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The New Warden

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE WARDEN'S LODGINGS

The Founders and the Benefactors of Oxford, Princes, wealthy priests, patriotic gentlemen, noble ladies with a taste for learning; any of these as they travelled along the high road, leaving behind them pastures, woods and river, and halted at the gates of the grey sacred city, had they been in melancholy mood, might have pictured to themselves all possible disasters by fire and by siege that could mar this garnered glory of spiritual effort and pious memory. Fire and siege were the disasters of the old days. But a new age has it own disasters – disasters undreamed of in the old days, and none of these lovers of Oxford as they entered that fair city, ever could have foretold that in time to come Oxford would become enclosed and well-nigh stifled by the peaceful encroachment of an endless ocean of friendly red brick, lapping to its very walls.

The wonder is that Oxford still exists, for the free jerry-builder

of free England, with his natural right to spoil a landscape or to destroy the beauty of an ancient treasure house, might have forced his cheap villas into the very heart of the city; might have propped his shameless bricks, for the use of Don and of shopkeeper, against the august grey college walls: he might even have insulted and defaced that majestic street whose towers and spires dream above the battlemented roofs and latticed windows of a more artistic age.

But why didn't he? Why didn't he, clothed in the sanctity of cheapness, desecrate the inner shrine?

The Wardens and the Bursars of colleges could tell us much, but the stranger and the pilgrim, coming to worship, feel as if there must have flashed into being some sudden Hand from Nowhere and a commanding Voice saying – "Thus far shalt thou come and no farther," so that the accursed jerry-builder (under the impression that he was moved by some financial reasons of his own) must have obediently picked up his little bag of tools and trotted off to destroy some other place.

Anyhow the real Oxford has been spared – but it is like a fair mystic gem in a coarse setting. No green fields and no rustling woods lead the lover of Oxford gently to her walls.

The Beauty of England lies there – ringed about with a desolation of ugliness – for ever. Still she is there.

Oxford has never been merely a city of learning, it has been a fighting city.

In the twelfth century it sheltered Matilda in that terrible,

barbaric struggle of young England.

In the seventeenth century it was a city in arms for the Stuarts. But these were civil wars. Now in the twentieth century Oxford has risen like one man, like Galahad – youthful and knightly – urgent at the Call of Freedom and the Rights of Nations.

And this Oxford is filled with the "sound of the forging of weapons," the desk has become a couch for the wounded, the air is full of the wings of war.

In this Oxford where the black gown has been laid aside and young men hurry to and fro in the dress of the battle-field – in this Oxford no man walked at times more heavily, feeling the grief that cannot be made articulate, than did the Warden of King's College as he went about his work, a lonely man, without wife or child and with poignant memories of the very blossom of young manhood plucked from his hand and gone for ever.

And of the men who passed under his college gates and through the ivy-clad quadrangles, most were strangers – coming and going – learning the arts of war – busy under orders, and the few, a poor remnant of academic youth – foreigners or weaklings. And he, the Warden himself, felt himself almost a stranger – for into his life had surged new thoughts, anxious fears and ambitious hopes – for England, the England of the years to come – an England rising up from her desolation and her mourning and striving to become greater, more splendid and more spiritual than she had been before.

It was a late October afternoon in 1916 and the last rays

of autumn sunshine fell through the drawing-room windows of the Warden's lodgings. These rays of sunshine lit up a notable portrait over the stone fireplace. The portrait was of a Warden of the eighteenth century; a fine fleshy face it was, full of the splendid noisy paganism of his time. You can stand where you will in the room, but you cannot escape the sardonic stare that comes from his relentless, wide-open, luminous eyes. He seems as if he challenged you to stop and listen to the secret of his double life – the life of a scholar and divine of easy morals. Words seemed actually upon his lips, thoughts glowing in his eyes – and yet – there is silence.

There was only one person in the room, a tall vigorous woman, still handsome in spite of middle age, and she was looking up at the portrait with her hands clasped behind her back. She was not thinking of the portrait – her thoughts were too intent on something else. Her thoughts indeed had nothing to do with the past – they were about the future, the future of the new Warden, Dr. Middleton, the future of this only brother of hers whom she loved more than anyone in the world – except her own husband; a brother more than ten years younger than herself, to whom she had been a mother till she married and who remained in her eyes a sort of son, all the more precious to her because children had been denied her.

She had come at her brother's call to arrange his new home for him. She had arranged everything with sober economy, because Oxford was mourning. She had retained all that she

found endurable of the late Warden's. And now she turned round and looked on her handiwork.

The room wore an air of comfort, it was devoid of all distressful knick-knacks and it was arranged as were French "Salons" of the time of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse for conversation, for groups of talkers, for books and papers; the litter of culture. It was a drawing-room for scholars in their leisure moments and for women to whom they could talk. But there was no complaisance in Lady Dashwood's face as she looked at her brother's drawing-room, just because her thoughts were deeply occupied with his future. What was his future to be like? What was in store for him? And these thoughts led her to give expression to a sudden outspoken remark – unflattering to that future.

"And now, what woman is going to become mistress of this room?"

Lady Dashwood's voice had a harshness in it that startled even herself. "What woman is going to reign here?" she went on, as if daring herself to be gentle and resigned. After she had looked round the room her eye rested upon the portrait over the mantelpiece. He looked as if he had heard her speak and stared back at her with his large persistent selfish eyes – full of cynical wonder. But he remained silent. These were times that he did not understand – but he observed!

"It's on Jim's conscience that he *must* marry, now that men are so scarce. He's obsessed with the idea," continued Lady

Dashwood, thinking to herself. "And being like all really good and great men – absolutely helpless – he is prepared to marry any fool who is presented to him." Then she added, "Any fool – or worse!"

"And," she went on, speaking angrily to herself, "knowing that he is helpless – I stupidly go and introduce into this house, a silly girl with a pretty face whose object in coming is to be – Mrs. Middleton."

Lady Dashwood was mentally lashing herself for this stupidity.

"I go and actually put her in his way – at least," she added swiftly, "I allow her mother to bring her and force her upon us and leave her – for the purpose of entrapping him – and so – I've risked his future! And yet," she went on as her self-accusation became too painful, "I never dreamt that he would think of a girl so young – as eighteen – and he forty – and full of thoughts about the future of Oxford – and the New World. Somehow I imagined some pushing female of thirty would pretend to sympathise with his aspirations and marry him: I never supposed – But I ought to have supposed! It was my business to suppose. Here have I left my husband alone, when he hates being alone, for a whole month, in order to put Jim straight – and then I go and 'don't suppose' – I'm more than a fool – I'm – " The right word did not come to her mind.

Here Lady Dashwood's indignation against herself made the blood tingle hotly in her hands and face. She was by nature calm,

but this afternoon she was excited. She mentally pictured the Warden – just when there was so much for him to do – wasting his time by figuring as a sacrifice upon the Altar of a foolish Marriage. She saw the knife at his throat – she saw his blood flow.

At this moment the door opened and the old butler, who had served other Wardens and who had been retained along with the best furniture as a matter of course, came into the room and handed a telegram to Lady Dashwood.

She tore open the envelope and read the paper: "Arrive this evening – about seven. May."

"Thank – !" exclaimed Lady Dashwood – and then she suddenly paused, for she met the old thoughtful eye of Robinson.

"Yes!" she remarked irrelevantly. Then she folded the paper. "There is no answer," she said. "When you've taken the tea away – please tell Mrs. Robinson that quite unexpectedly Mrs. Jack Dashwood is arriving at seven. She must have the blue room – there isn't another one ready. Don't let in any callers for me, Robinson."

All that concerned the Warden's lodgings concerned Robinson. Oxford – to Robinson meant King's College. He had "heard tell" of "other colleges"; in fact he had passed them by and had seen "other college" porters standing about at their entrance doors as if they actually were part of Oxford. Robinson felt about the other colleges somewhat as the old-fashioned Evangelical felt about the godless, unmanageable, tangled, nameless rabble

of humanity (observe the little "h") who were not elected. The "Elect" being a small convenient Body of which he was a member.

King's was the "Elect" and Robinson was an indispensable member of it.

Robinson went downstairs with his orders, which, dropping like a pebble into the pool of the servants' quarters, started a quiet expanding ripple to the upper floor, reaching at last to the blue bedroom.

Alone in the drawing-room Lady Dashwood was able to complete her exclamatory remark that Robinson's solemn eye had checked.

"Thank Heaven!" she said, and she said it again more than once. She laughed even and opened the telegram again and re-read it for the pure pleasure of seeing the words. "Arrive this evening."

"I've risked Jim's life – and now I've saved it." Then Lady Dashwood began to think carefully. There was no train arriving at seven from Malvern – but there was one arriving at six and one at seven fifteen. Anyhow May was coming. Lady Dashwood actually laughed with triumph and said – "May is coming —*that* for 'Belinda and Co.'!"

"Did you speak to me, Lady Dashwood?" asked a girlish voice, and Lady Dashwood turned swiftly at the sound and saw just within the doorway a girlish figure, a pretty face with dark hair and large wandering eyes.

"No, Gwen!" said Lady Dashwood. "I didn't know you were there – " and again she folded the telegram and her features resumed their normal calm. With that folded paper in her hand she could look composedly now at that pretty face and slight figure. If she had made a criminal blunder she had – though she didn't deserve it – been able to rectify the blunder. May Dashwood was coming! Again: "*That* for Belinda and Co.!"

The girl came forward and looked round the room. She held two books in her hand, one the Warden had lent her on her arrival – a short guide to Oxford. She was still going about with it gazing earnestly at the print from time to time in bird-like fashion.

"Mrs. Jack Dashwood is arriving this afternoon," said Lady Dashwood as she moved towards the door.

"Oh," said Gwen, and she stood still in the glow of the windows, her two books conspicuous in her hand. She looked at the nearest low easy-chair and dropped into it, propped one book on her knee and opened the other at random. Then she gazed down at the page she had opened and then looked round the room at Lady Dashwood, keenly aware that she was a beautiful young girl looking at an elderly woman.

"Mrs. Dashwood is my husband's niece by marriage," said Lady Dashwood.

"Oh, yes," said Gwen, who would have been more interested if the subject of the conversation had been a man and not a woman.

"You don't happen to know if the Warden has come back?" asked Lady Dashwood as she moved to the door.

"He is back," said Gwen, and a slightly deeper colour came into her cheeks and spread on to the creamy whiteness of her slender neck.

"In his library?" asked Lady Dashwood, stopping short and listening for the reply.

"Yes!" said Gwen, and then she added: "He has lent me another book." Here she fingered the book on her knee. "A book about the – what-you-may-call-'ems of King's, I'm sorry but I can't remember. We were talking about them at lunch – a word like 'jumps'!"

If a man had been present Gwen would have dimpled and demanded sympathy with large lingering glances; she would have demanded sympathy and approbation for not knowing the right word and only being able to suggest "jumps."

One thing Gwen had already learned: that men are kinder in their criticism than women! It was priceless knowledge.

"Founders, I suppose you mean," said Lady Dashwood and she opened the door. "Never mind," she said to herself as she closed the door behind her. "Never mind – May is coming – 'Jumps!' What a self-satisfied little monkey the girl is!"

At the head of the staircase it was rather dark and Lady Dashwood put on the lights. Immediately at right angles to the drawing-room door two or three steps led up to a corridor that ran over the premises of the College porter. In this corridor were three bedrooms looking upon the street, bedrooms occupied by Lady Dashwood and by Gwendolen Scott, and the third

room, the blue room, about to be occupied by Mrs. Dashwood. Lady Dashwood passed the corridor steps, passed the head of the staircase, and went towards a curtained door. This was the Warden's bedroom. Beyond was his library door. At this door beyond, she knocked.

An agreeable voice answered her knock. She went in. The library was a noble room. Opposite the door was a wide, high latticed window, hung with heavy curtains and looking on to the Entrance Court. To the right was a great fireplace with a small high window on each side of it. On the left hand the walls were lined with books – and a great winged book-case stood out from the wall, like a screen sheltering the door which Lady Dashwood entered. Over the door was the portrait of a Cardinal once a member of King's. Over the mantelpiece was a large engraving of King's as it was in the sixteenth century. At a desk in the middle of the room sat the Warden with his back to the fire and his face towards the serried array of books. He was just turning up a reading-lamp – for he always read and wrote by lamplight.

"Robinson hasn't drawn your curtains," said Lady Dashwood.

"I am going to draw them – he came in too soon," said the Warden, without moving from his seat. His face was lit up by the flame of the lamp which he was staring at intently. There was just a faint sprinkling of grey in his brown hair, but on the regular features there was almost no trace of age.

"You have given Gwen another book to read," said Lady Dashwood coming up to the writing-table.

The Warden raised his eyes very slowly to hers. His eyes were peculiar. They were very narrow and blue, seeming to reflect little. On the other hand, they seemed to absorb everything. He moved them very slowly as if he were adjusting a photographic apparatus.

"Yes," he said.

"You might just as well, my dear, hand out a volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* to the sparrows in your garden," said his sister.

The Warden made no reply, he merely moved the lamp very slightly nearer to the writing pad in front of him.

He had a stored-up memory of pink cheeks, a pure curve of chin and neck, a dark curl by the ear; objects young and graceful and gradually absorbed by those narrow eyes and stored in the brain. He also had memories less pleasant of the slighting way in which once or twice his sister had spoken of "Belinda and Co.," meaning by that the mother of this pretty piece of pretty girlhood, and the girl herself.

"She tries hard to read because we expect her to," continued Lady Dashwood. "If she had her own way she would throw the books into the fire, as tiresome stodge."

The Warden was listening with an averted face and now he remarked —

"Did you come in, Lena, to tell me this?"

