

GEORGE GISSING

ISABEL
CLARENDON,
VOL. I (OF II)

George Gissing

Isabel Clarendon, Vol. I (of II)

«Public Domain»

Gissing G.

Isabel Clarendon, Vol. I (of II) / G. Gissing — «Public Domain»,

© Gissing G.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	13
CHAPTER III	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

George Gissing

Isabel Clarendon, Vol. I

(of II) / In Two Volumes

CHAPTER I

From Salcot East to Winstoke there are two roads, known respectively as the old and the new. The latter was made about the middle of the present century; the old road is immemorial. By the modern highway the distance between the two parishes is rather less than five miles; pursue the other, and you fetch a compass of well-nigh ten, taking into account all the inexplicable windings and angularities between the “White Hart Inn” at Salcot, where the roads disdainfully part company, to Winstoke Rectory, where they unite and form the village street. It says much for ancestral leisureliness in that north-west corner of –shire, that the old way ever established itself, or, being established, was used to so recent a date; on the other hand, the construction of the new thoroughfare looks remarkably like a practical joke, perpetrated at their own expense by the good people of the country side, seeing that this activity displayed itself just when it was least called for. Formerly, there was a silk manufactory at Salcot East, and direct communication with the neighbouring parish would have been a convenience; only when the industry in question had fallen into complete decay, and when it could not matter to any one whether it took one hour or two to reach Win-stoke (where not even a market was held), did the inhabitants tax themselves for the great undertaking.

As regards picturesqueness, needless to say that the old road has enormously the advantage. A pedestrian with time on his hands and walking for walking’s sake, could not hesitate between the hard white turnpike, running on into level distance between dusty hedgerows, and that charming glimpse of elm-shadowed lane, grass creeping from the densely verdurous bank on either side to the deep moistened ruts, and, twenty yards away, a sudden turn round a fantastic oak, all beyond a delightful uncertainty. Such a pedestrian was Bernard Kingcote, a man neither too old nor too busy to be rambling aimlessly on this Midsummer Day; over his shoulders a small knapsack, with a waterproof strapped upon it, in his hand a stick he had cut from an oak-tree. Since eleven in the morning the sun had shone as in England it shines but rarely—a steady force of fire which drew the perspiration from every pore of one standing unshaded. Under these circumstances, Kingcote had loitered about Salcot all the day, having reached the place after a four-mile stroll from another little town where he had passed the preceding night. There were leafy lurking-places here and there along the banks of the stream called Sale, and the “White Hart” gave promise of a comfortable, homely meal at mid-day. The time passed pleasantly enough till late afternoon, for he had a couple of books in his knapsack, and made purchase of another in a musty little shop full of miscellaneous rubbish, into which he was tempted by the sight of a shelf of ragged volumes; then came tea at the “White Hart” again, and he was ready, after a survey of his Ordnance map, to use the cool of the evening for a ramble on to Winstoke. But as he came forth from the inn, unexpected entertainment presented itself. A dancing bear had just been led into the town, and the greater part of the population had assembled in the broad street to watch the poor dusty-coated beast. With a humorous sadness on his countenance, Kingcote stood in the doorway, observant of the artificial biped and the natural ones which surrounded it. As he waited, a trifling incident occurred which afterwards came back to his memory with more significance than he had attributed to it at the time; somebody jolted against him from behind, and then a country fellow of evil appearance staggered out of the inn and mixed with the crowd; he was seemingly half-drunk, or but just awakened.

This gave the pedestrian the impulse needed to send him forth on his way. He looked for a moment along the new road, then his eyes wandered to the old, and he turned at once into the latter. There was a sign-post at the parting; both its arms said, "To Winstoke," but one was crumbling, fungus-scored, its inscription barely legible; the other a stout piece of timber, self-assertive, with rounded ends and freshly painted in black and white. Kingcote passed with a mental comment.

The road was just what it promised, perfectly rural, sweet with all summer growths, seldom without trees on both sides, ash predominating, oak and holly frequent. It mounted little hills where the least turn would have enabled it to keep level; oftener still made a curve or a corner, to all appearances merely for the sake of constructing an exquisite little picture of banks and boughs and luxuriant vegetation.

At times nothing was to be seen for the robust old hedges; then would come a peep over open country, a stretch of yellow fields bounded far away by the bare chalk-hills. No cottages, no trim borders of stately parks, seldom a gate giving into a grass meadow. It seemed that no one ever came this way; the new road had monopolised traffic of every kind. The gnats began to swarm; here and there a spider, acting with the assurance of long impunity, had carried his invisible silken thread right across the road; the birds were softening their multitudinous voices to sunset. Now and then was heard a sound of deep, steady breathing from behind the hedge, and an odour of warm, sweet breath filled the air; it was a cow that lay there chewing the cud. Or a horse, turned out to grass, would put his head up and look over into the lane, half-alarmed at the approach of a human being. The pedestrian had a friendly word for him.

Kingcote's way of walking was that of a man accustomed to his own society; he advanced slowly, yet without pauses, and often became forgetful of the things about him. His face was neither sad nor cheerful, but the tendency of its free play of feature was clearly in the direction rather of the former than of the latter expression. It was plain that he enjoyed to the full the scenes through which he passed, and enjoyed them as a man of poetic sensibilities, but there was no exuberance of vitality in his delight. He looked like one who had been walking all through the heat of the day, and was growing weary for his night's retreat. Evidently he had nothing of the naturalist's instinct; he never bent to examine a flower or leaf, and he could not indeed have assigned its name to any but the commonest; the very trees whose beauty dwelt longest in his eye did not suggest to him their own familiar appellations. To judge from his countenance, the communing which he held with himself was constant and lively; at times words even fell from his lips. It was not the face of a man at ease with his own heart, or with the circumstances amid which his life had fallen. A glance of pleasure hither or thither was often succeeded by the shadow of brooding, and this by a gleam of passion, brief but significant enough. This inward energy was brought to view on features sufficiently remote from any ordinary stamp to prove interesting in themselves; they were those of a young man—Kingcote was not quite thirty.

When he had been walking for a couple of hours, his thoughts began to turn to his plans for the following day; he took the map out again, and examined it as he proceeded. He had been away from home—from London—three days; to-morrow would be Friday, and on Saturday he proposed to return. There came into his mind a question about money, and he felt for his purse. For the first time he came to a standstill; neither in the wonted pocket nor anywhere else was his purse to be found. It had contained all his immediate resources, with the exception of a few loose coppers. Then it was that the course of reflection brought him back to that incident in the doorway of the "White Hart," and he felt little doubt that the seemingly drunken boor who pushed against him had in the same moment dexterously picked his pocket. The purse had been safe when he paid his bill at the inn, and certainly he had not left it behind him by accident. At all events, purse and money were gone, and it was not our friend's temper to fall into useless lamentation over irremediable accidents. If, indeed, the case were one of theft—and no other explanation seemed possible—he wished the rascal luck of his three pounds or so, and, walking slowly on again, began to ask himself what was to be done.

To stop at Winstoke, take up quarters there at an inn, and wait till money could be sent to him from London, was the course which naturally first suggested itself. Yet the reasons against it were not long in being discovered.

What guarantee could he give to his landlord—short of remaining shut up in the inn all day—of his honest intention to pay when money arrived? His knapsack and three old books were not much of a pledge. Another would perchance have never given this matter a thought, but a feature of Kingcote's character was concerned in it. He was too proud to subject himself to possible suspicion, especially that of his social inferiors; to explain his position to an innkeeper would have galled him exceedingly, still more so to live for a day under the innkeeper's eyes without an explanation. Things which most men accept as the every-day rubs of the world were to Kingcote among the worst evils of existence; the most ordinary transaction with uneducated and (as he held) presumably uncivilised persons at all times made him uncomfortable, and a necessity such as the present assailed his fastidiousness with no little severity. He reopened his map, and began to calculate the possibility of walking straight on to London. There was no possibility in the matter. He might sleep in the open air this midsummer night, and it would be rather pleasant than otherwise, but the situation would only be complicated by the pressing need of breakfast in the morning. Was there nothing for it but to face the innkeeper?

