the light is very sweet. It is best not to be too bright.'

'Do you think so?' he said anxiously. 'I am not quite sure. I think it would be more effective with a higher tone just here; and this line of drapery is a little stiff – just a little stiff. Could you hold the lamp for a moment, Helen? There! that is better. Now Paolo's foot is free, and the attitude is more distinct. Follow the line of the chalk and tell me what you think. That comes better now?'

'Yes, it is better,' said Helen; and then she paused and summoned all her courage. 'Don't you think,' she faltered, 'that Francesca – is – almost too innocent and sweet?'

'Too innocent!' said poor Robert, opening his honest eyes. 'But, dear, you forget! She was innocent. Why, surely, you are not the one to go in for anything sensational, Helen! This is not Francesca in the Inferno, but Francesca in the garden, before

any harm had come near her. I don't like your impassioned women.' He had grown a little excited, feeling, perhaps, more in the suggestion than its mere words; but now he came to a stop, and his voice regained its easy tone. 'The whole thing wants a great deal of working up,' he said; 'all this foreground is very imperfect – it is too like an English garden. I acknowledge my weakness; my ideal always smacks of home.'

Helen said no more. How could she. He was ready laughingly to allow that England came gliding into his pencil and his thoughts when he meant to paint Italy: a venial, kindly error. But candid and kind as he was, he could not bear criticism on the more vital points. She held the lamp for him patiently, though it strained her arm, and tried to make what small suggestions she could about the foreground; and in her heart, as she stood trembling with pain and excitement, would have liked to thrust the flame through that canvas in very love for the painter. Perhaps some painter's wife who reads this page, some author's wife, some woman jealous and hungry for excellence in the productions of those she loves, will understand better than I can describe it how Helen felt.

When he had finished those fond scratches of chalk upon the picture, and had taken the lamp from her hand to relieve her, Drummond was shocked to find his wife so tremulous and pale. He made her sit down in his great chair, and called himself a brute for tiring her. 'Now let us have a comfortable talk over the other matter,' he said. The lamp, which he had placed on a table

littered with portfolios and pigments, threw a dim light through the large studio. There were two ghostly easels standing up tall and dim in the background, and the lay figure ghostliest of all, draped with a gleaming silvery stuff, pale green with lines of silver, shone eerily in the distance. Drummond sat down by his wife, and took her hand in his.

'You are quite chilly,' he said tenderly; 'are you ill, Helen? If it worries you like this, a hundred directorships would not tempt me. Tell me frankly, my darling – do you dislike it so much as this?'

'I don't dislike it at all,' she said eagerly. 'I am chilly because the night is cold. Listen how the wind is rising! That sound always makes me miserable. It is like a child crying or some one wailing out of doors. It affects my nerves – I don't know why.'

'It is nothing but the sound of rain,' he said, 'silly little woman! I wonder why it is that one likes a woman to be silly now and then? It restores the balance between us, I suppose; for generally, alas! Helen, you are wiser than I am, which is a dreadful confession for a man to make.'

'No, no, it is not true,' she said with indescribable remorse. But he only laughed and put his arm round her, seeing that she trembled still.

'It is quite true; but I like you to be silly now and then – like this. It gives one a glimmer of superiority. There! lean upon me and feel comfortable. You are only a woman after all. You want your husband's arm to keep you safe.'

'What is that?' said Helen with a start. It was a simple sound enough; one of the many unframed, unfinished drawings which covered the walls had fallen down. Robert rose and picked it up, and brought it forward to the light.

'It is nothing,' he said; and then with a laugh, looking at it, added, '*Absit omen!* It is my own portrait. And very lucky, too, that it was nothing more important. It is not hurt. Let us talk about the bank.'

'Oh, Robert, your portrait!' she said with sudden unreasonable terror, clutching at it, and gazing anxiously into the serene painted face.

'My portrait does not mind in the least,' he said, laughing; 'and it might have been yours, Helen. I must have all those fastenings seen to to-morrow. Now, let us talk about the bank.'

