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Author: Anthony Pryde

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NIGHTFALL

by

ANTHONY PRYDE

CHAPTER I

"Tea is ready, Bernard," said Laura Clowes, coming in from the garden.

It was five o'clock on a June afternoon, but the hall was so dark that she had to grope her way. Wanhope was a large, old-fashioned manor-house, a plain brick front unbroken except in the middle, where its corniced roof was carried down by steps to an immense gateway of weathered stone, carved with the escutcheon of the family and their Motto: FORTIS ET FIDELIS. Wistarias rambled over both sides, wreathing the stone window-frames in their grape-like clusters of lilac bloom, and flagstones running from end to end, shallow, and so worn that a delicate growth of stoncrop fringed them, shelved down to a lawn.

Indoors in the great hall it was dark because floor and staircase and wall and ceiling were all lined with Spanish chestnut-wood, while the windows were full of Flemish glass in purple and sepia and blue. There was nothing to reflect a glint of light except a collection of weapons of all ages which occupied the wall behind a bare stone hearth; suits of inlaid armour, coats of chainmail as flexible as silk, assegais and blowpipes, Bornean parangs and Gurkha kukris, Abyssinian shotels with their double blades, Mexican knives in chert and chalcedony, damascened swords and automatic pistols, a Chinese

bronze drum, a Persian mace of the date of Rustum, and an Austrian cavalry helmet marked with a bullet-hole and a stain.

Gradually, as her eyes grew used to the gloom Laura found her way to her husband's couch. She would have liked to kiss him, but dared not: the narrow mocking smile, habitual on his lips, showed no disposition to respond to advances. Dressed in an ordinary suit of Irish tweed, Bernard Clowes lay at full length in an easy attitude, his hands in his pockets and his legs decently extended as Barry, his male nurse, had left them twenty minutes ago: a big, powerful man, well over six feet in height, permanently bronze and darkly handsome, his immense shoulders still held back so flat that his coat fitted without a wrinkle—but a cripple since the war.

Laura Clowes too was tall and slightly sunburnt, but thin for her height, and rather plain except for her sweet eyes, her silky brown hair, and—rarer gift!—the vague elegance which was a prerogative of Selincourt women. She rarely wore expensive clothes, her maid Catherine made most of her indoor dresses, and yet she could still hold her own, as in old days, among women who shopped in the Rue de la Paix. This afternoon, in her silk muslin of the same shade as the trail of wistaria tucked in where the frills crossed over her breast, she might have gone astray out of the seventeenth century.

"Tea is in the parlour," said Mrs. Clowes. "Shall I wheel you round through the garden? It's a lovely day and the roses are in their perfection, I counted eighty blooms on the old Frau Karl. I should like you to see her."

"I shouldn't. But you can drag me into the parlour if you like," said Bernard Clowes—a grudging concession: more often than not he ate his food in the hall. His wife pushed his couch, which ran on cycle wheels and so lightly that a child could propel it, into her sitting-room and as near as she dared to the French windows that opened without step or ledge on the terrace flagstones and the verdure of the lawn. Out of doors, for some obscure reason, he refused to go, though the garden was sweet with the scent of clover and the gold sunlight was screened by the milky branches of a great acacia. Still he was in the fresh air, and Laura hastily busied herself with her flowered Dresden teacups, pretending unconsciousness because if she had shown the slightest satisfaction he would probably have demanded to be taken back. Her mild duplicity was of course mere make believe: the two understood each other only too well: but it was wiser to keep a veil drawn in case Bernard Clowes should suddenly return to his senses. For this reason Laura always spoke as if his choice of a confined life were only a day or two old. Had he said—as he might say at any moment—"Laura, I should like to go for a drive," Laura would have been able without inconsistency to reply, "Yes, dear: what time shall I order the car?" as though they had been driving together every evening of their married life.

"What have you been doing today?" Clowes asked, sipping his tea and looking out of the window. He had shut himself up in his bedroom with a headache and his wife had not seen him since the night before.

"This morning I motored into Amesbury to change the library books and to enquire after Canon Bodington. I saw Mrs. Bodington and Phoebe and George—"

"Who's George?"

"Their son in the Navy, don't you remember? The Sapphire is in dry dock—"

"How old is he?"

"Nineteen," said Mrs. Clowes.

"Oh. Go on."

"I don't remember doing anything else except get some stamps at the post office. Stay, now I come to think of it, I met Mr. Maturin, but I didn't speak to him. He only took off his hat to me, Bernard. He is seventy-four."

"Dull sort of morning you seem to have had," said Bernard Clowes.

"What did you do after lunch?"

"With a great want of intelligence, I strolled down to Wharton to see Yvonne, but she was out. They had all gone over to the big garden party at Temple Brading. I forgot about it—"

"Why weren't you asked?"

"I was asked but I didn't care to go. Now that I am no longer in my first youth these expensive crushes cease to amuse me." Bernard gave an incredulous sniff but said nothing. "On my way home I

looked in at the vicarage to settle the day for the school treat. Isabel has made Jack Bendish promise to help with the cricket, and she seems to be under the impression that Yvonne will join in the games. I can hardly believe that anything will induce Yvonne to play Nuts and May, but if it is to be done that energetic child will do it. No, I didn't see Val or Mr. Stafford. Val was over at Red Springs and Mr. Stafford was preparing his sermon."

"Have you written any letters?"

"I wrote to father and sent him fifty pounds. It was out of my own allowance. He seems even harder up than usual. I'm afraid the latest system is not profitable."

"I should not think it would be, for Mr. Selincourt," replied Bernard Clowes politely. "Monte Carlo never does pay unless one's pretty sharp, and your father hasn't the brains of a flea. Was that the only letter you wrote?"

"Yes—will you have some more bread and butter?"

"And what letters did you get?" Clowes pursued his leisured catechism while he helped himself daintily to a fragile sandwich. This was all part of the daily routine, and Laura, if she felt any resentment, had long since grown out of showing it.

"One from Lucian. He's in Paris—"

"With—?"

"No one, so far as I know," Laura replied, not affecting to misunderstand his jibe. Lucian Selincourt was her only brother and very dear to her, but there was no denying that his career had its seamy side. He was not, like her father, a family skeleton—he had never been warned off the Turf: but he was rarely solitary and never out of debt. "Poor Lucian, he's hard up too. I wish I could send him fifty pounds, but if I did he'd send it back."

"What other letters did you have?"

Mrs. Clowes had had a sheaf of unimportant notes, which she was made to describe in detail, her husband listening in his hard patience. When they were exhausted Laura went on in a hesitating voice, "And there was one more that I want to consult you about. I know you'll say we can't have him, but I hardly liked to refuse on my own imitative, as he's your cousin, not mine. It was from Lawrence Hyde, offering to come here for a day or two."

"Lawrence Hyde? Why, I haven't seen or heard of him for years," Clowes raised his head with a gleam of interest. "I remember him well enough though. Good-looking chap, six foot two or three and as strong as a horse. Well-built chap, too. Women ran after him. I haven't seen him since we were in the trenches together."

"Yes, Bernard. Don't you recollect his going to see you in hospital?"

"So he did, by Jove! I'd forgotten that. He'd ten days' leave and he chucked one of them away to look me up. Not such a bad sort, old Lawrence."

"I liked him very much," said Laura quietly.

"Wants to come to us, does he? Why? Where does he write from?"

"Paris. It seems he ran across Lucian at Auteuil—"

"Let me see the letter."

Laura give it over. "Calls you Laura, does he?" Clowes read it aloud with a running commentary of his own. "H'm: pleasant relationship, cousins-in-law. . . 'Met Lucian . . . chat about old times'—is he a bird of Lucian's feather, I wonder? He wasn't keen on women in the old days, but people change a lot in ten years . . . 'Like to come and see us while he's in England . . . run over for the day'—bosh, he knows we should have to put him up for a couple of nights! . . . 'Sorry to hear such a bad account of Bernard'—Very kind of him, does he want a cheque? Hallo! 'Lucian says he is leading you a deuce of a life.' Upon my word!" He lowered the letter and burst out laughing—the first hearty laugh she had heard from him for many a long day. Laura, who had given him the letter in fear and trembling and only because she could not help herself, was exceedingly relieved and joined in merrily. But while she was laughing she had to wink a sudden moisture from her eyelashes: this glimpse of the natural self of the man she had married went to her heart. "Is it true?" he said, still with that friendly twinkle in his eyes. "Do I lead you the deuce of a life, poor old Laura?"

"I don't mind," said Laura, smiling back at him. She could have been more eloquent, but she dared not. Bernard's moods required delicate handling.

"He's a cool hand anyhow to write like that to a woman about her husband. But Lawrence always was a cool hand. I remember the turn-up we had in the Farringay woods when I was twelve and he was fourteen. He nearly murdered me. But I paid him out," said Bernard in a glow of pleasurable reminiscence. "He was too heavy for me. Old Andrew Hyde came and dragged him off. But I marked him: he was banished from his mother's drawingroom for a week—not that he minded that much . . . Aunt Helen was a pretty woman. Gertrude and I never could think why she married Uncle Andrew, but I believe they got on all right, though she was a big handsome woman—a Clowes all over—while old Andrew looked like any little scrub out of Houndsditch. Never can tell why people marry each other, can you?" Bernard was becoming philosophical. I suppose if you go to the bottom it's Nature that takes them by the scruff of the neck and gives them a gentle shove and says 'More babies, please.' She doesn't always bring it off though, witness you and me, my love.— But I say, Laura, I like the way you handed over that letter! Thought it would do me good, didn't you? Look here, I can't have my character taken away behind my back! You tell him to come and judge for himself."

"You'll get very tired of him, Berns," said Laura doubtfully. "You always say you get sick of people in twenty-four hours: and I can't take him entirely off your hands—you'll have to do your share of entertaining him. He's your cousin, not mine, and it'll be you he comes to see."

"I shan't see any more of him than I want to, my dear, on that you may depend," said Bernard with easy emphasis. "If he invites himself he'll have to put with what he can get. But I can stand a good deal of him. Regimental shop is always amusing, and Lawrence will know heaps of fellows I used to know, and tell me what's become of them all. Besides, I'm sick to death of the local gang and Lawrence will be a change. He's got more brains than Jack Bendish, and from the style of his letter he can't be so much like a curate as Val is." Val Stafford was agent for the Wanhope property. "Oh, by George!"

"What's the matter?"

Bernard threw back his head and grinned broadly with half shut eyes. "Ha, ha! by Gad, that's funny—that's very funny. Why, Val knows him!"

"Knows Lawrence? I never heard Val mention his name."

"No, my love, but one can't get Val to open his lips on that subject. Lawrence and I were in the same battalion. He was there when Val got his ribbon."

"Really? That will be nice for Val, meeting him again."

"Oh rather!" said Bernard Clowes. "On my word it's a shame and I've half a mind . . . No, let him come: let him come and be damned to the pair of them! Straighten me out, will you?" He was liable like most paralytics to mechanical jerks and convulsions which drove him mad with impatience. Laura drew down the helplessly twitching knee, and ran one firm hand over him from thigh to ankle. Her touch had a mesmeric effect on his nerves when he could endure it, but nine times out of ten he struck it away. He did so now. "Go to the devil! How often have I told you not to paw me about? I wish you'd do as you're told. What do you call him Lawrence for?"

"I always did. But I'll call him Captain Hyde if you like—"

"'Mr.,' you mean: he's probably dropped the 'Captain.' He was only a 'temporary.'"

"For all that, he has stuck to his prefix," said Laura smiling. "Lucian chaffed him about it. But Lawrence was always rather a baby in some ways: clocked socks to match his ties, and astonishing adventures in jewellery, and so on. Oh yes, I knew him very well indeed when I was a girl. Mr. and Mrs. Hyde were among the last of the old set who kept up with us after father was turned out of his clubs. I've stayed at Farringay."

"You never told me that!"

"I never thought of telling you. Lawrence hasn't been near us since we came to Wanhope and I don't recollect your ever mentioning his name. You see I tell you now."

"How old were you when you stayed at Farringay?"

"Twenty-two. Lawrence and I are the same age."

"And you knew him well, did you?"

"We were great friends," said Mrs. Clowes, tossing a lump of sugar out of the window to a lame jackdaw. She had many such pensioners, alike in a community of misfortune. "And, yes, Berns, you're right, we flirted a little—only a little: wasn't it natural? It was only for fun, because we were both young and it was such heavenly weather—it was the Easter before war broke out. No, he didn't ask me to marry him! Nothing was farther from his mind."

"Did he kiss you?"

Laura slowly and smilingly shook her head. "Am I, Yvonne?"

"But you liked the fellow?"

"Oh yes, he was charming. A little too much one of a class, perhaps: there's a strong family likeness, isn't there, between Cambridge undergraduates? But he was more cultivated than a good many of his class. We used to go up the river together and read —what did one read in the spring of 1914? Masefield, I suppose, or was it Maeterlinck? Rupert Brooks came with the war. Imagine reading 'Pelleas et Melisande' in a Canadian canoe! It makes one want to be twenty-two again, so young and so delightfully serious." It was hard to run on while the glow faded out of Bernard's face and a cold gloom again came over it, but sad experience had taught Laura that at all costs, under whatever temptation, it was wiser to be frank. It would have been easier for the moment to paint the boy and girl friendship in neutral tints, but if its details came out later, trivial and innocent as they were, the economy of today would cost her dear tomorrow. Her own impression was that Clowes had never been jealous of her in his life. But the pretence of jealousy was one of his few diversions.

"I dare say you do wish you were twenty-two again," he said, delicately setting down his tea cup on the tray—all his movements, so far as he could control them, were delicate and fastidious. "I dare say you would like a chance to play your cards differently. Can't be done, my, girl, but what a good fellow I am to ask Lawrence to Wanhope, ain't I? No one can say I'm not an obliging husband. Lawrence isn't a jumping doll. He's six and thirty and as strong as a horse. You'll have no end of a good time knitting up your severed friendship .. 'Pon my word, I've a good mind to put him off. . I shouldn't care to fall foul of the King's Proctor."

"Will you have another cup of tea before I ring"

"No, thanks . . . Do I lead you the deuce of a life, Lally?"

"You do now and then," said his wife, smiling with pale lips.

"It isn't that I'm sensitive for myself, because I know you don't mean a word of it, but I rather hate it for your own sake. It isn't worthy of you, old boy. It's so—so ungentlemanly."

"So it is. But I do it because I'm bored. I am bored, you know. Desperately!" He stretched out his hand to her with such haggard, hunted eyes that Laura, reckless, threw herself down by him and kissed the heavy eyelids. Clowes put his arm round her neck, fondling her hair, and for a little while peace, the peace of perfect mutual tenderness, fell on this hard-driven pair. But soon, a great sigh bursting from his breast, Clowes pushed her away, his features settling back into their old harsh lines of savage pain and scorn.

"Get away! get up! do you want Parker to see you through the window? If there's a thing on earth I hate it's a dishevelled crying woman. Write to Lawrence. Say I shall be delighted to see him and that I hope he'll give us at least a week. Stop. Warn him that I shan't be able to see much of him because of my invalid habits, and that I shall depute you to entertain him. That ought to fetch him if he remembers you when you were twenty-two."

Laura was neither dishevelled nor in tears: perhaps such scenes were no novelty to her. She leant against the frame of the open window, looking out over the sunlit garden full of flowers, over the wide expanse of turf that sloped down to a wide, shallow river all sparkling in western light, and over airy fields on the other side of it to the roofs of the distant village strung out under a break of woody hill.

"Are you sure you want him? He used to have a hot temper when he was a young man, and you know, Berns, it would be tiresome if there were any open scandal."

"Scandal be hanged," said Bernard Clowes. "You do as you're told." His wife gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders as if to disclaim further responsibility. She was breathing rather hurriedly as if she had been running, and her neck was so white that the shadow of her sunlit wistaria threw a faint lilac stain on the warm, fine grain of her skin. And the haggard look returned to Bernard's eyes as he watched her, and with it a wistfulness, a weariness of desire, "hungry, and barren, and sharp as the sea." Laura never saw that hunger in his eyes. If he spared her nothing else he spared her that.

"You do as I tell you, old girl," his harsh voice had softened again. "There won't be any row. Honestly I'd like to have old Lawrence here for a bit, I'm not rotting now. He had almost four years of it—almost as long as I had. I'll guarantee it put a mark on him. It scarred us all. It'll amuse me to dine him and Val together, and make them talk shop, our own old shop, and see what the war's done for each of us: three retired veterans, that's what we shall be, putting our legs under the same mahogany: three old comrades in arms." He gave his strange, jarring laugh. "Wonder which of us is scarred deepest?"

CHAPTER II

WANHOPE and Castle Wharton—or, to give them their due order, Wharton and Wanhope, for Major Clowes' place would have gone inside the Castle three times over—were the only country houses in the Reverend James Stafford's parish. The village of Chilmark—a stone bridge, crossroads, a church with Norman tower and frondlike Renaissance tracery, and an irregular line of school, shops, and cottages strung out between the stream and chalky beech-crested hillside occupied one of those long, winding, sheltered crannies that mark the beds of watercourses along the folds of Salisbury Plain. Uplands rose steeply all along it except on the south, where it widened away into the flats of Dorsetshire. Wharton overlooked this expanse of hunting country: a formidable Norman keep, round which, by gradual accretion, a dwelling-place had grown up, a history of English architecture and English gardening written in stone and brick and grass and flowers. One sunny square there was, enclosed between arched hedges set upon pillars of carpenters' work, which still kept the design of old Verulam: and Yvonne of the Castle loved its little turrets and cages of singing birds, and its alleys paved with burnet, wild thyme, and watermints, which perfume the air most delightfully, not passed by as the rest, but being trodden upon and crushed.

Wanhope also, though modest by comparison, had a good deal of land attached to it, but the Clowes property lay north up the Plain, where they sowed the headlands with red wheat still as in the days of Justice Shallow. The shining Mere, a tributary of the Avon, came dancing down out of these hills: strange pastoral cliffs of chalk covered with fine sward, and worked by the hands of prehistoric man into bastions and ramparts that imitated in verdure the bold sweep of masonry.

Mr. Stafford was a man of sixty, white-haired and of sensitive, intelligent features. He was a High Churchman, but wore a felt wideawake in winter because when he bought it wideawakes were the fashion for High Churchmen. In the summer he usually roved about his parish without any hat at all, his white curls flying in the wind. He was of gentle birth, which tended to ease his intercourse with the Castle. He had a hundred a year of his own, and the living of Chilmark was worth 175 pounds net. So it may have been partly from necessity that he went about in clothes at which any respectable tramp would have turned his nose up: but idiosyncrasy alone can have inspired him to get the village tailor to line his short blue pilot jacket with pink flannelette. "It's very warm and comfortable, my dear," he said apologetically to his wife, who sat and gazed at him aghast, "so much more cosy than Italian cloth."

On that occasion Mrs. Stafford was too late to interfere, but as a rule she exercised a restraining influence, and while she lived the vicar was not allowed to go about with holes in his trousers. After her death Mr. Stafford mourned her sincerely and cherished her memory, but all the same he was glad to be able to wear his old boots. However, he had a cold bath every morning and kept his hands irreproachable, not from vanity but from an inbred instinct of personal care. Yvonne of the Castle, who spoke her mind as Yvonne's of the Castle commonly do, said that the fewer clothes Mr. Stafford wore the better she liked him, because he was always clean and they were not.

Mr. Stafford had three children; Val, late of the Dorchester Regiment, Rowsley an Artillery lieutenant two years younger, and Isabel the curate, a tall slip of a girl of nineteen. They were all beloved, but Val was the prop of the family and the pride of his father's heart. Invalided out of the Army after six weeks' fighting, with an honourable distinction and an irremediably shattered arm, he had been given the agency of the Wanhope property, and lived at home, where the greater part of his three hundred a year went to pay the family bills. Most of these were for what Mr. Stafford gave away, for the vicar had no idea of the value of money, and was equally generous with Val's income and his own.

Altogether Mr. Stafford was a contented and happy man, and his only worry was the thought, which crossed his mind now and then, that Chilmark for a young man of Val's age was dull, and that the Wanhope agency led nowhere. If Val had been an ambitious man! But Val was not ambitious, and Mr Stafford thanked heaven that this pattern son of his had never been infected by the vulgar modern craze for money making. His salary would not have kept him in luxury in a cottage of his own, but it

was enough to make the vicarage a comfortable home for him; and, so long as he remained unmarried, what could he want more, after all, than the society of his own family and his kind country neighbours?

Rowsley, cheerfully making both ends meet in the Artillery on an allowance from his godmother, was off his father's hands. Isabel? Mr. Stafford did not trouble much about Isabel, who was only a little girl. She was a happy, healthy young thing, and Mr. Stafford was giving her a thoroughly good education. She would be able to earn her own living when he died, if she were not married, as every woman ought to be. (There was no one for Isabel to marry, but Mr. Stafford's principles rose superior to facts.) Meantime it was not as if she were running wild: that sweet woman Laura Clowes and the charming minx at the Castle between them could safely be left to form her manners and see after her clothes.

One summer afternoon Isabel was coming back from an afternoon's tennis at Wharton. Mrs. Clowes brought her in the Wanhope car as far as the Wanhope footpath, and would have sent her home, but Isabel declined, ostensibly because she wanted to stretch her legs, actually because she couldn't afford to tip the Wanhope chauffeur. So she tumbled out of the car and walked away at a great rate, waving Laura farewell with her tennis racquet. Isabel was a tall girl of nineteen, but she still plaited her hair in a pigtail which swung, thick and dark and glossy, well below her waist. She wore a holland blouse and skirt, a sailor hat trimmed with a band of Rowsley's ribbon, brown cotton stockings, and brown sandshoes bought for 5/11-3/4 of Chapman, the leading draper in Chilmark High Street. Isabel made her own clothes and made them badly. Her skirt was short in front and narrow below the waist, and her sailor blouse was comfortably but inelegantly loose round the armholes. Laura Clowes, who had a French instinct of dress, and would have clad Isabel as Guinevere clad Enid, if Isabel had not been prouder than Enid, looked after her with a smile and a sigh: it was a grief to her to see her young friend so shabby, but, bless the child! how little she cared—and how little it signified after all! Isabel's poverty sat as light on her spirits as the sailor hat, never straight, sat on her upflung head.

Isabel knew every one in Chilmark parish. Pausing before a knot of boys playing marbles: "Herbert," she said sternly, "why weren't you at school on Sunday?" Old Hewett, propped like a wheezy mummy against the oak tree that shaded the Prince of Wales's Feathers, brought up his stiff arm slowly in a salute to the vicar's daughter. "Evening," said Isabel cheerfully, "what a night for rheumatics isn't it?" Hewitt chuckled mightily at this subtle joke. "Evening, Isabel," called out Dr. Verney, putting up one finger to his cap: he considered one finger enough for a young lady whom he had brought into the world. Isabel knew every one in Chilmark and every one knew her. Such a range of intensive acquaintance is not so narrow as people who have never lived in a country village are apt to suppose.

Past the schoolhouse, past the wide stone bridge where Isabel loved to hang over the parapet watching for trout—but not tonight, for it was late, and Isabel after a "company tea" wanted her supper: by a footpath through the churchyard, closely mown and planted with rosebushes: and so into the church, where, after dropping a hurried professional curtsey to the altar, she set about her evening duties. Isabel called herself the curate, but she did a good deal which is not expected of a curate, such as shutting windows and changing lesson-markers, propping up the trebles when they went astray in the pointing of the Psalms, altering the numbers on the hymn-board, writing out choir papers, putting flowers in the vases and candles in the benediction lights, playing the organ as required and occasionally blowing it. . . . Before leaving the church she fell on her knees, in deference to Mr. Stafford and the text by the door, and said a prayer. What did she pray? "O Lord bless this church and all who worship in it and make father preach a good sermon next Sunday. I wish I'd been playing with Val instead of Jack, we should have won that last set if Jack hadn't muffed his services. . . . Well, this curate was only nineteen."

And then, coming out into the fading light, she locked the north door behind her and went off whistling like a blackbird, if a blackbird could whistle the alto of Calkin's Magnificat in B flat. . . . Five minutes climbing of the steep brown floor of the beechwood, and she was out on uplands in the dying fires of day. It had been twilight in the valley, but here the wide plain was sunlit and the air was fresh and dry: in the valley even the river-aspens were almost quiet, but here there was still a sough of wind coming and going, through the dry grass thick set with lemon thyme and lady's slipper, or along the low garden wall where red valerian sprouted out of yellow stonecrop.

A wishing gate led into the garden, and Isabel made for an open window, but halfway over the sill she paused, gazing with all her soul in her eyes across the vicarage gooseberry bushes. That grey suit was Val's of course, but who was inside the belted coat and riding breeches? "Rows-lee!" sang out Isabel, tumbling back into the garden with a generous display of leg. The raiders rose up each holding a handful of large red strawberries melting ripe, and Isabel, pitching in her racquet on a sofa, ran across the grass and enfolded her brother in her arms. Rowsley, dark and slight and shrewd, returned her hug with one arm, while carefully guarding his strawberries with the other—"You pig, you perfect pig!" wailed Isabel. "I was saving them for tea tomorrow, Laura's coming and I can't afford a cake. Oh joy, you can buy me one! How long can you stay?"

"Over the week end: but I didn't come to buy you cakes, Baby. I haven't any money either. I came because I wanted you to buy me cakes."

"O well never mind, I'll make one," Isabel joyously slipped her hand through Rowsley's arm. "Then I can get the flour from the baker and it won't cost anything at all—it'll go down in the bill. Well give me one anyhow, now they're picked it would be a pity to waste them." She helped herself liberally out of Val's hand. "Now stop both of you, you can't have any more."

She linked her other arm in Val's and dragged her brothers out of the dangerous proximity of the strawberry beds. Val sat down on a deck chair, one leg thrown over the other, Rowsley dropped at full length on the turf, and Isabel doubled herself up between them, her arms clasped round her knees. "How's the Old Man?" she asked in friendly reference to Rowsley's commanding officer. "Oh Rose, I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. Will Spillsby be able to play on the Fourth?" Spillsby, a brother subaltern and a famous bat, had twisted his ankle at the nets, and Rowsley in his last letter had been uncertain whether he would be well enough to play the Sappers at the annual fixture.

Happily Rowsley was able to reassure his young sister: the ankle was much better and Spillsby was already allowed to walk on it. Isabel then turned her large velvet eyes—gazelle eyes with a world of pathos in their velvet gloom on her elder brother. "Coruscate, Val," she commanded. "You haven't said anything at all yet. We should all try to be bright in the home circle. We cannot all be witty, but—Ow! Rowsley, if you pull my hair I shall hit you in the—in the place where the Gauls fined their soldiers if they stuck out on parade. Oh, Val, that really isn't vulgar, I found it in Matthew Arnold! Their stomachs, you know. They wouldn't have fined you anyhow. You look fagged, darling— are you?"

"Not so much fagged as hungry," said Val in his soft voice. "It's getting on for nine o'clock and I was done out of my tea. I went in to Wanhope, but Laura was out, and Clowes was drinking whisky and soda. I cannot stand whisky at four in the afternoon, and Irish whisky at that. There'll be some supper going before long, won't there?"

"Not until half past nine because Jimmy has his Bible class tonight." Jimmy was Mr. Stafford: and perhaps a purist might have objected that Mrs. Clowes and Yvonne Bendish had not done all they might have done to form Isabel's manners. "I'm so sorry, darling," she continued, preparing to leap to her feet. "Shall I get you a biscuit? There are oatmeals in the sideboard, the kind you like, I won't be a minute—"

"Thanks very much, I'd rather wait. Did you see Mrs. Clowes today? Clowes said she was at the Castle."

"So she was, sitting with Mrs. Morley in an angelic striped cotton. Mrs. Morley was in mauve ninon and a Gainsborough hat. Yvonne says Mr. Morley is a Jew and made his money in I. D. B.'s, which I suppose are some sort of stocks?" Neither of her brothers offered to enlighten her, Rowsley because he was feeling indolent, Val because he never said an unkind word to any one. Isabel, who was enamoured of her own voice flowed on with little delay: "If he really is a Jew, I can't think how she could marry him; I wouldn't. Mrs. Morley can't be very happy or Laura wouldn't go and talk to her. Laura is so sweet, she always sits with people that other people run away from. Oh Val, did Major Clowes tell you their news?" Isabel might refer to her father as Jimmy and to Rowsley's commander as the Old Man, but she rarely failed to give Bernard Clowes his correct prefix.

"No—is there any?"

"Only that they have some one coming to stay with them. Won't he have a deadly time?" Isabel glanced from Val to Rowsley in the certainty of a common response. "Imagine staying at Wanhope! However, he invited himself, so it's at his own risk. Perhaps he's embarrassed like you, Rose, and wants Laura to feed him. It's rather fun for Laura, though—that is, it will be, if Major Clowes isn't too hopeless."

Strange freemasonry of the generations! Mr. Stafford's children loved him dearly and he was wont to say that there were no secrets at the vicarage, yet they lived in a conspiracy of silence, and even Val, who was mentally nearer to his father's age, would have been loth to let Mr. Stafford know as much as Isabel knew about Wanhope. It was assumed that Val's job was the very job Val wanted. Mr. Stafford had indeed a suspicion that it was not all plain sailing: Bernard Clowes retained just so much of the decently bred man as to be courteous to his wife before a mere acquaintance, but the vicar came and went at odd hours, and he observed now and then vague intimations—undertones from Bernard himself, an uncontrollable shrinking on Laura's part, an occasional hesitation or reluctance in Val—which hinted at flying storms. But Val, the father supposed, could make allowance for a cripple: Bernard was so much to be pitied that no man would resent an occasional burst of temper! And there his children left him. The younger generation can trust one another not to interfere, but when the

seniors strike in, with their cut and dry precedents and rule of thumb moralities, who knows what mischief may follow? Elder people are so indiscreet!

"It's a cousin of Major Clowes," Isabel continued, "but they haven't met for years and years—not since the war. Laura knows him too, she met him before she was married and liked him very much indeed. She's looking forward to it—that is, she would be if she had spirit enough to look forward to anything."

"Clowes never said a word to me about it," remarked Val.

"Didn't he?" Isabel unfolded herself and stood up. "That means he is going to be tiresome. I must run now, it's five past nine. Which will you both have, cold beef or eggs?"

"Oh, anything that's going," said Val.

"Eggs," said Rowsley, "not less than four. Without prejudice to the cold beef if it's underdone. Hallo!"

"What?"

"What's the matter with your skirt?"

"Nothing," said Isabel shortly. She screwed her head over her shoulder in a vain endeavour to see her own back. "It's perfectly all right."

"It would be, on a scarecrow." Isabel stuck her chin up. "Have you been over to the Castle in that kit, Baby? Well, if Yvonne won't give you some of her old clothes, you might ask the kitchenmaid."

"The kitchenmaid has more money than I have," said Isabel cheerfully. "Is it so very bad? It's clean anyway, I washed and ironed it myself."

"It looks very nice and so do you," said Val. Isabel eyed him with a softened glance: one could rely on Val to salve one's wounded vanity, but, alas! Val did not know home-made from tailor-made. Reluctantly she owned to herself that she had more faith in Rowsley's judgment. "It seems rather short though," Val added. "I suppose you will have to go into long frocks pretty soon, won't you, and put your hair up?"