He moved on, and a turn in the road exposed a scene which for the moment made him lose sight of his annoyances. He had suddenly come in full view of a cottage, and, it seemed to him, a cottage of ideal rusticity. It was very old, built of brick which had become finely toned wherever it was not hidden by ivy, and the tiles of the roof were patched with richest hues of moss and lichen; its low upper storey had two dormer windows. The dwelling lay a few yards back from the road, and in the middle of the grass before the door stood the bowed trunk of an old, old oak-tree, branchless, hollow, killed by the parasites which clung about it in astonishing luxuriance. To the rear of the cottage, which seemed to be uninhabited, grew a cluster of tall trees, with a quantity of bushy undergrowth; the tree-tops were black with rooks' nests, and the birds themselves were loud in talk. This scene, with its background of magnificent evening sky above remote hills of the intensest blue, might well have brought the pedestrian to a pause; it was something else, however, that checked him with a movement of surprise. He was no longer alone with nature; facing the cottage sat a girl, busy over a water-colour sketch; she was working with rapid eagerness, and, as she sat with her back to him, she could not see, and had not heard, his approach. Kingcote would have liked to stay here awhile, but the stranger's presence made it difficult. Taking a step or two onwards, he speedily drew her attention; she suspended the work of her pencil and looked quickly round. Kingcote experienced a sense of profound disappointment; far from being in harmony with the scene, the face presented to him was irregular in feature and harsh in expression; the eyes seemed very large, and, having met his, did not at once remove themselves, but continued to gaze with something like defiance, whilst the lips worked in a curiously nervous way, not at all pleasant to watch. She was perhaps nineteen; her dress very plain, but that of a lady. With the observance of these details, Kingcote walked past her at a sharp pace, and did not venture to stay his steps again till the ever-winding road had taken him from the sketcher's sight.

"I never saw so uninteresting a girl," was his first thought, but it had scarcely passed through his mind when he felt that its hastiness did not in truth embody his impression. To say that he had never seen a less pleasing girl would be more accurate. A merely uninteresting face would not at once, and so forcibly, have printed itself upon his memory; he already felt that the unpropitiating gaze of those large, cold eyes would remain long with him. He wondered who she might be. Certainly no conventional young lady who came out to sketch in a feeble way, in the ordinary course of her mild domestic existence; more likely than that, a professional artist, or one studying to become such. There had been no opportunity for a glance at her work, but the earnestness with which she gave herself up to it inspired a certain confidence as to the results. Whence did she come, dressed as if for a brief walk, with her camp stool and sketching apparatus?

One more, and this the last, turn of the old road showed that she need not have come any very great distance. Kingcote found himself entering Winstoke. On his left hand was the village church, a low edifice with a solid, square tower, and, just beyond it, what was evidently the rectory. These occupied the angle made by the two roads as they reunited. Across the churchyard and the rectory garden was visible the white dust of the turnpike, along which on the further side ran a high brick wall capped with tiles, the enclosure of private grounds. The rectory thus stood with its back to the church; its front windows looked upon a large open space, grass-grown and shadowed with fine trees, the whole surrounded with iron chains loosely swinging from post to post. On the left proceeded the high wall just mentioned, leading to gates and a lodge; the dense foliage of a well-wooded park rose behind it. To the right stood a few picturesque houses, with little gardens before them. Straight on lay the main street of the village, the yellow-washed fronts vanishing at length amid yet more trees. Children were playing on the enclosed grass, and with their voices mingled the notes of a piano from an open window near at hand. It was all very beautiful in the light of sunset. For a minute or two Kingcote stood with a face of contentment, soothed and restful.

It was half-past eight; the chiming of the church clock proclaimed it. If he intended to pass the night in Winstoke it was time to make up his mind where he should seek quarters. He began to stray round the enclosure towards the houses of the street, walking slowly and with frequent stoppings, beginning at length to feel the full annoyance of his position, and in his somewhat hasty way inwardly cursing the whole social constitution which made such a disagreeable experience possible. As he drew near the lodge gates in the high wall, he perceived a handsome drinking fountain, built of marble and set in the wall itself. He was thirsty, and went to take a draught of water. Above the basin was an inscription, carved in old English letters, "The Knight's Well," and a recent date beneath it. The name struck him pleasantly; no doubt there was some legend attached to it, which he promised himself to seek out. He drank with delight of the sweet, cold water, and was about to fill the cup a second time, when a little boy, who had come up to his side unobserved, a youngster of six or seven, addressed him with curious gravity.

"That water is enchanted," said the child. "I wouldn't drink more than one if I was you."

Kingcote laughed with pleasure.

"Enchanted?" he exclaimed. "I feared there was none such left in the world. How do you know it is?"

The child was neatly dressed in light summer clothing, in knickerbockers, and round his waist was a green sash which held a toy bugle. He looked up with bright, intelligent eyes, not quite certain how to take the stranger's laughter.

"I know," he replied, "because my father has told me. One cup does you good, but after the first—"

He paused and shook his head. Possibly the evils which would result from a second draught were but darkly vague in his imagination.

"Who is your father?" Kingcote inquired after a moment's reflection.

"My father is the rector," was the little fellow's reply, not without dignity. Even as he spoke he caught sight of a lady and a gentleman walking towards them, the attire of the latter proclaiming the rector himself. The child at once drew out his bugle and blew a joyous blast of welcome—tarantar-ar-a!

"This is my father coming," he then explained to Kingcote. "Ask him about the Knight's Well, and he'll tell you, I've no doubt."

And he ran off to meet the pair. Already Kingcote had perceived that the lady was she whom he had passed in the lane. The reverend gentleman had relieved her of the camp-stool, and was talking in the manner of one who enjoys the exercise of his own voice, with something, too, of the tone and aspect observable in men who believe themselves not on the whole disagreeable to ladies. He seemed to be just on the hither side of middle age, had a very fresh complexion, and kept drawing

himself up to the limit of his five feet six, like one who wishes to correct a habit of stooping. As he talked, he held his glasses in one hand, and with them tapped the other; the camp-stool was pressed under his left arm.

Kingcote drew aside, as if he would walk over to the enclosure. At the lodge gates the two paused; the clergyman was politely insisting on carrying the camp-stool up to the house, the young lady refusing with rather a hard smile. Kingcote saw now that she was tall, and held herself with the grace of strong and shapely limbs. When she had persuaded the rector to take his leave, and was on the point of entering the gates, she turned half round, and Kingcote once more found the large eyes fixed full upon him. She cast the glance without any embarrassment, and, having satisfied her curiosity, walked on and disappeared.

The rector and his little boy, to whom the young lady had paid no attention, came away and walked towards the rectory. Kingcote could see that the child was speaking of him. On the spur of a sudden determination, he followed, coming up to the two just as they reached the house. With a courteous raising of his hat, he begged the favour of a few words with the clergyman.

“By all means, sir,” was the genial response. “Be off to bed, Percy; you’ve no business to be up at this hour, you rascal.”

The boy blew a farewell blast and ran round to a garden entrance at the side of the house.

“Let us enter,” said the clergyman—Mr. Vissian was his name—when he had taken another look at the stranger.

This was better than discussing awkward matters in the open street. Kingcote found himself with satisfaction in a cosy study, the windows of which looked upon a trim garden with a view of the church beyond. Requested to seat himself, he told, as well as he could, the story of his lost purse, dwelling on the humorous features of his situation, and frankly avowing the reasons which led him to apply to the rector of the parish rather than establish himself at an inn and wait for a remittance. Would Mr. Vissian lend him a sum of money sufficient for the night’s expenses and for return to London on the morrow?

“With pleasure I will do so,” responded the clergyman at once, plunging both hands into his trouser pockets. Then his face darkened. “I—really—” he began with hesitation, “that is if I —. Pray have the goodness to excuse me for a moment,” he added with a jerk, and, his face reddening a little, he hurried out of the room.

Kingcote wondered what this might mean. Was it prudence coming rather late, or unanticipated poverty? He rose and looked at the volumes on the shelves behind him. They were not the kind of books one ordinarily finds in a country rector’s library; instead of commentators and sermons there were rows of old English play-books beautifully bound—the collection of an enthusiast in such matters. The binding of a complete set of Dodsley was engaging his admiration when Mr. Vissian returned.

“Do you think a pound would suffice to your needs?” the clergyman asked, still rather disturbed in countenance.

