

Hope Anthony

Double Harness



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	28
CHAPTER VI	34
CHAPTER VII	39
CHAPTER VIII	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	50

Double Harness

CHAPTER I SOME VIEWS OF THE INSTITUTION

The house – a large, plain white building with no architectural pretensions – stood on a high swell of the downs and looked across the valley in which Milldean village lay, and thence over rolling stretches of close turf, till the prospect ended in the gleam of waves and the silver-grey mist that lay over the sea. It was a fine, open, free view. The air was fresh, with a touch of salt in it, and made the heat of the sun more than endurable – even welcome and nourishing. Tom Courtland, raising himself from the grass and sitting up straight, gave utterance to what his surroundings declared to be a very natural exclamation:

"What a bore to leave this and go back to town!"

"Stay a bit longer, old chap," urged his host, Grantley Imason, who lay full length on his back on the turf, with a straw hat over his eyes and nose, and a pipe, long gone out, between his teeth.

"Back to my wife!" Courtland went on, without noticing the invitation.

With a faint sigh Grantley Imason sat up, put his hat on his head, and knocked out his pipe. He glanced at his friend with a look of satirical amusement.

"You're encouraging company for a man who's just got engaged," he remarked.

"It's the devil of a business – sort of thing some of those fellows would write a book about. But it's not worth a book. A page of strong and indiscriminate swearing – that's what it's worth, Grantley."

Grantley sighed again as he searched for his tobacco-pouch. The sigh seemed to hover doubtfully between a faint sympathy and a resigned boredom.

"And no end to it – none in sight! I don't know whether it's legal cruelty to throw library books and so on at your husband's head –"

"Depends on whether you ever hit him, I should think; and they'd probably conclude a woman never would."

"But what an ass I should look if I went into court with that sort of story!"

"Yes, you would look an ass," Grantley agreed. "Doesn't she give you – well, any other chance, you know?"

"Not she! My dear fellow, she's most aggressively the other way."

"Then why don't you give her a chance?"

"What, you mean –?"

"Am I so very cryptic?" murmured Grantley as he lit his pipe.

"I'm a Member of Parliament."

"Yes, I forgot. That's a bit awkward."

"Besides, there are the children. I don't want my children to think their father a scoundrel." He paused, and added grimly: "And I don't want them to be left to their mother's bringing-up either."

"Then we seem to have exhausted the resources of the law."

"The children complicate it so. Wait till you have some of your own, Grantley."

"Look here – steady!" Grantley expostulated. "Don't be in such a hurry to give me domestic encumbrances. The bloom's still on my romance, old chap. Talking of children to a man who's only been engaged a week!" His manner resumed its air of languid sympathy as he went on: "You needn't see much of her, Tom, need you?"

"Oh, needn't I?" grumbled Courtland. He was a rather short, sturdily built man, with a high colour and stiff black hair which stood up on his head. His face was not wanting in character, but a look of plaintive worry beset it. "You try living in the same house with a woman – with a woman like that, I mean!"

"Thanks for the explanation," laughed Grantley.

"I must go and wire when I shall be back, or Harriet'll blow the roof off over that. You come too; a stroll'll do you good."

Grantley Imason agreed; and the two, leaving the garden by a little side gate, took their way along the steep road which led down to the village, and rose again on the other side of it, to join the main highway across the downs a mile and a half away. The lane was narrow, steep, and full of turns; the notice "Dangerous to Cyclists" gave warning of its character. At the foot of it stood the Old Mill House, backing on to a little stream. Farther on lay the church and the parsonage; opposite to them was the post-office, which was also a general shop and also had rooms to let to visitors. The village inn, next to the post-office, and a dozen or so of labourers' cottages exhausted the shelter of the little valley, though the parish embraced several homesteads scattered about in dips of the downs, and a row of small new red villas at the junction with the main road. Happily these last, owing to the lie of the ground, were out of sight from Grantley Imason's windows, no less than from the village itself.

"And that's the home of the fairy princess?" asked Courtland as they passed Old Mill House, a rambling, rather broken-down old place, covered with creepers.

"Yes; she and her brother moved there when the old rector died. You may have heard of him – the Chiddingfold who was an authority on Milton. No? Well, he was, anyhow. Rather learned all round, I fancy – Fellow of John's. But he took this living and settled down for life; and when he died the children were turned out of the rectory and took Old Mill House. They've got an old woman – well, she's not very old – with the uneuphonious name of Mumble living with them. She's been a sort of nurse-housekeeper-companion: a mixed kind of position – breakfast and midday dinner with the family, but didn't join his reverence's evening meal. You know the sort of thing. She's monstrously fat; but Sibylla loves her. And the new rector moved in a fortnight ago, and everybody hates him. And the temporary curate, who was here because the new rector was at Bournemouth for his health, and who lodged over the post-office, has just gone, and everybody's dashed glad to see the last of him. And that's all the news of the town. And, behold, Tom, I'm the squire of it, and every man, woman, or child in it is, by unbroken tradition and custom, entitled to have as much port wine out of my cellar as his, her, or its state of health may happen to require."

He threw off this chatter in a gay self-contented fashion, and Tom Courtland looked at him with affectionate envy. The world had been very good to him, and he, in return, was always amiable to it. He had been born heir and only child of his father; had inherited the largest share in a solid old-fashioned banking-house; was now a director of the great joint-stock undertaking in which the family business had consented to merge itself on handsome terms; had just as much work to do as he liked, and possessed, and always had enjoyed, more money than he needed. He was thirty-three now, and had been a social favourite even before he left school. If it was difficult to say what positive gain his existence had been to society, there was no doubt that his extinction would at any time have been considered a distinct loss.

"A country squire with a rosy-cheeked country girl for wife! That's a funny ending for you, Grantley."

"She's not rosy-cheeked – and it's not an ending – and there's the post-office. Go in, and be as civil as you can to Lady Harriet."

A smile of pity, unmistakably mingled with contempt, followed Courtland into the shop. The tantrums of other men's wives are generally received with much the same mixture of scepticism and disdain as the witticisms of other parents' children. Both are seen large, very large indeed, by sufferers and admirers respectively.

The obligation of being as civil as he could to his wife caused Courtland to take three or four minutes in framing his telegram, and when he came out he found Grantley seated on the bench that stood by the inn and conversing with a young man who wore a very old coat and rough tweed knickerbockers. Grantley introduced him as Mr. Jeremy Chiddingfold, and Courtland knew that he was Sibylla's brother. Sibylla herself he had not yet seen. Jeremy had a shock of sandy hair, a wide brow, and a wide mouth; his eyes were rather protuberant, and his nose turned up, giving prominence to the nostrils.

"No family likeness, I hope?" Courtland found himself thinking; for though Jeremy was a vigorous, if not a handsome, masculine type, the lines were far from being those of feminine beauty.

"And he's enormously surprised and evidently rather shocked to hear I'm going to marry his sister – oh, we can talk away, Jeremy; Tom Courtland doesn't matter. He knows all the bad there is about me, and wants to know all the good there is about Sibylla."

One additional auditor by no means embarrassed Jeremy; perhaps not a hundred would have.

"Though, of course, somebody must have married her, you know," Grantley went on, smiling and stretching himself luxuriously like a sleek indolent cat.

"I hate marriage altogether!" declared Jeremy.

Courtland turned to him with a quick jerk of his head.

"The deuce you do!" he said, laughing. "It's early in life to have come to that conclusion, Mr. Chiddingfold."

"Yes, yes, Jeremy, quite so; but – " Grantley began.

"It's an invention of priests," Jeremy insisted heatedly.

Courtland, scarred with fifteen years' experience of the institution thus roundly attacked, was immensely diverted, though his own feelings gave a rather bitter twist to his mirth. Grantley argued, or rather pleaded, with a deceptive gravity:

"But if you fall in love with a girl?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Well, but the world must be peopled, Jeremy."

"Marriage isn't necessary to that, is it?"

"Oho!" whistled Courtland.

"We may concede the point – in theory," said Grantley; "in practice it's more difficult."

"Because people won't think clearly and bravely!" cried Jeremy, with a thump on the bench.

"Because they're hidebound, and, as I say, the priests heaven-and-hell them till they don't know where they are."

"Heaven-and-hell them! Good phrase, Jeremy! You speak feelingly. Your father, perhaps – ? Oh, excuse me, I'm one of the family now."

"My father? Not a bit. Old Mumples now, if you like. However that's got nothing to do with it. I'm going on the lines of pure reason. And what is pure reason?"

The elder men looked at one another, smiled, and shook their heads.

"We don't know; it's no use pretending we do. You tell us, Jeremy," said Grantley.

"It's just nature – nature – nature! Get back to that, and you're on solid ground. Why, apart from anything else, how can you expect marriage, as we have it, to succeed when women are what they are? And haven't they always been the same? Of course they have. Read history, read fiction (though it isn't worth reading), read science; and look at the world round about you."

He waved his arm extensively, taking in much more than the valley in which most of his short life had been spent.

"If I'd thought as you do at your age," said Courtland, "I should have kept out of a lot of trouble."

"And I should have kept out of a lot of scrapes," added Grantley.

"Of course you would!" snapped Jeremy.

That point needed no elaboration.

"But surely there are exceptions among women, Jeremy?" Grantley pursued appealingly. "Consider my position!"

"What is man?" demanded Jeremy. "Well, let me recommend you to read Haeckel!"

"Never mind man. Tell us more about woman," urged Grantley.

"Oh, lord, I suppose you're thinking of Sibylla?"

"I own it," murmured Grantley. "You know her so well, you see."

Descending from the heights of scientific generalisation and from the search after that definition of man for which he had been in the end obliged to refer his listeners to another authority, Jeremy lost at the same time his gravity and vehemence. He surprised Courtland by showing himself owner of a humorous and attractive smile.

"You'd rather define man, perhaps, than Sibylla?" suggested Grantley.

"Sibylla's all right, if you know how to manage her."

"Just what old Lady Trederwyn used to say to me about Harriet," Courtland whispered to Grantley.

"But it needs a bit of knowing. She's got the deuce of a temper – old Mumples knows that. Well, Mumples has got a temper too. They used to have awful rows – do still now and then. Sibylla used to fly out at Mumples, then Mumples sat on Sibylla, and then, when it was all over, they'd generally have a new and independent row about which had been right and which wrong in the old row."

"Not content with a quiet consciousness of rectitude, as a man would be?"

"Consciousness of rectitude? Lord, it wasn't that! That would have been all right. It was just the other way round. They both knew they had tempers, and Mumples is infernally religious and Sibylla's generous to the point of idiocy in my opinion. So after a row, when Sibylla had cheeked Mumples and told her to go to the devil (so to speak), and Mumples had sent her to bed, or thumped her, or something, you know – "

"Let us not go too deep into family tragedies, Jeremy."

"Why, when it had all settled down, and the governor and I could hear ourselves talking quietly again – "

"About marriage and that sort of question?"

"They began to have conscience. Each would have it borne in on her that she was wrong. Sibylla generally started it. She'd go weeping to Mumples, taking all her own things and any of mine that were lying about handy, and laying them at Mumples' feet, and saying she was the wickedest girl alive, and why hadn't Mumples pitched into her a lot more, and that she really loved Mumples better than anything on earth. Then Mumples would weigh in, and call Sibylla the sweetest and meekest lamb on earth, and say that she loved Sibylla more than anything on earth, and that she – Mumples – was the worst-tempered and cruellest and unjustest woman alive, not fit to be near such an angel as Sibylla. Then Sibylla used to say that was rot, and Mumples said it wasn't. And Sibylla declared Mumples only said it to wound her, and Mumples got hurt because Sibylla wouldn't forgive her, when Sibylla, of course, wanted Mumples to forgive her. And after half an hour of that sort of thing, it was as likely as not that they'd have quarrelled worse than ever, and the whole row would begin over again."

Grantley lay back and laughed.

"A bit rough on you to give your things to – er – Mumples?" suggested Courtland.

"Just like Sibylla – just like any woman, I expect," opined Jeremy, but with a more resigned and better-tempered air. His reminiscences had evidently amused himself as well as his listeners.

"Wouldn't it have been better to have a preceptress of more equable temper?" asked Grantley.

"Oh, there's nothing really wrong with Mumples; we're both awfully fond of her. Besides she's had such beastly hard luck. Hasn't Sibylla told you about that, Imason?"

"No, nothing."

"Her husband was sent to quod, you know – got twenty years."

"Twenty years! By Jingo!"

"Yes. He tried to murder a man – a man who had swindled him. Mumples says he did it all in a passion; but it seems to have been a cold sort of passion, because he waited twelve hours for him before he knifed him. And at the trial he couldn't even prove the swindling, so he got it pretty hot."

"Is he dead?"

"No, he's alive. He's to get out in about three years. Mumples is waiting for him."

"Poor old woman! Does she go and see him?"

"She used to. She hasn't for years now. I believe he won't have her – I don't know why. The governor was high sheriff's chaplain at the time, so he got to know Mumples, and took her on. She's been with us ever since, and she can stay as long as she likes."

"What things one comes across!" sighed Tom Courtland.

Grantley had looked grave for a moment, but he smiled again as he said:

"After all, though, you've not told me how to manage Sibylla. I'm not Mumples – I can't thump her. I should be better than Mumples in one way, though. If I did, I should be dead sure to stick to it that I was right."

"You'd stick to it even if you didn't think so," observed Courtland.

For a moment the remark seemed to vex Grantley, and to sober him. He spent a few seconds evidently reflecting on it.

"Well, I hope not," he said at last. "But at any rate I should think so generally."

"Then you could mostly make her think so. But if it wasn't true, you might feel a brute."

"So I might, Jeremy."

"And it mightn't be permanently safe. She sees things uncommonly sharp sometimes. Well, I must be off."

"Going back to Haeckel?"

Jeremy nodded gravely. He was not susceptible to ridicule on the subject of his theories. The two watched him stride away towards Old Mill House with decisive vigorous steps.

"Rum product for a country parsonage, Grantley."

"Oh, he's not a product; he's only an embryo. But I think he's a promising one, and he's richly amusing."

"Yes, and I wonder how you're going to manage Miss Sibylla!"

Grantley laughed easily. "My poor old chap, you can't be expected to take a cheerful view. Poor old Tom! God bless you, old chap! Let's go home to tea."

As they walked by the parsonage a bicycle came whizzing through the open garden-gate. It was propelled by a girl of fifteen or thereabouts – a slim long-legged child, almost gaunt in her immaturity, and lamentably grown out of her frock. She cried shrill greeting to Grantley, and went off down the street, displaying her skill to whosoever would look by riding with her arms akimbo.

"Another local celebrity," said Grantley. "Dora Hutting, the new parson's daughter. That she should have come to live in the village is a gross personal affront to Jeremy Chiddingfold. He's especially incensed by her lengthy stretch of black stockings, always, as he maintains, with a hole in them."

Courtland laughed inattentively.

"I hope Harriet'll get that wire in good time," he said.

No remark came into Grantley's mind, unless it were to tell his friend that he was a fool to stand what he did from the woman. But what was the use of that? Tom Courtland knew his own business best. Grantley shrugged his shoulders, but held his peace.

CHAPTER II

THE FAIRY RIDE

Courtland went off early next morning in the dog-cart to Fairhaven station – no railway line ran nearer Milldean – and Grantley Imason spent the morning lounging about his house, planning what improvements could be made and what embellishments provided against the coming of Sibylla. He enjoyed this pottering both for its own sake and because it was connected with the thought of the girl he loved. For he was in love – as much in love, it seemed to him, as a man could well be. "And I ought to know," he said, with a smile of reminiscence, his mind going back to earlier affairs of the heart, more or less serious, which had been by no means lacking in his career. He surveyed them without remorse, though one or two might reasonably have evoked that emotion, and with no more regret than lay in confessing that he had shared the follies common to his age and his position. But he found great satisfaction in the thought that Sibylla had had nothing to do with any of the persons concerned. She had known none of them; she was in no sense of the same set with any one of the five or six women of whom he was thinking; her surroundings had always been quite different from theirs. She came into his life something entirely fresh, new, and unconnected with the past. Herein lay a great deal of the charm of this latest, this final affair. For it was to be final – for his love's sake, for his honour's sake, and also because it seemed time for such finality in that ordered view of life and its stages to which his intellect inclined him. There was something singularly fortunate in the chance which enabled him to suit his desire to this conception, to find the two things in perfect harmony, to act on rational lines with such a full and even eager assent of his feelings.