"Oh bother my hair and my dresses!" said Isabel with a great sigh. "I will pin my hair up when I get some new clothes, but how can I when I haven't any money and Jim hasn't any money and neither of you have any money? Don't you see, idiot," this was exclusively to Rowsley, "when I pin my hair up I shall turn into a grown up lady? And then I shall have to wear proper clothes. At present I'm only a little girl and it doesn't signify what I wear. If any one will give me five pounds I'll pin my hair up like a shot. Oh dear, I wonder what Yvonne would say if Jack expected her to outfit herself for five pounds? I do wish some one would leave me 10,000 pounds a year. Get up now, you lazy beggar, come and help me lay the supper. It's Fanny's evening out."

She pulled Rowsley to his feet and they went off together leaving Val alone on the lawn: good comrades those two, and apparently more of an age, in spite of the long gap between them, than Rowsley and Val, who was the eldest by only eighteen months. And Val sat on alone, while stains of coral and amber faded out of the lavender sky, and a rack of sea clouds, which half an hour ago had shone like fiery ripples, dwindled away into smoke—mist—a mere shadow on the breast of the night. Stars began to sparkle, moths and humming cockchafers sailed by him, a chase of bats overhead endlessly fell down airy precipices and rose in long loops of darkling flight: honeysuckle and night-scented stock tinged with their sweet garden perfume the cool airs from the moor.

Val lit a cigarette, a rare indulgence. If cigarettes grew on gooseberry bushes Val would have been an inveterate smoker, but good Egyptians were a luxury which he could not often afford. The Wanhope agency was ample for his needs, though underpaid as agencies go: but there was Rowsley, always hard up, uncomplaining, but sensitive, as a young fellow in his position is sure to be, and secretly fretting because he could not do as other men did: and there was Isabel, for whom Val felt the anxiety Mr. Stafford ought to have felt, and was trying to make the provision Mr. Stafford ought to have made: and then there was the vicar himself, who laid out a great deal of money in those investments for which we are promised cent per cent interest, but upon a system of deferred payment.

Tonight however Val lit a cigarette, and then a second, to the surprise of Isabel, who saw the red spark on the lawn. She thought her brother must be tired, and perhaps it really was the long day without food that made him so restless in mind and so uneasy. Bernard Clowes had been more than usually cranky that afternoon. Even the patient Val had had thoughts of throwing up his job when the cripple made him go through his week's accounts, scrutinizing every entry and cross-examining him on every transaction in such a tone as the head of a firm might employ to a junior clerk suspected of dishonesty. It was Bernard's way: it meant nothing: but it was irksome to Val, especially when he could

not soothe himself by dropping into Laura's quiet parlour for a cup of tea. Yet his irritation would not have lingered through a cigarette if Isabel's news had not revived it. This cousin of Bernard's! Val had not much faith in any cousin of Bernard Clowes: nor in the kindness of life.

Val was a slight, fair, pleasant-looking man of eight or nine and twenty, quiet of movement, friendly-mannered and as inconspicuous as his own rather worn grey tweeds: one of a class, till he raised his eyes: and then? There was something strange in Val's eyes when they were fully raised, an indrawn arresting brilliance difficult to analyse: imaginative and sympathetic, as if he were at home in dark places: the quality of acceptance of pain.

Adepts in old days knew by his eyes a man who had been on the rack. Stafford had been racked: and by the pain that is half shame, the keenest, the most lacerating and destructive of wounds. He had suffered till he could suffer no more, and tonight in the starlit garden he, suffered still, without hope, or rebellion, or defence.

Indoors Rowsley and Isabel, with the rapidity of long use, laid the cloth, and Isabel fetched cold beef from the larder and butter and eggs from the dairy, while Rowsley went down the cellar with a jug and a candle and drew from the cask a generous allowance of beer. "Come along in, old Val," said Isabel, reappearing at the open window, "You and Rose are both famishing and I'm not," this was a pious fiction, "so you can begin and I'll wait for Jimmy. I dare say he's gone wandering off somewhere and won't be in till ten."

Val came across the dark, cool lawn and climbed over the window sill. A shabby room, large and low: a faded paper, grey toning to blue: a carpet of faded roses on a grey ground: the shaded Dresden lamp and roselit supper table shining like an island in a pool of shadow, and those two beloved heads, both so dark and smooth and young, tam cara capita! Neither of them suspected that Val was unhappy. His feeling for them was more fatherly than fraternal, and Rowsley, strange to say, fell in with Val's attitude, coming to his brother for money as naturally as most young men go to their parents. Val sat at the head of the table because Mr. Stafford could not carve. "There!" said Isabel, giving him his plate. "Mustard? I've just made it so you needn't look to see if it's fresh. Watercress: I picked it myself. Lettuce. Cream and vinegar and sugar. Beer. Now do you feel happy? Lord love you, dear, I like to see you eat."

She sat on the arm of Mr. Stafford's mahogany chair. "What time do you want breakfast? Seven o'clock? Major Clowes wouldn't come down at seven if he were your agent. Can you get back to tea tomorrow? Laura may bring the cousin up to tea with her and she wants him to meet you."

"Very good of her. Why?"

"Oh, because he was in the Army too and all through the war. He went out with the first hundred thousand. He's much older than you are—the same age as Laura. Oh, wait a minute!" exclaimed Isabel in the tone in which a Frenchwoman says *Tenez*. I forgot. She thinks you must have met him, Val."

"Possibly," said Val.

"Was he in the Dorchesters?" asked Rowsley—much more interested than his brother, no doubt because he was not so hungry as Val, who was giving all his attention to his supper.

"No, in the Winchesters," said Isabel. "Do I mean the Winchesters, Val? What was Major Clowes' old regiment?"

"Clowes was in the Wintons."

Isabel nodded. "Then so was the cousin. And Laura says he was out there when the Wintons were in the next bit of trench north of the Dorchesters. He was there when—when you were wounded." Such was Val Stafford's modesty that in the family circle it was not in etiquette to refer in other terms to that famous occasion.

"I don't remember any fellow named Clowes and I never knew Bernard Clowes had a cousin out there," said Val, mixing himself a salad.

"Oh, his name isn't Clowes. It's Ryde or Pride or something like that. I'm sorry to be so vague, but Jack Bendish and Yvonne and Mrs. Morley were all talking at once. Lawrence Pied—Fried—"

"Lawrence Hyde?"

"Yes, that's it! Then you really do remember him?"

"Er—yes. Is that lamp smoking, Rowsley? You might turn it down a trifle, I can't reach."

"Let me, let me?— What was he like?"

"Who—Hyde? Oh," said Val vaguely, "he was like the rest of us —very tired."

"Tired?" echoed Isabel with a blank face, "but, Val darling, he couldn't have been only tired! What should you think he was like when he wasn't tired?"

"That is a question I have occasionally asked myself," Val answered with his faint indecipherable smile. "My dear child, I only saw him once or twice. He was a senior captain and commanded his company. I was a very junior lieutenant."

"Still he was there at the time," reflected Isabel. "O Rose! if he's anything like nice, which is almost past praying for in Major Clowes' cousin, let's beguile him into the gooseberry bushes and make him tell us all about it! Val is very dear to his family, but no one, however tenderly attached to him, could call him a brilliant raconteur. Now Mr. Hyde won't have any modest scruples. Val, if there is a slug in that lettuce I wish you would say so. It would hurt my feelings less than for you to sit looking at it in a stony silence. Was he good-looking?"

"Possibly he might be," said Val, "when he scraped the dirt off."
After a moment he added, "He was very decent to me."

"Was he? Then he was nice?"

"Gnat," said Rowsley from the middle of his third egg. Isabel rounded him indignantly.

"I'm not gnatting! I'm not asking Val anything about himself, am I? Val can't possibly mind telling me about another man in another regiment. You eat your eggs, there's a good boy, before they get cold.— Laura says the Dorchesters dined the Winchesters once when they were in billets. Was that when you and Mr. Hyde were there?"

"Captain Hyde," Val corrected his young sister. "Yes, we both graced the festive board. It was too festive for me. We had Buszard's soup and curried chicken and real cream, and more champagne than was good for us. But it was not on that occasion that Hyde was so decent to me. The day I—the day Dale went down—" Rowsley nodded to him as he raised his glass of beer to his lips—"thank you, Rose.— As I was saying, that evening I ran across Hyde between the lines. The Dorsets and Wintons had gone over the top together, and he had been left behind with a bullet in his chest. I was done to the world, but he had some brandy left and shared it with me. If it had not been for Hyde I should never have brought Dale in."

"Well, I've never heard that before," said Rowsley to his fourth egg.

Isabel was silent, and her eyes in the shadow of a momentary gravity were the eyes of a woman and not of a child. She raised them to look out at the evening sky, indigo blue against the lamplit interior, or faintly primrose in the west, and wondered for the thousandth time why it was still such an effort to Val to refer to his brief military experience. Soft country noises came in, peaceful and soothing: the short shrill shriek of a bat, the rustle of a branch of rose-leaves moving like a hand over the window panes, a faint breathing of wind from the moor. Surely the scar of war ought to be healed by now! Isabel kept these thoughts to herself: young as she was, her solitary life—for a woman alone among men is always to some extent solitary—had trained her to a clear perception of what had better not be said.

"When is Hyde coming?" asked Val, going on with his salad.

"Tomorrow, didn't you hear me say Laura is going to bring him here to tea? He's staying at his own place, Farringay—I think from the way Laura spoke it is what one calls a place—and they expect him by the morning train. Laura's to meet him in the car."

"Did you ask her to bring him in to tea," said Rowsley, frowning over the marmalade jar, "when Val is safe to be out and you didn't know I should be here?"

"Yes: oughtn't I to have?"

"No."

"Is there anything else you would like to speak to me about?" said Isabel after a pregnant silence. "Dear Rowsley, you seem determined to look after my manners and morals! I asked him to please Laura. She's nervous of Major Clowes. Jack and Yvonne are coming too."

"Oh I don't see that it signifies," said Val. Mrs. Clowes wouldn't have accepted if it weren't all right. I don't see that you or I need worry if she doesn't. Isabel is old enough to pour out tea for herself. In any

case, as it happens, you'll be here if I'm not, and I dare say Jimmy will look in for ten minutes."

"You are sweet, Val," said Isabel gratefully.

"Oh I don't say Rowsley's not right! Prigs generally are: and besides now I come to think of it, Laura did look faintly amused when I asked her. But these stupid things never occur to me till afterwards! After all, what am I to do? I can't manufacture a chaperon, and it would be very bad for the parish if the vicar never entertained. And it's not as if Captain Hyde were a young man; he's thirty-six if he's a day."

CHAPTER III

When the sea retreats after a storm one finds on the beach all sorts of strange flotsam. Bernard Clowes was a bit of human wreckage left on the sands of society by the storm of the war. When it broke out he was a second lieutenant in the Winchester Regiment, a keen polo player and first class batsman who rarely opened a book. He was sent out with the First Division and carried himself with his usual phlegmatic good humour through almost four years of fighting from Mons to Cambrai.

In the March break-through he had his wrist broken by a rifle-bullet and was invalided home, where he took advantage of his leave to get married, partly because most of the men he knew were already married, and partly to please his sister. There were no other brothers, and Mrs. Morrison, a practical lady, but always a little regretful of her own marriage with Morrison's Boot and Shoe Company, recommended him with the family bluntness to arrange for an olive branch before the Huns got him.

Laura, a penniless woman two years his senior and handicapped by her disreputable belongings, was not the wife Gertrude Morrison would have chosen for him: still it might have been worse, for Laura was well-born and personally irreproachable, while Clowes, hot-blooded and casual, was as likely as not to have married a chorus-girl. If any disappointment lingered, Gertrude soothed it by trying over in her own mind the irritation that she would be able to produce in Morrison circles: "Where he met her? Oh, when she was staying with her married sister at Castle Wharton . . . Yvonne, the elder Selincourt girl, married into the Bendish family."

Bernard did not care a straw either for the paternal handicap or for the glories of the Wharton connection. He took his love-affair as simply as his cricket and with the same bold confidence. Laura was what he wanted; she would fit into her surroundings at Wanhope as delicately as an old picture fits into an old frame, and one could leave her about—so he put it to himself—without fear of her getting damaged. When Tom Morrison, shrewd business man, dropped a hint about the rashness of marrying the daughter of a scamp like Ferdinand Selincourt, Bernard merely stared at him and let the indiscretion go in silence. He can scarcely be said to have loved his bride, for up to the time of the wedding his nature was not much more developed than that of a prize bull, but he considered her a very pretty woman, and his faith in her was a religion.

So they were married, and went to Eastbourne for their honeymoon: an average match, not marked by passion on either side, but destined apparently to an average amount of comfort and good will. They had ten gay days before Laura was left on a victoria platform, gallantly smiling with pale lips and waving her handkerchief after the train that carried Bernard back to the front.

Five months later on the eve of the Armistice he was flung out of the service, a broken man, paralysed below the waist, cursing every one who came near him and chiefly the surgeons for not letting him die. No one ever desired life more passionately than Bernard desired death. For some time he clung to the hope that his mind would wear his body out. But his body was too young, too strong, too tenacious of earth to be betrayed by the renegade mind.

There came a day when Clowes felt his youth welling up in him like sap in a fallen tree: new energy throbbed in his veins, his heart beat strong and even, it was hard to believe that he could not get off his bed if he liked and go down to the playing fields or throw his leg over a horse. This mood fastened on him without warning in a Surbiton hospital after a calm night without a sleeping draught, when through his open window he could see green branches waving in sunlight, and hear the cries of men playing cricket and the smack of the driven ball: and it was torture. Tears forced their way suddenly into Bernard's eyes. His nurse, who had watched not a few reluctant recoveries, went out of the room. Then his great chest heaved, and he sobbed aloud, lying on his back with face unhidden, his wide black eyes blinking at the sweet pale June sky. No chance of death for him: he was good for ten, twenty, fifty years more: he could not bear it, but it had to be borne. He tried to pull himself up: if he could only

have reached the window! But the arms that felt so strong were as weak as an infant's, while the dead weight of his helpless legs dragged on him like lead. The only result of his struggle was a dreadful access of pain. Reaction followed, for he had learnt in his A B C days not to whimper when he was hurt, and by the time the nurse returned Clowes had scourged himself back to his usual savage tranquillity. "Can I have that window shut, please?" he asked, cynically frank. "I used to play cricket myself."

Laura Clowes in this period went through an experience almost equally formative. Two years older than Bernard, she was also more mature for her years and had developed more evenly, and from the outset her engagement and marriage had meant more to her than to Bernard, because her girlhood had been unhappy and they provided a way of escape. Her sister Yvonne had met Jack Bendish at a race-meeting and he had fallen madly in love with her and married her in a month in the teeth of opposition. That was luck—heaven-sent luck, for Yvonne on the night before her marriage had broken down utterly and confessed that if Jack had not saved her she would have gone off with the first man who asked her on any terms, because she was twenty-nine and sick to death of wandering with her father on the outskirts of society. Subsequently Yvonne had after a hard fight won a footing at Wharton for herself and her sister, and there Laura had met Clowes, not such a social prize as Jack, but rich and able to give his wife an assured position. She was shrewd and realized that in himself he had little to offer beyond a handsome and highly trained physique and a mind that worked lucidly within the limits of a narrow imagination but she was beyond all words grateful to him, and he fascinated her more than she realized.

The ten days at Eastbourne opened her eyes. Bernard enjoyed every minute of them and was exceedingly pleased with himself and proud of his wife, but for Laura they were a time of heavy strain. Innocent and shy, she had feared her husband, only to discover that she loved him better than he was capable of loving her. Laura was not blind. She understood Bernard and all his limitations, the dangerous grip that his passions had of him, his boyish impatience, his wild-bull courage, and his inability to distinguish between a wife and a mistress: she was happiest when he slept, always holding her in his arms, exacting even in sleep, but so naively youthful in the bloom of his four and twenty summers, and, for the moment, all her own. She loved him "because I am I—because you are you," and her tenderness was edged with the profound pity that women felt in those days for the men who came to them under the shadow of death. It was her hope that the strong half-developed nature would grow to meet her need. It grew swiftly enough: in the forcing-house of pain he soon learned to think and to feel: but the change did not lead him to his wife's heart.

Laura had married a man of a class and apparently normal to a fault: she found herself united now to incarnate storm and tempest. The first time she saw him at Surbiton, he drove her out in five minutes with curses and insult. Why? Laura, wandering about half-stunned in the visitors' room, had no idea why. She stumbled against the furniture: she looked at the photographs of Windermere and King's College Chapel and the Nursing Staff on the walls: she took up Punch and began to read it. Laura was no dreamer, she had never doubted that her husband would rather have the use of his legs again than all the feminine devotion in the world, but she had hoped to soothe him, perhaps for a little while to make him forget: it had not crossed her mind that her anguish of love and service would be rejected. Enlightenment was like folding a sword to her breast.

By and by his nurse came down to her, a young hard-looking woman with tired eyes. She had little comfort to give, but what she gave Laura never forgot, because it was the truth without any conventional or sentimental gloss. "You're having a bad time with him, aren't you?" she said, coldly sympathetic. "It won't last. Nothing lasts. You mustn't think he's left off caring for you. I expect he was very fond of you, wasn't he? That's the trouble. Some men take invalid life nicely and let their wives fuss over them to their hearts' content, but Major Clowes is one of those tremendously strong masculine men that always want to be top dog. Besides, you're young and pretty, if you don't mind my saying so, and you remind him of what he's done out of . . . Twenty-four, isn't he? Don't give way, Mrs. Clowes, you've a long road before you; these paralysis cases are a frightful worry, almost as bad for the friends as they are for the patient; but if you play up it'll get better instead of worse. He'll get used to it and so will you. One gets used to anything."

Even so: time goes on and storms subside. Bernard Clowes came out of the hospital and he and his wife settled down on friendly terms after all. "It's not what you bargained for when you married me," said the cripple with his hard smile. "However, it's no good crying over spilt milk, and you must console yourself with the fact that there's still plenty of money going. But I wish we'd had a little more time together first." He pierced her with his black eyes, restless and fiery. "I dare say you would have liked a boy. So should I. Nevermind, my girl, you shan't miss much else."

Wanhope, the family property, was buried deep in Wiltshire, three or four miles from a station. Laura liked the country: Wanhope let it be, then: and Wanhope it was, with the additional advantage that Yvonne was at Castle Wharton within a stroll. Laura liked a wide house and airy rooms, a wide garden,

plenty of land, privacy from her neighbours: all this Wanhope gave her, no slight relief to a girl who had been brought up between Brighton and Monte Carlo. The place was too big to be run without an agent? No drawback, the agent: on the contrary, Clowes looked out for a fellow who would be useful to Laura, a gentleman, an unmarried man, who would be available to ride with her or make a fourth at bridge—and there by good luck was Val Stafford ready to hand. Born and reared in the country, though young and untrained, Val brought to his job a wide casual knowledge of local conditions and a natural head for business, and was only too glad to squire Laura in the hunting field. For Laura must hunt: as Laura Selincourt she had hunted whenever she was offered a mount, and she was to go on doing as she had always done. Laura would rather not have hunted, for the freshness of her youth was gone and the strain of her life left her permanently tired, and she pleaded first expense, then propriety. "Don't be a damned fool," replied Bernard Clowes. So Laura went riding with Val Stafford.

"Come in," said Major Clowes in a rasping snarl, and Laura came into her husband's room and stumbled over a chair. The windows were shuttered and the room was still dark at eleven o'clock of a fine June morning. Laura, irrepressibly annoyed, groped her way through a disorder of furniture, which seemed, as furniture always does in the dark, to be out of place and malevolently full of corners, and without asking leave flung down a shutter and flung up a window. In a field across the river they were cutting hay, and the dry summer smell of it breathed in, and with it the long rolling whirr of a haymaking machine and its periodical clash, most familiar of summer noises. And the June daylight lit up the gaunt body of Bernard Clowes stretched out on a water mattress, his silk jacket unbuttoned over his strong, haggard throat. "Really, Berns," said Laura, flinging down a second shutter, "I don't wonder you sleep badly. The room is positively stuffy! I should have a racking headache if I slept in it."

"Well, you don't, you see," Bernard replied politely. "Stop pulling those blinds about. Come over here." Laura came to him. "Kiss me," said Clowes, and she laid her cool lips on his cheek. Clowes received her kiss passively: even Laura, though she understood him pretty well, never was sure whether he made her kiss him because he liked it or because he thought she did not like it.

"Where are you off to now?" asked Clowes, pushing her away: "you look very smart. I like that cotton dress. It is cotton, isn't it?" he rubbed the fabric gingerly between his finger and thumb. "Did Catherine make it? That girl is a jewel. I like that gipsy hat too, it's a pretty shape and it shades your eyes. I call that sensible, which can't often be said for a woman's clothes. You have good eyes, Laura, well worth shading, though your figure is your trump card. I like these fitting bodices that give a woman a chance to show what shape she is. All you Selincourt women score in evening gowns. Yvonne has a topping figure, though she's an ugly little devil. She has an American complexion and her eyes aren't as good as yours. Where did you say you were going?"

"To the station to meet Lawrence. I promised to fetch him in the car."

"Lawrence? So he's due today, is he? I'd forgotten all about him. And you're meeting him? Oh yes, that explains the dress and hat, I thought you wouldn't have put them on for my benefit."

"Dear, it's only one of the cotton frocks I wear every day, and I couldn't go driving without a hat, could I?"

"Can't conceive why you want to go at all." Laura was silent. "If Lawrence must be met, why can't Miller go alone?" Miller was the chauffeur. "Undignified, I call it, the way you women run after a man nowadays. You think men like it but they don't."

Laura wondered if she dared tell him not to be silly. He might take it with a grin, in which case he would probably relent and let her go: or—? The field of alternative conjecture was wide. In the end Laura, whose knee was still aching from her adventure with the chair, decided to chance it. But—perhaps because they were suffused with irritation—the words had no sooner left her lips than she regretted them.

"I won't have it." Bernard's heavy jaw was clenched like a bloodhound's. "It's not decent running after Hyde while I'm tied here by the leg. I won't have you set all the village talking. There's the Times on my table. Stop. Where are you going?"

"To ring the bell. It's time Miller started. You don't want your cousin to find no one there to meet him—not even a cart for his luggage."

"He can walk. Do him good: and Miller can fetch the luggage afterwards. You do as I tell you. Take the Times. Sit down in that chair with your face to the light and read me the leading articles and the rest of the news on Page 7. Don't gabble: read distinctly if you can—you're supposed to be an educated woman, aren't you?"

Poor Laura had been looking forward to her drive. She had taken some innocent pleasure in choosing

the prettiest of her morning dresses, a gingham that fell into soft folds the colour of a periwinkle, and in rearranging the liberty scarf on her drooping gipsy straw, and in putting on her long fringed gauntlets and little country shoes. Her husband's compliments made her wince, Jack Bendish had eyes only for his wife, Val Stafford's admiration was sweet but indiscriminate: but she remembered Lawrence as a connoisseur. And worse than the sting of her own small disappointment were the breaking of her promise to Lawrence, the failure in hospitality, in common courtesies.

And for the thousandth time Laura wondered whether it would not have been better for Bernard, in the long run, to defy his senseless tyranny. He was at her mercy: it would have been easy to defy him. Easy, but how cruel! A trained nurse would have made short work of Bernard's whims, he would have been washed and brushed and fed and exercised and disregarded—till he died under it? Perhaps. It was safer at all events to let him go his own way. He could never hope to command his regiment now: let him get what satisfaction he could out of commanding his wife! She would have preferred a form of sacrifice which looked less like fear, but there was little sentiment in Bernard, and love must not pick and choose. For it was love still, the old inexplicable fascination: in the middle of one of his tirades, when he was at his most wayward, she would lose herself in the contemplation of some small physical trait, the scar of a burn on his wrist or the tiny trefoil-shaped birthmark on his temple, as if that summed up for her the essence of his personality, and were more truly Bernard Clowes than his intemperate insignificance of speech. . . . Even when others suffered for it she yielded to Bernard, because she loved him and because he suffered so infinitely worse than they.

For denial maddened him. He raised himself on his arm, crimson with anger, his chest heaving under the thin silken jacket which defined his gaunt ribs—"Sit down, will you, damn you?" Because Laura believed that she and she only stood between her husband and despair, she yielded and began to read out the Times leader in a voice that was perfectly gentle and placid.

Bernard sank back and watched her like a cat after a mouse. He was under no delusion: he knew she was not cowed or nervous, but that the spring of her devotion was pity—pity ever fed anew by his dreadful helplessness: and it was this knowledge that drove him into brutality. The instincts of possession and domination were strong in him, and but for the accident that wrenched his mind awry he would probably have made himself a king to Laura, for, once her master, he would have grown more gentle and more tender as the years went by, while Laura was one of those women who find happiness in love and duty: not a weak woman, not a coward, but a humble-minded woman with no great opinion of her own judgment, who would have liked to look up to father, brother, sister, husband, as better and wiser than herself. But in his present avatar he could not master her: and Clowes, feeling as she felt, seeing himself as she saw him, came sometimes as near madness as any man out of an asylum. He was not far off it now, though he lay quiet enough, with not one grain of expression in his cold black eyes.

The 11:39 pulled up at Countisford station, and Lawrence Hyde got out of a first class smoking carriage and stood at ease, waiting for his servant to come and look after him. "There'll be a car waiting from Wanhope, Gaston—"

"Zere no car 'ere, M'sieu—ze man say."

"What, no one to meet me?" Evidently no one: there were not half a dozen people on the flower-bordered platform, and those few were country folk with bundles and bags. Lawrence strolled out into the yard, hoping that his servant's incorrigibly lame English might have led to a misunderstanding. But there was no vehicle of any kind, and the station master could not recommend a cab. Countisford was a small village, smaller even than Chilmark, and owed the distinction of the railway solely to its being in the flat country under the Plain. "But you don't mean to say," said Lawrence incredulous, "that I shall have to walk?"

But it seemed there was no help for it, unless he preferred to sit in the station while a small boy on a bicycle was despatched to Chilmark for the fly from the Prince of Wales's Feathers; and in the end Lawrence went afoot, though his expression when faced with four miles of dusty road would have moved pity in any heart but that of his little valet. Hyde was one of those men who change their habits when they change their clothes. He did not care what happened to him when he was out of England, following the Alaskan trail in eighty degrees of frost, or thrashing round the Horn in a tramp steamer, but when he shaved off his beard, and put on silk underclothing and the tweeds of Sackville Street, he grew as lazy as any flaneur of the pavement. Gaston however was not sympathetic. He was always glad when anything unpleasant happened to his master.

Leaving Gaston to sit on the luggage, Lawrence swung off with his long even stride, flicking with his stick at the bachelor's buttons in the hedge. He could not miss his way, said the station master: straight down the main road for a couple of miles, then the first turning on the left and the first on the left again. Some half a mile out of Countisford however Lawrence came on a signpost and with the traveller's instinct stopped to read it:

So ran the clear lettering on the southern arm. Eastwards a much more weatherbeaten arm, pointing crookedly up a stony cart track, said in dim brown characters: "CHILMARK 2 M." Plainly a short cut over the moor! Better stones underfoot than padded dust: and Lawrence struck uphill swiftly, glad to escape from the traffic of the London road. But he knew too much about short cuts to be surprised when, after climbing five hundred feet in twice as many yards—for the gradients off the Plain are steep—he found himself adrift on the open moor, his track going five ways at once in the light dry grass.

He halted, leaning on his stick. He was on the edge of the Plain: below him stretched away a great half-ring of cultivated country, its salencies the square tower of a church jutting over a group of elms, or the glint of light on a stream, or pale haystacks dotted round the disorderly yard of a grange—the tillage and the quiet dwellings of close on a thousand years. On all this Lawrence Hyde looked with the reflective smile of an alien. It touched him, but to revolt. More than a child of the soil he felt the charm of its tranquillity, but he felt it also as an oppression, a limitation: an ordered littleness from which world-interests were excluded. He was a lover of art and a cosmopolitan, and though the lowland landscape was itself a piece of art, and perfect in its way, Hyde's mind found no home in it. Yet, he reflected with his tolerant smile, he had fought for it, and was ready any day to fight for it again—for stability and tradition, the Game Laws, the Established Church, and the rotation of crops. He was the son of an English mother and had received the training of an Englishman. A rather cynical smile, now and then, at the random and diffident ways of England was the only freedom he allowed to the foreign strain within him.

And when he looked the other way even this faint feeling of irritation passed off, blown away by the wind that always blows across a moor, thin and sweet now, and sunlit as the light curled clouds that it carried overhead through the profound June blue. Acres upon acres of pale sward, sown all over with the blue of scabious and the lemon-yellow of hawkweed, stretched away in rolling undulations like the plain of the sea; dense woods hung massed on the far horizon, beech-woods, sapphire blue beyond the pale silver and amber, of the middle distance, and under them a puff of white smoke from a passing train, or was it the white scar of a quarry? He could not be sure across so many miles of sunlit air, but it must have been smoke, for it dissolved slowly away till there was no gleam left under the brown hillside. Here too was stability, permanence: the wind ruffling the grass as it had done when the Normans crossed their not far distant Channel, or rattling over hilltops through leather-coated oak groves which had kept their symmetry since their progenitors were planted by the Druids. Here was nothing to cramp the mind: here was the England that has absorbed Celt, Saxon, Fleming, Norman, generation after generation, each with its passing form of political faith: the England of traditional eld, the beloved country.

In the meanwhile Lawrence had to find Chilmark. He had neither map nor compass and was unfamiliar with the lie of the land, but, mindful of the station master's directions to go south and turn twice to the left, he shaped a course south-east and looked for a shepherd to ask his way of. At present there were no shepherds to be seen and no houses; here and there a trail of smoke marked some hidden hamlet, sunk deep in cup or cranny, but which was Chilmark he could not tell. Down went the track, plunging towards a stream that brawled in a wild bottom: up over a rough hillside ruby-red with willowherb: then down again to a pool shaded by two willows and a silver birch, and lying so cool and solitary in its own cloven nook, bounded in every direction by half a furlong of chalky hillside, that Lawrence was seized with a desire to strip and bathe, and sun himself dry on the brilliant mossy lawn at its brink. But out of regard for the Wanhope lunch hour he walked on, following a trickle of water between reeds and knotgrafs, till in the next winding of the glen he came on a house: only a labourer's cot, two rooms below and one above, but inhabited, for smoke was coming out of the chimney. Lawrence turned up a worn thread of path and knocked with his stick at the open door.

It was answered by a tall young girl with a dirty face, wearing a serge skirt pinned up under a dirty apron. The house was dirty too: the smell of an unwashed, unswept interior came out of it, together with the wailing of a fretful baby. "I've missed my way on the moor," said Lawrence, inobtrusively holding his handkerchief to his nose. "Can you direct me to Chilmark?"