“Amplly,” Kingcote hastened to reply; hesitation being impossible under the circumstances.

“You—you are quite sure?”

“Quite. I am greatly indebted to your kindness.”

Mr. Vissian held out a sovereign with a smile of embarrassment; the other took it, and, to get past the delicate point, remarked with a glance at the book-shelves:

“You are interested in dramatic literature, I see. Pray let me show you something I picked up in a shop at Salcot this morning.”

He quickly unstrapped his knapsack, and extracted from it a thin, backless book, the outside leaves crumpled and dirty, and held it out to the rector. Mr. Vissian had put on his glasses, and took the offered object with an expression of dubious curiosity. Could any good thing come out of Salcot

East? But at the first sight of the title-page he positively flushed with excitement. It was the first edition of Otway's "Venice Preserved."

"You found this in Salcot?" he exclaimed. "My good sir, what did you give for it?"

"The sum of one penny," replied Kingcote, with a smile. "It was stuffed among a lot of trash; but for want of something to do I should never have looked through the heap."

"By the Turk!" Mr. Vissian ejaculated. "'As it is acted at the Duke's Theatre... Printed for Jos. Hindmarsh at the sign of the "Black Bull," over against the Royal Exchange in Cornhill. 1682.' Upon my word!"

He chuckled with gleeful appreciation; something of envy too was in the side glance he threw upon the happy possessor. Forthwith he became as friendly and unconstrained as if he had known Kingcote for years. Taking from his pocket a bunch of delicate little keys, he stepped up to a book-case with a glass front, opened it with care, and began to draw forth the treasures. He was boy-like in the exuberance of his zeal, rubbed his hands, uttered crows and chirpings, and grew the more delighted the more he became aware of his guest's congenial tastes. Kingcote was nothing of a genuine book-hunter; his years and temperament preserved him from that delightful pedantry; but he knew and enjoyed the literature in question. More than an hour passed in talk; it grew all but dark.

"We must have a light," cried Mr. Vissian.

"Is it not time that I saw after my room at the inn?" Kingcote asked, looking at his watch.

"Inn? 'Ah! to be sure. But—if I might offer—really I wish you'd let us give you a bed here for the night. It would save trouble."

"On the contrary, I fear it would give trouble somewhat needlessly."

But Mr. Vissian insisted.

"I will give directions at once. It must be supper time too. Mrs. Vissian has thought me busy, I fear, and has let the usual hour go by. Pray come into the sitting-room. It's a year since I had any one to chat with over these things. It does me good; it does me good."

In the sitting-room supper was already spread—plain bread and cheese and draught ale. In an arm-chair, busy with sewing, sat the rector's wife. She looked very youthful, and was indeed only five-and-twenty, having been married at seventeen. She was delicate, pretty, and a trifle troubled in face.

"A friend of mine, dear," said the rector, with an affectionate courtesy which pleased Kingcote, "who will remain with us for the night."

Mrs. Vissian looked just a little startled, but speedily put on pleasant smiles, and went away to make her necessary preparations. On her return the talk turned to the son of the house, Master Percy.

"What did he mean," Kingcote asked, "by telling me that the water of the Knight's Well was enchanted, and that you must not drink more than one cup?"

Father and mother broke into laughter.

"You thought it an interesting local legend, no doubt," said Mr. Vissian. "I am sorry to disabuse you. That enchantment is merely a sanitary precaution of my own. It's not good for the child to drink much of the water this hot weather, so I hit on a device which has proved more efficacious than anything more literal would have done."

"But is there no legend connected with the well?" Kingcote asked.

"Oh yes. The spring has doubtless been used for centuries. I will show you the story, after supper, in the county history. The marble basin was built five years ago by Mrs. Clarendon, the lady who lives at the house over there, which is itself called Knightswell."

"The lady," Kingcote asked quickly, "whom I saw entering the gates?"

"No, no," corrected Mr. Vissian, with a smile, "Mrs. Clarendon is in London. That was Miss Warren, a—a distant relation."

"A very different person from Mrs. Clarendon," put in Mrs. Vissian, in a low voice. The rector murmured assent.

"It was Miss Warren, then," Kingcote pursued, "whom I saw sketching a charming cottage in the lane not far away. What an exquisite spot that is!"

"Wood End—yes. The trees there are all that remains of a forest."

"The cottage is vacant, isn't it?"

"Yes, has been for a year. A labourer and his family left and went to Canada; Mrs. Clarendon gave the poor people the means to emigrate, and we hear they are already doing well."

"No one whom Mrs. Clarendon helps fails to do so," remarked the rector's wife.

"What maybe the rent of such a cottage?" Kingcote inquired carelessly, leaning back in his chair.

"Half-a-crown a week is what Yardley wants for that, I think," replied the rector.

The guest sat upright.

"Half-a-crown? A delightful little place like that! Six pounds ten a year?"

"I believe so."

They were rising from the table. King-cote stood in his place, meditating. Mrs. Vissian again left the room.

"Suppose," began Kingcote at length, "one took a fancy to live in that cottage, would it be possible to find a labourer's wife—or some person of that kind—to come and give one say an hour's service daily?"

"Very possible, I should say," returned the rector, with some surprise. "Do you contemplate such a step?"

"One might do worse, I fancy," was King-cote's only reply.

Mrs. Vissian returned, bringing with her a large volume, the county history of which her husband had spoken.

"Always thoughtful, and always helpful," said the rector, with a smile which made his face look wonderfully good. "Thank you, Lucy. Now you shall read us the story yourself, if you will give us that pleasure."

Mrs. Vissian consented with a pretty blush. The story told how, in the troublous times of King Stephen, there stood in this place the stronghold of a great baron, who, shortly after he had wedded a noble and beautiful lady, fell in combat with another lord, the origin of their quarrel being obscure, and, indeed, nothing to the point. The lady, thus widowed, shut herself up in her castle and refused to yield to the victor, who had been one of many rejected suitors for her hand in former days, and now saw his opportunity of forcing her to become his wife. The stronghold being closely beleaguered for many days, and the garrison, too weak to make an effective sortie, already nigh to starvation, by the interposition of Providence there appeared upon the scene a certain knight, who also had been one of the lady's wooers, and who, in despair at her refusal of him, had betaken himself to fight in the Holy Land. Thence he was even now returned with a good band of tried followers. Learning how matters stood, he forthwith gave battle to the besiegers, hoping to rescue the lady he still loved, or, if that might not be, willing and glad to yield his life in her service. As indeed he did, for though victorious in the conflict, he was at the last moment mortally pierced by an arrow. In the ardour of pursuing the foe, his men lost sight of their leader; the wounded knight dragged himself to a spring hard by, and whilst endeavouring to slake his thirst, bled to faintness and so died. There his body was found by the lady of the castle when she came forth to give due thanks to her deliverer. In memory of his devotion, she built a basin of fair stone to gather the waters of the spring, and from that day forth it was known as the *Knight's Well*.

"We always call Mrs. Clarendon 'the lady of Knightswell,'" said Mrs. Vissian, when she had ceased to read.

"The name is a beautiful one," said Kingcote.

"It suggests a fair and gracious and noble woman."

"Exactly what it should suggest," returned the lady, with a pleased laugh.

“And who is the lord of Knightswell?” asked the guest.

“There is none,” the rector made answer. “Mrs. Clarendon has been a widow for a long time. But what say you to a pipe before bedtime, and a look at one or two old books? My dear Lucy,” he exclaimed, turning to his wife, “our friend has just captured a first edition of the ‘Venice Preserved.’ And *where*, think you? In a miserable shop in Salcot East!—And *what for*, think you? One penny, by the Turk! One penny!”

Mrs. Vissian smiled, but at the same time shook her head; and Kingcote wondered why.

