

# GEORGE GISSING

ISABEL

CLARENDON,

VOL. II (OF II)

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**Isabel Clarendon, Vol. II (of II)**

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## Isabel Clarendon, Vol. II

### (of II) / In Two Volumes

## CHAPTER I

Vincent Lacour rose at eleven these dark mornings; by half-past twelve he had breakfasted and was at leisure. To begin the day with an elastic interval of leisure seemed to him a primary condition of tolerable existence. From his bedroom windows he had a glimpse of a very busy street, along which, as he hummed at his toilet, he could see heavily-laden omnibuses hastening Citywards; he thought with contemptuous pity of the poor wretches who had to present themselves at bank, or office, or shop by a certain hour. "Under no circumstances whatever," he often said to himself with conviction, "would I support life in that way. If it comes to the worst, there are always the backwoods. Hard enough, no doubt, but that would be in the order of things. If I stick in the midst of civilisation, I live the life of a civilised man." A mode of looking at things wherein Vincent was probably rational enough.

On the present morning, about the middle of January, no sight of dolorous traffic had disturbed his soul. When he raised his blind, the gas had merely reflected itself against the window-panes; outside was Stygian darkness, vaguely lurid in one or two directions; the day was blinded with foul vapour. He shrugged his shoulders, and went through the operation of dressing in a dispirited way. In his sitting-room things were a trifle better; with a blazing fire and drawn curtains, it was just possible to counterfeit the cheerful end of day. The odour of coffee and cutlets aided him in forgetfulness of external miseries.

"I suppose," Vincent mused, as he propped the newspaper against the coffee-pot, "they go to business even such mornings as this. Great heavens!"

When the woman who waited upon him in his chambers had cleared the table and betaken herself to other quarters where her services were in request, Lacour placed himself in a deep chair, extended his limbs, and lit a cigarette from the box which stood on a little round table at his elbow. He was still in his dressing-gown; and, as he let his head fall back and puffed up thin streams of smoke, the picture of civilised leisure was complete. His fine hair, suffered to grow rather long, and at present brushed carelessly into place till it should have dried in the warmth of the room, relieved the delicate tints of his complexion; his throat was charmingly white against the dark velvet collar of the gown. The only detail not in harmony with his attitude and surroundings was the pronounced melancholy of his expression, the habitual phase of his countenance whenever, as now, he lost self-consciousness in reverie. The look one bears at such times is wont to be a truthful representation of the inner man, not merely of the moment's mood but of personality itself.

When he had reposed thus for half-an-hour, he went to his writing-table, took from a drawer an unfinished letter, and, with the help of a blotting-pad, resumed the writing of it in his chair by the fireside.

".... I am still waiting for an answer from Mrs. Clarendon to my last letter; no doubt she merely delays till she can tell me on what day she will be in London. I have told her with all emphasis that we would neither of us think of taking any steps until her health is completely restored and all her arrangements made; but she has assured me several times that it is her wish for our marriage to take place as soon as possible.

"There is a point, my dear Ada, which I have not hitherto ventured to mention to you; if I do so now, I feel sure I shall find that your ideas are precisely the same as my own. You know, of course, what Mrs. Clarendon's circumstances will be when her guardianship comes to an end, and you feel,

as I do, that such a state of things is not practically possible. There can be no doubt of the truth of what I hear from several people, that she has refused an offer of marriage from Lord Winterset; it is astonishing, but the source of the statement is, I am told, the Earl himself. Well, you will see what I hint at; I know you have from the first had the same wish. Personally I shall have nothing to do with money matters; they are hateful to me, and, besides, are not your desires supreme? Whatever proposal you make will, doubt not, meet with my approval. Write to me in your own charming way of these matters; my words are blunt and rude.

"I am glad you share my dislike to settling down at once either at Knightswell or in London. My idea is that we should spend at least a year in travelling. We will go to the East. I believe Oriental modes of life will exactly suit my temperament. I dislike activity; to dream away days in some delightful spot within view of the Bosphorus, with a hookah near at hand, and you reading poetry to me—I think I could make that last a long time. You will educate me. I have all sorts of rudimentary capacities, which will never develop by my own efforts, but with you to learn from as we chat at our ease among orange-groves, I may hope to get some of the culture which I do indeed desire. I—"

The flow of first personal pronouns was checked by a knock at the outer door, the knock of a visitor. With some surprise Lacour rose and went to open. With yet more surprise he admitted a young lady, whose face, though it was half-hidden with a shawl, he knew well enough.

"Are you alone?" she asked in a muffled voice. "Can I speak to you?"

"Yes, I am alone. Pray come in."

When the shawl was thrown aside, Rhoda Meres stood looking nervously about the room. She was visibly in great agitation, and her appearance seemed to show that she had dressed hurriedly to come out. Lacour offered a chair by the fire, but she held at a distance, and at length sat on the couch which was near her as she entered. Clearly it was powerlessness to stand that made her seek the support. She held the shawl lightly across her lap; shame and misery goaded her, and she could neither raise her eyes nor speak.

"If you will allow me," said Vincent, whose lips had been moving curiously as he regarded her, "I will just make a little change in my costume. Do come nearer to the fire. I won't be a minute."

Left alone she began to cry quietly, and this gave her a measure of relief. Before Lacour returned, she had time to dry her eyes and survey the room again. Her prettiness was of the kind which suffers rather from the signs of distress; she knew it, and it was a fresh source of trouble. She still did not look up when Lacour, conventionally attired, took his stand before the fire-place.

"It's a hideous morning," he began, with as much ease of manner as he could command. "Whatever can have brought you out in such weather?"

"Is it true what father has just told me?" broke from her lips; "is it true that you are going to marry Ada Warren?"

"Yes," replied Lacour with gravity, "it is true. I supposed you knew long since."

"Oh, it is cruel of you!" cried the girl passionately. "How can you speak to me in that way?"

She hid her face upon the head of the sofa and wept unrestrainedly. Lacour was uncomfortable. He took up a paper-knife and played with it, then seated himself by the table, rested his elbow on it and watched her, his own features a good deal troubled.

"Miss Meres—," he began, but her smothered voice interrupted him.

"You did not call me that the last time we were together," she sobbed. "Why do you try to put a distance between us in that way? It is not three months since that day when I met you—you asked me to—at South Kensington, and you speak as if it was years ago. You must have gone straight from me to—to her!"

Lacour had an eye for the quiet irony of circumstances; it almost amused him to reflect how literally true her words were. None the less he was troubled by her distress.

"Rhoda," he said, leaning forward and speaking with calm reproof, "this is altogether unworthy of you. I thought you so perfectly understood; I thought it had all been made clear between us. Now

do give up crying, there's a good girl, and come to the fire. You look wretchedly cold. Take your hat off—won't you?"

"No, no; how can you expect me to make myself at ease in that way! I ought not to be here at all; it is foolish and wrong to have come to you. But I couldn't believe it; I was driven to come and ask you to contradict it. And you only tell me it is true; that you thought I knew it! I don't understand how you can be so cruel."

"Now let us talk," said Lacour, tapping his knee with the paper knife. "Why should you be so surprised at what you hear? You know all about my position; we talked it over in full that day at the Museum, didn't we? I was absolutely frank with you; I concealed nothing, and I pretended nothing. We liked each other; that we had both of us found out, and there was no need to put it into words. We found, too, that there was a danger of our growing indispensable to each other, a state of things which had to be met rationally, and—well, put an end to. Had we been at liberty to marry, I should certainly have asked you to be my wife; as there was no possibility of that, we adopted the wisest alternative, and agreed not to meet again. I cannot tell you how I admired your behaviour; so few girls are capable of talking in a calm and reasonable spirit of difficulties such as these. Any one watching us would have thought we were discussing some affair of the most every-day kind. As I say, you were simply admirable. It grieves me to see you breaking down so after all; it is not of a piece with the rest of your behaviour; it makes a flaw in what dramatists call the situation. Don't you agree with me? Have I said anything but the truth?"

Rhoda listened, with her eyes fixed despairingly on the ground; her hands holding the edge of the sofa gave her the appearance of one shrinking back from a precipice. When he had finished his statement, she faced him for the first time.

"What would you have thought if I had gone at once and married somebody else?"

"I should have heartily wished you every happiness."

"Should you have thought I did right?" she asked with persistence, clinging still to the edge of the sofa.

"On the whole, perhaps not."

"You mean," she said, not without bitterness, a fresh tear stealing to her cheek, "that you believe in my feeling for you, and wish me to understand that yours for me hadn't the same seriousness?"

"No, I didn't mean that. You must remember that I am not defending this step of mine, only showing you that I have not violated any compact between us. We were both left free, that's all."

"Then you don't care for her!" the girl exclaimed, with mingled satisfaction and reproof.

Lacour threw one leg over the other, and bent the paper-knife on his knee.

"You must remember," he said, "that marriages spring from many other motives besides personal inclination. I have told you that I don't defend myself. I'm afraid I mustn't say more than that."

Rhoda let her eyes wander; agitation was again getting hold upon her.

