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Содержание

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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I
THE CALL FROM WITHOUT

Colonel Fanshawe was riding slowly back to his bungalow about an hour before the sunset of a hot and brilliant day in the middle of March. He had spent a long day in the saddle, for the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Forces was at Peshawar on a visit of inspection, and he had reviewed and inspected and inspected and reviewed and given medals and colours and compliments and criticism till the whole garrison, who had been under arms on the parade ground since an early hour that morning, was ready to drop with a well-earned fatigue. That evening there was to be a great dinner-party followed by a dance at the house of the Resident. To-morrow the Commander-in-Chief was to go up the Khyber pass, returning just in time to catch the night train to Lahore, arriving there at daybreak, and prepared to spend another day similar to this. And yet, so reflected Colonel Fanshawe, he was made, to all appearance, of flesh and blood, exactly like anybody else: indeed, he was endowed with flesh to a somewhat phenomenal extent; for, though not of unusual height, he swung a full eighteen stone into his saddle, ate and drank in perfectly amazing quantities, and, without doubt, would to-night prance genially and colossally from beginning to end of every dance with a succession of the prettiest girls in Peshawar. It was equally certain that at the conclusion he would go in person to the bandmaster and beg as a personal favour for an extra or two… And Colonel Fanshawe, lean and slight and in excellent condition, felt himself a pigmy and an invalid in contrast with this indefatigable elephant who all day had seemed only to wax in energy and boisterousness and monumental briskness. It was as if some huge Government building had burst into active life: John Bull himself, as in the pages of some patriotic print, had become incarnate, commanding and guffawing and perspiring.

But the day, though fatiguing to everybody else except the Commander-in-Chief, had been highly satisfactory. Twice had he complimented Colonel Fanshawe on the smartness of his Pathan regiment, and since the regiment was one of the two institutions for which the Colonel lived and loved, it followed that in retrospect his habitual content, which at all times was of a very sterling quality, had been lifted to the levels of the sublime. And anticipation was up to the level of retrospect, for the second of these institutions which engaged all his energies and affection was the home towards which he was now ambling along the dusty roads. In the imperturbable fashion of a man who was not gifted with much imagination, he enjoyed what he had to the almost complete exclusion of desiring that which he had not; and though, if a genuine wishing-cap had been put ready to his hand, he would certainly have had a request or two to make, he never, in the absence of that apocryphal piece of headgear, let his mind dwell on what it might have brought him. His wife, the second of that name, and Elizabeth, the daughter of the first, almost completely exiled from his mind all desires connected with his home, and were sufficient to satisfy the emotional needs of a love which was not the less luminous because it lacked the iridescence of romance. It burned with a steady and unwinking flame, without rockets and multi-coloured stars, and was eminently suited to light a man's way, so that he should go without stumbling through the dusk of a hazardous world. For the sake of his wife or of Elizabeth he would have given his life unquestioningly and with cheerfulness, regretting the necessity

should such arise, but he would have done so without any of the ecstasy of self-sacrifice that inspired the hymns and the beatitudes on the lips of martyrs. In this sunny afternoon of middle age which had come to him there were none of the surprising flames that glorify the hour of dawn.

The road from the parade ground through cantonments lay level and dusty; carob-trees, dense and varnished of foliage, with the long scimitar-shaped seed-pods of last year still clinging to them, met and mingled their branches together overhead, giving a vault of shadow from a midday sun, but now, as the day drew near to its close, the level rays poured dazzling between the tree-trunks, turning the dust-ridden air into a mist of dusky gold. In front, seen through the arching trees, the huddled native town rose dim and amorphous through the haze, and the acres of flowering fruit-trees were a flush of pink and white petals. Southwards, level and infinite as the sea, the Indian plain stretched to the farthest horizons, to the north rose the hills shoulder over shoulder till they culminated in fleecy clouds, among which, scarcely distinguishable, there glistened the immemorial whiteness of the eternal snows. Here, down in the plain, the very existence of those frozen cliffs seemed incredible, for, though there were still a dozen days of March to run, it seemed as if the powers of the air, in whose control is the great oven of India, had drawn the damper, so to speak, out of that cosmetic furnace during the last week, to see if the heating apparatus was all in order for the approaching hot season, and Colonel Fanshawe's decision, against which there had been the growlings of domestic mutiny, that Elizabeth should start for England the next week, crystallized itself into the inexorable. He had gone so far in the freshness of the morning hours to-day as to promise her to reconsider his decision, but he determined now to telegraph for her passage as soon as he got home.

He quickened his pace a little as he approached his gate, at the lure of the refreshing hours that he had promised himself in his garden before it was necessary to dress for the dinner and the ball. The hot weather had already scorched to a cinder the herbs and grasses of unwatered places, but no such tragedy had yet overtaken this acre of green coolness, with its ditches and channels of unlimited irrigation, where the unusual heat had but caused the expansion, in a burst of premature luxuriance, of all the flowers that should have decorated April. So brilliant was this galaxy, that Colonel Fanshawe could hardly regret it, though it meant that even now the days of the garden were numbered, and that through April it would sleep unblossoming, till the rains of May stirred it into that brief and delirious frenzy of flowering again that lasts but for a day or two, in some sultry intermission of the streaming skies that so soon open their flood-gates again, and cover the steaming earth with disjected petals. But at present, though April would pay the price in barrenness and withered leaf, summer and spring were in flower together, and tulips and petunias, marigolds and flame-flower, morning-glory and bougainvillæa made a jubilance of many-coloured carpet, while, more precious than all to the Colonel's soul, his rose hedges of crimson ramblers, Gloire de Dijon, and the briars of Peshawar flared with innumerable fragrance. A few days before, reluctantly, and with some inkling of the sentiments of a murderer who plans a crime, he had abandoned, marooned, so to speak, his tennis-court to die of drought, but the motive of his deed really gave a verdict of nothing more bloodthirsty than justifiable grassicide, for the well had given unmistakable signs that it was not capable of keeping the whole garden alive. Besides – and here for a moment his content was clouded again – Elizabeth was starting for England next week, and the tennis-court became an investment that paid no dividends in pleasure. His wife never played; she would as soon have thought of coming downstairs to breakfast, and certainly she never did that. She preferred dancing all night.

He gave his horse into the charge of his orderly at the gate, and, a little stiff and bow-legged from so many hours in the saddle, walked up the short drive that lay between the abandoned tennis-court and the rose-garden which was in full effervescence of flower and fragrance. Between him and his garden there was a relation as intimate almost and as comprehending as that between two personalities, and had some one with the gift of vivid yet easily intelligible eloquence presented his feeling towards it, as towards some beautiful dumb creature with a living identity of its own, the Colonel, though it had never struck him in that light before, would have acknowledged the truth of

the imagery. Just now this silent sweet-smelling creature had begun to make a stir again after the hot windlessness of the day, for the breeze of sunset, invigorating as wine, had just sprung up, and wafted the evidence of its fragrant life in sheets and webs of perfume through the sibilant air, while as evidence of Elizabeth there came through the open windows of the drawing-room as complicated a *mêlée* of sound from the grand piano. Devoted and affectionate as father and daughter were to each other, Colonel Fanshawe felt slightly shy of Elizabeth when she was at the piano, for Elizabeth playing was Elizabeth transformed. A sort of fury of passion and intentness possessed her; she evoked from the strings a personality as real to herself as was his garden to the Colonel, and all this intensity, as her bewildered father occasionally said to himself, was born from the compositions of "some German Johnny." In that rapt adoration of melody Elizabeth's mother lived again, just as she seemed to glow again from within Elizabeth's flushed face and sparkling eyes as she played. So, refraining from interrupting his daughter in her ecstatic communings with the particular German Johnny who engaged her attention at the moment, the Colonel stepped softly round the corner, and ordered himself a cup of tea in his bedroom, with which he refreshed himself as he adopted a garden-garb for his hot and close-fitting uniform. His wife, as he well knew, would be resting in her sitting-room in anticipation of the fatigue of the dinner and dance which were to close the day. Had there been no dance or dinner in prospect, she would be doing the same thing in repair of previous fatigue. She was one of those women who are capable of exertion as long as that over which they exert themselves furnishes them with amusement; an hour's uncongenial occupation tired her completely out. But she was able to do anything she wanted to, and such a performance under such circumstances seemed but to invigorate her. Her husband rejoiced in her strength, and sympathized with her weakness with equal sincerity.

He was no lily-handed gardener, no finger-tip lover, who, with an ivory-handled *sécateur*, snips off minute dead twigs, and selects a rosebud for his buttonhole, but went about his business with the tender ruthlessness that true gardening demands. Up one of the pillars of the veranda there climbed together a great ramping mass of blue convolvulus and an Ard's pillar; and the constricting plant was quietly intent on strangling the rose. Now, the convolvulus was an interloping adventuress, invading territories that were not her own, and regretfully but inexorably Colonel Fanshawe committed murder, snipping off the sappy stem at its root, and gently disentangling its voluted tendrils. As he stripped it down the new bull-pup came with sentimental sighs out of the house, and then, becoming aware, no doubt by some subtle brain-wave, that the murdered morning-glory was an enemy, flung himself on the bestrewn tendrils, and got tightly involved therein, and rolled away in a state of wild-eyed and bewildered entanglement, barking hoarsely. Upon which an observant pigeon on the roof remarked quite clearly, "Look at the fool! Look at the fool!" Simultaneously, with a loud false chord, the wild torrents of notes within ceased. There came a sound quite exactly as if somebody had banged down the lid of a piano, and Elizabeth came out on to the veranda. She was very tall, as tall almost as her father, and the long lines of her figure showed slim and boylike through the thin blouse and blue linen skirt against which the evening breeze pressed, moulding them to the limbs within. Her hair lay thick and low above her small face, and her mouth, in spite of the heightened colour of her cheeks and the vividness of her eyes, drooped a little as if fatigued. She had clasped her long-fingered hands behind her head, and she stood there a moment without seeing her father, with amusement gathering in her eyes as she observed the comedy of the constricted puppy. Then, turning her head, she saw him.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried. "Are you back? And, if so, why didn't you tell me? The fact is that you love your garden better than your only daughter."

Colonel Fanshawe had two nails and a piece of bass string in his mouth destined for the support of the disentangled rose, and could give no assurance beyond an incoherent mumbling.

"It is true," said Elizabeth. "And what makes me feel it more keenly is that I haven't had any tea. Daddy, do leave your silly plants and talk to me. I haven't spoken to a soul all day. Mamma had lunch in her room. She is saving up for this evening, and I haven't seen anybody. In fact, it has all been rather dismal. I've been playing the piano, and I have come to the conclusion that I shall never

be able to play at all. So I banged down the lid, and I shall never open it again. Do get down from that silly ladder and talk to me."

Colonel Fanshawe was methodical. He put the two nails in a box and looped up the spray of the rose in a manner which, though temporary, would last till he could get to work again.

"That sounds rather a dismal little chronicle, Lizzy," he said. "So if you feel that we can't talk while I go on gardening – "

"It has nothing to do with my feelings," remarked Elizabeth; "it is a mere question of external impossibilities. Have you had tea?"

"Yes."

"Then come and see me have mine. I shall eat quantities and quantities of tea, and not have any dinner, I think. One can't dine alone, and you and mamma are dining out at the Residency and going to the dance. Daddy, I do think mamma might have let me go to the ball; I'm eighteen, and if one isn't old enough to go to a dance at eighteen, I don't know when one is."

Elizabeth paused a moment, and put her nose in the air.

"I don't believe mamma will want me to come out till it is time for me to go in again," she remarked.

Colonel Fanshawe had an admirable gift of silence. When he concluded that there was no advantage to be gained by speech he could refrain from it, instead of, like the most part of mankind, making a series of injudicious observations. At the bottom of Elizabeth's remark, as he well knew, there lay stewing a herb of rather bitter infusion, which he had no desire to stir up. But Elizabeth, so it seemed, felt disposed to do the stirring herself.

"Mamma will have the next eight months all to herself," she said, "and she can dance all the time. I wish to state quite explicitly that I think she might have let me go to this dance. I have told her so, and so for fear she should tell you, I do it myself."

Elizabeth's eye wandered on to the path, and she broke off suddenly.

"Oh, my beloved Shah Jehan," she said, "you will certainly strangle yourself."

This appeared highly probable, for Shah Jehan, the young and imperial bull-pup, had managed to entangle himself so strictly in the yards of strong convolvulus which the Colonel had cut down that his eyes were starting out of his head, and only the most remote sort of growl could escape from his enveloped throat. With the cake-knife, which she snatched up from the tea-table, Elizabeth ran to his rescue.

"It's such a blessing, daddy," she said as she returned to him, "that you and I are so very much one person, because we can say anything we like to each other, and it is certain that the other one – how tiresome language is – the one I mean, who listens only really listens to his own thoughts."

"Ah, my dear Elizabeth!" said he suddenly, laying his hand on her arm. If Elizabeth's mother lived again when Elizabeth played, masked behind her daughter's face, she appeared with no guard of flesh in between when Elizabeth said that.

She drew his hand through her arm and strolled with him up the path.

"It is so, daddy," she repeated; "and when I grumble to you it is only as if I grumbled to myself. Mamma might have let me go to this one dance, and she doesn't, because she wants all the dancing she can get herself, and naturally doesn't want to sit in a row instead. But she'll have to let me come out next autumn. Oh, by the way, I had forgotten the most important thing of all. Have you settled when I am to go to England?"

"Yes, dear; next week. I have telegraphed for your passage."

"What a loathsome and disgusting daddy," remarked Elizabeth.

"Possibly! But the loathsome daddy isn't going to have a tired and white-faced daughter, if he can avoid it. I shall miss you more than you can possibly guess, Lizzie."

Elizabeth gave a great sigh.

"I'm so glad!" she said. "I hope you will be thoroughly unhappy. I shan't like it, either. But mamma won't mind; that's a comfort."