He reminded himself, with his favourite shrug, that to talk of chance was to fall into an old fallacy; but the sense of accident remained. The thing had been so entirely unplanned. He had meant to buy a place in the North; it was only when the one he wanted had been snapped up by somebody else that the agents succeeded in persuading him to come and look at the house at Milldean. It happened to take his fancy, and he bought it. Then he happened to be out of sorts, and stayed down there an unbroken month, instead of coming only from Saturday to Monday. Again, Sibylla and Jeremy had meant to go away when the rector died, and had stayed on only because Old Mill House happened to fall vacant so opportunely. No other house was available in the village. So the chances went on, till chance culminated in that meeting of his with Sibylla: not their first encounter, but the one he always called his meeting with her in his own thoughts – that wonderful evening when all the sky was red, and the earth too looked almost red, and the air was so still. Then he had been with her in his garden, and she, forgetful of him, had turned her eyes to the heavens, and gazed and gazed. Presently, and still, as it seemed, unconsciously, she had stretched out her hand and caught his in a tight grip, silently but urgently demanding his sympathy for thoughts and feelings she could not express. At that moment her beauty seemed to be born for him, and he had determined to make it his. He smiled now, saying that he had been as impulsive as the merest boy, thanking fortune that he could rejoice in the impulse instead of condemning it – an end which *a priori* would have seemed much the more probable. In nine cases out of ten it would have been foolish and disastrous to be carried away in an instant like that. In his case it had, at any rate, not proved disastrous. From that moment he had never turned back from his purpose, and he had nothing but satisfaction in its now imminent accomplishment.

"Absolutely the right thing! I couldn't have done better for myself."

He stood still once in the middle of the room and said these words aloud. They exhausted the subject, and Grantley sat down at his writing-table to answer Mrs. Raymore's letter of congratulation. He had never been in love with Mrs. Raymore, who was his senior by ten years; but she was an old and intimate friend – perhaps his most intimate friend. She had been more or less in his confidence

while he was wooing Sibylla, and a telegram apprising her of his success had called forth the letter to which he now owed a response.

"If I had been a poor man," he wrote in the course of his reply, "I wouldn't have married – least of all a rich wife. Even as a well-to-do man, I wouldn't have married a rich wife. You have to marry too much besides the woman! And I didn't want a society woman, nor anybody from any of the sets I've knocked about with. But I did want to marry. I want a wife, and I want the dynasty continued. It's come direct from father to son for five or six generations, and I didn't want to stand on record as the man who stopped it. I'm entirely contented, no less with the project than with the lady. It will complete my life. That's what I want – a completion, not a transformation. She'll do just this for me. If I had taken a child and trained her, I couldn't have got more exactly what I want; and I'm sure you'll think so when you come to know her. Incidentally, I am to acquire a delightful brother-in-law. He'll always be a capital fellow; but, alas, he won't long be the jewel he is now: just at that stage between boy and man – hobbledehoy, as you women used to make me so furious by calling me – breathing fury against all institutions, especially those commonly supposed to be of divine origin; learned in ten thousand books; knowing naught of all that falls under the categories of men, women, and things; best of all, blindly wrath at himself because he has become, or is becoming, a man, and can't help it, and can't help feeling it! How he hates women and despises them! You see, he has begun to be afraid! I haven't told him that he's begun to be afraid; it will be rich to watch him as he achieves the discovery on his own account. You'll enjoy him very much."

Grantley ended his letter with a warm tribute to Mrs. Raymore's friendship, assurances of all it had been to him, and a promise that marriage should, so far as his feelings went, in no way lessen, impair, or alter the affection between them.

"He's very nice about me," said Mrs. Raymore when she had finished reading; "and he says a good deal about the brother-in-law, and quite a lot about himself. But really, he says hardly one word about Sibylla!"

Now it was, of course, about Sibylla that Mrs. Raymore had wanted to hear.

Late afternoon found Grantley cantering over the downs towards Fairhaven. Sibylla had been staying the night there with a Mrs. Valentine, a friend of hers, and was to return by the omnibus which plied to and from Milldean. Their plan was that he should meet her and she should dismount, leaving her luggage to be delivered. He loved his horse, and had seized the opportunity of slipping in a ride. When she joined him he would get off and walk with her. As he rode now he was not in the calm mood which had dictated his letter. He was excited and eager at the prospect of meeting Sibylla again; he was exulting in the success of his love, instead of contemplating with satisfaction the orderly progression of his life. But still he had not, and knew he had not, quite the freedom from self-consciousness which marks a youthful passion. The eagerness was there, but he was not surprised, although he was gratified, to find it there. His ardour was natural enough to need no nursing; yet Grantley was inclined to caress it. He laughed as he let his horse stretch himself in a gallop; he was delighted, and a trifle amused, to find his emotions so fresh: none of the luxury, none of the pleasure-giving power, had gone out of them. He was still as good a lover as any man.

He was cantering over the turf thirty or forty yards from the road when the omnibus passed him. The driver cried his name, and pointed back with his whip. Grantley saw Sibylla a long way behind. He touched his horse with the spur, and galloped towards her. Now she stood still, waiting for him. He came up to her at full speed, reined in, and leapt off. Holding his bridle and his hat in one hand, with the other he took hers, and, bowing over it, kissed it. His whole approach was gallantly conceived and carried out.

"Ah, you – you come to me like Sir Galahad!" murmured Sibylla.

"My dear, Sir Galahad! A banker, Sir Galahad!"

"Well, do bankers kiss the hands of paupers?"

"Bankers of love would kiss the hands of its millionaires."

"And am I a millionaire of love?"

Grantley let go her hand and joined in her laugh at their little bout of conceits. She carried it on, but merrily now, not in the almost painful strain of delight which had made her first greeting sound half-choked.

"Haven't I given it all to you – to a dishonest banker, who'll never let me have it back?"

"We pay interest on large accounts," Grantley reminded her.

"You'll pay large, large interest to me?"

She laid her hand on his arm, and it rested there as they began to walk, the good horse Rollo pacing soberly beside them.

"All the larger if I've embezzled the principal! That's always the way, you know." He stopped suddenly, laughing, "It's quite safe!", and kissed her.

He held her face a moment, looking into the depths of her dark eyes. Now he forgot to be amused at himself or even gratified. If he was not as a boy-lover, it was not because he advanced with less ardour, but that he advanced with more knowledge; not because he abandoned himself less, but that he knew to what the self-abandonment was.

She walked along with a free swing under her short cloth skirt; evidently she could walk thus for many a mile with no slackening and no fatigue. The wind had caught her hair, and blew it from under, and round about, and even over the flat cap of red that she wore; her eyes gazed and glowed and cried joy to him. There under the majestic spread of sky, amid the exhilaration of the salt-tasting air, on the green swell of the land, by the green and blue and white of the sea, she was an intoxication. Grantley breathed quickly as he walked with her hand on his wrist.

"It's so new," she whispered in a joyful apology. "I've never been in love before. You have! Oh, of course you have! I don't mind that – not now. I used to before – before you told me. I used to be very jealous! I couldn't be jealous now – except of not being allowed to love you enough."

"When I'm with you I've never been in love before."

"I don't believe you ever have – not really. I don't believe you could – without me to help you!" She laughed at her boast as she made it, drumming her fingers lightly on his arm; his blood seemed to register each separate touch with a beat for each. "When we're married, Grantley, you shall give me a horse, such a good horse, such a fast horse – as good and as fast as dear old Rollo. And we'll ride – we'll ride together – oh, so far and so fast, against the wind, right against it breathlessly! We'll mark the setting sun, and we'll ride straight for it, never stopping, never turning. We'll ride straight into the gold, both of us together, and let the gold swallow us up!"

"A bizarre ending for a respectable West End couple!"

"No ending! We'll do it every day!" She turned to him suddenly, saying, "Ride now. You mount – I'll get up behind you."

"What? You'll be horribly uncomfortable!"

"Who's thinking of comfort? Rollo can carry us easily. Mount, Grantley, mount! Don't go straight home. Ride along the cliff. Come, mount, mount!"

She was not to be denied. When he was mounted she set her foot lightly on his, and he helped her up.

"My arm round your waist!" she cried. "Why, I'm splendid here! Gallop, Grantley, gallop! Think somebody's pursuing us and trying to take me away!"

"Must poor Rollo drop down dead?"

"No, but we'll pretend he will!"

Now and then he cried something back to her as they rode; but for the most part he knew only her arm about him, the strands of her hair brushing against his cheek as the wind played with them, her short quick breathing behind him. The powerful horse seemed to join in the revel, so strong and easy was his gait as he pulled playfully and tossed his head. They were alone in the world, and the world was very simple – the perfect delight of the living body, the unhindered union of soul with soul

– all nature fostering, inciting, applauding. It was a great return to the earliest things, and nothing lived save those. They rode more than king and queen; they rode god and goddess in the youth of the world, descended from High Olympus to take their pleasure on the earth. They rode far and fast against the wind, against it breathlessly. They rode into the gold, and the gold swallowed them up.

The blood was hot in him, and when first he heard her gasp "Stop!" he would pay no heed. He turned the horse's head towards home, but they went at a gallop still. He felt her head fall against his shoulder. It rested there. Her breath came quicker, faster; he seemed to see her bosom rising and falling in the stress. But he did not stop. Again her voice came, strangled and faint:

"I can't bear any more. Stop! Stop!"

One more wild rush, and he obeyed. He was quivering all over when they came to a stand. Her hold round him grew loose; she was about to slip down. He turned round in his saddle and caught her about the waist with his arm. He drew her off the horse and forward to his side. He held her thus with his arm, exulting in the struggle of his muscles. He held her close against him and kissed her face. When he let her go and she reached earth, she sank on the ground and covered her face with both hands, all her body shaken with her gasps. He sat on his horse for a moment, looking at her. He drew a deep inspiration, and brushed drops of sweat from his brow. He was surprised to find that there seemed now little wind, that the sun was veiled in clouds, that a waggon passed along the road, that a dog barked from a farmhouse, that the old ordinary humdrum world was there.

He heard a short stifled sob.

"You're not angry with me?" he said. "I wasn't rough to you? I couldn't bear to stop at first."

She showed him her face. Her eyes were full of tears; there was a deep glow on her cheeks, generally so pale. She sprang to her feet and stood by his horse, looking up at him.

"I angry? You rough? It has been more than I knew happiness could be. I had no idea joy could be like that, no idea life had anything like that. And you ask me if I'm angry and if you were rough! You're opening life to me, showing me why it is good, why I have it, why I want it, what I'm to do with it. You're opening it all to me. And all the beauties come out of your dear hand, Grantley. Angry! I know only that you're doing this for me, only that I must give you in return, in a poor return, all I have and am and can be – must give you my very, very self."

He was in a momentary reaction of feeling; his earnestness was almost sombre as he answered:

"God grant you're doing right!"

"I'm doing what I must do, Grantley."

He swung himself off his horse, and the ready smile came to his face.

"I hope you'll find the necessity a permanent one," he said.

She too laughed joyfully as she submitted to his kiss.

It was her whim, urged with the mock imperiousness of a petted slave, that he should mount again, and she walk by his horse. Thus they wended their way home through the peace of the evening. She talked now of how he had first come into her life, of how she had begun to – She hesitated, ending, "How I began first to feel you – " and of how, little by little, the knowledge of the feeling had disclosed itself. She was wonderfully open and simple, very direct and unabashed; yet there was nothing that even his fastidious and much-tested taste found indelicate or even forward. In glad confidence she told all, careless of keeping any secrets or any defences against him. The seed had quickened in virgin soil, and the flower had sprung up in a night – almost by magic, she seemed to fancy. He listened tenderly and indulgently. The flame of his emotion had burnt down, but there was an after-glow which made him delightfully content with her, interested and delighted in her, still more thoroughly satisfied with what he had done, even more glad that she was different from all the others with whom he had been thrown. While she displayed to him at once the joy and the spontaneity of her abandonment of her whole existence and self to him, she made him surer of his wisdom in taking her and all she offered, more convinced of the excellence of this disposition of his life. She could give him all he pictured as desirable – the stretches of tranquillity, the moments of strong feeling.

She had it in her to give both, and she would give all she had to give. In return he gave her his love. No analysis seemed needful there. He gave her the love of his heart and the shelter of his arm; what more he could give her the afternoon had shown. But in the end it was all contained and summed up in a word – he gave his love.

They came to the crest of the hill where the road dipped down to Milldean, and paused there. "What a wonderful afternoon it's been!" she sighed.

The enchantment of it hung about her still, expressing itself in the gleam of her eyes and in her restlessness.

"It's been a very delightful one," he leaned down and whispered to her. "It's given us something to look back on always."

"Yes, a great thing to look back on. But even more to look forward to. It's told us what life is going to be, Grantley. And to think that life used to mean only that!"

She waved her hand towards Milldean.

Grantley laughed in sheer enjoyment of her. Amusement mingled with his admiration. His balance had quite come back to him. A review of the afternoon, of their wild ride, made him give part of his amusement to his own share in the proceedings. But who expects a man, or need expect himself, to be wise when he is in love? If there be a chartered season for sweet folly, it is there.

"Can we always be careering over the downs in the teeth of the wind, riding into the gold, Sibylla?" he asked her in affectionate mockery.

She looked up at him, answering simply:

"Why not?"

He shook his head with a whimsical smile.

"Whatever else there is, our hearts can be riding together still."

"And when we're old folks? Isn't it only the young who can ride like that?"

She stood silent for a moment or two. Then she turned her eyes up to his in silence still, with the colour shining bright on her cheeks. She took his hand and kissed it. He knew the thought that his words had called into her mind. He had made the girl think that, when they were old, the world would not be; there would be young hearts still to ride, young hearts in whom their hearts should be carried still in the glorious gallop, young hearts which had drawn life from them.

They parted at the gate of Old Mill House. Grantley urged her to come up to his house in the evening and bring Jeremy with her, and laughed again when she said, "Bring Jeremy?" She was confused at the hint in his laughter, but she laughed too. Then growing grave, she went on:

"No, I won't come to-night. I won't see you again to-night. I want to realise it, to think it all over."

"Is it so complicated as that? You're looking very serious!"

She broke into a fresh laugh, a laugh of joyful confession.

"No, I don't want to think it over. I really want to live it over, to live it over alone, many, many times. To be alone with you again up on the downs there."

"Very well. Send Jeremy up. By now he must be dying for an argument; and he's probably not on speaking terms with Mrs. Mumble."

He gave her his hand; any warmer farewell there in the village street was quite against his ways and notions. He observed a questioning look in her eyes, but it did not occur to him that she was rather surprised at his wanting Jeremy to come up after dinner. She did not propose to spend any time with Jeremy.

"I'll tell him you want him," she said; and added in a whisper, "Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!"

He walked his horse up the hill, looking back once or twice to the gate where she stood watching him till a turn of the lane hid him from her sight. When that happened, he sighed in luxurious contentment, and took a cigarette from his case.

To her the afternoon had been a wonder-working revelation; to him it seemed an extremely delightful episode.

CHAPTER III

THE WORLDLY MIND

For a girl of ardent temper and vivid imagination, strung to her highest pitch by a wonderful fairy ride and the still strange embrace of her lover, it may fairly be reckoned a trial to listen to a detailed comparison of the hero of her fancy with another individual – who has been sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude for attempted murder! Concede circumstances extenuating the crime as amply as you please (and My Lord in scarlet on the Bench had not encouraged the jury to concede any), the comparison is one that gives small pleasure, unless such as lies in an opportunity for the exercise of Christian patience. This particular virtue Jeremy Chiddingfold suspected of priestly origin; neither was it the strongest point in his sister's spiritual panoply. He regarded Sibylla's ill-repressed irritation and irrepressible fidgeting with a smile of malicious humour.

"You might almost as well come up to Imason's," he whispered.

"She can't go on much longer!" moaned Sibylla.

But she could. For long years starved of fruition, her love revelled luxuriantly in retrospect and tenderly in prospect; and she was always good at going on, and at going on along the same lines. Mrs. Mumble's loving auditors had heard the tale of Luke's virtues many a time during the period of his absence (that was the term euphemistically employed). The ashes of their interest suddenly flickered up at the hint of a qualification which Mrs. Mumble unexpectedly introduced.

"He wasn't the husband for every woman," she said thoughtfully.

"Thank heaven!" muttered Jeremy, glad to escape the superhuman.

"Eh, Jeremy?"

She revolved slowly and ponderously towards him.

"Thank heaven he got the right sort, Mumples."

"He did," said Mrs. Mumble emphatically; "and he knew it – and he'll know it again when he comes back, and that's only three years now."

A reference to this date was always the signal for a kiss from Sibylla. She rendered the tribute and returned to her chair, sighing desperately. But it was some relief that Mrs. Mumble had finished her parallel, with its list of ideal virtues, and now left Grantley out of the question.