"You mean that I have no right to question you. I know I haven't, but—it all seems so impossible," she burst forth. "How can you tell me in such a voice that you are doing what you know isn't right? When father told me this morning I didn't know about that will; he only explained, because there was no use in keeping it secret any longer, and of course he knew nothing of—of the way it would come upon me."

"Ah, you know about the will? I am very glad of that; it makes our explanation easier."

She fixed her eyes upon him; they were only sad at first, but expanded into a despairing amazement.

"How *can* you speak so to me?" she asked in a low and shaken voice.

Lacour threw away the paper-cutter, and once more stood up.

"How am I to speak, Rhoda? Should you prefer to have me tell you lies? Why couldn't you accept the fact, and, knowing all the details, draw your own conclusion? You were at liberty to hold

me in contempt, or to pity me, as you thought fit; you were even at liberty to interfere to spoil my marriage if you liked—”

“You think me capable of that? No wonder you part from me so easily. I thought you knew me better.”

She put her hands over her face and let her tears have way.

“Rhoda,” he exclaimed nervously, “there are two things I can’t bear—a woman angry and a woman crying; but of the two I’d rather have the anger. You are upsetting me dreadfully. I had ever so much rather you told me in plain, knock-down words just what you think of me. If you distress yourself in that way I shall do something absurd, something we shall both of us be sorry for. Really, it was a horrible mistake to come here; why should we have to go through a scene of this kind? You are giving me—and yourself—the most needless pain.”

She rose and sought the door with blinded eyes, as if to go from him at once. Lacour took a step or two towards her, and only with difficulty checked himself.

“Rhoda!” he exclaimed, “you cannot go out in that way. Sit down; do as I tell you!”

She turned, and, seeing his face, threw herself on her knees before him.

“Vincent, have pity on me! You can’t, you won’t, do this! I will kneel at your feet till you promise me to break it off. I can’t bear it! Vincent, I can’t bear it! It will drive me mad if you are married. I can’t live; I shall kill myself! You don’t know what my life has been since we ceased to meet; I couldn’t have lived if I hadn’t had a sort of hope that—oh, I know it’s all my own fault; I said and did things I never should have done; you are blameless. But you *cannot* marry another woman when you—I mean, not at once, not so soon! It isn’t three months, not three months, since you said you liked me better than any one else you had ever met. Can’t you be sorry for me a little? Look at me—I haven’t even the pride a woman ought to have; I am on my knees to you. Put it off a little while; let me see if I can get to bear it!”

She had caught and held the hand with which he had endeavoured to raise her. The man was in desperate straits; his face was a picture of passionate torment, the veins at his temple blue and swollen, his lips dry and quivering. With an effort of all his strength he raised her bodily, and almost flung her upon the sofa, where she lay with half-closed eyes, pallid, semi-conscious.

“Lie there till you are quiet,” he said with a brutality which was the result of his inner struggle, and not at all an utterance of his real self, “and then go home. I am going out.”

He went into an inner room, and reappeared in a moment equipped for walking. Rhoda had risen, and was before him at the door, standing with her face turned from him.

“Wait till I have been gone a minute,” she said. “Forgive me; I will never come again.”

“Where are you going?” he inquired abruptly.

“Home.”

A sudden, violent double-knock at the door made them both start.

“It’s only the postman,” Lacour explained. The interruption had been of good effect, relieving the overcharged atmosphere.

“Listen to me for one moment before you go,” he continued. “You must see perfectly well that you ask what is impossible. Mistake or not, right or wrong, I cannot undo what I have done; we must consider other people as well as ourselves. For all that, we are not going to part in an unfriendly way. I am sensitive; I could not be at my ease; I think you owe it to me to restore our relations to their former reasonable state.”

“I will try,” came from the girl in a whisper.

“But I must have your promise. You will go home to your father and sister, and will live as you have been doing.”

“Do you know how that has been?” she murmured.

“In future it must be different,” he urged vehemently. “Cannot you see that by being unhappy you reproach me?”

“I do not reproach you, but I cannot help my unhappiness.”

“But you *must* help it,” he cried half-angrily. “I will not have that laid to my account. You must overcome all such weakness. The feeling you profess for me is unreal if you are not capable of so small an effort on my behalf. Surely you see that?”

“I will try.”

“Good. And now how are you going home? By train? No, I shall not let you go by train; you are not fit. Come to the foot of the stairs, and I will get you a cab. Nonsense, you need not drive as far as the house. Why will you irritate me by such resistance? The fog? It is as good as gone; it was quite light in the other room. Please go before me down the stairs, and stop at the bottom. Now that is a good girl.”

She held her hand to say good-bye, saying: “It is for the last time.”

“No, but for a long time. You are a brave girl, and I shall think very kindly of you.”

He found a cab, prepaid the fare, and waved his hand to her as she was carried off. The fog had become much thinner, but there was nothing to be seen still save slush underfoot and dim lights in the black front of the opposite house. Lacour hastened up to his rooms again, suddenly mindful of the letter which the postman had left and which was very possibly from Mrs. Clarendon.

No; the envelope showed an unknown hand. He opened it with disappointment, and found a folded sheet of letter-paper, on which was written something which had neither the formal commencement nor the conclusion of an ordinary letter; it was dated but not signed, and the matter of it this:

“The writer of this is personally acquainted with you, and desires to save you from the disagreeable consequences of an important step which you are contemplating. This step you are about to take in reliance upon the testamentary document which has hitherto been accepted as the late Mr. Clarendon’s valid will. My friendly object is to warn you that the document in question will prove inoperative, seeing that Mr. Clarendon left a will of more recent date, which disposes of his property in a wholly different manner. This will is being kept back in accordance with express private injunctions of the testator; its very existence is unknown to any save the writer of this. It will be produced either immediately after Miss Warren’s marriage or upon her coming of age, should the latter event precede the former.

“The writer of this cannot of course make any bargain of secrecy with you, but he trusts that you will manifest your gratitude by heeding his desire and keeping silence in a matter which henceforth cannot affect you.”

This astonishing communication, awakening memories of old-fashioned melodrama, was penned in firm, masculine handwriting, not unlike that of a legal copying clerk. Lacour read it again and again, his amazement at first rendering him incapable of scrutinising each particular. He stood for a quarter of an hour with the paper in his hand, oblivious of everything in life save those written words. Recovering himself somewhat, he picked up the envelope from the floor and examined its postmarks; they were metropolitan. At last he seated himself to think.

Anonymous letters are, to all save Cabinet Ministers and police officials, agitating things, if only as examples of a rare phenomenon. The tendency is to attach importance to them, however strong the arguments making for a less grave consideration. An anonymous letter concerning some matter of vital importance to the recipient will rarely leave him at ease until events have adduced their final evidence on one side or the other; mystery wholly impenetrable will often exert a moral influence which no lucidity of argument, no open appeal, could ever have attained. The present missive had everything in its favour; it could not have come at a more opportune moment, it could not have found a mind better prepared to receive and be affected by it. Lacour must have been singularly free from those instincts of superstition which linger in the soundest minds not to be struck with something like awe at the fact of the postmans knock which signalled such an arrival having come just when it did, at the moment when he had, after a hard struggle, crushed down a generous impulse, and was

congratulating himself upon his success. He did not care to handle the paper, but let it lie before his eyes on the table. He was nervously excited. This message from the unknown was at once a reproach and a command; as a mere warning on behalf of his material interests he was not yet able to regard it.

The rest of the day was none too long to be wholly given up to brooding on the one subject. With calmness naturally came a consideration of the possibility that the letter was a mere hoax; yet he could not earnestly entertain that view. Who should send it? His intended marriage was known, he felt sure, to very few people; certainly to none of those frisky spirits who were his associates in London, and who alone would relish such a form of amusement. Mrs. Clarendon? Her name haunted him suggestively from the first. But in that case it would be no mere joke, but a trick seriously meant to succeed. Was Mrs. Clarendon capable of such a trick to maintain her position yet a little longer? That was not to be easily credited; yet Lacour had sufficient insight into his own being to understand how very possible it is for a character of pure instincts to reconcile itself with the meanest motives in special circumstances. Of men and women most justly deemed noble there is not one of whom it is safe to predict a noble course of conduct; the wise content themselves with smiling approval after the event. He knew how terribly hard it must be for her to come down from her position of comfort and dignity, how strong the temptation must be to postpone her fall by any means. But in that case—why had she refused to marry Lord Winterset, and thus not only make herself independent of Ada's actions, but rise at once to a social standing compared with which her present one was insignificant? This was final, one would think, against the supposition of her being guilty of such a stratagem. On the other hand, if it were no mere fiction, if this will did in truth exist, could Mrs. Clarendon be the person who was keeping it back? It seemed ridiculous to suppose such a thing, though of course the nature of the will might reveal unimaginable reasons. What was the law on the subject? Could any one with impunity act thus? Lacour half rose to get at his tomes of legal lore, but a reflection checked him: wills have often come to light long after the testator's death, and it would be the easiest thing in the world to create an appearance of chance discovery.