"Do you mean Chilmark or Castle Wharton? Oh Dorrie, don't cry!" She lifted the babe on her arm and stood gazing at Lawrence in a leisured and friendly manner, as if she wondered who he were. "It isn't far, but it's a long rambling village and there are any number of paths down. And if you want the Bendishes—" Evidently she thought he must want the Bendishes, and perhaps Lawrence's judgment was a little bribed by her artless compliment, for at this point he began to think her pretty in an undeveloped way: certainly she had lovely eyes, dark blue under black lashes, which reminded him of other eyes that he had seen long ago—but when? He could not remember those wistful eyes in any other woman's face.

"I'm making for Wanhope—Major Clowe's house."

"Oh, but then you must be Captain Hyde," exclaimed Miss Stafford: "aren't you? that Mrs. Clowes was expecting."

"My name is Hyde. No one met me at the station" in spite of himself Lawrence could not keep his grievance out of his voice "so, as there are no cabs at Countisford, I had to walk."

"Oh! dear, how sad: and on such a hot day too! You'll be so tired." Was this satire? Pert little thing! Lawrence was faintly amused—not irritated, because she was certainly very pretty: what a swan's throat she had under her holland blouse, and what a smooth slope of neck! But for all that she ought to have sirred him.

"So you know Mrs. Clowes, do you?" He said with as much politeness as a little girl deserves who has lovely eyes and a dirty face. It had crossed his mind that she might be one of the servants at Wanhope: he knew next to nothing of the English labouring classes, but was not without experience of lady's maids.

"Yes, I know her," said Isabel. She hung on the brink of introducing herself—was not Captain Hyde coming to tea with her that afternoon?—but was deterred by a very unusual feeling of constraint. She was not accustomed to be watched as Hyde was watching her, and she felt shy and restless, though she knew not why. It never entered her head that he had taken her for Dorrie Drury's sister. She was dressed like a servant, but what of that? In Chilmark she would have remained "Miss Isabel" if she had gone about in rags, and it would have wounded her bitterly to learn that she owed the deference of the parish rather to her rank as the vicar's daughter, who visited at Wanhope and Wharton, than to any dignity of her own. In all her young life no one had ever taken a liberty with Isabel. And, for that matter, why should any one take a liberty with Dorrie Drury's sister? Isabel's father would not have done so, nor her brothers, nor indeed Jack Bendish, and she was too ignorant of other men to know what it was that made her so hot under Hyde's eyes. "But you'll be late for lunch. Wait half a minute and I'll run up with you to the top of the glen."

Lawrence watched her wrap her charge carefully in a shawl, and fetch milk from the dresser, and coax till Dorrie turned her small head, heavy with the cares of neglected babyhood, sideways on the old plaid maud and began to suck. Apparently he had interrupted the scrubbing of the kitchen floor, for the tiles were wet three quarters of the way over, and on a dry oasis stood a pail, a scrubbing brush, and a morsel of soap. Among less honourable odours he was glad to distinguish a good strong whiff of carbolic.

Isabel meanwhile had recovered from her little fit of shyness. She pulled off her apron and pulled down her skirt (it had been kilted to the knee), rinsed her hands under a tap, wiped her face with a wet handkerchief, and came out into the June sunshine bareheaded, her long pigtail swinging between drilled and slender shoulders. "Yours are London boots," she remarked as she buttoned her cuff. "Do you mind going over the marsh?"

"Not at all."

"Not if you get your feet wet?" Lawrence laughed outright. "But it's a real marsh!" said Isabel offended: "and you're not used to mud, are you? You don't look as if you were." She pointed down the glen, and Lawrence saw that some high spring, dammed at its exit and turned back on itself, had filled the wide bottom with a sponge of moss thickset with flowering rush and silken fluff of cotton grass. "There's no danger in summertime, the shepherds often cross it and so do I. Still if you're afraid—"

"I assure you I'm not afraid," said Lawrence, looking at her so oddly that Isabel was not sure whether he was angry or amused. Nor was Lawrence. She had struck out of his male vanity a resentment so crude that he was ashamed of it, ashamed or even shocked? He was not readily shocked. A pure cynic, he let into his mind, on an easy footing, primitive desires that the average man admits only behind a screen. Yet when these libertine fancies played over Isabel's innocent head they were distasteful to him: as he remembered once, in a Barbizon studio, to have knocked a man down for a Gallic jest on the Queen of Heaven although Luke's Evangel meant no more to him than the legend of Eros and Psyche. But one can't knock oneself down—more's the pity!

"Oh, all right," said Isabel impatiently. He was watching her again! "But do look where you're going, this isn't Piccadilly. You had better hold my hand."

Lawrence was six and thirty. At eighteen he would have snatched her up and carried her over: at thirty-six he said: "Thanks very much," touched the tips of her fingers, let them fall. . . . Unfortunately however he weighed more than Isabel or the shepherds, and, half way across, the green floor quietly gave way under him: first one foot immersed itself with a gentle splash and then the other—"Oh dear"

said Isabel, seized with a great disposition to laugh. Lawrence was not amused. His boots were full of mud and water and he had an aching sense of injured dignity. The bog was not even dangerous: and ankle-deep, calf-deep, knee-deep he waded through it and got out on the opposite bank, bringing up a cloud of little marsh-bubbles on his heels. Isabel would have given all the money she had in the world—about five shillings to go away and laugh, but she had been well brought up and she remained grave, though she grew very red.

"I am so sorry!" she faltered, looking up at Lawrence with her beautiful sympathetic eyes (one must never say I told you so). "I never thought you really would go in. You must be very heavy! Oh! dear, I'm afraid you've spoilt your trousers, and it was all my fault. Oh! dear, I hope you won't catch cold. Do you catch cold easily?"

"Oh no, thanks. Do you mind showing me the way to Wanhope?"

Isabel without another word took the steep hillside at a run. In her decalogue of manners to refuse an apology was an unpardonable sin. How differently Val would have behaved! Val never lost his temper over trifles, and if anything happened to make him look ridiculous he was the first to laugh at himself. At this time in her life Isabel compared Val with all the other men she met and much to his advantage. She forgot that Lawrence was not her brother and that no man cares to be made ridiculous before a woman, or rather she never thought of herself as a woman at all.

She pointed east by south across the Plain. "Do you see that hawk hovering? Carry your eye down to the patch of smoke right under him, in the trees: those are the Wanhope chimneys. If you go straight over there till you strike the road, it will bring you into Chilmark High Street. Go on past Chapman the draper's shop, turn sharp down a footpath opposite the Prince of Wales's Feathers, cross the stream by a footbridge, and you'll be in the grounds of Wanhope."

"Thank you," said Lawrence, "your directions are most precise." He had one hand in his pocket feeling among his loose silver: tips are more easily given than thanks, especially when one is not feeling grateful, and he was accustomed to pay his way through the world with the facile profusion of a rich man. Still he hesitated: if he had not the refined intuition that would have made such a blunder impossible to Val Stafford, he had at all events enough intelligence to hesitate. There is a coinage that is safer than silver, and Lawrence thought it might well pass current (now that she had washed her face) with this fair schoolgirl of sixteen, ruffled by sun and wind and unaware of her beauty. He would not confess to himself that the prospect of Isabel's confusion pleased him.

He bent his head, smiling into Isabel's eyes. "You're a very kind little girl. May I—?"

"No," said Isabel.

The blood sprang to her cheek, but she did not budge, not by a hair's breadth. "I beg your pardon," said Lawrence, standing erect. He had measured in that moment the extent of his error, and he cursed, not for the first time, his want of perception, which his ever-candid father had once called a streak of vulgarity. Defrauded of the pleasure he had promised himself from the contact of Isabel's smooth cheek, he grew suddenly very tired of her. Young girls with their trick of attaching importance to trifles are a nuisance!

He forced a smile. "I beg your pardon, I had no idea— I see you're ever so much older than I thought you were. Some day I shall find my way up here again and you must let me make my peace with a box of chocolates." He raised his hat—he had not done so when she opened the door—and swung off across the moor, leaving the vicar's daughter to go back and scrub Mrs. Drury's floor as it had never been scrubbed before in its life. The honours of the day lay with Isabel, but she was not proud of them, and her face flamed for the rest of the morning. "You're worse than Major Clowes!" she said violently to the kitchen tap.

CHAPTER IV

"How do?" Bernard Clowes was saying an hour later. "So good of you to look us up."

Lawrence, coming down from his own room after brushing his muddy clothes, met his cousin with a good humoured smile which covered dismay. Heavens, what a wreck of manhood! And how chill it struck indoors, and how dark, after the June sunshine on the moor! Delicately he took the hand that

Clowes held out to him— but seized in a grip that made him wince. Clowes gave his curt "Ha ha!"

"I can still use my arms, Lawrence. Don't be so timid, I shan't break to pieces if I'm touched. It's only these legs of mine that won't work. Awkward, isn't it? But never mind that now, it's an old story. You had a mishap on the moor, the servants tell me? Ah! while I think of it, let me apologize for leaving you to walk from the station. Laura, my wife, you know, forgot to send the car. By the by, you know her, don't you? She says she met you once or twice before she married me."

Like most men who surrender to their temperaments, Lawrence was as a rule well served by his intuitions. Now and again they failed him as with Isabel, but when his mind was alert it was a sensitive medium. He dropped with crossed knees into his chair and glanced reflectively at Bernard Clowes, *heu quantum mutatus*. . . . When the body was wrecked, was there not nine times out of ten some corresponding mental warp? Bernard's fluent geniality struck him as too good to be true—it was not in Bernard's line: and why translate a close friendship into "meeting once or twice"? Was Bernard misled or mistaken, or was he laying a trap?—Not misled: the Laura Selincourt of Hyde's recollection was not one to stoop to petty shifts.

"Once or twice?" Lawrence echoed: "Oh, much oftener than that! Mrs. Clowes and I are old friends, at least I hoped we were. She can't be so ungracious as to have forgotten me?"

"She seems to have, doesn't she?" Bernard with his inscrutable smile let the question drop. "Just touch that bell, will you, there's a good fellow? So sorry to make you dance attendance— Hallo, here she is!"

Laura had been waiting in the parlour, under orders not to enter till the bell rang. She had heard all, and wondered whether it was innocence or subtlety that had walked in and out of Bernard's trap. She remembered Hyde was much like other fourth-year University men except that he was not egotistical and not shy: he had altered away from his class, but in what direction it was difficult to tell: there was no deciphering the pleasant blankness of his features or the conventional smile in his black eyes.

"I haven't seen you for fourteen years," she said, giving him her hand. "Oh Lawrence, how old you make me feel!"

"Shall I swear you haven't changed? It would be a poor compliment."

"And one I couldn't return. I shouldn't have known you, unless it were by your likeness to Bernard."

"Am I like Bernard?" said Lawrence, startled.

"That's a good joke, isn't it?" said Clowes. "But my wife is right. If I were not paralysed, we should be a good bit alike."

Under the casual manner, it was in that moment that Hyde saw his cousin for what he was: a rebel in agony. There was a tragedy at Wanhope then, Lucian Selincourt had not exaggerated. Though Lawrence was not naturally sympathetic, he felt an unpleasant twinge of pity, much the same as when his dog was run over in the street: a pain in the region of the heart, as well defined as rheumatism. In Sally's case, after convincing himself that she would never get on her legs again, he had eased it by carrying her to the nearest chemist's: the loving little thing had licked his hand with her last breath, but when the brightness faded out of her brown eyes, in his quality of Epicurean, Lawrence had not let himself grieve over her. Unluckily one could not pay a chemist to put Bernard Clowes out of his pain! "This is going to be deuced uncomfortable," was the reflection that crossed his mind in its naked selfishness. "I wish I had never come near the place. I'll get away as soon as I can."

Then he saw that Bernard was struggling to turn over on his side, flapping about with his slow uncouth gestures like a bird with a broken wing. "Let me—!" Laura's "No, Lawrence!" came too late. Hyde had taken the cripple in his arms, lifting him like a child: "You're light for your height," he said softly. He was as strong as Barry and as gentle as Val Stafford. Laura had turned perfectly white. She fully expected Clowes to strike his cousin. She could hardly believe her eyes when with a great gasp of relief he flung his arm round Hyde's neck and lay back on Hyde's shoulder. "Thanks, that's damned comfortable—first easy moment I've had since last night," he murmured: then, to Laura, "we must persuade this fellow to stop on a bit. You're not in a hurry to get off, are you, Lawrence?"

"Not I. I'll stay as long as you and Laura care to keep me."

"I and Laura, hey?"

Bernard's flush faded: he slipped from Hyde's arm.

"H'm, yes, you're old friends, aren't you? Met at Farringay? I'd forgotten that." He shut his eyes. "And

Laura's dying to renew the intimacy. It's dull for her down here. Take him into the garden, Lally. You'll excuse me now, Lawrence, I can't talk long without getting fagged. Wretched state of things, isn't it? I'm a vile bad host but I can't help it. At the present moment for example I'm undergoing grinding torments and it doesn't amuse me to make conversation, so you two can cut along and disport yourselves in any way you like. Give Lawrence a drink, will you, my love? . . . Oh no, thanks, you've done a lot but you can't do any more, no one can, I just have to grin and bear it. Laura, would you mind ringing for Barry? I'm not sure I shall show up again before dinner-time. It's no end good of you, old chap, to come to such a beastly house. . ."

He pursued them with banal gratitude till they were out of earshot, when Lawrence drew a deep breath as if to throw off some physical oppression. Under the weathered archway, down the flagged steps and over the lawn. . . How still it was, and how sweet! The milk-blossoms in the spire of the acacia were beginning to turn faintly brown, but its perfume still hung in the valley air, mixed with the honey-heavy breath of a great white double lime tree on the edge of the stream. There were no dense woods at Wanhope, the trees were set apart with an airy and graceful effect, so that one could trace the course of their branches; and between them were visible hayfields from which the hay had recently been carried, and the headlands of the Plain—fair sunny distances, the lowlands bloomed over with summer mist, the uplands delicately clear like those blue landscapes that in early Italian pictures lie behind the wheel of Saint Catherine or the turrets of Saint Barbara.

"A sweet pretty place you have here. I was in China nine weeks ago. Everlasting mud huts and millet fields. I must say there's nothing to beat an English June."

"Or a French June?" suggested Laura, her accent faintly sly.
"Lucian said he met you at Auteuil."

"Dear old Lucian! He seemed very fit, but rather worried about you, Laura—may I call you Laura? We're cousins by marriage, which constitutes a sort of tie. Besides, you let me at Farringay."

"Farringay. . . What a long while ago it seems! I can't keep up any pretence of juvenility with you, can I? We were the same age then so we're both thirty-six now. Isn't it strange to think that half one's life is over? Mine doesn't seem ever to have begun. But you wouldn't feel that: a man's life is so much fuller than a woman's. You've been half over the world while Berns and I have been patiently cultivating our cabbage patch. I envy you: it would be jolly to have one's mind stored full of queer foreign adventures and foreign landscapes to think about in odd moments, even if it were only millet fields."

"I've no ties, you see, nothing to keep me in England. Come to think of it, Bernard is my nearest male relative, since my father died five years ago."

"I heard of that and wanted to write to you, but I wasn't sure of your address"

"I was in Peru. They cabled to me to come home when he was taken ill, but I was up country and missed it. The first news I had was a second cable announcing his death. It was unlucky."

"For both of you," said Laura gently, "if it meant that he was alone when he died." Sincere herself, Mrs. Clowes exacted from her friends either sincerity or silence, and her sweet half-melancholy smile pierced through Hyde's conventional regrets. He was silent, a little confused.

They were near the river now, and in the pale shadow of the lime tree Laura sat down on a bench, while Hyde threw himself on a patch of sunlit turf at her feet. Most men of his age would have looked clumsy in such an unbuttoned attitude, but Hyde was an athlete still, and Laura, who was fond of sketching, admired his vigorous grace. She felt intimate with him already: she was not shy nor was Lawrence, but this was an intimacy of sympathy that went deeper than the mere trained ease of social intercourse: she could be herself with him: she could say whatever she liked. And, looking back on the old days which she had half forgotten, Laura remembered that she had always felt the same freedom from constraint in Hyde's company: she had found it pleasant fourteen years ago, when she was young and had no reserves except a natural delicacy of mind, and it was pleasant still, but strange, after the isolating adventure of her marriage. Perhaps she would not now have felt it so strongly, if he had not been her husband's cousin as well as her friend.

She sat with folded hands watching Lawrence with a vague, observant smile. Drilled to a stately ease and worn down to a lean hardihood by his life of war and wandering, he was, like his cousin, a big, handsome man, but distinguished by the singular combination of black eyes and fair hair. Was there a corresponding anomaly in his temperament? He looked as though he had lived through many experiences and had come out of them fortified with philosophy—that easy negative philosophy of a man of the world, for which death is only the last incident in life and not the most important. Of Bernard's hot passions there was not a sign. Amiable? Laura fancied that so far as she was concerned

she could count on a personal amiability: he liked her, she was sure of that, his eyes softened when he spoke to her. But the ruck of people? She doubted whether Lawrence would have lost his appetite for lunch if they had all been drowned.

The pleasant, selfish man of the world is a common type, but she could not confine Lawrence to his type. He basked in the sun: with every nerve of his thinly-clad body he relinquished himself to the contact of the warm grass: deliberately and consciously he was savouring the honied air, the babble of running water, the caress of the tiny green blades fresh against his cheek and hand, the swell of earth that supported his broad, powerful limbs. This sensuous acceptance of the physical joy of life pleased Laura, born a Selincourt, bred in France, and temperamentally out of touch with middle-class England.

Whether one could rely on him for any serviceable friendship Laura was uncertain. As a youth he had inclined to idealize women, but she was suspicious of his later record. Good or bad it had left no mark on him. Probably he had not much principle where women were concerned. Few of the men Laura had known in early life had had any principles of any sort except a common spirit of kindness and fair play. Her brother was always drifting in and out of amatory entanglements—the hunter or the hunted—and he was not much the worse for it so far as Laura could see. Perhaps Hyde was of the game stamp, in which case there might well be no lines round his mouth, since lines are drawn by conflict: or perhaps a wandering life had kept him out of harm's way. It made no great odds to Laura—she had not the shrinking abhorrence which most women feel for that special form of evil: it was on the same footing in her mind as other errors to which male human nature is more prone than female, a little worse than drunkenness but not so bad as cruelty. From her own life of serene married maidenhood such sins of the flesh seemed as remote as murder.

The strong southern light broke in splinters on the dancing water, and was mirrored in reflected rippings, silver-pale, tremulous, over the shadowy understems of grass and loosestrife on the opposite bank. "And I never gave you anything to drink after all!" said Laura after a long, companionable silence. "Why didn't you remind me?"

"Because I didn't want it. Don't you worry: I'll look after myself. I always do. I'm a charming guest, no trouble to any one."

"At least have a cigarette while you're waiting for lunch! I'm sorry to have none to offer you."

"Don't you smoke now? You did at Farringay."

"No, I've given it up. I never much cared for it, and Bernard does so hate to see a woman smoking. He is very old-fashioned in some ways."

"And do you always do as Bernard likes?" Lawrence asked with an impertinence so airy that it left Laura no time to be offended. "—It was a great shock to me to find him so helpless. Is he always like that?"

"He can never get about, if that's what you mean." It was not all Hyde meant, but Laura had not the heart to repress him; she felt that thrill of guilty joy which we all feel when some one says for us what we are too magnanimous to say for ourselves. "He lies indoors all day smoking and reading quantities of novels."

"Fearfully sad. Very galling to the temper. But there are a lot of modern mechanical appliances, aren't there, that ought to make him fairly independent?"

"He won't touch any of them."

"Sick men have their whims. But can't you drag him out into the sun? He ought not to lie in that mausoleum of a hall."

"He has never been in the garden in all our years at Wanhope."

Lawrence took off his straw hat to fan himself with. It was not only the heat of the day that oppressed him. "Poor, wretched Bernard! But I dare say I should be equally mulish if I were in his shoes. By the by, was he really in pain just now?"

"Really in pain?" Laura echoed. "Why—why should you say that?" She no longer doubted Lawrence Hyde's subtlety. "He's constantly in pain and he scarcely ever complains."

"Oh? I didn't know one suffered, with paralysis."

"He has racking neuritis in his shoulders and back."

"That's bad. I'm afraid he can't be much up to entertaining visitors. Does he hate having me here?"

"No! oh no! I know he sometimes seems a little odd," said poor Laura, wishing her guest were less clear-sighted: and yet before he came she had been hoping that Lawrence would divine the less obvious aspects of the situation, and perhaps, since a man can do more with a man like Bernard than any woman can, succeed in easing it. "But can you wonder? Struck down like this at five and twenty! and he never was keen on indoor interests—sport and his profession were all he cared about. Please, Lawrence, make allowances for him—he had been looking forward so much to your coming here! A man's society always does him good, and you know how few men there are in this country: we have only the vicar, and the doctor, and Jack Bendish and people who stay at the Castle. And if you only realized how different he was with you from what he is with most people, you would be flattered! He won't let any one touch him as a rule, except Barry, whom he treats like a machine. But he was quite grateful to you—he seemed to lean on you."

"Did he?"

She had made Lawrence feel uncomfortable again in the region of the heart, but he was deliberately stifling pity, as five years ago, in a Peruvian fonda, he had subdued his filial tenderness and grief. He was not callous: if he had had the earlier cable he would have sailed for home without delay. But since Andrew Hyde was dead and would never know whether his son wept for him or not, Lawrence set himself to repress not only tears but the fount of human feeling that fed them. He had dabbled enough in psychology to know that natural emotions, if not indulged, may only be driven down under the surface, there to work havoc among the roots of nerve life. Lawrence however had no nerves and no fear of Nemesis, and no inclination to sacrifice himself for Bernard, and he determined, if Wanhope continued to inspire these oppressive sensations to send himself a telegram calling him away.

He changed the subject. "It's a long while since I've heard stockdoves cooing. And, yes, that's a nightingale. Oh, you jolly little beggar!" His face fell into boyish creases when he smiled. "Do you remember the nightingales at Farringay? Laura— may I say it?—while rusticating in Arden you haven't forgotten certain talents you used to possess. The dress is delightful, but where the masterhand appears is in the way it's worn. That carries me back to Auteull."

"Nonsense!" said Laura, changing her attitude, but not visibly displeased.

"Oh I shan't say don't move" Lawrence murmured. "The slippers also. . . . Are there many trout in this river, I wonder? Hallo! there's a big fellow rubbing along by that black stone! Must weigh a cool pound and a half. I suppose the angling rights go with the property?"

"You can fish all day long if you like: the water is ours, both sides of it, as far south as the mill above Wharton and a good half-mile upstream. The banks are kept clear on principle, though none of us ever touch a line. The Castle people come over now and then: Jack Bendish is keen, and he says our sport is better than theirs because they fish theirs down too much. Val put some stock in this spring."

"Val?"

"You seem to fit in so naturally," Laura smiled, "that I forget you've only just come. Val is Bernard's agent, and I ought not to have omitted him from our list of country neighbours, but he's like one of the family. Bernard wants you, to meet him because he was near you in the war. But I don't know that you'll have much in common: Val was very junior to you, and he's not keen on talking about it in any case. So many men have that shrinking. Have you, I wonder?"

"I'm afraid I don't take impressions easily. Didn't your friend enjoy it?"

"He had no chance. He had only six or seven weeks at the front; he was barely nineteen, poor boy, when he was invalided out. That was why Bernard offered him the agency—he was delighted to lend a helping hand to one of his old brother officers."

"Wounded?"

"Yes, he had his right arm smashed by a revolver bullet. Then rheumatic fever set in, and the trouble went to the heart, and he was very ill for a long time. I don't suppose he ever has been so strong as he was before. What made it so sad was the splendid way he had just distinguished himself," Laura continued. She gave a little sketch of the rescue of Dale, far more vivid than Val had ever given to his family. "Perhaps you can imagine what a fuss Chilmark made over its solitary hero! We're still proud of him. Val is always in request at local shows: he appears on the platform looking very shy and bored. Poor boy! I believe he sometimes wishes he had never won that embarrassing decoration."

"What's his name?"

"Val Stafford. Why—do you remember him?"

"Er—yes, I do," said Lawrence. He took out his cigar case and turned from Laura to light a cigar. "I knew a lot of the Dorchesters. . . Amiable-looking, fair boy, wasn't he?"

"Middle height, and rather sunburnt. But that description fits such dozens! However, I'm taking you up to tea there this afternoon, if the prospect doesn't bore you, so you'll be able to judge for yourself. He has a young sister who threatens to be very pretty. Are you still interested in pretty girls, M. le capitaine?"

"Immensely." Hyde lay back on one arm, smoking rather fast. "I see no immediate prospect of my being bored, thanks. Rather fun running into Stafford again after all these years! I shall love a chat over old times." He raised his black eyes, and Laura started. Was it her fancy, or a trick of the sunlight, that conjured up in them that sparkle of smiling cruelty, gone before she could fix it? "You say he doesn't care to talk about his military exploits? He always was a modest youth, I should love to see him on a recruiting platform. Wait till I get him to myself, he won't be shy with me. Did you tell him I was coming?"

"I told his sister Isabel, who probably told him. I haven't seen him since, he hasn't happened to come in; I suppose the hay harvest has kept him extra busy—Dear me! why, there he is!"

In the field across the stream a young man on horseback had come into view. Catching sight of Laura he slipped across a low boundary wall, his brown mare, a thoroughbred, changing her feet in a ladylike way on the worn stones, and trotted down to the riverbank, raising his cap.

"Coming in to lunch, Val?" Laura called across the water.

"Thank you very much, I'm afraid I shan't have time."

"But you haven't been in since Sunday!" Laura's accent was reproachful. "Why are you forsaking us? We need you more than the farm does!"

Val's pleasant laugh was the avoidance of an answer. "So sorry! But I can't come in now, Laura: I have to go over to Countisford to talk to Bishop about the new tractor, and I want to get back by teatime. Isabel tells me you're bringing Captain Hyde up to see us." He raised his cap again, smiling directly at Lawrence, who returned the salute with such gay good humour that Laura was able to dismiss that first fleeting impression from her mind. So this was Val Stafford, was it? And a very personable fellow too! Hyde had not foreseen that ten years would work as great a change in Val as in himself, or greater.

"I was going to call on you in due form, sir, but my young sister hasn't left me the chance. You haven't forgotten me, have you?"

"No, I remember you most distinctly. Delighted to meet you again."

"Thank you. The pleasure is mutual. Now I must push on or I shall be late."

"He can use his arm, then," said Lawrence, as Val rode away, jumping his mare over a fence into the road. "Shaves himself and all that, I suppose? He rides well."

"A great deal too well! and rides to hounds too, but he ought not to do it, and I'm always scolding him. He can't straighten his right arm, and has very little power in it. He was badly thrown last winter, but directly he got up he was out again on Kitty."

"Living up to his reputation." Lawrence flicked the ash from his cigar. "I should have known him anywhere by his eyes."

"He has kept very young, hasn't he? An uneventful life without much anxiety does keep people young," philosophized Laura. "I feel like a mother to him. But you'll see more of him this afternoon."

"So I shall," said Lawrence, "if he isn't detained at Countisford."

CHAPTER V

The reason why Lawrence found Isabel scrubbing Mrs. Drury's floor was that Dorrie's pretty, sluttish little mother had been whisked off to the Cottage Hospital with appendicitis an hour earlier. She was in great distress about Dorrie when Isabel, coming in with the parish magazine, offered to stay while Drury went to fetch an aunt from Winterbourne Stoke. When Drury drove up in a borrowed farm cart, Isabel without expecting or receiving many thanks dragged her bicycle to the top of the glen and pelted off across the moor. Her Sunbeam was worn and old, so old that it had a fixed wheel, but what was that to Isabel? She put her feet up and rattled down the hill, first on the turf and then on the road, in a happy reliance on her one serviceable brake.

Her father was locked in his study writing a sermon: Isabel however tumbled in by the window. She sidled up to Mr. Stafford, sat on his knee, and wound one arm round his neck. "Jim darling," she murmured in his ear, "have you any money?"

"Isabel," said Mr. Stafford, "how often have I told you that I will not be interrupted in the middle of my morning's work? You come in like a whirlwind, with holes in your stockings—"

Isabel giggled suddenly. "Never mind, darling, I'll help you with your sermon. Whereabouts are you? Oh!—I need not tell you, my friends, the story we all know so well!—Jim, that's what my tutor calls 'Redundancy and repetition.' You know quite well you're going to tell us every word of it. Darling take its little pen and cross it out—so—with its own nasty little cross-nibbed J—"

"What do you mean by saying you want money," Mr. Stafford hurriedly changed the subject, "and how much do you want? The butcher's bill came to half a sovereign this week, and I must keep five shillings to take to old Hewitt—"

"I want pounds and pounds."

"My dear!" said Mr. Stafford aghast. He took off his spectacles to polish them, and then as he put them on again, "If it's for that Appleton boy I really can't allow it. There's nothing whatever wrong with him but laziness"

"It isn't for Appleton. It's for me myself." Isabel sat up straight, a little flushed. "I'm growing up. Isn't it a nuisance? I want a new dress! I did think I could carry on till the winter, but I can't. Could you let me have enough to buy one ready-made? Chapman's have one in their window that would fit me pretty well. It's rather dear, but somehow when I make my own they never come right. And Rowsley says I look like a scarecrow, and even Val's been telling me to put my hair up!"

"Put your hair up, my child? Why, how old are you? I don't like little girls to be in a hurry to turn into big ones"

"I'm not a little girl," said Isabel shortly. "I'm nineteen."

"Nineteen? no, surely not!"

"Twenty next December."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Stafford, quite overcome. "How time flies!" He set her down from his knee and went to his cash box. "If Val tells you to put your hair up, no doubt you had better do it." He paused. "I don't know whether Val said you ought to have a new frock, though? I can't bear spending money on fripperies when even in our own parish so many people—" Some glimmering perception reached him of the repressed anguish in Isabel's eyes. "But of course you must have what you need. How much is it?"

"1. 11. 6."

"Oh, my dear! That seems a great deal."

"It isn't really much for a best dress," said poor Isabel.

"But you mustn't be extravagant, darling," said Mr. Stafford tenderly. "I see other girls running about in little cotton dresses or bits of muslin or what not that look very nice—much nicer on a young girl than 'silks and fine array.' Last time Yvonne came to tea she wore a little frock as simple as a child's"

"She did," said Isabel. "She picked it up in a French sale. It was very cheap—only 275 francs."

"Eleven pounds!" Mr. Stafford held up his hands. "My dear, are you sure?"

"Quite," said Isabel. Mr. Stafford sighed. "I must speak to Yvonne. 'How hardly shall they...'" He took a note out of his cash box. "Can't you make that do—?" he was beginning when a qualm of compunction came upon him. After all it was a long time since he had given Isabel any money for herself, and there must be many little odds and ends about a young girl's clothing that an elderly man wouldn't

understand. He took out a second note and pressed them both hurriedly into Isabel's palm. "There! now run off and don't ask me for another penny for the next twelvemonth!" he exclaimed, beaming over his generosity though more than half ashamed of it. "You extravagant puss, you! dear, dear, who'd have a daughter?"

Isabel gave him a rather hasty though warm embrace (she was terribly afraid that his conscience would prick him and that he would take the second note away again), and flew out of the window faster than she had come in. The clock was striking a quarter past one, and she had to scamper down to Chapman's to buy the dress, and a length of lilac ribbon for a sash, and a packet of bronze hairpins, and be back in time to lay the cloth for two o'clock lunch. If it is only for idle hands that Satan finds mischief, he could not have had much satisfaction out of Isabel Stafford.