"Why wasn't he the husband for every woman, Mumples?" inquired Jeremy as he lit his pipe. "They're all just alike, you know."

"You wait, Jeremy!"

"Bosh!" ejaculated Jeremy curtly.

"He liked them good-looking, to start with," she went on; "and I was good-looking." Jeremy had heard this so often that he no longer felt tempted to smile. "But there was more than that. I had tact."

"Oh, come now, Mumples! You had tact? You? I'm – well, I'm –"

"I had tact, Jeremy." She spoke with overpowering solidity. "I was there when he wanted me, and when he didn't want me I wasn't there, Sibylla."

"Didn't he always want you?" Brother and sister put the question simultaneously, but with a quite different intention.

"No, not always, dears. – Is that your foot on my table? Take it off this instant, Jeremy!"

"Quite a few thousand years ago there was no difference between a foot and a hand, Mumples. You needn't be so fussy about it."

Sibylla got up and walked to the window. From it the lights in Grantley's dining-room were visible.

"I haven't seen him for ten years," Mrs. Mumble went on; "and you've known that, my dears, though you've said nothing – no, not when you'd have liked to have something to throw at me. But I never told you why."

Sibylla left the window and came behind Mrs. Mumble, letting her hand rest on the fat shoulder.

"He broke out at me once, and said he couldn't bear it if I came to see him. It upset him so, and the time wouldn't pass by, and he got thinking how long the time was, and what it all meant. Oh, I can't tell you all he said before he was stopped by the – the man who was there. So I promised him I wouldn't go any more, unless he fell ill or wanted me. They said they'd let me know if he asked for me and was entitled to a visit. But word has never come to me, and I've never seen him."

She paused and stitched at her work for a minute or two.

"You must leave men alone sometimes," she said.

"But, Mumples, you?" whispered Sibylla.

Mrs. Mumble looked up at her, but made no answer. Jeremy flung down his book with an impatient air; he resented the approaches of emotion – especially in himself.

"He'll be old when he comes out – comes back – old and broken; they break quickly there. He won't so much mind my being old and stout, and he won't think so much of the time when I was young and he couldn't be with me; and he'll find me easier to live with: my temper's improved a lot these last years, Sibylla."

"You silly old thing!" said Sibylla.

But Jeremy welcomed a diversion.

"Rot!" he said. "It's only because you can't sit on us quite so much now. It's not moral improvement; it's simply impotence, Mumples."

Mrs. Mumble had risen in the midst of eulogising the improvement of her temper, and now passed by Jeremy, patting his unwilling cheek. She went out, and the next moment was heard in vigorous altercation with their servant as to the defects of certain eggs.

"I couldn't have done that," said Sibylla.

"Improved your temper?"

"No, stayed away."

"No, you couldn't. You never let a fellow alone, even when he's got toothache."

"Have you got it now?" cried Sibylla, darting towards him.

"Keep off! Keep off! I haven't got it, and if I had I shouldn't want to be kissed."

Sibylla broke into a laugh. Jeremy relit his pipe with a secret smile.

"But I do call it fine of Mumples."

"Go and tell her you've never done her justice, and cry," he suggested. "I'm going up to Imason's now, so you can have it all to yourselves."

"I don't want to cry to-night," Sibylla objected, with a plain hint of mysterious causes for triumph.

Jeremy picked up his cap, showing a studious disregard of any such indications.

"You're going up the hill now? I shall sit up for you."

"You'll sit up for me?"

"Yes. Besides I don't feel at all sleepy to-night."

"I shall when I come back."

"I shan't want to talk."

"Then what will you want? Why are you going to sit up?"

"I've ever so many things to do."

Jeremy's air was weary as he turned away from the inscrutable feminine. While mounting the hill he made up his mind to go to London as soon as he could. A man met men there.

No air of emotion, no atmosphere of overstrained sentiment, hung, even for Jeremy's critical eye, round Grantley Imason's luxurious table and establishment. They suggested rather the ideal of

comfort lovingly pursued, a comfort which lay not in gorgeousness or in mere expenditure, but in the delicate adjustment of means to ends and a careful exclusion of anything likely to disturb a dexterously achieved equipoise. Though Jeremy admired the absence of emotion, his rough vigorous nature was challenged at another point. He felt a touch of scorn that a man should take so much trouble to be comfortable, and should regard the achievement of his object as so meritorious a feat. In various ways everything, from the gymnastic apparatus in the hall to the leg-rest in front of the study fire, sought and subserved the ease and pleasure of the owner. That, no doubt, is what a house should be – just as a man should be well dressed. It is possible, however, to be too much of a dandy. Jeremy found an accusation of unmanliness making its way into his mind; he had to banish it by recalling that, though his host might be fond of elegant lounging, he was a keen sportsman too, and handled his gun and sat his horse with equal mastery. These virtues appealed to the English public schoolboy and to the amateur of Primitive Man alike, and saved Grantley from condemnation. But Jeremy's feelings escaped in an exclamation:

"By Jove, you are snug here!"

"I don't pretend to be an ascetic," laughed Grantley, as he stretched his legs out on the leg-rest.

"Evidently."

Grantley looked at him, smiling.

"I don't rough it unless I'm obliged. But I can rough it. I once lived for a week on sixpence a day. I had a row with my governor. He wanted me to give up – Well, never mind details. It's enough to observe, Jeremy, that he was quite right and I was quite wrong. I know that now, and I rather fancy I knew it then. However, his way of putting it offended me, and I flung myself out of the house with three-and-six in my pocket. Like the man in Scripture, I couldn't work and I wouldn't beg, and I wouldn't go back to the governor. So it was sixpence a day for a week and very airy lodgings. Then it was going to be the recruiting-sergeant; but, as luck would have it, I met the dear old man on the way. I suppose I looked a scarecrow; anyhow, he was broken up about it, and killed the fatted calf – killed it for an unrepentant prodigal. And I could do that again, though I may live in a boudoir."

Jeremy rubbed his hands slowly against one another – a movement common with him when he was thinking.

"I don't tell you that to illustrate my high moral character – as I say, I was all in the wrong – but just to show you that, given the motive – "

"What was the motive?"

"Pride, obstinacy, conceit – anything you like of that kind," smiled Grantley. "I'd told the fellows about my row, and they'd said I should have to knuckle down. So I made up my mind I wouldn't."

"Because of what they'd say?"

"Don't be inquisitorial, Jeremy. The case is, I repeat, not given as an example of morality, but as an example of me – quite different things. However, I don't want to talk about myself to-night; I want to talk about you. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"Oh, I'm all right!" declared Jeremy. "I've got my London B.A. (It didn't run to Cambridge, you know), and I'm pegging away." A touch of boyish pompousness crept in. "I haven't settled precisely what line of study I shall devote myself to, but I intend to take up and pursue some branch of original research."

Grantley's mind had been set on pleasing Sibylla by smoothing her brother's path. His business interest would enable him to procure a good opening for Jeremy – an opening which would lead to comfort, if not to wealth, in a short time, proper advantage being taken of it.

"Original research?" He smiled indulgently. "There's not much money in that."

"Oh, I've got enough to live on. Sibylla's all right now, and I've got a hundred a year. And I do a popular scientific article now and then – I've had one or two accepted. Beastly rot they have to be, though."

Grantley suggested the alternative plan. Jeremy would have none of it. He turned Grantley's story against him.

"If you could live on sixpence a day out of pride, I can live on what I've got for the sake of – of – " He sought words for his big vague ambitions. "Of knowledge – and – and – "

"Fame?" smiled Grantley.

"If you like," Jeremy admitted with shy sulkiness.

"It'll take a long time. Oh, I know you're not a marrying man; but still, a hundred a year – "

"I can wait for what I want."

"Well, if you change your mind let me know."

"You didn't let your father know."

Grantley laughed.

"Oh, well, a week isn't ten years, nor even five," he reminded Jeremy.

"A man can wait for what he wants. Hang it, even a woman can do that! Look at Mumples!"

Grantley asked explanations, and drew out the story which Mrs. Mumble had told earlier in the evening. Grantley's fancy was caught by it, and he pressed Jeremy for a full and accurate rendering, obtaining a clear view of how Mrs. Mumble herself read the case.

"Quite a romantic picture! The lady and the lover, with the lady outside the castle and the lover inside – just for a change."

Jeremy had been moved by the story, but reluctantly and to his own shame. Now he hesitated whether to laugh or not, nature urging one way, his pose (which he dignified with the title of reason) suggesting the other.

"A different view is possible to the worldly mind," Grantley went on in lazy amusement. "Perhaps the visits bored him. Mumples – if I may presume to call her that – probably cried over him and 'carried on,' as they say. He felt a fool before the warder, depend upon it! And perhaps she didn't look her best in tears – they generally don't. Besides we see what Mumples looks like now, and even ten years ago – ! Well, as each three months, or whatever the time may be, rolled round, less of the charm of youth would hang about her. We shouldn't suggest any of this to Mumples, but as philosophers and men of the world, we're bound to contemplate it ourselves, Jeremy."

He drank some brandy and soda and lit a fresh cigar. Jeremy laughed applause. Here, doubtless, was the man of the world's view, the rational and unsentimental view to which he was vowed and committed. Deep in his heart a small voice whispered that it was a shame to turn the light of this disillusioned levity on poor old Mumples' mighty sorrow and trustful love.

"And when we're in love with them they can't do anything wrong; and when we've stopped being in love, they can't do anything right," Grantley sighed humorously. "Oh, yes, there's another interpretation of Mr. Mumble's remarkable conduct! You see, we know he's not by nature a patient man, or he wouldn't have committed the indiscretion that brought him where he is. Don't they have bars, or a grating, or something between them at these painful interviews? Possibly it was just as well for Mumples' sake, now and then!"

Despite the small voice Jeremy laughed more. He braved its accusation of treachery to Mumples. He tried to feel quite easy in his mirth, to enjoy the droll turning upside down of the pathetic little story as pleasantly and coolly as Grantley there on his couch, with his cigar and his brandy and soda. For Grantley's reflective smile was entirely devoid of any self-questioning or of any sense of treachery to anybody or to anything with claims to reverence or loyalty. It was for Jeremy, however, the first time he had been asked to turn his theories on to one he loved and to try how his pose worked where a matter came near his heart. His mirth did not achieve spontaneity. But it was Grantley who said at last, with a yawn:

"It's a shame to make fun out of the poor old soul; but the idea was irresistible, wasn't it, Jeremy?"

And Jeremy laughed again.

Jeremy said good-night and went down the hill, leaving Grantley to read the letters which the evening post had brought him. There had been one from Tom Courtland. Grantley had opened and glanced at that before his guest went away. There were new troubles, it appeared. Lady Harriet had not given her husband a cordial or even a civil welcome; and the letter hinted that Courtland had stood as much as he could bear, and that something, even though it were something desperate, must be done. "A man must find some peace and some pleasure in his life," was the sentence Grantley chose to read out as a sample of the letter; and he had added, "Poor old Tom! I'm afraid he's going to make a fool of himself."

Jeremy had asked no questions as to the probable nature of Courtland's folly (which was not perhaps hard to guess); but the thought of him mingled with the other recollections of the evening, with Mrs. Mumble's story and the turn they had given to it, with Grantley's anecdote about himself, and with the idea of him which Jeremy's acute though raw mind set itself to grope after and to realise. The young man again felt that somehow his theories had begun to be no longer theories in a vacuum of merely speculative thought; they had begun to meet people and to run up against facts. The facts and the people no doubt fitted and justified the theories, but to see how that came about needed some consideration. So far he had got. He had not yet arrived at a modification of the theories, or even at an attitude of readiness to modify them, although that would have been an unimpeachable position from a scientific standpoint.

The sight of Sibylla standing at the gate of their little garden brought his thoughts back to her. He remembered that she had promised to sit up – an irrational proceeding, as her inability to give good ground for it had clearly proved; and it was nearly twelve – a very late hour for Milldean – so well had Grantley's talk beguiled the time. Sibylla herself seemed to feel the need of excuse, for as soon as she caught sight of her brother she cried out to him:

"I simply couldn't go to bed! I've had such a day, Jeremy, and my head's all full of it. And on the top of it came what poor Mumples told us; and – and you can guess how that chimed in with what I must be thinking."

He had come up to her, and she put her hand in his.

"Dear old Jeremy, what friends we've been! We have loved one another, haven't we? Don't stop loving me. You don't say much, and you pretend to be rather scornful – just like a boy; and you try to make out that it's all rather a small and ordinary affair – "

"Isn't it?"

"Oh, I daresay! But to me? Dear, you know what it is to me! I don't want you to say much; I don't mind your pretending. But just now, in the dark, when we're all alone, when nobody can possibly hear – and I swear I won't tell a single soul – kiss me and tell me your heart's with me, because we've been true friends and comrades, haven't we?"

It was dark and nobody was there. Jeremy kissed her and mumbled some awkward words. They were enough.

"Now I'm quite happy. It was just that I wanted to hear it from you too."

Jeremy was glad, but he felt himself compromised. When they went in, his first concern was to banish emotion and relieve the tension. Mrs. Mumble's workbox gave a direction to his impulse. If a young man be inclined, as some are, to assume a cynical and worldly attitude, he will do it most before women, and, of all women, most before those who know him best and have known him from his tender age, since to them above all it is most important to mark the change which has occurred. So Jeremy not only allowed himself to forget that small voice, and, turning back to Mrs. Mumble's story, once more to expose it to an interpretation of the worldly and cynical order, but he went even further. The view which Grantley had suggested to him, which had never crossed his mind till it was put before him by another, the disillusioned view, he represented now not as Grantley's, but as his own. He threw it out as an idea which naturally presented itself to a man of the world, giving the impression that it had been in his mind all along, even while Mrs. Mumble was speaking. And now

he asked Sibylla, not perhaps altogether to believe in it, but to think it possible, almost probable, and certainly very diverting.

Sibylla heard him through in silence, her eyes fixed on him in a regard grave at first, becoming, as he went on, almost frightened.

"Do ideas like that come into men's minds?" she asked at the end. She did not suspect that the idea had not been her brother's own in the beginning. "I think it's a horrible idea."

"Oh, you're so high-falutin!" he laughed, glad, perhaps, to have shocked her a little.

She came up to him and touched his arm imploringly.

"Forget it," she urged. "Never think about it again. Oh, remember how much, how terribly she loves him! Don't have such ideas." She drew back a little. "I think – I think it's almost – devilish: I mean, to imagine that, to suspect that, without any reason. Yes – devilish!"

That hit Jeremy; it was more than he wanted.

"Devilish! You call it devilish? Why, it was – " He had been about to lay the idea to its true father-mind; but he did not. He looked at his sister again. "Well, I'm sorry," he grumbled. "It only struck me as rather funny."

Sibylla's wrath vanished.

"It's just because you know nothing about it that you could think such a thing, poor boy!" said she.

It became clearer still that Grantley must not be brought in, because the only explanation which mitigated Jeremy's offence could not help Grantley. Jeremy was loyal here, whatever he may have been to Mrs. Mumble. He kept Grantley out of it. But – devilish! What vehement language for the girl to use!

CHAPTER IV

INITIATION

Mrs. Raymore was giving a little dinner at her house in Buckingham Gate in honour of Grantley Imason and his wife. They had made their honeymoon a short one, and were now in Sloane Street for a month before settling at Milldean for the autumn. The gathering was of Grantley's friends, one of the sets with whom he had spent much of his time in bachelor days. The men were old-time friends; as they had married, the wives had become his acquaintances too – in some cases (as in Mrs. Raymore's) more than mere acquaintances. They had all been interested in him, and consequently were curious about his wife – critical, no doubt, but prepared to be friendly and to take her into the set, if she would come. Mrs. Raymore, as she sat at the head of her table, with Grantley by her and Sibylla on Raymore's right hand at the other end, was thinking that they, in their turn, might reasonably interest the young bride – might set her thinking, and encourage or discourage her according to the conclusions she came to about them. She and Raymore would bear scrutiny well as things went. There was a very steady and affectionate friendship between them; they lived comfortably together, and had brought up their children – a boy and a girl – successfully and without friction. Raymore – a tall man with a reddish face and deliberate of speech – was always patient and reasonable. He had never been very impassioned; there had not been much to lose of what is most easily lost. He might have had a few more intellectual tastes, perhaps, and a keener interest in things outside his business; but she had her own friends, and on the whole there was little to complain of.