"Elizabeth, I wish – "

"Yes, I know, dear; so do I. You needn't explain. I wish to begin to eat my enormous tea also, so let us sit down. I don't want to go to England; and, besides, staying with Aunt Julia is exactly like lying on a feather-bed, with all the luxuries of the season on a table close to you, and the windows tightly shut. And Edith is like the clean lace-border to the pillow. I shall be so comfortable."

"Well, that's something, Lizzie."

"It isn't; it's nothing and worse than nothing. I don't want to be comfortable. Nothing that is really alive is ever comfortable. Aunt Julia and Edith and all Heathmoor generally are dead and buried. I am not sure they do not stink – "

"My dear – "

"As it says in the Bible," said Elizabeth, "nobody there is ever hungry or thirsty, nobody is unhappy or happy, nobody wants. They are all like fishes in an aquarium; you can't get at them because there is a sheet of strong glass in between. And there aren't any tigers or burning ghats or cobras or cholera."

"I shouldn't be particularly sorry if there were fewer of those blessings here," remarked her father.

"Perhaps; but they help to make things real. It is so easy to lose all sense of being alive if you are too comfortable."

Elizabeth pointed to the molten west.

"There," she said, "that's a sunset. But in England for the most part they wrap it up in nice soft thick clouds, so that it isn't a real sunset. And dear Aunt Julia wraps up her own life and the life of every one about her in the same way. She mops up every one's vitality as with a sponge by thinking exclusively about not getting wet or tired. Oh, how I love this naked, tired, wicked, mysterious land, with all its deadliness and its dust and its sunsets and its secrets, which I shall never fathom any more than I can fathom Schumann! I'm a savage, you know. I love wild, unhappy things – "

Elizabeth broke off suddenly.

"I don't believe even you understand what I mean, daddy," she said.

"Yes, my dear, I do," said he. "I could tell you exactly what you mean. But have your say first; you have not nearly done yet. I will tell you what you mean when you have finished."

Elizabeth laughed.

"That will be a good thing," she said, "because, though I know that I mean something, I often have not the least idea what it is. Daddy, I wish I was a boy so terribly sometimes, and I know you do too. If I was a boy I would get up now and kiss you, and walk straight off into the direction of where the moon is just going to rise. I would have adventures – oh, such adventures!"

"My dear, you would get malaria, and come home next morning with a violent headache and ask me for some quinine."

She shook her head.

"You are wrong," she said. "I wouldn't come back even to you for years, not until I had learned what it all means. I would be afraid of nothing; I would shrink from nothing. Perhaps I should see Malaria herself in the jungle down there by the Indus – a tall, white-faced woman, with golden irises to her eyes, and I would talk to her and learn about her. I would go into the temple of the Brahmins at Benares and listen to them preaching sedition. I would sit by the corpse as it burned by the river bank, watching it, oh, so quietly, and loving it. I would go into the opium dens and learn how to dream… Learn how to dream! I wonder if that is what I want to do? I think it must be that. Sometimes when I am playing I begin to dream, and just as I am getting deep I strike a false chord and wake myself up, or mamma comes in and says it is time for me to go driving with her."

Elizabeth had forgotten about the enormous tea she had intended to eat, and still sat upright on the edge of her chair, looking out over the gathering night. Already in the swiftly darkening dusk the colours were withdrawn from the flower-beds, and only the heavy odours gave token of their blossoming. A streak of dwindling orange lingered in the west; above, in the fathomless blue, stars that five minutes before had been but minute pinpricks of luminance were grown to yellow lamps and globes of light. Somewhere in the lines a bugle suddenly blared out its message to the stillness and was silent again. A little farther off a tom-tom beat with endless iteration.

Then she spoke again, more rapidly.

"It is only by dreaming that you can get close to the world," she said, "and hope to get at its meaning. People who are completely awake spend all their time in doing things that don't matter. You, for instance, daddy – you and your inspections and reviews. What does it all come to? Would this world be one whit the worse if you didn't do any of it? Yet perhaps I am wronging you, for, anyhow, you can go mooning about your garden for hours together. Let me see – where had I got to?"

Colonel Fanshawe was watching Elizabeth a little uneasily. This strange mood of hers was not new to him. Half a dozen times before he had known her go off into these dim rhapsodies, and they somewhat disconcerted him. He made an effort to bring her back into realms less shadowy.

"Where had you got to?" he asked. "Upon my word, my dear, I don't think you had got anywhere particular. Wouldn't it be well to begin that enormous tea of which you spoke?"

But the girl was fathoms deep in this queer reverie of speculation. She shook her head at him.

"No; you don't understand yet," she said. "One has to dream first before one can do any good while one is awake. Unless you call baking bread and milking cows doing good. You have to penetrate, penetrate. It is a kingdom with high walls round it, and I expect there are many gates. Perhaps we all have our own gates; perhaps mine is a gate made of music and yours is a garden-gate. Don't misunderstand me, daddy, or think I am talking nonsense, or think, again, that what I mean is religion, though I dare say there is a religion-gate as well. All I know is that you have to pass dreaming through one of the gates in order to get inside the kingdom. And when you do get inside you find that it isn't so much that you have got inside the kingdom as that the kingdom has got inside you. I know it must be so. Each of us, I expect, has to find himself, and when he has found himself… Oh, God knows!"

She broke off, and instantly poured herself out a cup of tea.

"I am so hungry," she said, "and I had quite forgotten. While I eat and drink, daddy, you shall keep your promise and tell me what I mean. You said you knew. Or have I been talking the most dreadful rubbish? But, if so, I am rubbish myself, for what I have said is Me."

Colonel Fanshawe lit a cigarette.

"No, my dear, you haven't been talking rubbish," he said. "But if I had said exactly the same it would have been rubbish." He meditated a moment or two, for, though he felt what he wanted to say, it was rather difficult for him to find the words for it. At the same time also there was that in what Elizabeth had said which strangely moved him; it recalled to him in this sunny afternoon of life something of what he had felt when he brought home, worshipping and loving, Elizabeth's mother.

"You have talked admirable sense, dear," he said, "for the very simple reason that you are eighteen. But it would be rubbish in my mouth at forty-eight. You feel that you are surrounded by delicious mysteries, into the heart of which you mean to penetrate. You can do it too, and I so earnestly hope you will. While you are yet young you can fall in love."

Elizabeth looked at him in disappointed amazement.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"I assure you it is enough. You will not believe it now – "

"But fall in love?" said the girl again. "With a man? Just with a common man?"

"Yes, just with a common man," said he. "At least, it is quite certain that the immense majority of mankind will call him a common man. You will find that he makes everything beautiful."

"But I know how beautiful it all is already," said she.

"Yes, and it all puzzles you. You don't know what it means. Well, it means what I have told you – love."

"Oh, daddy, is that all?" said the girl again.

"In a way, it is. I mean that you can't go beyond that. But – "

Again he paused, feeling a sudden shyness, even with his own daughter, in speaking of anything that concerned him so intimately.

"But though you can't go beyond love," he said, "you can go into it – penetrate, penetrate, as you said just now, yourself. And the more you penetrate into it the more you will see that there is no end to it, and no beginning either. And then you will call it by another name."

He paused for a moment, and got up as he heard himself somewhat shrilly summoned from within the house.

"It seems to you all rather dull, I am afraid, my dear," he said, "but it isn't."

Elizabeth rose also.

"But why would it be nonsense for you to speak of it as I did?" she asked. "And why is it excellent sense for me to do so?"

"Because when you are forty-eight, my dear, you will have had to learn a certain sort of patience and indulgence, which is quite out of place when you are eighteen. You will have seen that the people who bake bread and milk cows and review troops, as I do, may conceivably be doing – well, doing quite nicely. But you are quite right to think them useless old fogies at present!"

Elizabeth gave him a quick little kiss.

"You are a darling!" she said. "And now I am going to vanish swiftly round the corner of the veranda. Mamma has called you three times and you haven't answered. You will get into trouble, and so I desert you."

Elizabeth's amiable scheme was executed a little too late. She had barely got half-way down the veranda when her stepmother rustled out of the drawing-room, already dressed for her party. Her light, slight figure was still like a girl's – like a girl's, too, was her evening dress, with its simple, straight cut. Nor did her face – smooth, delicate, and soft – belie the impression; but her forehead and the outer corners of her eyes were a little lined, as if a sleepless night had momentarily devitalized her youth. And her voice, when she spoke, was old – old and querulous.

"Bob, I have been calling and calling you!" she said. "And are you not dressed yet? What have you been doing? Elizabeth, why did you not send your father to dress? We shall be late, as usual, and if husband and wife are late every one always thinks it is the wife's fault. Do go and dress, my dear; and Elizabeth, my darling, will you come and talk to me while I wait for him? I am so dreadfully tired! I am sure I do not know how I shall get through the evening. What a pity you are not a year older, and then you could go instead of me and let me pass a quiet evening at home! Or why are not you and I going to have a dear little evening alone together?"

Elizabeth retraced her steps.

"I am quite willing to go instead of you, mamma!" she said.

"Dearest, I know how unselfish you are. But you must keep your sweet girlish freshness another year, and not tire yourself with sitting up and dancing all night. I know you think I ought to have let you go to-night, but you must allow me to judge of that. Indeed, my dear, I feel sure you do."

This little speech was admirably characteristic of Mrs. Fanshawe. At one moment she would be finding fault with everybody, at the next she would shower tenderness on them. It mattered nothing to her that only a few hours ago she and Elizabeth had exchanged peculiarly clear-cut and opposed views on the subject of this dance; she was quite capable, a few hours later, of assuming that they were quite in accord about it. She never had the smallest qualms on the subject of her own sincerity, as is the habit of thoroughly insincere people. She was merely quite determined to get her own way over any point in which she had a preference, and, having got it, always proceeded to make herself charming in a rather helpless and clinging kind of manner. Whether her husband had ever gone so far

as to admit even to himself the fact of her insincerity is doubtful. Where his affection was engaged he lost all power of criticism; where he loved he swallowed whole.

Mrs. Fanshawe gave a delicate little sigh – a very perfect and appealing little sigh. It might have been supposed, so finished was it, so perfectly phrased, that she had practised it for years in private. Such was not the case; it was quite natural to her artificial self, and came to her lips as spontaneously as song to a thrush.

"We must see a great deal of each other these next days, Elizabeth," she said, "before you go off to all the gaiety and delights of England. How I long to come with you, for I am sure the hot weather will utterly knock me up; but of course my duty is with your father. I should not dream of leaving him while I went home to enjoy myself."

"But you will go up to the hills next month, mamma, will you not?" said the girl. "And stop there till the autumn? And you will like that, won't you?"

Mrs. Fanshawe gave the famous little sigh again.

"Like it? My dear, it is the emptiest, emptiest life," she said; "nothing but gossip and parties all day and dancing in the evening. I would far sooner stop down here with your father, and only go away with him when he can get off. But of course he would not hear of that, for he knows very well that to spend the summer here would kill me. I should not dream of distressing him by suggesting it."

Occasionally Elizabeth's patience gave way before the accumulation of such insincerities. In general she put up with them unrebelliously, adapting herself to the experience of daily life. But now and then she rose in flagrant and unsuspected mutiny. She did so on this occasion, as her father appeared again dressed for this evening's functions.

"Daddy," she said, "mamma has been telling me how much she would like to stop here with you instead of going up to the hills. Wouldn't that be nice for you? It sounds a charming plan, mamma."

Mrs. Fanshawe did not suffer a moment's discomposure. She took Elizabeth's chin daintily in her fingers and gave her a little butterfly kiss, which could not disarrange anybody's complexion.

"Darling, what an idea!" she said. "What can I have been saying to make you think I meant that! Good-night, my little sweet one. Go to bed early, and I shall come to my room like a mouse, so as not to disturb you. And, in turn, dear, would you mind not beginning to practise till, shall we say, eleven to-morrow morning. Begin then and wake me up with some delicious thing like what you were playing so very early this morning. Good-night, sweet Cinderella!"

Elizabeth's rebellion vanished in a sense of amusement. She knew that she might as well expect to cause a blush of embarrassment on the face of the serene moon, by repeating to a mere mortal some unconsidered remark of hers, as to cause her stepmother a moment's loss of self-composure, and she smiled at the butterfly lips. Even when Mrs. Fanshawe caused her the greatest irritation she could not banish altogether the instinct of protection and tenderness towards that remarkably well-equipped little lady. She was really about as capable of taking care of herself as an iron-clad battleship anchored in a calm sea, with guns agape and torpedo-nets spread, but she conveyed so subtle an impression of dependence and timidity that even the victims of her most trying insincerities relented towards her as towards a pretty child eager for enjoyment. It was so easy to strike the smile off her face.

"Good-night, little mamma!" said Elizabeth. "Have a nice time and dance every dance. And I shan't disturb you to-morrow by my practising, as I am going with daddy up the Khyber."

"My darling, won't that be rather a long day for you? I hoped, perhaps, we should spend to-morrow quietly together, you and I."

"Oh no, not a bit long!" said Elizabeth, again with a little spark of irritation. "I shan't have spent all night dancing like you. Good-night, dear daddy! I shall be ready to start at eight."

Elizabeth made a renewed but absent-minded attack on her tea when the others had gone, countermanded dinner, and, in spite of her lately registered vow never to touch a piano again, went back into the drawing-room and opened it. A modern musician, a modern and ordinary concert-frequenter, indeed, would have pitied the rusticity of her old-fashioned taste, for not only were the

works but even the names of later authors unknown to her, and at the present moment she was finding Schumann's Noveletten a source of rapture and mystery to her. But, however old-fashioned in taste, she had the root of the matter in her profound love of melody and her secret, unswerving sense that in music was contained the riddle and the answer of the world. She, even as all others who have felt the incommunicable spell that lies in beauty of sound, knew that to put her feeling into words, or even into the cramping outlines of definite thought, was to distort and parody it, for the essence of the whole matter was that its spell was wordless. Images, of course, thronged in spate through her mind as she played or listened to music; sometimes it was a figure with veiled face that sang; sometimes it was a band of militant spirits who marched; sometimes through many-coloured mists, that grew thinner and more opalescent as a climax approached, there shone an ineffable light. But whatever image there came to her, she felt its inadequacy; it was at the most what a photograph is compared to the landscape which it records. Music was music; to those who understood, that would be a more satisfactory statement than any array of images which it suggested.