When evening came, he went to his restaurant and dined poorly, then walked for a long time about the streets, grievously perplexed. Some action he must take, and at once, but the conflicting reasons which swarmed in his mind were as far as ever from subordinating themselves to the leadership of a satisfactory argument. Probabilities were exasperatingly balanced. At one moment he had all but resolved to go down at once to Chislehurst and put the letter before Mrs. Clarendon. But what was the use? If she already knew of it, she would only profess ignorance of the whole matter; if she knew nothing, she could afford no help. Equally useless to seek the counsel of indifferent people; they could do no more than run through the conjectures with which he was already too familiar, and would naturally derive high amusement from his dilemma. The joke would spread. With a sense of relief he arrived at one conclusion: he must decide for himself and keep the anonymous letter a secret.

This meant, of course, that his marriage must be postponed. It was all very well to smile at the extreme improbability of the danger revealed to him, but the recollection of how improbable it had seemed would not go far in the way of consolation if he found himself married to Ada Warren and divorced from her possessions. There was, from one point of view, some comfort in the thought that his predicament would be just as grave if he had been about to marry Ada from pure affection; in no case could they live on his bachelor allowance. Lacour persuaded himself that this reflection would help him in the disagreeable task which he had to face. The marriage must be postponed; not, of course, in a sudden, crude, business-like way, but with ingenuity and tact, by the exertion of that personal influence which he believed to be supreme with Ada. All sorts of occasions for delay would present themselves. Mrs. Clarendon seemed anxious to have it over (a suspicious circumstance, by-the-bye), but Ada herself could not of course take any initiative in the matter, and would be the ready dupe of plausible representations. That she was deeply in love with him he took for granted; the pleasant flattery of a supposition which agreed so well with our friend's view of his own advantages was not to be resisted. In a year and a half she would be of age; it was a long time to wait, with a

prospect of mere frustration in the end, but there was no choice. If the danger proved illusory, after all he would not have lost much; nay, it was to be remembered that Ada's inheritance increased in value from accumulation, and would be yet more desirable after another eighteen months. Truly, there was a much-needed point of support; he must keep that well in mind. Of course, if any considerable heiress, with a more agreeable person, fell at his feet in the meantime, he held himself free to review his position; another advantage of delaying, if it came to that.

You will naturally understand that these reflections are not to be taken baldly as representing the state of Lacour's mind. He thought all these things, but he felt many other things simultaneously. I will just barely hint that when excitement had allayed itself, there might have been some dim motive, of which Lacour was himself unconscious, operating towards acquiescence in the unexpected turn things had taken. This, at all events, is one of the suggestions helping me to account for the fact that Lacour put away the anonymous letter that same night and adhered to his purpose of revealing its existence to no one. He would scarcely have done so if that day's mental perturbation had not brought into activity certain forces of his nature previously without influence on his decisions.

Mrs. Clarendon being with the Strattons at Chislehurst, Ada was living by herself at Knightswell. Instead of finishing the letter to her upon which he was engaged when interrupted by Rhoda Meres, Lacour, having let a day or two pass in nervous awaiting of each post, rose one morning with the determination to take train to Winstoke. On his breakfast-table he found a letter from Mrs. Clarendon—a brief matter-of-fact communication—telling him that she hoped to be in London that day week, and requesting him to previously pay a visit to her solicitor, who would discuss with him the business matters which it was needful to arrange. He pondered the words of this note, but only with the result of strengthening his resolve. After very little hesitation he penned a reply, begging that there might be no needless haste, and intimating, with skilful avoidance of direct falsehood, that he consulted Ada's wish in suppressing his own anxiety for a speedy marriage. "There are circumstances, as you know," wrote Vincent, "which make it my duty to exercise the utmost delicacy and discretion in all that concerns my marriage. I esteem you my true friend; I have often given you my perfect confidence, and in return I have asked for your forbearance when I showed myself weak or inconsistent. You will believe that I am not incapable of generosity, that I would not selfishly exact the fulfilment of any pledge which a hint should prove to have been rashly given. I am but too well aware of my own shortcomings, but after all there is a certain pride in me which will preserve me from the errors of vulgar self-confidence. I beg of you, dear Mrs. Clarendon, not to see in this more than I would imply. I only desire that there should be no unbecoming haste. Ada and myself are both, thank goodness! young enough, and, I believe, are sincerely devoted to each other. Let everything be done with careful reconsideration."

He read this through with an air of satisfaction, and posted it on his way to Waterloo Station. The train by which he travelled reached Winstoke at two o'clock. As it was a clear day he walked from the station to the village, which was nearly a mile, then took luncheon at the inn, and reached Knightswell about half-past three. On asking for Miss Warren he was led to the drawing-room.

Ada entered almost immediately. They had not seen each other since the day at South Kensington, and he was astonished at the girl's appearance. Her face had every mark of illness; there were dark rings about her eyes, her cheeks were colourless, her lips dry and nervous; she had a worn, anxious, feverish look, and the hand she gave him was hot. They exchanged no more than an ordinary friends' greeting, and Ada seated herself without having met his eyes.

Lacour drew his chair within reach of her, and leaned forward to take one of her hands, which she surrendered passively.

"What has made you look so ill?" he asked, with surprise. "Is it the result of your anxiety for Mrs. Clarendon? Why didn't you tell me that you were not well?"

"There was nothing necessary to speak of," she answered, in a voice which seemed to come from a parched throat. "I think I am not quite well, but it's nothing more than I am used to; I have headaches."

"You haven't written to me for a fortnight. Why didn't you ask me to come and see you?"

"I supposed you would come before long."

"You don't seem very glad to see me, now I have come," said Lacour musingly.

"Yes, I am glad."

The words had not much life, and the smile with which she accompanied them was as pain-stricken as a smile could be. Lacour, still holding her hand, looked down, his brows contracting.

"You haven't had any bad news?" he asked all at once, facing her.

"Bad news?"

"It is not anything you have heard that has made you ill?"

"Certainly not. What should I have heard?"

Her tone had sincerity in it, and relieved him from the suspicion that she too might have received an anonymous letter. He leaned back in his chair smiling.

"What should I have heard?" Ada repeated impatiently, examining his face.

"Oh, I don't know. We are always getting news, and there is so much more of bad than good. Mrs. Clarendon seems to be much better," he added, slapping his leg with his gloves.

"Yes. You have heard from her?"

"Several times. I had a letter this morning."

"What did she say?"

"She spoke of the necessary preparations for our marriage."

Ada was silent. She had several times moved nervously on her chair, and now she seemed compelled by restlessness to change her position. A small ornament on a bracket had got out of position; she went and put it right.

"What preparations?" she asked, walking to the window.

"I don't exactly know. She wishes me to see her lawyer. Unfortunately," he added in a joking tone, "you are not one of those girls whose marriage is a simple matter of the ceremony."

She turned and came towards him, her hands hanging clasped before her.

"That is something I have to speak of. I cannot mention it to Mrs. Clarendon, and if I tell you now it will be done with. I desire that there shall be no kind of settlement. Nothing of the kind is enacted by the will, and I do not wish it. Will you please to see that my wish is respected?"

"Why is it your wish?"

"I can give no reason. I wish it."

"I imagine there will be very strong opposition, and not only from Mrs. Clarendon. I expect the trustees will have something to say."

Ada's eyes flashed; her whole face showed agitation, passionate impatience.

"What does it matter what they say?" she exclaimed. "What are they to me? What is my future to them? If you refuse to give me an assurance that my one desire shall be respected I must turn to Mrs. Clarendon, and that will be hateful to me! I have asked nothing else; but this I wish."

"You put as much persistence into it as another would in pleading for exactly the opposite," remarked Lacour, his coolness contrasting strangely with her agitated vehemence. "You know that a wish of yours is a law to me, and I promise you to agree to nothing you would dislike; remember that they cannot do without my assent. But you see," he added, "that it is not a very easy thing for me to urge. I have already been made to feel quite sufficiently—"

He interrupted himself. Ada waited for him to resume, still standing before him, but he kept silence.

"What have you been made to feel?" she asked, more quietly, her eyes searchingly fixed on him.

“Well, we won’t speak of that. Why do you stand? Come and let us talk of other things. You do indeed, Ada, look wretchedly ill.”

She averted her face impatiently. Though he had risen and was placing a chair for her, she moved to the window again.

“For my own part,” said Vincent, watching her, “I am grieved that you have set your mind on that. My own resolve was that everything should be settled on you. I hadn’t given the matter a thought till just lately, but well, that is what I had determined.”

Ada turned in his direction.

“You have been corresponding with Mrs. Clarendon?” she said, only half interruptedly. “Yes, you told me. I understand.”

What she understood was clear enough to Lacour, and his silence was filled with a rather vigorous inward debate. A protest of conscience—strengthened by prudential reasons—urged his next words.

“You mustn’t let me convey a false impression. Mrs. Clarendon is delicacy itself; I am quite sure she would not mean—”

He checked himself, naturally confirming the false impression. Conscience had still a voice, but the resolve with which he had come into Ada’s presence grew stronger as he talked with her.

Then she did a curious thing. Coming from the window, she seemed about to walk past him, but, instead of passing, paused just when her dress almost brushed his feet, and stood with her eyes fixed on the ground.

“Do sit down.” Lacour forced himself to say, rising again and laying his hand on the other chair.