Soon after four Mrs. Clowes stepped from her car, shook out her soft flounces, and led the way across the lawn, Lawrence Hyde in attendance. The vicarage was an old-fashioned house too large for the living, its long front, dotted with rosebushes, rising up honey-coloured against the clear green of a beech grove. There are grand houses that one sees at once will never be comfortable, and there are unpretentious houses that promise to be cool in summer and warm in winter and restful all the year round: of such was Chilmark vicarage, sunning itself in the afternoon clearness, while faded green sunblinds filled the interior with verdant shadow, and the smell of sweetbrier and Japanese honeysuckle breathed round the rough-cast walls.

Isabel had laid tea on the lawn, and Mrs. Clowes smiled to herself when she saw seven worn deck chairs drawn up round the table; she was always secretly amused at Isabel in her character of hostess, at the naive natural confidence with which the young lady scattered invitations and dispensed hospitality. But when Isabel came forward Laura's covert smile passed into irrepressible surprise. She raised her eyebrows at Isabel, who replied by an almost imperceptible but triumphant nod. In her white and mauve embroidered muslin, her dark hair accurately parted at the side of her head and drawn back into what she called a soup plate of plaits, Isabel no longer threatened to be pretty. Impelled by that singularly pure benevolence which a woman who has ceased to hope for happiness feels for the eager innocence of youth, Laura drew her close and kissed her. "My sweet, I'm so glad," she whispered. A bright blush was Isabel's only answer. Then Mrs. Clowes stepped back and indicated her cavalier, very big and handsome in white clothes and a Panama hat: "May I introduce— Captain Hyde, Miss Stafford," with a delicate formality which thrilled Isabel to her finger-tips. Let him see if he would call her a little girl now!

Lawrence recognized Isabel at a glance, but he was not abashed. He scarcely gave her a second thought till he had satisfied himself that Val Stafford was not present. Lawrence smiled, not at all surprised: he had had a presentiment that Val, the modest easy-going Val of his recollections, would be detained at Countisford: too modest by half, if he was shy of meeting an old friend! Rowsley Stafford was doing the honours and came forward to be introduced to Lawrence, a ceremony remarkable only because they both took an instantaneous dislike to each other. Lawrence disliked Rowsley because he was young and well-meaning and the child of a parsonage, and Rowsley disliked Lawrence because a manner which owed some of its serenity to his physical advantages, and his tailor, and his income, irritated the susceptibilities of the poor man's son.

Poor men's sons were often annoyed by Lawrence Hyde's manner. Not so Jack Bendish, sprawling in a deck chair which had no sound pair of notches: not so his wife, Laura's sister, Yvonne of the Castle, curled up on a moth-eaten tigerskin rug, and clad in raiment of brown and silver which even Mr. Stafford would not have credited to Chapman's General Drapery and Grocery Stores. Isabel was innocently surprised when the Bendishes found they had met Captain Hyde in town. Laura's smile was very faintly tinged with bitterness: she knew of that small world where every one meets every one, though she had been barred out of it most of her life, first by her disreputable father and then by the tragedy of her marriage: Rowsley pulled his tooth-brush moustache and said nothing. He was young, but not so young as Isabel, and there were moments when he felt his own footing at the Castle to be vaguely anomalous.

However, the talk ran easily. Lawrence, as was inevitable, sat down by Yvonne Bendish: she did not raise an eyelash to summon him, but it seemed to be a natural law that the rich unmarried man should sit beside her and talk cosmopolitan scandal, and show a discreet appreciation of her clothing and her eyes. Meanwhile the other four conversed with much greater simplicity upon such homely subjects as the coming school treat and the way Isabel had done her hair, Rowsley's regimental doings, and a recent turn-up between Jack Bendish as deputy M. F. H. and Mr. Morley the Jew.

Bernard Clowes had described Mrs. Jack Bendish as a plain little devil, but as a rule the devilry was more conspicuous than the plainness. She was a tall and extremely slight woman, her features insignificant and her complexion sallow, but her figure indecorously beautiful under its close French

draperies. And yet if she had let Lawrence alone he would have gone over to the other camp. How they laughed, three out of the four of them, and what marvellous good tea they put away! The little Stafford girl had a particularly infectious laugh, a real child's giggle which doubled her up in her chair. Lawrence had no desire to join in the school treat and barnyard conversation, but he would have liked to sit and listen.

"If no one will have any more tea," said Isabel, jumping up and shaking the crumbs out of her lap, "will you all come and eat strawberries?"

"Isn't Val coming in?" asked Laura.

"Not till after five. He said we weren't to wait for him: he was delayed in getting off. He sent his love to you, Laura, and he was very sorry."

"His love!" said Yvonne Bendish.

"My dear Isabel, I'm sure he didn't," said Laura laughing.

"Kind regards then," said Isabel: "not that it signifies, because we all do love you, darling. Val's always telling me that if I want to be a lady when I grow up I must model my manners on yours. Not yours, Yvonne."

"After that the least I can do is to wait and give him his tea when he does appear," said Laura. "It's very hot among the strawberry beds, and I'm a little tired: and I haven't seen Val for days."

"No more have I," said Yvonne in her odd drawl, "and I'm tired too." Mrs. Jack Bendish was made of whipcord: she had been brought up to ride Irish horses over Irish fences and to dance all night, after tramping the moors all day with a gun. "I'll stay with you and rest. Jack, you run on. Bring me some big ones in a cabbage leaf. And, Captain Hyde, you'll find them excellent with bread and butter." By which Lawrence perceived that his interest in the other camp had not gone unobserved, and that was the worst of Yvonne: but—and that was the best of Yvonne: there was no tinge of spite in her jeering eyes.

So the sisters remained on the lawn, and Jack Bendish, a perfectly simple young man, walked off with Rowsley to pick a cabbage leaf. Isabel was demureness itself as she followed with Captain Hyde. The embroidered muslin gave her courage, more courage perhaps than if she could have heard his frank opinion of it. "The trailing skirt of the young girl," said Miss Stafford to herself, "made a gentle frou-frou as she swept over the velvet lawn." A *quoi revent les jeunes filles*? Very innocent was the vanity of Isabel's dreams. She was not strictly pretty, but she was young and fresh, and the spotless muslin fell in graceful folds round her tall, lissome figure. To the jaded man of the world at her side Alas for Isabel! The jaded man of the world was a trifle bored: he was easily bored. He liked listening to Miss Stafford's artless merriment but he had no desire to share in it; what had he to say to a promoted schoolgirl in her Sunday best?

He began politely making conversation. "What a pretty place this is!" It seemed wiser not to refer even by way of apology to the indiscretion of the morning. "You have a beautiful view over the Plain. Rather dreary in winter though, isn't it?"

"I like it best then," said Isabel briefly. "Don't you want any strawberries?" She indicated the netted furrows among which little could be seen of Rowsley and Jack Bendish except their stern ends.

"No, thanks, I had too much tea." Isabel checked herself on the brink of reminding him that he had eaten only two cucumber sandwiches and a macaroon. In Lawrence Hyde's society her conversation had not its usual happy flow, she felt tonguetied and missish. "How close you are to the Downs here!" They were following a flagged path between espalier pear trees, and beds of broccoli and carrots and onions, and borders full of old standard roses and lavender and sweet herbs and tall lilies; at the end appeared a wishing gate in a low stone wall, and beyond it, pathless and sunshiny, the southern stretches of the Plain. "Are you a great gardener, Miss Isabel?"

"Some," said Isabel. "I look after my pet vegetables. The flowers have to look after themselves. My father has eruptions of industry." She overflowed into a little laugh. "We don't encourage him in it. He had a bad attack of weeding last spring, and pulled up all my little salads by mistake." Now that small tale, she reflected, would have tickled Jack Bendish, but Captain Hyde, though he smiled at it dutifully, did not seem to be amused.

"Oh bother you!" Isabel apostrophised him mentally. "You're not the grandson of a duke anyhow. I expect you would be nicer if you were."

She folded her arms on the gate and gazed across the Plain. The village below was not far off, but

they could see nothing of it, buried as it was in the river-valley and behind a green arras of beech leaves: in every other direction, far as the eye could see, leagues of feathery pale grass besprinkled with blue and yellow flowers went away in ribbed undulations, occasionally rolling up into a crest on which a company of fir trees hung like men on march. The sun was pale and smudged, the sky veiled: on its silken pallor floated, here and there, a blot of dark low cloud, and the clear distances presaged rain.

"May I—?" Lawrence took out his cigarettes. Isabel gave a grudging assent. She could not understand how any one could be willing to taint the sweet summering air that had blown over so many leagues of grass and flowers. "Dare I offer you one?" Lawrence asked, tendering his case. It was of gold, and bore his monogram in diamonds. Isabel eyed it scornfully. Jack Bendish's was only silver and much scratched and dented into the bargain. Now Jack Bendish was the grandson of a duke.

"No thank you," said Miss Stafford. "I detest smoking."

To this Lawrence made no reply at all, no doubt, thought Isabel, because he did not consider it worth one. She was proportionally surprised and a trifle flattered when he replaced the cigarette to which he had just helped himself. "The young girl had not realized her own power. She was only just coming into her woman's kingdom. Her heart beat faster and a vermilion blush dyed her pale cheek." Isabel's favourite authors were Stevenson and Mr. Kipling, but her mental rubric insisted on clothing itself in the softer style of Molly Bawn.

"I don't detest other people's smoking," she explained in a rather penitent tone.

"Let's get out on the downs," said Lawrence. He swung the gate to and fro for her, then took off his hat and strolled slowly by her side through the rustling grass. "Really," he said, more to himself than to her, "there are places in England that are very well worth while."

"Worth while what?"

"Er—worth coming to see. I suppose there isn't much shooting to be had except rabbits." He swung an imaginary gun to his shoulder and sighted it at a quarry which seemed to Isabel to be equally imaginary. "See him? Under that heap of stones left of the beech ring." Isabel's vision was both keen and practised, but she saw nothing till the rabbit showed his white scut in a flickering leap to earth.

"You have jolly good eyes," she conceded, still rather grudgingly.

"So have bunnies, unluckily. Major Clowes tells me there's pretty good shooting over Wanhope. I suppose your brother looks after it, for of course Clowes can do nothing. It was a great stroke of luck for my cousin, getting hold of a fellow like Val."

"I don't know about that. It was a great stroke of luck for Val."

"I want so much to meet him. I'm disappointed at missing him this afternoon. I remember him perfectly in the army, though he was only a boy then and I wasn't much more myself. He must be close on thirty now. But when I met him this morning it struck me he hadn't altered much." Isabel, looking up eager-eyed, felt faintly and mysteriously chilled. Was there a point of cruelty in Hyde's smile? as there was now and then in his cousin's: she had seen Bernard Clowes watching his wife with the same secret glow.

"Val is old for his age," she said. "He always seems much older than my other brother, although there are only two or three years between them."

"Probably his spell in the army aged him. It must have been a formative experience."

This time Isabel had no doubt about it, there was certainly a touch of cruel irony in Hyde's soft voice. Her breath came fast. "Why do you say that?": she cried—"say it like that?"

The smile faded: Lawrence turned, startled out of his self-possession. "Like what?"

"As if you we're sneering at Val!"

"I?— My dear Miss Isabel, aren't you a little fanciful?"

Isabel supposed so too, on second thoughts: how could any man sneer at a record like Val's: unless indeed it were with that peculiarly graceless sneer which springs from jealousy? And, little as she liked Captain Hyde, she could not think him weak enough for that. She blushed again, this time without any

rubric, and hung her head. "I'm sorry! But you did say it as if you didn't mean it. Perhaps you think we make too much fuss over Val? But in these sleepy country villages exciting things don't happen every day. I dare say you've had scores of adventures since that time you met Val. But Chilmark hasn't had any. That makes us remember."

"My dear child," said Lawrence with an earnest gentleness foreign to his ordinary manner, "you misunderstood me altogether. I liked your brother very much. Remember, I was there when he won his decoration—" He broke off. An intensely visual memory had flashed over him. Now he knew of whom Isabel had reminded him that morning: she had her brother's eyes.

"At the very time? Were you really? Do, do, do tell me about it! Major Clowes never will—he pretends he can't remember."

"Has Val never told you?"

"Hardly any more than was in the official account—that he was left between the lines after one of our raids, and went back in spite of his wound to bring in Mr. Dale. He had to wait till after dark?" Lawrence nodded. "And 'under particularly trying conditions.' Why was that?"

"Because Dale was so close to the German lines. He was entangled in their wire."

Isabel shuddered. "It seems so long ago. One can't understand why such cruelties were ever allowed. Of course they will never be again." This naive voice of the younger generation made Lawrence smile. "And Val had to cut their wire?"

"To peel it off Dale, or peel Dale off it—what was left of him. He didn't live more than twenty minutes after he was brought in."

"Did you know Dale?"

"Not well: he was in my cousin's company, not in mine."

"And was Val under fire at the time?"

"Under heavy fire. The Boches were sending up starshells that made the place as light as day."

"I can't understand how Val could do it with his broken arm."

"His arm wasn't broken when he cut their wires."

"Oh! When was it then?"

Hyde flicked with his stick at the airy heads of grass that rose up thin-sown out of a burnished carpet of lady's slipper. His manner was even but his face was dark. "He had it splintered by a revolver—shot on his way home, near our lines."

"Oh! But the Army doctors said the shot must have been fired at close quarters?"

"There, you see I'm not much of an authority, am I? No doubt, if they said so, they were right. The fact is I was knocked out myself that afternoon with a rifle bullet in the ribs. It was a hot corner for the Wintons and Dorsets."

"Were you? I'm sorry." Isabel ran her eyes with a touch of whimsical solicitude over Hyde's tall easy figure and the exquisite keeping of his white clothes. Difficult to connect him with the bloody disarray of war! "Were you too left lying between the lines?"

"With a good many others, English and German."

"There was a fellow near me that hadn't a scratch. He was frightened—mad with fear: he lay up in the long grass and wept most of the day. I never hated any one so much in my life. I could have shot him with pleasure."

"German, of course?"

Hyde smiled. "German, of course."

"If he had been English he would have deserved to be shot," said Isabel briefly: then, reverting to a subject in which she was far more deeply interested, "Rowsley—my second brother—said I wasn't to cross-examine you: but it was a great temptation, because one never can get anything out of Val. And after all we've the right to be proud of him! Even then, when every one was so brave, you would say, wouldn't you, that Val earned his distinction? It really was what the Gazette called it, 'conspicuous

gallantry'?"

"It was a daring piece of work," said Lawrence, reddening to his hair. He fought down a sensation so unfamiliar that he could scarcely put a name to it, and forced himself on: "We were all proud of him and we none of us forget it. Don't tell him I said so, though. It isn't etiquette. You won't think I'm trying to minimize what Val did, will you, if I say that we who were through the fighting saw so many horrible and ghastly things . . ." Again his voice failed. He was aware of Isabel's bewilderment, but he was seeing more ghosts than he had seen in all the intervening years of peace, and they came between him and the sunlit landscape and Isabel's young eyes. War! always war! human bodies torn to rags in a moment, and the flowers of the field wet with a darker moisture than rain: the very smell of the trenches was in his nostrils, their odour of blood and decay. What in heaven's name had brought it all back, and, stranger still, what had moved him to speak of it and to betray feelings whose very existence was unknown to him and which he had never betrayed before?

The silence was brief though to Lawrence it seemed endless. He drove the ghosts back to quarters and finished quietly: "Well, we won't talk about that, it's not a pleasant subject. Only give Val my love and tell him if he doesn't look me up soon I shall come and call on him. We're much too old friends to stand on ceremony."

"All right, I will," said Isabel.

There was a shrub of juniper close by, and she felt under its sharp branches. "Do you like honeysuckle?" She held up a fresh sprig fragrant with its pale horns, which she had tracked to covert by its scent. Lawrence was not given to wearing buttonholes, but he understood the friendly and apologetic intention and inclined his broad shoulder for Miss Stafford to pass the stem through the lapel of his coat. Isabel had not intended to pin it in for him, but she was generally willing to do what was expected of her. She took a pin from her own dress (there were plenty in it), and fastened the flower deftly on the breast of Captain Hyde's white jacket.

And so standing before him, her head bent over her task, she unwittingly left Lawrence free to observe the texture of her skin, bloomed over with down like a peach, and the curves of her young shoulders, a little inclined to stoop, as young backs often are in the strain of growth, but so firm, so fresh, so white under the thin stuff of her bodice: below her silken plaits, on the nape of her neck, a curl or two of hair grew in close rings, so fine that it was almost indistinguishable from its own shadow. Swiftly, without warning, Lawrence was aware of a pleasurable commotion in his veins, a thrill that shook through him like a burst of gay music. This experience was not novel, he had felt it three or four times before in his life, and on the spot, while it was sending gentle electric currents to his finger-tips, he was able to analyse its origin—item, to warm weather and laziness after the strain of his Chinese journey, so much: item, to Isabel's promise of beauty, so much: item, to the disparity between her age and his own, to her ignorance and immaturity, the bloom on the untouched fruit, so much more. But there was this difference between the present and previous occasions when he had fallen or thought of falling in love, that he desired no victory: no, it was he and not Isabel who was to capitulate, leaning his forehead upon her young hand. . . . And he had never seen her till that morning, and the child was nineteen, the daughter of a country vicarage, brought up to wear calico and to say her prayers! more, she was Val Stafford's sister, and she loved her brother. Lawrence gave himself a gentle shake. At six and thirty it is time to put away childish things. "Thank you very much. Is that Mrs. Clowes calling us?"

It was Laura Clowes and Yvonne Bendish, and Lawrence, as he strolled back with Isabel to the garden gate, had an uneasy suspicion that the episode of the honeysuckle had been overseen. Laura was graver than usual, while Yvonne had a sardonic spark in her eye. "I'm afraid it's no use waiting any longer, Isabel," said Laura.

"What do you think, Lawrence? It's after six o'clock."

"Hasn't Val come?" said Isabel.

"No, he must have been kept at Countisford. It's a long ride for him on such a hot day. Perhaps Mrs. Bishop made him stay to tea."

"As if he would stay with any old Mrs. Bishop when he knew you were coming here!" said Isabel scornfully. "Poor old Val, I shan't tell him how you misjudged him, he'd be so hurt. But I'll send him down, shall I, to see you and Captain Hyde after supper?—Tired? Oh no, he's never too tired to go to Wanhope."

She kissed Laura, gave Lawrence her sweetest friendly smile, and returned to the lawn, where Yvonne had apparently taken root upon her tigerskin. Isabel heard Rowsley say, "Make her shut up, Jack," but before she could ask why Yvonne was to be shut up the daughter of Lilith had opened fire on

the daughter of Eve. "And what did you think of Lawrence Hyde?" Mrs. Bendish asked, stretching herself out like a snake and examining Isabel out of her pale eyes, much the colour of an unripe gooseberry. "Was he very attractive? Oh Isabel! oh Isabel! I should not have thought this of one so young."

Isabel considered the point. "I can't understand him," she said honestly. "I liked parts of him. He isn't so—so homogeneous as most people are."

"Did he ask you for the honeysuckle?"

"No, I gave it to him for a peace offering. I hurt his feelings, and afterwards I was sorry and wanted to make it up with him. But would you have thought he had any feelings? any, that is, that anything I said would hurt?"

"Certainly not," from Rowsley.

"Any woman can hurt any man," said Yvonne. "But, of course, you aren't a woman, Isabel. What was the trouble?"

"Oh, something about the war."

"No, my child, it wasn't about the war. It was something that stung up his vanity or his self-love. Lawrence isn't a sentimentalist like Jack or Val." Here Jack Bendish got as far as an artless "Oh, I say!" but his wife paid no attention. "Lawrence never took the war seriously."

"But he did," insisted Isabel. "He coloured all over his face—"

She paused, realizing that Mrs. Bendish, under her mask of scepticism, was agog with curiosity. Isabel was not fond of being drawn out. Lawrence had given her his confidence, and she valued it, for with all her ignorance of society she had seen too much of plain human nature to suppose that he was often taken off his guard as he had been by her: and was she going to expose him to Yvonne's lacerating raillery? A thousand times no! "I misunderstood something he said about Val," she continued with scarcely a break, and falling back on one of those explanations that deceive the sceptical by their economy of truth. "It was stupid of me, and awkward for him, so I had to apologize."

"I see. Come, Jack." Yvonne rose to her feet, more like a snake than ever in her flexibility and swiftness, and held Isabel to her for a moment, her arm round her young friend's waist. "But if you pin any more buttonholes into Captain Hyde's coat," the last low murmur was only for Isabel's ear, "he will infallibly kiss you: so now you are forewarned and can choose whether or no you will continue to pay him these little attentions."

Isabel was not disturbed. She had early formed the habit of not attending to Mrs. Bendish, and she unwound herself without even changing colour.

"You always remind me of Nettie Hills at the Clowes's lodge," she retorted. "Mrs. Hills says she's that flighty in the way she carries on, no one would believe what a good sensible girl she is under all her nonsense, and walks out with her own young man as regular as clockwork."

CHAPTER VI

And that evening Val Stafford came to pay his respects to his old comrade in arms. Lawrence had travelled so much that it never took him long to settle down. Even at Wanhope he managed within a few hours to make himself at home. A trap sent over to Countisford brought back his manservant and an effeminate quantity of luggage, and by teatime his room was strewn from end to end with a litter of expensive trifles more proper to a pretty woman than to a man. Mrs. Clowes, slipping in to cast a housewifely glance to his comfort, held up her hands in mock dismay. "You must give yourself plenty of time to dust all this tomorrow morning, Caroline," she said to the house-maid. She laughed at the gold brushes and gold manicure set, the polished array of boots, the fine silk and linen laid out on his bed, the perfume of sandalwood and Russian leather and eau de cologne. "And I hope you will be able to make Captain Hyde's valet comfortable. Did he say whether he liked his room?"

"I reelly don't know, ma'am," replied the truthful Caroline. "You see he's a foreigner, and most of what he says, well, it reelly sounds like swearing."

"Madame." It was Gaston himself, appearing from nowhere at Laura's elbow, and saluting her with an emprossement that was due, if Laura had only known it, to the harmony of her flounces. Laura eyed the little Gaston kindly. "You are of the South, are you not?" she said in her soft French, the French of a Frenchwoman but for a slight stiffness of disuse: "and are you comfortable here, Gaston? You must tell me if there is anything you want."

Gaston was grateful less for her solicitude than for the sound of his own language. When she had left the room he caught up a photograph, thrust it back into his master's dressingcase, and spat through the open window—"C'est fini avec toi, vieille biche," said he: "allons donc! j'aime mieux celle-ci par exemple."

But, though Laura laughed, it was with indulgence. While Isabel and Lawrence were conversing among the juniper bushes, the Bendishes had given Mrs. Clowes a sketch of Hyde which had confirmed her own impressions. Although he liked good food and wine and cigars, he liked sport and travel too, and music and painting and books. His eighty-guinea breechloaders were dearer to him than the lady of the ivory frame. Who was the lady of the ivory frame? Gaston would have been happy to define with the leer of the boulevards the relations between his master and Philippa Cleve. Gaston had no doubt of them, nor had Frederick Cleve; Philippa had high hopes; Lawrence alone hung fire. If he continued to meet her and she to offer him lavish opportunities the situation might develop, for Lawrence was not sufficiently in earnest in any direction to play what has been called the ill-favoured part of a Joseph, but in his heart of hearts, this Joseph wished Potiphar would keep his wife in order. And, strange to say, Yvonne was not far wide of the mark. She believed that Joseph was a sinner but not a willing one: and Jack Bendish, a little astray among these feminine subtleties, assented after his fashion—"Hyde's rather an ass in some ways," he said simply, "but he's an all-round sportsman."

Thus primed, Laura was able to draw out her guest, and dinner passed off gaily, for Bernard Clowes was no dog in the manger, and listened with sparkling eyes to adventures that ranged from Atlantic sailing in a thirty-ton yacht to a Nigerian rhinoceros shoot. Nor was Lawrence the focus of the lime-light—he was unaffectedly modest; but when, in expatiating on a favourite rifle, he confessed to having held fire till a charging rhinoceros bull was within eight and twenty yards of him, Bernard could supply the footnotes for himself. "I knew she wouldn't let me down," said Lawrence apologetically. "Ah! she was a bonnie thing, that old gun of mine. Ever shoot with a cordite rifle?" Bernard shook his head. "I'd like you to see my guns," Lawrence continued, too shrewd to be tactful. "I'll have them sent down, shall I? Or Gaston shall run up and fetch 'em. He loves a day in town."

Under this bracing treatment Bernard became more natural than Laura had seen him for a long time, and he stayed in the drawingroom after dinner, chatting with Lawrence and listening to his wife at the piano, till Laura thought the Golden Age had come again. How long would it last? Philosophers like Laura never ask that question. At all events it lasted till half past nine, when the sick man was honestly tired and the lines of no fictitious pain were drawn deep about his mouth and eyes.

Mrs. Clowes went away with her husband, who liked to have her at hand while Barry was getting him to bed, and Lawrence had strolled out on the lawn, when a shutter was thrown down in Bernard's room and Laura reappeared at the open window. "Lawrence, are you there?" she asked, shading her eyes between her hands.

"Here," said Lawrence removing his cigar.

"Will you be so very kind as to unlock the gate over the footbridge? If Val does look us up tonight he's sure to scramble over it, which is awkward for him with his stiff arm."

She dropped a key down to Lawrence. A voice—Bernard's called from within, "Good night, old fellow, thanks for a pleasant evening. I'm being washed now."

The night was overcast, warm, quiet, and very dark under the trees: there was husbandry in heaven, their candles were all out. And by the bridge under the pleated and tasselled branches of an alder coppice the river ran quiet as the night, only uttering an occasional murmur or a deep sucking gurgle when a rotten stick, framed in foam, span down the silken whirl of an eddy: but down-stream, where waifs of mist curled like smoke off a grey mirror, there was a continual talking of open water, small cold river voices that chattered over a pebbly channel, or heaped themselves up and died down again in the harsh distant murmur of the weir. The quantity of water that passed through the lock gates should have been constant from minute to minute, but the roar of it was not constant, nor the pitch of its note, which fell when Lawrence stood erect, but rose to a shrill overtone when he bent his head: sometimes one would have thought the river was going down in spate, and then the volume of sound dwindled to a mere thread, a lisp in the air. Lawrence was observing these phenomena with a mind vacant of thought when he heard footsteps brushing through the grass by the field path from the village. Val had come, then, after all!

Val had naturally no idea that any one was near him. He had reached the gate and was preparing to vault it when out of the dense alder-shadow a hand seized his arm. "So sorry if I startled you." But Val was not visibly startled. "Mrs. Clowes sent me, down to let you in."

"Did she? Very good of her, and of you," returned Val's voice, pleasant and friendly. "She always expects me to walk into the river. But, after all, I shouldn't be drowned if I did. Is Clowes gone to bed?"

"He's on his way there. Did you want to see him?"

"I'll look in for five minutes after Barry has tucked him up. Have you been introduced to Barry yet? He's quite a character."

"So I should imagine. He came in to cart Bernard off, and did something clumsy, or Bernard said he did, and Bernard cuffed his head for him. Barry didn't seem to mind much. Why does he stay? Is it devotion?"

"He stays because your cousin pays him twice what he would get anywhere else. No, I shouldn't call Barry devoted. But he does his work well, and it isn't anybody's job."

"I believe you," Lawrence muttered.

"Warm tonight, isn't it? No, thanks, I won't have anything to drink— I've only just finished supper. By the by, let me apologize for my absence this afternoon. I was most awfully sorry to miss you, but I never got away from Countisford till after half past five, and my mare cast a shoe on the way back. Then I tried to get her shod in Liddiard St. Agnes, which is one of those idyllic villages that people write books about, and there I found an Odd-fellows' fete in full swing. The village blacksmith was altogether too harmonious for business, so not being able to cuff his head, like your cousin, I was obliged to walk home.

"Really'? Have a cigar if you won't have anything else." Val accepted one, and in default of a match Lawrence made him light it from his own. He was entirely at his ease, though the situation struck him as bizarre, but he did not believe that Val was at ease, no, not for all his natural manner and fertility in commonplace. Lawrence was faintly sorry for the poor devil, but only faintly: after all, an awkward interview once in ten years was a low price to pay for that night which Lawrence never had forgotten and never would forget. He had an excellent memory, photographic and phonographic, a gift that wise men covet for themselves but deprecate in their friends.

Lawrence was no Pharisee, but he was not a Samaritan either. He had deliberately set himself to pull up any stray weeds of moral scruple that lingered in a mind stripped bare of Christian ethic, a task harder than some realize, since thousands of men who have no faith in Christ practise virtues that were not known for virtues by the Western world before Christ came to it. But every man is his own special pleader, and Lawrence, whose theory was that one man is as good as another, retained a good hearty prejudice against certain forms of moral failure, and excused it on the ground that it was rather a taste than a principle. He looked directly into Stafford's eyes as the red glow of the cigar flamed and faded between the two heads so close together, and in his own eyes there was the same point of smiling ironic cruelty that Isabel had read in them—the same as Stafford himself had read in them not so many years ago. But apparently Stafford read nothing in them now.

"Sit down, won't you? you've had a fagging day." Lawrence indicated the chairs left on the lawn. "Hear me beginning to play the host! As a matter of fact, you must know your way about the place far better than I do. Although we're cousins, Bernard and I have seen next to nothing of each other since we were boys at school. You, Val, must know him better than any one except his wife. I want you to tell me about him. I'm in dangerous country and I need a map."

"I should be inclined to vary the metaphor a little and call him an uncharted sea," Val smiled as he threw one leg over the other and settled himself among his cushions. He was dead tired, having been up since six in the morning and on his feet or in the saddle all day. "But I'm at your service, subject always to the proviso that I'm Bernard's agent, which makes my position rather delicate. What is it you want to know?"

Since it was whether Clowes behaved decently to his wife, Lawrence shifted in his chair and flicked the ash from his cigar. "Imprimis, whether Bernard has a trout rod I can borrow. I didn't know there was any fishing to be had or I'd have brought my own."

"You can have mine: I scarcely ever touch a line now. Certainly not in hay-harvest! I'll send it down for you the first thing—" Was it possible that he was as insouciant as he professed to be?

"Oh, thanks very much," Hyde cut in swiftly, but I couldn't borrow yours. I'll find out if Clowes can't

lend me one."

"As you please." Stafford left it at that and passed on. "But I don't fancy Bernard has ever thrown a line in his life, he is too energetic to make a fisherman. By the way, I suppose you won't be staying any length of time at Wanhope?"

Lawrence smiled, the wish was father to the thought: that was more like the Val of old times!

"That depends—mainly on my cousin, to be frank: I suspect he'll soon get sick of having a third person in the house."

"Oh, probably. But you needn't take any notice of that." Lawrence looked up in surprise. "But, perhaps, that is none of my business. Or will you let me give you one warning, since you've asked for a map? Don't be too prompt to take Bernard at his word. He may be very rude to you and yet not want you to go. He sacks Barry every few weeks. In fact now I come to think of it I'm under notice myself, for last time I saw him he told me to look out for another job. He said what he wanted was a practical man who knew a little about farming."