To-night as she played she found running, like a strong undertow beneath sunlit and placid surfaces, certain words of her father. Was it, indeed, love that inspired this beauty? If so, how was it that she who so ceaselessly worshipped its manifestation had never a glimpse of the spirit that inspired it?.. He had said more than that. He had said – here the ripple of the triplets enthralled and enchained her for a moment – he had said that for her the love of a common man would interpret things for her.

Elizabeth was playing with divided mind. Her fingers, that is to say, already schooled to the notes, rendered bar after bar to her inner, her contemplative self, while her thoughts, that swarm of active honey-bees that bring the crude treasure to the hive, were busy on their quests. Love, he had said, would teach her. Had love taught Schumann this moon-melody, this star-sown heaven of song?.. Had the thought of Madame Schumann made vocal to him the magic spell?.. This was a thing to smile at. Daddy did not understand, of course, what music was. He did not know how far it transcended in reality all else that can be felt or thought.

But, to do him justice, that was not the sum, the conclusion of his words. The love of a man, he had said, would teach her love, and the dwelling in that would teach her that love had neither end nor beginning, and she would call it by another name.

Instantly and ludicrously an image presented itself, the image of the regimental church, with its pitch-pine pews, its crude windows, its encaustic tiles, its braying harmonium. Yet all these unlovely objects somehow symbolized to her father all and more than all that music symbolized to her. And he was not imaginative; he was not poetical; he was not artistic. But to him, here was the one eternally satisfying answer to all questions that could ever be asked.

Elizabeth's fingers had come to the end of the first Novelette, but her unconscious mind, even as her thinking mind, heeded them no longer. The whole of her mind, conscious and unconscious alike, peered eagerly into this, asking itself what it saw there. And it saw nothing except the coloured glass and the pitch-pine; heard nothing but the wheeze of the harmonium, and the somewhat bucolic merriment of a chant in C major.

She rose from the piano and strolled out into the yellow, honey-coloured moonlight – a moonlight not pale and cold, but partaking of the ardour and the weariness of the Indian day. She recalled all that religion, direct religious worship, that is to say, and adoration of a personal and inner principle, had meant to her life, and, fully honest with herself, she saw how intensely little, how infinitesimally small that had been. There were her childish prayers, first of all, sentences which she could never remember having learned, for they came out of her earliest mists of childhood, and she could no more recollect being taught either them or their meaning than she could recollect being taught to wash her face. They were both on exactly the same plane; they belonged to the ritual of getting up and going to bed. There was washing to be done; there were buttons to be negotiated; there were prayers to be said. She had taken it on trust that these performances had to be gone through; the reason for them had never interested her. Then a further piece of observance had been introduced

into the routine of life, and with her best frock and hat she had stood and sat and knelt, sometimes with tedium, sometimes in absorbed attention to interesting members of the congregation, while words were recited, and hymns sung. It was rather pleasant to recognize among the formulas of public worship her own bedside ejaculations, just as it is pleasant to recognize familiar faces in a crowd. It was pleasant also to be encouraged to join her small voice in the more cheerful intervals of singing. Church, in fact, was a not unattractive way of spending an hour on Sunday morning, and was part of Sunday in precisely the same degree and with exactly the same meaninglessness as her prayers were part of the ritual of dressing and undressing. Much of what was recited there was connected with the Jews who had astounding adventures in Egypt and in the wilderness.

She had heard, she had listened, she had been taught, prepared for confirmation, and taken to communion. She supposed that she believed that she was a Christian, but she believed, for that matter, in Australia, and, for that matter, she knew she was English. But neither her belief in Australia nor in the truth of Christianity was coloured with emotion or directed her actions. She would not, as far as she was aware, behave any differently if Australia was suddenly swallowed up in the ocean, or if the historical facts on which Christianity was based were proved to be fallacious. In no way did either fact enter into her life. She was not, for instance, kind and honest and truthful because she was a Christian.

But she knew that in beauty she sought a meaning that she had never yet found, that at times she agonized to discover, and catch hold of, something on which to rest, from which to derive…

She had wandered down the length of the dusky garden alleys between the roses and yellow mimosas until she had come to the low stone wall at the bottom of her father's garden. Here the cantonments ended, and half a mile of dry dusty land lay between her and the native city, which rose a black blot against the blue of the night sky. A few low huts of cattle-tenders were scattered about, and the feather-like plumes of tamarisk, and clear-cut aloes broke the level monotony. One such aloe close at hand flowered a few days before, and now the great stalk, fifteen feet high, with its cluster of blossoms at the end of the horizontal twigs, stood like a telegraph pole across the face of the moon, and Elizabeth wondered at this prodigious force that from the empty air and barren soil raised in so few days this triumphant engine and distributor of life. For years this plant had silently and slowly grown, a barren growth in a barren land; then suddenly it had been caught in the whirlpool of production, of fruition, and with a stupendous output, which should cause its own exhausted death, had erected that beacon flame with that torch of transmitted life. Had it felt a death-bed revelation, as it were? Was it satisfied to bear witness to life and to die? What did it mean? What did it all mean?

A small trodden track lay just below the three-foot wall on which she leaned, and at the moment she heard something stir there close to her. Looking over, she saw that an old man was squatting there. He had a long white beard that fell nearly to his waist; he was naked but for the loin-cloth about his middle, and by his side lay a tall crutch and an empty begging-bowl of wood. But round his shoulders, which glistened in the moonlight, she saw that there was bound the three-fold cord that marks a Brahmin.

Apparently he heard her movement as she leaned over, and turned his head towards her. Deadly weakness and exhaustion were printed there, but more clearly than that there shone from it a quiet indwelling joy, an expression of rapture, of ecstasy.

Elizabeth spoke to him in the vernacular.

"You want food?" she said.

"I want nothing, lady," said he.

Elizabeth suddenly felt that there was something here for *her;* that this aged, quiet face, so full of joy, so shadowed by weakness, had a message. The feeling was instinctive and unaccountable.

"I will get you food in a moment," she said.

"I do not want food," said he.

Elizabeth put her hand on the top of the low wall and easily vaulted over.

"But you are tired and hungry," she said, "and you must have travelled far from your native place to come up here. Where are you from?"

"From Benares. I have searched all my life, but to-day my search is over."

A sudden wave of uncontrollable emotion seized the girl.

"Oh, tell me what you have searched for?" she said. "What *is* it?"

"It is the Life itself," he said. "And I have found."

He fell back, and lay quite still, with open eyes and smiling mouth. Even as he said he had found.

CHAPTER II
THE RIDDLE GROWS

In these days of the diffusion of the products of trade and the benefits doubtful and otherwise of civilization, when the Amir of Afghanistan has a piano, and the Grand Llama of Thibet a bicycle, it must not shock the reader to know that Elizabeth travelled up the Khyber Pass in the company of her father and the Commander-in-Chief in a motor-car. That military hero who had danced three-quarters of the night with the young ladies of Peshawar, not singling out any one for his favours, but cutting up his heart into a large number of small pieces, and giving one to each, was delighted to find there was yet another charming maiden whom he had not yet seen, and, rolling his jolly sides with laughter, supposed that there had been a conspiracy among the beauties of Peshawar to keep the fairest of them all out of the ballroom. Gallantry and excessive animal spirits are apt to be rather disgusting in elderly and obese persons, but the vitality of this amiable old warrior was so genuine in its boyishness that the primmest of the sex that he so indiscriminately adored were disarmed by his monstrous flatteries. But when our party had passed the fort of Jamrud that guards the Indian end of the historic road, and entered on the defile which from immemorial days has been the coveted key that has locked and unlocked the treasure of India, each yard of which has been bought and paid for in blood, Sir Henry's gallant loquacity was abated, and the magic of the most historic highway in the world cast its spell on him.

Elizabeth had hardly slept last night, but that which had kept her still and wakeful during the dark hours had been so strong a stimulus to her mind, that morning saw no haggard cheeks and drooping eyelids, but an alert and fresh-coloured face. That strange sudden death of the white-haired traveller had not in the least shocked or terrified her, for her whole soul was full of the discovery of how wonderful and beautiful a thing is death to one who has lived, and who, like this aged Brahmin, had looked upon it not as a cold hand that locks the gates of the sepulchre, but as a friend who opens a door into a fuller life, an ampler perception. Hitherto she had never looked on death, and in so far as she thought of it at all, viewed it as a remote and cruel contingency, horrible to contemplate and best forgotten. She had no idea that it could be like *that,* that calm moment of healing that had not distorted the peace and the joy on the old man's face, but had merely wiped off, as if it had been some travel-stain, some superficial blur, the weariness and the age that had a moment before overlaid it. She found, too, that she had no horror at the touch of the lifeless shell, and had helped the servants to move the body. But before she had called for assistance she had sat a minute or two alone with the body, the face of which was calmer and more serene than the flooding moonlight that illuminated it, and had kissed, in a sort of inexplicable reverence and tenderness, the lined forehead.

And all night long that face had remained with her. If she shut her eyes it hovered before her in the darkness of her closed lids, answering the question she did not know how to frame. Triumph, conviction, certainty, attainment was the response. She could not doubt that this death by the wayside of but one of the teeming millions, and that one so aged, so stricken, was a royal entry from an ante-chamber into a throne-room. She had seen a soul attain; the dead smiling face no less than the last words which the triumphant lips had spoken assured her of it. All his life he had sought, knowing what he sought; as yet she but felt the conviction that there was something to seek.

For a while, however, all this sank out of sight in her mind, as if she had dropped treasure into a well. It was there safe, and when she dredged for it she would find it again, but for the present, as they wound upwards on the narrow road, the magic of the way enchained her. Barer and more precipitous rose the barren hill-sides of neutral native territory, between which wound the narrow riband of the English road. All the way along it, within communicable distance from each other, the sentries of the Khyber Rifles guarded the pass, to give safe conduct to the caravan that came with carpets and dried fruits and incense from the unknown country beyond, and to that which, with the products of

civilization, oil and sheet iron and calico, passed from the plain into the mountains of Afghanistan. They overtook and passed the caravan that had rested last night at the entrance to the pass, going westwards; six hundred camels, bearded and with soft, padding steps, carried the amorphous mass of merchandise. Some were gentle beasts, mild-eyed and depressed, others were muzzled with rope and foamed at the mouth. Myriad were the types of those who drove them; there were pale-faced boys with flaxen hair; there were hawk-nosed eager Pathans of the type so familiar to Elizabeth in the parades of her father's regiment, snub-nosed Mongolians, Thibetans, with their high cheek-bones and wide-lipped mouths, and of them all there was not one in whose face this morning Elizabeth did not see signs of some secret quest, some unconjecturable search. One perhaps desired money, one an end to this mounting road; one was hungry, another thirsty, but behind all these superficial needs she read into each face a desire, a quest. Often, as if in answer to her eager glance, she received a questioning stare, as if the gazer sought from her some signal that he was waiting for. All nature that morning had a question on its lips for Elizabeth, and an answer if she could but interpret it. The grey climbing hill-sides already aquiver in the hot sun seemed ready to tell her why they stood there broad-flanked and menacing. The brook that came cool and bubbling from below a rock by the wayside, fringing its course with cresses and feathery grass, had learned in the darkness of the earth, in the sub-terrestrial caves from which it sprang, the reason of its going. Scattered by the roadside here and there were Afghan villages, and at the mouths of excavated dwellings in the hill-side stood the wild-eyed native folk who were born and lived and loved and fought and murdered, maybe, all in obedience to some law of being that caused the aloe to shoot up in erect strong stem and blossom, and that lit the fires of victory in the eyes of the dying Brahmin. All seemed ready to tell her the answer could she but frame her question.

Like an obsession this sense of revelation ready to show itself to her, could she but put herself on the plane of thought where it lay, besieged her all day, and as they returned to the caravanserai at the foot of the pass as the sun, declining behind the western hills, turned them for a moment into glowing amber, it seemed to elude her but by a hair's-breadth. There all was ready for the reception of the caravan that had marched through the pass into India that day; the sellers of bread were pulling out of their circular ovens excavated in the ground the flat cakes of unleavened bread, the brass samovars hissed at the booths of the tea-sellers, and cauldrons of hot soup boiled and bubbled. Already the van of the wayfarers was entering the guarded gates that were pierced in the mud walls, and the camels, weary with the long stage, bent their unwieldy joints and lay down for their drivers to strip off their load. Some were too tired to eat, and, resting their queer prehistoric heads on their bended forelegs, closed their long-lashed eyes and slept. Others, hungry and restless, foamed and lathered and snapped greedily at the mounds of dried fodder that their drivers placed before them. Tired men got their bowls of soup or tea from the stalls, and, leaning against the sides of their beasts, ate their supper, and wrapping their heads in their dusty gay-coloured shawls, slept by their sleeping animals. Others, inclined for a chat, collected round the shops of the provision-sellers against the wall of the serai, and smoked and talked when their supper was done; others, three or four clubbing together, lit fires of the brushwood they had gathered during the day, and cooked their own food at cheaper rate than obtained in the stores. Ponies nickered and twitched at their heel-ropes, the sharp, pungent smell of the wood fires and the wreaths of aromatic smoke drifted slowly along the sluggish currents of the almost windless air, and gradually the empty space of the serai became a mosaic of sleeping men and beasts. The hills that the sunset had turned into molten tawny gold grew dark again with the gathering night, and in the depth of the velvet vault above the wheeling stars grew large.

And behind all the various forms of life, behind the molten hills, behind the sky, behind the limbs of the bearded camels, behind the chatter and smoke of the provision booths, there lurked, so it seemed to Elizabeth, one impulse, one energy common to all. In her head lay some remembered melody of Schumann, that seemed to beat to the same indwelling rhythms to which the stars pulsated.