He saw that she trembled; then, with a quick movement, she went to a chair at a greater distance.

“These things are horribly awkward to talk about,” he said, leaning forward at his ease. “Let’s put them aside, shall we? We shall have plenty of time to consider all that.”

Ada raised her face and looked at him.

“Plenty of time?”

“Surely. I have begged Mrs. Clarendon to remember how anxious we both are to do nothing hastily, to leave her ample time for the arrangements she will find necessary,—her own, I mean. I am sure I represented your wish?”

“Certainly,” was the scarcely audible reply.

“It will of course be some time before she is perfectly strong,” Vincent pursued, noting with much satisfaction what he deemed a proof of the strength of her passion for him; she was so clearly disappointed. “Such an illness must have pulled her down seriously. I should think by the summer she will be herself again. It is wretched that we are so utterly dependent on others, and are bound to act with such cautious regard.”

“You have fixed the summer, in your correspondence with her?”

“Oh no! I leave it quite open. But we cannot, of course, wait for ever.”

Ada sat motionless, her hands in her lap. Her features were fixed in hard, blank misery. No wonder the girl looked ill. Ever since the day on which she wrote to Lacour her acceptance of his offer, life had been to her a mere battle of passions. When time and the events which so rapidly succeeded had dulled the memory of that frenzy which drove her to the step, of set purpose she nursed all the dark and resentful instincts of her nature, that they might support her to the end. Pride was an ally; if it cost her her life she would betray by no sign the suffering she had brought upon herself. She blinded her feelings, strove to crush her heart when it revolted against her self-imposed deception that she loved this man who would become her husband. Had she not found a pleasure in his society? Did not his attentions flatter and even move her? And ever she heard a voice saying that he cared nothing for her, that she had a face which could attract no man, that her money alone drew him to her, and that voice was always Mrs. Clarendon’s. Hatred of Isabel was in moments almost madness. It seemed in some horribly unnatural way to be increased by the sight of the pale and suffering face;

a wretched perversion poisoned the sympathy which showed itself in many an act of kindness. The struggle with her better nature brought her at times near to delirium. When Isabel's convalescence began, Ada counted the days. She knew that Lacour would not postpone their marriage an hour later than necessity demanded; her strength would surely hold out a few more weeks. That he did not come to see her was at once a relief and a source of bitterness; his letters she read with a mixture of eagerness and cold criticism. She stirred herself to factitious passion, excited all the glowing instincts, all the dormant ardours, of her being—and shivered before the flame. Every motive that could render marriage desirable she dwelt upon till it should become part of her hourly consciousness. The life she would lead when marriage had given her freedom was her constant forethought. She was made for enjoyment, and would enjoy. For her should exist no petty social rules, no conventional hypocrisies. In London her house should be a gathering-place of Bohemians. She herself did not lack brains, and her wealth would bring people about her. She would be a patroness of art and letters, would make friends of actresses who needed helping to opportunities of success, of artists who were struggling against unmerited neglect. Reading had filled her mind with images of such a world; was it not better than that dull sphere which styled itself exclusive?.... When at length Mrs. Clarendon left Knightswell to go to the Strattons, Ada promised herself that any morning might bring a definite proposal of a day for her wedding. With difficulty she restrained herself from asking when it was to be. She had put aside every doubt, every fear, every regret; her life burned towards that day which would complete her purpose. And now....

"But we must see each other oftener," Lacour was saying. "If Mrs. Clarendon will welcome me—"

She interrupted him harshly.

"Is Mrs. Clarendon the only person you consult henceforth?"

"My dear Ada, you mustn't misunderstand a mere form of politeness."

"Such forms have always been disagreeable to me."

She rose and moved to the fire-place. Lacour watched her from under his eyebrows. It grew more and more evident how strong was his hold upon her; he asked himself whether a little innocent quarrel might not best serve his ends.

"I am wearying you," he said, rising.

She could not let him go without plain question and answer; it seemed to her that she had reached the limit of endurance, that her strength would fail under the trial of another hour. Yet her lips would form no word.

"In what have I displeased you, Ada?" Vincent inquired, with an air of much surprise.

"Clearly I have done so. Pray tell me what I have said or done."

She turned from the fire and faced him.

"When is it your intention for our marriage to take place?"

Lacour was suspicious again. This astounding eagerness must be the result of some information she had received; she dreaded to lose him. Did not her desire about the settlement somehow depend upon the same cause?

"Surely I have no interest in putting it off," he said, his head a little on one side, his most delicate smile in full play.

"But you think it had better not be before the summer?"

"Is not that best? I have no will but yours, Ada."

"I think," she replied slowly, "that it shall be, not this summer, but the summer of next year."

"A year and a half still? For whatever reason?" he cried.

"I shall come of age then," she continued, looking past him with vague eyes. "I need consult no one then about my wishes."

"My dear Ada, you surely do not think I hesitated—"

"No," she said firmly, "but it will be better. Have I your consent to this?"

He walked away a few steps, desperately puzzled, exasperated, by the necessity of answering yes or no, when more than he could imagine might depend upon the choice.

“This is a joke, Ada!” he said, coming back with disturbed countenance.

“Nothing less. I ask you to postpone our marriage till I am twenty-one.”

Her eyes did not move from his face. If he had said, “We will be married next week,” she would have given him her hand in assent. Surely at that moment the air must have been full of invisible mocking spirits, waiting, waiting in delicious anticipation of human folly.

“If that is your wish,” Lacour said, “I cannot oppose it.” He had assumed dignity.

“My constancy, Ada, can bear a test of eighteen months.”

“I will let Mrs. Clarendon know,” Ada observed quietly. “It will relieve her mind.”

Should he leave her thus? He hesitated for a moment. Pooh! As if he could not whistle her back whenever it suited him to do so; women appreciate a display of dignity and firmness. He held his hand in silence, and, when she gave him hers, he just touched it with his lips. As he moved to the door he expected momentarily to hear his name uttered, to find himself recalled. No; she allowed him to disappear. He left the house rather hurriedly, and not in an entirely sweet temper, in spite of the fact that he had gained the very end he had in view, and which he had feared would be so difficult of attainment, would necessitate such a succession of hypocrisies and small conflicts.

How the imps in the air exploded as soon as he was gone!

## CHAPTER II

Mrs. Stratton was summoned home by her husband's arrival just before Christmas. Isabel preferred to delay yet a little, and reached Chislehurst a fortnight later, accomplishing the journey with the assistance of her maid only. It proved rather too much for her strength, and for a day or two she had to keep her room. Then she joined the family, very pale still, and not able to do much more than hold a kind of court throned by the fireside, but with the light of happiness on her face, listening with a bright smile to every one's conversation, equally interested in Master Edgar's latest exploit by flood or field, and in his mother's rather trenchant comments on neighbouring families.

All the Strattons were at home. The four British youths had been keeping what may best be described by Coleridge's phrase, "Devil's Yule." Colonel Stratton was by good luck a man of substance, and could maintain an establishment corresponding to the needs of such a household. Though Mrs. Stratton had spoken of her house as being too large, it would scarcely be deemed so by the guests of mature age who shared it with the two young Strattons already at Woolwich and Sandhurst, and the other two who were still mewing their mighty youth at scholastic institutions. There was a certain upper chamber in which were to be found appliances for the various kinds of recreation sought after by robust young Britons; here they put on "gloves," and pummelled each other to their hearts' satisfaction—thud—thud! Here they vied with one another at single-stick—thwack—thwack! Here they swung dumb-bells, and tumbled on improvised trapezes. And hence, when their noble minds yearned for variety, they rushed headlong, pell-mell into the lower regions of the house, to the delights of the billiard-room. They had the use of a couple of horses, and the frenzy of their over-full veins drove them in turns, like demon huntsmen, over the frozen or muddy country. They returned at the hour of dinner, and ate—ate in stolid silence, till they had appeased the gnawing of hunger, then flung themselves here and there about the drawing-room till their thoughts, released from the brief employment of digestion, could formulate remarks on such subjects as interest youth of their species.

Mrs. Stratton enjoyed it all. Her offspring were perfect in her eyes. Had they been less riotous she would have conceived anxiety about their health. When her third boy, Reginald, aged thirteen years, fell to fisticuffs with a youthful tramp in a lane hard by, and came home irreconisable from blood and dirt, she viewed him with amused astonishment, and, after setting him to rights with sponge and sticking-plaster, laughingly recommended that in future he should fight only with his social equals. With the two eldest she was a sort of sister; they walked with her about the garden with their arms over her shoulders; the confidence between her and them was perfect, and certainly they were very fond of her. They were stalwart young ruffians, these two, with immaculate complexions and the smooth roundness of feature which entitles men to be called handsome by ladies who are addicted to the use of that word. Mrs. Stratton would rather have been their mother than have borne Shakespeare and Michael Angelo as twins.