"And you stay on? Quite right, if it suits your book." Unconsciously putting the worst construction on everything Val said or did, Lawrence's conclusion was that probably Val, an amateur farmer, was paid, like Barry, twice what he was worth in the market. "But it wouldn't suit mine. However, I don't imagine Bernard will try it on with me. I'm not Barry. If he hits me I shall hit him back."

"Oh, will you?" returned Val, invisibly amused. "I'm not sure that wouldn't be a good plan. It has at least the merit of originality. All the same I'm afraid Mrs. Clowes wouldn't like it, she is a standing obstacle in the way of drastic measures."

"But why do you want me to stay?" Lawrence asked more and more surprised.

"Well, here is what brought me up tonight, when I knew Bernard would be on his way to bed. Will you—" he leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees—"stick it out, whatever happens, for a week or two, and keep your eyes open? Life at Wanhope isn't all plain sailing."

"Plain sailing for Bernard?"

"Or for his wife."

"You speak as the friend of the house who sees both sides?"

"They're forced on me."

"I'll stay as long as I'm comfortable," said Lawrence, cynically frank. "More I can't promise."

Val leant back with an imperceptible shrug. He was disappointed but not surprised: there was in Hyde a vein of hard selfishness— not a weakness, for the egoism which openly says "I will consult my own convenience first" is too scornful of public opinion to be called weak, but an acquired defensive quality on which argument would have been thrown away. Val's arm dropped inert, he was tired, not in body alone, but by the strain of contact with another mind, hostile, and pitiless, and dominant.

And Lawrence also was content to sit silent, lulled by the rising and falling murmur of the stream, and by that agreeably cruel memory. . . . He had no inclination to recall it to Val, but it lent an emotional piquancy to their intercourse. He had the whip hand of Val through the past, and perhaps the present also. Lawrence had been struck by Val's allusion to Mrs. Clowes. He was the friend of the house, was he? Now the position of a friend of the house who shields a wife from her husband is notoriously a delicate one.

Val roused himself. "Well, we'll drop this. I must now say two words on a different subject: I'd rather let it alone, and so I dare say would you, but we shall meet a good deal off and on while you're here, and it had better be got over. I'm sorry if I embarrass you—"

"Set your mind at rest," said Lawrence, silkenly brutal. "You don't embarrass me at all."

He threw away his cigar and got up laughing, and as Val also rose Lawrence gently slapped him on the back. "I know what you're driving at—that you've not forgotten that small indiscretion of yours, or ceased to regret it. Don't you worry, Val! You always were one of the worrying sort, weren't you? But you need never refer to it again, and I won't if you don't." Surely a generous, a handsome offer! But Stafford only touched with the tips of his fingers the ringed and manicured hand of the elder man.

"Thank you! But I wasn't going to say anything of the sort. The fact is that for a long while I've been making up my mind to see you some time when you were in England: there was no hurry, because so

long as my father's alive I can do nothing, but when I heard you were coming to Wanhope the opportunity was too good to be missed. Railway fares," Val added with a preoccupied smile, "are a consideration to me. So don't walk away yet, Hyde, please. I have such a vivid recollection of the last time we met. Between the lines at dawn. Do you remember?"

"Everything, Val."

"You were badly hurt, but before you fainted you dragged a promise out of me."

"Dragged it out of you?" Lawrence repeated: "that's one way of putting it!"

"But I made some feeble resistance at the time," said Val mildly. "My head wasn't clear then or for a long while after, but I had a—a presentiment that it was a mistake. You meant it kindly." Had he? Lawrence laughed. He had never been able, to analyse the complex of instincts and passions that had determined his dealings with Stafford on that dim day between the lines.

"You were in a damned funk weren't you, Val?"

Stafford gave a slight start, the reaction of the prisoner under a blow. But apart from the coarse cynicism of it, which irritated him, it was no more than he had foreseen, and from then on till the end he did not flinch.

"Yes, anything you like: you can't overstate it. But my point is that I gave you my parole. Will you release me from it?"

"Good God!" said Lawrence.

He had never been more surprised in his life. "Come in: let us talk this over in the light."

CHAPTER VII

Through the open windows of the drawingroom, where candlesticks of twisted silver glimmered among Laura's old, silvery brocades, and dim mirrors, and branches of pink and white rosebuds blooming deliciously in rose-coloured Dubarry jars, the two men came in together, Lawrence keenly on the watch. But observation was wasted on Stafford who had nothing to conceal, who was merely what he appeared to be, a faded and tired-looking man of middle height, with blue eyes and brown hair turning grey, and wellworn evening clothes a trifle rubbed at the cuffs. It was difficult to connect this gentle and unassuming person with the fiery memory of the war, and Lawrence without apology took hold of Stafford's arm like a surgeon and tried to flex the rigid elbow-muscles, and to distinguish with his fingers used to handling wounds the hard seams and hollows below its shrunken joint. The action, which was overbearing was by no means redeemed by the intention, which was brutal.

"Surely after all these years you don't propose to confess, Val?"

"I should like to make some sort of amends."

"Too late: these things can never be undone."

"No, of course not. Undone? no, nothing once done can be undone."

"But one needn't follow a wrong path to the bitter end. You made me give you that promise for the sake of discipline and morale. But of the men who were in the trenches with us that night how many are left? Your battalion were pretty badly cut up at Cambrai, weren't they? And the survivors are all back in civil life like ourselves. If it were to come out now there aren't twenty men who would remember anything about it: except of course here in Chilmark, where they know my people so well."

"But you surely don't contemplate writing to the War Office? I've no idea what course they would take, but they'd be safe to make themselves unpleasant. I might even come in for a reprimand myself! That's a fate I could support with equanimity, but what about you? If I were you I shouldn't care to be hauled up for an interview!"

"Really, if you'll forgive my saying so, I don't want to enter into contingencies at all. Give me my promise back, Hyde, there's a good fellow, it's worth nothing now to anyone but the owner."

"What about your own people?" said Lawrence, his hands in his pockets, and falling unawares into the tone of the orderly room. "You'll do nothing while your father's alive: I'm glad you've sense enough for that: but what about your brother and sister? You're suffering under some unpractical attack of remorse, Val, and like most penitent souls you think of nothing but yourself."

"On the contrary, I shrink very much from bringing distress on other people. I'm well aware," said Val slowly, "that a man who does what I've done forfeits his right to take an easy way out."

"An easy way?"

"Believe me, I haven't found the way you imposed on me an easy one."

"Poor wretch!" said Lawrence under his breath. Stafford heard, perhaps he was meant to hear: and he glanced out over the dark turf on which the windows traced a golden oblong, over the trees, dark and mysterious except where the same light caught and bronzed the tips of their branches. In its glow every leaf stood out separate and defined, clearer than by day through the contrast of the immense surrounding darkness: and so it had been in that bit of French forest years ago, when the wild bright searchlights lit up its plague-spotted glades. Civilians talk glibly of courage and cowardice who have never smelt the odour of corruption. . . .

"What's your motive? Some misbegotten sense of duty?"

"Partly," said Val, turning from the window. How like his eyes were to his young sister's! The impression was unwelcome, and Lawrence flung it off. "I ought never to have given way to you. I ought to have faced Wynn-West and let him deal with me as he thought fit. After all, I was of no standing in the regiment. A boy of nineteen—what on earth would it have signified? I was so very young."

Nineteen! yes, one called a lad young at nineteen even in those pitiless days. Under normal conditions he would have had two or three years' more training before he was required to shoulder the responsibilities and develop the braced muscles of manhood.

"Anyhow it's all over now—"

"No, you forget." A wave of colour swept over Val's face but his voice was steady. "Through me the regiment holds a distinction it hasn't earned, and the distinction is in hands that don't deserve to hold it. That isn't consonant with the traditions of the service."

"Oh, when it comes to the honour of the Army—!" Lawrence jeered at him. "There speaks the soldier born and bred. But I was only a 'temporary.' Give me a personal reason."

"Well, I can do that too! I hate sailing under false colours. The good folk of Chilmark; my own people; Bernard, Laura" Lawrence's eyes began to sparkle: when a man's voice deepens over a woman's name—! "Oh, I dare say nothing will ever come of it," Val resumed after a moment: "my father may live another thirty years, and by that time I should be too old to stand in a white sheet. Or perhaps I shall only tell one or two people—"

"Mrs. Clowes?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You would like to tell my cousin and his wife?"

"I should like to feel myself a free agent, which I'm not now, because I'm under parole to you."

"And so you will remain," said Lawrence coldly.

"You mean that?"

"Thoroughly. I've no wish to distress you, Val, but I'm no more convinced now than I was ten years ago that you can be trusted to judge for yourself. You were an impulsive boy then with remarkably little self-control: you're—forgive my saying so—an impulsive man now, capable of doing things that in five minutes you would be uncommonly sorry for. How long would Bernard keep your secret? If I'm not much mistaken you would lose your billet and the whole county would hear why. The whole thing's utter rubbish. You make too much of your ribbon: you—I—it would never have been given if Dale's father hadn't been a brass hat."

Stafford was ashy pale. "I know you think you're just."

"No, I don't. I'm not just, my good chap: I'm weakly, idiotically generous. In your heart of hearts you're grateful to me. Now let's drop all this. Nothing you can say will have the slightest effect, so you

may as well not say it." He stood by Val's chair, laughing down at him and gently gripping him by the shoulder. "Be a man, Val! you're not nineteen now. You've got a comfortable job and the esteem of all who know you—take it and be thankful: it's more than you deserve. If you must indulge in a hair shirt, wear it under your clothes. It isn't necessary to embarrass other people by undressing in public."

Thought is free: one may be at a man's mercy and in his debt and keep one's own opinion of him, impersonal and cold. With a faint smile on his lips Val got up and strolled over to the piano. "Hullo, what's all this music lying about?" he said in his ordinary manner. "Has Laura been playing? Good, I'm so glad: Bernard can hardly ever stand it. See the first fruits of your bracing influence! Oh, the Polonaises . . ." And then he in his turn began to play, but not the melancholy fiery lyrics that had soothed Laura's unsatisfied heart. Val, a thorough musician, went for sympathy to the classics. Impulsive? There was not much impulse left in this quiet, reticent man, who with his old trouble fresh on him could sit down and play a chorale of Bach or a prelude of Mozart, subordinating his own imperious anguish to the grave universal daylight of the elder masters. Long since Val had resolved that no shadow from him should fall across any other life. He had foresworn "that impure passion of remorse," and so keen an observer as Rowsley had grown up in his intimacy without suspecting anything wrong. Unfortunately for Val, however, he still suffered, though he was now denied all expression, all relief: the wounded mind bled inwardly. It was no wonder Val's hair was turning grey.

Lawrence, no mean judge of music, understood much—not all—of the significance of Val's playing. He was an imaginative man—far more so than Val, who would have lived an ordinary life and travelled on ordinary lines of thought but for the war, which wrenched so many men out of their natural development. But it was again unfortunate for Val that the sporting instinct ran strong in Captain Hyde. He was irritated by Val's grave superior dignity, and deep and unacknowledged there was working in him the instinct of the bully, the love of cruelty, overlaid by layer on layer of civilization, of chivalry, of decency, yet native to the human heart and quick to reassert itself at any age: in the boy who thrashes a smaller boy, in the young man who takes advantage of a woman, in the fighter who hounds down surrendered men.

He settled himself in a chair close to the piano. "Val, I'm very glad to have met you. Having taken so much upon me," he was smiling into Val's eyes, "I've often wondered what had become of you. This," he lightly touched Val's arm, "was a cruel handicap. I had to disable you, but it need not have been permanent."

"Do you mind moving? you're in my light."

He shifted his chair by an inch or so. "After all, what's a single failure of nerve? Physical causes—wet, cold, indigestion, tight puttees—account for nine out of ten of these queer breakdowns. At all events you've paid, Val, paid twice over: when I read your name in the Honours List I laughed, but I was sorry for you. The sword-and-epaulets business would have been mild compared to that."

"Cat and mouse, is it?" said Val, resting his hands on the keys.

"What?"

"I'm not going to stand this sort of thing, Hyde, not for a minute."

"I don't know what you mean," said Lawrence, reddening slowly to his forehead. But it was a lie: he was not one of those who can overstep limits with impunity. The streak of vulgarity again! and worse than vulgarity: Andrew Hyde's sardonic old voice was ringing in his ears, "Lawrence, you'll never be a gentleman."

"All right, we'll leave it at that. Only don't do it again."
Lawrence was dumb. "Here's Mrs. Clowes."

Val rose as Laura came in, released at length from attendance on her husband. "I heard you playing," she said, giving him her hand with her sweet, friendly smile. "So you've introduced yourself to Captain Hyde? I hope you were nice to him, for my gratitude to him is boundless. I haven't seen Bernard looking so fit or so bright for months and months! Now sit down, both of you, and we'll have cigarettes and coffee. Ring, Val, will you—? it's barely half past ten."

"I can only stay for one cigarette, Laura: I must get home to bed."

"But, my dear boy, how tired you look!" exclaimed Laura. "You do too much—I'm sure you do too much. He wears himself out, Lawrence—oh! my scarf!" She was wearing a silver scarf over her black dress, and as she moved it fluttered up and caught on the chain round her throat. "Unfasten me, please, Val," she said, bending her fair neck, and Val was obliged laboriously to disentangle the silken cobweb from the spurs of her clear-set diamonds, a process which fascinated Lawrence, whose mind was more

French than English in its permanent interest in women. Certainly Val's office of friend of the family was not less delicate because Laura, secure in her few years seniority, treated him like a younger brother! Watching, not Val, but Val's reflection in a mirror, Lawrence overlooked no shade of constraint, no effort that Val made to avoid touching with his finger-tips the satin allure of Laura's exquisite skin. "Poor miserable Val!" Suspicion was crystallizing into certainty. "Or is it poor Bernard? No, I swear she doesn't know. Does he know himself?"

A servant had brought in coffee, and Lawrence in his quality of cousin poured out two cups and carried them over to Laura and to Val. "Well, I'm damned!" murmured Lawrence as Val refastened the clasp of the chain. "Picturesque, all this.— Here, Val, here's your coffee."

"But do you know each other so well as that?" exclaimed Laura, arching her wren's-feather eyebrows.

"I was an infant subaltern when Hyde knew me," said Val laughing, "and he was a howling swell of a captain. Do you remember that night you all dined with us, sir, when we were in billets? We stood you champagne—"

"Purchased locally. I remember the champagne."

"Dine with us tomorrow night," said Laura. "Do! and bring Isabel." Lawrence gave an imperceptible start: for the last hour he had forgotten Isabel's existence except when her eyes had looked at him out of her brother's face. "The child will enjoy it, I never knew any one so easily pleased; and you and Lawrence and Bernard can rag one another to your heart's content. Yes, you will, I know you will, Army men always do when they get together; and you're all boys, even Bernard, even you with your grey hair, my dear Val; as for Lawrence, he's only giving himself airs."

"Yes, do bring your sister," said Lawrence. "She is the most charming young girl I've met for years, if a man of my mature age may say so. She is so natural, a rare thing nowadays: the modern *jeune fille* is a sophisticated product."

"Bravo, Lawrence!" cried Mrs. Clowes, clapping her hands. "Now, Val, didn't I tell you Isabel was going to be very, very pretty? That's settled, then, you'll both come: and, to please me," she looked not much older than Isabel as she took hold of the lapel of Val's coat, "will you wear your ribbon? I know you hate wearing it in civilian kit! But I do so love to see you in it: and it's not as if there would be any one here but ourselves."

Lawrence swung round on his heel and walked away. One may enjoy the pleasures of the chase and yet draw the line at watching an application of the rack, and it sickened him to remember that his own hand had given a turn to the screw. It had needed that brief colloquy to let him see what Stafford's life was like at Wanhope, and in what slow nerve-by-nerve laceration amends were being made. He admired the gallantry of Stafford's reply.

"My dear Laura, I would tie myself up in ribbon from head to foot if it would give you pleasure. I'll wear it if you like, though my superior officer will certainly rag me if I do."

"No, I shan't," said Lawrence shortly.

CHAPTER VIII

"And now tell me," murmured Mrs. Clowes in the mischievously caressing tone that she kept for Isabel, "did mamma's little girl enjoy her party?"

"Rather!" said Isabel—with a great sigh, the satisfied sigh of a dog curling up after a meal. "They were lovely strawberries. And what do you call that French thing? Oh, that's what a *vol-au-vent* is, is it? I wish I knew how to make it, but probably it's one of those recipes that begin 'Take twelve eggs and a quart of cream.' I wish nice things to eat weren't so dear, Jimmy would love it. Captain Hyde took two helps—did you see?—big ones! If he always eats as much as he did tonight he'll be fat before he's fifty, which will be a pity. He ate three times what Val did."

"Is that what you were thinking of all the time? I noticed you didn't say very much."

"Well, I was between Captain Hyde and Major Clowes, and they neither of them think I'm grown up," explained Isabel. "They talked to each other over the top of me. Oh no, not rudely, Major Clowes was as

nice as he could be" (Isabel salved her conscience by reflecting that this was verbally true since Major Clowes could never be nice), "and Captain Hyde asked me if I was fond of dolls—"

"My dear Isabel!"

"Or words to that effect. Oh! it's perfectly fair, I'm not grown up, or only by fits and starts. Some of me is a weary forty-five but the rest is still in pigtailed. It's curious, isn't it? considering that I'm nearly twenty. Let's go through the wood, my stockings are coming down." Out of sight of the house in a clearing of the loosely planted alder-coppice by the bridge, she pulled them up, slowly and candidly: white cotton stockings supported by garters of black elastic. "After all," she continued, "I'm housekeeper, and in common politeness we shall have to dine you back, so I really did want to see what sort of things Captain Hyde likes. But it's no use, he won't like anything we give him. Not though we strain our resources to the uttermost. Laura! would Mrs. Fryar give me the receipt for that vol-au-vent? I don't suppose we could run to it, but I should love to try."

"Mrs. Fryar would be flattered," said Laura, finding a chair in the forked stem of a wild apple-tree, while Isabel sat plump down on the net of moss-fronds and fine ivy and grey wood-violets at her feet. "But, my darling, you're not to worry your small head over vol-au-vents! Lawrence will like one of your own roast chickens just as well, or any simple thing—"

"Oh no, Lawrence won't!" Isabel gave a little laugh. "Excuse my contradicting you, but Lawrence isn't a bit fond of simple things. That's why he doesn't like me, because I'm simple, simple as a daisy. I don't mind—much," she added truthfully. "I can survive his most extended want of interest. After all what can you expect if you go out to dinner in the same nun's veiling frock you wore when you were confirmed, with the tucks let down and the collar taken out? O! Laura, I wish someone would give me twenty pounds on condition that I spent it all on dress! I'd buy—I'd buy—oh,—silk stockings, and long gloves, and French cambric underclothes, and chiffon nightgowns like those Yvonne wears (but they aren't decent: still that doesn't matter so long as you're not married, and they are so pretty)! And a homespun tailor-made suit with a seam down the back and open tails: and—and—one of those real Panamas that you can pull through a wedding ring: and—oh! dear, I am greedy! It must be because I never have any clothes at all that I'm always wanting some. I ache all over when I look at catalogues. Isn't it silly?"

If so it was a form of silliness with which Mrs. Clowes was in full sympathy. In her world, to be young and pretty gave a woman a claim on Fate to provide her with pretty dresses and the admiration of men. As for Yvonne, till she married Jack Bendish she had never been out of debt in her life. "No, it's the most natural thing on earth," said Laura. "How I wish—!"

"No, no," said Isabel hastily. "It's very, very sweet of you, but even Jimmy wouldn't like it: and as for Val I don't know what he'd say! Poor old Val, he wants some new evening clothes himself, and it's worse for him than for me because men do so hate to look shabby and out at elbows. He's worn that suit for ten years. My one consolation is that Captain Hyde couldn't wear a suit he wore ten years ago. It would burst."

"Isabel! really! you ridiculous child, why have you such a spite against poor Lawrence? Any one would think he was a perfect Daniel Lambert! Do you know he's a pukka sportsman and has shot all over the world? Lions and tigers, and rhinoceros, and grizzly bears, and all sorts of ferocious animals! He's promised me a black panther skin for my parlour and he's persuaded Bernard to call in Dr. Verney for his neuritis, so I won't hear another word against him!"

"Has he? H'm. . . . No, I haven't any prejudice against him: in fact I like him," said Isabel, smiling to herself. "But he reminds me of Tom Wallis at the Prince of Wales's Feathers. Do you remember Tom? 'Poor Tom,' Mrs. Wallis always says, 'he went from bad to worse. First it was a drop too much of an evening; and then he began getting drunk mornings: and then he 'listed for a soldier!' Not that Captain Hyde would get drunk, but he has the same excitable temperament. . . . Laura!"

"What is it?" said Mrs. Clowes, framing the young face between her hands as Isabel rose up kneeling before her. In the quivering apple-tree shadow Isabel's eyes were very dark, and penetrating and reflective too, as if she had just undergone one of those transitions from childhood to womanhood which are the mark and the charm of her variable age. Laura was puzzled by her judgment of Lawrence Hyde, so keen, yet so wide of the truth as Laura saw it: "excitable" was the last thing that Laura would have called him, and she couldn't see any likeness to Tom Wallis. But one can't argue over a man's character with a child. "Why so serious?"

"This evening, at dinner, weren't there some queer undercurrents?"

"Undercurrents!" Laura drew her hands away. She looked startled and nervous. "What sort of undercurrents?"

"When they were chaffing Val about his ribbon. Oh, I don't know," said Isabel vaguely. Laura drew a breath of relief. "I was sorry you made him wear it. But he'd cut his hand off to please you, darling. You don't really realize the way you can make Val do anything you like."

"Nonsense," said Laura, but with an indulgent smile, which was her way of saying that it was true but did not signify. She was no coquette, but she preferred to create an agreeable impression. Always in France, where women are the focus of social interest, there had been men who did as Laura Selincourt pleased, and the incense which Val alone continued to burn was not ungrateful to her altar. "As if Val would mind about a little thing like that."

Isabel shook her head. "Perhaps you weren't attending. Major Clowes was very down on him for wearing it—chaffing him, of course, but chaffing half in earnest: a snowball with a stone in it. Naturally Val wasn't going to say you made him—"

"No, but Lawrence did: or I should have cut in myself."

"Yes, after a minute, he interfered, and then Major Clowes shut up, but it was all rather—rather queer, and I'm sure Val hated it. You won't make him do it again, will you? Val's so odd. Laura—don't tell any one—I sometimes think Val's very unhappy."

"Val, unhappy? You fanciful child, this is worse than Tom Wallis! What should make Val unhappy? He might be dull," said Laura ruefully. "Life at Wanhope isn't exciting! But he's keen on his work and very fond of the country. Val is one of the most contented people I know."

A shadow fell over Isabel's face, the veil that one draws down when one has offered a confidence to hands that are not ready to receive it. "Then it must be all my imagination." She abandoned the subject as rapidly as she had introduced it. "O! dear, I am sleepy." She stretched herself and yawned, opening her mouth wide and shutting it with a little snap like a kitten. "I was up at six to give Val his breakfast, and I've been running about all day, what with the school treat next week, and Jimmy's new night-shirts that I had to get the stuff for and cut them out, and choir practice, and Fanny taking it into her head to make rhubarb jam. How can London people stay up till twelve or one o'clock every night? But of course they don't get up at six."

"Have a snooze in my hammock," suggested Laura. "I see Barry coming, which means that Bernard is going off and I shall have to run away and leave you, and probably the men won't come out for some time. Take forty winks, you poor child, it will freshen you up."

"I never, never go to sleep in the daytime," said Isabel firmly. "It's a demoralizing habit. But I shouldn't mind tumbling into your hammock, thank you very much." And, while Mrs. Clowes went away with Barry, she slipped across to Laura's large comfortable cot, swung waist-high between two alders that knelt on the river brink.

Isabel sprawled luxuriously at full length, one arm under her head and the other dropped over the netting: her young frame was tired, little flying aches of fatigue were darting pins and needles through her knees and shoulders and the base of her spine. The evening was very warm and the stars winked at her, they were green diamonds that sparkled through chinks in the alder leafage overhead: round dark leaves like coins, and scattered in clusters, like branches of black bloom. Near at hand the river ran in silken blackness, but below the coppice, where it widened into shallows, it went whispering and rippling over a pebbly bottom on its way to the humming thunder of the mill. And in a fir-tree not far off a nightingale was singing, now a string of pearls dropping bead by bead from his throat, now rich turns and grace-notes, and now again a reiterated metallic chink which melted into liquid fluting:

Vogek im Tannenwald
Pfeifet so hell:
Pfeifet de Wald aus und ein,
wo wird mein Schatze sein?
Vogele im Tannenwald pfeifet so hell.

Isabel was still so young that she felt the beauty more deeply when she could link it with some poetic association, and as she listened to the nightingale she murmured to herself "In some melodious plot of beechen green with shadows numberless"—but it isn't a beech, it's a fir-tree," and then wandering off into another literary channel, "How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves! Eternal passion—eternal pain' . . . but I don't believe he feels any pain at all. It is we who feel pain. He's not been long married, and it's lovely weather, and there's plenty for them to eat, and they're in love . . . what a heavenly night it is! I wish some one were in love with me. I wonder if any one ever will be.

"How thrilling it would be to refuse him! Of course I couldn't possibly accept him—not the first: it would be too slow, because then one couldn't have any more. One would be like Laura. Poor Laura!

Now if she were in that tree"—Isabel's ideas were becoming slightly confused—"it would be natural for her to be melancholy—only if she were a bird she wouldn't care, she would fly off with some one else and leave Major Clowes, and all the other birds would come and peck him to death. They manage these things better in bird land." Isabel's eyes shut but she hurriedly opened them again. "I'm not going to go to sleep. It's perfectly absurd. It can't be much after nine o'clock. I dare say Captain Hyde will come out before so very long . . . I should like to talk to him again by myself. He isn't so interesting when other people are there. I wonder why I told Laura he was getting fat? He isn't: he couldn't be, to travel all over the world and shoot black panthers. And if he did take two helps of vol-au-vent, you must remember, Isabel, he's a big man—well over six feet—and requires good support. He certainly is not greedy or he would have tried to pick out the oysters: all men love oysters.

"He was nice about Val's ribbon, too . . . wish I understood about that ribbon. Val was grateful: he said 'Thanks, Hyde' while Major Clowes was speaking to Barry. Laura isn't stupid, but she never understands Val. 'Contented?' My dearest darling Val! If he were being roasted over a slow fire he would be 'contented' if Laura was looking on. That's the worst of being perfectly unselfish: people never realize that you're unselfish at all. Wives don't seem to hear what their husbands say. Often and often Major Clowes is absolutely insulting to Val, before Laura and before me. But Laura always looks on Val as a boy. Perhaps if Captain Hyde hears it going on he'll interfere and shut Major Clowes up as he did tonight. He can manage Major Clowes . . . which is clever of him! 'A strong, silent man'—as a matter of fact he talks a good deal. . . . But I loved him for sitting on Major Clowes. I'd rather he were nice to Val than to me.

"But he might be nice to me too. . . .

"He was, yesterday afternoon. How he coloured up! He was absolutely natural for the minute. That can't often happen. People who don't like giving themselves away are thrilling when they do."

Another yawn came upon her.

"O! dear, I really mustn't go to sleep. What a lulling noise you make, you old river! I don't think I can get up at six tomorrow. This hammock is as comfortable as a bed. 'The young girl reclined in a graceful attitude, her head pillowed on her slender hand, her long dark lashes entangled and resting on her ivory cheek.' Well, they couldn't rest anywhere else: unless they were long enough to rest on her nose. 'Her—her breathing was soft and regular . . .'" It became so. Isabel slept.

Val would rather have owed no gratitude to a man he disliked so much as Hyde. When Bernard was wheeled away, an interchange of perfunctory civilities was followed by a constrained silence, which Val broke by rising. "Hyde, if you'll excuse me, I'll say five words to Bernard before Barry begins getting him to bed. There's a right of way dispute going on that he liked me to keep him posted up in."

"Do," said Lawrence vaguely. He brushed past Val and escaped into the garden.

Lawrence was enjoying his stay at Wanhope, but tonight he felt defrauded, though he knew not why. He had had an agreeable day. In the morning Jack Bendish had appeared on horseback and Lawrence had ridden over with him to lunch at Wharton, a sufficiently amusing experience, what with the crabbed high-spirited whims of Jack's grandfather and the old-fashioned courtesy of Lord Grantchester, and Yvonne's romantic toilette: later Laura had joined them and they had played bowls on the famous green: in the cool of the evening he had strolled home with Laura through the fields. Dinner too had been amusing in its way, the wines were excellent, the parlour maid waited at table like a deft ghost, and he recognized in Mrs. Fryar an artist who was thrown away alike on Bernard's devotion to roast beef and Val's inability to remember what he ate. Yet Lawrence was left vaguely discontented.

Bernard's manner to Val had set his teeth on edge. Bernard could have meant no harm: no one had ever known the truth except Lawrence and Val, and possibly Dale with such torn shreds of consciousness as H. E. and barbed wire had left him: but in all innocence Bernard had set the rack to work as deftly as Lawrence could have done it himself. Lawrence pitied—no, that was a slip of the mind: he was not so weak as to pity Stafford, but their intercourse was difficult, genant.

And Isabel Stafford too: Clowes had left her out of the conversation as though she were a child, and though Lawrence tried to bring her in she remained, so to say, in the nursery most of the time, speaking when she was spoken to but without any of her characteristic freshness and boldness. She was the schoolgirl that Clowes expected her to be. Her very dress irritated Lawrence, as if he had seen a fine painting in a tawdry frame, or a pearl of price foiled by a spurious setting. He had not felt any glow at all, and was left to suppose his fancy had played him a trick. Disappointing! and now there was no chance of revising his impression, for apparently she had gone away with Laura—who should have known better than to leave Captain Hyde to his own devices. But probably Miss Stafford had refused to face the men alone: it was what a little shy country girl would do.