Her father was standing alone beside her; a little way off the genial Commander-in-Chief was tasting the soup that bubbled in the tin-plated cauldrons, pronouncing it excellent, and bidding his aide-de-camp, a slim young, weary Englishman, translate his verdict of it to the gratified booth-keeper. Some word of the identity of this great boisterous hedonist had been passed about the serai, but the tired drovers of the caravan paid little heed. And yet, here incarnate, was the figure-head of the English power that guaranteed their safe journey through the turbulent lands of the frontier, and that would avenge with wicked little spitting guns and a troop of khaki-clad soldiers any raid that the ungoverned tribe might make. But Sir Henry, in spite of this, roused but little attention; the tired drovers slept; those who were more alert were but employed with jokes and snatches of song round the samovars and soup-cauldrons. The hills and the stars attended as little; everything and everybody was intent on his own inward calls, just as last night the Brahmin who lay by the wayside had no need of food, and but thought of the finding of that for which all his years had searched.

And then Elizabeth's questing soul suddenly gave up the pursuit of a hidden cause, and felt content with the obvious explanation. She took her father's arm.

"Oh, daddy, I've had such a lovely day!" she said. "What heaps of different things there are in the world, and what heaps of different businesses. And it all makes such a jumbled incoherent whole! In half an hour we shall be back home again, and it will be time to dress, and mamma will tell us all she has done to-day. After dinner I will play the piano to you till you snore, and as soon as you snore I shall wake you up again and make you write to Aunt Julia to say when I shall arrive at Heathmoor."

He pressed her hand as it lay in the crook of his arm.

"It is a less tragic view than that of last night," he said.

"I know. At this moment I don't mind the least about going to England. I'm – I'm going to take things as they come."

Elizabeth paused a moment, as with the vividness of ocular hallucination the Brahmin's face once more swam before her eyes.

"But that doesn't mean I am not going to be serious," she said. "I want 'richly to enjoy.' Doesn't that come in the Bible somewhere? I expect there are many routes that arrive at the same place."

To anybody unacquainted with the sum of Elizabeth's musings that day, this was necessarily a cryptic speech. It grew more cryptic yet.

"Perhaps drink leads the drunkard there," she said, "and music the musician. Doesn't one develop, daddy, through one's passions, and not through one's renunciations? I can't see how starving your desires can possibly help one."

"My dear, there are desires and desires," he said.

"And where do they all come from? Surely from the search."

He was silent a moment, and at that moment anything short of enthusiastic acceptance of her illumination was a coldness, a hand of ice to Elizabeth.

"Daddy, you don't understand," she said. "As long as we want, it doesn't much matter what we want. Isn't it half the battle to be eager?"

He shook his head.

"Again I should talk nonsense if I agreed with you," he said. "Eagerness is a sword, my dear; but it is not armour."

"I don't want armour," she said quickly. "I am not afraid of being hurt."

"Ah, don't get hurt, my darling!" he said.

"Not I. And if I do get hurt, daddy, I shall come crying to you, and you will have to comfort me. Oh, oh – look at all those tired men, with no beds to lie on, and no pillows and no tooth powder or sponges! Don't you envy them? They will wake up in the morning, and find *themselves* there, and, after all, nothing else can matter. I don't want to be bothered with possessions. I want to be – " Elizabeth suddenly broke off, interrupting her speech and thought alike.

"Daddy, that darling Sir Henry has had soup, and now he is eating unleavened cakes, and a peculiarly murderous-looking Pathan is tempting him with a pomegranate. Do stop him; he is dining with us in an hour's time, and mamma will be so vexed if he doesn't eat the most enormous dinner."

Colonel Fanshawe, with Elizabeth still on his arm, stepped over a couple of sleeping prostrate forms.

"Yes, we will go to him," he said, "and you shall tell me more about the simple life afterwards. It is getting late."

Sir Henry had just cracked a pomegranate in his enormous beefy hands.

"God bless me!" he was saying. "I never saw anything look so good. Fanshawe, be kind enough to tell this man in your best Pushtoo, that there's a fortune in pomegranates. Why, it's quite delicious; never tasted such a fine fruit."

Colonel Fanshawe made some amiable equivalent of all this in Pushtoo, and spoke to Sir Henry again.

"He says that his trees will bear in greater abundance than ever now, sir. But it is rather late. I think we ought to be getting home. You won't have more than time to eat your dinner in comfort before the train – "

Sir Henry rejected a mass of seeds.

"Yes, yes; we'll go," he said. "Why, here's my Miss Elizabeth come to insist. I always obey the ladies, Colonel; you obey the ladies always, and you'll have a confoundedly pleasant time. Now, Miss Elizabeth, quick march, is it?"

A sleepless day following on a dancing night, had produced in Mrs. Fanshawe that uncertainty of temper which, when it exhibits itself in children, is called fractiousness. The Commander-in-Chief, who dined with them *en famille,* had been obliged to leave in order to catch his train before dinner was over, and in consequence the very expensive strawberries which she had designed to form an exceptional dessert were eaten by herself and Elizabeth, while the Colonel went to the station to speed his parting chief. The chief also during dinner had paid, according to her estimate of what was proper, insufficient attention to his hostess, and more than sufficient to Elizabeth, on whom he rained showers of robust gallantries. In addition, some vague story of a dead man found in the garden had agitated her, while not a single soul from the rest of the station had called to tell her how complete was the eclipse that all other women suffered at the ball last night in consequence of her effulgence. This was enough to start a promising crop of grievances and gloomy forebodings in Mrs. Fanshawe's mind, which she served up, so to speak, young, succulent, and tender like mustard and cress. The crop was of extremely varied growth – a perfect macedoine of mixed and bitter vegetables, among which her habitual helplessness and childlike manner had been completely volatilized.

"I think it is no wonder," she said, "that the military future of India gives politicians grave anxiety at home, when there is such a doddering old goose at the head of affairs."

"Oh, mamma, it's rather a telling sort of doddering!" said Elizabeth. "They gave him a tremendous reception at Jamrud."

"And laughed at him behind his back, I know," said Mrs. Fanshawe, with decision. "And his conduct at dinner, too, with his absurd jokes. I had hoped, Elizabeth, that your good sense would have enabled you to see through them, and for my part, the most charitable explanation I can think of is that he had had too much wine, which I am sure I hope he will sleep off before he makes another laughing-stock of himself at Lahore. Stuffing himself with soup and pomegranates, too, like a school-boy at a confectioner's!"

Elizabeth forebore to suggest that a school confectioner who sold soup and pomegranates would be a unique species of tradesman, and proceeded to eat strawberries one by one from the dish. Her stepmother did not often spout with vinegar, when she did the wisest thing was not to attempt to staunch the flow, but merely wait till it ran dry. But it appeared that her silence acted as spur sufficient.

"And as you have nothing to tell me about the pleasures of your expedition," observed Mrs. Fanshawe, "I must be content with picturing it to myself, as, indeed, I have been doing all day, thinking that now you had got to Landi Kotal, and now to the other place, the name of which I forget."

"We started at eight," began Elizabeth.

"I am quite aware of that, dear," said Mrs. Fanshawe. "I had lain awake till then after the ball, and was just beginning to think I should get to sleep, when I heard you laughing and calling so merrily. I only thought, 'Now my dear ones are starting on their expedition,' nothing more at all. Except to look out of my window, though the light hurt my eyes, to see if you were likely to have a fine day. But, since you have nothing to tell me – "

"Indeed, mamma, we all talked about our day at dinner," said Elizabeth. "I should have thought you had heard enough of it."

Mrs. Fanshawe closed her eyes until Elizabeth ceased speaking, and then went on exactly where she had left off.

"What you have been doing," she said. "I must try to entertain you with what happened last night. The room was very hot and full, and indeed, with Sir Henry bouncing about, there was little space for anybody else to dance at all. Such an elephant I have never yet seen outside a menagerie or at the Durbar, and I should not wonder if when he retired next year, as I am told he does, Barnum offered something handsome for him. But it would be a risky purchase; he might burst any day and cover the place with pomegranate seeds."

Elizabeth gave a little inward gurgle of laughter at this picturesque phrasing. A peculiarity of Mrs. Fanshawe, and one which she shared with many of the human race, was that, when vexed, her sense of humour entirely deserted her, though her humour itself indulged in admirable touches. There was, for instance, humour in her swift thumbnail sketch of an exploding warrior in a menagerie, but her perception of her own felicity failed to recognize it. Under these circumstances it was not diplomatic for others to greet it; their amusement was not wanted. Mrs. Fanshawe proceeded in her inimitable way, in a rather faint voice.

"Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday," she said. "I hope, Elizabeth, you will be able to let me see a little of you before you bury yourself in your trunks. I hope, too, you will keep a hand on your natural exuberance during your voyage. You must not be carried away by such foolish sallies and witticisms as seemed to amuse you during dinner, and make undesirable acquaintances. There is sure to be a number of skylarking young men on board going home, who will want to romp with any girl handy. And be careful to dress very plainly and quietly. You will earn in respect what you will lose in being stared at. Of course you will chiefly sit in the ladies' saloon, especially after dark, and not play any of those foolish games with buckets and bits of rope, which occasion so much silly shouting and giggling, unless there are one or two elderly women playing!"

She observed, with a shaded glance, that Elizabeth had finished the strawberries.

"Perhaps you would pass me the strawberries, dear," she said. "They are quite excellent."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" began Elizabeth.

"Ah, you have eaten them all, have you? It is not of the slightest consequence. I only wanted one or two, and no doubt I am quite as well without them. Indeed, I am only glad that you have enjoyed them so much, and wish for your sake there were more. Ah, here is your father back from seeing poor Sir Henry off. Take the dish off the table, darling, so that he shall not see we have had strawberries, for they are his favourite fruit."

The goaded Elizabeth turned.

"Daddy," she said, "I have eaten all the strawberries, so that there are none for you and mamma."

Mrs. Fanshawe gave her a reproachful glance.

"Really, Elizabeth!" she said. "So you are back, Bob. Did you see the poor old man into his train? I was saying to Elizabeth that I hoped it was only wine, but I am afraid his brain must be going. I should not wonder if he became quite childish."

Colonel Fanshawe lifted his eyebrows in mild surprise.

"Sir Henry?" he said. "I hope neither conjecture is true, my dear. By the way, he sent his warmest thanks to you and hoped so much that when you went up to Simla you would stay with him a week or two. He will be there all next month. But of course if you are afraid of his being sent for to go to the asylum – "

Mrs. Fanshawe did not waste time over her transitions; she did not modulate from key to key, but, without sequence of transitional chords, put her finger firmly down on the notes she intended to play.

"My darling, how literally you take my little joke!" she said. "Dear Sir Henry! He is like a great boy, is he not, with his jokes and high spirits! I declare he made me feel a hundred years old. I must say that it is very civil of him, and of course I shall go. I regard the invitations of the Commander-in-Chief as a royal command, when one is in India."

An unusual impulse of candour took possession of her.

"Besides," she said, "it will be much more amusing and comfortable than at the hotel."

Elizabeth, as had now been settled, was to start for England the next week, and since, after the visit of the Commander-in-Chief, a quiet reaction settled down on Peshawar, Mrs. Fanshawe was at liberty to work herself to the bone, as she herself phrased it, to make preparations for her departure. As a matter of strict fact, her labours in this regard were to order her *ayah* to wash out a Thermos flask of hers, the possession of which, she declared, would make "all the difference" to Elizabeth's comfort on her journey down to Bombay, and to determine to finish a woollen crochet scarf for her, which would make "all the difference" when she was on the boat. The necessity of finishing this – for her determination was invincible on the point – caused her to insist on a good deal of reading aloud in the evening, which she always enjoyed, while the breaking of the Thermos flask – quite irreplaceable in Peshawar – by her *ayah* gave her an excuse, which she had long been wanting, for dismissing her, since it was quite impossible to trust a woman who could be careless over such a treasure, and to keep a servant whom she could not trust, was to violate one of her most sound household laws. Under the stress of these duties it was only prudent to rest for rather longer hours than usual after lunch, with the crochet scarf put on a table by her sofa, in case her afternoon insomnia was persistent, and except for lunch, she was practically invisible until evening. Under these circumstances, though she continued to plan long quiet days for herself and Elizabeth before the wrench of parting came, the girl saw more than usual of her father, for, to speak frankly, it was impossible to have the sense of seeing anybody else when Mrs. Fanshawe was present. She was obtrusive in the faint but shrill trumpeting manner of a mosquito.

To Elizabeth, therefore, and, though loyalty prevented his ever forming such a thought to himself, perhaps to her father, too, these days had a recaptured charm. It was now a couple of years since her stepmother had made the third – not shadowy – in her home; before that, for her mother had died in her infancy, she and her father had been inseparable companions. And in these two years Elizabeth had grown up; from the high romantic mists of childhood, she had stepped down into the level plains, and saw womanhood stretching out in front of her. As was natural, that expanse had come slowly and gradually into sight, and it was not till these few days of companionship with her father brought back the habit of earlier years that she began to realize how far she had travelled. She found, too, that the adequacy of the prattling companionship of childhood no longer satisfied her; her heart needed a more mature diet, her brain was awake and tingling with a hundred questions and surmises such as a few days before had inspired her wondering conjectures when she found him at work in his garden. Then, for the first time quite consciously, she had asked herself that momentous question as to the meaning, the principle that lay behind all the phenomena which she had taken for granted; then, too, she had realized that to her father the explanation lay in, or, at any rate, was bound up with, something inherent in the prayers and hymns at church. There to him was the finality which she had been consciously seeking, about which for the first time she felt any real curiosity.