Their father—one may be excused for almost forgetting him—was a man of not more than medium height, but very solidly built, and like all his boys, bullet-headed. His round chubby face was much bronzed, his auburn hair and bushy beard of the same colour preserved to him a youthful appearance, which was aided by the remarkably innocent and soft-tempered look of his eyes. He was a man of weak will and great bodily strength; his sons had a string of stories to illustrate the latter—the former would perhaps have been best discoursed upon by Mrs. Stratton. A man of extreme simplicity in his habits, and abnormally shy; with men he was by no means at his ease till they became very old acquaintances, and with women ease never came to him at all. The defect was the more painful owing to his very limited *moyens* in the matter of conversation; had it not been for the existence of weather, the colonel would, under ordinary circumstances, have preserved the silence for which nature intended him. Of Mrs. Clarendon in particular he had a kind of fear, though at the same time

he was attracted to her by her unfailing charm; he knew she sought opportunities of teasing him, and, though it cost him much perspiration, he did not dislike the torment. With her he would have been brought to talk if with any one; a fearful fascination often drew him to her side, only to find, when he valorously opened his lips, that a roguish smile had robbed him of every conception of what he was going to say.

“Well, colonel?” she began, on a typical occasion, one morning when they were alone together for a few minutes.

The colonel turned his eyes to the windows, coughed, and, looking uneasily round, observed that it was astonishingly warm for the season.

“It is,” assented Isabel gravely. Whereupon, as if struck by the similarity of their sentiments, he looked into her face, and repeated his assertion with more emphasis.

“Astonishingly warm for January. You find it so? So do I. Yes, you really notice it?”

“I have been thinking over it since I got up,” said Isabel. “I wonder how many degrees we have in this room?”

With the delight of a shy man who has found something definite to speak of, Colonel Stratton at once started up to go to the thermometer which hung in the window; a half-suppressed laugh made him stop and turn round.

“You don’t really care to know,” he said, flushing up to the eyes. “That’s one of your jokes, Mrs. Clarendon. Ha, ha! Good!”

He stood before her, desperately nibbling both ends of his moustache—he had acquired much skill in the habit of getting them both into his mouth at the same time.

“Well, colonel?”

“You are in a—frisky mood this morning, Mrs. Clarendon,” he burst forth, laughing painfully.

“A what kind of mood?”

“I beg your pardon. I should have chosen a better word,” he exclaimed, in much confusion. “It really is wonderfully warm for the season—you notice it?”

“Colonel, I assure you I notice it.”

Fear at length overcame fascination.

“I must go and have a look at that new bay,” he murmured. “You—you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Clarendon? Ah, here’s Rose! Don’t you notice how very warm it is, my dear?”

“Rose,” said Mrs. Clarendon, when the colonel had made his escape at quick time, “come here and answer me a rude question. Don’t be shocked; it’s something I do so want to know. How did the colonel”—she lowered her voice, her eyes were gleaming with fun—“how did the colonel propose to you?”

“My dear,” was the reply, given in a humorous whisper, “I did it myself.”

On another occasion, Colonel Stratton came into the room when Isabel was reading. She just noticed his presence, but did not seem inclined to talk, had, in fact, a shadow on her brow. The colonel observed this, by side glances. He moved about a little, and somehow managed to get behind her chair. Then, tapping her on the shoulder—it was his habit with male acquaintances, and he was probably unconscious of the act—he said, in a low voice but with much energy:

“It’s a damned shame! A damned shame!” He had disappeared when Isabel turned to look at him.

She was not quite well that day, or something troubled her. After lunch she went to her own room, and, when she had sat for some time unoccupied, took from her writing-case a letter which she had written the day before. It was to Ada. As she glanced over it, some painful emotion possessed her.

“I can’t send it! I am ashamed!” Her lips uttered the words which she had spoken only to herself. She crumpled the sheet, and threw it into the fire.

She dined alone, and, a little later, Mrs. Stratton came to sit with her. After various talk, Mrs. Stratton said:

“A couple of friends are coming from town to-morrow—one of them a friend of yours.”

“Who?”

“Rather more than a friend; a relative, I suppose.”

“Robert Asquith?” said Isabel, surprised.

“Yes; I invited him some time ago, at Knightswell.”

“Why, I had a letter from him just before I left, and he didn’t say anything about it. How came you to make such friends with him?”

“Oh, he took my fancy! And I thought it might be pleasant for you to meet here.”

“Certainly; I am delighted.”

“I’m so glad you like him,” she added, after a pause. “I had no idea you got on such good terms when he came down.”

“Why do you never speak of him?” Mrs. Stratton asked, smiling slightly.

“Don’t I? I really can’t say. I suppose I take Robert for granted. I dare say he speaks as little of me as I of him.”

“Perhaps so,” said the other, in an unusually absent way. Then she asked:

“He has never been married?”

“Oh no! Robert is a confirmed old bachelor.”

“Rather strange that, don’t you think? He is in easy circumstances, I think you told me?”

“Decidedly easy.”

“And good-looking.”

“You think so? Yes, I suppose he is,” mused Isabel.

“Suppose? You know very well he is, my dear. And what is he doing, pray?”

“I really can’t say. He has rooms, and lives, I suppose, a very idle life. I shouldn’t wonder if he goes back to the East some day.”

“Very much better for him to stay in England, it seems to me,” remarked Mrs. Stratton drily. Isabel changed the subject.

She went to her bedroom early, and, when her attendant had helped her into the easy costume of a dressing-gown, sat by the fire and let her eyes dream on the shapes of glowing coal. Presently she shook loose her hair, which was done up for the night, and spread it over her shoulders. She took a tress between the fingers of her left hand and stroked its smoothness, a smile growing upon her lips. Then she paced the length of the room several times, standing a moment before the mirror when she reached it. The dressing-gown became well the soft outlines of her form; the long, dark hair, rippling in its sweep from brow to shoulder, changed somewhat the ordinary appearance of her face, gave its sweetness a graver meaning, a more earnest cast of thought.

“If he saw me now he would tell me I was beautiful.”

She smiled at herself, sighed a little, and, before resuming her seat, took from a drawer three letters which she had received during her stay here. Each was of many pages, closely written; he who wrote them had much to say. Isabel had read them many, many times. No such letters had ever before come to her; her pride and joy in them was that of a young girl, touched, however, with the sadness and regret never absent from joy which comes late. She thought how different her life would have been if she had listened to words like these when the years spread out before her a limitless field of hope. It seemed too much as if these letters were addressed to some one else, and had only been given her to read. She had to bring herself with conscious effort to an understanding of all they implied, all they demanded. Yet they moved her to deepest tenderness.

And that was the most marked quality of the letters themselves. In them was sounded by turns every note of love. There was the grace of pure worship, the lyric rapture of passion and desire, the soft rhythm of resigned longing, the sweet sadness of apprehension; but the note of an exquisite tenderness was ever recurrent, with it the music began and ended. They were the love letters of a poet, one in whom melancholy mingled with every emotion, whose brightest visions of joy were shadowed

by brooding mortality. There was nothing masterful, no exaction, no distinctly masculine fervour. If a dread fell upon him lest the happiness promised was too great, it found voice in passionate entreaty. He told her much of his past life, its inner secrets, its yearnings, its despair. Of her infinite pity she had chosen him; she would not let him fall again into utter darkness? Love did not stir in him vulgar ambitions; to dwell in the paradise of her presence was all that his soul desired; let the world go its idle way. Too soft, too tender; another would have read his outpourings with compassionate fear, dreading the future of such a love. He visioned a happiness which has no existence. Men win happiness, but not thus. To woo and win as pastime in the pauses of the world's battle, to make hearth and home a retreat in ill-hap, a place of rest between the combats of day and day, to kindly regard a wife for her usefulness, and children for the pride they satisfy, thus, and not otherwise, do men come to content. Content that is not worth much, perhaps; but what is the price current of misery?

Isabel wrote in reply to each letter; King-cote would have liked to pay in gold the village postman who brought her writing to his door. She, too, spoke with love's poetry, and her passion rang true. How strange to pen such words! She had always thought of such forms of expression with raillery, perhaps with a little contempt. Boys and girls of course wrote to each other in this way; it was excusable as long as one did not know the world. For all her knowledge of the world she would not now have surrendered the high privilege of language born of the heart. And in all that she wrote—in her thoughts too—it was her effort to place *him* in that station of mastery which he would not claim for himself. Was there already self-distrust, and was it only woman's instinct of subjection? She would have had him more assured of his lordship, would have desired that he should worship with less humility. If a man have not strength, love alone will not suffice to bind a woman to him; she will pardon brutality, but weakness inspires her with fear. Isabel had no such thoughts as these, but perchance had his letters contained one sentence of hard practical planning at the end of all their tenderness she would have found that something which unconsciously she lacked. She had bridged the gulf between him and herself; she was ready to make good words by deed, and, in spite of every obstacle, become his wife; it must be his to bear her manfully from one threshold to the other. Once done, she felt in her soul that she should regret nothing; she loved him with the first love of her life. But his hand must uphold her, guide her, for she would close her eyes when the moment came....

She was alone in Mrs. Stratton's boudoir next morning, when the door was pushed open; turning, she saw her cousin.

"I was told that I might come here in search of you," said Robert, with his genial smile. "How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you. How are you?—as the children answer. But I needn't ask that; you have a wonderful faculty for looking healthy."