When the Warden was annoyed there was in his voice and in his manner a "something" which many people called

"formidable." As Lady Dashwood stood looking down at him, there flashed into her mind a scene of long ago, where the Warden, then an undergraduate, had (for a joke at a party in his rooms) induced by suggestion a very small weak man with peaceful principles to insist on fighting the Stroke of the college Eight, a man over six feet and broad in proportion. She remembered how she had laughed, and yet how she made her brother promise not to exercise that power again. Probably he had completely forgotten the incident. Why! it was nearly eighteen years ago, nearly nineteen; and here was James Middleton no longer an undergraduate but the Warden! Lady Dashwood bent over him smiling and laid her solid motherly hand upon his head. "Oh, dear, how time passes!" she said. "Jim, you are such a sweet lamb. No, I didn't come to tell you that. I came to ask you if you were going to dine with us this evening?"

"Yes," said the Warden. "Why?" and he now looked round at his sister without a trace of irritability and smiled.

"Because Mrs. Jack Dashwood is coming here. I didn't mention it before. Well, the fact is she happens to have a few days' rest from her work in London. She is with some relative in Malvern and coming on here this afternoon."

"Mrs. Jack Dashwood!" repeated the Warden with evident indifference.

"Jack Dashwood's widow. You remember my John's nephew Jack? Poor Jack who was killed at Mons!"

Yes, the Warden remembered, and his face clouded as it

always did when war was mentioned.

"May and he were engaged as boy and girl – and I think she stuck to it – because she thought she was in honour bound. Some women are like that – precious few; and some men."

The Warden listened without remark.

"And I am just going to telephone to Mr. Boreham," said Lady Dashwood, "to ask him to come in to dinner to meet her!"

"Boreham!" groaned the Warden, and he took up his pen from the table.

"I'm so sorry," said Lady Dashwood, "but he used to know May Dashwood, so we must ask him, and I thought it better to get him over at once and have done with it."

"Perhaps so," said the Warden, and he stretched out his left hand for paper. "Only – one never has done – with Boreham."

"Poor old Jim!" said Lady Dashwood, "and now, dear, you can get back to your book," and she moved away.

"Book!" grumbled the Warden. "It's business I have to do; and anyhow I don't see how anyone can write books now! Except prophecies of the future, admonitions, sketches of possible policies, heart-searchings."

Lady Dashwood moved away. "Well, that's what you're doing, dear," she said.

"I don't know," said the Warden gloomily, and he reached out his hand, pulling towards him some papers. "One seems to be at the beginning of things."

Lady Dashwood closed the door softly behind her.

"He's perplexed," she said to herself. "He is perplexed – not merely because we are at 'the beginning of things,' but because – I have been a fool and – " She did not finish the sentence. She went up early to her room and dressed for dinner.

It was impossible to be certain when May would come, so it would be better to get dressed and have the time clear. May's arrival was serious business – so serious that Lady Dashwood shuddered at the mere thought that it was by a mere stroke of extraordinary luck that she could come and would come! If May came by the six train she would arrive before seven.

But seven o'clock struck and May had not arrived. She might arrive about eight o'clock. Lady Dashwood, who was already dressed, gave orders that dinner was to be put off for twenty minutes, and then she telephoned this news to Mr. Boreham and sent in a message to the Warden. But she quite forgot to tell Gwen that dinner was to be later. Gwen had gone upstairs early to dress for dinner, for she was one of those individuals who take a long time to do the simplest thing. This omission on the part of Lady Dashwood, trifling as it seemed, had far-reaching consequences – consequences that were not foreseen by her. She sat in the drawing-room actively occupied in imagining obstacles that might prevent May Dashwood from keeping the promise in her telegram: railway accidents, taxi accidents, the unexpected sudden deaths of relatives. As she sat absorbed in these wholly unnecessary and exhausting speculations, the door opened and she heard Robinson's quavering voice make the

delicious announcement, "Mrs. Dashwood!"

CHAPTER II
MORAL SUPPORT

May Dashwood's features were not faultless. For instance, her determined little nose was rather short and just a trifle retroussé and her eyebrows sometimes looked a little surprised. Her great charm lay not in her clear complexion and her bright brown hair, admirable as they were, but in her full expressive grey eyes, and when she smiled, it was not the toothy smile of professional gaiety, but a subtle, archly animated and sympathetic smile; so that both men and women who were once smiled at by her, immediately felt the necessity of being smiled at again!

May was still dressed in mourning, very plainly, and she wore no furs. She came into the room and looked round her.

"May!" exclaimed Lady Dashwood.

"I thought you were ill, Aunt Lena!" said May amazed at the sight of Lady Dashwood, dressed for dinner and apparently in robust health.

"I *am* ill," exclaimed Lady Dashwood, and she tapped her forehead. "I'm ill here," and she advanced to meet her niece with open arms.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Dashwood, hastening up to her aunt.

"I'm still partially sane, May – but – if you hadn't come!" said Lady Dashwood, kissing her niece on both cheeks. She did not

finish her sentence.

Mrs. Dashwood put both hands on her aunt's shoulders and examined her face carefully.

"Yes, I see you're quite sane, Aunt Lena."

"Will you minister to a mind – not actually diseased but oppressed by a consuming worry?" asked Lady Dashwood earnestly. "Don't think I'm a humbug – I need you much more, just now, than if I'd been merely ill – with a bilious attack, say. You've saved my life! I wish I could explain – but it is difficult to explain – sometimes."

"I'm glad I've saved your life," said May, and she smiled her peculiar smile.

"I see victory – the battle won – already," said Lady Dashwood, looking at her intently. "I wish I could explain – "

"Let it ooze out, Aunt Lena. I can stay for three days – if you want – if I can really do anything for you – "

"Can't you stay a week?" asked Lady Dashwood. "May, I'm not joking. I want your presence badly – can't you spare the time? Relieve my mind, dear, at once, by telling me you can!"

Lady Dashwood's face suddenly became puckered and her voice was so urgent that May's smile died away.

"If it is really important I'll stay a week. Nothing wrong about you – or – Uncle John?" May looked into her aunt's eyes.

"No!" said Lady Dashwood. "John doesn't like my being away. An old soldier has much to make him sad now, but no – " Then she added in an undertone, "Jim …" and she stared into her

niece's face.

Under the portrait of that bold, handsome, unscrupulous Warden of King's a faithful clock ticked to the passing of time. The time it showed now was twenty minutes to eight. Both ladies in silence had turned to the fire and they were now both standing each with one foot on the fender and were looking up at the portrait and not at the clock. Neither of them, however, thought of the portrait. They merely looked at it – as one must look at something.

"Jim," sighed Lady Dashwood. "You don't know him, May."

"Is it he who is ill?" asked May.

"He's not ill. He is terribly depressed at times because so many of his old pupils are gone – for ever. But it's not that, not that that I mean. You know what learned men are, May?" Lady Dashwood did not ask a question, she was making an assertion.

May Dashwood still gazed at the portrait but now she lowered her eyelids, looking critically through the narrowed space with her grey eyes.

"No, I don't know what learned men are," she replied very slowly. "I have met so few."

"Jim has taken – " and again Lady Dashwood hesitated.

"Not to Eau Perrier?" almost whispered Mrs. Dashwood.

"Certainly not," exclaimed Lady Dashwood. "I don't think he has touched alcohol since the War. It's nothing so elementary as that. I feel as if I were treacherous in talking about it – and yet I must talk about it – because you have to help me. A really learned

man is so – "

"Do you mean that he knows all about Julius Cæsar," said May, "and nothing about himself?"

"I shouldn't mind that so much," said the elder lady, grasping eagerly at this introduction to an analysis of the learned man. "I had better blurt it all out, May. Well – he knows nothing about women – " Lady Dashwood spoke with angry emphasis, but in a whisper.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Dashwood, and now she stared deeply at one particular block of wood that was spitting quietly at the attacking flames. She raised her arm and laid her hand on her aunt Lena's shoulder. Then she squeezed the shoulder slightly as if to gently squeeze out a little more information.

"Jim is – I'm not sure – but I'm suspicious – on the verge of getting into a mess," said her aunt still in a low voice.

"Ah!" said May again. "With some woman?"

"All perfectly proper," said Lady Dashwood, "but – oh, May – it's so unspeakably dreary and desolating."

"Much older than he is?" asked May softly, with an emphasis on "much."

"Very much younger," said Lady Dashwood. "Only eighteen!"

"Not nice then?" asked May again softly.

"Not anything – except pretty – and" – here Lady Dashwood had a strident bitterness in her voice – "and – she has a mother."

"Ah!" said May.

"You know Lady Belinda Scott?" asked Lady Dashwood.

May Dashwood moved her head in assent. "Not having enough money for everything one wants is the root of all evil?" she said imitating somebody.

"Belinda exactly! And all that you and I believe worth having in life – is no more to her – than to – to a monkey up a tree!"

Mrs. Dashwood spoke thoughtfully. "We've come from monkeys and Lady Belinda thinks a great deal of her ancestry."

"Then you understand why I'm anxious? You can imagine – "

May moved her head in response, and then she suddenly turned her face towards her aunt and said in the same voice in which she had imitated Belinda before —

"If dull people like to be dull, it's no credit to 'em!"

Lady Dashwood laughed, but it was a hard bitter laugh.

"Oh, May, you understand. Well, for the twenty-four hours that Belinda was here, she was on her best behaviour. You see, she had plans! You know her habit of sponging for weeks on people – she finds herself appreciated by the 'Nouveaux Riches.' Her title appeals to them. Well, Belinda has never made a home for her one child – not she!"

Mrs. Dashwood's lips moved. "Poor child!" she said softly, and there was something in her voice that made Lady Dashwood aware of what she had momentarily forgotten in her excitement, that the arm resting on her shoulder was the arm of a woman not yet thirty, whose home had suddenly vanished. It had been riddled with bullets and left to die at the retreat from Mons.

Lady Dashwood fell into a sudden silence.

"Go on, dear Aunt Lena," said May Dashwood.

"Well, dear," said Lady Dashwood, drawing in a deep breath, "Linda got wind of my coming here to put Jim straight and she pounced down upon me like a vulture, with Gwen, asked herself for one night, and then talked of 'old days, etc.,' and how she longed for Gwen to see something of our 'old-world city.' So she simply made me keep the child for 'a couple of days,' then 'a week,' and then 'ten days' – and how could I turn the child out of doors? And so – I gave in – like a fool!" Then, after a pause, Lady Dashwood exclaimed – "Imagine Belinda as Jim's mother-in-law!"

"But why should she be?" asked May.

"That's the point. Belinda would prefer an American Wall Street man as a son-in-law or a Scotch Whisky Merchant, but they're not so easily got – it's a case of get what you can. So Jim is to be sacrificed."

"But why?" persisted May quietly.

"Why, because – although Jim has seen Belinda and heard her hard false voice, he doesn't see what she is. He is too responsible to imagine Belindas and too clever to imagine Gwens. Gwen is very pretty!"

May looked again into the fire.

"Now do you see what a weak fool I've been?" asked Lady Dashwood fiercely.

"Lady Belinda will bleed him," said May.

"When Belinda is Jim's mother-in-law, he'll have to pay for

everything – even for her funeral!"

"Wouldn't her funeral expenses be cheap at any price?" asked May.

"They would," said Lady Dashwood. "How are we to kill her off? She'll live – for ever!"

Then Mrs. Dashwood seemed to meditate briefly but very deeply, and at the end of her short silence she asked —

"And where do I come in, Aunt Lena? What can I do for you?"

Lady Dashwood looked a little startled.

What May had actually got to do was: well, not to do anything but just to be sweet and amusing as she always was. She had got to show the Warden what a charming woman was like. And the rest, he had to do. He had to be fascinated! Lady Dashwood could see a vision of Gwen and her boxes going safely away from Oxford – even the name of Scott disappearing altogether from the Warden's recollection.

But after that, what would happen? May too would have to go away. She was still mourning for her husband – still dreaming at night of that awful sudden news from France. May would, of course, go back to her work and leave the Warden to – well – anything in the wide world was better than "Belinda and Co." And it was this certainty that anything was better than Belinda and Co., this passionate conviction, that had filled Lady Dashwood's mind – to the exclusion of all other things.

It had not occurred to her that May would ask the definite question, "What am I to do?" It was an awkward question.

"What I want you to do," said Lady Dashwood, speaking slowly, while she swiftly sought in her mind for an answer that would be truthful and yet – inoffensive. "Why, May, I want you to give me your moral support."

May looked away from the fire and contemplated the point of her boot, and then she looked at the point of Lady Dashwood's shoe – they were both on the fender rim side by side – May's right boot, Lady Dashwood's left shoe.

"Your moral support," repeated Lady Dashwood. "Well, then you stay a week. Many, many thanks. To-night I shall sleep well."

Lady Dashwood was conscious that "moral support" did not quite serve the purpose she wanted, she had not quite got hold of the right words.

May's profile was absolutely in repose, but Lady Dashwood could feel that she was pondering over that expression "moral support." So Lady Dashwood was driven to repeat it once more. "Moral support," she said very firmly. "Your moral support is what I want, dear May."

They had not heard the drawing-room door open, but they heard it close although it was done softly, and both ladies turned away from the fire.

Gwendolen Scott had come in and was walking towards them, dressed in white and looking very self-conscious and pretty.

"But you haven't told me," said Mrs. Dashwood tactfully, as if merely continuing their talk, "who that portrait represents?"

"Oh, an old Warden," replied Lady Dashwood indifferently.

"Moral support" or not – the compact had been made. May was pledged for the week. All was well! Lady Dashwood could look at Gwen now with an easy, even an affectionate smile. "Gwen, let me introduce you to Mrs. Jack Dashwood," she said.