Isabel's arm hanging over the edge of the hammock, and pearly white in the dark, was his first warning of her presence. He crossed the wood with his hunter's step and found her lapped in dreams, the starlight that filtered between the alder branches chequering her with a faint diaper of light and shade. Only the very young can afford to be, seen asleep, when the face sinks back into its original repose, and lines and wrinkles reappear in the loss of all that smiling charm of expression which may efface them by day. Laura, asleep, looked old and haggard. But Isabel presented a blank page, a face virginally pure, and candid, and lineless: from the attitude of her young body one would have thought she was constructed without bones, and from her serenity it might have been a child who slept there in the June night, so placidly entrusting herself to its mild embrace. Vividly aware that he had no right to watch her, Lawrence stood watching her, though afraid at every breath that she would wake up: it was hard to believe that even in her sleep she could remain insensible of his eyes. Here was the authentic Isabel, the girl who had enchanted him on the moor: the incarnation of that classic beauty by which alone his spirit was capable of being touched to fine issues. The alder branches quivered, their clusters of black shadow fell like an embroidered veil over the imperfections of her dress, but what light there was shone clear on her head and throat, and the pearly moulding of her shoulder, based where her sleeve was dragged down a little by the tension of her weight upon it. All the mystery of womanhood and all its promise of life in bud and life not yet sown lay on this young girl asleep in the starshine. Lights flashed up in the house, figures were moving between the curtains: Laura had left Bernard, soon she would come out into the garden and call to Isabel, and Isabel would wake and his chance be lost. His chance? Isabel had rashly incurred a forfeit and would have to pay. The frolic was old, there was plenty of precedent for it, and not for one moment did Lawrence dream of letting her off. A moth, a dead leaf might have settled on her sleeping lips and she would have been none the wiser, and just such a moth's touch he promised himself, the contact of a moment, but enough to intoxicate him with its sweetness, and the first—yes, he believed it would be the first: not from any special faith in Isabel's obduracy, but because no one in Chilmark was enough of a connoisseur to appreciate her. Yes, the first, the bloom on the fruit, the unfolding of the bud, he promised himself that: and warily he stooped over Isabel, who slept as tranquil as though she were in her own room under the vicarage eaves. Lawrence held his breath. If she were to wake? Then?—Oh, then the middleaged friend of the family claiming his gloves and his jest! But Lawrence was not feeling middle-aged.

"O! dear," said Isabel, "I've been asleep!"

She sat up rubbing her eyes. "Laura, are you there?" But no one was there. Yet, though she was alone, in the solitude of the alder shade Isabel blushed scarlet. "What a ridiculous dream! worse than ridiculous, What would Val say if he knew? Really, Isabel, you ought to be whipped!" She slipped to her feet and peered suspiciously this way and that into the shadowy corners of the wood. Not a step: not the rustle of a leaf: no one.

Yet Isabel's cheeks continued to burn, till with a little frightened laugh she buried them in her hands. "O! it was— it was a dream—?"

CHAPTER IX

Lawrence's reflections when he went to bed that night were more insurgent and disorderly than usual. In his negative philosophy, when he shut the door of his room, it was his custom to shut the door on memory too—to empty his mind of all its contents except the physical disposition to sleep. He cultivated an Indian's self-involved and deliberate vacancy. On this his second night at Wanhope however—Wanhope which was to bring him a good many white nights before he was done with it—he lay long awake, watching the stars that winked and glittered in the field of his open window, the same stars that were perhaps shining on Isabel's pillow. . . .

Isabel: it was on her that his thoughts ran with a tiring persistency against which his common sense rebelled. A kiss! what was it after all? A Christmas forfeit, a prank of which even Val Stafford could have said no worse than that it was beneath the dignity of his six and thirty years: only too flattering for such a little country girl, sunburnt, simple, and occasionally tongue-tied. The lady of the ivory frame (whom Lawrence had fished out of her seclusion and set up on his dressing table, to the disgust of Caroline: who was a Baptist, and didn't care to dust a person who wore so few clothes), the lady of the ivory frame was far handsomer than Isabel, or at least handsome in a far more finished style.

Lawrence had the curiosity to get out of bed and carry Mrs. Cleve to the window. Yes, she certainly was an expensive luxury, this smiling lady, her eyes large and liquid, her waved hair rippling under its

diamond aigrette, her rather wide, eighteenth century shoulders dimpling down under a collar of diamonds to the half bare swell of her breast: and for an amateur of her type she was charming, with her tired, sophisticated glance and her fresh mouth, like a rouged child: but it was borne in on Lawrence that she was not for him. He had kissed her two or three times, as occasion served and she seemed to desire it, but he had never lain awake afterwards, nor had his heart beaten any faster, no, not even in the summerhouse at Bingley when she was fairly in his arms. He pitched the photograph into a drawer. Frederick Cleve was safe, for him.

Strolling out on the balcony, Lawrence folded his arms on the balustrade. The night was hot: perhaps that was why he could not sleep. By his watch it was ten minutes past two. The moon was near her setting. She lay on her back with tumbled clouds all round her: mother & pearl clouds, quilted, and tinged with a sheen of opal. He wondered whether Bernard was asleep: poor Bernard, lying alone through the dreary hours. Perhaps it was because Lawrence was not at all like a curate that Bernard had already made his cousin free of certain dark corners which Val had never been allowed to explore. "My wife? She's not my wife," Clowes had said, staring up at Lawrence with his wide black eyes. "She's my nurse." And he went on defining the situation with the large coarse frankness which he permitted himself since his accident, and which did not repel Lawrence, as it would have repelled Val or Jack Bendish, because Lawrence habitually used the same frankness in his own mind. There was some family likeness between the cousins, and it came out in their common contempt for modern delicacy, which Bernard called squeamishness and Lawrence damned in more literary language as the Victorian manner.

The moon dipped lower over the trees while Lawrence took one of his sharp turns of self-analysis. Most men live in a haze, but Lawrence was naturally a clear thinker, and he had neither a warm heart nor a sentimental temperament to blind him. Cleve was safe: but with his Rabelaisian candour and cultivated want of scruple Lawrence reflected that Cleve had been anything but safe at Bingley. Whence the change? From Isabel Stafford! Lawrence shrugged his shoulders: he was accustomed to examine himself in a dry light of curiosity, and no vice or weakness shocked him, but here was pure folly.

What was he doing at Wanhope? "I'm contracting attachments," he reflected, unbuttoning his silk jacket to feel the night air cool on his chest, a characteristic action: wind, sunshine, a wandering scent, the freshness of dew, all the small sensuous pleasures that most men neglect, Lawrence would go out of his way to procure. "I'm breaking my rule." Long ago he had resolved never to let himself get fond of any one again, because in this world of chance and change, at the mercy of a blindly striking power, the game is not worth the candle: one suffers too much.

As for Miss Stafford, one need not be a professed stole to draw the line at a little country girl, pious to insipidity and simple to the brink of silliness. Here Lawrence, not being one of those who deny facts when they are unwelcome, caught himself up: she was not insipid and her power over him was undeniable. Twice within forty-eight hours she had defeated his will, and what was stranger was that each time he had surrendered eagerly, feeling for the moment as though it didn't matter what he said or did before Isabel.—It was at this point of his analysis that Lawrence began to take fright. "You rascal," he said to himself, "so that's why you're off Mrs. Cleve, is it? What is it you want—to marry the child? You would be sick to death of her in six weeks—and haven't you had enough of giving hostages to Fortune?"

Hostages to fortune: that pregnant phrase frightens men who fear nothing else in heaven or earth. But not one of Hyde's friends knew that he had ever given fortune a hostage. He was not reserved as a rule: indeed he was always willing to argue creed and code with a frankness rare in the self-conscious English race: he was never shy and there was little in him that was distinctively English. But he was too subtle and inconsistent for the average homogeneous Englishman, and not even the comrades of trench and tent knew much about his private life. Lawrence was one of those products of a high civilization which have in them pretty strong affinities with barbarism,—but always with a difference. The noble savage tortures his enemy out of hate or revenge: Lawrence, more sophisticated in brutality, was capable of doing it by way of a psychological experiment. The savage takes a short cut from desire to possession: Lawrence though his blood ran hot curbed it from caution, because in modern life women are a burden and a drag.

This was the trained and tempered Lawrence Hyde, a personage of great good humour and numitigable egoism. This was the companion of easy morals with whom Lawrence was on familiar terms. But on that first white night at Wanhope Lawrence grew dimly aware of the upheaval of deeper forces, as if his youth were stirring in its grave. When Laura Clowes smiled at him with her gallant bearing: when Bernard gripped his hand in wishing him good night: when Val in the middle of the psychological experiment pierced him with his grave tired eyes, all sorts of feelings long dormant and believed to be dead came to life in Lawrence: pity, and affection, and remorse and shame. "Hang the

fellow!" Lawrence reflected. "He's too like his sister. And Isabel? She is a child." Whose voice was it that answered, "This is the woman I have been waiting for all my life?"

And then, turning at bay, he came to a sufficiently cynical conclusion. "No nonsense!" he said to himself. "Your trouble is that she's twenty and you're six and thirty, which is a dangerous age. But you don't want to marry her, and there's no middle course. Fruit defendu, mon ami: hands off! If you can't be sensible you'll have to shift out of Wanhope and compromise on Mrs. Cleve."

The rain held off, and after breakfast—a cheery meal at which Bernard for the first time for many months appeared dressed and in a good temper—Lawrence fulfilled the main duty of a guest by going for a walk.

He came by footbridge and field path into the High Street, where he was immediately buttonholed by the vicar. Lawrence had a fixed idea that all priests were hypocrites: they must be, since as educated men they could not well believe the fables they were paid to teach! But it was hard to associate hypocrisy with Mr. Stafford, whose fond ambition it was to nail Lawrence Hyde to lecture on his Chinese travels before the Bible Class. "Oh, nothing religious," he explained, holding his victim firmly by the coat as Lawrence edged away. "Only half an hour's story-telling to put a few new ideas into their heads—as if you were talking to a young brother of your own. I'm always trying to get them to emigrate, but they need a great deal of shoving." Lawrence said they could not emigrate to China, and, further, that he didn't regard them as brothers. "How narrow you are, some of you University men!" sighed Mr. Stafford. "What a concept of society! But," brightening, "you're not so bad as you're painted. Come, come! a fifth-of-August recruit can't very well deny that we're all brothers in arms?" Before Lawrence escaped he was not sure that he hadn't pledged himself to an address on "Fringes of the Empire," with special reference to the C.U.M.C.A.

It was too sunny to fish, but the trout lured him, and from the cross-roads by the stone bridge he struck into a footpath that led upstream into the hills, behind whose green spurs Chilmark before long was out of sight. Here it was lonely country. Sometimes on a headland the sun flashed white over a knot of labourers, scything the hay where no machine could go: sometimes a shepherd's cote gleamed far off above the pale wattlings of a fold: but as he wound on—and on into the Plain there was no sign of man in all the hot landscape, and no motion but the bicker of the stream over its stony bed, and the hum of insect life busy on its millions of dark and tiny vibrant wings. Not a breath of wind stirred among these grassy valleys, and Lawrence, feeling warm, had sat down by a pool under a sapling birchtree, when he heard a step on the path. It was Isabel Stafford.

He had hardly seen her again overnight, for Val had carried his young sister away before ten o'clock. He waited for her in the rare shadow of the birchtree, a tall powerful figure in a white drill suit of the tropics, his fair skin and black eyes shaded by a wide Panama hat. Isabel as she drew near was vexed to find herself blushing. She was a little shy of Captain Hyde, a little averse to meet his sparkling eyes.

"Isn't it hot?" she said, frankly wiping her face with a large handkerchief. "This is a favourite pool of mine, I often sit here when I come this way. I never saw such beautiful dragonflies, did you? They must be nearly as big as hummingbirds."

Over the brown mirror of the pool a troop of great dragonflies were ceaselessly darting to and fro, their metallic wings making a faint whirr as they looped in blinding mazes through the air that glowed blue with their splendour. "Very beautiful," said Lawrence.

"Are you out for a walk? I'm on my way to Wancote." Here panic fell on Isabel, the panic that lies in wait for young girls: if he were to think she thought he ought to offer to escort her! "I'm late, I must go on now. Good-bye!"

Lawrence stood looking down at her, impassive, almost sombre, but for the hot glow in his eyes. His caution had gone overboard. "Mayn't I come too?"

"Oh. . . ."

"Do let me."

"If you—if you like."

The valley narrowed as it receded, the upland air began to sparkle with a myriad prismatic needles that glittered from the wings of flies and beetles, and from dewdrops on patches of turf still as grey as hoarfrost in the shadow on the edge of a wood, and from wayside hollies whose leaf-points were all starred in silver. The blue bow overhead was stainless, not a cloud in it nor a mist: azure, azure, and unfathomable, like the heart of man, or the justice of God.—Isabel was not shy now but alert and radiant, as if she had caught a sparkle from the air: and expansive, as women are when they are sure of

pleasing. "'For the jaded man of the world at her side, the young girl's rustic freshness was her chief charm. She was so different from the beautiful but heartless mondaines he had known in Town. No diamonds glittered round her slender throat, and her hands, though small and well-shaped, were tanned by the summer sun. But for the jaded-man-of-the-world, weary of sparkling epigram or caustic repartee, her simple chatter held a fascination of its own.' I don't believe," reflected Isabel, coming down mentally to plain prose, "he'd mind if I talked to him about the dinner or last week's washing bill."

She did not in fact enter on any such intimate topic, but conversed sedately about parish politics and the beauties of the Plain. "This is a very lonely part," she said, "there are scarcely any houses. I'm taking the magazine to one of Major Clowes' shepherds. It's rather interesting going there. He's mad."

"Mad!"

"As a March hare. He's perfectly harmless of course, and an excellent shepherd. In lambing time he looks after the ewes like a mother, Val says his flock hardly ever lose a lamb. But he's a thrilling person to district-visit. Last time I went he had the Prince of Wales staying with him."

"Why on earth don't they put him in an asylum?"

"Do you know much about country villages?" Isabel enquired. "I thought not. They never put any one in an asylum till after he's got into trouble, and not always then if he doesn't want to go: just as they never build a bridge over a level crossing till one or two people have been killed. We had a woman in Chilmark that was much madder than poor dear Ben is. She took a knife out of her drawer once when I was there and told me she was going to cut her throat with it. She made me feel the edge to see how sharp it was. At last she cut the children's throats instead of her own, and then they put her away, but none of them died and she's out again now. She's supposed to be cured. You see a County asylum doesn't keep people longer than it must because the money comes out of the rates."

"Do you mean to say," Lawrence fastened on the point that struck him most forcibly, "that your father lets you go to such places by yourself?"

"Oh yes: why not? He would think it showed want of faith to prevent me. He's very sensible about things like that," said Isabel without affectation. "There are always typhoid and diphtheria about in the autumn, but Jimmy never fusses. It wouldn't be much use if he did, with him and Val always in and out of infected houses."

"Pure fatalism—" said Lawrence, hitting with his stick at the flowers by their path. "Your brother ought to put his foot down—" Isabel seized his arm.

"Take care!— There was a bee in it. You really are most careless Captain Hyde! I shan't take you for any more walks if you do that. I dare say it was one of my own bees, and he had the very narrowest escape! And Val wouldn't dream of interfering. Ben and I are the best of friends. Besides, it's Mrs. Janaway I really go to see, poor dear, she don't ever hear a bit o' news from week's end to week's end. Wouldn't you be glad to see me," her eyes were destitute of challenge but not of humour, "if you lived three miles deep in the Plain, alone with your husband and the Prince of Wales?"

"I should be delighted to see you at any time."

Isabel, not knowing what to do with this speech, let it alone. "And the dog: I mustn't forget the dog. They have a thoroughbred Great Dane. Mr. Bendish gave Ben the puppy because it was the worst of the litter and they thought it would die: but it didn't die—no animal does that Ben gets hold of—and he's too fond of it now to part with it, though a dog fancier from Amesbury has offered him practically his own price for it."

"I should like to see the Dane."

"Well, you will, if you come with me. There's the cottage."

They had turned a bend and the head of the dale lay before them, a mere dimpling depression between breasts of chalky grass. Set close by the way on a cross-track, which forded the brook by stepping stones and went on over the downs to Amesbury, stood a small, square, tumbledown cottage, its door opening on primeval turf, though behind it a plot of garden enclosed in a quickset hedge provided Mrs. Janaway with cabbages and gooseberries and sour apples and room to hang out the clothes.

"Ben won't be in, but Billy will be looking after Clara. Billy is no good with the sheep, but he's death on tramps. In fact if I weren't here it wouldn't be too safe for you to go to the door. A Dane can pull any man down: I've heard even Jack Bendish say he wouldn't care to tackle him—"

Even Jack Bendish! Lawrence smiled. He felt the prick of Isabel's blade, it amused him, automatically he reacted to it, she made him want to fight the Dane first and Jack Bendish afterwards—but he retained just too much of the ascendancy of his six and thirty years to gratify her by self-betrayal. "You're a very brave young lady," he said cheerfully, "but if I were Val—"

He stopped short. From the cottage window, now not twenty yards off, there had come a burst of the most appalling screams he had ever heard in his life, the mechanical screaming of mortal agony. Isabel went as white as chalk and even Hyde felt the blood turn cold at his heart. Next moment the door was torn open and out of it came a big red-bearded man, dressed in a brown tweed jacket and velveteen trousers tied at the knees, and prancing high in a solemn jig. In one hand he held up an iron stake and in the other a rag of red and black carpet . . . the body of a woman in a black dress, her arms and legs hanging down, her face a scarlet mask that had ceased to scream.

"Keep back, Isabel," said Lawrence: then, running across the turf, "Drop that, Janaway! drop her!" in the hard authoritative voice of the barrack square. With the fitful docility of the mad, Janaway obeyed, and directly he did so Lawrence checked and stood on the defensive, taking a moment to collect his wits—he had need of them: he had to make his head guard his hands. He was a tall powerful man, but so was the shepherd: to offset Hyde's science, Janaway was mad and would be stopped by no punishment short of a knock-out blow: and Lawrence carried only an ordinary walking-stick, while Janaway had hold of an upright from a bit of iron railing, five feet long and barbed like a spear.

"If he whacks me over the head with that or jabs it into my stomach, I'm done," Lawrence thought, and pat to the moment Janaway, his mouth open and his teeth bare, rushed on him and struck at his eyes. Lawrence parried and sprang aside: but his arm was jarred to the elbow. "That was a close call. Ha! my chance now . . ." Like a flash, as Janaway turned, Lawrence ran in to meet him body to body, seized him by the lapels of his coat, pinned down his arms, set one foot against his thigh, and with no great exertion of strength, by the Samurai's trick of falling with one's enemy, heaved him up and shot him clean over his own shoulder: then, as they dropped together, struck with his wrist a paralyzing blow at the base of the spine. Janaway's yell of fury was choked into a rattling groan.

Lawrence was up in a twinkling, but the shepherd lay where he had fallen, and Lawrence let him lie: he knew that, so handled, the victim could be counted out of action, perhaps for good and all. He stood erect, breathing deep. Ben could wait, but what of Mrs. Ben? He was shocked to find Isabel already at her side on the reddened turf.

Mechanically Lawrence picked up his stick before he went to join her. Clara was huddled up over a pool of blood, her head between her knees: not a pleasant sight for a young girl. But Isabel, though white and trembling, was collected. "I can't feel her heart, I—I'm afraid—"

She broke off. Her glance had travelled beyond Lawrence and her features were stiffening into a mask of fear. "Oh, the dog, the dog!" she pointed past him. "Billy, Billy, down, sir!"

From some eyrie on the hillside the Dane had watched without emotion the legitimate spectacle of his master beating his mistress: in the war of the sexes, a dog is ever on the man's side. But when the tables were turned Billy went to the rescue. He was coming round the corner of the cottage when Isabel caught sight of him, travelling in great bounds at the pace of a wolf, but silent. Lawrence had but just time to swing Isabel behind him before the Dane leapt for his throat. Lawrence struck him over the head, but the blow glanced: so sudden, so thundering came the impact that Lawrence all but went down under it: and once down. . . .

The great jaws snapped one inch from his cheek, and before the Dane could recover Lawrence had seized him by the throat and fought him off. Then Lawrence set his back against the cottage wall and felt safer. A second blow got home, and spoiled Billy's beauty for ever: it laid open his left eye and the left side of his jaw. Undaunted, the Dane gave himself an angry shake, which splattered Lawrence with blood, and gathered his haunches for a second spring. But by now Lawrence had clubbed his stick and was beating him about the head with its heavy knobbed handle. Swift as the dog was, the man was swifter: they fought eye to eye, the man forestalling every motion of the dog's whipcord frame: Lawrence's blood was up, he would have liked to fight it out bare-handed. They would not have been ill-matched, for when the Dane reared Lawrence overtopped him only by an inch or so, and the weight of the steelclad paws on his breast tore open his clothes and pinned him to the wall. But Lawrence thrashed him off his feet whenever he tried to rise, till at length the lean muzzle sank with a low baffled moan.

Even then there was such fell strength in him that Lawrence dared not spare him, and blow rained on blow.—"Don't kill him," said Isabel. "Put this over his head."

Lawrence took the length of serge she gave him and with characteristic indifference to danger

stooped over the dog, whose spirit he admired, and tried to swathe his head in its heavy folds. But, torn, blinded, baffled, the Dane was undefeated. He wrenched his jaws out of their mufflings and rolled his head from side to side, snapping right and left. "Oh Billy," cried Isabel, "you know me, lie down, dear old man!" A pure-bred dog when sight and hearing are gone will recognize a familiar scent. In an agony of pity Isabel flung her arm over the heaving shoulders—

"Don't!" Lawrence dragged her off, but too late: the Dane's teeth had snapped on her wrist. The next moment he was lying on his side with his brains beaten out. Lawrence was willing to spare his own enemy but not Isabel's.

"Oh," said Isabel, shivering and moaning, "oh, my poor old Billy!"

"Damn your poor old Billy," said Lawrence: "let me look at your arm."

He carried her indoors, leaving Janaway and his wife and the Dane lying scattered on the sunlit turf. He did not care one straw whether they lived or died. In the little front parlour, neat and fresh with its window full of white muslin and red geraniums, he laid Isabel on a sofa and rolled up her sleeve: the flesh was not much torn but the Dane's fangs had sunk in deep and clean. "How far are we from a doctor?"

"Four miles. Why? Billy wasn't mad. I shall be all right directly. May I have some water to drink?"

"Curse these country hamlets," said Lawrence. He could not carry her four miles, nor was she fit to walk so far: but to fetch help would mean an hour or so's delay. He went into the kitchen to fill a tumbler from the pump, and found an iron wash-bowl in Clara Janaway's neat sink, and a kettle boiling on the hob beside a saucepan of potatoes that she had been cooking for dinner. Isabel sat up and took the glass from his hand.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, raising her beautiful dark eyes in a diffident apology. "It was all my own fault." Lawrence slipped a cushion under her head and drew her gently down. "Oh, thank you! But please don't trouble about me. I do feel rather queer." Lawrence thought it probable. He had been bitten by a dog himself and knew how horribly such a wound smarts. "It was all so—so very dreadful. But I shall be all right directly.. Do go back to the others: I'm afraid poor Clara—oh! oh, Captain Hyde! What are you doing?"

"Set your teeth and shut your eyes," said Lawrence "it won't take long. Your beloved Billy wasn't a nice animal to be bitten by. No, he wasn't mad, but his teeth weren't very clean, and we don't want blood poisoning to set up. Steady now." He pressed his lips to her arm.

Isabel's hand lay lax in his grasp while he methodically sucked the wound and rinsed his mouth from her tumbler. He hurt her, but she had been bred to accept pain philosophically. "Is it done?" she asked meekly when he released her. "Not any more?"

"No, that's enough. Now for a drop of warm water." He bathed the wound thoroughly and in default of a better dressing bound it up with his own handkerchief. "I wish I had some brandy to give you, but there isn't a drop in the place. Your estimable friend appears to have been a teetotaler. I don't doubt he was a pattern of all the virtues.— But for that matter I couldn't give the child publichouse stuff.— Now, my little friend, if you'll lie quiet for five minutes, I'll see what's going on outside."

"Please may I have my skirt?"

"Your what?"

"My serge skirt."

It had not struck Lawrence till then that she was dressed in a white muslin blouse and a pink and blue striped petticoat. "Do you mean to say that was your skirt you gave me to tie up the dog's head in?"

"I hadn't anything else," said Isabel still more apologetically, and blushing—she was feeling very guilty, very much ashamed of the trouble she had given: "and you don't know how fond Ben was of Billy!"

"Oh, damn Billy!" said Lawrence for the second time.

He went out into the summer sunshine. The dog, the fallen man, the fallen woman, not one of them had stirred a hair. All was peaceful and clear in every note of black and white and scarlet on the turf plat where they lay as if on a stage, in their green setting of dimpled hillside and beech grove and

marsh. There was a sickly smell in the hot bright air which carried Lawrence back to the trenches.

He went to examine the human wreckage. No need to examine Billy —his record for good or ill was manifestly closed: and Lawrence had a sickening suspicion that Mrs. Janaway too had finished with a world which perhaps had not offered her much inducement to remain in it. He lifted her up and laid her down again in a decent posture, straightening her limbs and sweeping back her clotted grey hair: no, no need to feel for the pulse in that faded breast from which her husband had partly torn away the neatly darned stuff bodice, so modest with its white tucker and silver Mizpah brooch. Lawrence composed its disorder with a reverent hand, spreading his own coat over her face.

He went on to Ben, and was frankly disappointed to find that Ben was not dead—far from it: he gave a deep groan when Lawrence rolled him over: but it was a case of broken arm and collarbone, if not of spinal injury as well. Lawrence found a length of line in the yard—Clara's clothes-line, in fact—and knotted it into a triple cord, for, though no sane man could have got far in such a state, it was on the cards that Janaway in his madness might scramble up and wander away on the downs. So Lawrence lashed him hand and foot, and Ben blinked and grinned at the sun and slavered over his beard.

It was while thus employed that Lawrence began to wonder what would have happened if Isabel had come to Wancote alone. She might have run away. But would she, while Ben was engaged in carpet-beating? Not she! Lawrence was not a fanciful man: but the red and grey remains of Clara Janaway would have set the visualizing faculty to work in the mind of a ploughboy. After tying the last of a dozen knots, reef knots and none too loose, he went to the back of the cottage where Isabel could not see him and was swiftly and violently sick.

After that he felt better. There was a pump in the yard, and he rinsed his head and hands under it, and washed off as best he could the stains of the fight, and re-knotted his scarf and shook himself down into his disordered clothes before going back to Isabel. And then it was that Isabel received of him a fresh impression as though she had never known him before, one of those vivid second impressions that efface earlier memories.

Val had always held paternal rank, Captain Hyde had been introduced as Val's late superior officer, and so Isabel had accepted him as Val's contemporary, of the generation before her own. But framed in the sunlit doorway, a very tall handsome man in undress, his coat thrown off, his trousers belted on his lean flanks, his wet shirt modelling itself over his powerful throat and shoulders and sticking to his ribs, Hyde might have been only six or seven and twenty: and certainly his manner was not middle-aged! Val's language was refined enough for a curate, and even Rowsley in his young sister's presence never went beyond a sarcenet oath; but Hyde's frank fury was piquant to Isabel's not very decorous taste. When he came in, her pain and faintness began to diminish as if a stream of warm fresh life were flowing into her veins.

"Are you better, Miss Isabel?"

"Ever so much better, thank you. Is—is Clara—?"

Cool, grave, and tranquil, Lawrence took her hand. "Clara is dead." He felt her trembling, and found a form of consolation which would have been slow to occur to his unprompted fancy. "Better so, isn't it? She wouldn't have been very happy after her husband's trying to kill her."

"No, she wouldn't want them to put him in an asylum," Isabel agreed, but in a subdued voice. "Did you forget my skirt?"

"No, but it was rather in a mess with the unfortunate Billy, and I'm afraid you'll have to do without it. I'm going to take you home now. You can walk, can't you, with my help? I'd like to carry you a few steps, till we're out of sight of the cottage. Put your arm round my neck." Isabel hesitated. She had been frightened out of her life and still felt cruelly shaken, but her quick sense of the ridiculous protested against this deference paid to her when she wasn't really hurt and it was all her own fault. What would Val have said? But apparently Captain Hyde was less exacting than Val. "Ah! let me: it is an ugly little scene outside and I don't want you to be haunted by it."

She resigned herself. She had not yet begun to feel shy of Lawrence, she was a child still, a child with the instincts of a woman, but those instincts all asleep. They quickened in her when she felt the glow of his life so near her own, but there was a touch of Miranda in Isabel, and no cautionary withdrawal followed.

And Lawrence? The trustfulness of a noble nature begets what it assumes. One need not ask what would have become of Miranda if she had given her troth to an unworthy Ferdinand, because the Mirandas of this world are rarely deceived. Hyde was but a battered Ferdinand. He was a man of strong and rather coarse fibre who had indifferently indulged tastes that he saw no reason to restrain.

But he was changing: when he carried Isabel across the sunlit grass plot, her beautiful grave childish head lying warm on his shoulder, he had travelled far from the Hyde of the summer house at Bingley.

"My word!" said Yvonne Bendish, startled out of her drawl. "Is it you, Isabel?" She reined in and sat gazing with all her eyes at the couple coming down the field path to Chilmark Bridge. "Have you had an accident? What's happened?"

"Excuse my hat," said Lawrence with rather more than his habitual calm. "How lucky to have met you. There has been a shocking business up at Wancote. Perhaps you would take Miss Stafford home? She should be got to bed, I think."

Mrs. Jack Bendish was not soon ruffled, nor for long. "Lift her in," she said. "Sorry I can't make room for you too, Captain Hyde, you are as white as a ghost. Very upsetting, isn't it? but don't worry, girls of her age turn faint rather easily. Her arm hurt? . . ." She pointed down the road with her whip. "Dr. Verney lives at The Laburnus, on the right, beyond the publichouse. If you would be so kind as to send him up to the vicarage?"

She whipped up her black ponies and was gone. Lawrence was grateful to her for asking no questions, but he would rather have taken Isabel direct to Val. Romance in bud requires a delicate hand. Now Mrs. Jack Bendish had all the bourgeois virtues except modesty and discretion.

CHAPTER X

The Wancote affair made a nine days' wonder in the Plain. Indeed it even got into the London papers, under such titles as "A Domestic Tragedy" or "Duel with a Dog": and, while the Morning Post added a thumbnail sketch of Captain Hyde's distinguished career, the Spectator took Ben as the text of a "middle" on "The Abuse of Asylum Administration in Rural Districts."

Lawrence himself, when he had despatched Hubert Verney to the vicarage, would have liked to cut his responsibility. But it could not be done: first there was the village policeman to run to earth and information to be laid before him, and then, since Brown's first flustered impulse was to arrest all concerned from Lawrence to Clara Janaway, Lawrence had to walk down with him to Wharton to interview Jack Bendish, as both the nearest magistrate and the nearest sensible man. But after pouring his tale into Jack's sympathetic ear he felt entitled to wash his hands of the affair. Instead of going back to Wanhope with the relief party he got Bendish to drop him at the field path to Wanhope: and he slipped up to his room by a garden door, bathed, changed, and came down to lunch without trace of discomposure. Gaston, curtly ordered to take his master's clothes away and burn them, was eaten by curiosity, but in vain.

Even before his cousin, Lawrence did not own to his adventure till the servants had left the room. If it could have been kept dark he would not have owned to it at all. He did so only because it must soon be common property and he did not care to be taxed with affectation.

When, bit by bits his story came out across the liqueur glasses and the early strawberries, Major Clowes laid his head back and roared with laughter. Lawrence was annoyed: he had not found it amusing and he felt that his cousin had a macabre and uncomfortable sense of humour. But Bernard, wiping the tears from his eyes, developed unabashed his idea of a good joke. "Hark to him! Now isn't that Lawrence all over? What! can't you run down for twenty-four hours to a hamlet the size of Chilmark but you must bring your faics divers in your pocket?"