But she was as diffident about putting any question to him about it as he, all these years, had been of initiating any speech on the subject. A man's religious convictions necessarily take the colour and texture, so to speak, of his mind, and this quiet, unassertive man was no more in the habit of speaking about them than about his loyalty to the King or his habits of personal cleanliness. Such subjects as these, rightly or wrongly, are the last to find vocal expression; he would have found it as difficult and as unnatural to speak to Elizabeth on religious topics as to discourse on the meaning of the National Anthem, or ask her at breakfast if she had performed her ablutions with thoroughness. In his own case, his conduct, his work, and his immaculate appearance bore witness to the reality of his convictions on these three respects, and, though he shared with no mother the responsibility of parentage, he assumed her welfare in these regards. It was not because the reality of them was faint to him that he was reticent, it was because the reality was a matter of instinct, deeply felt and inwardly imperative. Throughout the reigns of various governesses, he had from time to time reminded those ladies of his wish that a Bible lesson should inaugurate the labours of the day, and, having thus provided for the material of religious instruction, he believed that the child's nature would, out of that pabulum, secrete, in the manner of well-nourished bodily glands, the secret essences that sustained and built. But there had resulted from this method of reticence, a symptom which should have troubled him if he wanted confirmation of its success, for Elizabeth, so open, so garrulous with him on all other subjects, had never spoken to him on this one. This he set down to the same instinct that made himself shy of speech on such subjects, namely, the inherent conviction that does not care to discuss matters like loyalty and cleanliness. It had never occurred to him that her silence was due to indifference, to incuriousness, and that religious instruction was to her no more than a part of the curriculum of the week-day church, an hour's slightly distasteful feature of Sunday morning.

But now Elizabeth's curiosity was aroused. "The scheme of things entire" had begun to make audible to her its first faint flute-like call, a call that, before there has fallen on the spirit any experience of agony, of darkness, of loneliness, is as fascinating as the music of Pan or the voice of Sirens, and she longed to know how it sounded in the ears of others. For herself, she was confused, bewildered by the remote uncapturable melody, that at present only gave hints in broken phrases to her untrained ear.

The two were riding back one day from a horseback saunter along the lanes among the fruit orchards. The blossom was beginning to fall, and when a puff of wind disturbed its uncertain clinging the ground below would be showered with snowy pear-blossom or pink with the flower of the peach. Elizabeth, in tune with the spring, was inclined to lament this.

"I would almost go without peaches," she said, "if that would save the blossom from falling."

He laughed.

"Yet it would be a hard choice," he said, "to determine whether one would look at a tree covered with blossom, instead of having dessert. I think I should let Nature take its course, Lizzie, after all."

"Is it meant that the blossom has to fall before the fruit comes?" she asked.

"Well, yes. To want it otherwise would be parallel to wanting girls and boys not to grow up."

"And you do?"

"Naturally, though it is at the expense of their rosy petals." This seemed to give Elizabeth sufficient material for a pondering silence, which lasted a couple of minutes.

"*I* want to grow up," she observed, "and keep all my youth as well."

He smiled at her.

"Hard, but worth attempting," he said.

"Oh … do you mean it is possible, daddy?"

"Certainly! You can keep all of youth that is really worth having. But, as I said, hard. For instance, you can continue to have all the glow of enthusiasm of youth till it is time to think about – about turning in."

"Dying? I don't want ever to think about it. I think it is a perfectly disgusting prospect. Don't you hate the idea of it, daddy?"

He let his eyes dwell on her a moment.

"I can't say that I do, Lizzie," he said. "Don't misunderstand me. I enjoy life tremendously; I'm not in the least tired of it. But, as for hating the idea of death, why no! You see, you see, it's only another stage in growing up, which is a process with which, as I said, I am in sympathy."

They were passing through a lane deeply sunk between its adjacent fields; a cool draught flowed down it, and Elizabeth shivered.

"Oh, daddy, to be put in the cold earth!" she said. "That, anyhow, is a quite certain accompaniment of death; there is no doubt about that. And about the rest, who knows?"

"My dear, you don't doubt, do you?" he asked.

"I don't know that I do. One is taught; I was taught. I suppose I believe in the arithmetic I learned, and in the geography I learned – "

She broke off suddenly as a little wind, as it were, blew across the placid sunlit sea of her consciousness, shattering the brightnesses.

"But because I have learned a thing it does not become part of me, as people tell me," she said. "You have to leaven a thing with love in order to assimilate it. I've always known that those things are bone of your bone to you, part of you, vital part of you, part that could not be amputated. Even the fact that you have never talked to me about them has shown that. You don't tell me that you love me, simply because it is part of you to do so; nor do I remind you that I have ten fingers and ten toes."

She checked her horse as they emerged from the lane into the stream of the traffic that was passing into the native city.

"That's why we have never talked about it, daddy," she said in sudden enlightenment. "It was too real to you, and it didn't touch me."

She had never seen him so troubled.

"Didn't touch you?" he asked. "You don't believe – "

Elizabeth laid her hand on his knee.

"Daddy dear, I believe in all things living and beautiful, and true. Don't take it to heart – pray don't. Does – does the blossom know what fruit is coming? But surely the fruit comes."

Swiftly, suddenly at this supreme instant of sunset, all the world was changed; it was as if it passed into the heart of an opal. The dust of the main road into which the two had just turned was transfigured into mist of gold and rose; the wayfarers who passed along, plodding home with camels and mild-eyed buffaloes, were changed into citizens of some rainbow-kingdom. More brilliant grew the excellent opalescence, and then all the tints of it were sucked up into one soft crimson that flooded earth and sky. Then, as the darkness began to overlay it, it grew dusky and yet duskier, till the incarnadined air was robbed of its glories. But high above them northwards and eastwards flamed the rose-coloured snows.

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER III
COMFORTABLE MRS. HANCOCK

It is almost doubtful whether it is right to call Heathmoor a village, since there is something plebeian about the word, implying labourers' cottages and public-houses and an admixture of corduroy in the trousers of the male inhabitants with strings tied, for reasons eternally inexplicable, below their knees. Even less is Heathmoor a town, if by a town we denote an assemblage of houses cheek to jowl, streets with tramways or omnibuses and a scarcity of trees and gardens. Indeed, no known word implying the collected domicile of human beings – which Heathmoor certainly is – will describe it, and the indication of it necessitates a more verbose method.

It lies at so convenient a distance from the metropolis, and is served by so swift and proper a succession of trains at those hours when Heathmoor travels, that it combines, as its inhabitants unanimously declare, all the advantages of town with the pleasures and fine air of the country. Twenty minutes in a well-padded railway-carriage with bevelled mirrors and attractive photographs of beaches and abbeys and nice clear rivers lands the business men to whom Heathmoor almost entirely belongs in one of the main and central arteries of the London streets, and twenty-three minutes suffices to take them and their wives and daughters home again after they have dined in town and been to the play. The question of those extra minutes is a staple of conversation in Heathmoor, and there is a great deal of high feeling about it, for nobody can see, especially after hours of conversation on the subject, why the railway company should not quicken up the return trains in the evening. Another peculiarity of those otherwise admirable trains is that the first-class carriages are invariably full and the rest of the vehicles comparatively empty. Tickets, moreover – those mean little oblongs of cardboard – are seldom seen, and ticket collectors never make their demands. If some energetic young man, newly promoted, ventures to open a first-class carriage-door between Heathmoor and London, by the train that leaves Heathmoor at 9.6 a.m., for instance, or the later one at 9.42 a.m., its occupants look at him in disgusted astonishment. One, perhaps, sufficiently unbends to murmur, "Season," but probably no notice is taken of him till the guard, hurrying up, gives him a couple of hot words, and apologizes to the gentlemen. On the whole, they are not made uncomfortable by such intrusions; interruption, in fact, rarely occurring, somewhat emphasizes the privileged aloofness of these Heathmoor magnates, just as an occasional trespasser in well-ordered domains makes to glow the more brightly the sense of proprietorship. The impertinence receives but a shrug, and a settlement behind the page of the *Financial Times* follows.

The second of these trains, namely, the 9.42 a.m. from Heathmoor, performs a more sociable journey, for there is less of the *Financial Times* in it and more of the ladies of Heathmoor, who, with business to transact in the shops, go up to town in the morning with amazing frequency, returning, for the most part, by an equally swift transit, which lands them back at home again at twenty minutes past one. All the morning, in consequence, between those hours the roads at Heathmoor, which are level and well drained owing to its famous gravelly soil, which renders it so salubrious a settlement, are comparatively empty, for those who do not go to London find in their houses and gardens sufficient occupation to detain them there till lunch-time. Once again, between five and six the male population swarms homewards, and a row of cabs uniformly patronized awaits the arrival of the midnight train from town, which enables its travellers to have stayed to the very end of most theatrical performances.

A small mercantile quarter clusters round the station, but the local shops are neither numerous nor, as Mrs. Hancock, Colonel Fanshawe's widowed sister, sometimes laments, "choice." Butcher,

baker, and greengrocer supply the less "choice" comforts of life, but if you want a sweetbread in a hurry, or a bundle of early asparagus, it is idle to expect anything of the sort. A "Court milliner," who lately set up there behind a plate-glass window and some elegant "forms," has a great deal of time on her hands, and a tailor, who professes to have the newest suitings, and to be unrivalled in the matter of liveries, does little more than put an occasional patch in the garments of the male inhabitants, for Heathmoor, in general, gets its apparel from metropolitan markets, and prefers to be waited on by large and noiseless parlourmaids. In fact, the mercantile quarter forms but an insignificant fraction of Heathmoor residences, the bulk of which consists of admirably comfortable and commodious villas, each standing segregate in its acre or half-acre of garden. All along the well-kept roads – the roads at Heathmoor seem to be washed and dusted, like china, every morning – are situated these residences, so aptly described as desirable, each with its gate, its laurel hedge, and small plot of grass in front, each with its tennis-court or croquet-lawn at back, its tiled roofs, its "tradesmen's entrance," and its crimson rambler aspiring above the dining-room bow-window. The larger houses – those in fact which stand on acre plots – have a stable or garage attached to them, though all are in telephonic communication with the livery stables that are situated on the far side of the railway-bridge, and all are built in accordance with a certain English norm or rule, designed to ensure solid comfort and an absence of draughts. There is none that lacks the electric light, none in which rivers of hot and cold water are not laid on upstairs and downstairs, none that lacks a lavatory situated close to the front door, in which is hung up a convincing and lucid diagram of the system of drainage. But there is no monotony or uniformity in the appearance of these houses; some are of brick, some of rough-cast, and all have a certain mediocre individuality of their own – like the faces of a flock of sheep – which renders them to the observer as various as the high-sounding names that are so clearly printed on their front gates.

Most of these exceedingly comfortable houses, designed for the complete convenience of couples with or without small families, are, as has been said, built on half-acre or acre plots. They are all of modern construction, with a view to the saving of domestic labour, for Heathmoor as a place of residence for well-to-do City men is but of late discovery. But here and there a more spacious specimen can be encountered, and Mrs. Hancock, who found nothing choice in the Heathmoor shops, had some ten years ago, on the death of her husband, bought two of these acre plots, and had built thereon a house of larger rooms, a boudoir, and a stable with coachman's quarters. Since then she had devoted nearly all her income to rendering herself completely and absolutely comfortable. An excellent cook, salaried at sixty pounds a year, a sum which, according to the regular Heathmoor standard, would be considered to be sufficient to pay the wages of a parlourmaid also, largely contributed to her well-being, and a maid, a serious butler with the deportment of a dean, a chauffeur, two housemaids, a kitchen-maid, a gardener, and a daughter were all devoted to the same mission. The daughter occupies the ultimate place in this list, not because Edith was not loving and loved, but because on the whole her contribution to her mother's comfort was materially less than that of any of the others, though perhaps physically more. Indeed, she shared in rather than subscribed to it, drove with her in her motor, ate of the delicious food, while in the evenings she laid out her own game of patience, without being called upon to advise or condole or congratulate in respect of Mrs. Hancock's. It is true that the window on Edith's side of the car was put down if her mother required a little more air without being too close to its ingress, and put up if Mrs. Hancock in her seat wished to avoid a draught, but she was by no means enserfed to the ruling spirit that directed and controlled the movements of the other dependents. Naturally she drove and dined with her mother, read her into a comfortable doze after tea, and did all the duties of a daughter, but she had, even when with Mrs. Hancock, an existence and a volition of her own, which the others had not.

Indeed, there was at this present time an event maturing that promised to provide Edith with a completer independence yet, for Mrs. Hancock had for months been encouraging an attachment that was wholly sensible, and, like most sensible things, could not possibly be called romantic. Edward

Holroyd, the young man in question, was very well off, being partner in a firm of sound, steady-going brokers in the City, was regularity itself in the persistence with which he caught the 9.6 a.m. train to town every morning, and, as far as could be ascertained, had never, in spite of his twenty-seven years, given any serious attention to a girl until Mrs. Hancock firmly turned his well-featured head in Edith's direction. He lived, furthermore, in a half-acre residence of his own, next door to Mrs. Hancock, and this she reckoned as a solid item among his eligibilities, for Edith would be able to give a great deal of companionship to her mother during the hours when her husband was in the City. Mrs. Hancock did not forget to add – to her own credit side, so to speak – that, since Edith would thus generally lunch with her, and drive with her afterwards, this would save her daughter something substantial in house-books, and give her the motor-drive she was accustomed to. It is true that her prospective husband had a motor of his own in which it might be supposed that Edith could take the air if so inclined, consequently Mrs. Hancock added another item to her own credit when she reflected that if Edith drove with her there would be effected a saving in Edward's tyre and petrol bills. This was entirely congenial to her mind, for she delighted to make economies for other people as well as herself, if the perfection of her own comfort was not affected thereby.

On this genial morning of early May, ventilated by a breath of south-west wind, and warmed by a summer sun, the dining-room windows of Arundel – the agreeable name of Mrs. Hancock's house – were both open, and she was sitting at a writing-table just within, fixing her plans for the day. She always sat here after breakfast until she had seen her cook, sent orders to her chauffeur, and read the smaller paragraphs in the *Morning Post.* Usually the plans for the day, the marching orders, as she habitually called them, depended completely on the weather. If it was fine she drove in her car from twelve to a quarter-past one, and again, after a salutary digestive pause after lunch, when she engaged with the more solid paragraphs in the *Morning Post,* from three till a quarter to five. This, it must be understood, was the curriculum for the summer; in the winter radical changes might occur; and sometimes if the morning was fine, but promised rain later, she would start as early as eleven, and went out – if the weather still held up – for quite a short time in the afternoon. But she always went out twice, even if occasionally her inclination would have been to stop at home, for Denton, the steady chauffeur, and Lind, the serious butler, would have thought it odd if she did not take two airings. Did she, then, go out when she had a bad cold? No; but then she never had a bad cold.