An hour later he was alone in a little bedchamber which looked out from the front of the house. The sun had been so strong upon the roof all day that this upper room was overheated; he extinguished the light as soon as possible, and sat down to get a breath of fresh air at the open window. His eyes turned in the direction of Knightswell. The east lay over there, and already it seemed as though a new day were beginning to touch the heavens; there was a broad region of delicate dusky pink above the dark tops of trees, and outlined against it was visible the roof of Mrs. Clarendon's house. There was no shining of the moon, and but few stars anywhere in the sky; the night throbbed with a passion of silence. Just as Kingcote's eyes perceived the gables of Knightswell, somewhere in the park broke forth the song of a nightingale. For many minutes an unbroken stream of melody flooded the darkness; he all but sobbed in listening. Pain of the past and anguish of longing to the years which waited with unknown gifts of fate made his heart tumultuous. The kindness he had met with touched him; he had tender thoughts of the good rector and his sweet-faced, girlish wife. He loved this place; Knightswell was musical in his ears; he longed to see that gentle lady whose title has such a pleasant and stately sound of romance, and of whom such good things were spoken. As the nightingale sang he kept repeating to himself her name, “the Lady of Knightswell.” She had been a widow for a long time, said the rector; yet they had not spoken of her as of one who was old. He pictured to himself the fair, sweet, queenly woman whom that name would become.

The bird ceased. Over the country passed a leafy murmur, a hushed whisper of the tall dark trees, growing to a sigh, almost to a low wail, dying over Knightswell. Then an owl hooted thrice. The night had turned cold.

CHAPTER II

When Isabel Maddison married Mr. Clarendon she was generally esteemed, among such as had any interest in the matter, a highly fortunate young woman. Handsome, penniless, but nineteen years old, at a step she had achieved social apotheosis. Six months prior to the event Isabel had been on the point of accepting an engagement as a governess at a salary of twenty-six pounds a year. By agreeing to the alternative proposal she became wife of a county member, mistress of a mansion in Mayfair and of a delightful estate in –shire, presumptive possessor, before many years should have passed, of a fortune solidly correspondent with such show of dignity. Whatever might be the drawbacks, there was much to be said for the bargain.

The event was not as entirely romantic as it might have been; she was not positively discovered with ink-stained fingers among schoolgirls' copy-books, and carried off by a masterful passion to grace a London season. The kindly interposition of a certain Lady Kent, an old friend of her mother's, bridged the gulf between social impossibility and that respectable limbo where every aspiration is sanctioned and a dutiful waiting upon Providence is taught to ally itself with the graces of self-assertion. Isabel was the daughter of a country solicitor, who, dying before middle age, left a widow and two children, a freehold worth about thirty-five pounds a year, and a policy of life insurance for two thousand pounds. Mrs. Maddison thus found herself not particularly well provided for, and, but for the assistance of a brother who farmed some three hundred acres in the same county, would have been at a loss how to educate her boy of ten and bring up (we do not speak of education in the case of girls) her little Bella of seven. With all the aid that others were able or disposed to render, the first years of widowhood saw a good deal of pinching and struggling in the home, which had to be kept on a footing of gentility with firm resistance of that terrible temptation, encroachment upon capital. The boy Richard eventually went to learn farming with his uncle, and, at the latter's death, being then nearly twenty, made use of a legacy of a hundred pounds to transport himself to Australia, where he flourished among sheep. Isabel was then seventeen. Her mother also received a small legacy at the uncle's decease, and it was decided to use this in "finishing off" Isabel, that is to say, in giving her a year or so of that kind of training which would enable her to earn her living as a governess.

Already there was an alternative. The gentleman who had succeeded to Mr. Maddison's practice, or rather, who had managed to establish one where only a shadow had existed, had kept an eye on Isabel through these past ten years, and, now that the girl was to be sent away from home, astonished both her and her mother by a proposal of marriage. He was a young Irishman, blessed with much self-confidence, and holding it for a certainty that he was destined to become Attorney-General. When Isabel reported the proposal to her mother she could scarcely speak for laughter. Mrs. Maddison was grave, and wanted time to think. But Isabel looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece, laughed yet more, and there was an end of the matter.

She went away to school, and remained there for a year and a half. Then it was that Lady Kent, now for two years a widow, her husband having died after a weary invalid vegetation at German baths, came to pay visits in her native county, and renewed a long-interrupted friendship with Mrs. Maddison. The two had been neighbours as children, had married about the same time—the one her luckless solicitor, the other a baronet who promised to live a year and lingered nearly twenty—and now, in spite of social differences, found that they still had a kindness for each other. Isabel was at home, advertising and answering advertisements. The first glance at this young lady satisfied Lady Kent that the projects in hand were not promising.

"I doubt whether any one will have her," she said to Mrs. Maddison. "I'm sure I wouldn't."

The poor lady looked up in astonishment at so unkind a speech.

“My dear,” explained the woman of the world, “she is far too good-looking, has too much blood, doesn’t at all belong to the governess breed. I would say, don’t let her be thrown away, if I were not sure better things were in store for her.”

What these better things might be it was not difficult to imagine; but the chance of their attainment seemed so remote that Mrs. Maddison was half disposed to resent such remarks as gratuitous cruelty. Lady Kent went away and reflected. She paid another visit in a day or two, and brought forth a startling proposal.

“I have no children of my own,” she said, “and I shan’t marry again—had enough of it. Let me take Bella to London and give her a season.”

“But how will that—”

“Never mind; let us trust in Providence. She’ll be none the worse, in any case. Depend upon it, she won’t be a governess; and for looking about one London is the only place.”

Mrs. Maddison shook her head. Her troubles were increased by the arrival just then of that offer of a place at six-and-twenty pounds. Isabel knew nothing of Lady Kent’s proposal, and was willing to go away; but the mother’s heart had been set in commotion by her friend’s talk. There were days of miserable uncertainty, and ultimately Isabel herself was taken into consultation. Lady Kent, who was greatly struck with the girl, and foresaw congenial excitement in a plan which her native kindness made agreeable, repeated her proposal in serious form. Isabel (so she spoke in private to Mrs. Maddison) was made to shine in society. She had just been “finished off” with the ordinary accomplishments, and if she now “came out” there was much probability of her attracting a suitable husband. She should not incur the least danger, that Lady Kent would guarantee. What was the use of beauty to a poor girl if not to get her an establishment in life? There was no disgrace in standing up and proclaiming oneself to be disposed of; the folly and the danger would lie in trying to keep out of sight. Whether was it better, to be pursued by rascals as a beautiful governess, or to meet face to face with honest men who would be likely to fall in love with beauty for its own sake, or at all events be willing to purchase it respectably? In this way was the mother talked into compliance. Isabel herself had only to subdue her exultation. With the beginning of the season she and Lady Kent opened the campaign together.

The details are not of importance. The seat of war is a familiar region to my readers, and the engagements reported year after year so closely resemble each other that they have become by this time rather tedious in the chronicling. Lady Kent’s prophecy was fulfilled. Isabel had at least three possible offers, and she selected that of Mr. Eustace Clarendon. For this gentleman’s qualifications see above.

For the girl was charming; not beautiful as yet, that was to come later; but so blest with sweetness of virginal feature, so radiant with the joy of maiden health, so abundant in graceful and dainty instincts, with so rapturous a smile, with a laugh which came so direct from the source of nature’s music, that her presence smote upon the heart like very sunshine. It mattered not where or when she was discovered, her grace was perfect. In a week she had all the pretty artificialities of the town in complete possession; one would have thought she had been born and bred in the atmosphere of refined insincerity. When she appeared on the Row, who would have thought that she had learned her riding on a saddleless colt at her uncle’s farm? When she laughingly consented to play to a few friends, it certainly did not suggest itself that she had toiled at the instrument in order to teach children for six-and-twenty pounds a year. She was, as Lady Kent had seen, born for society; it was her element; it brought out all that was best and loveliest in her; it made her a complete being. Society could not give her more than it was in her to produce; but on the other hand, it planted not one seed of alien evil. Pure-minded she left her home, and, without a shadow on the purity of her thought, she entered the home of the man who had won so priceless a treasure. Throughout her life it was to be the same. Suffering what was in her to suffer, growing in self-knowledge, growing in tenderness of soul and in outward perfection, always a queen of society, always making her food of the best that mere society

had to offer, Isabel Clarendon was but Isabel Maddison ripened and subdued in maturity of charm. Not the greatest and highest among women; falling short of much that marks the noblest woman-soul; failing in force, failing in courage, with eyes too level on the surface of this world, but woman womanly in every fraction of her being, and, as such, infinite in suggestiveness, infinite in loveliness.