'Oh, Robert,' she said, 'let us have nothing to do with it. It *is* an omen, a warning. We are very well as we are. Give up all these business things which you don't understand. How can you understand them? Give it up, and let us be as we are.'

'Because a nail has come out of the wall?' he said. 'Do you suppose the nail knew, Helen, or the bit of painted canvas? Nonsense, dear. I defy all omens for my part.'

And just then the wind rose and gave a wailing cry, like a spirit in pain. Helen burst into tears which she could not keep back. No; it was quite true, the picture could not know, the wind could not know what was to come. And yet —

Drummond had never seen his wife suffer from nerves or

fancies, and it half-amused, half-affected him, and went to his heart. He was even pleased, the simple-minded soul, and flattered by the sense of protection and strength which he felt in himself. He liked nothing better than to caress and soothe her. He took her back to the drawing-room and placed her on a sofa, and read the new book of poetry to her which she had taken such a fancy to. Dear foolishness of womankind! He liked to feel her thus dependent upon his succour and sympathy; and smiled to think of any omen that could lie in the howling of the wind, or the rising of a summer storm.

CHAPTER IV

It is needless to say that Helen's superstition about the fall of the picture and the sighing of the wind vanished with the night, and that in the morning her nervousness was gone, and her mind had returned to its previous train of thought. Her passing weakness, however, had left one trace behind. While he was soothing her fanciful terrors, Robert had said, in a burst of candour and magnanimity, 'I will tell you what I will do, Helen. I will not act on my own judgment. I'll ask Haldane and Maurice for their advice,' 'But I do not care for their advice,' she had said, with a certain pathos. 'Yes, to be sure,' Robert had answered; for, good as he was, he liked his own way, and sometimes was perverse. 'They are my oldest friends; they are the most sensible fellows I know. I will tell them all the circumstances, and they will give me their advice.'

This was a result which probably would have come whether Helen had been nervous or not; for Haldane and Maurice were the two authorities whom the painter held highest after his wife. But Helen had never been able to receive them with her husband's faith, or to agree to them as sharers of her influence over him. It said much for her that she had so tolerated them and schooled herself in their presence that poor Drummond had no idea of the rebellion which existed against them in her heart. But both of them were instinctively aware of it, and felt that they were not

loved by their friend's wife. He made the same announcement to her next morning with cheerful confidence, and a sense that he deserved nothing but applause for his prudence. 'I am going to keep my promise,' he said. 'You must not think I say anything to please you which I don't mean to carry out. I am going to speak to Haldane and Maurice. Maurice is very knowing about business, and as for Stephen, his father was in an office all his life.'

'But, Robert, I don't want you to ask their advice. I have no faith in them. I would rather a hundred times you judged for yourself.'

'Yes, my darling,' said Robert; 'they are the greatest helps to a man in making such a decision. I know my own opinion, and I know yours; and our two good friends, who have no bias, will put everything right.'

And he went out with his hat brushed and a new pair of gloves, cheerful and respectable as if he were already a bank director, cleansed of the velvet coats and brigand hats and all the weaknesses of his youth. And his wife sat down with an impatient sigh to hear Norah play her scales, which was not exhilarating, for Norah's notions of time and harmony were as yet but weakly developed. While the child made direful havoc among the black notes, Helen was sounding a great many notes quite as black in her inmost mind. What could they know about it? What were they to him in comparison with herself? Why should he so wear his heart upon his sleeve? It raised a kind of silent exasperation within her, so good as he was, so kind, and tender, and loving; and

yet this was a matter in which she had nothing to do but submit.

These two cherished friends of Robert's were not men after Helen's heart. The first, Stephen Haldane, was a Dissenting minister, a member of a class which all prejudices were in arms against. It was not that she cared for his religious opinions or views, which differed from her own. She was not theological nor ecclesiastical in her turn of mind, and, to tell the truth, was not given to judging her acquaintances by an intellectual standard, much less a doctrinal one. But she shrank from his intimacy because he was a Dissenter – a man belonging to a class not acknowledged in society, and of whom she understood vaguely that they were very careless about their h's, and were not gentlemen. The fact that Stephen Haldane was a gentleman as much as good manners, and good looks, and a tolerable education could make him, did not change her sentiments. She was too much of an idealist (without knowing it) to let proof invalidate theory. Accordingly, she doubted his good manners, mistrusted his opinions, and behaved towards him with studied civility, and a protest, carefully veiled but never forgotten, against his admission to her society. He had no right to be there; he was an intruder, an inferior. Such was her conclusion in a social point of view; and her husband's inclination to consult him on most important matters in their history was very galling to her. The two had come to know each other in their youth, when Haldane was going through the curious incoherent education which often leads a young man temporarily to the position of Dissenting minister. He