Gwen had expected Mrs. Dashwood to be an elderly relative of the family who would not introduce any new element into the Warden's little household. She had not for a moment anticipated *this*! It was disconcerting. Gwen was very much afraid of clever women, they moved and looked and spoke as if they had been given a key "to the situation," though what that key was and what that situation exactly was Gwen did not quite grasp.

Even the way in which Mrs. Dashwood put her hand out for a scarf she had thrown on to a chair; the way she moved her feet, moved her head; the way her plain black dress and the long plain coat hung about her, her manner of looking at Gwen and accepting her as a person whom she was about to know, all this mysterious "cachet" of her personality – made Gwen uneasy. Besides this elegant woman was not exactly elderly – about twenty-eight perhaps. Gwen was very much disconcerted at this unexpected complication at the Lodgings – her life had been for the last few months since she left school in July, crowded with difficulties.

"I don't think I want that man to speak," said Mrs. Dashwood, turning her head to look back at the portrait.

"What a funny thing to say!" thought Gwen, about a mere portrait, and she sniggled a little. "He's got a ghost," she said

aloud. "Hasn't he, Lady Dashwood?"

"No," said Lady Dashwood briefly. "He hasn't got a ghost. The college has got a ghost – "

"Oh, yes," said Gwen, "I mean that, of course."

"If the ghost is – all that remains of the gentleman over the fireplace," said Mrs. Dashwood, "I hope he doesn't appear often." She was still glancing back at the portrait.

"Isn't it exciting?" said Gwen. "The ghost appears whenever anything is going to happen – "

"My dear Gwen," said Lady Dashwood, "in that case the ghost might as well bring his bag and baggage and remain here."

"What sort of ghost?" asked Mrs. Dashwood.

"Oh, only an eighteenth-century ghost – the ghost of the college barber," said Lady Dashwood. "When that man was Warden, the college barber went and cut his throat in the Warden's Library."

"What for?" asked Mrs. Dashwood simply.

"Because the Warden insisted on his doing the Fellows' hair in the new elaborate style of the period – on his old wages."

Mrs. Dashwood pondered, still looking at the portrait.

"I should have cut the Warden's throat – not my own," she said, "if I had, on my old wages, to curl and crimp instead of merely putting a bowl on the gentlemen's heads and snipping round."

"But he had his revenge," said Gwen eagerly, "he comes and shows himself in the Library when a Warden dies."

Lady Dashwood had not during these last few minutes been

really thinking of the Warden or of the college barber, nor of his ghost. She was thinking that it was characteristic of Gwen to be excited by and interested in a silly ghost story – and it was equally characteristic of her to be unable to tell the story correctly.

"He is supposed to appear in the Library when anything disastrous is going to happen to a Warden," she said, and no sooner were the words out of her mouth than she paused and began thinking of what she was saying. "Anything disastrous to a Warden!" She had not thought of the matter before – Jim was now Warden! Anything disastrous! A marriage may be a disaster. Death is not so disastrous as utter disappointment with life and the pain of an empty heart!

"Come along, May," she said, trying to suppress a shiver that went through her frame. "Come along, May. Goodness gracious, it's nearly eight o'clock and we are going to dine at eight fifteen!"

"I can dress in two shakes," said May Dashwood.

"I've asked Mr. Boreham," said Lady Dashwood, pushing her niece gently before her towards the door and blessing her – in her under-thoughts ("Bless you, May, dear dear May!"). "He talked so much about you the other day," she went on aloud, "that when I got your wire – I felt bound to ask him – I hope you don't mind."

"Nobody does mind Mr. Boreham," said May. "I haven't seen him – for years."

"You know his aunt left him Chartcote, so he has taken to haunting Oxford for the last three months. Talk of ghosts – "

Then the door closed behind the two ladies and Gwen was

left alone in the drawing-room. She went up to the clock. It was striking eight. Fifteen minutes and nothing to do! She would go and see if there were any letters. She went outside. Letters by the first post and by the last post were all placed on a table at the head of the staircase. Gwen went and looked at the table. Letters there were, all for the Warden! No! there was one for her, from her mother. She opened it nervously. Was it a scolding about losing that umbrella? Gwen began to read:

"My dear Gwen,

"I hope you understand that Lady Dashwood will keep you till the 3rd. You don't mention the Warden! Does that mean that you are making no progress in that direction? Perhaps taking no trouble!

"The question is, where you will go on the 3rd?"

Here Gwen's heart gave a thump of alarm and dismay.

"It is all off with your cousin Bridget. She writes that she can't have you, because she has to be in town unexpectedly. This is only an excuse. I am disappointed but not surprised, after that record behaviour to me when the war broke out and after promising that I should be in her show in France, and then backing out of it. Exactly why, I found out only yesterday! You remember that General X. had actually to separate two of the 'angels' that were flitting about on their work of mercy and had come to blows over it. Well, one of the two was your cousin Bridget. That didn't get photographed in the papers. It would have looked sweet. But now I'm going to give you a scolding. Bridget did get wind

of your muddling about at the Ringwood's little hospital this summer, and spending all your time and energy on a man who I told you was no use. What's the good of talking any more about it? I've talked till I'm blue – and yet you will no doubt go and do the same thing again.

"I ought not to have to tell you that if you do come across any stray Undergraduates, don't go for them. Nothing will come of it. Try and keep this in your noddle. Go for Dr. Middleton – men of that age are often silliest about girls – and don't simply go mooning along. Then why did you go and lose your umbrella? You have nothing in this wide world to think of but to keep yourself and your baggage together.

"It's the second you have lost this year. I can't afford another. You must 'borrow' one. Your new winter rig-out is more than I can afford. I'm being dunned for bills that have only run two years. Why can't I make you realise all this? What is the matter with you? Give the maid who waits on you half a crown, nothing to the butler. Lady D. is sure to see you off – and you can leave the taxi to her. Leave your laundry bill at the back of a drawer – as if you had mislaid it. I will send you a P.O. for your ticket to Stow."

Here Gwen made a pause, for her heart was thumping loudly.

"There's nothing for it but to go to Nana's cottage at Stow for the moment. I know it's beastly dull for you – but it's partly your own fault that you are to have a dose of Stow. I'm full up for two months and more, but I'll see what I can do for you at once. I am writing to Mrs. Greenleafe Potten, to ask her if she will have you for a week on Monday, but I'm

afraid she won't. At Stow you won't need anything but a few stamps and a penny for Sunday collection. I've written to Nana. She only charges me ten shillings a week for you. She will mend up your clothes and make two or three blouses for you into the bargain. Don't attempt to help her. They must be done properly. Get on with that flannelette frock for the Serb relief. Address me still here.

"Your very loving,

"Mother."

Nana's cottage at Stow! Thatch smelling of the November rains; a stuffy little parlour with a smoky fire. Forlorn trees outside shedding their last leaves into the ditch at the side of the lane. Her old nurse, nearly stone deaf, as her sole companion.

Gwen felt her knees trembling under her. Her eyes smarted and a great sob came into her throat. She had no home. Nobody wanted her!

CHAPTER III
PASSIONATE PITY

A tear fell upon the envelope in her hand, and one fell upon the red carpet under her feet. She must try and not cry, crying made one ugly. She must go to her room as quickly as she could.

Then came noiselessly out from the curtained door at Gwen's right hand the figure of Dr. Middleton. He was already dressed for dinner, his face composed and dignified as usual, but preoccupied as if the business of the day was not over. There were these letters waiting for him on the table. He came on, and Gwen, blinded by a big tear in each eye, vaguely knew that he stooped and swept up the letters in his hand. Then he turned his face towards her in his slow, deliberate way and looked. She closed her eyes, and the two tears squeezed between the lids, ran down her cheeks leaving the delicate rosy skin wet and shining under the electric light.

Tears had rarely been seen by the Warden: never – in fact – until lately! He was startled by them and disconcerted.

"Has anything happened?" he asked. "Anything serious?" It would need to be something very serious for tears!

The gentleness of his voice only made the desolation in Gwen's heart the more poignant. In a week's time she would have to leave this beautiful kindly little home, this house of

refuge. The fear she had had before of the Warden vanished at his sudden tenderness of tone; he seemed now something to cling to, something solid and protective that belonged to the world of ease and comfort, of good things; things to be desired above all else, and from which she was going to be cruelly banished – to Stow. She made a convulsive noise somewhere in her young throat, but was inarticulate.

There came sounds of approaching steps. The Warden hesitated but only for a moment. He moved to the door of the library.

"Come in here," he said, a little peremptorily, and he turned and opened it for Gwen.

Gwen slid within and moving blindly, knocked herself against the protruding wing of his book-shelves. That made the Warden vexed with somebody, the somebody who had made the child cry so much that she couldn't see where she was going. He closed the door behind her.

"You have bad news in that letter?" he asked. "Your mother is not ill?"

Gwen shook her head and stared upon the floor, her lips twitching.

"Anything you can talk over with Lady Dashwood?" he asked.

"No," was the stifled answer with a shake of the dark head.

"Can you tell me about it? I might be able to advise, help you?"

"No!" This time the sound was long drawn out with a shrill sob.

What was to be done?

"Try not to cry!" he said gently. "Tell me what it is all about. If you need help – perhaps I can help you!"

So much protecting sympathy given to her, after that letter, made Gwen feel the joy of utter weakness in the presence of strength, of saving support.

"Shall I read that letter?" he asked, putting out his hand.

Gwen clutched it tighter. No, no, that would be fatal! He laid his hand upon hers. Gwen began to tremble. She shook from head to foot, even her teeth chattered. She held tight on to that letter – but she leaned nearer to him.

"Then," said the Warden, without removing his hand, "tell me what is troubling you? It is something in that letter?"

Gwen moved her lips and made a great effort to speak.

"It's – it's nothing!" she said.

"Nothing!" repeated the Warden, just a little sternly.

This was too much for Gwen, the tears rose again swiftly into her eyes and began to drop down her cheeks. "It's only – " she began.

"Yes, tell me," said the Warden, coaxingly, for those tears hurt him, "tell me, child, never mind what it is."

"It's only – ," she began again, and now her teeth chattered, "only – that nobody cares what happens to me – I've got no home!"

That this pretty, inoffensive, solitary child had no home, was no news to the Warden. His sister had hinted at it on the day

that Gwen was left behind by her mother. But he had dismissed the matter, as not concerning the college or the reconstruction of National Education. Since then whenever it cropped up again, he again dismissed it, because – well, because his mind was not clear. Now, suddenly, he seemed to be more certain, his thoughts clearer. Each tear that Gwen dropped seemed to drop some responsibility upon him. His face must have betrayed this – perhaps his hands also. How it happened the Warden did not quite know, but he was conscious that the girl made a movement towards him, and then he found himself holding her in his arms. She was weeping convulsively into his shirt-front – weeping out the griefs of her childhood and girlhood and staining his shirt front with responsibility for them all, soaking him with petty cares, futile recollections, mean subterfuges, silly triumphs, sordid disappointments, all the small squalid moral muddle that Belinda Scotts call "life."

All this smothered the Warden's shirt-front and trickled sideways into the softer part of that article of his dress.

For the first few moments his power of thinking failed him. He was conscious only of his hands on her waist and shoulder, of the warmth of her dark hair against his face. He could feel her heart thumping, thumping in her slender body against his.

A knock came at the door.

The Warden came to himself. He released the weeping girl gently and walked to the door.

He opened it, holding it in his hand. "What is it, Robinson?"

he asked, for he had for the moment forgotten that it was dinner time, and that a guest was expected.

"Mr. Boreham is in the drawing-room, sir," said the old servant very meekly, for he met the narrow eyes fixed coldly upon him.

"Very well," said the Warden, and he closed the door again.

Then he turned round and looked at Gwendolen Scott. She was standing exactly where he had left her, standing with her hands clutching at a little pocket-handkerchief and her letter. She was waiting. Her wet eyelashes almost rested on her flushed cheeks. Her lips were slightly swollen. She was not crying, she was still and silent. She was waiting – her conceit for the moment gone – she was waiting to know from him what was going to become of her. Her whole drooping attitude was profoundly humble. The humility of it gave Middleton a strange pang of pain and pleasure.

The way in which the desire for power expresses itself in a man or woman is the supreme test of character. The weak fritter away on nothings the driving force of this priceless instinct; this instinct that has raised us from primeval slime to the mastery of the world. The weak waste it, it seems to slip through their fingers and vanish. Only the strong can bend this spiritual energy to the service of an important issue, and the strongest of all do this unconsciously, so that He, who is supreme Master of the souls of men, could say, "Why callest thou *Me* good?"

The Warden in his small sphere of academic life showed

himself to be one of the strong sort. His mind was analytical rather than constructive, but among all the crowded teaching staff of Oxford only one other man – and he, too, now the head of a famous college – had given as much of himself to his pupils. Indeed, so much had the Warden given, that he had left little for himself. His time and his extraordinarily wide knowledge, materials that he had gathered for his own use, all were at the service of younger men who appealed to him for guidance. He grasped at opportunities for them, found gaps that they could fill, he criticised, suggested, pushed; and so the years went on, and his own books remained unwritten. Only now, when a new world seemed to him to be in the making – he sat down deliberately to give his own thoughts expression.

Men like Middleton are rare in any University; a man unselfish enough and able enough to spend himself, sacrifice himself in "making men." And even this outstanding usefulness, this masterly hold he had of the best men who passed through King's would not have forced his colleagues to elect him as Warden. They made him Warden because they couldn't help themselves, because he was in all ways the dominating personality of the college, and even the book weary, the dull, the frankly cynical among the Fellows could not escape from the conviction that King's would be safe in Middleton's hands, so there was no reason to seek further afield.