Of the two offers which Isabel declined, only one concerns us. One evening early in the season she was taken down to dinner by a gentleman named Asquith. They were introduced to each other just as the movement from the drawing-room began, and the mention of their respective names brought a look of surprise to either face.

“Have I not,” asked Mr. Asquith, “the honour and pleasure of being related to you? Are we not cousins in some degree or other?”

“I really believe we are,” Isabel replied, with her irresistible smile. “At least, I suppose you belong to the family of which I have heard.”

“And assuredly I hope that you belong to the family of which __I have heard,” said the young man, whose arm trembled sensibly as she put her hand upon it.

Question and answer brought about a satisfactory establishment of identity, and the pleasure which Isabel experienced, without attempt at concealment, in having found a kinsman who belonged of right to the fashionable world, was anything but disagreeable to the kinsman himself. The Asquiths were connections of Mr. Maddison, but the family had been in Canada for many years, and since their return of late to England, had not come in contact with the widow and her children. Robert Asquith was three-and-twenty, without any definite occupation, save that he was nominally reading for the Bar, and possessed of an income of five hundred a year, which was not likely to grow to anything more respectable until he should perchance inherit from his father—a hale man with a number of daughters to look after. Very likely Isabel was just a little to blame for what ensued. Glad of having found a relation, she perhaps laid upon the frail tie of consanguinity rather more stress than it could be reasonably expected to bear, allowed, perhaps, rather too much of cousinly intimacy to forthwith establish itself, and, in pure innocence, gave Robert Asquith too much reason to believe that his society was agreeable to her for its own sake. She was never a coquette; but a man had to be as free-thoughted and sunny-tempered as herself to endure the halcyon weather of her intimate friendliness and not be tempted to change a smile for a sigh. Robert was specially exposed to such temptation, for he had rather more than average self-esteem, knew himself to be goodlooking, and, despite his tatterdemalion five hundred a year, for the most part bore the attitude of a man who is looking deliberately about him to throw his handkerchief to the fairest and best, sure of its being eagerly stooped for. Of course he was conscious of an understanding that the fairest and best would, in the nature of things, have a gold pedestal for her loveliness, and, of all young men, he seemed the last to forget this essential element of womanly charm. There was a breezy coolness about him, a leisureliness of temperament manifesting itself for instance in perfection of toilette, a touch of ironical humour in his mode of speech, which from the first gave to Isabel a sense of safety in accepting his attentions. Lady Kent, of course, discovered at once the details of Mr. Asquith’s position, and, in her lightly suggestive way, imparted the information to Isabel. But the latter smiled at the thought of Robert’s seeking such a wife; she felt she understood him better than that. As it happened, she did not. Possibly she failed by miscalculation of her own witchery. However it came about, there, at length, was Robert Asquith at her feet, offering her, with a modesty she had not given him credit for, the devotion of his life. With a surprised shake of the head she reminded him that she had not a farthing. The usual tone of their conversation warranted a little levity on her part at this juncture. Behold! he knew it, and cared not. If his own income seemed paltry (alas! it was), would she not wait and let him seek a position? In brief, could she not love him a little, and try to love him more? for indeed his love for her was—

Foolish Robert Asquith! Love cometh not by endeavour; and, as for Isabel, how could she wait? Had it so pleased the Fates that she *could* have loved him, had there but fallen upon these maiden

years a spark of that heaven's fire, so that calculation of income and other degradations might all at once have become as naught, to what heights of glorified womanhood might not this soul have risen, and what blessedness like unto his who should have held her in his sovereign hands?

Robert saw her no more. He was in London still at the date of her marriage, but shortly after that he had obtained a Government appointment in Turkey, and the ship bore him to Eastern lands. He was then three-and-twenty. Five years later news of her widowhood reached him in Constantinople, and he exchanged with her one or two cousinly letters. There was an interval, and correspondence renewed itself, this time begun by Isabel. But Robert began to travel; he wrote from India, Japan, California; then he was back in Constantinople. His father died, and Robert was wealthy; he came to England for a month, spent an hour with his cousin, returned to Turkey, still holding a Government appointment. Now at length he had returned to England for good, and was looking about for a settlement. He was forty.

So Isabel married Mr. Eustace Clarendon, M.P. At nine-and-forty he was held to be a handsome man, though in all probability he had been an ugly one twenty years before. His good looks consisted, if in anything, in a clean precision of nose and jaw, allying itself with the gray clearness of a cold eye and the display of a very satisfactory set of teeth. His hair was very scant, but he just escaped the charge of baldness; he had thin whiskers, high up on each cheek. His manners were a trifle frigid, and his eyes wandered absently as he talked with you, but it was said that he could make himself excessively agreeable when he pleased. Probably he did so to Isabel. He was much addicted to politics, and had all his life nourished political ambition; his failure to reach anything was perhaps responsible for a certain sourness of visage, a certain cynicism of tone, at times. Still, he impressed the ordinary observer as a man of parts; he had a way of uttering sententious truisms which imposed upon the average listener, and drew fine distinctions between Liberalism (which he represented) and Radicalism (which he shuddered at), calculated to make one reflect—on politics. He lived much at clubs, and, though he had purchased the fine estate of Knightswell, cared nothing for country pursuits.

They were married, and lived together for five years. Outwardly there was nothing whatever to suggest that they were not as happy as married people ordinarily are. They had no children, and Mr. Clarendon was said to be vexed at this, but such little vexations a wise man philosophically endures. And Mr. Clarendon laid claim to a certain kind of philosophy. In these latter years of his life his cynicisms of speech became rather more pronounced, but they were of a kind which with most people earned him credit for superiority. One favourite phrase he had which came to his lips whenever he happened to be talking of his worldly affairs; it was: "*Après moi le déluge.*" He seemed to mean something special by this.

Isabel grew to hate the sound of those words, as if they had been a formula of diabolical incantation.

At first she had life all her own way. They went on to the Continent, where her young mind grew, then came back to spend the winter at Knightswell. The house was kept incessantly full of guests, and Isabel shone. Mr. Clarendon never rode to hounds, but for his wife's sake hunters were bought, and Isabel proved herself the most splendid horsewoman in the field; that bareback riding at her uncle's farm had been of service to her. She entered into the joy of hunting with almost reckless abandonment; she risked leaps which made men stare, and was in at the death with a face and figure which took away one's breath. Mr. Clarendon stayed at home these days, and was in the doorway to receive her when she returned. They were not seen to greet each other.

Then Mr. Clarendon fell ill of the disease which was to kill him. It was horribly painful, necessitating hideous operations, renewed again and again; an illness lasting for three years. He went to London, and Isabel began her work of tending him. To move about his bedroom, with that clear, cold, gray eye of his following her wherever she went, was a ghastly trial, but she bore it. Society was renounced; only occasionally she went to see intimate friends. One day her maid, a woman who loved her, begged leave to tell her something—something of which she was not sure that she ought to speak.

“Whenever you leave the house, ma’am,” she said, “a man follows you—follows you everywhere, and back home again.”

“Why, what man?”

“A man, ma’am, who—who has been to see master several times,” said the servant, with apprehension.

“You mean—a paid man? A man employed for this?”

It was enough. Isabel went out no more. A friend or two came to see her, but at length she was deserted. Her mother died, and she could not even attend the funeral. Then Mr. Clarendon was removed to Knightswell, where she tended him for yet another year. At length he died after an agony of twelve hours. His last words were: “*Après moi le déluge.*”

It was said that he had left an extraordinary will; those who cared to do so discovered the details, and talked them over with much enjoyment of the sensation. Outwardly, Isabel’s life soon returned to its former joyousness. In the season in London (though not in the former house; she took rooms each year for three months), the rest of the year at Knightswell, she pursued her social triumphs; people held that she was more charming than ever. One curious change there was in her circumstances. Immediately after her husband’s death she took to live with her a little girl of seven, a very plain and unattractive child, whose name was Ada Warren. She seemed to have made of her an adoptive daughter. Those who knew Mr. Clarendon’s will understood the child’s presence in the house. Mrs. Clarendon never directly spoke of her.

And so twelve years of widowhood went by, and time brought the Midsummer Day which found Bernard Kingcote rambling between Salcot East and Winstoke. Mrs. Clarendon’s age was now thirty-six.