Then came the Fanshaws – John and Christine. He was on the Stock Exchange; she, a dainty pretty woman, given up to society and to being very well dressed, but pleasant, kind, and clever in a light sort of way. They liked to entertain a good deal, and got through a lot of money. When Fanshaw was making plenty, and Christine had plenty to spend, things went smoothly enough. In bad times there was trouble, each thinking that retrenchment could best be practised by the other and in regard to the expenses to which the other was addicted: it was, for instance, the stables against the dressmaker then. The happiness of the household depended largely on the state of the markets – a thing which it might interest Mrs. Grantley Imason to hear.

Next came the Selfords – Richard and Janet. He was a rather small frail man, of private means, a dabbler in art. She was artistic too, or would have told you so, and fond of exotic dogs, which she imported from far-off places, and which usually died soon. They were a gushing pair, both towards one another and towards the outside world; almost aggressively affectionate in public. "Trying to humbug everybody," Tom Courtland used to say; but that was too sweeping a view. Their excessive amiability was the result of their frequent quarrels – or rather tiffs, since quarrel is perhaps an over-vigorous word. They were always either concealing the existence of a tiff or making one up, reconciling themselves with a good deal of display. Everybody knew this, thanks in part to their sharp-eyed sharp-tongued daughter Anna, a girl of sixteen, who knew all about the tiffs and could always be got to talk about them.

The last pair were the Courtlands themselves. All the set was rather afraid of Lady Harriet. She was a tall, handsome, fair woman, still young; she patronised them rather, but was generally affable and agreeable when nothing occurred to upset her. Tom Courtland grew more depressed, heavy, and dreary every day. A crisis was expected – but Lady Harriet's small-talk did not suffer. Mrs. Raymore thought that the less Grantley's wife saw or knew of that household the better.

The party was completed by Suzette Bligh, a girl pretty in a faded sort of way, not quite so young as she tried to look, and in Mrs. Raymore's opinion, quite likely not to marry at all; and finally by young Blake, Walter Dudley Blake, a favourite of hers and of many other people's, known as a climber of mountains and a shooter of rare game in his energetic days; suspected of enjoying life somewhat

to excess and with riotous revelry in his seasons of leisure; impetuous, chivalrous, impulsive, and notably good-looking. Mrs. Raymore had put him on Sibylla's right – in case her husband should not prove amusing to the honoured guest.

On the whole, she thought, they ought not to frighten Sibylla much. There was one terrible example – the Courtlands; but when it comes to throwing things about, the case is admittedly abnormal. For the rest they seemed, to the student of matrimony, fair average samples of a bulk of fair average merit. Perhaps there might have been an ideal union – just to counter-balance the Courtlands at the other extreme. If such were desirable, let it be hoped that the Imasons themselves would supply it. In regard to one point, she decided, the company was really above the average – and that the most important point. There had been rumours once about Christine Fanshaw – indeed they were still heard sometimes; but scandal had never assailed any other woman there. In these days that was something, thought Mrs. Raymore.

Grantley turned from Christine Fanshaw to his hostess.

"You're very silent. What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Sibylla's really beautiful, and in a rather unusual way. You might pass her over once; but if you did look once, you'd be sure to look always."

"Another woman's looks have kept your attention all this time?"

"Your wife's," she reminded him with an affectionately friendly glance. "And I was wondering what she thought of us all, what we all look like in those pondering thoughtful questioning eyes of hers."

"Her eyes do ask questions, don't they?" laughed Grantley.

"Many, many, and must have answers, I should think. And don't they expect good answers?"

"Oh, she's not really at all alarming!"

"You can make the eyes say something different, I daresay?"

He laughed again very contentedly. Mrs. Raymore's admiration pleased him, since she was not very easy herself to please. He was glad she approved of Sibylla, though as a rule his own opinion was enough for him.

"Well, they aren't always questioning. That would be fatiguing in a wife – really as bad as continually discussing the Arian heresy, as old Johnson says. But I daresay," he lowered his voice, "Lady Harriet would excite a query or two."

"You've told me nothing about Sibylla. I shall have to find it all out for myself."

"That's the only knowledge worth having; and I'm only learning myself still, you know."

"Really, that's an unusually just frame of mind for a husband. I've high hopes of you, Grantley."

"Good! Because you know me uncommonly well."

She thought a moment.

"No, not so very well," she said. "You're hard to know."

He took that as a compliment; probably most people would, since it seems to hint at something rare and out of the common; inaccessibility has an aristocratic flavour.

"Oh, I suppose we all have our fastnesses," he said with a laugh which politely waived any claim to superiority without expressly abandoning it.

"Doesn't one give up the key of the gates by marrying?"

"My dear Kate, read your Bluebeard again!"

Mrs. Raymore relapsed into the silence that was almost habitual to her, but it passed through her mind that the conversation had soon turned from Sibylla to Grantley himself, or at least had dealt with Sibylla purely in her bearing on Grantley; it had not increased her knowledge of Mrs. Imason as an independent individual.

"Well, with business what it is," said Fanshaw in his loud voice – a voice that had a way of stopping other people's voices – "we must cut it down somewhere."

"Oh, you're as rich as Croesus, Fanshaw!" objected young Blake.

"I'm losing money every day! Christine and I were discussing it as we drove here."

"I like your idea of discussion, John," remarked Christine in her delicate tones, generally touched with sarcasm. "I couldn't open my lips."

"He closed you, and then threw out your Budget?" asked Grantley.

"He almost stripped my gown from my back, and made an absolute clutch at my diamonds."

"I put forward the reasonable view," Fanshaw insisted rather heatedly. "What I said was, begin with superfluities – "

"Are clothes superfluities?" interjected Christine, watching the gradual flushing of her husband's face with mischievous pleasure.

"Nothing is superfluous that is beautiful," said Selford; he lisped slightly, and spoke with an affected air. "We should retrench in the grosser pleasures – eating and drinking, display, large houses – "

"Peculiar dogs!" suggested Blake, chaffing Mrs. Selford.

"Oh, but they are beautiful!" she cried.

"Horses!" said Christine, with sharp-pointed emphasis. "You should really be guided by Mr. Selford, John."

"Every husband should be guided by another husband. That's axiomatic," said Grantley.

"I'm quite content with my own," smiled Mrs. Selford. "Dick and I always agree."

"They must be fresh from a row," Tom Courtland whispered surlily to Mrs. Raymore.

"About money matters the man's voice must in the nature of things be final," Fanshaw insisted. "It's obvious. He knows about it; he makes it – "

"Quite enough for him to do," Christine interrupted. "At that point we step in – and spend it."

"Division of labour? Quite right, Mrs. Fanshaw," laughed Blake. "And if any of you can't manage your department, I'm ready to help."

"They can manage that department right enough," Fanshaw grumbled. "If we could manage them as well as they manage that – " He took a great gulp of champagne, and grew still redder when he heard Christine's scornful little chuckle.

Raymore turned to Sibylla with a kind fatherly smile.

"I hope we're not frightening you, Mrs. Imason? Not too much of the seamy side?"

Blake chimed in on her other hand:

"I'm here to maintain Mrs. Imason's illusions."

"If we're talking of departments, I think that's mine, Blake, thank you," called Grantley with a laugh.

"I'm sure I've been most considerate." This was Lady Harriet's first contribution to the talk. "I haven't said a word!"

"And you could a tale unfold?" asked Blake.

She made no answer beyond shrugging her fine shoulders and leaning back in her chair as she glanced across at her husband. A moment's silence fell on the table. It seemed that they recognised a difference between troubles and grievances which could be discussed with more or less good-nature, or quarrelled over with more or less acerbity, and those which were in another category. The moment the Courtlands were in question, a constraint arose. Tom Courtland himself broke the silence, but it was to talk about an important cricket-match. Lady Harriet smiled at him composedly, unconscious of the earnest study of Sibylla's eyes, which were fixed on her and were asking (as Mrs. Raymore would have said) many questions.

When the ladies had gone, Fanshaw buttonholed Raymore and exhibited to him his financial position and its exigencies with ruthless elaboration and with a persistently implied accusation of Christine's extravagance. Selford victimised young Blake with the story of a picture which he had just picked up; he declared it was by a famous Dutch master, and watched for the effect on Blake,

who showed none, never having heard of the Dutch master. Tom Courtland edged up to Grantley's side; they had not met since Grantley's wedding.

"Well, you look very blooming and happy, and all that," he said.

"First-rate, old boy. How are you?"

Tom lowered his voice and spoke with a cautious air.

"I've done it, Grantley – what I wrote to you. By God, I couldn't stand it any longer! I'd sooner take any risk. Oh, I shall be very careful! I shan't give myself away. But I had to do it."

Grantley gave a shrug.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry," he said. "That sort of thing may turn out so awkward."

"It'd have to be infernally awkward to be worse than what I've gone through. At any rate I get away from it sometimes now, and – and enjoy myself."

"Find getting away easy?"

"No; but as we must have shindies, we may as well have them about that. I told Harriet she made the house intolerable, so I should spend my evenings at my clubs."

"Oh! And – and who is she?"

He looked round warily before he whispered:

"Flora Bolton."

Grantley raised his brows and said one word:

"Expensive!"

Tom nodded with a mixture of ruefulness and pride.

"If you're going to the devil, you may as well go quickly and pleasantly," he said, drumming his fingers on the cloth. "By heaven, if I'd thought of this when I married! I meant to go straight – you know I did?"

Grantley nodded.

"I broke off all that sort of thing. I could have gone straight. She's driven me to it – by Jove, she has."

"Take care, old chap. They'll notice you."

"I don't care if – Oh, all right, and thanks, Grantley. I don't want to make an exhibition of myself. And I've told nobody but you, of course."

Sibylla, never long in coming to conclusions, had made up her mind about the women before the evening was half over. Lady Harriet was strange and terrible when the known facts of the case were compared with her indolent composure. Mrs. Selford was trivial and tiresome, but a good enough little silly soul. Suzette Bligh was entirely negligible; she had not spoken save to flirt very mildly with Blake. Mrs. Raymore elicited a liking, but a rather timid and distant one; she seemed very clear-sighted and judicial. Christine Fanshaw attracted her most, first by her dainty prettiness, also by the perfection of her clothes (a thing Sibylla much admired), most by her friendly air and the piquant suffusion of sarcastic humour that she had. She seemed to treat even her own grievances in this semi-serious way – one of them certainly, if her husband were one. Such a manner and such a way of regarding things are often most attractive to the people who would find it hardest to acquire the like for themselves; they seem to make the difficulties which have loomed so large look smaller – they extenuate, smooth away, and, by the artifice of not asking too much, cause what is given to appear a more liberal instalment of the possible. They are not, however, generally associated with any high or rigid moral ideas, and were not so associated in the person of pretty Christine Fanshaw. But they are entirely compatible with much worldly wisdom, and breed a tolerance of unimpeachable breadth, if not of exalted origin.

"We'll be friends, won't we?" Christine said to Sibylla, settling herself cosily by her. "I'm rather tired of all these women, except Kate Raymore, and she doesn't much approve of me. But I'm going to like you."

"Will you? I'm so glad."

"And I can be very useful to you. I can even improve your frocks – though this one's very nice; and I can tell you all about husbands. I know a great deal – and I'm representative." She laughed gaily. "John and I are quite representative. I like John really, you know; he's a good man – but he's selfish. And John likes me, but I'm selfish. And I like teasing John, and he takes a positive pleasure sometimes in annoying me."

"And that's representative?" smiled Sibylla.

"Oh, not by itself, but as an element, sandwiched in with the rest – with our really liking one another and getting on all right, you know. And when we quarrel, it's about something, not about nothing, like the Selfords – though I don't know that that is quite so representative, after all." She paused a moment, and resumed less gaily, with a little wrinkle on her brow: "At least, I think John really likes me. Sometimes I'm not sure, though I know I like him; and when I'm least sure I tease him most."

"Is that a good remedy?"

"Remedy? No, it's temper, my dear. You see, there was a time when – when I didn't care whether he liked me or not; when I – when I – well, when I didn't care, as I said. And I think he felt I didn't. And I don't know whether I've ever quite got back."

Ready with sympathy, Sibylla pressed the little richly beringed hand.

"Oh, it's all right. We're very lucky. Look at the Courtlands!"

"The poor Courtlands seem to exist to make other people appreciate their own good luck," said Sibylla, laughing a little.

"I'm sure they ought to make you appreciate yours. Grantley and Walter Blake are two of the most sought-after of men, and you've married one of them, and made quite a conquest of the other to-night. Oh, here come the men!"

Young Blake came straight across to them, and engaged in a verbal fencing-match with Christine. She took him to task for alleged dissipation and over-much gaiety; he defended his character and habits with playful warmth. Sibylla sat by silent; she was still very ignorant of all the life they talked about. She knew that Christine's charges carried innuendoes from the way Blake met them, but she did not know what the innuendoes were. But she was not neglected. If his words were for gay Christine, his eyes were very constantly for the graver face and the more silent lips. He let her see his respectful admiration in the frank way he had; nobody could take offence at it.

"I suppose you must always have somebody to be in love with – to give, oh, your whole heart and soul to, mustn't you?" Christine asked scornfully.

"Yes, it's a necessity of my nature."

"That's what keeps you a bachelor, I suppose?"

He laughed, but, as Sibylla thought, a trifle ruefully, or at least as though he were a little puzzled by Christine's swift thrust.

"Keeps him? He's not old enough to marry yet," she pleaded, and Blake gaily accepted the defence.

Their talk was interrupted by Lady Harriet's rising; her brougham had been announced. Grantley telegraphed his readiness to be off too, and he and Sibylla, after saying good-night, followed the Courtlands downstairs, Raymore accompanying them and giving the men cigars while their wives put their cloaks on. Grantley asked for a cab, which was some little while in coming; Tom Courtland said he wanted a hansom too, and stuck his cigar in his mouth, puffing out a full cloud of smoke. At the moment Lady Harriet came back into the hall, Sibylla following her.

"Do you intend to smoke that cigar in the brougham as we go to my mother's party?" asked Lady Harriet.

"I'm not aware that your mother minds smoke; but as a matter of fact I'm not going to the party at all."

"You're expected – I said you'd come."

"I'm sorry, Harriet, but you misunderstood me."

Tom Courtland stood his ground firmly and answered civilly, though with a surly rough tone in his voice. His wife was still very quiet, yet Raymore and Grantley exchanged apprehensive looks; the lull before the storm is a well-worked figure of speech, but they knew it applied very well to Lady Harriet.

"You're going home, then?"

"Not just now."

"Where are you going?"

"To the club."

"What club?"

"Is my cab there?" Grantley called to the butler.

"Not yet, sir; there'll be one directly."

"What club?" demanded Lady Harriet again.

"What does it matter? I haven't made up my mind. I'm only going to have a rubber."

Then it came – what Sibylla had been told about, what the others had seen before now. They were all forgotten – host and fellow-guests, even the servants, even the cabman, who heard the outburst and leant down from his high seat, trying to see. It was like some physical affliction, an utter loss of self-control; it was a bare step distant from violence. It was the failure of civilisation, the casting-off of decency, a being abandoned to a raw fierce fury.

"Club!" she cried, a deep flush covering her face and all her neck. "Pretty clubs you go to hard on midnight! I know you, I know you too well, you – you liar!"

Sibylla crept behind Grantley, passing her hand through his arm. Tom Courtland stood motionless, very white, a stiff smile on his lips.

"You liar!" she said once again, and without a look at any of them swept down the steps. She moved grandly. She came to the door of her brougham, which the footman held for her. The window was drawn up.

"Have you been driving with the windows shut?"

"Yes, my lady."

"I told you to keep them down when it was fine. Do you want to stifle me, you fool?" She raised the fan she carried; it had stout ivory sticks and a large knob of ivory at the end. She dashed the knob against the window with all her strength; the glass was broken and fell clattering on the pavement as Lady Harriet got in.

The footman shut the door, touched his hat, and joined the coachman on the box.

With his pale face and set smile, with his miserable eyes and bowed shoulders, Tom Courtland went down the steps to his cab. Neither did he speak to any of them.

At last Raymore turned to Sibylla.

"I'm so sorry it happened to-night – when you were here," he said.

"What does it mean?" she gasped.

She looked from Grantley to Raymore and back again, and read the answer in their faces. They knew where Tom Courtland had gone. Grantley patted her hand gently, and said to Raymore:

"Well, who could stand a savage like that?"

It was the recognition of a ruin inevitable and past cure.