But women and sentiment had played a very small part in the Warden's life. His acquaintance with women had been

superficial. He did not profess to understand them. Gwendolen Scott had for several days sat at his table, looking like a flower. That her emotions were shallow and her mind vacant did not occur to the Warden. She was like a flower – that was all! His business had been with men – young men. And just now, as one by one, these young men, once the interest and pride of his college, were stricken down as they stood upon the very threshold of life, the Warden's heart had become empty and aching.

And now, on this autumn evening, this sobbing girl seemed, somehow, all part of the awful tragedy that was being enacted, only in her case – he had the power to help. He need not let her wander alone into the wilderness of life.

For the first time in his life, his sense of power betrayed him. It was in his own hands to mould the future of this helpless girl – so he imagined!

He experienced two or three delicious moments as he walked towards her, knowing that she would melt into his arms and give up all her sorrows into his keeping. She was waiting on his will! But was this love?

The Warden was well aware that it was not love, such as a man of his temperament conceived love to be.

But his youth was passed. The time had gone when he could fall in love and marry a common mortal under the impression that she was an angel. Was it likely that now, in middle life, he would find a woman who would rouse the deepest of his emotions or satisfy the needs of his life?

Why should he expect to find at forty, what few men meet in the prime of youth? All that he could expect now – hope for – was standing there waiting for him. Waiting with blushes, timid, dawning hope; full of trust and so pathetically humble!

He took her into his arms and spoke, and his voice was steady but very low and a little husky.

"There is no time to talk now. But you shall not go out into the wilderness of life, if you are afraid."

She pressed her face closer to him – in answer.

"If you want to, if you care to – come to me, I shall not refuse you a home. You understand?"

She did fully understand. Her mother's letter had made it clearer than ever to her that marriage with somebody sufficiently well off is a haven of refuge for a woman, a port to be steered for with all available strength.

Suddenly and unexpectedly Gwen had found herself in harbour, and the stormy sea passed.

"Run up to your room now," he said, "and bathe your face and come down to the drawing-room as if nothing had happened."

He did not kiss her. A thought, such as only disturbs a man of scrupulous honour, came to him. He was so much older than she was that she must have time to think – she must come to him and ask for what he could give her – not, as she was just now – convulsed with grief; she must come quietly and confidently and with her mind made up. There must be no working upon her emotions, no urgency of his own will over a weaker will;

no compulsion such as a strong man can exercise over a weak woman.

He pushed her gently away, and she raised her head, smiling through her tears and murmuring something: what was it? Was it "Thanks;" but she did not look him in the face, she dare not meet those narrow blue eyes that were bent upon her.

He stood watching her as she moved lightly to the door. There she turned back, and even then she did not raise her eyes to his face, but she smiled a strange bewildered smile into the air and fled.

It was really *she* who had conquered, and with such feeble weapons.

She had gone. The door was closed. The Warden was alone.

He looked round the room, at the book-lined walls, at his desk strewn with papers, and then the whole magnitude and meaning of what he had done – came to him!

He took out his watch. It was twenty past eight – all but a minute. In less than twenty minutes he had disposed of and finally settled one of the most important affairs of life. Was this the action of a sane man?

During the last few days he had gradually been drifting towards this, just drifting. He had been dreaming of it all the time, dreaming in that part of his brain where the mind works out its problems underground, waiting until the higher world of consciousness calls for them, and they are flung out into the open daylight – solved. A solution found without real solid

premeditation.

Was the solution to his life's problem a good one, or a bad one? Was it true to his past life, or was it false? Can a man successfully live out a plan that he has only dimly outlined in a dream and swiftly finished in a passion of pity?

It was Middleton's duty as host to go into the drawing-room. He must go at once and think afterwards. And yet he lingered. She might not claim him. She too might have been moved only by a momentary emotion! But what right had he to be speculating on the chance of release? It was a bad beginning!

On the floor lay a letter. The Warden had not noticed it before. He picked it up. It was the letter that she had held in her trembling hands.

He stood holding it, and then suddenly he opened the flap and pulled the sheet from its cover. He unfolded it and looked at the signature. Yes, it was from her mother. He folded the paper again and put it back in the envelope.

Then as he stood for a moment, with the letter in his hand, he perceived that his shirt-front was stained – with her tears.

He left the library and went towards his bedroom behind the curtained door. He had the letter in his hand. He caught sight of Louise, Lady Dashwood's maid, near the drawing-room door. The Warden held the letter out to her.

"Please put this letter in Miss Scott's room," he said. "I found it lying on the floor;" and he went back into his room.

Louise had gone to the drawing-room with a handkerchief

forgotten by Lady Dashwood. She took the letter and went upstairs to her mistress's room, gazing at the letter as she walked. Now Louise was not a French woman for nothing. A letter – even an open letter – passing between a male and a female, must relate to an affair of the heart. This was interesting – exciting! Louise felt the necessity of thinking the matter out. Here was a pretty young lady, Miss Scott, and here was the Warden, not indeed very young, but *très très bien, très distingué!* Very well, if the young lady was married, then well, naturally something would happen! But she was "Miss," and that was quite other thing. Young unmarried girls must be protected – it is so in *la belle France*. Louise pulled the envelope apart and drew out the contents. She opened the letter, and searched for the missive between its folds which was destined for the hands of "Miss." There was none. Louise spread out the letter. Her knowledge of English as a spoken language was limited, and as a written language it was an unending puzzle.

She could, however, read the beginning and the end.

"Dear Gwen" … and "Mother." *Hein!*

The reason why the letter had been put into her hands was just because she could not read it.

What cunning! Without doubt, there were some additions added by the Warden here and there to the maternal messages, which would have their significance to "Miss." Again, what cunning!

And the Warden, so dignified and so just as he ought to be!

Ah, my God, but one never knows!

Louise folded up the letter and replaced it in its envelope.

Doubtless my Lady Dashwood was in the dark. Oh, completely! That goes without saying. Louise had already tidied the room. There was nothing more for her to do. She had been on the point of going down to the servants' quarters. Should she take the letter as directed to the room occupied by "Miss"? That was the momentous question. Now Louise was bound hand and foot to the service of Lady Dashwood. Only for the sake of that lady would Louise have endured the miseries of Oxford and the taciturnity of Robinson, and the impertinence of Robinson's grandson, Robinson aged fifteen, and the stupid solemnity of Mrs. Robinson, the daughter-in-law of Robinson and the widowed mother of the young Robinson.

Louise loved Lady Dashwood. Lady Dashwood was munificent and always amiable, things very rare. Also Louise was a widow and had two children in whom Lady Dashwood took an interest.

That Monsieur, the head of the College, should secretly communicate with a "Miss" was a real scandal. *Propos d'amour* are not for young ladies who are unmarried. The Warden ought to have known better than that – Ah, poor Lady Dashwood!

Torn between the desire to participate in an interesting affair and her duty not to assist scandals in the family of my Lady Dashwood, Louise stood for some time plunged in painful argument with herself. At last her sense of duty prevailed! She

would not deliver the letter. No, not if her life depended on it. The question was – Ah, this would be what she would do. A brilliant idea had struck her. Louise went to the dressing-table. It was covered with Lady Dashwood's toilet things, all neatly arranged. On the top of the jewel drawers at one side lay two envelopes, letters that had come by the last post and had been put aside hurriedly by Lady Dashwood. Louise lifted these two letters and underneath them placed the letter addressed to Miss Gwendolen Scott.

"Good!" exclaimed Louise to the empty room. "The letter is now in the disposition of the Good God! And the Warden! All that there is of the most as it ought to be! Ah, but it is incredible!"

Louise went to the door and put out the lights. Then she closed the door softly behind her and went downstairs.

CHAPTER IV
THE UNFORESEEN HAPPENS

Before his maternal aunt had left him Chartcote, the Honourable Bernard Boreham's income had been just sufficient to enable him to live without making himself useful. The Boreham estate in Ireland was burdened with obligations to female relatives who lived in various depressing watering-places in England. Bernard, the second son, had not been sent to a public school or University. He had struggled up as best he might, and like all the members of his family, he had left his beloved country as soon as he possibly could, and had picked up some extra shillings in London by writing light articles of an inflammatory nature for papers that required them. Boreham had had no real practical acquaintance with the world. He had never been responsible for any one but himself. He was a floating cloudlet. Ideas came to him easily – all the more easily because he was scantily acquainted with the mental history of the past. He did not know what had been already thought out and dismissed, nor what had been tried and had failed. The world was new to him – new – and full of errors.

From the moment that Chartcote became his and he was his own master, it occurred to him that he might write a really great book. A book that would make the world conscious of its follies.

He felt that it was time that some one – like himself – who could shed the superstitions and the conventions of the past and step out a new man with new ideas, uncorrupted by kings or priests (or Oxford traditions), and give a lead to the world.

It was, of course, an unfortunate circumstance that Oxford was now so military, so smitten by the war and shorn of her pomp, so empty of academic life. But after the war Boreham meant among other things to study Oxford, and if perfectly frank criticism could help her to a better understanding of her faults in view of the world's requirements – well, it should have that criticism. Boreham had considerable leisure, for apart from his big Book which he began to sketch, he found nothing to do. Every sort of work that others were doing for the war he considered radically faulty, and he had no scheme of his own – at the moment. Besides, he felt that England was not all she ought to be. He did not love England – he only liked living in England.

Boreham had arrived punctually for dinner on that October evening; in fact, he had arrived too early; but he told Lady Dashwood that his watch was fast.

"All the clocks in Oxford are wrong," he said to her, as he stood on the hearthrug in the drawing-room, "and mine is wrong!"

Boreham was tall and fair and wore a fair pointed beard. His features were not easy to describe in detail, they gave one the impression that they had been cut with insufficient premeditation by the hand of his Creator, from some pale fawn-

coloured material. He wore a single eyeglass which he stuck into a pale blue eye, mainly as an aid to conversation. With Boreham conversation meant an exposition of his own "ideas." He was disappointed at finding only Lady Dashwood in the drawing-room; but she had been really good natured in asking him to come and meet May Dashwood, so he was "conversing" freely with her when the door opened and Gwendolen Scott came in. Boreham started and put his eyeglass in the same eye again, instead of exercising the other eye. He was agitated. When he saw that it was not May Dashwood who had come in, but a youthful female unknown to him and probably of no conversational significance, he dropped his glass on to his shirt-front, where it made a dull thud. Gwen's face was flushed, and her lips still a little swollen; but there was nothing that betrayed tears to strangers, though Lady Dashwood saw at once that she had been crying. As soon as the introduction was over Gwen sank into a large easy-chair where her slight figure was almost obliterated.

She had got back her self-control. It had not, after all, been so difficult to get it back – for the glow of a new excitement possessed her. For the first time in her life she had succeeded. Until to-day she had had no luck. At a cheap school for the "Education of Daughters of Officers" Gwen had not learnt more than she could possibly help. Her first appearance in the world, this last summer, had been, considering her pretty face, on the whole a disappointment. But now she was successful. Gwen

tingled with the comfortable warmth of self-esteem. She looked giddily round the spacious room – was it possible that all this might be hers? It was amazing that luck should have just dropped into her lap.

Boreham had turned again to Lady Dashwood as soon as he had been introduced and had executed the reverential bow that he considered proper, however contemptuously he might feel towards the female he saluted.

"As we were saying," he went on, "Middleton – except to-day – has always been punctual to the minute, by that I mean punctual to the fastest Oxford time. He is the sort of man who is born punctual. Punctually he came into the world. Punctually he will go out of it. He has never been what I call a really free man. In other words, he is a slave to what's called 'Duty.'"

Here the door opened again, and again Boreham was unable to conceal his vivid curiosity as he turned to see who it was coming in. This time it was the Warden – the Warden in a blameless shirt-front. He had changed in five minutes. He walked in composed as usual. There was not a trace in his face that in the library only a few minutes ago he had been disposing of his future with amazing swiftness.

"Go on, Boreham," said the Warden, giving his guest, along with the glance that serves in Oxford as sufficient greeting to frequenters of Common Room, a slight grasp of the hand because he was not a member of Common Room. The Warden had not heard Boreham's remarks, he merely knew that he had

interrupted some exposition of "ideas."

In a flash the Warden saw, without looking at her, that Gwen was there, half hidden in a chair; and Gwen, on her side, felt her heart thump, and was proudly and yet fearfully conscious of every movement of the Warden as he walked across the room and stood on the other side of the hearthrug. "Does he – does that important person belong to me?" she thought. The conviction was overpowering that if that important person did belong to her, and it appeared that he did, she also must be important.

Boreham's appearance did not gain in attractiveness by the proximity of his host. He began again in his rapid rather high voice.

"You see for yourself," he said, turning back to Lady Dashwood: "here he is – the very picture of what is conventionally correct, his features, his manner, before which younger men who are not so correct actually quail. I'm afraid that now he is Warden he has lost the chance of becoming a free man. I had hopes of one day seeing him carried off his feet by some impulse which fools call 'folly.' If he could have been even once divinely drunk, he might have realised his true self, I am afraid now he is hopeless."

"My dear man, your philosophy of freedom is only suitable for the 'idle rich.' You would be the first person to object to your cook becoming divinely drunk instead of soberly preparing your dinner."

Boreham always ignored an argument that told against him,

so he merely continued —

"As it is, Middleton, who might have been magnificent, is bound hand and foot to the service of mere propriety, and will end by saddling himself with some dull wife."

The Warden stood patient and composed while Boreham was talking about him. He took out his watch and glanced at Lady Dashwood.

"I've given May five minutes' grace," she said, and then turned her face again to Boreham. "But why should Jim marry a dull wife? It will be his own fault if he does."

Gwen in her large chair sat stupefied at the word "wife."