CHAPTER III

One morning in August Mrs. Clarendon was sitting in the garden at Knightswell, with Ada Warren and a young lady named Rhoda Meres, a guest at the house. They had chosen a spot which was often resorted to for tea on hot afternoons, a little piece of lawn closely shut in with leafage, whence an overbowered pathway led out to the front garden. The lady of Knightswell sat reposefully in a round-backed rustic chair. She wore a pretty garden costume, a dainty web of shawl just covering her head, her crossed feet just showing below the folds of her dress. An open sunshade lay tumbled on the grass beside her, and on her lap was an illustrated paper, of which she turned the leaves with idle interest. Miss Warren sat a couple of yards away, reading a review. Her dress was plain, and of dark material, and she wore a brown broad-brimmed straw hat. The other young lady made no pretence of being occupied. With knit brows and bent head she walked backwards and forwards on the grass, biting a long leaf which she had pulled from a bough in passing. She was a pretty girl, fair-cheeked and graceful of form. She carried her hat by its ribbon, and let the stray sunlight make gleamings upon her golden hair. Her age was not quite nineteen, and the beautiful lines of her maiden figure lost nothing by her way of holding herself, whether she moved or stood.

After several side glances at her silent companions, she presently came to a pause before Mrs. Clarendon's chair, and, still holding the leaf between her lips, asked, rather plaintively:

"Why shouldn't I, Mrs. Clarendon?"

Isabel looked up with suave smiling features, and met the girl's eyes in silence for a moment.

"My dear Rhoda," she said then, "why should you?"

"No," urged the girl, "I think all the reasons are needed on the other side. I must do something, and this is what I think I'm suited for. Why shouldn't I?"

"For one thing, because you are a lady, and ladies don't do such things."

"There you have Mrs. Clarendon's last word," remarked Ada Warren, without looking up. Her voice contrasted strangely with those which had been just heard; it was hard in tone, giving clear utterance to each syllable, as if to accentuate the irony in her observation.

"Certainly," said Isabel, with good humour; "if Rhoda is content to let it be."

Still biting her leaf, Miss Meres held her head a little on one side, and, after glancing at Ada, turned her eyes again upon Mrs. Clarendon.

"But are you quite sure it is so, Mrs. Clarendon?" she urged. "I mean that ladies don't go on to the stage? It used to be so, no doubt, but things have been changing. I'm sure I've heard that both ladies and gentlemen are beginning to take to acting nowadays. And I can't see why they shouldn't. It seems to be better than—"

She stopped, and looked a little embarrassed.

"Better than doing nothing at all, you were going to say," Isabel supplied; "like myself, for instance? Perhaps it is. But I fancy that the ladies who go on to the stage are generally those who, for some reason or other, have lost their places in society."

"With a large S," put in Ada, still without looking up.

"Yes, a very large one," assented Isabel, smiling.

"And suppose," exclaimed Rhoda, suddenly bold, "I don't care anything about the society which spells itself with a large S."

Mrs. Clarendon shook her head indulgently.

"My child, you can't help caring about it."

"Not if I find something I like better outside it?"

Mrs. Clarendon crossed her hands upon the paper, and sighed a little before speaking.

"You think it would be nice to become a Bohemian, and live in contempt of us poor subjects of Mrs. Grundy. Rhoda, those Bohemians struggle for nothing so hard as to get into society. If they

are successful, the best fruit of their success is an invitation to a lady's 'at home,' the unsuccessful ones would give their ears to be received in the most commonplace little drawing-room. Now you have already what they strive for so desperately. You'll see all this plainly enough when you know a little more of the world."

Rhoda turned away, and recommenced her pacing.

"What does your father say to it?" Mrs. Clarendon asked, after a short silence.

"Father? Oh! he shrugs his shoulders and looks puzzled. Poor father always does that, whatever the difficulty. If I ask him whether the butcher hasn't charged us too much a pound for veal, he shrugs and looks puzzled. I believe he'd do just the same if I asked him whether to-morrow wasn't going to be the Day of Judgment."

Isabel raised her forefinger with a warning smile. Ada Warren laughed.

After another turn on the grass, the girl again paused before Mrs. Clarendon.

"Mr. Lacour told me the other day that he thought of going on to the stage himself. He didn't see any harm in it."

As she spoke, Rhoda examined the border of her hat.

"Mr. Lacour!" exclaimed Isabel. "Oh, Mr. Lacour says wonderful things, and has wonderful plans. So you confided your project to Mr. Lacour, did you?"

Isabel threw a rapid glance at Ada whilst speaking; the latter appeared busy with her book.

"No, no," disclaimed Rhoda rapidly, "I didn't say a word to him of my own idea. It only came out in conversation."

Mrs. Clarendon gave a little "h'm," and stroked the back of one hand with the fingers of the other.

"It's a mistake, my dear Rhoda," she said. "Like it or not, we have to consider our neighbour's opinion, and that doesn't yet regard the stage as a career open to gentlemen's daughters."

"There's no knowing what we *may* come to," remarked Ada absently.

"Then what *am* I to do, Mrs. Clarendon?" cried the other girl almost piteously.

"A great many things. To begin with, you have to help me to make my garden party on Monday a success. Then again—oh, you have to become acquainted with my cousin, Mr. Asquith. Here he is!"

From the covered pathway issued a tall gentleman of middle age, dressed in a cool summer suit, holding his hat in his hands. His appearance was what is called prepossessing; by his own complete ease and air of genial well-being he helped to put others in the same happy state, his self-satisfaction not being of the kind which irritates by excess. His head was covered with a fine growth of black hair, which continued itself in the form of full whiskers, and with these blended the silken grace of a moustache long enough to completely conceal the lips. His features were slightly browned by Eastern suns. His eyes, as he viewed in turn each of the three ladies, had a calm, restful gaze which could have embarrassed no one, hinting only the friendliest of inward comment.

Isabel rose and stepped forward to meet him. In the act of greeting she was, perhaps, seen to greatest advantage. The upright grace of her still perfect figure, the poise of her head, the face looking straight forward, the smile of exquisite frankness, the warmth of welcome and the natural dignity combined in her attitude as she stood with extended hand, made a picture of fair womanhood which the eye did not readily quit. It was symbolical of her inner self, of the large affections which made the air about her warm, and of the sweet receptiveness of disposition which allowed so many and so different men to see in her their ideal of a woman.

"You found the trap at the station?" she asked, and, satisfied on this point, presented him to her companions. Though Asquith had just reached England in time to see his cousin once or twice before she left London, he had still to become acquainted with Ada Warren, who did not go to town with Mrs. Clarendon, but preferred to make her visits at other times, staying with Mr. Meres and his daughters. Ada was silent during the ceremony of introduction, and did not give her hand; Rhoda showed her more expansive nature and smiled prettily in Robert's face.

"I thought you would find it pleasant to come and sit here a little before lunch," said Isabel, by way of leading to conversation.

But Asquith merely bent his head; he seemed all at once to have become a trifle absent, and, after letting his gaze rest on Miss Warren for a few moments, had turned his look groundwards. But the interval was very short.

"That groom of yours who drove me over," he began, in a leisurely tone and with an appreciative smile, "is a wonderful man."

"That's interesting," said Isabel. "I fear I haven't discovered his exceptional qualities."

"They are remarkable. His powers of observation. I make a point of conversing whenever opportunity offers. The suggestive incident was a pig crossing the road; I remarked that it was a fine pig. By a singular accident I must have hit upon the man's specialty; he looked at me with gratitude, and forthwith gave me—you can't imagine—the most wonderful disquisition on pigs. He spoke as if he loved them. 'Now, a pig's heye, sir! Did you ever happen to notice a pig's heye, sir?' I was afraid to say that I had. 'There's more in a pig's heye, sir, than you'd find creditable,'—meaning credible, of course. 'There's that knowingness in a pigs heye, sir, it can't be described in words. *When* it isn't fierce,—and if it is, the fierceness of it there's no imagining!'"

This narration, given with much quiet humour, made Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda laugh. Ada Warren had resumed her review, or at all events had it lying open on her lap, and showed no smile. Robert watched her with his quiet eyes. In Miss Meres he seemed to have little interest, and he looked far more frequently at Ada than at Mrs. Clarendon.