To-day, however, being Ascension Day, the marching orders became exceedingly complicated; and when Lind came in to say that Denton was waiting for her commands, he received the same instructions that had been given him last Ascension Day, but never since. These were not the same as on Sundays and Christmas Days, because on Ascension Day Mrs. Hancock drove in the afternoon.

"Tell Denton I shall want the car at ten minutes to eleven," she said. "No; you had better say a quarter to – to take me to church. He must be back there at a quarter-past twelve, or, say ten minutes past. I shall drive this afternoon at three. Or – "

Mrs. Hancock pondered a moment, exactly as she had done on last Ascension Day.

"Edith, dear," she said to her daughter, who was winding the clock, "I think we had better lunch to-day at one instead of at half-past. There will not be time to settle down to anything after church. And in that case we had better go out this afternoon at half-past two. And lunch will be at one, Lind. I will see Mrs. Williams now."

She paused again. This was not a usual Ascension Day pause, though connected with it.

"I see there is a holiday on the Stock Exchange, Edith," she said, "so perhaps Mr. Holroyd will lunch with us. Wait a moment, Lind."

She did not scribble a note, and never had done so, but wrote it very neatly, begging pardon for so short a notice, and hoping that if – a verbal answer was all that was required.

"I will see Mrs. Williams as soon as I get the answer, Lind," she said, "and I will tell you then whether we shall be two at lunch or three."

It was not worth while to "settle" to anything when an interruption would come so soon; and Mrs. Hancock looked quietly and contentedly out over the garden, where Ellis was mowing the tennis-court. The flower-beds below the window dazzled with the excellence of their crimson tulips, and swooned with the sunny fragrance of their wallflowers, and the hedge of espaliered apples that separated the lawn from the kitchen-garden was pink with blooms of promise. The rose-trees were all cut back in storage for their summer flowering; no spike of weed was insolent on the well-kept paths or garden-beds, and no tending that the most exacting gardener's companion could suggest as suitable to the season had been left undone. The same flawless neatness distinguished the dining-room from which Mrs. Hancock looked out. Landseer prints hung quite straight on the paper of damask red. Such chairs as were not in use stood square-shouldered to the walls; the writing-table where she sat was dustlessly furnished with pens, pen-wipers, pencils, sealing-wax, and all stationery appertaining; the maroon curtains were looped back at exactly the same angle, and six inches of green blind showed at the top of each window. Room and garden were as *soignés* as Mrs. Hancock's own abundant hair.

Mrs. Hancock's pass-book had been returned to her from her bankers that morning, and she found it quite pleasant reading, pleasant enough, indeed, to open and read again as she waited for the arrival of the verbal message from next door. Next to devising and procuring all that could be secured of material comforts, the occupation that, perhaps, chiefly administered to her content was that of saving money. This seemed to her an extremely altruistic pleasure, since, if you took a large enough view of it, she was saving for Edith. Thus she would always purchase anything she wanted at the place where it could most cheaply be obtained, provided its quality was in no way inferior, and she never omitted to lay in a replete cellar of coal during the summer months. Anything like waste was abhorrent to her, and, though her ordinary living expenses were excessively high, she could not secure absolute comfort and the flawless appointment of her house at a smaller outlay. She paid high wages to her servants and gladly defrayed their doctors' and dentists' bills, since she wished to make it impossible for them to think of leaving her when once she was satisfied with them, for a change of servants was uncomfortable, and produced days of uneasy suspense before it became certain that the new one would suit her. All such expenses were incurred to procure comfort, and so were necessary, but beyond them she was extremely economical and dearly liked the secure and continued feeling of a big balance at the bank. When that balance grew very large she made a prudent investment, often through Edward Holroyd, and told herself that she was doing it for the sake of Edith.

Before long came a warm acceptance of her hospitality from next door, and, having sent for Mrs. Williams, she added mutton cutlets to the menu, and withdrew the asparagus, as her cook was certain there was not enough for three; then she got up from her writing-table, since the marching orders were now completed. Her plump and pleasant face was singularly unwrinkled, considering the fifty years that had passed over it, yet it would perhaps have been even more singular if the years had written on it any record of their passage. It is true that she had married, had borne a child, and had lost a husband, but none of these events had marred the placidity of her nature. At the most, they had been but pebbles tossed into and swallowed up below that unruffled surface, breaking it but for a moment with inconsiderable ripples. She had married because she had easily seen the wisdom of becoming the wife of a well-to-do and wholly amiable man instead of continuing to remain the once handsome Miss Julia Fanshawe. Wisdom still continued to be justified of her child, for she enjoyed the whole of her late husband's income, and since her clear four thousand pounds a year was derived from debenture stock and first mortgage bonds, it was not likely that these fruits of prudence would wither or decay on this side of the grave. But she did not ever distress or harass herself with the thought of anything so comfortless as sepulchres, but devoted her time and money to the preservation of her health, and the avoidance of all such worries and anxieties as could possibly disturb the poise and equilibrium of her nervous system. She was slightly inclined to stoutness, and occasionally had rheumatic twinges in the less important joints, but a month spent annually at Bath sufficed to keep these little ailments in check, while the complete immunity she enjoyed there from all household

anxieties, since she lived in a very comfortable hotel, was restorative to a nervous system that already hovered on perfection, and enabled her to take up her home duties again – which, as has been said, consisted in providing comfort for herself – with renewed vigour. This visit to Bath was to take place next week, and for the last ten days she had thought of little else than the question as to whether she would take Denton and her motor-car with her. Last night only she had come to the determination to do so, and consequently there was a great deal to be thought about to-day as to cushions, luggage, and where to lunch, for she was herself going to travel in it.

Edith had finished winding the clock when her mother got up.

"There is still half an hour before we need think of getting ready for church, dear," she said, "and we might go on planning our arrangements for next week. The maps are in the drawing-room, for Denton brought them in last night, but the print is so small that I should be glad if you would get my number two spectacles which I left in my bedroom. They are either on my dressing-table or on the small table by my bed. Filson will find them if you cannot put your hand on them. Oh, look; there are two starlings pecking at the garden-beds. How bold they are with the mowing-machine so close! I hope Ellis will scare them away from the asparagus."

Edith managed to find the number two spectacles without troubling Filson, and devoted her whole mind, which was as tranquil and lucid as her mother's, to the great question of the journey to Bath. Though the distance was something over a hundred miles, it was clearly better to risk being a little over-tired, and compass the whole in one day, rather than spend the night – perhaps not very comfortably – at some half-way country inn, where it was impossible to be certain about the sheets. After all, if the fatigue was severe a day's rest on arrival at Bath, postponing the treatment till the day after, would set things right. But in that case lunch must either be obtained at Reading, or, better still, they could take it with them in a luncheon-basket, and eat it *en route*. Denton could take his, too, and they would stop for half an hour to eat after Reading, thus dividing the journey into two halves. So far so good.

The question of Filson's journey was more difficult. If the day was fine she could, of course, travel outside with Denton, but if it was wet she would have to come inside – a less ideal arrangement with regard to knees. In that case also Lind would have to go up to town with the heavy luggage, and see it firmly bestowed in the Bath express at Paddington. At this point Edith triumphantly vindicated the superiority of two heads over one, and suggested that Filson should go up to town with the heavy luggage, and catch the 2.30 express (was it not?) at Paddington, thus arriving at Bath before them. Indeed, she would have time almost to unpack before they came.

The 2.30 train was verified, and thereafter all was clear. Lind would escort Filson and the heavy luggage to the station, and since Mrs. Williams would be putting up lunches anyhow, Filson could take hers as well… But it was time to get ready for church, and the question of cushions and cloaks for so long a drive which might be partly cold and partly warm must wait. But certainly Denton would have to come in either after church or in the evening, for the route, which appeared to lie straight down the Bath road, had not been tackled at all yet.

Mrs. Hancock's religious convictions and practices, which Edith entirely shared with her, were as comfortable as her domestic arrangements, but simpler, and they did not occupy her mind for so many hours daily. It must be supposed that she recognized the Christian virtue of charity, for otherwise she would not, in the course of the year, have knitted so large a quantity of thick scarves, made from a cheap but reliable wool, or have sent them to the wife of her parish clergyman for distribution among the needy. She worked steadily at them after the short doze which followed tea, while Edith read aloud to her, but apart from this and the half-crowns which she so regularly put into the offertory-plate, the consideration of the poor and needy did not practically concern her, though she much disliked seeing tramps and beggars on the road. For the rest, a quiet thankfulness, except when she had rheumatism, glowed mildly in her soul for all the blessings of this life which she so abundantly enjoyed, and even when she had rheumatism she was never vehement against Providence.

She was quite certain, indeed, that Providence took the greatest care of her, and she followed that example by taking the greatest care of herself, feeling it a duty to do so. For these attentions she returned thanks every morning and evening in her bedroom, and in church on Sunday morning, and also frequently in the evening, if fine. When rheumatism troubled her she added a petition on the subject and went to Bath. Never since her earliest days had she felt the slightest doubts with regard to the religion that was hers, and dogma she swallowed whole, like a pill. Her father had been a Canon of Salisbury, and in the fourth and least-used sitting-room in the house, where smoking was permitted if gentlemen were staying with her, was a glass-fronted bookcase in which were four volumes of his somewhat controversial sermons. These she sometimes read to herself on wet Sunday evenings, if Edith chanced to have a sore throat. Her evening doze usually succeeded this study. But to say that the principles of a Christian life were alien to her would be libellous, since, though neither devout nor ascetic, she was kind, especially when it involved no self-sacrifice, she was truthful, she was a complete stranger to envy, slander, or malice, and was quite unvexed by any doubts concerning the wisdom and benevolence of the Providence in which she trusted as firmly as she trusted in aspirin and Bath for her rheumatism.

At the church in which she was so regular an attendant, she found both doctrine and ritual completely to her mind, even as it was to the mind of the comfortable and prosperous inhabitants of Heathmoor generally. No litany ever lifted up its lamentable petitions there, the hymns were always of a bright and jovial order, unless, as in Lent, brightness was liturgically impossible, and the vicar even then made a habit of preaching delightfully short and encouraging sermons about the Christian duty of appreciating all that was agreeable in life, and told his congregation that it was far more important to face the future with a cheerful heart than to turn a regretful eye towards the sins and omissions of the past. To this advice Mrs. Hancock found it both her pleasure and her duty to conform, and, indeed, with her excellent health, her four thousand pounds a year, and her household of admirable servants, it was not difficult to face the future with smiling equanimity. And though, again, it would have been libellous to call her pharisaical, for she was not the least complacent in her estimate of herself, she would have experienced considerable difficulty in making any sort of catalogue of her misdoings. Besides, as Mr. Martin distinctly told them, it was mere morbidity to dwell among the broken promises of the past. "Far better, dear friends, to be up and doing in the glorious sunlight of a new day. Sufficient, may we not truly say, to the day is the good thereof. Let that be our motto for the week. And now."

And the refreshed and convinced congregation poured thankful half-crowns into the velvet collecting pouches, and themselves into the glorious sunlight.

Edward Holroyd, from the bow-window of his dining-room next door – like most of the inhabitants of Heathmoor he habitually sat in his dining-room after breakfast when not leaving for the City by the 9.6 a.m. train – saw the Hancocks' car glide churchwards at ten minutes to eleven, and then proceeded to his drawing-room to practise on his piano with slightly agitated hands. The agitation was partly due to the extraordinary number of accidentals which Chopin chose to put into the Eleventh Etude, partly to a more intimate cause, connected with the invitation he had just accepted. For some months now – in fact, ever since his twenty-seventh birthday – he had made up his mind that it was time to get married, and had held himself in a position of almost pathetic eagerness – like a man crouching for the sprint, waiting the signal of the pistol – to fall in love. But either the pre-ordained maiden or some psychical defect in himself had been lacking, and he had long been wondering if there was to be any pistol at all. If not, it was idle to maintain himself in the tense, crouching strain. But he had no doubts whatever that he wished to be married, and that Mrs. Hancock – when he allowed himself for a moment to face a slightly embarrassing question – wished him to be married, too. She constantly turned his head in one particular direction, and that direction showed him, in house-agents' phrase, a very pleasing prospect, which, without complacency, he believed smiled on him with an open and even affectionate regard. But he wondered at himself for not being of a livelier

eagerness in emotional matters, for he brought to the vocations and avocations of his busy and cheerful life a fund of enthusiasm which was of more than normal intensity. Like the majority of the males of Heathmoor, he rounded off days of strenuous work in the City with strenuous amusements, and with croquet in summer and bridge and piano-playing in the winter, filled up to the brim the hours between the arrival of the evening train and bedtime. But the failure of the inevitable and unique She to put in an appearance and bewitch the eyes and the heart which were so eager to be spellbound was disconcerting. For years he had looked for her, for years he had missed her, and since his twenty-seventh birthday he had begun to determine to do without her. He accepted the limitations, namely, his own inability to fall in love, for which he could not devise a cure, and was prepared to close gratefully with so pleasant and attractive an arrangement as he believed to be open to him. He liked and admired Edith, her firm and comely face, her serene content, her quiet capable ways. She was as fond of croquet and bridge as himself, and – this was a larger testimonial than he knew – really enjoyed his piano-playing. And if the lightnings and thunders of romance roused no reverberating glories in his heart, it must be remembered that romance is a shy rare bird, coming not to nest under every eave, and that there would be a very sensible diminution in marriage fees if every man delayed matrimony until the blinding ecstatic light fell upon his enraptured eyes.