had started in life as a Bluecoat boy, and had shown what people call 'great talent,' but not in the academical way. As a young man he had loved modern literature better than ancient. Had he been born to an estate of ten thousand a year, or had he been born in a rank which would have secured him diplomatic or official work, he would have had a high character for accomplishments and ability; but he was born only of a poor Dissenting family, without a sixpence, and when his school career was over he did not know what to do with himself. He took to writing, as such men do, by nature, and worked his way into the newspapers. Thus he began to earn a little money, while vaguely playing with a variety of careers. Once he thought he would be a doctor, and it was while in attendance at an anatomical class that he met Drummond. But Haldane was soon sick of doctoring. Then he became a lecturer, getting engagements from mechanics' institutions and literary societies, chiefly in the country. It was at one of these lectures that he fell under the notice of a certain Mr Baldwin, a kind of lay bishop in a great Dissenting community. Mr Baldwin was much 'struck' by the young lecturer. He agreed with his views, and applauded his eloquence; and when the lecture was over had himself introduced to the speaker. This good man had a great many peculiarities, and was rich enough to be permitted to indulge them. One of these peculiarities was an inclination to find out and encourage 'rising talent.' And he told everybody he had seldom been so much impressed as by the talents of this young man, who was living (innocently) by his wits, and did not

know what to do with himself. It is not necessary to describe the steps by which young Haldane ripened from a lecturer upon miscellaneous subjects, literary and philosophical, into a most esteemed preacher. He pursued his studies for a year or two at Mr Baldwin's cost, and at the end of that time was promoted, not of course nominally, but very really, by Mr Baldwin's influence, to the pulpit of the flourishing and wealthy congregation of which that potentate was the head.

This was Stephen Haldane's history; but he was not the sort of man to be produced naturally by such a training. He was full of natural refinement, strangely blended with a contented adherence to all the homely habits of his early life. He had not attempted, had not even thought of, 'bettering' himself. He lived with his mother and sister, two homely Dissenting women, narrow as the little house they lived in, who kept him, his table, and surroundings, on exactly the same model as his father's house had been kept. All the luxuries of the wealthy chapel folks never tempted him to imitation. He did not even claim to himself the luxury of a private study in which to write his sermons, but had his writing-table in the common sitting-room, in order that his womankind might preserve the cold fiction of a 'best room' in which to receive visitors. To be sure, he might have been able to afford a larger house; but then Mrs Haldane and Miss Jane would have been out of place in a larger house. They lived in Victoria Villas, one of those smaller streets which copy and vulgarize the better ones in all London suburbs. It was close

to St Mary's Road, in which Drummond's house was situated, and the one set of houses was a copy of the other in little. The arrangement of the rooms, the shape of the garden, the outside aspect was the same, only so many degrees smaller. And this, it must be allowed, was one of the reasons why the Haldanes were unpalatable neighbours to Mrs Drummond; for, as a general rule, the people who lived in St Mary's Road did not know the inferior persons who inhabited Victoria Villas. The smaller copied the greater, and were despised by them in consequence. It was 'a different class,' everybody said. And it may be supposed that it was very hard upon poor Helen to have it known that her husband's closest friend, the man whose opinion he asked about most things, and whom he believed in entirely, was one who combined in himself almost all the objectionable qualities possible. He was a Dissenter – a Dissenting minister – sprung of a poor family, and adhering to all their shabby habits – and lived in Victoria Villas. The very address of itself was enough to condemn a man; no one who had any respect for his friends would have retained it for an hour. Yet it was this man whom Robert had gone to consult at the greatest crisis of his life.