CHAPTER V

THE BIRTH OF STRIFE

There are processes undergone which people hardly realise themselves, which another can explain by no record, however minute or laborious. They are in detail as imperceptible, as secret, as elusive as the physical changes which pass upon the face of the body. From day to day there is no difference; but days make years, and years change youth to maturity, maturity to decay. So in matters of the soul the daily trifling sum adds up and up. A thousand tiny hopes nipped, a thousand little expectations frustrated, a thousand foolish fears proved not so foolish. Divide them by the days, and there is nothing to cry about at bedtime, nothing even to pray about, if to pray you are inclined. Yet as a month passes, or two, or three, the atoms seem to join and form a cloud. The sunbeams get through here and there still, but the clear fine radiance is obscured. Presently the cloud thickens, deepens, hardens. It seems now a wall, stout and high; the gates are heavy and forbidding, and they stand where once there was ready and eagerly welcomed entrance and access. Think of what it is to look for a letter sometimes. It comes not on Monday – it's nothing; nor on Tuesday – it's nothing; nor on Wednesday – odd! nor on Thursday – strange! nor on Friday – you can't think! It comes not for a week – you are hurt; for a fortnight – you are indignant. A month passes – and maybe what you prized most in all your life is gone. You have been told the truth in thirty broken sentences.

Sibylla Imason took a reckoning – in no formal manner, not sitting down to it, still less in any flash of inspiration or on the impulse of any startling incident. As she went to and fro on her work and her pleasure, the figures gradually and insensibly set themselves in rows, added and subtracted themselves, and presented her with the quotient. It was against her will that all this happened. She would have had none of it; there was nothing to recommend it; it was not even unusual. But it would come – and what did it come to? Nothing alarming or vulgar or sensational. Grantley's gallantry forbade that, his good manners, his affectionate ways, his real love for her. It was forbidden too by the moments of rapture which she excited and which she shared; they were still untouched – the fairy rides on fairy horses. But is not the virtue of such things to mean more than they are – to be not incidents, but rather culminations – not exceptions, but the very type, the highest expression, of what is always there? Even the raptures she was coming to doubt while she welcomed, to mistrust while she shared. Would she come at once to hate and to strive after them?

In the end it was not the identity her soaring fancy had pictured – not the union her heart cried for, less even than the partnership which naked reason seemed to claim. She had not become his very self, as he was of her very self – nor part of him. She was to him – what? She sought a word, at least an idea, and smiled at one or two which her own bitterness offered to her. A toy? Of course not. A diversion? Much more than that. But still it was something accidental, something that he might not have had and would have done very well without; yet a something greatly valued, tended, caressed – yes, and even loved. A great acquisition perhaps expressed it – a very prized possession – a cherished treasure. Sometimes, after putting it as low as she could in chagrin, she put it as high as she could – by way of testing it. Put it how she would, the ultimate result worked out the same. She made much less difference to Grantley Imason than she had looked to make; she was much less of and in his life, much less of the essence, more of an accretion. She was outside his innermost self – a stranger to his closest fastnesses. Was that the nature of the tie or the nature of the man? She cried out against either conclusion; for either ruined the hopes on which she lived. Among them was one mighty hope. Were not both tie and man still incomplete, even as she, the woman, was in truth yet incomplete, yet short of her great function, undischarged of her high natural office? Was there not that in her now which should make all things complete and perfect? While that hope – nay, that conviction – remained she refused to admit that she was discontent. She waited, trying meanwhile to smother the discontent.

Of course there was another side, and Grantley himself put it to Mrs. Raymore when, in her sisterly affection for him and her motherly interest in Sibylla, she had ventured on two or three questions which, on the smallest analysis, resolved themselves into hints.

"In anything like a doubtful case," he complained humorously (for he was not taking the questions very seriously), "the man never gets fair play. He's not nearly so picturesque. And if he becomes picturesque, if he goes through fits hot and cold, and ups and downs, and all sorts of convulsions, as the woman does and does so effectively, he doesn't get any more sympathy, because it's not the ideal for the man – not our national idea, anyhow. You see the dilemma he's in? If he's not emotional he's not interesting; if he's emotional he's not manly. I'm speaking of a doubtful case all the time. Of course you may have your impeccable Still-Waters-Run-Deep sort of man – the part poor old Tom ought to have played. But then that is a part – a stage part, very seldom real. No; in a doubtful case the man's nowhere. Take it how you will, the woman is bound to win."

"Which means that you don't want to complain or criticise, but if I will put impertinent questions – "

"If you put me on my defence – " he amended, laughing.

"Yes, if I put you on your defence, you'll hint – "

"Through generalities – "

"Yes, through generalities you'll hint, in your graceful way, that Sibylla, of whom you're very fond – "

"Oh, be fair! You know I am."

"Is rather – exacting – fatiguing?"

"That's too strong. Rather, as I say, emotional. She likes living on the heights. I like going up there now and then. In fact I maintain the national ideal."

"Yes, I think you'd do that very well – quite well enough, Grantley."

"There's a sting in the tail of your praise?"

"After all, I'm a woman too."

"We really needn't fuss ourselves, I think. You see, she has the great saving grace – a sense of humour. If I perceive dimly that somehow something hasn't been quite what it ought to have been, that I haven't – haven't played up somehow – you know what I mean?"

"Very well indeed," Mrs. Raymore laughed gently.

"I can put it all right by a good laugh – a bit of mock heroics, perhaps – some good chaff, followed by a good gallop – not at all a bad prescription! After a little of that, she's laughing at herself for having the emotions, and at me for not having them, and at both of us for the whole affair."

"Well, as long as it ends like that there's not much wrong. But take care. Not everything will stand the humorous aspect, you know."

"Most things, thank heaven, or where should we be?"

"Tom Courtland, for instance?"

"Oh, not any longer, I'm afraid."

"It won't do for the big things and the desperate cases; not even for other people's – much less for your own."

"I suppose not. If you want it always, you must be a looker-on; and you'll tell me husbands can't be lookers-on at their own marriages?"

"I tell you! Facts will convince you sooner than I could, Grantley."

He was really very reasonable from his own point of view, both reasonable and patient. Mrs. Raymore conceded that. And he was also quite consistent in his point of view. She remembered a phrase from his letter which had defined what he was seeking – "a completion, not a transformation." He was pursuing that scheme still – a scheme into which the future wife had fitted so easily and perfectly, into which the actual wife fitted with more difficulty. But he was dealing with the difficulty in a very good spirit and a very good temper. If the scheme were possible at all – given Sibylla as

she was – he was quite the man to put it through successfully. But she reserved her opinion as to its possibility. The reservation did not imply an approval of Sibylla or any particular inclination to champion her; it marked only a growing understanding of what Sibylla was, a growing doubt as to what she could be persuaded or moulded into becoming. Mrs. Raymore had no prejudices in her favour.

And at any rate he was still her lover, as fully, as ardently as ever. Deep in those fastnesses of his nature were his love for her, and his pride in her and in having her for his own. The two things grew side by side, their roots intertangled. Every glance of admiration she won, every murmur of approval she created, gave him joy and seemed to give him tribute. He eagerly gathered in the envy of the world as food for his own exultation; he laughed in pleasure when Christine Fanshaw told him to look and see how Walter Blake adored Sibylla.

"Of course he does – he's a sensible young fellow," said Grantley gaily. "So am I, Christine, and I adore her too."

"The captive of your bow and spear!" Christine sneered.

"Of my personal attractions, please! Don't say of my money-bags!"

"She's like a very laudatory testimonial?"

"I just wonder how John Fanshaw endures you."

He answered her with jests, never thinking to deny what she said. He did delight in his wife's triumphs. Was there anything unamiable in that? If close union were the thing, was not that close? Her triumphs made his – what could be closer than that? At this time any criticism on him was genuinely unintelligible; he could make nothing of it, and reckoned it as of no account. And Sibylla herself, as he had said, he could always soothe.

"And she's going on quite all right?" Christine continued.

"Splendidly! We've got her quietly fixed down at Milldean, with her favourite old woman to look after her. There she'll stay. I run up to town two or three times a week – do my business – "

"Call on me?"

"I ventured so far – and get back as soon as I can."

"You must be very pleased?"

"Of course I'm pleased," he laughed, "very pleased indeed, Christine."

He was very much pleased, and laughed at himself, as he had laughed at others, for being a little proud too. He had wanted the dynasty carried on. There was every prospect of a start being made in that direction very prosperously. He would have hated to have it otherwise; there would have been a sense of incompleteness then.

"I needn't tell a wise woman like you that there's some trouble about such things," he went on.

"No doubt there is," smiled Christine. "But you can leave most of that to Sibylla and the favourite old woman," she added a moment later, with her eyes on Grantley's contented face, and that touch of acidity in her clear-toned voice.

Between being pleased – even very much pleased indeed – and a little proud over a thing (notwithstanding the trouble there is about it), and looking on it as one of the greatest things that Heaven itself ever did, there is a wide gulf, if not exactly of opinion, yet of feeling and attitude. From the first moment Sibylla had known of it, the coming of the child was the great thing, the overshadowing thing, in life. Nature was in this, and nature at her highest power; more was not needed. Yet there was more, to make the full cup brim over. Her great talent, her strongest innate impulse, was to give – to give herself and all she had; and this talent and impulse her husband had not satisfied. He was immured in his fastness; he seemed to want only what she counted small tributes and minor sacrifices – they had appeared large once, no doubt, but now looked small because they fell short of the largest that were possible. The great satisfaction, the great outlet, lay in the coming of the child. In pouring out her love on the head of the child she would at the same time pour it out at the feet of him whose the child was. Before such splendid lavishness he must at last stand disarmed, he must throw open all his secret treasure-house. His riches of love – of more than lover's love – must

come forth too, and mingle in the same golden stream with hers, all separation being swept away. Here was the true realisation, foreshadowed by the fairy ride in the early days of their love; here was the true riding into the gold and letting the gold swallow them up. In this all disappointments should vanish, all nipped hopes come to bloom again. For it her heart cried impatiently, but chid itself for its impatience. Had not Mrs. Mumble waited years in solitude and silence outside the prison gates? Could not she wait a little too?

It need hardly be said that in such a position of affairs as had been reached Mrs. Mumble was much to the fore. Her presence was indispensable, and valued as such, but it had some disadvantages. She shared Sibylla's views and Sibylla's temperament; but naturally she did not possess the charm of youth, of beauty, and of circumstance which served so well to soften or to recommend them. The sort of atmosphere which Mrs. Mumble carried with her was one which should be diffused sparingly and with great caution about a man at once so self-centred and so fastidious as Grantley Imason. Mrs. Mumble was lavishly affectionate; she was also pervasive, and, finally, a trifle inclined to be tearful on entirely inadequate provocation – or, as it appeared to any masculine mind, on none at all, since the tendency assailed her most when everything seemed to be going on remarkably well. Her physical bulk too was a matter which she should have considered; and yet perhaps she could hardly be expected to think of that.

Of course Jeremy Chiddingfold, neither lover nor father, and with his youthful anti-feminism still held and prized, put the case a thousand times too high, exaggerating all one side, utterly ignoring all the other, of what Grantley might be feeling. None the less, there was some basis of truth in his exclamation:

"If they go on like this, Grantley'll be sick to death of the whole thing before it's half over!"

And Jeremy had come to read his brother-in-law pretty well – to know his self-centredness, to know his fastidiousness, to know how easily he might be "put off" (as Jeremy phrased it) by an intrusion too frequent and importunate, or a sentiment extravagant in any degree or the least overstrained. Too high a pressure might well result in a reaction; it would breed the thought that the matter in hand was, after all, decidedly normal.

But altogether normal it was not destined to remain. Minded, as it might seem, to point the situation and to force latent antagonisms of feeling to an open conflict, Mistress Chance took a hand in the game. On arriving at the Fairhaven station from one of his expeditions to town, Grantley found Jeremy awaiting him. Jeremy was pale, but his manner kept its incisiveness, his speech its lucidity. Sibylla had met with an accident. She had still been taking quiet rides on a trusty old horse. To-day, contrary to his advice and in face of Grantley's, she had insisted on riding another – the young horse, as they called it.

"She was in one of her moods," Jeremy explained. "She said she wanted more of a fight than the old horse gave her. She would go. Well, you know that great beast of a dog of Jarman's? It was running loose – I saw it myself; indeed I saw the whole thing. She was trotting along, thinking of nothing at all, I suppose. The dog started a rabbit, and came by her with a bound. The horse started, jumped half his own height – or it looked like it – and she – came off, you know, pitched clean out of her saddle."

"Clear of the – ?"

"Yes, thank God – but she came down with an awful – an awful thud. I ran up as quick as I could. She was unconscious. A couple of labourers helped me to take her home, and I got Mumples; and on my way here I stopped at Gardiner's and sent him there, and came on to tell you."

By now they were getting into the dog-cart.

"Do you know at all how bad it is?" asked Grantley.

"Not the least. How should I?"

"Well, we must get home as quick as we can."

Grantley did not speak again the whole way. His mind had been full of plans that morning. His position as a man of land at Milldean was opening new prospects to him. He had agreed to come forward for election as a county alderman; he had been sounded as to contesting the seat for the Division. He had been very full of these notions, and had meant to spend two or three quiet days in reviewing and considering them. This sudden shock was hard to face and realise. It was difficult, too, to conceive of anything being wrong with Sibylla – always so fine an embodiment of physical health and vigour. He felt very helpless and in terrible distress; it turned him sick to think of the "awful thud" that Jeremy described. What would that mean? What was the least it might, the most it could, mean?

"You don't blame me?" Jeremy asked as they came near home.

"You advised her not to ride the beast: what more could you do? You couldn't stop her by force."

He spoke rather bitterly, as though sorrow and fear had not banished anger when he thought of his wife and her wilfulness.

Jeremy turned aside into the garden, begging to have news as soon as there was any. Grantley went into his study, and Mrs. Mumble came to him there. She was pitifully undone and dishevelled. It was impossible not to respect her grief, but no less impossible to get any clear information from her. Lamentations alternated with attempted excuses for Sibylla's obstinacy; she tried to make out that she herself was in some way to blame for having brought on the mood which had in its turn produced the obstinacy. Grantley, striving after outward calm, raged in his heart against the fond foolish old woman.

"I want to know what's happened, not whose fault it'll be held to be at the Day of Judgment, Mrs. Mumble. Since you're incapable of telling me anything, have the goodness to send Dr. Gardiner to me as soon as he can leave Sibylla."

Very soon, yet only just in time to stop Grantley from going upstairs himself, Gardiner came. He was an elderly quiet-going country practitioner; he lived in one of the red villas at the junction with the main road, and plied a not very lucrative practice among the farmhouses and cottages. His knowledge was neither profound nor recent; he had not kept up his reading, and his practical opportunities had been very few. He seemed, when he came, a good deal upset and decidedly nervous, as though he were faced with a sudden responsibility by no means to his liking. He kept wiping his brow with a threadbare red silk handkerchief and pulling his straggling grey whiskers while he talked. In a second Grantley had decided that no confidence could be placed in him. Still he must be able to tell what was the matter.

"Quickly and plainly, please, Dr. Gardiner," he requested, noting with impatience that Mrs. Mumble had come back and stood there listening; but she would cry and think him a monster if he sent her away.

"She's conscious now," the doctor reported, "but she's very prostrate – suffering from severe shock. I think you shouldn't see her for a little while."

"What's the injury, Dr. Gardiner?"

"The shock is severe."

"Will it kill her?"

"No, no! The shock kill her? Oh, no, no! She has a splendid constitution. Kill her? Oh, no, no!"

"And is that all?"

"No, not quite all, Mr. Imason. There is – er – in fact, a lesion, a local injury, a fracture, due to the force of the impact on the ground."

"Is that serious? Pray be quiet, Mrs. Mumble. You really must restrain your feelings."

"Serious? Oh, undoubtedly, undoubtedly! I – I can't say it isn't serious. I should be doing wrong – "

"In one word, is it fatal or likely to be fatal?"

Grantley was nearly at the end of his forced patience. He had looked for a man – he had, it seemed, found another old woman; so he angrily thought within himself as old Gardiner stumbled over his words and worried his whiskers.

"If I were to explain the case in detail – "

"Presently, doctor, presently. Just now I want the result – the position of affairs, you know."

"For the moment, Mr. Imason, there is no danger to Mrs. Imason – I think I may say that. But the injury creates a condition of things which might, and in my judgment would, prove dangerous to her as time went on. I speak in view of her present condition."

"I see. Could that be obviated?"

Gardiner's nervousness increased.

"By an operation directed to remove the cause which would produce danger. It would be a serious, perhaps a dangerous, operation – "

"Is that the only way?"

"In my judgment the only way consistent with – "

A loud sob from Mrs. Mumble interrupted him. Grantley swore under his breath.

"Go on," he said harshly.

"Consistent with the birth of the child, Mr. Imason."