It is clear "what was the matter," in medical phrase, with this handsome and lively young man. At heart he was an idealist, but one ready to capitulate, to surrender to beleaguering common sense. He was ready to sacrifice his dreams, a somewhat serious offence in a world where true dreamers are so rare. By nature he was a true dreamer, but accumulating wealth and the dense comfort of life at Heathmoor had done much to rouse him, though in music he still saw the fiery fabric, unsubstantial and receding. In performance he was quite execrable, in imagination of the highest calibre. Through all his patient and heavy strumming he heard the singing of the immortal bird, and even his reputation as a piano-player in the drawing-rooms of Heathmoor had not made him lose his profound appreciation of his own incompetence. But in music alone was he worthy any more of the title of a dreamer; to-day he stood pen in hand ready to sign the greatest capitulation to common sense that a man is ever called upon to make, for he was ready to give up the image of the invisible conjectured She that stood faintly glimmering in the inmost chamber of his heart and throw it open for a charming enemy to enter.

It was not long before he gave up his attempts on the piano, for this invitation to lunch next door had caused him to take a definite resolution which upset all steadiness and concentration, and, lighting a pipe, he strolled out into his garden. He had not room there for a full-sized croquet lawn, and had contented himself with three or four hoops of ultra-championship narrowness, through which, with the fervour of the true artist, he was accustomed to practise various awkward hazards. But here, again, as by the piano, desire failed, and, with an extinguished pipe, he sat down on a garden-seat, and experienced a sharp attack of spurious middle-age, such as is incidental to youth, regretting, as youth does, the advent of the middle-age, which in reality is yet far distant. He had completely made up his mind to propose to Edith that day, believing, without coxcombry, that he would be accepted, believing also that the future thus held for him many years of health and happiness, with the addition, no slight one, of a charming and inalienable companion whom he liked and admired. Yet something, the potentiality of the fire which had never yet been lit in him, caused him an infinite and secret regret for the step which was now as good as taken. He longed for something he had never experienced, for something of which he had no real conception, but of which he felt himself capable, for, as the flint owns fire in its heart, but must wait to be struck, he felt that his true destiny was not to be but a stone to mend a road, or, at the best, to be mortared into a house-wall, with all his fiery seed slumbering within him. Yet … what if there was no fire there at all? He had long held himself ready, aching, you might say, for the blow that should evoke it, and none had struck him into blaze.

It was not surprising that the approaching motor-drive to Bath loomed conversationally large at lunch, and Edward proved weighty in debate. He had a sharp, decisive habit in social affairs; his

small change of talk was bright and fresh from the mint, and seemed a faithful index to his keen face and wiry, assertive hair.

"Quite right not to break the journey, Mrs. Hancock," he said. "Most country hotels consist of feather-beds, fish with brown sauce, and windows over a stable-yard. But if you do it in one journey, get most of it over before lunch. I should start by ten at the latest."

Mrs. Hancock consulted a railway time-table.

"Then Filson will have to be finished with her packing at half-past nine," she said. "The heavy luggage must go to the station in the car before we start."

"Have it sent in a cab afterwards," suggested Holroyd.

Mrs. Hancock pondered over this.

"I don't think I should like that, should I, Edith?" she said. "I should prefer to see it actually leave the house. Or can I trust Lind and Filson? Edith, dear, remember to remind me to take the patience cards in my small bag. There is room to lay out a patience on the folding-table in the car, and it will help to pass the time."

"And have you got footstools?" asked Edward.

Over Mrs. Hancock's face there spread a smile like the coming of dawn. Here was a comfort that had never occurred to her.

"*What* a good idea!" she said. "I have often felt a little strained and uncomfortable in the knees when motoring for more than an hour or two. Very likely it was just the want of a footstool. Remind me to take out my bedroom footstool in the car this afternoon, Edith, to see if it is the right height. You *are* helpful, Mr. Holroyd. I never thought of a footstool."

His next half-dozen suggestions, however, showed that Mrs. Hancock had thought of a good deal already, including a Thermos flask of coffee, a contour map of the country, and a stylograph pen in case she found that she had left anything behind, and wanted to write a postcard *en route*. Postcards she always carried in a green morocco writing-case.

"Filson must take a postcard, too," she said, "ready directed to Lind, in case anything goes wrong with the luggage. That is a good idea. She will be very comfortable, do you not think, Mr. Holroyd, in a nice third-class compartment for ladies only. I am often tempted to go third-class myself, when I see how cheap and comfortable it is."

Edward felt quite certain that this was a temptation to which Mrs. Hancock had never yielded, and lunch proceeded in silence for a few moments. Then, since nobody was able to make any further suggestion whatever which could lead to additional comfort or security on this momentous journey, Mrs. Hancock allowed herself to be drawn into other topics, still not unconnected with Bath, such as the efficacy of the waters, and the steepness of the hills which surrounded it, which, however, with Denton's careful driving and the new brakes she had had fitted to her car, presented no unmanning terrors.

"I shall be there," she said, "exactly four weeks, so as to get back early in June. Bath is very hot in the summer, but I do not mind that, and the hotel rates are more reasonable then. After that we shall be occupied, for my niece, Elizabeth Fanshawe, will arrive almost as soon as I return. She will be with me till she goes back to India to her father in October."

Out of the depths of half-forgotten memories an image, quite vague and insignificant, broke the surface of Holroyd's mind.

"Was she not with you two years ago?" he asked. "A tall, dark girl with black hair."

"Fancy your remembering her! I so envy a good memory. Edith, dear, remind me to get the piano tuned. I will write from Bath. Elizabeth is for ever at the piano now, so my brother tells me. She will enjoy hearing you play, Mr. Holroyd. Well, if everybody has finished, I am sure you will like to have a cigarette in the garden. Edith will take you out and show you the tulips."

It must not be supposed that this arrangement was to be dignified into the name of manoeuvre on Mrs. Hancock's part, except in so far that after lunch she liked to skim the larger paragraphs of

the *Morning Post,* comfortably reclining on the sofa in her private sitting-room. She was not a person of subtle perceptions, and it had certainly never occurred to her that Holroyd had come to lunch that day with his purpose formed; she only wanted to read the *Morning Post,* and, as usual, to throw him and Edith together. As for Edith, she had been quite prepared a dozen times during this last month to listen with satisfaction to his declaration, and to give him an amiable affirmative on the earliest possible occasion. Each time that her mother arranged some similar little *tête-à-tête* for them she felt a slight but pleasurable tremor of excitement, but was never in the least cast down when it proved that her anticipations were premature. She was perfectly aware of her mother's approval, and it only remained to give voice to her own. She had long ago made up her mind that she would sooner marry than remain single, and she had never dreamed or desired that it should be any other man than this who should conduct her to the goal of her wishes. That she was in any degree in love with him – if the phrase connotes anything luminous or tumultuous – it would be idle to assert; but equally idle would it be to deny that, according to the manner of her aspirations, he seemed to her an ideal husband. For ten adolescent years – for she was now twenty-four – she had lived in the stifling and soul-quelling comfort of her mother's house, and it would have been strange if the dead calm and propriety of her surroundings had not bred in her a corresponding immobility of the emotions, for there is something chameleon-like in the spirit of every girl not powerfully vitalized; it assimilates itself to its surroundings, and custom and usage limn the hues, which at first are superficial and evanescent, into stains of permanent colour. Passion and deep feeling, so far from entering into Edith herself, had never even exhibited themselves in the confines of her horizons; she had neither experienced them nor seen others in their grip. But she thought – indeed, she was certain – that she would like to be mistress in the house where Edward Holroyd was master. She felt sure she could make herself and him very comfortable.

She went out, hatless like him, into the warm bath of sun and south-west wind, and they passed side by side up the weedless garden-path. All Nature, bees and bright-eyed birds and budding flowers, was busy with the great festival of spring and mating-time; nothing was barren but the salted weedless path, so carefully defertilized. The tulips were a brave show, and in their deep bed below the paling a border of wallflowers spun a web of warm, ineffable fragrance. Ellis, returned from his midday hour, was still engaged with the clicking mowing machine on the velvet-napped lawn, and they went on farther till the gravel of the paths of the flower-garden was exchanged for the cinders of the kitchen patch, and the hedge of espaliers hid them from the house. Then he stopped, and a moment afterwards she also, smoothing into place a braid of her bright brown hair. And without agitation came the question, without agitation the reply. Indeed, there was nothing for two sensible young people to be agitated about. Each was fond of the other, neither had seen any one else more desirable, and over the hearts of each lay thick the cobwebs of comfort and motor-cars and prosperous affairs and unimpassioned content. Only as he spoke he felt some vague soul-eclipse, some dispersal of a dream.

Then he drew her towards him and kissed her, and for one moment below the cobwebs in her heart something stirred, ever so faintly, ever so remotely, connected with the slight roughness of his close-shaven face, with the faint scent of soap, of cigarette. But it did not embarrass her.

They stood there for a moment looking into each other's faces, as if expecting something new, something revealed.

"Shall we tell your mother now?" he asked.

Still she looked at him; he was not quite the same as he had been before.

"Oh, in a minute or two," she said.

Suddenly he felt that he had to stir himself somehow into greater tenderness, greater – But he felt disappointed; it had all been exactly as he had imagined.

"I am very happy," he said. "I have thought about this moment so much, Edith."

It was the first time he had used her name.

"Edward!" she said, looking straight at him. "Edward! No, I don't think I shall call you Edward. I must have a name of my own for you."

At the moment the sound of a gong from within the house droned along the garden.

"The motor is round," she said.

This time it was he who delayed, though without passion.

"Your mother will not mind waiting a minute," he said.

"No. What else have you to say to me?"

"Everything; nothing."

She laughed.

"There is not time for the one," she said, "and no time is required for the other. Besides, all the time that there is is ours now."

In all her life she had never phrased a sentence so neat, so nearly epigrammatic. Its briskness was the fruit of the stimulus that had come to her.

They delayed no further, but went back to the house, where Mrs. Hancock was already waiting. She did not attempt to appear surprised at their news, but, placidly delighted at it, kissed them both, and took it for granted that Edward would come in to dine with them that evening. Then, since there was no use in vain repetitions, she reverted to the topic which had to be considered at once.

"Let me see," she said. "I think the motor is round, and Filson has brought down the footstool from my bedroom to see if it is the right height. A quarter to eight, then, dear Edward, to-night; we shall be quite alone, and if you will come in half an hour sooner I have no doubt that you will find my darling dressed and waiting to talk to you. Fancy what a lot you will have to say to each other now! And then, after dinner, as you are drinking your glass of port, I shall claim you for a little conversation, while we send Edith to wait in the drawing-room. Oh, I see you have brought the footstool from the spare room as well, Filson. That *was* well thought of, as they are of different heights, and one might suit if the other did not. Let me get in, and see which suits me best… Now try them one on top of the other, Filson. Well, really I think that is the most comfortable of all. Edith, dear, are you ready? And I have brought down my patience cards, and if I put them into the pocket under the window at once I can dismiss them from my mind. There! A quarter-past seven, then, dear Edward, for a chat before dinner. Yes, leave the footstools in the car, Filson, and we will measure the height when I come back."

Denton was standing with the door knob in his hand, waiting for orders.

"You might take us first to Slough, Denton," she said, "so that we shall see what the road is like before we join the Bath road next week, and then we can go through the Beeches. We are ten minutes late in starting, but if we are a little late for tea it won't matter for once in a way. Tell Mrs. Williams, Lind, that we may be ten minutes late for tea."

Mrs. Hancock habitually wore a perfectly natural and amiable smile on her pleasant face, except when her rheumatism gave her an exceptional twinge, or, more exceptionally yet, Mrs. Williams was not quite up to the mark. To-day the discovery of the footstools and Edith's engagement seemed to her to be touching examples of the care of Providence, and she was beamingly conscious of the variety of pleasant objects and topics in the world. She laid her hand in Edith's as the car started.

"And now I want to hear all – all about it, darling," she said. "Oh, look, there are two magpies! Is not that lucky? And will you let your window quite down, dear? It is so warm and pleasant this afternoon. I will have mine just half-way up. There! That is nice! And now I want to hear all about it."

Edith returned the affectionate pressure of her mother's hand.

"It was all so sudden, mother," she said, "and yet I was not at all startled. He – Edward stopped when we reached the kitchen-garden, and so I stopped, too. And, without any speeches, he just asked me, and I said 'Yes' at once, as I had always meant to. And then he said he was very happy, and kissed me."

Mrs. Hancock thought that Denton was driving a little too fast, as if he meant to make up the lost ten minutes, but she checked herself from calling down the tube to him.

"My dearest!" she said. "You will never forget the first kiss given you by the man who loves you. Oh, what a jolt!"

The jolt decided her, and she called to Denton not to go quite so fast. Then she pressed Edith's hand again.

"Tell me more, dear," she said. "Had you expected it at all?"

Edith looked at her with complete candour.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "And that is why it seemed so natural when it came."

The faintest flush glowed on her face.

"But I never liked him so much before as when he kissed me," she said. "It did not make me feel at all awkward. I used to think that if such a thing ever happened to me I should not know which way to look. But it all seemed quite natural. Our tastes agree in so many things, too – music and croquet and so on. That is a good thing, is it not?"

Mrs. Hancock beamed again.

"My dear, of course," she said. "Community of taste is half the" – battle, she was going to say – "half the strength and joy of marriage. Oh, here we are in Slough already. Turn to the right, Denton, and go through Burnham Beeches. Yes, what games of croquet you will have, and what music. I will get a gate made in the paling between his garden and ours, so that there will be no need to go round by the front door and ring the bell. I dare say Ellis could do it, or even if I had to get a carpenter it would be but a trifle anyhow, and I certainly shall not permit Edward to pay half of it, however much he may insist. Bless you, my darling! I feel so happy and contented about it. Look, there is a Great Western express. What a pace they go!"

Edith usually gave excellent attention to the various bright objects which continually caught and pleased her mother's eye. But to-day she wandered, or rather, did not wander.

"It was wonderful," she said. "I hadn't guessed."

But her mother had other things as well to think about.