"I don't think there's often much amiss with me. Setting aside the chance of breaking my neck over a fence, I think I may promise myself a few more years."

"And the risk of fences you are wise enough to avoid."

"Nothing of the kind. I was hunting in Leicestershire only yesterday."

"Impossible, Robert!"

"Indisputable fact—" He had it on his lips to call her "Isabel," but for some reason checked himself. "A friend of mine took me down and mounted me. I enjoyed it thoroughly."

"But you are becoming an Englishman."

"Was I ever anything else?"

"I believe I generally think of you in an Oriental light. At all events, you smoke a hookah, and very much prefer lying on a rug to sitting on a chair."

"The hookah I have abandoned; the rug comes of your imagination."

"Oh dear no; it was one of the first things you said to me when you came to see me last spring in town. It stamped you in my mind for ever."

They laughed.

“But I want to know how you are?” Robert resumed, leaning to her, with his hands on his knees. “Mrs. Stratton’s account is too vaguely ladylike. How, in truth, are you?”

A ripple of laughter replied to him.

“You show me that you can be mirthful; that is much, no doubt. But you must have a change.”

“Am I not having one?”

“Oh, I don’t call this a change. You must get fresh air.”

Asquith’s way of speaking with her was not quite what it had formerly been. He assumed more of—was it cousinship?—than he had done. Possibly the man himself had undergone certain changes during the last few months. Oriental he had been to a certain extent; something of over-leisureliness had marked his bearing; there had been an aloofness in his way of remarking upon things and people, a kind of mild fatalism in his modes of speech. An English autumn with its moor-sport and the life of country houses; an English winter with growth of acquaintances at hospitable firesides had doubtless not been without their modifying influence; but other reasons were also discoverable for the change in his manner towards Isabel. For one thing, he had heard of her refusal of Lord Winterset; for another, he knew of Ada’s approaching marriage.

She made no reply to his advice, and he continued.

“You know Henry Calder?”

“Well.”

“You know that he has been absolutely ruined by a bank failure?”

“You don’t say so?”

“Indeed. The poor fellow is in a wretched state—utterly broken down; they feared a few weeks ago that he was going crazy. You know that he was great at yachting; of course he has had to sell his yacht, and I have bought it.”

“What will you tell me next?”

“Why, this. It is essential that poor Calder should get away to the South, and nothing would do him half as much good as a sail among the islands. Now I propose to ask him to accompany me on such a cruise, say at the beginning of next month. He and I have been on the best of terms since we were lads, and there’s no kind of awkwardness in the arrangement; he goes to put me up to the art of seamanship. Of course his wife accompanies him, and probably their eldest girl.”

“That’s the kindest thing I have heard for a long time, Robert,” said Isabel, giving him a look of admiration.

“Oh dear no; nothing could be simpler. And now—I want you to come with them.” Isabel shook her head.

“But what is your objection?”

“I cannot leave England at present.”

“I don’t ask you to. We are at the middle of January; it will be time enough in three weeks.”

“Out of the question.”

She still shook her head, smiling. Robert reflected for a moment.

“When does this marriage take place?” he asked abruptly.

“Very shortly, I suppose. I have written to Mr. Lacour to request him to make arrangements as soon as he likes. I shall meet him in London on Monday.”

“Good. Then you are absolutely free.”

“I am not free.”

He glanced at her inquiringly.

“I am not free,” Isabel repeated, looking straight before her.

“I suppose I shall be grossly impertinent if I ask what it is that holds you?”

“I cannot now tell you, Robert, but—I must remain in England.”

Her voice had a tremor in it, which she did her best to subdue. She was smiling still, but in a forced, self-conscious way.

Asquith leaned back; he had lost his look of cheerful confidence.

"But it isn't such a grave matter, after all," said Isabel, restoring the former tone. "It was a very kind thought of yours, very kind—but you won't quarrel with me because I can't come? It will make no difference in your plan for the Calders, surely?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," Asquith replied, in an almost petulant manner, strangely at variance with his ordinary tone. He had thrust his hands into his pockets, and was tapping the carpet with his foot.

"What nonsense!" Isabel exclaimed, with growing good humour. "As if you would allow such a scheme to be overthrown just because one of the party failed you! I can suggest half a dozen delightful people who will be happy to go with you."

"No doubt; but I wanted you."

"Robert, you are undeniably Oriental; the despotic habit still clings to you. If one swallow doesn't make a summer, neither does one day's hunting make an Englishman."

His countenance cleared.

"Well," he said, "this is certainly not final. Let us wait till that wedding is over."

"It is final," she returned, very positively. "The wedding will not in the least alter things."

"What then are you going to do?" he asked, with deliberation, gazing at her steadily.

Her eyes fell, and she seemed half to resent his persistence, as she answered:

"I am going to live on three hundred a year."

"H'm! Do you think of living in London?"

"No; I do not think of living in London. Proceed, sir, with the cross-examination."

"I think I have been rude enough for one day," he returned, with a quiet smile as he rose from his chair.

She held her hand to him with the friendly grace which could repay even when it disappointed.

"Thank you, with all my heart," she said. "Only—remember how dear independence must be to me."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Lyster?" Robert asked, with a transition to easier topics.

"I don't think I know any one of that name."

"Some one who arrived here a few minutes after I did. It seems we came in the same train."

"To be sure; a friend the Strattons were expecting. Shall we go to the drawingroom?"

There they found the gentleman in question conversing with Mrs. Stratton, a man of smooth appearance and fluent speech. His forte seemed to be politics, on which subject he discoursed continuously during luncheon. There happened to be diplomatic difficulties with Russia, and Mr. Lyster—much concerned, by-the-bye, with Indian commerce—was emphatic in denunciation of Slavonic craft and treachery, himself taking the stand-point of disinterested honesty, of principle in politics.

"We shall have to give those fellows a licking yet," remarked Colonel Stratton, with confidence inspired by professional feeling.

"I should think so, indeed!" put in Frank Stratton, the eldest son. The two schoolboys had by this time returned to their football, and only the representatives of Woolwich and Sandhurst remained to grace the family table. "And the sooner the better."

"What I want to know," exclaimed Mr. Lyster, "is whether England is a civilising power or not. If so, it is our duty to go to war; if not, of course we may prepare to go to the—"

"Don't hesitate, Mr. Lyster," said Mrs. Stratton good-naturedly, "I'm sure we all agree with you."

"Civilisation!" proceeded the politician, when the laugh had subsided; "that is what England represents, and civilisation rests upon a military basis, if it has any basis at all. It's all very well to talk about the humanity of arbitration and fudge of that kind; it only postpones the evil day. Our position is the result of good, hard fighting, and mere talking won't keep it up; we must fight again. Too long a peace means loss of prestige, and loss of prestige means the encroachment of barbarians,

who are only to be kept in order by repeated thrashings. They forget that we are a civilising power; unfortunately we are too much disposed to forget it ourselves.”

“The mistake is,” remarked Frank Stratton, “to treat with those fellows at all. Why don’t we take a map of Asia and draw a line just where it seems good to us, and bid the dogs keep on their own side of it? Of course they wouldn’t do so—and then we lick’em!”

His mother looked at him with pride.

“I respect our constitution,” pursued Mr. Lyster, who was too much absorbed in his own rhetoric to pay much attention to the frivolous remarks of others; “but I’ve often thought it wouldn’t be amiss if we could have a British Bizmarck”—so he pronounced the name. “A Bizmarck would make short work with Radical humbug. He would keep up patriotism; he would remind us of our duties as a civilising power.”

“And he’d establish conscription,” remarked Frank. “That’s what we want.”

“Eh? Conscription? Well, I won’t go quite so far as that. It is one of our English glories that there are always men ready to volunteer for active service; men who are prepared to fight and, if need be, to die for their country. I shouldn’t like to see that altered. I think the voluntary system a good one. We are Englishmen; we don’t need to be driven to battle.”

Robert Asquith glanced at Isabel and smiled.

The weather was so bad in the afternoon that it was impossible to leave the house. The two young Strattons went to try and break each other’s heads at single-stick; the colonel, with his guests, repaired to the billiard-room, where they smoked, talked, and handled the cues. Asquith was not quite in the mood for billiards. When he had played with the colonel for half an hour, Mr. Lyster took his place, and he strolled round the room, examining the guns, cricket-bats, horse-whips, and pictures, which invited observation. Going to one of the seats to repose himself, he found a book lying close by on the floor, open leaves downwards, just as it had fallen. It was one of Captain Marryat’s novels. Robert threw up his legs on to the couch, and began to read.

Our friend was anything but a man of literary tastes; with the exception of purchases at railway stations, it is doubtful whether he had ever bought a book in his life. He read newspapers assiduously; they satisfied his need of mental pabulum. For the rest, he made the world his book, and had the faculty of extracting amusement from it in sufficient quantities to occupy his leisure time. He was anything but an ignorant man; conversation, and the haphazard experiences of life, had supplied him in a living way with knowledge which ordinarily has to be sought from the printed page; but intellectual tendencies, properly speaking, he had none. Art he only cared for in the elementary way; for music, he plainly confessed he had no ear. On men and manners, he habitually reflected, and had fair natural power of insight; problems of life were non-existent for him.