"No," said Boreham, emphatically. "It won't be his fault. The best of our sex are daily sacrificed to the most dismal women. Men being in the minority now – dangerously in the minority – are, as all minorities are, imposed upon by the gross majority. Supposing Middleton meets, to speak to, in his whole life, a couple of hundred women here and elsewhere, none of whom are in the least charming; well, then, one out of these two hundred, the one with the most brazen determination to be married, will marry him, and there'll be an end of it. The kindest thing, Lady Dashwood," continued Boreham, "and I speak from the great love I have for Middleton, is for you just to invite with sisterly discrimination some women, not quite unbearable to Middleton, and he, like the Emperor Theophilus, will come into this room with an apple in his hand and present it to one of them. He can make the same remark that Theophilus made to the lady he first

approached."

"And what was that?" asked Lady Dashwood. She was amused at finding the conversation turn on the very subject nearest her heart. Even Mr. Boreham was proving himself useful in uttering this blunt warning of dangers ahead.

"His remark was: 'Woman is the source of evil.' And the lady's reply was – "

Both Lady Dashwood and Gwen were gazing intently at Boreham and Boreham was staring fixedly at the ornament in Lady Dashwood's grey hair. No one but the Warden noticed the door open and May Dashwood enter. She was dressed in black and wore no ornaments. She had caught the gist of what Boreham was saying, and she made the most delightful movement of her hands to Middleton that expressed both respectful greeting to him as her host, and an apology for remaining motionless on the threshold of the room, so that she should not break Boreham's story.

"And her reply was," went on the unconscious Boreham, "'But surely also of much good!'"

So that was all! May Dashwood came forward and walked straight up to the Warden. She held out both her hands to him in apology for her behaviour.

"I hope he – whoever he was – did not marry the young woman who made such an obvious retort," she said. "Fancy what the conversation would be like at the breakfast table."

Boreham was too much occupied with his own interesting

emotions at the sudden appearance of Mrs. Dashwood to notice what was plain to Lady Dashwood and Gwendolen Scott, that the Warden seemed wholly taken by surprise.

"He didn't marry her," he said, as he held May Dashwood's hands for a moment and stared down into her upturned face with his narrow eyes. "But," he added, "the story is probably a fake."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Dashwood, as she released her hands. Then she turned to Boreham, who was waiting – a picture of self-consciousness in pale fawn.

Gwen's recently regained self-confidence was already oozing out of every pore of her skin. It didn't matter when the Warden and Mr. Boreham talked queer talk, that was to be expected; but what did matter was this Mrs. Dashwood talking queerly with them. Rubbish she, Gwen, called it. What did that Mrs. Dashwood mean by saying that the retort, "And also of much good," was obvious? What did "obvious" mean? To Gwen the retort seemed profoundly clever – and so true! How was she, Gwen, to cope with this sort of thing? And then there was the Warden already giving this terrible woman his arm and looking at her far too closely.

"Come, Gwen," said Lady Dashwood, "Mr. Boreham must take us both!"

Gwen's head swam. Along with this new and painful sensation had come a sudden recollection of something! That letter of her mother's! It had not been in her hand when she went into her bedroom. No, it had not. Had she dropped it in the library, when

the Warden had – Oh!

"I've lost my handkerchief," murmured the girl, "somewhere – " Her voice was very small and sad, and she looked helplessly round the room.

"Mr. Boreham, stop and help her find it," said Lady Dashwood, "I must go down."

Boreham stood rigidly at the door. He saw his hostess go out and still he did not move.

Gwen looked at him in despair. What she had intended, of course, was to have flown into the library and looked for her letter. How could she now, with Mr. Boreham standing in the way? And that terrible woman had gone off arm-in-arm with the Warden. Gwen stared at Boreham. An idea struck her. She would go into the library – after dinner – before the men came up. But she must pretend to look for her handkerchief for a minute or two.

"Do you call Mrs. Dashwood pretty?" she asked tremulously, not looking at Boreham, but diving her hand into the corners of the chair she had been sitting in. She must find out what men thought of Mrs. Dashwood. She must know the worst – now, when she had the opportunity.

"Pretty!" said Boreham, still motionless at the door. "That's not a useful word. She's alluring."

"Oh!" said Gwen. She had left off thumping the chair, and now walked slowly to him – wide-eyed with anxiety. To Gwen, a man past his youth, wearing a fair beard and fair eyebrows that

were stiff and stuck out like spikes, was scarcely a person of sex at all; but still he would probably know what men thought.

"I don't think she is pretty – very," she said, her lips trembling a little as she spoke, and she gazed in a challenging way at Boreham.

"She is the most womanly woman I know," said Boreham. "Middleton is probably finding that out already."

Gwen patted her waistband where it bulged ever so slightly with her handkerchief. "Womanly!" she repeated in a doubtful voice.

"He'll fall in love with her to-day and propose to-morrow. Do him a world of good," said Boreham.

"Propose!" Gwen caught her breath. "But he couldn't – she couldn't – he couldn't – marry!"

"Couldn't marry – I didn't say marry – I said he will propose to-morrow." Boreham laughed a little in his beard.

"I don't understand," stammered the girl. "You mean – she would refuse?"

"No," said Boreham. "It mightn't go as far as that – the whole thing is a matter of words – words – words. It's a part of a man's education to fall in love with Mrs. Dashwood!"

Gwen blinked at him. A piercing thought struck her brain. Spoken words – they didn't count! Words alone didn't clinch the bargain! Words didn't tie a man up to his promise. Was this the "law"? She must get at the actual "law" of the matter. She knew something about love-making, but nothing about the "law."

"Do you mean," she said, and she scarcely recognised her own voice, so great was her concentration of thought and so slowly did she pronounce the enigmatic words, "if he had kissed you as well, he would be obliged to marry one?"

Boreham knitted his brows. "If I was, at this moment to kiss you, my dear lady," he began, "I should not be compelled to marry you. Even the gross injustice meted out to us men by the laws (backed up by Mrs. Grundy) dares not go as far as that. But there is no knowing what new oppression is in store for us – in the future."

"I only mean," stammered Gwen, "*if* he had already said – something."

Boreham simply stared at her. "I am confused," he said. "Confused!"

"Oh, please don't imagine that I meant you," she entreated. "I never for one single instant thought of you. I should never have imagined! I am so sorry!"

And yet this humble apology did not mollify him. Gwen almost felt frightened. Everything seemed going to pieces, and she was no nearer knowing what the legal aspects of her case were.

"Have you found your handkerchief?" Boreham asked, and the spikes in his eyebrows seemed to twitch.

"It was in my band, all the time," said Gwen, smiling deprecatingly. "Oh, what a bother everything was!"

"Then we have wasted precious time for nothing," said

Boreham. "All the fun is going on downstairs – come along, Miss Wallace."

Boreham knew her name wasn't Wallace, but Wallace was Scotch and that was near enough, when he was angry.

Gwen went downstairs as if she were in an ugly dream. Her brief happiness and security and pleasure at her own importance was vanishing. This broad staircase that she was descending on Boreham's stiff and rebellious arm; this wall with its panelling and its dim pictures of strange men's faces; these wide doors thrown back through which one went solemnly into the long dining-room; this dining-room itself dim and dignified; all this was going to be hers – only – . Gwendolen, as she emerged into the glow of the long oval table, could see nothing but the face of Mrs. Dashwood, gently brilliant, and the Warden roused to attentive interest. What was Gwen to do? There was nobody whom she could consult. Should she write to her mother? Her mother would scold her! What, then, was she to do? Perhaps she had better write to her mother, and let her see that she had, at any rate, tried her best. And in saying the words to herself "tried her best," Gwen was not speaking the truth even to herself. She had not tried at all; the whole thing had come about accidentally. It had somehow happened!

Instead of going straight to bed that evening Gwen seated herself at the writing-table in her bedroom. She must write a letter to her mother and ask for advice. The letter must go as soon as possible. Gwen knew that if she put it off till the morning,

it might never get written. She was always too sleepy to get up before breakfast. In Oxford breakfast for Dons was at eight o'clock, and that was far too early, as it was, for Gwen. Then after breakfast, there was "no time" to do anything, and so on, during the rest of the day.

So Gwen sat at her writing-table and wrote the longest letter she had ever written. Gwen's handwriting was pointed, it was also shaky, and generally ran downhill, or else uphill.

"Dear Mummy,

"Please write and tell me what to do? I've done all I could, but everything is in a rotten muddle. This evening I was crying, crying a little at your letter – I really couldn't help it – but anyhow it turned out all right – and the Warden suddenly came along the passage and saw me. He took me into his library, I don't know how it all happened, Mummy, but he put his arms round me and told me to come to him if I wanted a home. He was sweet, and I naturally thought this was true, and I said 'Yes' and 'Thanks.' There wasn't time for more, because of dinner. But a Mr. Boarham, who is a sort of cousin of Dr. Middleton, says that proposals are all words and that you needn't be married. What am I to do? I don't know if I am really engaged or not – because the Warden hasn't said anything more – and suppose he doesn't – Isn't it rotten? Do write and tell me what to do, for I feel so queer. What makes me worried is Mrs. Dashwood, a widow, talks so much. At dinner the Warden seemed so much taken up by her – quite different. But then after dinner it wasn't like that. We sat in the drawing-room all the time and at least

the men smoked and Lady Dashwood and me, but not Mrs. Dashwood, who said she was Early Victorian, and ought to have died long ago. She worked. Lady Dashwood said that she smoked because she was a silly old heathen, and that made me feel beastly. It wasn't fair – but Lady Dashwood is often rather nasty. But afterwards *he* was nice, and asked me to play my reverie by Slapovski. I have never forgotten it, Mummy, though I haven't been taught it for six months. I am telling you everything so that you know what has happened. Well, Mr. Borham said, 'For God's sake don't let's have any music.' He said that like he always does. It is very rude. Of course I refused to play, and the Warden was so nice, and he looked at me very straight and did not look at Mrs. Dashwood now. I think it must be all right. He sat in an armchair opposite us, and put his elbow on the arm and held the back of his neck – he does that, and smoked again and stared all the time at the carpet by Mrs. Dashwood's shoes, and never looked at her, but talked a lot. I can't understand what they say, and it is worse now Mrs. D. is here. Only once I saw him look up at her, and then he had that severe look. So I don't think any harm has happened. You know what I mean, Mummie. I was afraid he might like her. I tell you everything so as you can judge and advise me, for I could not tell all this to old Lady Dashwood, of course. Lady Dashwood says smoking cigars in the drawing-room is good for the furniture!!! I thought it very disgusting of Mr. Borham to say, 'For God's sake.' He used not to believe in God, and even now he hasn't settled whether there is a God. We are all to go to Chartcote House for lunch. There

is to be a Bazaar – I forget what for, somewhere. I have no money except half-a-crown. I have not paid for my laundry, so I can leave that in a drawer. Now, dear Mummy, do write at once and say exactly what I am to do, and tell me if I am engaged or not.

"Your affectionate daughter,

"Gwen.

"I like the Warden ever so much, and partly because he does not wear a beard. I feel very excited, but am trying not to. Mrs. D. is to stay a whole week, till I go on the 3rd."

Gwen laid down her pen and sat looking at the sheet of paper before her. She had told her mother "everything." She had omitted nothing, except that her mother's letter had dropped somewhere, either in the library or the staircase, and she could not find it again. If it had dropped in the library, somebody had picked it up. Supposing the Warden had picked it up and read it? The clear sharp understanding of "honour" possessed by the best type of Englishman and Englishwoman was not possessed by Gwen – it has not been acquired by the Belindas of Society or of the Slums. But no, Gwen felt sure that the Warden hadn't found it, or he would have been very, very angry. Then who had picked it up?

CHAPTER V
WAITING

If Pilate had uttered the sardonic remark "What is truth?" in Boreham's presence, he would certainly have compelled that weary official to wait for definite enlightenment. Boreham would have explained to him that although Absolute Truth (if there is such a thing) lies, like our Destiny, in the lap of the gods, he, Boreham, had a thoroughly reliable stock of useful truths with which he could supply any inquirer. Indeed to Boreham, the discussing of truths was a comparatively simple matter. Truths were of two kinds. Firstly, they were what he, himself, was convinced of at the moment of speaking; and secondly, they were *not* what the man next him believed in. Boreham found intolerable any assertion made by people he knew. He knew them! *Voila!* But he felt he could very fairly well trust opinions expressed by the native inhabitants of – say Pomerania – or still better – India.

Boreham had already some acquaintances in Oxford to whom he spoke, as he said himself, "frankly and fearlessly," and who tolerated him, whenever they had time to listen to him, because he was entirely harmless and merely tiresome. But he was not surprised (it had occurred before) that the Warden refused his invitation to lunch at Chartcote. The ladies had accepted; and

when Boreham said "the ladies," on this occasion he was thinking solely of Mrs. Dashwood. Lady Dashwood had accepted the invitation because it was given verbally. She made no purely social engagements. The Warden, himself, did not entertain during the war, and the only engagements were those of business, or of hospitality of an academic nature.

The day following May Dashwood's arrival was entirely uneventful. The Warden was mostly invisible. May was as bright as she had been on her arrival. Gwen went about wide-eyed and wistful, and spoke spasmodically. Lady Dashwood was serene and satisfied. A shy Don accompanied by a very nice, untidy wife, appeared at lunch, and they were introduced by the Warden as Mr. and Mrs. Stockwell. Mr. Stockwell was struck dumb at finding himself seated next to Mrs. Dashwood, a type of female little known to him. But May bravely taking him in hand, he recovered his powers of speech and became epigrammatic and sparkling. This round-shouldered, spectacled scholar, with a large nose and receding chin, poured out brilliant observations, subtile and suggestive, and had an apparently inexhaustible store of the literature of Europe. He sat sideways in his chair and spoke into May's sympathetic ear, giving an occasional swift appealing glance at the Warden, who came within the range of his vision.