"It isn't my fault if you have dangerous lunatics at large," said Lawrence, helping himself daintily to cream. "If this is a specimen of the way things go on in country districts, thank you, give me a London slum. The brute was as mad as a hatter. He ought to have been locked up years ago. I can't conceive what Stafford was about to keep him on the estate."

"All very fine," Bernard chuckled, "but I'd lay any odds Ben didn't go for Mrs. Ben till he saw you coming."

"Adventures are to the adventurous," Laura mildly translated the bitter jest. Her mission in life was to smooth down Bernard's rough edges. "But that is too ugly, Berns. You oughtn't to say such a thing even in fun. It was no fun for Lawrence."

"I don't object to an occasional scrap," said Lawrence. "But this one was overdone." He shivered suddenly from head to foot.

"Hallo, old man, I didn't know you had a nerve in your body!" said Bernard staring at him.

Lawrence went on with his strawberries in an ungenial silence. He was irritated by his momentary self betrayal. If he had cared to explain it he would have had to confess that though personally indifferent to adventures he disliked to have women mixed up in them. He was glad when Laura with her intuitive tact changed the conversation, not too abruptly.

"All modern men have nerves. I should think Lawrence had as few as any, but it must have been a frightful scene. I must run up after lunch and see Isabel. Poor child! But she's wonderfully brave. All the Staffords were brought up to be stoical: if they knocked themselves about as children they were never allowed to cry. Mr. Stafford is a fanatic on the point of personal courage. Val told me once that the only sins for which his father ever cuffed him were telling fibs and running away."

"Did he get cuffed often?" Lawrence enquired.

"Shouldn't wonder," said Bernard. "Val's one of your nervy men."

"Not after he was ten years old," said Laura smiling. "But as a little boy he was always in trouble. Not the wisest treatment, was it? for a delicate, sensitive child."

"Miss Isabel is not nervous," said Lawrence. "She is as cool a young lady as I have ever seen. I believe she still owes me a grudge for hitting Billy so hard." He dipped his fingers delicately into his finger bowl. "No, no more, thanks. Did I tell you that the brute of a Dane bit her?"

"Bit Isabel!"

"Made his teeth pretty nearly meet in her forearm. She was trying to soothe the dear dog. Mr. Stafford's theories may be ethically beautiful, but I object to their being carried to extremes. Frankly, I should describe your young friend as idiotically rash," said Lawrence with a wintry smile. "I couldn't prevent her doing it because I hadn't the remotest notion she was going to do it. The Dane was practically mad with rage. I could have cuffed her myself with pleasure. It was a wild thing to do and not at all agreeable for me."

"But, my dear Lawrence, that is one way of looking at it!" Laura protested, amused by his cool egoism, though she took it with the necessary grain of salt. "Bitten by that horrible dog? My poor Isabel! she loves dogs—I don't suppose she stopped to consider her own feelings or yours."

"She ought to have had more sense."

"Hear, hear!" said Bernard. "Half the trouble in the world comes from women shoving in where they're not wanted. It's a pleasure to talk to you, Lawrence, after lying here to be slobbered over by a pack of old women. I always exclude you, my dear," he nodded to Laura, "but the parson twaddles on till he makes me sick, and Val's not much better. What's a woman want with courage? Teach her to buy decent clothes and put 'em on properly, and she's learning something useful. I'll guarantee Isabel only got in the way. But you, Lawrence," he measured his cousin with an admiring eye, much as a Roman connoisseur might have run over the points of a favourite gladiator, "I should have liked to see you tackle the Dane. You're a big chap—deeper in the chest than I ever was, and longer in the reach. What's your chest measurement?— Yes, you look it. And nothing in your hand but a stick? By Jove, it must have been worth watching! Hey, Laura?"

"Bernard, you are embarrassing! You will make even Lawrence shy. But, yes," Laura laid her hand on Hyde's arm: "I should have liked to watch you fight the Dane."

How long was it since any one had spoken to Lawrence in that warm tone of affection? Not since his father died. From time to time Mrs. Cleve or other ladies had flattered his senses or his vanity, but none of them had ever looked at him with Laura's kind admiring eyes. Perhaps after all there was something to be said for family life! Tragic wreck as Clowes was, he would have been far more to be pitied but for his wife: their marriage, crippled and sterilized, was yet—as Lawrence saw it—a beautiful relation. Suppose he stood in that relation to Isabel? Sitting at table in the cool panelled diningroom, his careless pose stiffening under Laura's touch, Lawrence for the first time began to wonder whether he would not gain more in happiness than he would lose in freedom if he were to make the child his wife.

"To make the child his wife." He was not really more of an egoist than the average man, but he did assume that if he wanted her he could win her. His mistress was very young: it was her rose of youth

and her unquelled spirit that charmed him even more than her beauty: and she had not sixpence to her name, while he was a rich man. He did not, as Bernard would have done, go on to plume himself on his magnanimity, or infer that Isabel's gratitude would give him a claim on her fealty over and beyond the Pauline duty of wives. In the immediate personal relation Lawrence was visited by a saving humility. But on the main issue he took, or thought he took, a practical view. A man in love cannot soberly analyse his own psychological state, and Lawrence did not know that he had fallen in love with Isabel at first sight or that the germ of matrimonial intentions had lain all along in his mind. Here and now he believed that he first thought of marrying her.

Then he would have to stay on at Wanhope. And court Isabel under the eyes of all Chilmark? Under Bernard's eyes at all events; they were already watching him. Lawrence was irritated: whatever happened, he was not going to be watched by his cousin and chaffed and argued over and betted on. In most points indifferently frank, Lawrence was silent as the grave where sex came into play.

"Thank you." He touched with his lips the hand that Laura had innocently laid on his wrist. "It can't really be fourteen years, Laura, since you were staying at Farringay."

"Flatterer!" said Laura, smiling but startled, and rising from her chair. "This to an old married woman!"

"Ah! when I remember that I knew you before this fellow did—!"

"Here, I say," came Bernard's voice across the table, riotously amused, "none o' that! none o' that!"

"Penalty for having a charming wife," laughed Lawrence, in his preoccupation blind and deaf to danger signals. He rose to open the door for Laura. "By the by, if you go to the vicarage this afternoon, I'll stroll up with you, if I may. I suppose I owe the young lady that much civility!"

"I can't: I'm busy," said Laura hastily. "That is, I don't know what time I shall get away. Go by yourself, don't wait for me."

"Rubbish," said Bernard. "Much pleasanter for both of you to have the walk together. Lawrence doesn't want to go alone, do you?" ("Rather not," said Lawrence heartily.) "And I don't want you here, my love, if that's the trouble, I can't have you tied to the leg of my sofa."

Later, when Lawrence had gone out on the lawn to smoke, Bernard recalled Laura. She came to him. He took hold of her wrist and lay smiling up at her. "Nice relationship, isn't it, cousins-in-law? So free and easy. You—. I watched you pawing him about. So affectionate. He felt it too. Did you see the start he gave? He twigged fast enough. Think you can play that game under my nose, do you? So you can. I don't care what you do. Take yourself off now and take him with you."

"Don't pinch my wrist below the cuff, Bernard," said his wife. "I can't wear gloves at tea."

"You can stop out all night for all I care," said Clowes. "I'm sick of the sight of you."

Then Laura knew that the Golden Age was over.

Isabel had refused to go to bed. She had no nerves: she saw life in its proper colours without refraction. The dreadful scene at Wancote had made its full impression on her, but she was not beset like Hyde by visions of what might have been. Still she was tired and subdued, and when Verney had dressed her arm she announced her intention of spending the afternoon in the garden out of the way of kind enquiries: and she settled herself on an Indian chair behind a thicket of lilac and syringa, while Val and Rowsley and Yvonne brought books and cushions and chocolate and eau de cologne to comfort beauty in distress.

But she had reckoned without the wicket gate in the garden wall, which Lawrence let himself in by. He caught sight of her as he crossed the lawn and came up to her bare-headed. "How are you?" he asked without preface. "Better now?"

His informality went against the grain of Isabel's taste: he had no right to presume on a forced situation: with what fastidious modesty Val would have drawn back! She was tired, and she did not want to be reminded of what had happened in the morning. She shut up her book, but kept a finger in the place. "Thank you. I'm sorry the others are all out."

"Mrs. Clowes sent me on ahead."

For the second time she had made Lawrence redden like a girl, and his easy manner deserted him. Isabel unconsciously let the book slip from her hand. The lives of the Forsythe family were less absorbing than her own life when this fiery dramatic glow was shed over it. A singular smile flitted over

her lips: "Well, you may as well sit down now you are here," she observed. Lawrence sat down in a deck chair and Isabel's smile broadened: she was laughing at him and teasing him with her eyes, though what she said remained conventional to the point of primness. "Is Laura coming to see me? How sweet of her! But what a pity she couldn't come with you! Why couldn't she?"

"I believe she stayed to look after my cousin."

"How is Major Clowes? Did he have a good night and was he in a— was he cheerful today?"

"So-so: he's not a great talker, is he?"

Isabel's speaking face expressed dissent. "Perhaps not when he's in a good temper. Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm always forgetting he's your cousin."

"I'm prone to forget it myself. I've seen so little of him."

("Though the blase-man-of-the-world had seen thousands of superbly beautiful women in elegant creations by Paquin or Worth, his gaze was riveted as by a mesmeric attraction on the innocent young girl in her simple little white muslin frock, with her lissome ankles and slim, sunburnt hands.") Laura said you had been a great traveller. Shall you settle down in England?"

"Not unless I marry."

Isabel declined this topic, on which Mrs. Jack Bendish would have expatiated. "Laura says you have a lovely old house in Somersetshire. It must be jolly to have an ancestral house."

"Mine is not ancestral," said Lawrence amused. "My father bought it forty years ago at the time of the agricultural depression. It belonged to some county people—Sir Frank Fleet—who couldn't afford to keep it up. It is a lovely place, Farringay, but it's full of Fleet ghosts and the neighbourhood doesn't let me forget that I'm an alien."

"But how absurd! how narrow-minded!" exclaimed Isabel. "Houses must change hands now and then, and I dare say your father was a better landlord than the Fleets were. Besides, see how much worse it might have been! There's Wilmerdings, here in Chilmark, that the Morleys have taken: his name isn't Morley at all, Yvonne says it's Moss in the City: but they foreclosed on the Orr-Matthews' mortgage and turned them out, and that darling old place is delivered over to a horrid little Jew!"

"Poor Morley!" said Lawrence laughing. "I am a Jew myself." Isabel was stricken dumb. "I thought I had better tell you than let you hear it from some one else. No, don't apologize! these things will happen, and I'm not deeply hurt, for I refuse to call sibb with a Moss-Morley. I should never foreclose on any one's mortgage. My mother was an Englishwoman and my father was a Levantine—half Jew, half Greek. Have you never heard of Andrew Hyde the big curio dealer in New Bond Street? He was commonly known as old Hyde-and-see. The Hyde galleries are famous. As I remember him he was a common-looking little old man with a passion for art."

"Well, I'm sorry I said such a stupid thing," said Isabel, still very red, "not because of hurting your feelings, for it isn't likely that anything I said would do that—but because it was stupid in itself, and narrow-minded, and snobbish. It'll be a lesson to me. All the same, it's interesting." She had forgotten by now that she was an innocent-young-girl and Lawrence a blase-man-of-the-world, and had slipped into a vein of intimacy which was fast charming Lawrence out of all his caution. "I suppose you take after your father, and that's why you're so unlike Major Clowes. He is a Clowes, but you're a Hyde."

"What does that mean?"

Isabel waited a moment to think it out. "You're more of a cosmopolitan; I expect you have a passion for art too, like your father. Major Clowes hasn't. He doesn't care two pins for the beauty of his old swords and daggers, he cares only for getting all the different sorts. You, perhaps, might care almost too much." Lawrence dropped his eyes. "And you vary more, you're not always the same, you have more facets: one can see you've done all sorts of things and mixed with all sorts of people. I suppose that's why you're so easily bored—I don't mean to be rude!"

"At the present moment I am deeply interested. Go on: it charms me to be dissected to my face, and by such an able hand."

"No: it's absurd and I never meant to begin it. Of course I don't know a bit what you're like."

"God forbid!" Lawrence murmured:—"Guess away and I'll tell you if you're right."

"You won't play fair. You won't own up and you'll get cross if I do."

"Not I, I have the most amiable temper in the world."

"Now I wonder if that's true?" said Isabel, scrutinizing him closely. "Perhaps you wouldn't often take the trouble to get in a wax. Oh well," surrendering at indiscretion, "then I guess that you care for very few people and for those few very much."

"Missed both barrels. I like any number of people and I shouldn't care if I never saw one of them again."

Isabel laughed. "I said you wouldn't play fair."

"Don't you believe me?"

"No, of course not. You wouldn't say it if it were true."

Lawrence drew a deep breath and looked away. Their nook of turf was out of sight of the house, sheltered from it behind a great thicket of lilac and syringa, which walled off the lawn from the kitchen garden full of sweet-smelling currant bushes and apple-trees laden with green fruit. The sleepy air was alive with gilded wasps, and between the stiffly-drooping apple-branches, with their coarse foliage, and the pencilled frieze of stonecrop and valerian waving along the low stone boundarywall, there was a dim honey-coloured expanse that stretched away like an inland sea, where, the afternoon sunshine lay in a yellow haze over brown and yellow and blue tracts of the Plain. Nothing was to be heard but the drone of wings near at hand and the whirr of a haycutter far down in the valley. No one was near and summer lay heavy on the land.

"I did care once. . . I had a bad smash in my life when I was little more than a boy." He dragged a heavy gold band from his finger. "That was my wedding ring."

"Oh ... I'm sorry!" faltered Isabel. She was stunned by the extraordinary confidence.

"I married out of my class. It was when I was at Cambridge. She was a beautiful girl but she was not a lady. Her father was a tobacconist in the Cury, and Lizzie liked to serve in the shop. As she didn't want to lose her character nor I my degree, we compromised on secret nuptials. I took a house for her in Newham where I could go and visit her. I ought not to tell you the rest of the story."

"Oh yes, you can," said Isabel simply. "I hear all sorts of stories in the village."

So childish in some ways, so mature in others, she saw that Lawrence was longing to unbosom himself, and her instinct was to listen quietly, for, after all, this, though the strangest, was not the first such confidence that had been poured into her ear. She and her brother Val were alike in occasionally hearing secrets that had never been told to any one else. Why? Probably because they never gave advice, never moralized, never thought of themselves at all but only of the friend in distress. Isabel took Hyde's hand and held it closely, palm to palm. "Tell me all about it."

"There was another fellow at Trinity who had been in the Sixth at Eton with me, a year older than I was, a very brilliant man and as hard as nails: Rendell, his name was: an athlete, a tophole centre-forward, with a fascinating Irish manner and blazing blue eyes. To him I told my tale, because we were Damon and Pythias, and I couldn't have kept a secret from him to save my life. I was an ingenuous youngster in those days: never was such a pal as my pal! He saw me through my marriage and afterwards I took him with me once or twice to Myrtle Villa: it may illuminate the situation if I say that it made me all the prouder of Lizzie when I saw Rendell admired her: never was such an idyll as my manage a trois! Unluckily, one evening when I turned up unexpectedly I found them together."

"Oh! . . . What did you do?"

"Nothing. There was nothing to be done. I wasn't going to ruin myself by divorcing her. Luckily the war broke out and Rendell and I both enlisted the next day. He was killed fighting by my side at Neuve Chapelle, and I had the job of breaking the news to Lizzie. She was royally angry, poor Lizzie: told me I had no right to be alive when a better man than myself was dead. I agreed: Rendell was—the better man, though he didn't behave well to me. He died better than he lived. Out there it didn't seem to matter much. He died in my arms."

"Did you forgive your wife?"

"I never lived with her again, if that's what you mean. If I had been willing, which I wasn't, she never would have consented. She had the rather irrational prejudices of her type and class, and persisted in regarding me, or professing to regard me, as answerable for Rendell's death. It wasn't true," said Lawrence, turning his eyes on Isabel without any attempt to veil their agony. "If I'd meant to shoot him I should have shot him to his face. But I'd have saved him if I could. How on earth could any one do

anything in such a hell as Neuve Chapelle? That week every officer in my company was either killed or wounded. But Lizzie had no imagination. She couldn't get beyond the fact that I was alive and he was dead."

"What became of her?"

"I'm sorry to say she went to the bad. She had money from both of us, but she spent it in public houses—didn't seem to care what happened to her after losing Arthur: a wretched life: it ended last January with her death from pneumonia after measles. That was what brought me back to England; I couldn't stand coming home before."

"Was it a relief when she died?"

"No, I was sorry," said Hyde. His wide black eyes, devil-driven beyond reticence, were riveted on Isabel's: apparently she no longer existed for him except as the Chorus before whom he could strip himself of the last rag of his reserve. "It brought it all back. I was besotted when I married her, and I remembered all that when I saw her dead. I forgot the other men. It was just as it was when Arthur died. I couldn't do anything for him, and he was in agony: he was shot through the stomach: it didn't seem to matter then that he had robbed me of Lizzie. I couldn't even get him a drop of water to drink. He died hard, did Rendell. It wasn't true, what Lizzie said. I'd have given my life for him. But I couldn't even make it easy for him to go."

"Poor Rendell," said Isabel softly, "and poor you! Oh, I'm so sorry—I'm so sorry!"

She was not afraid of Hyde now nor shy of him, she felt only an immense pity for him—this man who for no conceivable reason and without the slightest warning had flung the weight of his terrible past on her young shoulders. She longed to comfort him. But he was inaccessibly far away, isolated, his voice rapid and hard and clear, his manner normal: every nerve stripped bare but still rigid. Inexperienced as she was, Isabel had a shrewd idea of his immediate need. She took up the ring that Lawrence had wrenched off and slipped it on his finger again.

"Don't do that," said Lawrence starting: "why do you do that?"

"But I shall love to see you wear it," said Isabel. "It's the sign that you've forgiven them both."

"Have I?"

"Of course you have. You loved them too much not to forgive."

"It is true. But I hate myself for it," said Lawrence. "I hate your etiolated Christian ethics. I don't believe in the forgiveness of sins. The complaisant husband, O God! If I'd had the spirit of a man, I should have shot Arthur the night—that night— . . ."

"But you loved him," said Isabel, "and your wife too. You felt revenge and hate and passion, but love was stronger: and love is nobler than hate. They betrayed you, but you never betrayed them. It wasn't unmanly of you, it was defeat and dishonour for them, not for you, when Rendell, after that great wrong he had done you, when you tried to make it easy for him to go."

"May I—?" said Lawrence.

He leaned his face down on her open palms, and she felt the tears that she could not see. He could not control them, and indeed after the first racking agony, when he felt as though his will were being torn out of him by the roots, he made no effort to control them, releasing Isabel and dropping at full length upon the turf. Nothing else, no torment of his own thoughts, not Rendell's last pangs nor his wife's beauty young again in death had ever made Hyde weep: if Rendell had died hard, Lawrence had lived equally hard, locking up his frightful trouble in his own breast, escaping from it when he could, cursing it and fighting against it when it threatened to overpower him. But now he surrendered to it and acknowledged to himself that it had broken his life. And he felt no shame, not one iota, nothing but a profound soulagement: the proud reticent man, too vain to shed tears in his own room alone, wept voluntarily before Isabel, uncovering for her pity the wounds not only of grief but of rage and humiliation.

Such an outbreak would have been impossible in a man of pure English blood, and in a pure Oriental it would have manifested itself differently, but Isabel had truly said of Hyde that his temperament was not homogeneous: the mixed strain in him betrayed him into strange incongruities of strength and weakness. Isabel shut her eyes to incongruity. She gave him without stint the pitying gentleness he thirsted for. She refused now to contrast him with her brother. Certainly Val's judgment would have been cutting and curt. But just? Hardly. By instinct Isabel felt that her brother's clear, sane, English

mind had not all the factors necessary for judging this collapse.

Her imagination was at work in the shadow: "the night—that night. . . ." How do men live through such hours? She saw Lizzie as a chocolate-box beauty, but redeemed from hebetude by her robust youth: able to attract Hyde by his love of luxury and to hold him by main force: uneducated, coarse, and cruel, but not weak. What a disastrous marriage! doomed from the outset, even if no Rendell had come on the scene. Isabel dismissed Rendell rather scornfully: in that night at Myrtle Villa she felt pretty sure that the duel had been fought out between husband and wife: the very staging of it, picturesque for Lizzie Hyde and tragic for her husband, must for the entrapped lover have taken a frame of ignominious farce. A gleam shot through Isabel's eyes—as she imagined Rendell trying to face Hyde, and Hyde sparing him and sending him away untouched. No, no! as between the two men, the honours lay with Hyde.

But as between him and Lizzie? There the reckoning was not so easy. His wife had set scars on him that would never wear out. Dimly Isabel guessed that since coming out of her destructive hands Hyde himself could be both coarse and cruel: the seed of brutality must have been in him all along, but Myrtle Villa had fertilized it. If he married again, what would be required of Lizzie's successor? A strange deep smile gave to Isabel's young lips the wisdom of the women of all the ages. Love that gives without stint asking for no recompense: love that understands yet will not criticize nor listen to criticism: love that dares to deny its lover for his own sake.

After collapse came quiescence, and, after a long quiescence, revival. Hyde raised himself on his arm and felt for his handkerchief—indifferent to Isabel's observation, or soothed by it: his features were ravaged. Isabel drenched her own handkerchief in Mrs. Bendish's eau-de cologne and gave it him, dripping wet. "Take this, it will do you good."

"Thank you" said Lawrence, exhausted and subdued.

Becoming gradually rather more composed, he raised his eyes again. "What must you think of me? It is beyond apology. Will you ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive: I'm not hurt."

"You're rather young to hear such a history as mine."

She blushed. "Val says it doesn't matter what one knows so long as one doesn't think about it in the wrong way." With her sweet friendly smile, she touched with her fingertip the lapel of his coat: an airy gesture, but there was a fire as well as sweetness in Isabel, and for his life Lawrence could not repress a start. "You mustn't mind me, Captain Hyde. You needn't mind, because you couldn't help it. One can keep a secret for twenty years but not for ever, and for confessor I suppose any woman will do better than a man, won't she? It's not as though I should ever tell any one else: I never will, I promise you that. You'll go away and never see me again, and it'll be as though no one knew or as though I were dead."

Touching innocence! Did she indeed imagine that after such a scene . . . ?

"But I do not care two straws," said Lawrence, "so spare your consolations! On the contrary, it has been a great relief to me. It's as if you had unlocked a door. The prisoner you have set free thanks you. I was only afraid it might have been too much for you, but you're made of strong stuff. Yet I don't suppose you ever saw a man weep before: well, you've seen it now: mon Dieu, mon Dieu, but I am tired! But you've let yourself in for a considerable responsibility."

"For what?"

"For me. Do you think it can ever again be the same between us?" On one knee by Isabel's chair, Hyde laughed down at her with his brilliant eyes, irreticent and unsparing of timidity in others. "Do you think I could have leaned my head on any hands but yours?"

He came too near, he touched her. Isabel had gone through a great deal that day, but, with the cruel and sordid history of Hyde's married life fresh in her mind, none of the material horrors at Wancote had produced in her such a shuddering recoil as now. His wife had not been dead six months! "Captain Hyde, how dare you?"

"I beg your pardon."

Lawrence drew himself up, a good-humoured smile on his lips: but they were pale. "I—I didn't mean to hurt you," faltered Isabel, as the tension of his silence reached her. What right had she, a young girl, to impose her own code of delicacy on a man of Hyde's age and standing?—Lawrence looked at her

searchingly and his eyes changed, the sad irony died out of them, and rapidly, imperceptibly, he returned to his normal manner.

"Nor I to frighten you. Why, what a child it is, after all! Yes, your hands are strong, but they aren't practised yet. Never mind, you shall forget or remember anything you like, except this one thing which it pleases me and may please you to remember that I'm very glad you know the worst and weakest of me—"

"Isabel, are you there?"

Thus daily life revenges itself on those who forget its existence.

"That is Val's voice," said Lawrence. He stood up, no longer pale. "Heavens, I can't face him!"

"Oh dear!" said Isabel in dismay. She was no more anxious for them to meet than Lawrence was, but Val's footstep on the turf was dangerously near. But he was making for the middle of the lilac-hedge, for the red rose archway and the asphalt walk between reddening apple trees: and Isabel was sitting near the end, close to the garden wall. She flew out of her chair, held up a branch while Lawrence squeezed between the wall and the lilacs, and flew back and curled up again. The lilac leaves had not finished twinkling and rustling when Val appeared.

"How are you, invalid? I came home early on purpose to look after you." He was in well-worn grey riding clothes, booted and spurred, his whip in one hand and his gloves in the other: a slight, cool, well-knit figure of low tones and half-lights. "Have you had a quiet afternoon?"

"So-so," said Isabel, crimson.

"You look flushed, my darling," said Val tenderly. He sat down at the foot of Isabel's Indian chair and laid a finger on her wrist. "You don't feel feverish, do you?" The light click of the wicket gate, which meant that Lawrence was safely off the premises, enabled Isabel to say no with a sigh of relief. "It must be the hot weather. Hallo! what have we here?"

He held up the gold cigarette case which had dropped from Hyde's coat when he was lying on the grass.

"Some of Mrs. Bendish's property by the look of it," remarked Val. "Diamonds, begad! I should have thought Yvonne had better taste. But it must be hers, though the cipher doesn't seem to have a B in it. I'll guarantee it isn't Rosy's." He slipped it into his pocket. "I'll give it to Jack, I shall see him tonight at the vestry-meeting."

"It belongs to Captain Hyde."

"How do you know?"

"He's been here this afternoon."

"How long did he stay?"

"What time is it?— An hour and twenty minutes."

"What brought him?" said Val, bewildered.

Isabel was mute. . . "I don't know what you're talking about, Isabel. Has he been with you all that time? Very stupid of him when I particularly wanted you to have a quiet afternoon. When did he go?"

"He has only just gone."

"Just gone? I never saw him."

"He went by the wicket gate."

"But I came in by the wicket gate myself!" said Val. His kind serene eyes rested on his sister without a shadow of any thought behind surprise.

"I left the mare with Rowsley in the village."

Isabel sat up suddenly and wound her arms round Val's neck. "I sent him away when I heard you coming. He dodged you behind the lilacs. I didn't want to tell you he'd been here. I never should have told you if you hadn't found that case."

"You got rid of him— This minute? Because I came—? Isabel!" Stafford held her off. "It is not possible

—! Listen to me: I will have an answer. I know Hyde. Has he said anything to offend you?"

"No! no! oh Val, don't be so angry!"

"Lucky for him," said Val, drawing a long breath and sitting down again, his whip across his knee. "My dear little sister, you mustn't make mysteries out of nothing at all! I'm sorry I startled you, but you startled me: I didn't know what to make of it. Hyde has not a very good name. . . . In fact I'd rather you didn't see too much of him unless Rose or I were there: it was cheek of him to come up this afternoon when I was out, considering that he scarcely knows you: but I suppose he thinks the Wancote show gives him right of entry. That is the sort of thing a chap like Hyde does think. Now begin again and tell me what it's all about."

"Oh, nothing, Val, nothing!" said Isabel, laughing, though the tears were not far from her eyes. "I didn't know you could get in such a wax if you tried! It's as you say, a little mystery of nothing at all. I'd tell you like a shot if I could, but I can't because it would be breaking a promise."

"Hyde had no earthly right to make you promise."

"It was of my own accord."

"It is all wrong," said Val. "Promises and silly secrets between a child like you and a fellow like Hyde!" He was more grave and vexed than Isabel had ever seen him. "There must be no more of it."

"There won't if I can help it!" said Isabel. "I like Captain Hyde—yes, I do: I know you don't, and I can quite see that he's what Rose would call a bit of an outsider, but I'm sorry for him and there's a great deal I like in him. But I don't want to see him again for years and years." She gave a little shiver of distaste: if anything had been wanting to heighten the reaction of her youth against Hyde's stained middle age, the evasions in which he had involved her would have done it. "Now don't scold me any more! I'm innocent, and I feel rather sad. The world looks unhomey this afternoon. All except you! You stay there where I can watch you: you're so comfortably English, so nice and cool and quiet! There's no one like you, no one: the more I see of other people the more I like you! I'm so glad you don't wear linen clothes and a Panama hat and rings. I'd give you away if you did with half a pound of tea. No, it's no use asking me any more questions because I shan't answer them: a promise is all the more binding if one would rather not keep it. No, and it's no use fishing either, I can keep a secret as well as you can—"

She broke off before the white alteration in Val's face.

"Has—"

"No," said Isabel slowly: "no, he never mentioned your name."

CHAPTER XI

"Val"

"M'm."

"I say"

"What, then?"

"What's all this about the Etchingham agency?"

Val Stafford, smoking a well-earned pipe some hours later in the evening sunlight on the vicarage lawn, looked up at his brother over the Chronicle with a faint frown. "Who?"

"Ah! who?" said Rowsley, squatting cross-legged on the turf.

"Jack began on it this afternoon, and I had to switch him off, for I didn't care to own that it was news to me."

"There's nothing in it at present."

"The duke has offered me the management of his Etchingham property," said Val unwillingly. "Oh no, not to give up Bernard: Etchingham, you see, marches with Wanhope and the two could be run

together. He was awfully nice about it: would take what time I could give him: quite saw that Wanhope would have to come first."

"How much?"

"Four hundred and an allowance for a house. Five, to be precise, which is what he is giving Mills: but of course I couldn't take full time pay for a part-time job."

Rowsley whistled.

"Yes, it would be very nice," said Val, always temperate. "It would practically be 300 pounds, for I couldn't go on taking my full 300 pounds from Bernard. I should get him to put on a young fellow to work under me."

"It would make a lot of difference to you, even so."

"To us," Val corrected him. "Another pound a week would oil the wheels of Isabel's housekeeping. And—" he hesitated, but having gone so far one might as well go on—"it would enable me to do two things I've long set my heart on, only it was no use saying so: give you another hundred and fifty a year and insure my life in Isabel's favour. It would lift a weight off my mind if I could do that. Suppose I were to die suddenly—one never knows what would become of her? She'll be able to earn her own living after taking her degree in October, but women's posts are badly paid and it's uncommonly hard to save. Oh yes, old boy, I know you'd look after her! But I don't want her to be a drag on you: it's bad enough now—you never grumble, but I know what it's like never to have a penny to spare. Times have changed since I was in the Army, but nothing alters the fact that it's uncommonly unpleasant to be worse off than other fellows. I hate it for you—all the more because you don't grumble. It is a constant worry to me not to be able to put you in a better position."

Rowsley had been too long inured to this paternal tenderness to be sensible of its touching absurdity on the lips of a man not much older than himself. But he was not a selfish youth, and he remonstrated with Val, though more like a son than a brother. "Yes, I dare say, but where do you come in? A stiff premium for Isabel and 50 pounds for Jim and 150 pounds for me doesn't leave much change out of 300 pounds!"

"Oh, I've all I want. Living at home, I don't get the chance of spending a lot of pocket money."

"Why don't you close at once?"

"Because I can't get an answer out of Bernard. I've spoken to him but he won't decide one way or the other. And he's my master, and I can't take on another job if he objects. That's why I kept it dark at home: what's the good of raising hopes that may be disappointed?"