The story which he had picked up absorbed him; he read on and on with a boy’s simple enjoyment. His body rested in a corner of the seat, his legs were stretched at full length, one over the other, he held the book up in both hands; often he laughed aloud, and at other times his face wore an expression of the gravest interest. The billiard players had passed out of his world.

When at length he put down the book, he found himself alone in the room. He jumped up, flung the book on to the green table, yawned, stretched his arms, slapped his legs to restore circulation, and walked to the window. It was growing dark. In the leafless garden the rain fell steadily; occasionally drops made their way down the chimney, and hissed upon the fire. Robert had the feeling of one who awakes after dissipation, a debauched and untidy sensation. He felt the necessity of plunging his face in water.

Having done so, he made his way to the drawing-room. Visitors were not to be expected such an afternoon as this, and at first he thought the room was empty. But Mrs. Stratton was sitting with her back to him; the ruffling of a newspaper she held apprised him of her presence.

“So some one has appeared at last,” said the lady, “not for my company, of course, but for a cup of tea. Would you be so good as to ring the bell?”

“The tea will be grateful, I admit,” returned Robert, doing her bidding, “but your society no less. In fact, I want to speak to you.”

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Clarendon refuses my invitation—that I mentioned in my letter, you remember.”

“Refuses? What is her objection?”

“Nothing definite. She says she cannot leave England, that’s all. Has she—I don’t think there’s any harm in asking you, is there?—has she spoken with you at all of what she is going to do?”

“Well, no. In fact, it’s a subject she won’t approach. I don’t think she has formed any plans whatever yet.”

Asquith reflected, and at the same time tea was brought in and lamps lit.

“I half supposed,” said Mrs. Stratton, glancing aside at him, as she held up the teapot, “that you were the most likely person to know of her plans.”

“I assure you, Mrs. Stratton, that was a mistake, an entire mistake.”

The lady raised her eyebrows a little and carefully removed a tea-leaf from her cup.

“You take it for granted,” she asked, after a moment, “that she will really quit Knights-well?”

“How otherwise? I am perfectly sure that nothing would induce her to continue living there under the new *régime*. If the persons concerned had been—had been other than they of course the affair might have been very simple. But not as it is.”

“By-the-bye,” he added, “she gave me one piece of information. She does not intend to live in London.”

“Where then, I wonder?”

“I can’t conjecture.”

“I would repeat the invitation, I think,” said Mrs. Stratton, looking at him.

“I shall do so, though not just yet.”

The colonel and Mr. Lyster came in talking loudly. .

“Ah, we left you asleep,” said the former to Robert. “Didn’t like to disturb you. We’ve had a walk.”

“A walk, in this weather!” exclaimed his wife.

“Oh yes; a little rain does one no harm. Not a bad afternoon; there’s a pleasant warmth in the air. Don’t you notice a warmth in the air, Asquith?”

“Yes, here in the drawing-room. I can’t answer for outside.”

“Oh, it’s distinctly warm. Eh, Lyster?”

Mrs. Clarendon appeared in the room. The colonel lost his ease, and began to walk about. The conversation became general.

There were several other people at dinner. It fell to Asquith to take down a certain Miss Pye, a tall young lady with a long thin nose, simply dressed in white, with much exposure of bust. This *décolleté* costume was a thing Robert found it impossible to get used to; he felt that if he went on dining with ladies for another five-and-twenty years there would still arise in him the same sensation of amazement as often as he turned to speak and had his eyes regaled with a vision of the female form divine, with its most significant developments insisted upon. Singular questions of social economy invariably suggested themselves. How far was this fashion a consequence of severe competition in the marriage market? He always found it a little difficult to look his fair neighbour in the face, and, when he at length did so, experienced surprise at her placid equanimity. Miss Pye’s equanimity it would have taken much to disturb. As in duty bound, Robert made his endeavour to interest her in various kinds of conversation. The affirmative and negative particles alone replied to him. She ate with steady application; she smiled feebly when he attempted a very evident joke; she appeared to have no concern in any of the things about which men and women use or abuse the gift of speech. Yet he succeeded at last.

“Did you ever read a book called—?” he asked, naming the novel of Marryat’s which had absorbed him through the afternoon.

“I should think so!” exclaimed Miss Pye, her eyes gleaming with appreciation. “Isn’t it awfully jolly? And—”

She proceeded to name half a dozen other works by the same refined and penetrating author.

“That’s the kind of book I like,” she said. “I believe I ought to have been a boy by rights. My brothers have all Marryat, and Mayne Reid, and Cooper; and I know them all by heart. ‘Valentine Vox,’ too; do you know that? Oh, you just get it, as soon as you can. And ‘Tom Burke of Ours’; that’s Lever. And ‘Handy Andy.’ You *haven’t* read ‘Handy Andy’? But what a great deal you have to read yet.”

Robert admitted that such was the case. Miss Pye had got upon her subject, and Asquith drew her out. She was something of a new female type to him; but only so because he had long been unused to the society of English girls. Had he mentioned a book by George Eliot she would have told him that her mother didn’t approve of that writer, who was an atheist and immoral.

Later he found himself by Isabel. Her proximity was pleasant to him. He would have preferred just now to sit by her in silence, an glance at her face occasionally, but that was scarcely possible.

“You will let me hear from you when that business is over?” he said.

“I will. Remember it is not my function to send invitations for the wedding.”

“I suppose not.”

Somebody else drew near.

As they passed from the dining-room after breakfast next morning, Isabel said to Mrs. Stratton:

“Come to the boudoir; I have a letter I want to show you.”

The letter was this:

“Dear Mrs. Clarendon,

“I want to tell you in as few words as possible that my marriage is indefinitely postponed. It will not, in any event, take place before I complete my twenty-first year. My second purpose in writing to you is to ask your permission to go at once to London and live in Mr. Meres’ house. This is for purposes of study. I am unable to procure at Knightswell the materials I need. Will you oblige me with a reply as soon as you can?

“Faithfully yours,

“Ada Warren.”

“It does not in the very least surprise me,” observed Mrs. Stratton, smiling urbanely.

“I don’t think I could say that. I *am* surprised. I believed Ada would stick to a purpose through thick and thin.”

“My dear, she accepted that man in a moment of pique, and she has very wisely repented whilst there is time.”

Isabel was silent.

“And her wanting to go to London,” pursued the other. “It’s all perfectly clear. She’s ashamed of herself; she can’t face you.”

Isabel seated herself and mused, the letter on her lap. Her cheek had a flush of excitement, and her eyes were very bright.

“Look at this, too,” she said, with a laugh, taking from its envelope another letter she was holding. “From Mrs. Bruce Page. I wonder *she* is not ashamed of herself, I really do!”

“My dearest Mrs. Clarendon,” ran this epistle, “it would be a mercy if you would let me know what your latest news is about that boy. Do you hear from or of him? Has he done anything surprising yet? I shouldn’t a bit wonder if he does—I mean in this affair. He is capable of anything. Do let me know at once if you have any curious news either from him or Ada.”

“It looks as if she anticipated it,” said Mrs. Stratton.

“It does. It would be no great wonder if she proved to be at the bottom of it.”

“Of the postponement, or rupture, or whatever it is?”

Isabel nodded.

“But what shall you do immediately?”

“Nothing. What is there to do? Merely write and give her the permission she asks for.”

“I am really delighted at this!” Mrs. Stratton exclaimed.

“Why should you be delighted? I assure you it is nothing to me.”

“My dear, it is everything—you will tell Mr. Asquith?”

“I suppose so. It will annoy him.”

She reddened, and corrected herself.

“Nonsense, I didn’t mean to say that. I dare say he will take it very much as you do. But you will both be wrong, both be wrong.”

“Isabel, you are mysterious.”

“Am I?” she asked with a laugh, not a very joyous one.

“Yes, more mysterious than I like.”

“Then indeed it won’t be mysterious at all. It’s only in your imagination, Rose. Oh dear, oh dear!” she sighed, “this world is a hard one!”

“I wonder whether you will hear from Mr. Lacour?” Mrs. Stratton asked, after trying to read her friend’s face.

“I wonder,” said Isabel absently.

Their conversation soon came to an end. There was to be driving before lunch as the sky had cleared, and it was not till afternoon that Isabel had an opportunity of informing her cousin of the news she had received.

Robert heard it calmly.

“I really do not know whether to congratulate you or not,” he said, with meaning.

“At all events, you may congratulate Ada.”

“Probably. Do you stay here much longer?”

“I go at the end of the week, the day after to-morrow.”

“So soon?”

“Yes, Knightswell must not be left empty.”

They gazed at each other without definite expression.

## CHAPTER III

I shall be home on Saturday,” wrote Isabel, at the close of a letter addressed to Wood End. “I am writing to Mr. Vissian, to ask him to come and see me before his afternoon service on Sunday, as I want to speak with him of several things. Will *you* come at three? He will leave shortly after, and you—perhaps will not care to stay?”

She said nothing of the event which had hurried her return, neither did she mention it in her letter to the rector. Mr. Vissian called at the cottage on Friday.