"Edward was quite right," she said. "A footstool, or rather one on top of another, makes all the difference. I shall order a very thick one from the stores, sending the height I require. And I think I must give a little dinner-party before I go to Bath, dear, just to tell a few friends our news. I wish the asparagus was a little more forward. How lovely the beeches are! And look at those sweet little birds! Are they thrushes, I wonder, or what? And what do you guess they are saying to each other? I will ask Mr. Beaumont, I think, and the Martins and Mr. and Mrs. Dobbs. It will not do to have it on Wednesday if we start early on Thursday, as we shall find plenty of little jobs on the last evening, and it will be wise to get to bed early if we are to motor all next day. It must be Tuesday. Perhaps the asparagus will have come popping up, if the hot weather holds. Darling, I cannot tell you how pleased I am! And what an excitement for your cousin Elizabeth. Fancy if she was a bridesmaid before she went back to India! What a lot she would have to tell to Uncle Robert! We shall soon have to begin to think when it is to be."

Mrs. Hancock said no more on this subject, for the fact was that she had not made up her mind when she wished the marriage to take place. She had vaguely contemplated going to Egypt with her daughter next winter, and she could not offhand balance the disadvantages of going alone (in case she settled that Edith should be married first), with the advantage of saving the expenses of taking her. Then a brilliant possibility struck her. Edward might be induced to come too, in which case the marriage must certainly take place first. Since then he would, of course, pay for Edith. But all this required consideration.

Indeed, there were many things which would need a great deal of careful thought. Chief among them, already blotting out the beauty of the beeches, was the whole question of settlements. Edith would naturally inherit the whole of her mother's money at her death (an event to be contemplated with only the most distant recognition), and Mrs. Hancock had no intention of making serious inroads into her income, which, handsome as it was, did not more than provide her with everything she

wanted, and enable her to put by a nice round sum of money every year. This she was so much accustomed to do that it was unreasonable to expect her at her age to break so prudent and long-established a habit. But all this must depend to some extent on Edward's attitude and expectations. She had no doubt that, for his part, he would do all that was generous, which would obviate the necessity of being very open-handed herself. Living next door, Edith would be able to come in to lunch every day when he was in the City, and enjoy her motor-drive, as usual, without any expense. The croquet-lawn, too, would be quite at Edward's disposal… Practically, she was presenting the young couple with a motor-car, a lunch daily, and a croquet-lawn, kept in excellent order by Ellis, straight away. Then there were wedding presents to be thought of, which would be a great expense; and Elizabeth was going to spend four months at least with her – an additional drain… Mrs. Hancock began to feel quite worried and pressed for money, as she was accustomed to do when, having made some considerable investment, she found she had not more than two or three hundred pounds lying at her bank.

Edward arrived, as had been already agreed, half an hour before dinner, and found Edith, already dressed, waiting for a lover's talk in the drawing-room. Lind had seen that the housemaids had completed the evening toilet of the room, and strict injunctions had been issued that the two were not to be disturbed. Edward kissed her again as soon as they were left alone, but after that no interruption, however sudden, would have surprised a fiery scene. Both were placid, content, happy, undisturbed by strong emotion, and unembarrassed by its absence. But though as yet no surface signs gave indication, the evenly hung balance had begun to quiver. Once more his kiss woke in her a tremor of dim agitation, while inwardly he wondered, though as yet unembarrassed, at his own want of emotion. Not for a moment did he regret what he had done; he was happy in the event of the day, but only a little surprised, a little scornful of himself for finding that he felt so precisely as he had anticipated that he would feel. He had not expected to be inflamed with sudden rapture, and was not. Dimly he saw that the adventure to which they were committed promised more to her than it did to him, and he was ashamed of that. Yet to him it had its definite promise. This charming girl whom he liked, whom he admired, with whom he was in sympathy, had consented to share his life with him. To no one would he have so willingly offered himself as to her who had so willingly accepted him. His horizon, such as it was, was filled with her… Only he wondered, and that but vaguely, what lay over that horizon's rim. But he found no difficulty in framing his lips to the sense and nonsense of lover's talk.

"I have been too happy all the afternoon to do anything," he said. "I have just sat and strolled and thought and waited."

He possessed himself of her hand, and told himself how capable it was, yet how soft, how pretty. Hitherto he had not given many thoughts to hands; now he realized that this particular one concerned him. He admired it; it was strong and fine.

"Ah, I am having a bad influence upon you already," said she, "if I make you idle."

Suddenly it appeared to him a wonderful and beautiful thing that he and a charming girl should be saying these intimate things, and his response was almost eager.

"I was only idle from happiness," he said. "Isn't it all wonderful? Would you have had me go to tea with some foolish people whom I did not want to see?"

"I make you misanthropic as well. But I'm not ashamed if I make you happy."

Something stirred within her, some new beating pulse. She came a little closer to him.

"You looked so nice, Edward," she said, "this afternoon, when you stopped and spoke. But I couldn't bear your tie. I shall knit you one the same shade of brown as your eyes. I will do it at Bath."

"It is a great nuisance your going to Bath," he said. "Must you really go? I want you here. But the tie will be lovely."

"Oh, conceit," she said, "after I have told you it is to be the colour of your eyes."

"I forgot that. Aren't you being rather malicious?"

He looked up from her hand to her face. Never before had he noticed how bright and abundant was her hair, how delicate the line of black eyebrow. He corrected himself.

"Malicious, did I say?" he asked. "I meant – I meant delicious. And, talking of eyes, I must give you a turquoise engagement ring for the day, and a sapphire one for the evening."

"What has that to do with eyes?" she asked.

"Everything. Yours are light blue in the sunlight, and dark blue at night."

"I feel as if I ought to apologize. But I don't think I shall; it wasn't my fault."

"I don't insist," said he. "But I insist on knowing one thing. When?"

"When? What do you mean?" she asked.

"Look me in the face, and say you don't know."

Edith laughed – a happy little quiver of a laugh that she had never heard yet.

"I could if I liked," she said. "But I don't choose to. If you mean – "

"That is exactly what I mean."

"How can you know before I have said it?" she asked.

"I can. Do say what I mean."

Again she laughed.

"When shall we be married was what you meant."

She looked extremely pretty and rather shy. He had never noticed before how fine was her mouth, how fine and fair the curve of her upper lip.

"Yes, sapphire and turquoise," he said. His lips said it, his brain said it.

The sonorous tones of the Chinese gong, manipulated with so cunning a crescendo and diminuendo by Lind, boomed through the house. Immediately afterwards Mrs. Hancock's tread, noticeably heavy, was heard on the stairs. She hummed some little nameless ditty in warning. Edith got up.

"Dinner already?" she said.

Edward, perhaps, was not quite so much surprised at the swiftness of the passage of this half-hour.

"Before you have answered my question," he said as the door opened.

CHAPTER IV
COMFORTABLE PLANS

Had the Day of Judgment or any other devastating crisis been fixed for the morrow, that would not have delayed Mrs. Hancock's retirement to her bedroom not later than eleven the night before. Sometimes, and not rarely, she went upstairs at half-past ten in order to get a good night before the fatigues of the next day, whatever they might happen to be, but in no case, unless by chance she went to the theatre in town, was she later than eleven. She did not always go to bed immediately on arrival in her room; frequently, after she had played her invariable game of patience, while Filson brushed her hair, she read a book, since, as she so often lamented, she had so little time for reading during the day; sometimes she sat in front of her fire making further plans for her comfort.

To-night plans occupied her for a considerable time, and though they directly concerned Edith, they might still be correctly classified as bearing on her own comfort. She had literally enjoyed half an hour's conversation with Edward after dinner; this had been of a highly satisfactory character, for she had ascertained that he was making a really substantial income, and that he had investments, all of a sound character, which already amounted to over thirty thousand pounds. This, in the event of his death – to which apparently he did not mind alluding at all – he was prepared to settle on his wife. The house next door was freehold property of his, and, though he had contemplated selling that and purchasing one that was more of the size to which Edith was accustomed, he seemed perfectly ready to fall in with Mrs. Hancock's clearly expressed wish that he should remain where he was, for the wrench of parting with Edith at all was only tolerable to her if the parting was not to be more than a few yards in breadth. The question of the garden-gate in the paling did not, however, fill him with any intense enthusiasm, and she, after making it quite clear that he was not expected to pay for it, let the subject drop. But she intended to give Ellis the necessary instructions all the same, for she was quite sure he would like it when it was done. Furthermore, he had not expressed the least curiosity as regards what allowance or dowry she was intending to give Edith, which showed a very proper confidence. He could not, in fact, have behaved with greater delicacy, and yet that delicacy had put Mrs. Hancock, so to speak, rather in a hole. She had to determine, by the light of her own generosity alone, what she was prepared to do.

It was this point that now occupied her, after she had written a note to the stores, ordering a footstool nine inches high, covered in a dark red shade of russia leather… So *that* was off her mind. Edward had given quite a warm welcome to the scheme of the Egyptian expedition, and had expressed his readiness to take no holiday this summer, but have his vacation then. In this case, marriage in November, a month's honeymoon with his bride, and a reunion with Mrs. Hancock at Cairo, was an ideal arrangement. All this kindled Mrs. Hancock's sense of generosity, for it would relieve her of the expense of Edith on the Egyptian tour, and in the first glow of her gratification, she proposed to herself to settle on Edith a sum that should produce four hundred pounds a year. She was almost surprised at herself for this unhesitating open-handedness, and sat down to consider just what it meant.

Four hundred a year represented a capital of over ten thousand pounds. That seemed a great deal of money to put without restriction into the hands of a girl who hitherto had been accustomed to control only an allowance for dress and pocket-money paid quarterly. It would be much more prudent, and indeed kinder, to give her, at first anyhow, till by experience in household management, she became accustomed to deal with larger sums, a quarterly allowance as before. Four hundred a year was more than double what she had been accustomed to, and no doubt Edward, who was clearly the soul of generosity, would give her no less. Edith would then be mistress, for her own private expenses alone, of no less than eight hundred a year. This was colossal affluence; enough, carefully used, for the upbringing and support of an entire family. She could never spend eight hundred a year, and there was no need for her to save, since she was the wife of a well-to-do husband, and heiress

to a considerable fortune. So much money would but be a burden to her. If her mother allowed her two hundred a year, that added to what Edward would no doubt insist on giving her – Mrs. Hancock had settled that he would certainly give as much as she had originally thought of giving – would make her a more than ample allowance.

Her thoughts went back for a moment to the note to the stores which lay on the table. Certainly a footstool made a motor-drive much more comfortable, and, since Edith was going to accompany her to Bath, her mother could not bear the thought that she should lack the comforts she gave herself. She would order two footstools… Without a moment's hesitation she opened the letter and made the necessary alteration. There! That was done. How pleased Edith would be.

She returned to the question of the allowance, viewing it, as it were, from a rather greater distance. She hoped, she prayed that Edith would have children, who must certainly adore their granny. Their granny would certainly adore them, and it would be nothing less than a joy to her to give each of them, say, a hundred pounds every birthday, to be prudently invested for them, so that when they came of age they would have tidy little fortunes of their own. She glowed with pleasure when she thought of that. Children's education was a great expense, and it would be so nice for Edward to know that, as each child of his came of age, he would have waiting for him quite a little income of his own; or, capitalized, such a sum would start the boys in life, and provide quite a dowry for the daughters. At compound interest money doubled itself in no time; they would all be young men and women of independent means. Perhaps Edith would have five or six children, and, though Mrs. Hancock's munificence would then be costing her six hundred a year – or interest on fifteen thousand pounds – she felt that it would be the greatest delight to pinch herself to make ends meet for the sake of being such a fairy-granny. But if she was paying Edith two hundred a year all the time the very queen of the fairy-grannies would scarcely be able to afford all this. And she felt quite sure that Edith would choose to have her children provided for rather than herself, for she had the most unselfish of natures.

Hitherto Edith had received a hundred and fifty a year for dress and travelling expenses when she went alone. She had done very well on that, and was always neat and tidy; now without doubt her husband would pay all her travelling expenses, since they would always travel together. Even if she continued to give Edith a hundred and fifty pounds a year, that, with her travelling expenses paid by her husband, and an allowance – as before – of four hundred a year from him, would be far more than she could possibly require. Besides, her mother had already settled to provide lunch for her every day while Edward was in town, and a motor-drive afterwards, while to keep the croquet-lawn at such a pitch of perfection as so fine a player as Edward would expect – and she was determined he should find – would mean very likely another gardener, or, at any rate, a man to come in once or twice a week to help Ellis. Then there was the trousseau to be thought of, which Mrs. Hancock was invincibly determined to provide herself, and that would cost more than the whole of Edith's allowance for the year. Certainly, with this necessary visit to Bath, and the winter in Egypt which she had promised Edward she would manage, and with the expense of having Elizabeth in the house all the summer she herself would be very poor indeed for the next year. It seemed really unreasonable that for these twelve months she would give Edith any allowance at all. And by that time, please God, there might be a little grandchild to begin providing for. Evidently she would have to be very careful and saving, but the thought of those for whom she would be stinting herself made such sacrifice a work of joy and pleasure. But for a moment she looked at the note to the stores again, wondering whether it would not be possible to put one footstool between them to be shared by both. That red leather was very expensive.

Then there were wedding presents to be thought of, and, though she was determined to give Edith her whole trousseau, she meant to behave lavishly in this respect, and, glowing with the prospective delight of giving, she opened the Bramah-locked jewel safe which was let into her bedroom wall. She quite longed to clasp round Edith's neck the four fine rows of pearls which had come to her from her late husband, but this was impossible, since she was convinced they were

heirlooms, and must remain in her possession till her death. There was a diamond tiara, which, it was true, was her own property, but this was far too matronly an ornament for a young bride; diamond tiaras also were out of place in Heathmoor, and she had not once worn it herself in the ten years that she had lived there; it was no use giving dear Edith jewels that she would but lock up in her safe. Then there was an emerald necklace of admirable stones, but it was old-fashioned, and green never suited Edith. She disliked green; she would not wear it. But pink was her favourite colour, and here was the very thing, a dog-collar of beautiful coral with a pearl clasp. How often had Edith admired it! How often had her mother thought of giving it her! There was a charming moonstone brooch, too, set in dear little turquoises. The blue and the pink would go deliciously together. As a matter of fact the turquoises were rather green, too.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.