"Ah!" At last he had got to the light, and the nervous old man had managed to deliver himself of his message. "I understand you now. Setting the birth of the child on one side, the matter would be simpler?"

"Oh, yes, much simpler – not, of course, without its – "

"And more free from danger?"

"Yes, though – "

"Practically free from danger to my wife?"

"Yes; I think I can say practically free in the case of so good a subject as Mrs. Imason."

Grantley thought for a minute.

"You probably wouldn't object to my having another opinion?" he asked.

Relief was obvious on old Gardiner's face.

"I should welcome it," he said. "The responsibility in such a case is so great that – "

"Tell me the best man, and I'll wire for him at once."

Even on this point Gardiner hesitated, till Grantley named a man known to everybody; him Gardiner at once accepted.

"Very well; and I'll see my wife as soon as you think it desirable." He paused a moment, and then went on: "If I understand the case right, I haven't a moment's hesitation in my mind. But I should like to ask you one question: am I right in supposing that your practice is to prefer the mother's life to the child's?"

"That's the British medical practice, Mr. Imason, where the alternative is as you put it. But there are, of course, degrees of danger, and these would influence – "

"You've told me the danger might be serious. That's enough. Dr. Gardiner, pending the arrival of your colleague, the only thing – the only thing – you have to think of is my wife. Those are my definite wishes, please. You'll remain here, of course? Thank you. We'll have another talk later. I want to speak to Jeremy now."

He turned towards the window, meaning to join Jeremy in the garden and report to him. Mrs. Mumble came forward, waving her hands helplessly and weeping profusely.

"Oh, Mr. Imason, imagine the poor, poor little child!" she stammered. "I can't bear to think of it."

Grantley's impatience broke out in savage bluntness.

"Against her I don't care that for the child!" he said, snapping his fingers as he went out.

CHAPTER VI

NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD

No doubt the bodily shock, the laceration of her nerves, and the condition she was in had something to do with the way Sibylla looked at the matter and with the attitude which she took up. These accidental circumstances gave added force to what was the natural outcome of her disposition. A further current of feeling, sweeping her in the same direction, lay in the blame which she eagerly fastened on herself. Her wilfulness and heedlessness cried out to her for an atonement; she was eager to make an appeasing sacrifice and caught at the opportunity, embracing readily the worst view of the case, drawing from that view an unhesitating conclusion as to what her duty was. Thus deduced, the duty became a feverish desire, and her only fear was that she might be balked of its realisation. She had risked her child's life; let her risk her life for her child. That idea was by itself, and by its innate propriety, enough to inspire her mind and to decide her will. It was but to accumulate reasons beyond need when she reminded herself that even before the accident all her weal had hung on the child, every chance that remained of overcoming certain failure, of achieving still the splendid success of which she had dreamed, in her life and marriage. The specialist was to arrive the next morning; she was reluctant to wait even for that. Old Gardiner was for her an all-wise all-sufficient oracle of the facts, because he had declared them to be such as fitted into the demands of her heart and of her mood. Left to herself, she would have constrained his fears, overborne his doubts, and forced him to her will; he would have stammered all in vain about what was the British medical practice. As it was, open-eyed, refusing to seek sleep, strung up by excitement, all through the evening she battled against her husband for her way.

If she had no hesitation in one view, Grantley never wavered from the other. The plain unreasonableness of not awaiting the specialist's verdict was not hard to enforce. Sibylla, professing to yield, yet still assumed what the verdict should be, and pressed for a promise. At first he evaded her urgency by every device of soothing counsels, of entreaties that she would rest, of affectionate reproofs. She would not allow evasion. Then when his refusal came, it came tenderly, inspired by his love for her, based on an appeal to that. It was on this that he had relied. He was puzzled that it failed of the full effect he had looked for; and, beyond the puzzle, gradually a sense of bitter hurt and soreness grew up in his mind. He did not know of the secret connection in her thoughts between the child and an ideal perfecting of the love between her and him; she was at once too centred on her own desire to make him see, and too persuaded that such hopes must be secret if they were to remain hopes at all. He saw only that when he persuaded, cajoled, flattered, and caressed as a lover he failed. His power seemed gone. Her appeal was to him in another character, and that very fact seemed to put him on a lower plane. He had not doubted, for a moment, what came first to him – it was her life, her well-being, his love of her. As she persisted in her battle, the feeling grew that she made an inadequate return, and showed an appreciation short of what was his due. Gradually his manner hardened, his decision was expressed more firmly; he stiffened into a direct antagonism, and interposed his will and his authority to effect what his love and his entreaties had failed to do. He never lacked courtesy; he could not, under such circumstances as these, desire to fail in gentleness. But it was his will against hers now, and what his will was he conveyed clearly.

A trained nurse had arrived from Fairhaven; but Sibylla vehemently preferred the presence of Mrs. Mumble, and it was Mrs. Mumble whom Grantley left with her when he came down to his study about midnight. He had not dined, and a cold supper was laid out on the table. Jeremy was there, trying to read, eyeing the supper ravenously, yet ashamed of being hungry. He fell on the beef with avidity when Grantley observed that anyhow starving themselves could serve no useful purpose. Grantley was worried, but not anxious; he had confidence in the specialist, and even in Gardiner's

view there was no danger if the right course were followed. To the disappointment which that course involved he had schooled himself, accepting it almost gladly as by so far the lesser evil.

"If you were to talk to Sibylla now," he said, "I think you'd be reminded of those old days you once told me about. Fate has thumped her pretty severely for anything she did, but she's mortally anxious to be thumped more, and very angry with me because I won't allow it. Upon my word, I believe she'd be disappointed if Tarlton told us that the thing wasn't so bad after all, and that everything would go right without anything being done."

"I daresay she would; but there's no chance of that?"

"Well, I'm afraid not. One must believe one's medical man, I suppose, even if he's old Gardiner – and he seems quite sure of it." Grantley drank and sighed. "It's uncommonly perverse, when everything was so prosperous before."

The day had left its traces on Jeremy. Though he had not told Grantley so, yet when he saw Sibylla thrown he had made no doubt she was killed – and she was the one person in the world whom he deeply loved. That fear was off him now, but the memory of it softened him towards her – even towards her foolishness, which he had been wont to divide very distinctly from her, and to consider himself free to deal with faithfully.

"At best it'll be a most awful disappointment to her."

"Yes, it must be that – and to me too," said Grantley.

"She was just living in and for the thing, you know."

Grantley made no answer this time; a shade of annoyance passed over his face.

"She never could give herself to more than one thing at a time – with her that one thing was always the whole hog, and there was nothing else. That's just how it's been now."

Jeremy's words showed true sympathy, and, moreover, a new absence of shame in expressing it; but Grantley did not accord them much apparent welcome. They came too near to confirming his suspicions; they harmonised too well with the soreness which remained from his impotent entreaties and unpersuasive caresses. Again without answering, he got up and lit his cigar.

"Oh, by the way," Jeremy went on, "while you were with Sibylla that girl from the rectory came up – you know, Dora Hutting – to ask after Sibylla and say they were all awfully sorry and anxious, and all that, you know."

"Very kind of them. I hope you told her so, and said what you could?"

"Yes, that's all right. The girl seems awfully fond of Sibylla, Grantley. By Jove, when we got talking about her, she – she began to cry!"

Grantley turned round, smiling at the unaccustomed note of pathos struck by Jeremy's tone.

"Rather decent of her, wasn't it?" asked Jeremy.

"Very nice. Did you console her?"

"Oh, I didn't see what the devil I could say! Besides I didn't feel very comfortable – it was rather awkward."

"I believe the girl's afraid of me – she always seems to come here when I'm away. Is she a pleasant girl, Jeremy?"

"Oh, she – she seemed all right; and I – I liked the way she felt about Sibylla."

"So do I, and I'll thank her for it. Is she getting at all prettier?"

"Well, I shouldn't call her bad-looking, don't you know!"

"She used to be a bit spotty," yawned Grantley.

"I don't think she's spotty now."

"Well, thank heaven for that anyhow!" said Grantley piously. "I hate spots above anything, Jeremy."

"She hasn't got any, I tell you," said Jeremy, distinctly annoyed.

Grantley smiled sleepily, threw himself on to his favourite couch, laid down his cigar, and closed his eyes. After the strain he was weary, and soon his regular breathing showed that he slept. Jeremy

had got his pipe alight and sat smoking, from time to time regarding his brother-in-law's handsome features with an inquiring gaze. There was a new stir of feeling in Jeremy. A boy of strong intellectual bent, he had ripened slowly on the emotional side, and there had been nothing in the circumstances or chances of his life to quicken the process thus naturally very gradual. To-day something had come. He had been violently snatched from his quiet and his isolation, confronted with a crisis that commanded feeling, probed to the heart of his being by love and fear. Under this call from life nascent feelings grew to birth and suppressed impulses struggled for liberty and for power. He was not now resisting them nor turning from them. He was watching, waiting, puzzling about them, hiding them still from others, but no longer denying them to himself. He was wondering and astir. The manhood which had come upon him was a strange thing; the life that called him seemed now full of new and strange things. Through his fear and love for Sibylla he was entering on new realms of experience and of feeling. He sat smoking hard and marvelling that Grantley slept.

Connected with this upheaval of mental conceptions which had hitherto maintained an aspect so boldly fundamental, and claimed to be the veritable rock of thought whereon Jeremy built his church, was the curious circumstance that he suddenly found himself rather sensitive about Grantley's careless criticism of Miss Dora Hutting's appearance. He had not denied the fact alleged about it, though he had the continuance of it. But he resented its mention even as he questioned the propriety of Grantley's sleeping. The reference assorted ill with his appreciation of Dora's brimming eyes and over-brimming sympathies. That he could not truthfully have denied the fact increased his annoyance. It seemed mean to remember the spots that had been on the face to which those brimming eyes belonged – as mean as it would have been in himself to recall the bygone grievances and the old – the suddenly old-grown – squabbles which he had had with the long-legged rectory girl. That old epithet too! A sudden sense of profanity shot across him as it came into his mind; he stood incomprehensively accused of irreverence in his own eyes.

Yet the spots had existed; and Sibylla had been wrong – had been wrong, and was now, it appeared, unreasonable. Moreover, beyond question, Mumples was idiotic. Reason was alarmed in him, since it was threatened. He told himself that Grantley was very sensible to sleep. But himself he could not think of sleep, and his ears were hungry for every sound from the floor above.

The stairs creaked – there was a sniff. Mrs. Mumble was at the door. Jeremy made an instinctive gesture for silence because Grantley slept. He watched Mrs. Mumble as she turned her eyes on the peacefully reposing form. The eyes turned sharp to him, and Mrs. Mumble raised her fat hands just a little and let them fall softly.

"He's asleep?" she whispered.

"You see he is. Best thing for him to do, too." His answering whisper was gruff.

"She's not sleeping," said Mrs. Mumble; "and she's asking for him again."

"Then we'd better wake him up." He spoke irritably as he rose and touched Grantley's shoulder.

"He must be tired out, don't you see?"

Mrs. Mumble made no answer. She raised and dropped her hands again.

Grantley awoke lightly and easily, almost unconscious that he had slept.

"What were we talking about? Oh, yes, Dora Hutting! Why, I believe I've been asleep!"

"You've slept nearly an hour," said Jeremy, going back to his chair.

Grantley's eyes fell on Mrs. Mumble; a slight air of impatience marked his manner as he asked:

"Is anything wrong, Mrs. Mumble?"

"She's asking for you again, Mr. Imason."

"Dear me, Gardiner said she should be kept quiet!"

"The doctor's lying down. But she'll not rest without seeing you; she's fretting so."

"Have you been letting her talk about it and excite herself? Have you been talking to her yourself?"

"How can we help talking about it?" Mrs. Mumble moaned.

"It's infernally silly – infernally!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "Well, I must go to her, I suppose." He turned to Jeremy. "It'll be better if you'll keep Mrs. Mumble with you. We'll get the nurse to go to Sibylla."

"I can't leave her as she is," said Mrs. Mumble, threatening a fresh outburst of tears.

Grantley walked out of the room, muttering savagely.

The strain of irritation, largely induced by Mrs. Mumble's lachrymously reproachful glances and faithful doglike persistency, robbed him of the tenderness by which alone he might possibly have won his wife's willing obedience and perhaps convinced her reason through her love. He used his affection now, not in appeal, but as an argumentative point. He found in her a hard opposition; she seemed to look at him with a sort of dislike, a mingling of fear and wonder. Thus she listened in silence to his cold marshalling of the evidences of his love and his deliberate enforcing of the claims it gave him. Seeing that he made no impression, he grew more impatient and more imperious, ending with a plain intimation that he would discuss the question no further.

"You'll make me the murderess of my child," she said.

The gross irrational exaggeration drove him to worse bitterness.

"I've no intention of running even the smallest risk of being party to the murder of my wife," he retorted.

Lying among her pillows, very pale and weary, she pronounced the accusation which had so long brooded in her mind.

"It's not because you love me so much; you do love me in a way: I please you, you're proud of me, you like me to be there, you like to make love to me, you like taking all I have to give you, and God knows I liked to give it – but you haven't given the same thing back to me, Grantley. I don't know whether you've got it to give to anybody, but at any rate you haven't given it to me. I haven't become part of you, as I was ready to become – as I've already become of my little unborn child. Your life wouldn't be made really different if I went away. In the end you've been apart from me. I thought the coming of the child must make all that different; but it hasn't: you've been about the child just as you've been about me."

"Oh, where on earth do you get such notions?" he exclaimed.

"Just the same as about me. You wanted me and you wanted a child too. But you wanted both with – well, with the least disturbance of your old self and your old thoughts: with the least trouble – it almost comes to that really. I don't know how to put it, except like that. You enjoyed the pleasant parts very much, but you take as little as you can of the troublesome ones. I suppose a lot of people are – are like that. Only it's a – a little unfortunate that you should have happened on me, because I – I can't understand being like that. To me it seems somehow rather cruel. So, knowing you're like that, I can't believe you when you tell me that you think of nothing but your love for me. I daresay you think it's true – I know you wouldn't say it if you didn't think it true; and in a way it's true. But the real, real truth is – " She paused, and for the first time turned her eyes on him. "The real truth is not that you love me too much to do what I ask."

"What else can it be?" he cried desperately, utterly puzzled and upset by her accusation.

"What else can it be? Ah, yes, what else?" Her voice grew rather more vehement. "I can answer that. What have I been doing these five months but learning the answer to that? I'll tell you. It's not that you love me so much, it's that you don't care about the child."

The words brought a suspicion into his mind.

"That old fool Mrs. Mumble has been talking to you? She's been repeating something I said? Well, I expressed it carelessly, awkwardly, but – "

"What does it matter what Mumbles has repeated? I knew it all before."

"Meddlesome old idiot!" he grumbled fiercely.

To him there was no reason in it all. The accusation angered him fiercely and amazed him even more; he saw no shadow of justice in it. He put it all down to Sibylla's exaggerated way of talking

and thinking. He was conscious of no shortcomings; the accusation infuriated the more for its entire failure to convince. "When two women put their heads together and begin to talk nonsense, there's no end to it; bring a baby, born or unborn, into the case, and the last chance of any limit to the nonsense is gone." He did not tell her that (though it expressed what he felt) in a general form; he fell back on the circumstances of the minute.

"My dear Sibylla, you're not fit to discuss things rationally at present. We'll say no more now; we shall only be still more unjust to one another if we do. Only I must be obeyed."

"Yes, you shall be obeyed," she said. "But since it's like that, I think that, whatever happens now, I – I won't have any more children, Grantley."

"What?"

He was startled out of the cold composure which he had achieved in his previous speech.

She repeated her words in a low tired voice, but firmly and coolly.

"I think I won't have any more children, you know."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"Oh, surely, yes!" she answered, with a faint smile.

Grantley walked up and down the room twice, and then came and stood by her bed, fixing his eyes on her face in a long sombre contemplation. The faint smile persisted on her lips as she looked up at him. But he turned away without speaking, with a weary shrug of his shoulders.

"I'll send the nurse to you," he said as he went towards the door.

"Send Mumples, please, Grantley."

Mrs. Mumble had done all the harm she could. "All right," he replied. "Try to sleep. Good-night."

He shut the door behind him before her answer came.

On the stairs he met Mrs. Mumble. The fat woman shrank out of his path, but he bade her good-night not unkindly, although absently; she needed no bidding to send her to Sibylla's room. He found Jeremy still in the study, still wide awake.

"Oh, go home to bed, old fellow!" he exclaimed irritably, but affectionately too. "What good can you do sitting up here all night?"