How Stockwell ate his food was impossible to discover. He seemed to give automatic twiddles to his fork and apparently swallowed something afterwards, for when Robinson's underling, Robinson *petit fils*, removed Stockwell's plates, they contained

only wreckage.

The Warden, aided by Lady Dashwood, struggled courteously with Mrs. Stockwell. She was obliged to talk across Gwendolen, who spent her time silently observing Mrs. Dashwood.

Mrs. Stockwell had pathetic pretensions to intellectuality, based on a masterly acquaintance with the names of her husband's books and the fact that she lived in the academic circle. She had drooped visibly at the first sight of her hostess and Mrs. Dashwood, but was soon put at her ease by Lady Dashwood, who deftly drew her away from vague hints at the possession of learning into talk about her children. Gwen, watching the Warden and Mrs. Dashwood across Mrs. Stockwell's imitation lace front, could not be moved to speech. To any one in the secret there was written on her face two absorbing questions: "Am I engaged or not?" "Is she trying to oust me?"

The Warden's enigmatic eyes held no information in them. He looked at her gravely when he did look, and – that was all. Was *he* waiting to know whether he was engaged or not? Gwen doubted it. He would be sure to know everything. He would know. Think of all those books in the library! Supposing he had found that letter – suppose he *had* read it? No, if he *had*, he would have looked not merely grave, but angry!

When the ladies rose from the table, Stockwell rose too, reluctantly and as if waking from a pleasant dream. He stared in a startled way at the Warden, who moved to open the door; he looked as if about to spring – then refrained, and resigning

himself to the unmistakable decision of the Fates, he remained standing, staring down at the table-cloth through his spectacles, with his cheeks flushed and his heart glad.

Mrs. Stockwell passed out of the room in front of May Dashwood, gratified, warm and trying to conceal the backs of her boots.

Finally the Stockwells went away, and then Lady Dashwood took her niece to the Magdalen walk. There among the last shreds of autumn, and in that muzzy golden sunshine of Oxford, they walked and talked with the constraint of Gwen's presence.

At tea two or three people called, but the Warden did not appear even for a hasty cup. At dinner an old pupil of the Warden's – lamed by the war – occupied the attention of the little party.

Gwen's spirits rose at the sight of a really young man, but she remembered her mother's admonition and did not make any attempt to attract his attention beyond opening her eyes now and then suddenly and widely and with an ecstasy of interest at some invisible object just above his head. Whether the youthful warrior's imagination was excited by this "passage of arms" Gwen never knew, because the Warden took his pupil off to the library after dinner, and did not even bring him into the drawing-room to bid farewell.

In the quiet of the drawing-room Gwen fell into thought. She wondered whether the Warden expected her to come and knock on his library door and walk in and tell him that she really did

want to be married to him? Or had he read that letter and – ? Why, she had thought all this over a hundred times, and was no farther on than she had been before.

After playing the Reverie by Slapovski, which Mrs. Dashwood had not yet heard, and which she expressed a desire to hear, Gwen settled down to knitting a sock. She had been knitting that sock for five months. It was surprising how small the foot was, at least the toe part; the heel indeed was ample. She had followed the directions with great care, and yet the stupid thing would come out wrong. It was irritating to see Mrs. Dashwood knitting away at such a pace. It made Gwen giddy to look at her hands. Lady Dashwood took up a book and read passages aloud. This was so intolerably dull that Gwen found it difficult to keep her eyes open. It is always more tiring when nothing is going on than when plenty of things are going on!

Lady Dashwood had just finished reading a passage and looked up to make a remark to May Dashwood, when she became aware of Gwen's face.

"My dear, you looked just like a melancholy peach. Go to bed!"

Gwen smiled and tumbled her pins into her knitting. She rose and said "Good night," glad to be released. Outside the drawing-room she stood holding her breath to hear if there was any sound audible from the library. She heard nothing. She moved over the soft carpet and listened again, at the door. She could hear the Warden's deep, masculine voice – like the vibration

of an organ, and then a higher voice, but what they said Gwen could not tell. She turned away and went up to bed. She was beginning to lose that feeling of not being afraid of the Warden. He was becoming more and more what he had been at first, an impressive and alarming personage, a human being entirely remote from her understanding and experience. At moments during dinner when she had glanced at him, he had seemed to her to be like a handsomely carved figure animated by some living force completely unknown to her. That such an incomprehensible being should become her husband was surely unlikely – if not impossible! Gwen's thoughts became more and more confused. Notwithstanding this confusion in what (if compelled to describe it) she would have called her soul, she closed her eyes and settled upon her pillow. She was conscious that she was disappointed and not happy. Then she suddenly became indifferent to her fate – saw in her mind's eye a hat – it absorbed her. The hat was lying on a chair. It was trimmed like some other hat. Then the hat disappeared, and Gwen was asleep.

As soon as Gwendolen had left the drawing-room Lady Dashwood closed her book and looked at her niece.

"Now," said Lady Dashwood, "I begin to think that I was unnecessarily alarmed about Jim. But it may be because you are here – giving me moral support." Lady Dashwood spoke the words "moral support" with great firmness. Having once said it and seen that it was wrong, she meant to stick to it.

"I wonder," began Mrs. Dashwood, and then she remained

silent and looked hard at her knitting.

Lady Dashwood still stared at her niece. But May did not conclude her sentence, if indeed she had meant to say any more.

"Why, you haven't noticed anything?" asked Lady Dashwood.

"Nothing!" said May, and she knitted on.

"To-day," said Lady Dashwood, "Jim has been practically invisible except at meals, but you've no idea how busy he is just now. All one's old ideas are in the melting-pot," she went on, "and Jim has schemes. He is full of plans. He thinks there is much to be done, in Oxford, with Oxford – nothing revolutionary – but a lot that is evolutionary."

Mrs. Dashwood dropped her knitting to listen, though she could have heard quite well without doing this.

"Imagine!" exclaimed Lady Dashwood, with a little burst of anger, "what a man like Jim, a scholar, a man of business, an organiser, what on earth he would do with a wife like Gwendolen Scott! The idea is absurd."

"The absurd often happens," said May, and as she said this she took up her knitting again with such a jerk that her ball of wool tumbled to the floor and began rolling; and being a tight ball it rolled some distance sideways from May's chair in the direction of the far distant door. She gave the wool a little tug, but the ball merely shook itself, turned over and released still more wool.

"Very well, remain there if you prefer that place," said May, and as she spoke there came a slight noise at the door.

Both ladies looked to see who was coming in. It was the

Warden. He held a cigar in his hand, a sign (Lady Dashwood knew it) that he intended merely to bid them "Good night," and retire again to his library. But he now stood in the half-light with his hand on the door, and looked towards the glow of the hearth where the two ladies sat alone, each lighted by a tall, electric candle stand on the floor. And as he looked at this little space of light and warmth he hesitated.

Then he closed the door behind him and came in.

CHAPTER VI
MORE THAN ONE CONCLUSION

The Warden came slowly towards them over the wide space of carpeted floor.

Lady Dashwood, who knew every passing change in his face and manner (they were photographed over and over again in every imaginable style in her book of life), noticed that the sight of herself and May alone, that is, without Gwen – had made him decide to come in. She drew her own conclusions and smiled.

"When you pass that ball of wool, pick it up, Jim," she said.

She spoke too late, however, and the Warden kicked the ball with one foot, and sent it rolling under a chair. It took the opportunity of flinging itself round one leg, and tumbling against the second. With its remaining strength it rolled half way round the third leg, and then lay exhausted.

"I'm not going to apologise," said the Warden, in his most courteous tones.

"You needn't do that, my dear, if you don't want to," said Lady Dashwood. "But pick up the ball, please."

"If I pick the ball up," said the Warden, "the result will be disastrous to somebody."

He looked at the ball and at the chair, and then, putting his cigar between his teeth, he lifted the chair from the labyrinth

of wool and placed it out of mischief. Then he picked up the ball and stood holding it in his hand. Who was the "somebody"? To whom did it belong? It was obvious to whom it belonged! A long line of wool dropped from the ball to the carpet. There it described a foolish pattern of its own, and then from one corner of that pattern the line of wool ran straight to Mrs. Dashwood's hands. She was sitting there, pretending that she didn't know that she was very, very slowly and deliberately jerking out the very vitals of that pattern, in fact disembowelling it. Then the Warden pretended to discover suddenly that it was Mrs. Dashwood's ball, and this discovery obliged him to look at her, and she, without glancing at him, slightly nodded her head, very gravely. Lady Dashwood grasped her book and pretended to read it.

"I suppose I must clear up this mess," said the Warden, as articulately as a man can who is holding a cigar between his teeth.

He began to wind up the ball.

"How beautifully you are winding it!" said May Dashwood, without looking up from her knitting.

The Warden cleared the pattern from the floor, and now a long line of wool stretched tautly from his hands to those of Mrs. Dashwood.

"Please stop winding," she said quietly, and still she did not look up, though she might have easily done so for she had left off knitting.

The Warden stopped, but he stood looking at her as if to challenge her eyes. Then, as she remained obstinately unmoved,

he came towards her chair and dropped the ball on her lap.

"You couldn't know I was winding it beautifully because you never looked."

"I knew without looking," said May. "I took for granted that you did everything well."

"If you will look now," said the Warden, "you will see how crookedly I've done it. So much for flattery."

He stood looking down at her bent head with its gold-brown hair lit up to splendour by the electric light behind her. Her face was slightly in shadow. The Warden stood so long that Lady Dashwood was seized with an agreeable feeling of embarrassment. May Dashwood was apparently unconscious of the figure beside her. But she raised her eyebrows. Her eyebrows were often slightly raised as if inquiring into the state of the world with sympathy tinged with surprise. She raised her eyebrows instead of making any reply, as if she said: "I could make a retort, but I am far too busy with more important matters."

The Warden at last moved, and putting a chair between the two ladies he seated himself exactly opposite the glowing fire and the portrait above it. Leaning back, he smoked in silence for a few moments looking straight in front of him for the most part, only now and then turning his eyes to Mrs. Dashwood, just to find out if her eyebrows were still raised.

Lady Dashwood began smiling at her book because she had discovered that she held it upside down.

"You were interested in Stockwell?" said the Warden

suddenly. "He is doing multifarious things now. He is an accomplished linguist, and we couldn't manage without him – besides he is over military age by a long way."

Lady Dashwood felt quite sure that his silence had been occupied by the Warden in thinking of May, so that his question, "You were interested," etc., was merely the point at which his thoughts broke into words.

"I was very much interested in him," said May. "It was like reading a witty book – only much more delightful."

"Stockwell is always worth listening to," said the Warden, "but he is sometimes very silent. He needs the right sort of audience to draw him out. Two or three congenial men – or one sympathetic woman." Here the Warden paused and looked away from May Dashwood, then he added: "I'm obliged to go to Cambridge to-morrow. You will be at Chartcote and you will get some amusement out of Boreham. You find everybody interesting?" He turned again and looked at her – this time so searchingly that a little colour rose in May Dashwood's cheek.

"Oh, not everybody," she said. "I wish I could!"

"My dear May," said Lady Dashwood, briskly seizing this brilliant opportunity of pointing the moral and adorning the tale, "even you can't pretend to be interested in little Gwendolen, though you have done your best. Now that you have seen something of her, what do you think of her?"

"Very pretty," said May Dashwood, and she became busy again with her work.

"Exactly," said Lady Dashwood. "If she were plain even Belinda would not have the impertinence to deposit her on people's doorsteps in the way she does."

The Warden took his cigar out of his mouth, as if he had suddenly remembered something that he had forgotten. He laid his hands on the arms of his chair and seemed about to rise.

"You're not going, Jim!" exclaimed Lady Dashwood. "I thought you had come to talk to us. We have been doing our duty since dawn of day, and this is May's little holiday, you know. Stop and talk nicely to us. Do cheer us up!" Her voice became appealing.

The Warden rose from his chair and stood with one hand resting on the back of it as if about to make some excuse for going away. Except for the glance, necessitated by courtesy, that May Dashwood gave the Warden when he entered, she had kept her eyes obstinately upon her work. Now she looked up and met his eyes, only for a moment.

"I'm not going," he said, "but I find the fire too hot. Excuse me if I move away. It has got muggy and warm – Oxford weather!"

"Open one of the windows," said Lady Dashwood. "I'm sure May and I shall be glad of it."

He moved away and walked slowly down the length of the room. Going behind the heavy curtains he opened a part of the casement and then drew aside one of the curtains slightly. Then he slowly came back to them in silence.

This silence that followed was embarrassing, so embarrassing

that Lady Dashwood broke into it urgently with the first subject that she could think of. "Tell May about the Barber's ghost, Jim."

"Where does he appear?" asked May, interestedly, but without looking up. "What part of the college?"

"In the library," said the Warden.

"And at the witching hour of midnight, I suppose?" said May.

"Birds of ill omen, I believe, appear at night," said the Warden. "All Souls College ought to have had an All Souls' ghost, but it hasn't, it has only its 'foolish Mallard.'"

"And if he does appear," said May, "what apology are you going to offer him for the injustice of your predecessor in the eighteenth century?"

The Warden turned and stood looking back across the room at the warm space of light and the two women sitting in it, with the firelight flickering between them.

"If I were to make myself responsible for all the misdemeanours of the Reverend Charles Langley," he said, "I should have my hands full;" and he came slowly towards them as he spoke. "You have only to look at Langley's face, over the mantelpiece, and you will see what I mean."

May Dashwood glanced up at the portrait and smiled.

"Do you admire our Custos dilectissimus?" he asked.

The lights were below the level of the portrait, but the hard handsome face with its bold eyes, was distinctly visible. He was looking lazily watchful, listening sardonically to the conversation about himself.

"I admire the artist who painted his portrait," said May.