"By-the-bye, some one we passed on the road," he said presently. He had a curious habit of mentioning in this disjointed way the subject of the remark he was about to make, and, so reposeful was his habit of speech, it often seemed as if the comment would never follow. "A young man, rather good-looking, or perhaps, rather noticeable. My friend the groom told me he was a settler in these parts; a gentleman who has taken a labourer's cottage, and lives in a more or less eccentric way. It sounded interesting. Do you know anything of him?"

"Oh yes," said Isabel, "our rector, Mr. Vissian, knows him, and speaks of him in superlatives. His name is Kingcote."

"But what is he doing here?—reading, rusticating? I suppose he's taken the cottage just for the summer months?"

"Mr. Vissian says he has settled here for good—a philosopher, who is tired of town life. He comes from London. I haven't been favoured with a glimpse of him yet, but several people have spoken of him. I think I must ask Mr. Vissian to bring him here."

"A month or so of summer would be pleasant, spent in that way," observed Mr. Asquith; "but to settle finally! Something morbid about him, I suppose; he looks, in fact, rather bloodless, like a man with a fixed idea. Ten to one, he's on precisely the wrong tack; instead of wanting more of his own society, he ought to have less of it. I suppose he lives alone?"

"Quite."

"The worst thing for any man. I shouldn't dare to converse with myself exclusively for two consecutive days. The great, preservative of sanity is free intercourse with one's fellow men—to see the world from all points, and to refrain from final conclusions."

Chat of this kind went on for a few minutes, all taking part in it except Ada.

"You are fond of the country, Miss Warren," Asquith said at length, addressing the latter directly.

"Yes, I'm fond of the country," was the reply, given in a mechanical way, and with a cold, steady look, whilst she ruffled the edges of her review. Asquith had found it at first difficult to determine whether the peculiarity of the girl's behaviour were due to excessive shyness or to some more specific cause; but shyness it certainly was not, her manner of speaking and of regarding him put that out of

the question. Did she, then, behave in this way to every stranger, or was he for some reason personally distasteful to her; or, again, had something just happened to disturb her temper?

“Your liking for it, though, would scarcely go to the extent of leading you to take up a solitary abode in a labourers cottage?”

“I can’t say,” Ada replied slowly. “One is often ready to do anything for the sake of being left alone.”

“Ada would stipulate, however, to be supplied with the *Fortnightly* or the *Nineteenth Century*,” put in Mrs. Clarendon laughingly.

“If anything could drive me into the desert,” was Robert’s remark, “it would be the hope of never again being called upon to look at them. I shouldn’t wonder if Mr.—Mr. Kingcote, isn’t it?—has fled from civilisation for the very same reason. Probably he has cast away books, and aims at returning to the natural state of man.”

“By no means,” said Isabel. “He has brought down quite a library.”

“Alas!” exclaimed Robert, with a humorous shaking of the head, “then he is, I fear, engaged in adding to the burden which oppresses us. No wonder he hides his head; he is writing a book.”

“Perhaps he is a poet, Mrs. Clarendon,” puts in Rhoda.

“Perhaps so, Rhoda; and some day we may have pilgrims from all corners of the earth visiting the cottage he has glorified.”

“With special omnibuses from Winstoke station,” added Robert, “and a colony of licensed victuallers thriving about the sacred spot.”

“Let us be thankful,” exclaimed Isabel, “that a poet’s fame is usually deferred for a generation or two. Ha, there’s the first luncheon bell! It brings a smile to your face, Robert.”

“Did I betray myself? I confess I breakfasted early.”

The two girls walked towards the house together, their elders following more slowly.

“Isn’t Rhoda Meres a nice girl?” said Isabel, when the object of her remark was out of hearing.

“Very,” her cousin assented, though without enthusiasm. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

“The poor child has got a foolish idea into her head; she wants to go on to the stage.”

“Does she—ha? Most young people have that idea at one time or another, I believe. In default of a special audience of one, you see—”

“And she *is* such a good, dear girl!” pursued Isabel, when Asquith showed no sign of continuing. “Her father is a literary man, the editor of a magazine called *Ropers Miscellany*—do you know it? He and I are the best of old friends. Its only with the thought of helping her father, I’m sure, that Rhoda has taken up this fancy; we must drive it out of her head somehow.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” remarked Robert, more absently than before.

Isabel glanced at him, and kept silence till they reached the house.

There was nothing remarkable about the structure itself of Knightswell; the front was long and low, built of brick faced with stone, and the level entrance was anything but imposing. The main portion of the building was early eighteenth century, but in the rear there still existed a remnant of the sixteenth century manor-house which had once stood here; the ancient hall now served as kitchen, its fine stone fireplace being filled up with an incongruous modern range. The present hall was surrounded with oak panelling, which Mr. Clarendon had obtained at the dismantling of an old house in the neighbourhood; all else of the interior had become, by successive changes, completely modernised, with the exception of an elaborate chimney-piece in the drawingroom—massive marble-work resting on caryatides—always said, though without corroborative evidence, to be a production of Grinling Gibbons. The faces of the two supporters were curiously unlike each other: on the one side it was that of a youthful maiden, who smiled, and seemed to be upraising her arms in sport; the other was an aged but not unbeautiful face, wearing an expression of long-suffering sadness, worn under the burden which the striving arms sustained. In the dining-room were a few good pictures,

taken with the house from the preceding occupants. For Knightswell was not the ancestral abode of Mr. Clarendon's family; it had passed, by frequent changes, from tenant to tenant, all inglorious. Notwithstanding his historic name, Mr. Clarendon was a *novus homo*; his father had begun life as an obscure stockbroker, had made a great fortune, and ended his life in a comfortable dwelling in Bayswater; his daughters, there were two, married respectably, and were no more heard of.

During luncheon Asquith was still much occupied in observing Ada Warren whenever he could unobtrusively do so. The young ladies were rather silent, and even Isabel showed now and then a trace of effort in the bright flow of talk which she kept up. Between herself and her cousin, however, there was no lack of ease; a graceful intimacy had established itself on the basis of their kinship, though not exactly that kind of intimacy which bespeaks life-long association. Their talk was of the present, or of the immediate past; neither spoke of things or people whose mention would have revived the memory of years ago.

"And what are you doing with yourself?" Mrs. Clarendon inquired, when Robert had abandoned another futile attempt to draw Ada Warren into converse.

"Upon my word," was his reply, "I hardly know. The town; I see a good deal of it, indoors and out; it still has the charm of novelty. I can't say that time has begun to hang heavy on my hands; in truth, it seldom does."

"Fortunate being!"

"Yes, I suppose so. I find that people have a singular capacity for being bored; I notice it more than I used to. For my own part, I generally find a good deal of enjoyment to be got out of the present moment; the enjoyment of sound health, at lowest. You know how pleasant it is to look back on past days, even though at the time they may have seemed anything but delightful. I account for that by believing that the past always had a preponderant element of pleasure, though disturbing circumstances wouldn't allow us to perceive it. It's always a joy to be alive, and we recognise this in looking back, when accidents arrange themselves in their true proportion."

He glanced at Ada; the girl was smiling scornfully, her face averted to the window.

"The present being so delightful," said Mrs. Clarendon, "what joyous pleasures have you for the immediate future?"

"Grouse on Wednesday next," Robert replied, after helping himself to salt in a manner which suggested that he was observant of the number of grains he took. "An acquaintance who has a moor, or a portion of one, in Yorkshire, has given me an invitation. As I have never shot grouse, I shall avail myself of the opportunity to extend my experience."

"Promise me the pick of your first bag." There was a project for a long drive in the afternoon; the weather was bright but sufficiently cool, and Robert professed himself delighted. He had a few minutes by himself in the drawing-room when the ladies went up to make their preparations. He gave a careful scrutiny to the caryatides, smiling, as was generally the case when he regarded anything, then glanced about at the pictures and the chance volumes lying here and there; the latter were novels and light literature from Mudie's. Then he took up a number of the *Queen*, and began to peruse it, sitting in the window-seat.

"What a singular choice of literature!" exclaimed Isabel, as she came in drawing on her gloves.

"The *Queen*? It interests me. There's something so very concrete about such writing. I like the concrete."