"Yes, I suppose I may as well go – it's half-past two. I'll go out by the garden." He opened the window which led on to the lawn. The fresh night air came in. "That's good!" sniffed Jeremy.

Grantley stepped into the garden with him, and lit a cigarette.

"But is it all right, Grantley? Is Sibylla reasonable now?"

"All right? Reasonable?" Grantley's innermost thoughts had been far away.

"I mean, will she agree to what you wish – what we wish?"

"Yes, it's all right. She's reasonable now."

His face was still just in the light of the lamp which stood on a table in the window. Jeremy saw the paleness of his cheeks and the hard set of his eyes. There was no sign of relief in him or of anxiety assuaged.

"Well, thank heaven for that much, anyhow!" Jeremy sighed.

"Yes, for that much anyhow," Grantley agreed, pressing his arm in a friendly way. "And now, old boy, good-night."

Jeremy left him there in the garden smoking his cigarette, standing motionless. His face was in the dark now, but Jeremy knew the same look was in the eyes still. It was hard for the young man, even with the new impulses and the new sympathies that were alive and astir within him, to follow, or even to conjecture, what had been happening that night. Yet as he went down the hill it was plain even to him, plain enough to raise a sharp pang in him, that somehow the little child, unborn or whether it should yet be born, had brought not union, but estrangement to the house; not peace but a sword.

CHAPTER VII

A VINDICATION OF CONSCIENCE

It was a dull chilly afternoon in March. Christine Fanshaw huddled her slight little figure – she looked as if the cold would cut right through her – over a blazing fire in her boudoir. She held a screen between the flames and her face, and turned her eyes on Anna Selford, who was paying her a call. Anna was a plump dark girl, by no means pretty, but with a shrewd look about her and an air of self-confidence rather too assured for her years; she was dressed in a would-be artistic fashion, not well suited to her natural style.

"Awfully sad, isn't it?" she was saying. "But mamma says Mrs. Raymore is splendid about it. Mr. Raymore was quite upset, and was no good at all at first. It was Mrs. Raymore who went and got Charley away from the woman, and hushed up all the row about the money – oh, he had taken some from the office: he was in a solicitor's office, you know – and arranged for him to be sent out to Buenos Ayres – did the whole thing in fact. She's quite heart-broken about it, mamma says, but quite firm and brave too. How awful to have your son turn out like that! He was only nineteen, and Mrs. Raymore simply worshipped him."

"He used to be a very pretty little boy. A little boy! And now!" Christine plucked idly at the fringes of her hand-screen.

"And mamma says the woman was thirty, and not very good-looking either!"

"What a lot you know, Anna! You're hardly seventeen, are you? And Suzette Bligh's twenty-seven! But she's a baby compared to you."

"Oh, mamma always tells me things – or else I hear her and papa talking about them. When I'm washing the dogs, they forget I'm there, especially if they're squabbling at all. And I keep my ears open."

"Yes, I think you do."

"But generally mamma tells me. She always must talk to somebody, you see. When I was little she used to tell me things, and then forget it and box my ears for knowing them!"

Anna spoke without rancour; rather with a sort of quiet amusement, as though she had given much study to her mother's peculiarities and found permanent diversion in them.

"Poor Kate Raymore! So they're in trouble too!"

"Charley was awfully sorry; and they hope he'll come back some day, if he behaves well out there."

"Poor Kate Raymore! Well, there's trouble everywhere, isn't there, Anna?" She shivered and drew yet a little nearer the fire. "How are things at home with you?"

"Just as usual; nothing ever happens with us."

"It might be much worse than that."

"I suppose it might. It's only just rather dull; and I suppose I shall have to endure it for a long while. You see, I'm not very likely to get married, Mrs. Fanshaw. No men ever come to our house – they can't stand it. Besides I'm not pretty."

"Oh, come and meet men here; and never mind not being pretty; I could dress you to look quite smart. That's it! You should go in for smartness, not prettiness. I really believe it pays better nowadays. Get Janet – get your mother to give you an allowance, and we'll put our heads together over it."

"That's awfully kind of you, Mrs. Fanshaw."

"Oh, I like dressing people; and I do think girls ought to have their chances. But in those things she makes you wear – oh, my dear Anna!"

"Yes, I know. I'll ask her. And – "

Anna hesitated, then rose, and came over to Christine. Suddenly she kissed her.

"It's nothing, my dear," said Christine, amused but annoyed; she was very ready to help Anna, but did not care in the least for being kissed by her.

Anna sat down again, and there ensued a long pause.

"And as for not marrying," Christine resumed, "it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, I think. Oh, I should have hated to be an old maid; but still one would have avoided so much worry. Look at these poor Raymores! They've always got on so well too, up to now!"

She laid down her screen and pulled up her dress, to let the warmth get to her ankles. Anna looked at her dainty face lit up by the glow.

"I wish I was like you, Mrs. Fanshaw!"

Christine did not refuse the compliment; she only denied the value of the possession which won it for her.

"Much good it's done me, my dear!" she sighed. "But people who've not got looks never will believe how little good they are. Oh, I didn't mean to be rude, Anna! I believe in you, you know. I can do something with you. Only – " She stopped, frowning a little and looking vaguely unhappy. "Well," she resumed, "if it turns out that I can't take you under my wing, we must get hold of Sibylla. She's always ready to do things for people – and they've got lots of money, anyhow."

Anna's curiosity was turned in the direction of Sibylla.

"What was the truth about Mrs. Imason, Mrs. Fanshaw?"

"I made sure you'd know that too!" smiled Christine. "And if you don't, I suppose I oughtn't to tell you."

"I know she – she had an accident."

"Oh, well, everybody knows. Yes, she had, and they thought it was worse than it was. The country doctor down at Milldean made a mistake – took too serious a view, you know. And – and there was a lot of bother. But the London man said it would be all right, and so it turned out. The baby came all right, and it's a splendid boy."

"It all ended all right, then?"

Christine looked a little doubtful.

"The boy's all right, and Sibylla's quite well," she answered.

"But mamma said Mrs. Raymore hinted – "

"Well, Sibylla wouldn't believe the London man, you see. She thought that he – that he'd been persuaded to say she needn't have the operation she wanted to have, and that they meant to – Well, really, Anna, I can't go into details. It's quite medical, my dear, and I can't express myself discreetly. Anyhow Sibylla made a grievance of it, you know, and relations were a little strained, I think."

"Oh, well, I suppose that's over now, since everything's gone right, Mrs. Fanshaw?"

"It ought to be," said Christine, shy of asserting the positive fact. "But very often fusses about nothing do just as much harm as fusses about something big. It's the way one looks at them."

"Yes, I ought to know that, living in our house," remarked Anna Selford.

"You do give your parents away so!" Christine complained, with a smile in which pity was mingled.

The pity, however, was not for the betrayed, but for the traitor. Anna's premature knowingness and the suggestion of hardness it carried with it were the result of a reaction against the atmosphere of her home, against the half-real gush and the spasmodic emotionality of the family circle. In this revolt truth asserted itself, but sweetness suffered, and freshness lost its bloom. Christine was sorry when that sort of thing happened to young girls. But there it was. Anna was not the *ingénue*, and it was no good treating her as if she were.

"I'm really half glad you don't live in this house. I'm sure John and I couldn't bear the scrutiny – not just now, anyhow." She answered Anna's questioning eyes by going on: "Oh, it's terrible, my dear. We've no money – now, really, don't repeat that! And John's full of business worries. It's positively so bad that I have to try to be amiable about it!"

"I'm so sorry, and I really won't talk about it, Mrs. Fanshaw."

"No, don't, my dear – not till we're in the bankruptcy court. Then everybody'll know. And I daresay we shall have some money again; at least bankrupts seem to have plenty generally."

"Then why don't you?"

"Anna! John would cut his throat first. Oh, I really believe he would! You've no idea what a man like him thinks of his business and of his firm's credit. It's like – well, it's like what we women ought to think (again Christine avoided asserting the actual fact) about our reputations, you know. So you may imagine the state of things. The best pair is being sold at Tattersall's this very day. That's why I'm indoors – cabs are so cold and the other pair will have to go out at night."

Shiveringly she nestled to the fire again.

"I'm so awfully sorry, Mrs. Fanshaw! It'll all come right, won't it?"

"It generally does; but I don't know. And John says I've always been so extravagant – and I suppose I have. Well, I thought it was just that John was stingy. He had a splendid business, you know." She paused and smiled at Anna. "So now you know all of everybody's troubles," she ended.

Christine was not in the habit of giving praise beyond measure or without reservation either to herself or to other people, and she had done no more than justice to her present effort to be amiable. Money was the old cause of quarrel between her husband and herself; the alternation of fat and lean years had kept it always alive and intermittently active. But hitherto, while the fat seasons had meant affluence, the lean had never fallen short of plenty or of solvency. It had been a question of more or less lavish expenditure; that was all. Christine was afraid there was more now. Her husband was worried as he had never been before; he had dropped hints of speculations gone wrong and of heavy commitments; and Christine, a constant glancer at City articles and an occasional dabbler in stocks, had read that there was a crisis in the market in which he mainly dealt. Things were black; she knew it almost as well as he. Both showed courage, and the seriousness of the matter forbade mere bickering. Nor was either invulnerable enough to open the battle. Her extravagance exposed her to attack; he was conscious of hazardous speculations which had wantonly undermined the standing, and now threatened the credit, of a firm once strong and of excellent repute. Each needed at once to give and to receive charity. Thus from the impending trouble they had become better friends, and their underlying comradeship had more openly asserted itself. This amount of good there was in it, Christine thought to herself; and John, in his blunt fashion, had actually said as much to her.

"We're in the same boat, and we must both pull at our oars, old girl," he said, and Christine was glad he should say it, although she hated being called "old girl." John had a tendency towards plebeian endearments, she thought.

So the best pair went to Tattersall's, and some of the diamonds to a corresponding establishment in the jewellery line; and various other things were done or attempted with the view of letting free a few thousand pounds and of diminishing expenditure in the future. But John Fanshaw's brow grew no clearer. About these sacrifices there hung the air of doing what was right and proper – what, given the worst happening, would commend itself to the feelings of the creditors and the Official Receiver – rather than of achieving anything of real service. Christine guessed that the speculations must have been on a very large scale and the commitments very heavy. Could it be that ruin – real ruin – was in front of them? She could hardly realise that – either its coming or what life would be after it had come. And in her heart – here too she had said no more than truth – she did doubt whether John would stay in the world to see. Well, what could she do? She had three hundred a year of her own tied up, and (since they had no children) to go back to her people on her death. If the ruin came, she could find crusts for herself and John – if John were there. These were the thoughts which had kept intruding into her mind as she talked to Anna Selford and shivered now and then over the blazing fire. Yet she could face them better than John, thanks to a touch of fatalism in her nature. She would think of no violent step to avoid what she feared. Hating it, she would sit shivering by the fire, and wait for it all the same. She knew this of herself, and therefore was even more sorry for John than on

her own account. This state of mind made the amiability easier. It also awoke her conscience from a long sleep with regard to the way in which she had treated John in the past. Against this, however, she struggled not only fiercely, but with a conviction of justice. Here conscience was overdoing its part, and passing from scrupulousness to morbidity. The thing in question, the thing conscience had awoken about, belonged to the far past; it had been finished off and written off, enjoyed and deplored, brooded over and violently banished from thought, ever so long ago. Hardly anybody knew about it; it was utterly over. None the less, the obstinate irrational digs which conscience – awake again – gave her about it increased as John's face grew gloomier.

Late in the afternoon John Fanshaw came to his wife's room for a cup of tea.

"The pair went for only two hundred and forty-five," he said; "I gave four hundred for them six months ago. Ah, well, a forced sale, you know!"

"It doesn't make much difference, does it?" she asked.

"No," he said, absently stirring his tea. "Not much, Christine."

She sat very quiet by the fire watching him; her screen was in her hand again.

"It's no use, we must face it," he broke out suddenly. "Everything's gone against me again this week. I had a moral certainty; but – well, that isn't a certainty. And – "

He took a great gulp of tea.

A faint spot of colour came on Christine's cheek.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"I've been to see Grantley Imason to-day. He behaved uncommonly well. The bank can't do anything more for me, but as a private friend – "

"Had you to ask him for money, John?"

"Well, friends often lend one another money, don't they? I don't see anything awful in that. I daren't go to the money-lenders – I'm afraid they'll sell the secret."

"I daresay there's nothing wrong in it. I don't know about such things. Go on."

"He met me very straight; and I met him straight too. I told him the whole position. I said, 'The business is a good one, but I've got into a hole. Once I get out of that, the business is there. On steady lines (I wish to God I'd kept on them!) it's worth from eight to ten thousand a year. I'll pay you back three thousand a year, and five per cent. on all capital still owing.' I think he liked the way I put it, Christine. He asked if he could take my word for it, and I said he could; and he said that on the faith of that he'd let me have fifteen thousand. I call that handsome."

"Grantley always likes to do the handsome thing." She looked at him before she put her question. "And – and is that enough?"

He was ashamed, it was easy to see that – ashamed to show her how deep he was in the bog, how reckless he had been. He finished his tea, and potted about, cutting and lighting a cigar, before he answered.

"I suppose it's not enough?" said Christine.

"It's no use unless I get some more. I don't know where else to turn, and I must raise thirty thousand in a fortnight – by next settling day – or it's all up. I shall be hammered, Christine."

"If we sold up absolutely everything – ?"

"For God's sake no! That would ruin our credit; and then it wouldn't be thirty thousand we should want, but – oh, I don't know! Perhaps a hundred! We've sold enough already; there's nothing more we can do on the quiet."

He sat down opposite to her, and stared gloomily at the fire. Christine rather wondered that he did not turn to abuse of himself for having got into the bog, but she supposed that the speculative temper, which acknowledges only bad luck and never bad judgment, saved him from that. He looked at her covertly once or twice; she saw, but pretended not to, and waited to hear what was in his mind: something, clearly, was there.

"No, I don't know where to turn – and I shall be hammered. After thirty years! and my father forty years before me! I never thought of its coming to this." After a long pause he added: "I want another fifteen thousand, and I don't know where to turn." He smoked hard for a minute, then flung his cigar peevishly into the fire.

"I do wish I could help you, John!" she sighed.

"I'm afraid you can't, old lady." Again he hesitated. "Unless – " He broke off again.

Christine had some difficulty in keeping her nerves under control. When he spoke again it was abruptly, as though with a wrench.

"I say, do you ever see Caylesham now?"

A very slight, almost imperceptible, start ran over her.

"Lord Caylesham! Oh, I meet him about sometimes. He's at the Raymores' now and then – and at other places of course."

"He never comes here now, does he?"

"Very seldom: to a party now and then." She answered without apparent embarrassment, but her eyes were very sharply on the watch; she was on guard against the next blow.

"He was a good chap, and very fond of us. Lord, we had some fine old times with Caylesham!" He rose now and stood with his back to the fire. "He must be devilish rich since he came into the property."

He looked at her inquiringly. She said nothing.

"He's a good chap too. I don't think he'd let a friend go to the wall. What do you think? He was as much your friend as mine, you know."

"You'd ask him, John? Oh, I shouldn't do that!"

"Why not? He's got plenty."

"We see so little of him now; and it's such a lot to ask."

"It's not such a lot to him; and it's only accidental that we haven't met lately." He looked at her angrily. "You don't realise what the devil of a mess we're in. We've no choice, I tell you, but to get it from somewhere; and there's nobody else I know to ask. Why, he'll get his money back again, Christine."

Her screen was before her face now, so that he saw no more than her brow.

"I want you to go and ask him, Christine. That's what you can do for me. You said you wanted to help. Well, go and ask Caylesham to lend me the money."

"I can't do that, John."

"Why not? Why can't you?"

"I should hate your asking him, and I simply couldn't ask him myself."

"Why do you hate my asking him? You said nothing against my asking Grantley, and we haven't known him any better."

She had no answer to that ready. The thrust was awkward.

"Anyhow I couldn't ask him – I really couldn't. Don't press me to do that. If you must ask him, do it yourself. Why should I do it?"

"Why, because he's more likely to give it to you."

"But that's – that's so unfair. To send a woman because it's harder to refuse her! Oh, that isn't fair, John!"

"Fair! Good heavens, can't you understand how we're situated? It's ruin if we don't get it – and I'm damned if I'll live to see it! There!"

She saw his passion; his words confirmed her secret fear. She saw, too, how in the stress of danger he would not stand on scruples or be baulked by questions of taste or of social propriety. He saw possible salvation, and jumped at any path to it; and the responsibility of refusing to tread the path he put on her, with all it might mean.

"If I went and he said 'No,' you couldn't go afterwards. But you can go first, and you must go."