The other friend upon whom poor Drummond relied was less objectionable in a social point of view. He was a physician, and not in very great practice, being a crotchety man given to inventions and investigations, but emphatically 'a gentleman' according to Helen's own sense of the word. This was so far satisfactory; but if he was less objectionable, he was also much

less interesting than Stephen Haldane. He was a shy man, knowing little about women and caring less. He lived all by himself in a great house in one of the streets near Berkeley Square, a house twice as big as the Drummonds', which he inhabited in solitary state, in what seemed to Helen the coldest, dreariest loneliness. She was half sorry for, half contemptuous of him in his big, solemn, doubly-respectable hermitage. He was rich, and had nothing to do with his money. He had few friends and no relations. He was as unlike the painter as could be conceived; and yet in him too Robert believed. Their acquaintance dated back to the same anatomical lectures which had brought Haldane and Drummond together, but Dr Maurice was a lover of art, and had bought Robert's first picture, and thus occupied a different ground with him. Perhaps the irritating influence he had upon Helen was greater than that exercised by Haldane, because it was an irritation produced by his character, not by his circumstances. Haldane paid her a certain shy homage, feeling her to be different from all the women who surrounded himself; but Maurice treated her with formal civility and that kind of conventional deference which old-fashioned people show to the wishes and tastes of an inferior, that he may be set at his ease among them. There were times when she all but hated the doctor, with his courtesy and his silent air of criticism – but the minister she could not hate.

At the same time it must be allowed that to see her husband set out with his new gloves to ask the opinion of these two men, after

all the profound thought she had herself given to the subject, and the passionate feeling it had roused within her, was hard upon Helen. To them it would be nothing more than a wise or unwise investment of money, but to her it was a measure affecting life and honour. Perhaps she exaggerated, she was willing to allow – but they would not fail to underrate its importance; they could not – Heaven forbid they ever should! – feel as she did, that Robert, though an R.A., had failed in his profession. They would advise him to hold fast by that profession and leave business alone, which was as much as condemning him to a constant repetition of the despairs and discontents of the past; or they would advise him to accept the new opening held out to him and sever himself from art, which would be as good as a confession of failure. Thus it is evident, whatever his friends might happen to advise, Helen was prepared to resent.

At this moment Mrs Drummond's character was the strangest mixture of two kinds of being. She was, though a mature woman, like a flower bursting out of a rough husk. The old conventional nature, the habits and prejudices of the rich *bourgeois* existence to which she had been born, had survived all that had as yet happened to her in life. The want of a dining-room, which has been already noted, had been not a trivial accident but a real humiliation to her. She sighed when she thought of the great dinner-parties with mountains of silver on table and sideboard, and many men in black or more gorgeous beings in livery to wait, which she had been accustomed to in her youth; and when

she was obliged to furnish a supper for a group of painters who had been smoking half the night in the studio, and who were not in evening dress, she felt almost disgraced. Robert enjoyed that impromptu festivity more than all the dinner-parties; but Helen felt that if any of her old friends or even the higher class of her present acquaintances were to look in and see her, seated at the head of the table, where half a dozen bearded men in morning coats were devouring cold beef and salad, she must have sunk through the floor in shame and dismay. Robert was strangely, sadly without feeling in such matters. It never occurred to him that they could be a criterion of what his wife called 'position;' and he would only laugh in the most hearty way when Helen insisted upon the habits proper to 'people of our class.' But her pride, such as it was, was terribly wounded by all such irregular proceedings. The middle-class custom of dining early and making a meal of 'tea,' a custom in full and undisturbed operation round the corner in Victoria Villas, affected her with a certain horror as if it had been a crime. Had she yielded to it she would have felt that she had 'given in,' and voluntarily descended in the social scale. 'Late dinners' were to her as a bulwark against that social downfall which in her early married life had seemed always imminent. This curious raising up of details into the place of principles had given Helen many an unnecessary prick. It had made her put up with much really inferior society in the shape of people of gentility whose minds were all absorbed in the hard struggle to keep up appearances, and live as people lived with