"The first time I ever heard so learned a term applied to so frivolous a publication. After all, Rhoda, there may be more in us poor creatures than we gave ourselves credit for."

"Do tell me," said Robert, as he laid down the paper, "what is a—I hope I may ask—what is a 'graduated plastron'?"

"Oh, this is dreadful!" laughed Isabel. "Come along, the carriage is waiting; we'll discuss graduated plastrons on our way."

“Are we not to have the pleasure of Miss Warren’s company?” Robert asked, as they entered the phaeton.

“Ada never goes out with us,” was Mrs. Clarendon’s answer as she took the reins and prepared to drive.

There was no additional guest at dinner; the evening was helped along by Rhoda’s playing and singing. Her voice was good, and she had enjoyed good teaching; this at Mrs. Clarendon’s expense. It was one of many instances in which Isabel had helped her friends the Meres, her aid being given in a manner of which she alone had the secret—irresistible, warm-hearted, delicate beyond risk of offence. Ada sat in the room, but, as usual, had a book in her hands.

“You read much,” said Robert, seating himself beside her and perforce obtaining her attention.

“It is a way of getting through life,” the girl replied, rather less abruptly than she had hitherto spoken.

“That means that life is not quite so attractive to you as it might be?” he returned, under the cover of the music which had just begun.

“I doubt whether life is attractive to any one—who thinks about it.”

She had folded her hands on the pages and was leaning back in her chair. Robert examined her and came to the conclusion that she was not quite so disagreeable in countenance as the irregularity of her features at first led one to think. She had large eyes, and, to meet them, was to be strangely impressed, almost as with the attraction of beauty. Her evening dress was of black satin, a richer and more tasteful garment than he had expected she would wear, judging from her appearance earlier in the day. Her hair, too, was very carefully arranged. The foot, which just showed itself, was not small, but beautifully shaped. Ornaments she had none.

“That is censure clearly directed against myself,” Robert said, with good humour. “And yet I fancy I have thought a good deal of life.” Ada did not seem disposed to pursue the argument.

“What are you reading?” Asquith inquired. It was a volume of Comte. She showed the title without speaking.

“You are a Positivist?”

“No; merely an atheist.”

The confession was uttered in such a matter-of-fact tone that Robert was disposed to think she used the word just for the pleasure of startling him. There was, in fact, a barely perceptible glimmer in her eyes as she sat looking straight before her.

“That’s rather dogmatic, isn’t it?” he remarked, smiling. “The word Agnostic is better, I fancy.”

“I believe it comes to very much the same thing,” said Ada. “The new word has been coined principally to save respectability.”

“A motive with which you have small sympathy?”

“None whatever.”

There was a silence between them.

“You play?” Robert asked, Rhoda Meres having risen from the piano.

“Only for my own amusement.”

“Then certainly you play things which I should like to hear. Will you play me something that has a tune in it? I don’t mean to reflect upon Miss Meres’ playing; but my ear is in a rudimentary state. I should be very grateful if you would play something.”

Ada seemed to harden her face against an intruding smile. She rose, however, and walked over to the piano. Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda looked at her with undisguised surprise. Asquith noticed that her walk might have been graceful, had she not affected a sort of indifference in gait.

She seated herself at the instrument and played an operatic air; it lasted about three minutes, then she ceased. Robert looked in expectation of her resuming her former seat, but she walked straight to the door and disappeared.

Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda Meres exchanged glances, and for an instant there was a rather awkward silence. Isabel found a subject, and talked with her wonted vivacity.

Ada did not return. About half-past ten Rhoda began to make preparations for departure; she went to one of the windows, and held the blind aside a little to look out at the night.

“Oh! what a moon!” she exclaimed. “Mrs. Clarendon, do let us just go out for a minute on to the lawn; the country is so wonderful at night.”

Wrappers were at hand for the ladies, and the three went out together. The whole scope of visible heavens was pale with light; the blacker rose the circle of trees about Knights-well. The leaves made their weird whispering, each kind with its separate voice; no other sounds came from the sleeping earth.

“We often hear the nightingale,” Isabel said, lowering her voice. “Perhaps it’s too early yet.”

Then she added:

“This is the hour of our poet’s inspiration.”

“What poet?” asked Robert.

“Our poet in the cottage; don’t you remember?”

“Ah, the morbid young man. Poor fellow!”

Isabel suppressed a low laugh.

“Come, Rhoda dear, it’s cold,” she said to the girl, who had drawn a little apart.

Rhoda followed in silence, her head bent. In the hall she took her candle, and bade the two a hasty good-night.

“Why is she crying?” asked Robert, under his voice, as he entered the drawing-room again with Isabel.

The latter shook her head, but did not speak. She moved about the room for a moment; the shawl had half slipped from her shoulders, and made a graceful draping. Asquith stood watching her.

She approached him.

“I half hinted,” she began, “that I had a selfish object in asking you to come here. We are good friends, are we not?—old and good friends?”

There was a beautiful appeal upon her face, anxiety blending with a slight embarrassment. She had put aside the mask of light-heartedness, and that which it had all day been in her countenance to utter freely exposed itself. It was not so much as distress; rather, impatience of some besieging annoyance. She was more beautiful now than when Robert had read her face seventeen years ago. Still, he regarded her with his wonted smile. There was much kindness in his look; nothing more than kindness.

“The best of friends, Isabel, I hope,” he replied to her.

“I am going to ask you to do something for me,” she continued. “Will you sit down and listen to me? I am not sure that I do right in asking this favour of you, but you are the only one of my relatives whom I feel able to talk freely with, and I think I had rather you than any one else did this thing that I am going to ask. Perhaps you will find it too disagreeable; if so, tell me—you will promise to speak freely?”

“Certainly, I promise.”

They had taken their seats. Asquith rested one of his arms on a small table, and waited, the smile lingering. Isabel gathered the shawl about her, as if she felt cold. She was a trifle pale.

“You understand perfectly,” she resumed, with a certain abruptness, which came of the effort it cost her to broach the subject, “the meaning of Ada Warren’s presence in this house?”

“Perfectly, I think,” her cousin replied, with a slight motion of his eyebrows.

“That is to say,” pursued Isabel, looking at the fringe of her shawl, “you know the details of Mr. Clarendon’s will?”

He paused an instant before replying.

“Precisely,” was his word, as he tapped the table.

Isabel smiled, a smile different from that with which she was wont to charm. It was one almost of self-contempt, and full of bitter memories.

“I had never heard of her,” she continued, “until I was called upon to take her as my own child. Then she was sent to me from people who had had the care of her since she was three years old.”

Asquith slowly nodded, wrinkling his forehead.

“Well, we will speak no more of that. What I wish to ask you to do for me is this:—Oh, I am ashamed to speak of it! It is something that I ought to have done myself already. But I am a coward; I have always been a coward. I can’t face the consequences of my own—my own baseness; that is the true word. Will you tell Ada Warren what her real position is, and what mine?”

Asquith raised his head in astonishment.

“She is still ignorant?”

“I have every reason to believe so. I don’t think any one will have told her.”

Robert bit his upper lip.

“Has she never asked questions about her origin?”

“Yes, but only once. I told her that her parents were friends of Mr. Clarendon, and that she was an orphan, therefore I had taken her. That was several years ago.”

Again there was a pause in the dialogue. Isabel had difficulty in keeping her face raised; her cheeks had lost their pallor, the blood every now and then made them warm.

“She seems a strange being,” Asquith remarked. “I am not as a rule tempted to puzzle about people’s characteristics, but hers provoke one’s curiosity.”

“I cannot aid you,” Isabel said, speaking quickly. “I know her as little as on the day when I first saw her. I have tried to be kind; I have tried to—”

She broke off. Her voice had begun to express emotion, and the sound seemed to recall her to self-command. She looked up, smiling more naturally, though still with a touch of shame.

“Will you help me, cousin?” she asked.

“Certainly I will do what you wish. Do you desire me to explain everything in detail—”

“The will, the will,” she interposed, with a motion of her hand. “Yes, the full details of the will.”

“And if she asks me—?”

“You know nothing—that is best. You cannot speak to her on such a subject. Will you wait for me a moment?”

She rose hastily and left the room. Asquith remained standing till her return. She was only a few moments absent, and came back with a folded paper in her hand.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.