Christine raised her head and shook it.

"I can't go," she said.

"Why not? You're infernally odd about it! Why can't you go? Is it anything about Caylesham in particular?"

"No, no, nothing – nothing like that; but I – I hate to go."

"You must do it for me. I don't understand why you hate it so much as all that."

He was regarding her with an air at once angry and inquisitive. She dared hide her face no longer. She had to look at him calmly and steadily – with distress perhaps, but at all costs without fear or confusion.

"My good name depends on it, and all we have in the world; and – by God, yes! – my life too, if you like!" he exclaimed in rising passion. "You shall go! No, no! I don't mean that – I don't want to be rough! But, for heaven's sake – if you've ever cared about me, old woman – for heaven's sake, go!"

She hesitated still, and at this his passing touch of tenderness vanished; but it had moved her, and it worked with the fear that was on her.

"If you've a special reason, tell it me," he urged impatiently: "a special reason against asking Caylesham; somebody we must ask."

"I have no special reason against asking Lord Caylesham," she answered steadily.

"Then you'll go?"

A last struggle kept her silent a moment. Then she answered in a low voice:

"Yes, I'll go."

"There's a brave little woman!" he cried delightedly, and bent down as if he would kiss her; but she had slipped her screen up nearly to her eyes again, and seemed so unconscious of his purpose that he abandoned it. His spirits rose in a moment, as his sanguine mind, catching hold of the bare chance, twisted it into a good chance – almost into a certainty.

"Gad, I believe he'll give it you! You'll put it in such a fetching way. Oh, his money's safe enough, of course! But – well, you'll make him see that better than I could. He liked you so much, you know. By Jove, I'm sure he'll do it for you, you know!"

Christine's pain-stricken eyes alone were visible above the screen. Underneath it her lips were bent in an involuntary smile of most mocking bitterness. Conscience had not been at her without a purpose. At her husband's bidding she must go and ask Caylesham for money. She bowed to conscience now.

CHAPTER VIII

IDEALS AND ASPIRATIONS

A sudden rigidity seemed to affect Mrs. Raymore from the waist upwards. Her back grew stiff, her head rose very straight from the neck, her eyes looked fixedly in front of her, her lips were tight shut. These symptoms were due to the fact that she saw Tom Courtland approaching, in company with a woman who was certainly not Lady Harriet. Thanks to the gossip about among Tom's friends, Kate Raymore guessed who she was; the woman's gorgeous attire, her flamboyant manner, the air of good-natured rowdyism which she carried with her, all confirmed the guess. Yet Tom was walking with her in the broad light of day – not in the street, it is true; it was in a rather retired part of the Park. Still, people came there and drove by there, and to many his companion was known by sight and by repute. His conduct betrayed increasing recklessness. There was nothing to do but to pass him by without notice; he himself would wish nothing else and would expect nothing else. Still Mrs. Raymore was sorry to have to do it; for Tom had been kind and helpful in obtaining that position in a railway company's office in Buenos Ayres which had covered the disastrous retreat of her well-beloved son.

This lamentable affair had been hushed up so far as the outer world was concerned; but their friends knew the truth. In the first terrible days, when there had been imminent risk of a criminal prosecution, Raymore had rather lost his head and had gone round to Grantley Imason, to Tom Courtland, to John Fanshaw, making lament and imploring advice. So they all knew – they and their wives; and the poor boy's sister Eva had been told, perforce. There the public shame stopped, but the private shame was very bitter to the Raymores. Raymore was driven to accuse himself of all kinds of faults in his bringing-up of the boy – of having been too indulgent here or too strict there – most of all, of having been so engrossed in business as not to see enough of the boy or to keep proper watch on his disposition and companions, and the way he spent his time. Kate Raymore, who even now could not get it out of her head that her boy was a paragon, was possessed by a more primitive feeling. To her the thing was a nemesis. She had been too content, too sure all was well with their household, too uplifted in her kindly but rather scornful judgment of the difficulties and follies which the Courtland family, and the Fanshaw family, and other families of her acquaintance had brought before her eyes. She had fallen too much into the pose of the judge, the critic, and the censor. Well, she had trouble enough of her own now; and that, to say nothing of Tom's kindness about Buenos Ayres, made her sorrier to have to cut him in the Park.

She was a religious woman, of a type now often considered old-fashioned. The nemesis which she instinctively acknowledged she accepted as a just and direct chastisement of Heaven. Her husband was impatient with this view, but he had more sympathy with the merciful alleviation of her sorrow which Heaven had sent. In the hour of affliction her son's heart, which had wandered from her in the waywardness of his heady youth, had come back to her. They could share holy memories of hours spent before Charley went, after forgiveness had been offered and received, and they were all drawn very close together. With these memories in their hearts they could endure, and with a confident hope look forward to, their son's future. Meanwhile they who remained were nearer in heart too. Eva, who had been inclined to flightiness, was frightened and sobered into a greater tenderness and a more willing obedience; and Edgar Raymore himself, when once he had pulled himself together, had behaved so well and been such a help to his wife in the trial that their old relations of mellow friendship took on a more intimate and affectionate character.

It was Sibylla Imason whom Mrs. Raymore chose to pour out these feelings to. Who could better share them than the young wife still in the first pride and glory of her motherhood?

"Children bring you together and keep you together, whether in trouble or in joy. That's one reason why everybody ought to have children," Kate Raymore said with a rather tremulous smile.

"If there are none, there's such a danger of the whole thing getting old and cold, and – and worn-out, you know."

Sibylla was in wonderful health now, and at the best of her looks. Her manner too had grown more composed and less impulsive, although she kept her old graciousness. To Kate Raymore she seemed very fair and good to gaze on. She listened with a thoughtful gravity and the wonted hint of questioning or seeking in her eyes. There was a hint of pain in them also, and of this Mrs. Raymore presently became aware.

"That's how it ought to be," said Sibylla. "But – well, the Courtlands have children too."

The remark struck Kate Raymore as rather odd, coming from Sibylla, and associated with the hint of pain in Sibylla's eyes; but she was just now engrossed in her own feelings. She went on describing family life on the true lines – she wouldn't have it that they were unreal or merely ideal – and was quite content that Sibylla should listen.

Sibylla did listen; it was easier to do that than to talk on the subject herself. But she listened without much interest. It was old ground to her, broken by imagination, if not by experience – very familiar to her thoughts some months before. She had lived with – nay, seemed to live on – such ideas in the early days of her marriage, before the accident and all that had come from it. The things Kate Raymore said were no doubt true sometimes; but they were not true for her. That was the upshot of the matter. They were not true for Grantley Imason's wife, nor for the mother of his child. Her reason, dominated by emotion and almost as impulsive as its ruler, had brought her to that conclusion before ever her child was born. It dated from the night when she battled with Grantley, and she had never wavered in it since. She had abandoned hope of the ideal.

What of that? Do not most people have to abandon the ideal? Many of them do it readily enough, even with a secret sense of relief, since there is always something of a strain about an ideal: it is, in famous phrase, so categorically imperative. But Sibylla was a stickler for ideals; they were what she dealt in, what she proposed to barter and to bargain with; she had no place in her stock for humbler wares. Ideals or nothing! And, in the ideal, wifehood and motherhood were so indissolubly united that the failure of one soured her joy in the other. She loved the little child, but loved him with bitterness. He had become the symbol of her lost ideal.

But she did not say this to Kate Raymore, for with the loss of the ideal comes a certain shame of it. We see it then as we did not before, as we know now that others – so many others – see it; and we veil the broken image. The heart, once its throne, becomes its hiding-place.

All this was not for Kate Raymore. She must be left to wonder that Sibylla said so little about the baby – left to be amazed at an apparent coldness in the young mother – left to miss gracious extravagances of maternal joy and pride. For if Sibylla could not be open, neither would she play the hypocrite by parading a light-hearted enjoyment and exultation in the child. How should she display the boy and her proud pleasure in him to the world outside, when her pleasure was not shared at home, and her pride made her love covert there?

Christine Fanshaw, sharply guessing, had cried once:

"But surely Grantley's manner is irreproachable?"

Even now Sibylla's humour rose at the challenge.

"Yes, irreproachable. Of course it would be. All through, his solicitude for both of us was – beautiful! Even Mumples was shaken!"

"Shaken? Why, I thought – "

"Shaken in her bad opinion, I mean, Christine dear. Yes, if ever a man did his duty, did and said all the proper things, Grantley did. And he wasn't the least angry with me; he was only annoyed with Adam and Eve, you know. Of course he was awfully busy just then: County Council elections and what not. But you'd never have guessed it. He never seemed hurried, and he was always very – very solicitous."

"And now, Sibylla?"

"Just the same – and quite pleased. Only I think he wishes babies were like kittens – more animated and growing up quicker, you know. We happen to have a kitten, and I think he's more at his ease with that."

"Nonsense! Men are men, you know."

"Most of them seem to be," admitted Sibylla.

"It would be becoming," Christine observed, "if you recollected that you'd been in the wrong all through. You believed in the wrong doctor, you wanted the wrong thing, you were quite unreasonable. Hadn't you better remember that?"

"I do remember it. And if you want another admission – well, Grantley never reminds me of it by a look or a word."

"He's very much of a gentleman, Sibylla."

"He's never the least ungentlemanlike, Christine."

Christine enjoyed a distinction; she laughed gently.

"And you're a very lucky woman," she went on.

"Don't I say so in my prayers?"

"In a very dangerous state of mind."

Christine's eyes were set on her friend. Sibylla met them full and square. Her mirth, real or affected, vanished. She looked hard at Christine, and made no answer for a moment.

"Yes, I suppose I know what you mean by that," she said at last.

"It's so much easier to despair of your husband than of anybody else in the world – except your wife."

"I try to consider him a type."

"Well, don't find an exception. Oh, I'm not talking at random. I know!" She paused a moment and then went on: "There's a question I should like to ask you, but I suppose it's a question nobody ought to ask; it's too impertinent, even for me, I'm afraid."

Sibylla looked at her, and a faint touch of colour rose on her cheeks. There was a little defiance about her manner, as though she were accused, and stood on her defence rather uneasily. She understood what question it was that even Christine could not ask.

"Grantley and I are – perfectly good friends," she said.

Christine's next question was drawled out in a lazy murmur, and was never completed, apparently from mere indolence.

"It's you who – ?"

Sibylla nodded in an abrupt decisive fashion.

"And who do you see most of?" asked Christine.

The colour deepened a little on Sibylla's face.

"That doesn't follow. Don't talk like that."

"I've gone a great deal too far?"

"I really think you have, rather, and without an atom of reason."

"Oh, entirely! I apologise. That sort of thing happens to be – to be in my thoughts."

Sibylla, in some anger, had risen to go. The last words arrested her movement, and she stood in the middle of the room, looking down on Christine's little figure, nestling in a big armchair.

"Your thoughts? That sort of thing in your thoughts?"

"Oh, entirely in retrospect, my dear; and it generally comes of not being appreciated, and of wanting an outlet for – for – well, for something or other, you know."

"Are you going to speak plainly, Christine?"

"Not for worlds, my dear! Are you going to drop my acquaintance?"

"Why is it in your thoughts? You say it's – it's all in the past?"

"Really I'm beginning to doubt if there's such a thing as the past; and if there isn't, it makes everything so much worse! I thought it was all done with – done with long ago; and now it isn't. It's

just all – all over my life, as it used to be. And I – I'm afraid again. And I'm lying again. It means so many lies, you know." She looked up at Sibylla with a plaintiveness coloured by malice. "So if I've been impertinent, just put it down to what I happen to be thinking about, my dear."

Sibylla stood very quiet, saying nothing. Christine went on after a minute:

"Can't you manage to be wrapped up in the baby, my dear?"

"No, I can't." The answer was hard and unhesitating. "You've told me something people don't generally tell. I'll tell you something that I didn't think I ever should tell. I love my baby – and sometimes I hate to have to see him." Her eyes were on Christine's face, and there was distress – hopeless distress – in them. "Now I should think you'd drop my acquaintance," she ended with a laugh.

"Oh, I've never had a baby – I'm not shocked to death. But – but why, Sibylla?"

"Surely you can guess why! It's horrible, but it's not unintelligible, surely?"

"No, I suppose it's not," Christine sighed.

Christine's legs had been curled up on her chair; she let them down to the ground and rose to her feet.

"That's all from both of us for to-day?" she asked, with a wry smile.

"All for to-day, I think," answered Sibylla, buttoning her glove.

"I meant to be – friendly."

"You have been. I never guessed anything – anything of what you've said – about you."

"Nobody hinted it? Not even Harriet Courtland? She knew."

"I never see her. How did she know?"

"She was my great friend then. Rather funny, isn't it? I'm told Tom's getting quite regardless of appearances."

"Oh, I can't bear to talk about that!"

"No? Well, you can think of it now and then, can't you? It's rather wholesome to reflect how other people look when they're doing the things that you want – "

"Christine! Good-bye!"

"Oh, good-bye, my dear! And take care of yourself. Oh, I only mean the wind's cold."

But her look denied the harmless meaning she claimed for her parting words.

Grantley's attitude admits of simpler definition than his wife's. He attributed to her an abnormally prolonged and obstinate fit of sulks. People who have been in the wrong are generally sulky; that went a long way to account for it. Add thereto Sibylla's extreme expectations of a world and of an institution both of which deal mostly with compromises and arrangements short of the ideal, and the case seemed to him clear enough and not altogether unnatural, however vexatious it might be. He flew to no tragical or final conclusion. He did not despair; but neither did he struggle. He made no advances; his pride was too wounded, and his reason too affronted for that. On the other hand he offered no provocation. The irreproachability of his manner continued; the inaccessibility of his feelings increased. He devoted his mind to his work, public and commercial; and he waited for Sibylla to come to her senses. Given his theory of the case, he deserved credit for much courtesy, much patience, and entire consistency of purpose. And he, unlike Sibylla, neither talked to intimate friends nor invited questions from them. Both pride and wisdom forbade. Finally, while he acknowledged great discomfort (including a disagreeable element of the ludicrous), the idea of danger never crossed his mind; he would have laughed at Christine Fanshaw's warning, had it been addressed to him.

Whatever Sibylla's faults, levity was not among them, and danger in Christine's sense – danger of a break-up of the household, as distinguished from a continuance of it, however unsatisfactory that continuance might be – there would probably have been none, had not Walter Blake, after a lively, but not very profitable, youth, wanted to reform his life. He might have wanted to be wicked without creating any peril at all for the Imason household. But he wanted to be good, and he wanted Sibylla to make him good. This idea had occurred to him quite early in their acquaintance. He too had a faculty – even a facility – for idealising. He idealised Sibylla into the image of goodness and purity, which

would turn him from sin and folly by making virtue and wisdom not better (which of course they were already), but more attractive and more pleasurable. If they were made more attractive and more pleasurable, he would be eager to embrace them. Besides he had had a good deal of the alternatives, without ever being really content with them. By this time he was firmly convinced that he must be good, and that Sibylla, and Sibylla alone, could make him good. He did not at all think out what the process was to be, nor whither it might lead. He had never planned much, nor looked where things led to. Until they led to something alarming, he did not consider the question much. How she was to reform him he seemed to leave to Sibylla, but his demand that she should do it grew more and more explicit.

This was to attack Sibylla on her weak spot, to aim an arrow true at the joint in her harness. For (one is tempted to say, unfortunately) she knew the only way in which people could be reformed and made good, and caused to feel that wisdom and virtue were not only better (which of course they felt already), but also more pleasurable than folly and sin. (People who want to be reformed are sometimes, it must be admitted, a little exacting.) That could be done only by sympathy and understanding. And if they are thorough, sympathy and understanding compose, or depend on, or issue in love – in the best kind of love, where friend gives himself unreservedly to friend, entering into every feeling, and being privy to every thought. This close and intimate connection must be established before one mind can, lever-like, raise another, and the process of reformation be begun. So much is old ground, often trodden and with no pretence of novelty about it. But much of the power of a proposition may depend not on its soundness, but on the ardour with which it is seized upon, and the conviction with which it is held – which things, again, depend on the character and temper of the believer. Sibylla's character and temper made the proposition extraordinarily convincing. Her circumstances, as she conceived them, were equally provocative in the same direction. What was wrong with her? In the end that she was not wanted, or not wanted enough, that she had more to give than had been asked of her, and no outlet (as Christine had put it) sufficient to relieve the press of her emotions. It was almost inevitable that she should respond to Blake's appeal. He was an outlet. He was somebody who wanted her very much, whom she could help, with whom she could expand, to whom she could give what she had to give in such abundant measure.

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