“I have a message for you from Mrs. Clarendon,” he said. “She is returning, and will be glad to see you any time after three on Sunday. I shall be at the house between two and three myself—have to go specially—your audience will succeed mine.”

Kingcote smiled as he promised to obey the summons.

“We shall see you to-morrow as usual,” said Mr. Vissian, in going. “I *believe* I have got hold of something that will startle you. Nothing, nothing; merely the solution of a crux which has defied every Shakspearian critic hitherto. Don’t be too excited about it; it may prove a mare’s nest; *but*”—the rector half closed his eyes and nodded twice—“we shall see.”

He went off in his usual high spirits. Sundry Christmas bills had just reduced him to penury, but that was a care he did not allow to weigh upon him, for all that his black suit of daily wear cried shame upon him at the elbows—yet weaker points were happily concealed by pendent cloth. Had he not on his shelves the last year’s publications of the Early English Text Society, bound in halfcalf extra?

To his infinite annoyance, he waited in vain for Kingcote on Saturday evening. The discovery at which he had hinted, had become overnight a certainty; he was convinced that he had explained “the Lady of the Strachy!” (See, *loc. cit.*, the critical edition of *Twelfth Night*, which Mr. Vissian subsequently put forth—a work deserving more attention at the hands of Shakspearian scholars than it has received.)

“*What* can ail the man?” he exclaimed impatiently, as he kept coming forth from his study to Mrs. Vissian. “He never failed us before. If he only knew what I’ve got for him!”

But Kingcote did not appear, and Mr. Vissian only saw him on the morrow in Mrs. Clarendon’s drawing-room. Kingcote came in with a grave look, and shook hands with Isabel in silence.

“I hope you have come back quite restored,” he said, rather awkwardly, when it became incumbent upon him to speak. He was not good at acting.

“Why did you fail me last night?” inquired Mr. Vissian.

“I am very sorry. I was not well,” was the brief reply.

He seated himself and was mute. Isabel kept up a lively conversation with the rector, till the latter declared he would be late for church, and hurriedly made off. When he had closed the door behind him, Isabel rose softly, her face all joy; Kingcote moved to meet her, and she fell upon his neck.

“You are not well, dear?”

“That was only an excuse. How well *you* look, my beautiful!”

“You are glad to see me again?”

“Glad and sorry, for I have bad news to tell you.”

“You too have bad news?” she said anxiously.

“I, too?”

“Come and sit by me.”

They sat side by side.

“Oh, let it wait!” he whispered. “Forget both yours and mine for these few moments. Look at me; let me drink at your eyes. Speak, and call me by my name. I have only lived on the echoes of that voice. Where did you learn that music, Isabel? My pure-browed lady! Your head is like those which come before us in old songs, dark against gold tapestry, or looking from high castle-windows. You

should have lived when queens paced in moon-lit galleries, and heard below the poet softly singing to their beauty. Isabel! Is not that a sweet and queenly name?—and I may speak it.”

She listened, trembling with pleasure. Was not the world well lost for such worship? She all but forgot his mention of ill-hap, till the mute pain of his lips brought it back to her mind.

“What has happened, Bernard?”

“What I scarcely dare tell you. Let me kiss your lips once, and then move away and try to realise what it will be to leave you.”

“Leave me?”

“It has come at last. I have known that it must come, and yet I have closed my eyes against the certainty. I could not go to the Vissians’ last night because I was overcome with misery. In the morning I had heard from my sister that her husband is dead. She is helpless, without means of any kind, and her two children dependent upon her. I must go at once to London and—provide for them.”

“Provide for them? Has her husband left her nothing?”

“Not a coin. He was a man of business, and did badly; he has been ill for months, and they could not have lived but for money from me. It is good that he is dead. I had no more to give, unless I surrendered my independence. That of course I must do now, but for Mary and her children I can do it more easily. Her husband I disliked; association with him was impossible. He was without education, good of his kind perhaps, but—commercial. We only met once, and it was once too often.”

“But how could a sister of yours marry so?”

“Poor girl! I never understood it; but she was very young, and had known him some time. That was in Norwich, of course. She went off with him secretly, and they were married in London. Her mother would have nothing to do with them; at her death; what she would have left to Mary, came to me. It was trivial; I have more than repaid it.”

“Can his relations do nothing for her?”

“No. A brother of his, Mary tells me, has come, and will attend the funeral. But he has distinctly told her that he can give no help.”

Kingcote had drawn away a little; Isabel took and held his hand.

“Bernard, how can you support them?”

“Oh, for a time it doesn’t matter; I shall use my capital. Then I shall—work like others do, I suppose. I have had an easy life so long; it was sure to come to an end some day.”

“Why do you keep away from me? What does all this matter? Nothing has come between us, dear.”

His brows were heavy, and he could only look at her sadly. Isabel turned her head away, and dashed tears from her eyes.

“But you too have your ill news, you said?”

For answer she rose and fetched Ada’s letter. Bernard read it.

“Why ill news?” he asked, when he had brooded for a moment.

Isabel had not resumed her seat. She moved about in much agitation, and at length threw herself on her knees by him.

“It is something that I ought to have told you before,” she said. “It seemed, though, such an easy difficulty to overcome; I was so happy, and I would not think of anything in the way. I—” she hid her face against him—“I have lived beyond my income, and have had to borrow money—a large sum of money. I could not have done it, I think, unless it had seemed certain that I should marry some rich man,—though I had to insure my life, and there was my annuity. You know I have had only two thousand a year; it was so little for the way in which I lived. I have always been so thoughtless about money. I could not foresee this great happiness that has come to me. Do not think—Bernard, you won’t think that I should have ever married only because the man who asked me was rich,—I mean if I had never known you. You won’t think that? I have told you that I could never have brought myself

to that. Listen, the day before my accident, before I knew that you loved me, before my own love for you had become certain in my heart, Lord Winterset asked me to be his wife, and I—I refused.”

She had looked up pleadingly, but at the end hid her face again. Oh, it is so hard to a woman—nay, that is unjust, to a man also—to speak out the whole truth in self-accusation. Who ever yet did it? What penitent at the confessional? What votary in silent prayer? Maybe it is regard for the dignity of human nature which chains the tongue, that dignity which it costs so much to support, which we so often feel to be a name only, or the shadow of a name.

Kingcote could say nothing.

“Still, listen to me, my dearest! I could not let that stand between us. The debt would have to be paid some day, and when I *knew* who my husband was to be, there was only one way of meeting it. I should have asked Ada,” her voice sank, “to give me the money. She will be rich, very rich; she could easily give me that. She is good-hearted, I know, though we have never been able to love each other. Before her marriage I would have asked her to give it me, and she would not have refused; it would have been her first act when the property became hers.”

He laid his hand upon her bowed head, and stroked it tenderly; then he raised her to sit by him again.

“I am so glad you have told me that,” he said, smiling very kindly. “Let it be the end of your trouble. Ada will still give you the money when she is of age.”

She kept a long silence before her next words, then looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Are we to be parted so long?”

“But our marriage as yet was in any case impossible. It was bad enough to ask you to share poverty with me; you could not support my sister and her children.”

“Would not your own income have been sufficient for them? We should have had my money.”

“Even if it were enough—barely enough—at present, it could not possibly be so as the boys grow up. It is very hard to think of her living in such a poor and joyless way in those hateful surroundings. I dread to imagine her state now. She will have grown used to a mean, sordid life; her refinement will all be gone; the poisonous air of working London will have infected her. I shall feel shame that she is my sister.”

“That will soon be altered,” Isabel said comfortingly. “You will take her into new scenes. Your society will help her. Who would not grow gentle and refined in your presence? Oh, my love, my love!”

Passionate distress overcame her; she clung to him and wept silently. Kingcote was pale-and-woe-stricken; the future loomed hideous before him; he found it hard to feign to himself the gleaming of one far-off star of hope.

“Bernard!”

She raised her head, and looked into his eyes with a passion-glow of purpose.

“If I can obtain that money at once—borrow it, perhaps, from some one who will take my mere word to be repaid when Ada is of age—yes, yes, I could—will you marry me, and let us trust to the future? You are clever—you know so much—you will find some position, sooner or later. Who knows? Your sister may marry again. Will you take my hand, and let us face everything together?”

He was shaken from head to foot with the struggle her words excited. With her arms clinging thus around him, in a moment he would yield—and there was a voice within which whispered hoarsely that to yield would be to tempt a fearful fate. What might he not be led to do next? What impossible sacrifice of self-respect might not become inevitable? He had no jot of faith in his own power to make a future. Imagine this woman some day cooling in her love, and speaking with her pale face unutterable things. She would have a right to reproach him, and a reproach divined would drive him to frenzy. She was weak—he would not shape that into words, but the knowledge was in his heart. After all the features of her life that she had revealed to him, how could he dare the step she tempted him to? His love for her was so sincere that to place her in a position which might touch him with

shame on her behalf was in thought a horror. Of whom would she borrow a large sum of money on her bare word? That, to begin with, was impossible; think what it would cost her. Before, all was different. Her income and his put together did not in truth seem to him sad poverty; for her love's sake she would have contented herself. But the new responsibilities—and then this latest revelation—

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