"Yes, the artist knew what he was doing when he painted Langley," said the Warden. He seemed now to have recovered his ease, and stood leaning his arms on the back of the chair he had vacated. "Your idea is a good one," he went on. "I don't suppose it has occurred to any Warden since Langley's time that a frank and pleasant apology might lay the Barber's ghost for ever. Shall I try it?" he asked, looking at his guest.

"My dear," said Lady Dashwood slowly, "I wish you wouldn't even joke about it – I dislike it. I wish people wouldn't invent ghost stories," she went on. "They are silly, and they are often mischievous. I wish you wouldn't talk as if you believed it."

"It was you, Lena, who brought up the subject," said Middleton. "But I won't talk about him if you dislike it. You know that I am not a believer in ghosts."

Lady Dashwood nodded her head approvingly, and began turning more pages of her book.

"I sometimes wonder," said the Warden, and now he turned his face towards May Dashwood – "I wonder if men like Langley really believed in a future life?"

May looked up at the portrait, but was silent.

"The eighteenth century was not tormented with the question as we are now!" said the Warden, and again he looked at the auburn head and the dark lashes hiding the downcast eyes. "Those who doubt," he said slowly and tentatively, "whether after all the High Gods want us – those who doubt whether there are

High Gods – even those doubt with regret – now." He waited for a response and May Dashwood suddenly raised her eyes to his.

"There is no truculence in modern unbelief," he said, "it is a matter of passionate regret. And belief has become a passionate hope."

Lady Dashwood knew that not a word of this was meant for her. She disliked all talk about the future world. It made her feel dismal. Her life had been spent in managing first her father, then her brother, and now her husband, and incidentally many of her friends.

Some people dislike having plans made for them, some endure it, some positively like it, and for those who liked it, Lady Dashwood made extensive plans. Her brain worked now almost automatically in plans. For herself she had no plans, she was the planner. But her plans were about this world. To the "other world" Lady Dashwood felt secretly inimical; that "unknown" lurking in the future, would probably, not so long hence, engulf her husband, leaving her, alas! still on this side – with no heart left for making any more plans.

If she had been alone with the Warden he would not have mentioned the "future life," nor would he have spoken of the "High Gods." He knew her mind too well. Was he probing the mind of May Dashwood? Either he was deliberately questioning her, or there was something in her presence that drew from him his inmost thoughts. Lady Dashwood felt a pang of indignation at herself for "being in the way" when to be "out of the way" at

such a moment was absolutely necessary. She must leave these two people alone together – now – at this propitious moment. What should she do? She began casting about wildly in her brain for a plan of escape that would not be too obvious in its intention. The Warden had never been with May alone for five minutes. To-morrow would be a blank day – there was Chartcote first and then when they returned the Warden would be still away and very probably would not be visible that evening.

She could see May's raised face looking very expressive – full of thoughts. Lady Dashwood rose from her chair confident that inspired words would come to her lips – and they came!

"My dear Jim," she heard herself saying, "your mentioning the High Gods has made me remember that I left about some letters that ought to be answered. Horribly careless of me – I must go and find them. I'll only be away a moment. So sorry to interrupt when you are just getting interesting!" And still murmuring Lady Dashwood made her escape.

She had done the best she could under the circumstances, and she smiled broadly as she went through the corridor.

"That for Belinda and Co.!" she exclaimed half aloud, and she snapped her fingers.

And what was going to happen after Belinda and Co. were defeated, banished for ever from the Lodgings? What was going to happen to the Warden? He had been successfully rescued from one danger – but what about the future? Was he going to fall in love with May Dashwood?

"It sounded to me uncommonly like a metaphysical wooing of May," said Lady Dashwood to herself. "*That* I must leave in the hands of Providence;" and she went up to her room smiling. There she found Louise.

"Madame is gay," said the Frenchwoman, catching sight of the entering smile. "Gay in this sad Oxford!"

"Sad!" said Lady Dashwood, her smile still lingering. "The hospitals are sad, Louise, yes, very sad, and the half-empty Colleges."

"Oh, it is sad, incredibly sad," said the maid. "What kind of city is it, it contains only grey monasteries, no boulevards, no shops. There is one shop, perhaps, but what is that?"

Lady Dashwood had gone to the toilet table, for she caught sight of the letters lying on the top of the jewel drawers. She had seen them several times that day, and had always intended tearing them up, for neither of them needed an answer. But they had served a good purpose. She had escaped from the drawing-room with their aid. She took them up and opened them and looked at them again. Louise watched her covertly. She glanced at the first and tore it up; then at the second and tore that up. She opened the third and glanced at it. And now the faint remains of the smile that had lingered on her face suddenly vanished.

"My dear Gwen," (Lena badly written, of course).

"I hope you understood that Lady Dashwood will keep you till the 3rd. You don't mention the Warden! Does that mean that you are making no progress in that direction? Perhaps taking no

trouble! The question is – "

Here Lady Dashwood stopped. She looked at the signature of the writer. But that was not necessary – the handwriting was Belinda Scott's.

For a moment or two Lady Dashwood stood as if she intended to remain in the same position for the rest of her life. Then she breathed rather heavily and her nostrils dilated.

"Ah! Well!" said Louise to herself, and she nodded her head ominously.

Soon Lady Dashwood recovered herself and folded up the letter. She looked at the envelope. It was addressed to Miss Gwendolen Scott. She put the letter back into its envelope.

Had she opened the letter and then laid it aside with the others, without perceiving that the letter was not addressed to her and without reading it? Was it possible that she, in her hurry last evening, had done this? If so, Gwen had never received the letter or read it.

Of course she could not have read it. If she had, it would not have been laid on the toilet table. If Gwen had read it and left it about, it would have either been destroyed or taken to her room.

"Does Madame wish to go to bed immediately?" asked Louise innocently. She had been waiting nearly twenty-four hours for something to happen about that letter. She was beginning to be afraid that it might be discovered when she would not be there to see the effect it had on Madame. Ah! the letter was all that Louise's fancy had painted it. See the emotion in Madame's back!

How expressive is the back! What abominable intrigue! It was not necessary, indeed, to go to Paris to find wickedness. And, above all, the Warden – Oh, my God! Never, never shall I repose confidence even in the Englishman the most respectable!

"Presently," said Lady Dashwood, in answer to Louise's question.

Lady Dashwood had made up her mind. She must have opened all three letters but only read two of them. There was no other explanation possible. What was to be done with Gwen's letter? What was to be done with this – vile scribble?

Lady Dashwood's fingers were aching to tear the letter up, but she refrained. It would need some thinking over. The style of this letter was probably familiar to Gwendolen – her mind had already been corrupted. And to think that Jim might have had Belinda and Co., and all that Belinda and Co. implied, hanging round his neck and dragging him down – till he dropped into his grave from the sheer dead weight of it!

"Yes, immediately," said Lady Dashwood. She would not go downstairs again. It was of vital importance that Jim and May should be alone together, yes, alone together.

Lady Dashwood put the letter away in a drawer and locked it. She must have time to think.

A few minutes later Louise was brushing out her mistress's hair – a mass of grey hair, still luxuriant, that had once been black.

"I find that Oxford does not agree with Madame's hair," said

Louise, as she plied vigorously with the brush.

Lady Dashwood made no reply.

"I find that Oxford does not agree with Madame's hair at all, at all," repeated Louise, firmly.

"Is it going greyer?" said Lady Dashwood indifferently, for her mind was working hard on another subject.

"It grows not greyer, but it becomes dead, like the hair of a corpse – in this atmosphere of Oxford," said Louise, even more firmly.

"Try not to exaggerate, Louise," said Lady Dashwood, quite unmoved.

"Madame cannot deny that the humidity of Oxford is bad both for skin and hair," said Louise, with some resentment in her tone.

"Damp is not bad for the skin, Louise," said her mistress, "but it may be for the hair; I don't know and I don't care."

"It's bad for the skin," said Louise. "I have seen Madame looking grave, the skin folded, in Oxford. It is the climate. It is impossible to smile – in Oxford. One lies as if under a tomb."

"Every place has its bad points," said Lady Dashwood. "It is important to make the best of them."

"But I do not like to see Madame depressed by the climate here," continued Louise, obstinately, "and Madame has been depressed here lately."

"Not at all," said Lady Dashwood. "You needn't worry, Louise; any one who can stand India would find the climate of Oxford admirable. Now, as soon as you have done my hair, I want

you to go down to the drawing-room, where you will find Mrs. Dashwood, and apologise to her for my not coming down again. Say I have a letter that will take me some time to answer. Bid her good night, also the Warden, who will be with her, I expect."

Louise had been momentarily plunged into despair. She had been unsuccessful all the way round. It looked as if the visit to Oxford was to go on indefinitely, and as to the letter – well – Madame was unfathomable – as she always was. She was English, and one must not expect them to behave as if they had a heart.

But now her spirits rose! This message to the drawing-room! The Warden was alone with Mrs. Dashwood! The Warden, this man of apparent uprightness who was the seducer of the young! Lady Dashwood had discovered his wickedness and dared not leave Mrs. Dashwood, a widow and of an age (twenty-eight) when a woman is still young, alone with him. So she, Louise, was sent down, *bien entendu*, to break up the *tête-à-tête!*

Louise put down the brush and smiled to herself as she went down to the drawing-room.

She, through her devotion to duty, had become an important instrument in the hands of Providence.

When Lady Dashwood found herself alone, she took up her keys and jingled them, unable to make up her mind.

She had only read the first two or three sentences of Belinda's letter; she had only read – until the identity and meaning of the letter had suddenly come to her.

She opened the drawer and took out the letter. Then she

walked a few steps in the room, thinking as she walked. No, much as she despised Belinda, she could not read a private letter of hers. Perhaps, because she despised her, it was all the more urgent that she should not read anything of hers.

What Lady Dashwood longed to do was to have done with Belinda and never see her or hear from her again. She wanted Belinda wiped out of the world in which she, Lena Dashwood, moved and thought.

What was she to do with the letter? Jim was safe now, the letter was harmless – as far as he was concerned. But what about Gwen? Was it not like handing on to her a dose of moral poison?

On the other hand, the poison belonged to Gwen and had been sent to her by her mother!

The matter could not be settled without more reflection. Perhaps some definite decision would frame itself during the night; perhaps she would awake in the morning, knowing exactly what was the best to be done.

She put away the letter again, and again locked the drawer. She was putting away her keys when the door opened and she heard her maid come in.

There was something in the way Louise entered and stood at the door that made Lady Dashwood turn round and look at her. That excellent Frenchwoman was standing very stiffly, her eyes wide and agitated, and her features expressive of extreme excitement. She breathed loudly.

"What's the matter?" demanded Lady Dashwood.

"Madame Dashwood was not visible in the drawing-room!" said Louise, and she tightened her lips after this pronouncement.

"She had gone up to her bedroom?"

"Madame Dashwood is not in her bedroom!" said Louise, with ever deepening tragedy in her voice.

"Did you look for her in the library?" demanded Lady Dashwood.

"Madame Dashwood is not in the library!" said Louise. She did not move from her position in front of the door. She stood there looking the personification of domestic disaster, her chest heaving.

"Mrs. Dashwood isn't ill?" Lady Dashwood felt a sudden pang of fear at her heart.

"No, Madame!" said Louise.

"Then what is the matter?" demanded Lady Dashwood, sternly. "Don't be a fool, Louise. Say what has happened!"

"How can I tell Madame? It is indeed unbelievably too sad! I did not see Madame Dashwood but I heard her voice," began Louise. "Oh, Madame, that I should have to pronounce such words to you! I open the door of the drawing-room! It is scarcely at all lighted! No one is visible! I stand and for a moment I look around me! I hear sounds! I listen again! I hear the voice of Madame Dashwood! Ah! what surprise! Where is she? She is hidden behind the great curtains of the window, completely hidden! Why? And to whom does she speak? Ah, Madame, what frightful surprise, what shock to hear reply the voice, also

behind the curtain, of Monsieur the Warden! I cannot believe it, it is incredible, but also it is true! I stop no longer, for shame! I fly, I meet Robinson in the gallery, but I pass him – like lightning – I speak not! No word escapes from my mouth! I come direct to Madame's room! In entering, I know not what to say, I say nothing! I dare not! I stand with the throat swelling, the heart oppressed, but with the lips closed! I speak only because Madame insists, she commands me to speak, to say all! I trust in God! I obey Madame's command! I speak! I disclose frankly the painful truth! I impart the boring information!"

While Louise was speaking Lady Dashwood's face had first expressed astonishment, and then it relaxed into amusement, and when her maid stopped speaking for want of breath, she sank down upon a chair and burst into laughter.

"My poor Louise?" she said. "You never will understand English people. If Mrs. Dashwood and the Warden are behind the window curtains, it is because they want to look out of the window!"

Louise's face became passionately sceptical.

"In the rain, Madame!" she remarked. "In a darkness of the tomb?"

"Yes, in the rain and darkness," said Lady Dashwood. "You must go down again in a moment, and give them my message!"

CHAPTER VII
MEN MARCHING PAST

After the Warden had closed the door on his sister he came back to the fireplace. He had been interrupted, and he stood silently with his hand on the back of the chair, just as he had stood before. He was waiting, perhaps, for an invitation to speak; for some sign from Mrs. Dashwood that now that they were alone together, she expected him to talk on, freely.

She had no suspicion of the real reason why her Aunt Lena had gone away. May took for granted that she had fled at the first sign of a religious discussion. May knew that General Sir John Dashwood, like many well regulated persons, was under the impression that he had, at some proper moment in his juvenile existence now forgotten, at his mother's knee or in his ancestral cradle, once and for all weighed, considered and accepted the sacred truths containing the Christian religion, and that therefore there was no need to poke about among them and distrust them. Lady Dashwood had encouraged that sentiment of silent loyalty: it left more time and energy over for the discussion and arrangement of the practical affairs of life. May knew all this.