ten times their income, while it cut her off from a great many to whom appearances were less important, and who lived as happened to be most convenient to them, without asking at what hour dukes dined or millionnaires. The dukes probably would have been as indifferent, but not the millionnaires, and it was from the latter class that Helen came. But in the midst of all these all-important details and the trouble they caused her, had risen up, she knew not how, a passionate, obstinately ideal soul. Perhaps at first her thirst for fame had been but another word for social advancement and distinction in the world, but that feeling had changed by means of the silent anguish which had crept on her as bit by bit she understood her husband's real weakness. Love in her opened, it did not blind, her eyes. Her heart cried out for excellence, for power, for genius in the man she loved; and with this longing there came a hundred subtle sentiments which she did not understand, and which worked and fermented in her without any will of hers. Along with the sense that he was no genius, there rose an unspeakable remorse and hatred of herself who had found it out; and along with her discontent came a sense of her own weakness – a growing humility which was a pain to her, and against which her pride fought stoutly, keeping, up to this time, the upper hand – and a regretful, self-reproachful, half-adoration of her husband and his goodness, produced by the very consciousness that he was not so strong nor so great as she had hoped. These mingled elements of the old and the new in Helen's mind made it hard to understand her, hard to realise and follow

her motives; yet they explained the irritability which possessed her, her impatience of any suggestion from outside, along with her longing for something new, some change which might bring a new tide into the life which had fallen into such dreary, stagnant, unreal ways.

While she waited at home with all these thoughts whirling about her, Robert went out cheerfully seeking advice. He did it in the spirit which is habitual to men who consult their friends on any important matter. He made up his mind first. As he turned lightly round the corner, swinging his cane, instead of wondering what his friend would say to him, he was making up his mind what he himself would do with all the unusual power and wealth which would come to him through the bank. For instance, at once, there was poor Chance, the sculptor, whose son he could find a place for without more ado. Poor Chance had ten children, and was no genius, but an honest, good fellow, who would have made quite a superior stonemason had he understood his own gifts. Here was one immediate advantage of that bank-directorship. He went in cheerful and confident in this thought to the little house in Victoria Villas. Haldane had been ill; he had spent the previous winter in Italy, and his friends had been in some anxiety about his health; but he had improved again, and Robert went in without any apprehensions into the sitting-room at the back, which looked into the little garden. He had scarcely opened the door before he saw that something had happened. The writing-table was deserted, and a large sofa drawn near the

window had become, it was easy to perceive, the centre of the room and of all the interests of its inhabitants. Mrs Haldane, a homely old woman in a black dress and a widow's cap, rose hastily as he came in, with her hand extended, as if to forbid his approach. She was very pale and tremulous; the arm which she raised shook as she held it out, and fell down feebly by her side when she saw who it was. 'Oh, come in, Mr Drummond, he will like to see *you*,' she said in a whisper. Robert went forward with a pang of alarm. His friend was lying on the sofa with his eyes closed, with an ashy paleness on his face, and the features slightly, very slightly, distorted. He was not moved by the sound of Robert's welcome nor by his mother's movements. His eyes were closed, and yet he did not seem to be asleep. His chest heaved regularly and faintly, or the terrified bystander would have thought he was dead.

Robert clutched at the hand which the old lady stretched out to him again. 'Has he fainted?' he cried in a whisper. 'Have you had the doctor? Let me go for the doctor. Do you know what it is?'

Poor Mrs Haldane looked down silently and cried. Two tears fell out of her old eyes as if they were full and had overflowed. 'I thought he would notice you,' she said. 'He always was so fond of you. Oh, Mr Drummond, my boy's had a stroke!'

'A stroke!' said Drummond under his breath. All his own visions flitted out of his mind like a shadow. His friend lay before him like a fallen tower, motionless, speechless. 'Good God!' he said, as men do unawares, with involuntary appeal to Him who

(surely) has to do with those wild contradictions of nature. 'When did it happen? Who has seen him?' he asked, growing almost as pale as was the sufferer, and feeling faint and ill in the sense of his own powerlessness to help.