May, sitting by the fire, with her eyes on her work, observed the hesitation in the Warden's mind. She knew that he was waiting. She glanced up.

"What was it you were saying?" she asked in the softest of voices, for now that they were alone there was no one to be annoyed by a religious discussion.

The Warden moved round and seated himself. But even then he could not bring his thoughts to the surface: they lay in the back of his mind urgent, yet reluctant. Meanwhile he began talking about the portrait again. It served as a stalking horse. He told her some of the old college stories, stories not only of Langley, but of other Wardens in the tempestuous days of the Reformation and of the Civil War.

"And yet," he said suddenly, "what were those days compared with these? Has there been any tragedy like this?" He gazed at her now; with his narrow eyes strained and sad.

"Just at the beginning of the war," he said, "I heard – It was one hot brilliant morning in that early September. It was only a passing sound – but I shall never forget it, till I die."

May Dashwood's hands dropped to her lap, and she sat listening with her eyes lowered.

"There was a sound of the feet of men marching past, though I could not see them. Their feet were trampling the ground rhythmically, and all to the 'playing' of a bugler. I have never heard, before or since, a bugle played like that! The youth – I could picture him in my mind – blew from his bugle strangely ardent, compelling notes. It was simple, monotonous music, but there came from the bugler's own soul a magnificent courage and buoyancy; and the trampling feet responded – responded to

the light springing notes, the high ardour and gay fearlessness of youth. There was such hope, such joy in the call of duty! No thought of danger, no thought of suffering! All hearts leapt to the sounds! And the bugler passed and the trampling feet! I could hear the swift, high, passionate notes die in the distance; and I knew that the flower of our youth was marching to its doom."

The Warden got up from his chair, and walked away, and there was silence in the room.

Then he came up to where May sat and looked down at her.

"The High Gods," she said, quietly quoting his own phrase, "wanted them."

He moved away again. "I have no argument for my faith," he said. "The question for us is no longer 'I must believe,' but 'Dare I believe?' The old days of certainty have gone. Inquisitions, Solemn Leagues and Covenants have gone – never to return. All the clamour of men who claim 'to know' has died down."

And as he gazed at her with eyes that demanded an answer she said simply: "I am content with the silence of God."

He made no answer and leaned heavily on the back of his chair. A moment later he began to walk again. "I don't think I *can* believe that the heroic sacrifice of youth, their bitter suffering, will be mixed up indistinguishably with the cunning meanness of pleasure-seekers, with the sordid humbug of money-makers – in one vast forgotten grave. No, I can't believe that – because the world we know is a rational world."

May glanced round at him as he moved about. The great

dimly-lit room was full of shadows, and Middleton's face was dark, full of shadows too, shadows of mental suffering. She looked back at her work and sighed.

"Even if we straighten the crooked ways of life, so that there are no more starving children, no men and women broken with the struggle of life: even if we are able, by self-restraint, by greater scientific knowledge to rid the earth of those diseases that mean martyrdom to its victims; even if hate is turned to love, and vice and moral misery are banished: even if the Kingdom of Heaven does come upon this earth – even then! That will not be a Kingdom of Heaven that is Eternal! This Earth will, in time, die. This Earth will die, that we know; and with it must vanish for ever even the memory of a million years of human effort. Shall we be content with that? I fail to conceive it as rational, and therefore I cling to the *hope* of some sort of life beyond the grave – Eternal Life. But," and here he spoke out emphatically, "I have no argument for my belief."

He came and stood close beside her now, and looked down at her. "I have no argument for my belief," he repeated.

"And you are content with the silence of God," he added. Then he spoke very slowly: "I must be content."

If he had stretched out his hand to touch hers, it would not have meant any more than did the prolonged gaze of his eyes.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked – its voice alone striking into the silence. It seemed to tick sometimes more loudly, sometimes more softly.

The Warden appeared to force himself away from his own thoughts. With his hands still grasping the back of his chair, he raised his head and stood upright. The tick of the clock fell upon his ear; a monotonous and mechanical sound – indifferent to human life and yet weighted with importance to human life; marking the moments as they passed; moments never to be recalled; steps that are leading irretrievably the human race to their far-off destiny.

As the Warden's eyes watched the hands of the clock, they pointed to five minutes to eleven. A thought came to him.

"All the bells are silent now," he said, "except in the safe daylight."

May looked up at him.

"Even 'Tom' is silent. The Clusius is not tolled now."

He got up and walked along the room to the open window. There he held the curtain well aside and looked back at her. Why it was, May did not know, but it seemed imperative to her to come to him. She put her work aside and came through into the broad embrasure of the bay. Then he let the curtain fall and they stood together in the darkness. The Warden pushed out the latticed frame wider into the dark night. The air was scarcely stirring, it came in warm and damp against their faces.

The quadrangle below them was dimly visible. Eastwards the sky was heavy with a great blank pale space stretching over the battlemented roof and full of the light of a moon that had just risen, but overhead a heavy cloud slowly moved westwards.

They both leaned out and breathed the night air.

"It will rain in a moment," said the Warden.

"In the old days," he said, "there would have been sounds coming from these windows. There would have been men coming light-heartedly from these staircases and crossing to one another. Now all is under military rule: the poor remnant left of undergraduate life – poor mentally and physically – this poor remnant counts for nothing. All that is best has gone, gone voluntarily, eagerly, and the men who fill their places are training for the Great Sacrifice. It's the most glorious and the most terrible thing imaginable!"

May leaned down lower and the silence of the night seemed oppressive when the Warden ceased speaking.

After a moment he said, "In the old days you would have heard some far-off clock strike the hour, probably a thin, cracked voice, and then it would have been followed by other voices. You would have heard them jangle together, and then into their discordance you would have heard the deep voice of 'Tom' breaking."

"But he is at his best," went on the Warden, "when he tolls the Clusius. It is his right to toll it, and his alone. He speaks one hundred and one times, slowly, solemnly and with authority, and then all the gates in Oxford are closed."

Drops of rain fell lightly in at them, and May drew in her head.

"Oxford has become a city of memories to me," said the Warden, and he put out his arm to draw in the window.

"That is only when you are sad," said May.

"Yes," said the Warden slowly, "it is only when I give way to gloom. After all, this is a great time, it can be made a great time. If only all men and women realised that it might be the beginning of the 'Second Coming.' As it is, the chance may slip."

He pulled the window further in and secured it.

May pushed aside the curtain and went back into the glow and warmth of the room.

She gathered up her knitting and thrust it into the bag.

"Are you going?" asked the Warden. He was standing now in the middle of the room watching her.

"I'm going," said May.

"I've driven you away," he said, "by my dismal talk."

"Driven me away!" she repeated. "Oh no!" Her voice expressed a great reproach, the reproach of one who has suffered too, and who has "dreamed dreams." Surely he knew that she could understand!

"Forgive me!" he said, and held out his hand impulsively. At least it seemed strangely impulsive in this self-contained man.

She put hers into it, withdrew it, and together they went to the door. For the first time in her life May felt the sting of a strange new pain. The open door led away from warmth and a world that was full and satisfying – at least it would have led away from such a world – a world new to her – only that she was saying "Good night" and not "Good-bye." Later on she would have to say "Good-bye." How many days were there before that – five whole days? She walked up the steps, and went into the corridor.

Louise was there, just coming towards her.

"Madame desires me to say good night," said Louise, giving May's face a quick searching glance.

"I'll come and say good night to her," said May, "if it's not too late."

No, it was not too late. Louise led the way, marvelling at the callous self-assurance of English people.

Louise opened her mistress's door, and though consumed with raging curiosity, left Mrs. Dashwood to enter alone.

"Oh, May!" cried Lady Dashwood. She was moving about the room in a grey dressing-gown, looking very restless, and with her hair down.

"You didn't come down again," said May; "you were tired?"

"I wasn't tired!" Here Lady Dashwood paused. "May, I have, by pure accident, come upon a letter – from Belinda to Gwen. I don't know how it came among my own letters, but there it was, opened. I don't know if I opened it by mistake, but anyhow there it was opened; I began reading the nauseous rubbish, and then realised that I was reading Belinda. Now the question is, what to do with the letter? It contains advice. May, Gwen is to secure the Warden! It seems odd to see it written down in black and white."

Lady Dashwood stared hard at her niece – who stood before her, thoughtful and silent.

"Shall I give it to Gwen – or what?" she asked.

"Well," began May, and then she stopped.

"Of course, I blame myself for being such a fool as to have

taken in Belinda," said Lady Dashwood (for the hundredth time). "But the question now is – what to do with the letter? It isn't fit for a nice girl to read; but, no doubt, she's read scores of letters like it. The girl is being hawked round to see who will have her – and she knows it! She probably isn't nice! Girls who are exhibited, or who exhibit themselves on a tray ain't nice. Jim knows this; he knows it. Oh, May! as if he didn't know it. You understand!"

May Dashwood stood looking straight into her aunt's face, revolving thoughts in her own mind.

"Some people, May," said Lady Dashwood, "who want to be unkind and only succeed in being stupid, say that I am a matchmaker. I *have* always conscientiously tried to be a matchmaker, but I have rarely succeeded. I have been so happy with my dear old husband that I want other people to be happy too, and I am always bringing young people together – who were just made for each other. But they won't have it, May! I introduce a sweet girl full of womanly sense and affection to some nice man, and he won't have her at any price. He prefers some cheeky little brat who after marriage treats him rudely and decorates herself for other men. I introduce a really good man to a really nice girl and she won't have him, she 'loves,' if you please, a man whom decent men would like to kick, and she finds herself spending the rest of her life trying hard to make her life bearable. I dare say your scientists would say – Nature likes to keep things even, bad and good mixed together. Well, I'm against Nature. My under-housemaid develops scarlet fever, and dear old Nature

wants her to pass it on to the other maids, and if possible to the cook. Well, I circumvent Nature."

May Dashwood's face slowly smiled.

"But I did not bring Gwendolen Scott to this house – she was forced upon me – and I was weak enough to give in. Now, I should very much like to say something when I give the letter to Gwen. But I shall have to say nothing. Yes, nothing," repeated Lady Dashwood, "except that I must tell her that I have, by mistake, read the first few lines."

"Yes," said May Dashwood.

"After all, what else could I say?" exclaimed Lady Dashwood. "You can't exactly tell a daughter that you think her mother is a shameless hussy, even if you may think that she ought to know it."

"Poor Gwen and poor Lady Belinda!" said May Dashwood sighing, and moving to go, and trying hard to feel real pity in her heart.

"No," said Lady Dashwood, raising her voice, "I don't say 'poor Belinda.' I don't feel a bit sorry for the old reprobate, I feel more angry with her. Don't you see yourself – now you know Jim," continued Lady Dashwood, throwing out her words at her niece's retreating figure – "don't you see that Jim deserves something better than Belinda and Co.? Now, would you like to see him saddled for life with Gwendolen Scott?"

May Dashwood did not reply immediately; she seemed to be much occupied in walking very slowly to the door and then in

slowly turning the handle of the door. Surely Gwendolen and her mother were pitiable objects – unsuccessful as they were?

"Now, would you?" demanded Lady Dashwood. "Would you?"

"I should trust him not to do that," said May, as she opened the door. She looked back at the tall erect figure in the grey silk dressing-gown. "Good night, dear aunt." And she went out. "You see, I am running away, and I order you to go to bed. You are tired." She spoke through the small open space she had left, and then she closed the door.

"Trust him! Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Lady Dashwood, in a loud voice.

But she was not altogether displeased with the word "trust" in May Dashwood's mouth. "She seems pretty confident that Jim isn't going to make a martyr of himself," she said to herself happily.

The door opened and Louise entered with an enigmatical look on her face. Louise had been listening outside for the tempestuous sounds that in her country would have issued from any two normal women under the same circumstances.

But no such sounds had reached her attentive ears, and here was Lady Dashwood moving about with a serene countenance. She was even smiling. Oh, what a country, what people!

CHAPTER VIII
THE LOST LETTER

The next morning it was still raining. It was a typical Oxford day, a day of which there are so many in the year that those who have best known Oxford think of her fondly in terms of damp sandstone.

They remember her gabled roofs, narrow pavements, winding alleys humid and shining from recent rain; her mullioned windows looking out on high-walled gardens where the over-hanging trees drip and drip in chastened melancholy. They remember her floating spires piercing the lowering sodden sky, her grey courts and solemn doorways, her echoing cloisters; all her incomparable monastic glory soaked through and through with heavy languorous moisture, and slowly darkening in a misty twilight.

It is this sobering atmosphere that has brought to birth and has bred the "Oxford tone;" the remorseless, if somewhat playful handling of ideas.

Gwendolen Scott was no more aware of the existence of an "Oxford tone," bred (as all organic life has been) in the damp, than was the maidservant who brought her tea in the morning; but she perceived the damp. She could see through the latticed windows of the breakfast-room that it rained, rained and rained,

and the question was what she should do to make the time pass till they must start for Chartcote? No letter had yet come from her mother – and the old letter was still lost.

The best Gwen could hope for was that it had been picked up and thrown into the paper basket and destroyed.

Meanwhile what should she do? Lady Dashwood was always occupied during the mornings. Mrs. Dashwood did not seem to be at her disposal. What was she to do? Should she practise the "Reverie"? No, she didn't want to "fag" at that. She had asked the housemaid to mend a pair of stockings, and she found these returned to her room – boggled! How maddening – what idiots servants were! She found another pair that wanted mending. She hadn't the courage to ask Louise to mend it. If she tried to mend it herself she would only make a mess of it – besides she hadn't any lisle thread or needles.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.