'It was last night, late,' said the mother. Oh, Mr Drummond, this has been what was working on him. I knew it was never the lungs. Not one of us, either his father's family or mine, was ever touched in the lungs. Dr Mixwell saw him directly. He said not to disturb him, or I would have had him in bed. I know he ought to be in bed.'

'I'll go and fetch Maurice,' cried Robert. 'I shall be back directly,' and he rushed out of the room which he had entered so jauntily. As he flew along the street, and jumped into the first cab he could find, the bank and his directorship went as completely out of his mind as if they had been a hundred years off. He dashed at the great solemn door of Dr Maurice's house when he reached it and rushed in, upsetting the decorous servant. He seized the doctor by the shoulder, who was seated calmly at breakfast. 'Come along with me directly,' he said. 'I have a cab at the door.'

'What is the matter?' said Dr Maurice. He had no idea of being disturbed so unceremoniously. 'Is Mrs Drummond ill? Sit down and tell me what is wrong.'

'I can't sit down. I want you to come with me. There is a cab at the door,' said Robert panting. 'It is poor Haldane. He has had a fit – come at once.'

'A fit! I knew that was what it was,' said Dr Maurice calmly. He waved his hand to the importunate petitioner, and swallowed the rest of his breakfast in great mouthfuls. 'I'm coming; hold your tongue, Drummond. I knew the lungs was all nonsense – of course that is what it was.'

'Come then,' cried Robert. 'Good heavens, come! don't let him lie there and die.'

'He will not die. More's the pity, poor fellow!' said the doctor. 'I said so from the beginning. John, my hat. Lungs, nonsense! He was as sound in the lungs as either you or I.'

'For God's sake, come then,' said the impatient painter, and he rushed to the door and pushed the calm physician into his cab. He had come to consult him about something? Yes, to be sure, about poor Haldane – not to consult him – to carry him off, to compel, to drag that other back from the verge of the grave. If there was anything more in his mind when he started Drummond had clean forgotten it. He did not remember it again till two hours later, when, having helped to carry poor Haldane up-stairs, and rushed here and there for medicines and conveniences, he at last went home, weary with excitement and sympathetic pain. 'I have surely forgotten something,' he said, when he had given an account of all his doings to his wife. 'Good heavens! I forgot altogether that I went to ask somebody's advice.'

CHAPTER V

Mr Burton called next morning to ascertain Drummond's decision, and found that he had been sitting up half the night with Stephen Haldane, and was wholly occupied by his friend's illness. The merchant suffered a little vexation to be visible in his smooth and genial aspect. He was a middle-aged man, with a bland aspect and full development, not fat but ample. He wore his whiskers long, and had an air that was always jovial and comfortable. The cleanness of the man was almost aggressive. He impressed upon you the fact that he not only had his bath every morning, but that his bath was constructed on the newest principles, with water-pipes which wandered through all the house. He wore buff waistcoats and light trousers, and the easiest of overcoats. His watch-chain was worthy of him, and so were the heavy gold buttons at his sleeves. He looked and moved and spoke like wealth, with a roll in his voice, which is only attainable in business, and when business goes very well with you. Consequently the shade of vexation which came over him was very perceptible. He found the Drummonds only at breakfast, though he had breakfasted two hours before, and this mingled in his seriousness a certain tone of virtuous reproof.

'My dear fellow, I don't want to disturb you,' he said; 'but how you can make this sort of thing pay I can't tell. *I* breakfasted at eight; but then, to be sure, I am only a City man, and can't expect

my example to be much thought of at the West-end.'

'Is this the West-end?' said Robert, laughing. 'But if you breakfasted at eight, you must want something more by this time. Sit down and have some coffee. We are late because we have been up half the night.' And he told his new visitor the story of poor Stephen and his sudden illness. Mr Burton was moderately concerned, for he had married Mr Baldwin's only daughter, and was bound to take a certain interest in his father-in-law's *protégé*. He heard the story to an end with admirable patience, and shook his head, and said, 'Poor fellow! I am very sorry for him,' with due gravity. But he was soon tired of Stephen's story. He took out his watch, and consulted it seriously, muttering something about his appointments.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.