"Pity you can't chuck Bernard and take on Etchingam and the five hundred."

"I should never do that," said Val in the rare tone of decision which in him was final. "After all these years I could never leave Bernard in the lurch. I owe him too much."

"As if the boot weren't on the other leg!" Rowsley muttered. He was not mercenary—none of Mr. Stafford's children were: he saw eye to eye with Val in Val's calm preference of six to eight hundred a year: but when Val carried his financial principles into the realm of sentiment Rowsley now and then lost his temper. His brother smiled at him, amused by his irritation, unmoved by it: other men's opinions rarely had any weight with Val Stafford.

"Pax till it happens, at all events! Honestly I don't think Bernard means to object: he's been all smiles the last day or two—Hyde's coming has shaken him up and done him good—"

"Oh! Hyde!"

Val let fall his paper and looked curiously at Rowsley, whose tone was a challenge. "What is it now?"

"Do you like this chap Hyde?"

"That depends on what you mean by liking him. He's not a bad specimen of his class."

"What is his class? Do you know anything of his people?"

"Of his family I know little except that he has Jew blood in him and is very well off," Val could have told his brother where the money came from, but forbore out of consideration for Lawrence, who might not care to have his connection with the Hyde Galleries known in Chilmark. "He came here because Lucian Selincourt asked him to see if he could do anything for Bernard."

"I can't see Hyde putting himself out of his way to oblige Mr. Selincourt."

"If you ask me, Rose, I should say he had only just got back to England and was at a loose end. But there was a dash of good nature in it: he's genuinely fond of Mrs. Clowes."

"So I gathered," said Rowsley. His tone was pregnant. Val sat silent for a moment.

"What rubbish! He hasn't seen her for eight or ten years."

"Since her marriage." Val shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, Val, but I cannot see Hyde staying on at Wanhope out of cousinly affection for Bernard Clowes. It must be a beastly uncomfortable house to stay in. Nicely run and all that, and they do you very well, but Bernard is distinctly an acquired taste. Oh, my dear chap!" as Val's silence stiffened, "no one suggests that Laura's ever looked at the fellow! But facts are facts, and Hyde is— Hyde. I'm not a bit surprised to hear he has Jew blood in him," Rowsley continued, warming to the discussion: he was a much keener judge of character than the tolerant and easy-going Val. "That accounts for the arty strain in him. Yvonne says he's a thorough musician, and Jack told me Lord Grantchester took to him because he knew such a lot about pictures. Well, so he ought! He's a Londoner. What does he know of the country? Only what you pick up at a big country-house party or a big shoot! He's not the sort of chap to stay on at Wanhope for the pleasure of cheering up across-grained br—a fellow like Bernard. Yes, he's talking of staying on indefinitely: is going to send to town for one of his confounded cars. . . . And what other woman is there in Chilmark that he'd walk across the road to look at?"

"I'm not sure you're fair to him."

Rowsley turned up to his brother an amused, rather sweet smile.
"Val, you'd pray for the devil?"

"Oh, Hyde isn't a devil! I came pretty close to him ten years ago. He has a streak of generosity in him: no one knows that better than I do, for I'm in his debt. What? Oh! no, not in money matters: is that likely? But he's capable of . . . magnanimity, one might call it," Stafford fastidiously felt after precision: "no, he wouldn't pursue Laura; he wouldn't make her life harder than it is already."

"He might propose to make it easier." Rowsley threw a daisy at a cockchafer and missed it. "You and I are sons of a parsonage. We shouldn't run off with a married lady because it would be against our principles." His thin brown features were twisted into a faint grimace. Rowsley, like Val, possessed a satirical sense of humour, and gave it freer play than Val did. "It's so difficult to shake off early prejudices. When Fowler and I were at the club the other day, we met a horrid little sweep who waxed confidential. I said I couldn't make love to a married woman if I tried, and Fowler said he could but held rather not, and we walked off, but as I remarked to Fowler afterwards the funny thing was that it was true. I don't see anything romantic in the situation. It strikes me as immoral and disgusting. But Hyde wouldn't take a narrow view like mine. He has to live up to his tailor."

"Oh, really, Rose!" Val gave his unwilling laugh. "You're like Isabel, who can't forgive him for sporting a diamond monogram."

"No, but I'm interested. I know Jack's limitations, and Jimmy's, and yours, but Hyde's I don't know, and he intrigues me," said Rowsley, lighting a cigarette with his agile brown fingers. "Now I'll tell you the way he really strikes me. He's not a bad sort: I shouldn't wonder if there were more decency in him than he'd care to get credit for. But I should think," he looked up at Val with his clear speculative hazel eyes, "that he's never in his life taken a thrashing. He's always had pots of money and superb health. I know nothing, of his private concerns, but at all events he isn't married, and from what Jack says he's sought safety in numbers. No wife, no kids, no near relations—that means none of the big wrenches. No: I don't believe Hyde's ever taken a licking in his life."

"You sound as if you would like to administer one."

"Only by way of a literary experiment," said Rowsley with his mischievous grin. He was of the new Army, Val of the old: it was a constant source of mild surprise to Val that his brother read books about philosophy, and psychology, and sociology, of which pre-war Sandhurst had never heard: read poetry too, not Tennyson or Shakespeare, but slim modern volumes with brown covers and wide margins: and wrote verses now and then, and sent them to orange-coloured magazines or annual anthologies, at which Val gazed from a respectful distance. "I don't owe him any grudge. I'm not Bernard's dry-nurse!"

Val turned a leaf of his paper, but he was not reading it.

"I rather wish you hadn't said all this, Rowsley. It does no good: not even if it were true."

"Val, if it weren't such a warm evening I'd get up and punch your head. You're a little too bright and good, aren't you? Yvonne Bendish says it, and she's Laura's sister."

"Yvonne would say anything. I wish you had given her a hint to hold her tongue. She may do most pestilent mischief if she sets this gossip going."

"It'll set itself going," said Rowsley. "And, though I know the Bendishes pretty well, I really shouldn't care to tell Mrs. Jack not to gossip about her own sister. You might see your way to it, reverend sir, but I don't."

"If it came to Bernard's ears I wouldn't answer for the consequences."

"Won't Bernard see it for himself?"

"If I thought that," said Val, "if I thought that. . . ."

"You couldn't interfere, old man," said Rowsley with a shrewd glance at his brother. "Your hands are tied."

"H'm: yes, that's true." It was much truer than Rowsley knew. "I don't care," said Val, involuntarily crushing the paper in his hand: "I would not let that stand in my way: I'd speak to Hyde."

"Are you prepared to take high ground? I can't imagine any one less likely to be amenable to moral suasion, unless of course you're much more intimate with him than you ever let on to me. Perhaps you are," Rowsley added. "He certainly is interested in you."

"Hyde is?"

"Watches you like a cat after a mouse. What's at the root of it, Val? Is it the original obligation you spoke of? I'm not sure that I should care to be under an obligation to Hyde myself. Hullo, are you off?" Val had risen, folding the newspaper, laying it carefully down on his chair: in all his ways he was as neat as an old maid.

"I have to be at the managers' meeting by half past eight, and it's twenty past now."

Watching his brother across the lawn, Rowsley cudgelled his brains to account for Val's precipitate departure. The pretext was valid, for Val was always punctual, and yet it looked like a retreat—not to say a rout. But what had he said to put Val to flight?

Present at the managers' meeting were Val, still in breeches: Jack Bendish in a dinner jacket and black tie: Garrett the blacksmith, cursorily washed: Thurlow, a leading Nonconformist tradesman: and Mrs. Verney the doctor's wife. Agenda: to instruct the Correspondent to requisition a new scrubbing brush for the Infants' School. This done and formally entered in the Minutes by Mrs. Verney, the meeting resolved itself into a Committee of Ways and Means for getting rid of the boys' headmaster without falling foul of the National Union of Teachers; but these proceedings, though of extreme interest to all concerned, were recorded in no Minutes.

The meeting broke up in amity and Bendish came out into the purple twilight, taking Val's arm. It was gently withdrawn. "Neuritis again?" said Jack. "Why don't you try massage?" He always asked the same question, and, being born to fifteen thousand a year, never read between the lines of Val's vague reply. Val had a touch of neuritis in his injured arm two nights out of seven, but he could not find the shillings for his train fare to Salisbury, far less the fees of a professional masseuse. Bendish, who could have settled that difficulty out of a week's cigar bills, would have been shocked and distressed if Val had owned to it, but it was beyond the scope of his imagination, though he was a thoughtful young man and quietly did his best to protect Val from the tax of chauffeurs and gamekeepers. He understood that poor men cannot always find sovereigns. But he really did not know that sometimes they cannot even find shillings. Tonight he said, "I can't think why you don't get a woman over to massage you," and then, reverting to the peccant master, "Brown's a nuisance. He has a rotten influence on the elder boys. He's thick with all that beastly Labour crowd, and I believe Thurlow's right about his goings on with Warner's wife, though I wasn't going to say so to Thurlow. I do wish he'd do something, then we could fire him. But we don't want a row with the N.U.T."

"You can't fire a man for his political opinions."

"Why not, if they're wrong?" said Bendish placidly.

His was the creed that Labour men are so slow to understand because it is so slow to explain itself: not a blind prejudice, but the reasonable faith of one who feels himself to belong to an hereditary officer caste for whom privilege and responsibility go hand in hand. And an excellent working rule it is

so long as practice is not divorced from theory: so long as the average member of the governing class acts up to the tradition of government, be he sachem or daimio or resident English squire. It amused Val: but he admired it.

"Brown is a thorn in Jimmy's side," he remarked, dropping the impersonal issue. "I never in my life heard a man make such a disagreeable noise on the organ. I tackled him about it last Sunday. He said it ciphured, but organs don't cipher in dry weather, so I went to look at it and found three or four keys glued together with candle grease."

"Filthy swine! Are you coming round to Wanhope? I have to call in on my way home, my wife's dining there."

Val made no reply. "Are you coming up or not? You look fagged, Val," said Bendish affectionately. "Anything wrong?"

"No: I was only wondering whether I'd get you to take a message for me, but I'd better go myself."

Bendish nodded. "Just as you like. Have you settled yet about the Etchingham agency?"

"No, I'm waiting for Bernard."

"Hope you'll see your way to accepting. My only fear is that it would throw too much work on you; you're such a conscientious beggar! but of course you wouldn't do for us all the odd jobs you do for poor Bernard. Seems to me," Jack ruminated, "the best plan would be for you to have a car. One gets about quicker like that and it wouldn't be such a fag. There's that little green Napier roadster, she'd come in handy if we stabled her at Nicholson's." He added simply, to obviate any possible misunderstanding, "Garage bills our show, of course."

"Thanks most awfully," said Val, accepting without false pride. "I should love it, I do get tired after being in the saddle all day. It would more than make up for the extra work."

They were crossing the Wanhope lawn as he spoke, on their way to the open French windows of the parlour, gold-lit with many candles against an amethyst evening sky. Laura, in a plain black dress, was at the piano, the cool drenched foliage of Claude Debussy's rainwet gardens rustling under her magic fingers. Bernard was talking to Mrs. Jack Bendish, for the sufficient reason that she disliked him and disliked talking to any one while Laura played. Her defiant sparkle, her gipsy features, her slim white shoulders emerging from the brocade and sapphires of a sleeveless bodice cut open almost to her waist, produced the effect of a Carolus Duran lady come to life and threw Laura back into a dimmed and tired middle age. Jack's eyes glowed as they dwelt on her. His marriage had been a trial to his family, but no one could deny that Yvonne had made a success of it, for Jack worshipped her.—Lawrence, leaning forward in his chair, his forehead on his hand to shield his eyes from the light, looked exceedingly tired, and probably was so.

"Queer chap Hyde," said Bendish to Val as they waited on the grass for the music to finish. "Can't think what he's stopping on for."

"Oh, Jack, for heaven's sake don't you begin on that subject!"

"Hey? Oh! No, by Jove. Seems a shame, doesn't it?" returned Bendish, taking the point with that rapid effortless readiness of his class which made him more soothing to Val than many a cleverer man. "It all says itself, so what's the good of saying it? All the same I shan't be sorry when Hyde packs his movin' tent a day's march nearer Jerusalem." And with a casual wink at Val he stepped over the threshold. His judgment, so vague and shrewd and sure of itself, represented probably the kindest view that would be taken in Chilmark.

Their entrance broke up the gathering. Jack carried off his wife, and Barry appeared to wheel Bernard away to bed. With a word to Laura, Val followed the cripple to his room. The Duke was pressing for an answer, and long experience had taught Val that for Bernard one time was as good as another: it was not possible to count on his moods. And there was not much to be said; all pros and cons had been thrashed out before; the five minutes while Barry was out of the room fetching Bernard's indispensable hot-water bottles would give Val ample time to secure Bernard's consent.—Laura had scarcely finished putting away her music when Val came back, humming under his breath the jangled tune that echoes night in the streets of Granada. Laura glanced at Lawrence, who had gone into the garden to smoke and was passing and repassing the open window: no, he could not hear. "Well, Val?"

"Let me do that for you, shall I?" said Val, lightly smiling, at her. "Your ottoman has a heavy lid."

"Have you spoken to Bernard?"

"I have."

"And it's all right?"

"Yes" said Val, deftly flinging diamond-wise a glittering Chinese cloth: "is that straight?—that is, for me. I shan't take the agency."

"Val!"

"Bernard agrees with me that the double work would be too heavy. Of course I should like the money and I'm awfully sorry to disoblige Lord Grantchester and Jack, but one has one's limitations, and I don't want to knock up."

"It is too bad—too bad of Bernard," said Laura, lowering her voice as Lawrence lingered near the window. "He doesn't half deserve your goodness to him."

"Bosh!" said Val laughing. "Where do these candlesticks go? In my heart of hearts I'm grateful to him. I'm a cowardly beggar, Laura, and I was dreading the big financial responsibility. Oh no, Bernard didn't put any pressure on me: simply offered me the choice between Etchingam and Wanhope."

"They would pay you twice what you get from Bernard. Oh, Val, I wish you would take it and throw us over!"

"That's very unkind of you."

"Is this definite?"

"Quite: Bernard had thought it well over and made up his mind. I shouldn't speak to him about it if I were you."

"I shan't. I couldn't bear to."

"Bosh again—excuse me. I must go home. Good-night, dear." He held out his hand, wishing, in the repressed way that had become a second nature to him, that Laura would not wring it so warmly and so long. In the first bitterness of disappointment—so much the keener for his unlucky confidence to Rowsley—Val could not stand sympathy. Not even from Laura? Least of all from Laura. He nodded to her with a bright careless smile and went out into the night.

But he had still one more mission to perform before he could go home to break the bad news to Rowsley: a trying mission under which Val fretted in repressed distaste. He came up to Lawrence holding out the gold cigarette case. "You dropped this at our place when you were talking to my sister this afternoon."

"Did I?" Lawrence slipped it into his pocket. His manner was perfectly calm. "Thanks so much.—I hadn't missed it." He had no fear of having been betrayed, in essentials, by Isabel.

"I don't want to offend you," Val continued with his direct simplicity of manner, "but perhaps you hardly realize how young my sister is."

"Some one said she was nineteen, but why?"

"I don't know what you said to her, probably nothing of the slightest consequence, but she's only a child, and you managed to upset her. To be frank, I didn't want her to see any one this afternoon. Oh, she's all right, but her arm has run her up a bit of a temperature, and Verney wants her to keep quiet for a few days. It'll give her an excuse to keep clear of the inquest too. This sounds ungrateful as well as ungracious, when we owe you so much, but there's no ingratitude in it, only common sense."

"Oh, damn your common sense!" exclaimed Lawrence.

It was as laconic a warning-off as civility allowed: and it irritated Lawrence beyond bearing to be rebuked by young Stafford, whose social life stood in his danger, whom he could at pleasure strip to universal crucifying shame. But there was neither defiance nor fear in Val: tranquil and unpretentious, in his force of character he reminded Lawrence of Laura Clowes. She too had been attacked once or twice that evening by her husband, and Lawrence had admired the way in which she either foiled or evaded the rapier point, or took it to her bosom without flinching. This same silken courage, it seemed, Val also possessed. Both would stand up to a blow with the same grave dignity and—perhaps—secret scorn.

Minutes passed. Val waited because he chose not to be the first to break silence, Lawrence because he was absorbing fresh impressions with that intensity which wipes out time and place. He was in the

mood to receive them: tired, softened, and quickened, from the tears of the afternoon. After all Val was Isabel's brother and possessed Isabel's eyes! This drew Lawrence to him by a double cord: practically, because it is inconvenient to be on bad terms with one's brother-in-law, and mystically, because in his profound romantic passion he loved whatever was associated with her, down to the very sprig of honeysuckle that she had pinned into his coat. But for this cord his relations with Stafford would have begun and ended in a casual regret for the casual indulgence of a cruel impulse. But Isabel's brother had ex officio a right of entry into Hyde's private life, and, the doors once opened, he was dazed by the light that Val let in.

It was after ten o'clock and dews were falling, falling from a clear night. "One faint eternal eventide of gems," beading the dark turf underfoot and the pale faces of roses that had bloomed all day in sunshine: now prodigal of scent only they hung their heads like ghosts of flowers among dark glossy leaves. Stars hung sparkling on the dark field of heaven, stars threw down their spears on the dark river fleeting to the star-roofed distant Channel. Stream and grass and leaf-buds were ephemeral and eternal, ever passing and ever renewed, old as the stars, or the waste ether in which they range: the green, sappy stem, the dew-bead that hung on it, the shape of a ripple were the same now as when Nineveh was a queen of civilization and men's flesh was reddening alive in osier cages over altar fires on Wiltshire downs. And all the sweetness, all the romance of an English midsummer night seized the heart of Lawrence, a nomad, a returned exile, and a man in love—as if he had never known England before.

Or her inhabitants either! Lawrence, without country, creed, profession, or territorial obligation, was one of those sons of rich men who form, in any social order, its loosest and most self-centred class. In his set, frank egoism was the only motive for which one need not apologize. But in Chilmark it was not so. Far other forces were in play in the lives of the Stafford family, and Laura Clowes, and Lord Grantchester and his wife and Jack Bendish. What were these forces? Lawrence thought in flashes, by imagery, scene after scene flitting before him out of the last forty-eight hours. Homespun virtues: unselfishness, indifference to money values, the constant sense of filial, fraternal, social responsibility . . . the glow in Jack's eyes when they rested on his wife: Verney's war on cesspools: Leverton Morley as scoutmaster: the Chinese lecture: rosebushes in the churchyard, by the great stone cross with its list of names beginning "George Potts, Wiltshire Rifles, aged 49," and ending "Robert Denis Bendish, Grenadier Guards, aged 19: Into Thy Hands, O Lord": old, old feudal England, closeknit, no pastoral of easy virtues, yet holding together in a fellowship which underlies class disunion: whose sons, from days long before the Conquest, have always desired to go to sea when the cuckoo sang, and to come home again when they were tired of the hail and salt showers, because they could not bear to be landless and lordless men. . . .

[Footnote]

"Swylce geac mona geomran reorde, singe sumeres weard, sorge beade bittre in breosthord; pset se beorn ne wat, secg esteadig, hwset pa sume dreoga, pe pa wrseclastas widost lecga! . . . pince him on mode pset he his monndryhten clyppe and cysse andon cneo lecge honda and heafod; ponne onwsecne, gesihp him beforan fealwe wegass, bapian brimfuglas."

"Even so the cuckoo warns him with its sad voice, Summer's warden sings foreboding sorrow, bitter grief of heart. Little knows the prosperous fellow what others are doing who follow far and wide the tracks of exile . . . Then dreams the seafarer that he clasps his lord and kisses him, and on his knee lays hand and head; but he awakes and sees before him the fallow waterways and the sea-fowls bathing."

[End of Footnote]

Lawrence flung off the impression with a jerk of his shoulders, as if it were a physical weight. It was too heavy to be endured. Not even to marry Isabel was he going to impose on his own unbroken egoism the restricting code of a country village.

"You are a dreamer, Val! Why don't you throw over Bernard and take the Etchingham agency? Yes, I heard every word you said to Laura: you made a gallant effort, but the facts speak for themselves, and your terminological inexactitudes wouldn't deceive a babe at the breast. Bernard pays you 300 pounds a year and orders you about like a groom, Grautchester would give you six and behave like a gentleman. But no, you must needs stick to Bernard, though you never get any thanks for it! You're an unpractical dreamer."

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about."

"And you're all in it together, damn you!" Lawrence broke out with an angry laugh. "It's all equally picturesque—feudal's the word! I never knew anything like it in my life and I wouldn't have believed it could continue to exist. What do you do with gipsies? evict 'em, I suppose." He flung a second question at Val which made the son of a vicarage knit his brows.

"As a matter of fact there's a house in Brook Lane about which Bendish and I are a good deal exercised in our minds at the present moment . . . and the percentage of children born too soon after marriage is disastrous. You're all out, Hyde. Nothing could be more commonplace than Chilmark, believe me: life is like this all over rural England, and it's only from a distance that one takes it for Arcadia."

"Folly," said Lawrence. "Good God, why should you exercise your simple minds over the house in Brook Lane? Ah! because the men who go to it are your own men, and the parsonage and the Castle are answerable for their souls." Val, irritated, suggested that if Hyde's forebears had lived in Chilmark since the time when every freeman had to swear fealty, laying his hands between the knees of his lord, Hyde might have shared this feeling. "But they didn't," said Lawrence, drily. "My grandfather was a pawnbroker in the New Cut."

"Then perhaps you're hardly in a position to judge."

"Judge? I don't judge, my good fellow—I'm lost in admiration! In an age of materialism it's refreshing to come across these simple, homespun virtues. I didn't know there was a man left in England that would exist, for choice, on three hundred a year. Are you always content with your rustic ideals, Val? Haven't you any ambition?"

"I?" said Val.

"Carry me out of the fight," quoted Lawrence under his breath. "I swear I forgot."

Silence fell again, the silence on Lawrence's part of continual conflict and adjustment, and on Val's mainly of irritation. Lawrence talked too much and too loosely, and was over-given to damning what he disliked—a trick that went with his rings and his diamond monogram. Val was not interested in a townsman's amateur satire; in so far as Lawrence was not satirical, he had probably drunk one glass more of Bernard's champagne than was good for him! In the upshot, Val was less disinclined to credit Rowsley than half an hour ago.

Lawrence roused himself. "About your sister: I was sorry afterwards to have stayed so long. She seemed none the worse for it at the time, but no doubt she ought to keep quiet for a bit. Will you make my excuses to her?"

"I will with pleasure."

"And will you allow me to tackle Bernard about the agency?"

"To—?"

"If you won't resent my interfering? I can generally knock some sense into Bernard's head. It's an iniquitous thing that he should take advantage of your generosity, Val."

Stafford was completely taken by surprise. "I'd rather—it's most awfully kind of you," he stammered, "but I couldn't trespass on your kindness—"

"Kindness, nonsense! Bernard's my cousin: if your services are worth more in the open market than he pays you, it's up to me to see he doesn't fleece you. Otherwise you might ultimately chuck up your job, and where should we be then? In the soup: for he'd never get another man of your class—a gentleman—to put up with the rough side of his tongue. No: he must be brought to book: if you'll allow me?"

Val's disposition was to refuse; it was odious to him to accept a favour from Hyde. But pride is one of the luxuries that poor men cannot afford. "I should be most grateful. Thank you very much."

"And now go to bed: you're tired and so am I. I've had the devil of a hard day." He stretched himself, raising his wrists to the level of his shoulders, luxuriously tense under the closefitting coat. "I shall hope to see your sister again after the inquest."

"Yes," said Val, hesitating: "are you staying on, then?"

"As you advised."

"You'll be very bored."

"No, I've fallen in love." Val gave a perceptible start. "With the country," Lawrence explained with a merry laugh. "Rustic ideals. Don't misjudge me, I beg: I have no designs on Mrs. Bendish."

"Hyde . . .

"Well, my dear Val?"

"Give me back my parole."

"Not I."

"You're unjust and ungenerous," said Val with repressed passion. "But I warn you that I shall interfere none the less to protect others if necessary. Good-night."

Lawrence watched him across the lawn with a bewildered expression. But he forgot him in a minute—or remembered him only in the association with Isabel which brought Val into the radius of his good will.

CHAPTER XII

"Hadow's bringing out a new play," remarked Lawrence, looking up from the Morning Post. "A Moore comedy, They're clever stuff, Moore's comedies: always well written, and well put on when Hadow has a hand in it. You never were a playgoer, Bernard."

"Not I," said Bernard Clowes. He and his guest were smoking together in the hall after breakfast, Lawrence imparting items of news from the Morning Post, while Bernard, propped up in a sitting attitude on the latest model of invalid couch, turned over and sorted on a swing table a quantity of curios mainly in copper, steel, and iron. Both swing-table and couch had been bought in London by Lawrence, and to his vigorous protests it was also due that the great leaved doors were thrown wide to the amber sunshine: while the curios came out of one of his Eastern packing-cases, which he had had unpacked by Gaston for Bernard to take what he liked. Lawrence's instincts were acquisitive, not to say predatory. Wherever he went he amassed native treasures which seemed to stick to his fingers, and which in nine cases out of ten, thanks to his racial tact, would have fetched at Christie's more than he gave for them. Coming fresh from foreign soil, they were a godsend to Bernard, who was weary of collecting from collectors' catalogues. "Can I have this flint knife? Egyptian, isn't it? Oh, thanks awfully, I'm taking all the best." This was true. But Lawrence, like most of his nation, gave freely when he gave at all. "No, I never was one for plays except Gilbert and Sullivan and the 'Merry Widow' and things like that with catchy tunes in 'em. Choruses." He gave a reminiscent laugh.

"Legs?" suggested Lawrence.

"Exactly," said Bernard, winking at him. "Oh damn!" A mechanical jerk of his own legs had tilted the table and sent the knife rolling on the floor. Lawrence picked it up for him, drew his feet down, and tucked a rug over his hips.

"Mind that box of Burmese darts, old man, they're poisoned.— I used to be an inveterate first-nighter. Still am, in fact, when I'm in or near town. I can sit out anything from 'Here We Are Again' to 'Samson Agonistes.' To be frank, I rather liked 'Samson': it does one's ears good to listen to that austere, delicate English."

"How long would these take to polish one off?"

"Ten or twelve hours, chiefly in the form of a hoop. No, Berns, I can't recommend them." He drew from its jewelled sheath and put into Bernard's hands a Persian dagger nine inches long, the naked blade damascened in wavy rippings and slightly curved from point to hilt. "That would do your trick better. Under the fifth rib. I bought it of a Greek muleteer, God knows how he got hold of it, but he was a bit of a poet: he assured me it would go in 'as soft as a kiss.' For its softness I cannot speak, but it is as sharp as a knife need be."

"Sharper," said Bernard, his thumb in his mouth.

"You silly ass, I warned you!— I should rather like to see this

Moore play. I suppose Laura never goes, as you don't?"

"I don't stop her going, as you jolly well know. She's welcome to go six nights a week if she likes."

"She couldn't very well go alone," Lawrence ignored the scowl of his host. "Tell you what: suppose I took her tonight? I could run her up and down in my car, or we could get back by the midnight train. Would the feelings of Chilmark be outraged?"

"What business is it of Chilmark's? If I'm complaisant, that's enough," said Bernard, his features relaxing into a broad grin. "I may be planked down in a country village for the rest of my very unnatural life, but I'll be shot if I'll regulate mine or my wife's & behaviour by the twaddle they talk! I'll have that dagger." Slipping it slowly into its sheath he watched it travel home, the supple female curve gliding and yielding as a woman yields to a man's caress. "Voluptuous, I call it. Under the left breast, eh?" He drew it again and held it poised and pointing at his cousin. "Come, even I could cut your heart out with a gem of a blade like that." Lawrence held himself lightly erect, his big frame stiffening from head to foot and the pupils of his eyes dilating till the irids were blackened. "Call Laura." Bernard sheathed the dagger again and laid it down. "She's out there snipping away at the roses. Why can't she leave 'em to Parker? She's always messing about out there dirtying her hands, and then she comes in and paws me. Call her in."

Lawrence escaped into the sunshine. He had not liked that moment when Bernard had held up the dagger, nor was it the first time that Bernard had made him shiver, but these vague apprehensions soon faded in the open air. It was a sallow sunshine, a light wind was blowing, and the lawn was spun over with brilliancies of gossamer and flecked with yellow leaflets of acacia and lime. Little light clouds floated overhead, sun-smitten to a fiery whiteness, or curling in gold and silver surf over the grey of distant hayfields. In the borders the velvet bodies of bees hung between the velvet petals, ruby-red, of dahlias. There had been no frost, and yet a foreboding of frost was in the air, a sparkle, a sting—enough to have braced Lawrence when he went down to bathe before breakfast, standing stripped amid long river-herbage drenched in dew, a west wind striking cold on his wet limbs: sensations exquisite so long as the blood of health and manhood glowed under the chilled skin! It was early autumn.

Time slips away fast in a country village, and Lawrence remained a welcome guest at Wanhope, where Chilmark said—though with a covert smile—that Captain Hyde had done his cousin a great deal of good. Bernard was better behaved with Lawrence than with any one else, less surly, less unsociable, less violently coarse: since June there had been fewer quarrels with Val and Barry and the servants, and less open incivility to Laura. He had even let Laura give a few mild entertainments, arrears of hospitality which she was glad to clear off: and he had appeared at them in person, polite and well dressed, and on the friendliest terms with his cousin and his wife.

Lawrence knew his own mind now. It was because he knew it that he held his hand: meeting Isabel two or three times a week, entering into the life of the little place because it was her life, fighting Val's battle with Bernard—and winning it—because Val was her brother. When he remembered his collapse he was not abashed: shame was an emotion which he rarely felt: but he had gone too far and too fast, and was content to mark time in a more rational and conventional courtship.

But a courtship under the rose, for before others he hid his love like a crime, treating Isabel as good humoured elderly men treat pretty children. Where the astringent memory of Lizzie came into play, Lawrence was dumb. The one aspect of that fiasco which he had not fully confessed to Isabel—though only because it was not then prominent in his mind—was its scorching, its lacerating effect on his pride. But for it he would probably have flung discretion to the winds, confided in Laura, in Bernard, in Val, pursued Isabel with a hot and headstrong impetuosity: but it had left the entire tract of sex in him one seared and branded scar.

Even when they were alone together, which rarely happened—Val saw to that—he had as yet made no open love to her: it was difficult to do so when one was never secure from interruption for ten minutes together. Of late he had begun to chafe against Val's cobweb barriers. Three months is a long time! and patience was not a virtue that came natural to Lawrence Hyde.

He found Laura cutting off dead roses, a sufficiently harmless occupation, one would have thought: a trifle thinner, a trifle paler than when he came: and were those grey threads in her brown hair?

"Berns wants you," said Lawrence. "I've done such an awful thing, Laura—"

Again that flash of imperfect perception! What was going on under the surface at Wanhope, that Laura should turn as white as her handkerchief? He hurried on as if he had noticed nothing. "Bernard and I have been laying our heads together. Do you know what I'm going to do? Run you up to town to see the new Moore play at Hadow's."

"Delightful!" Already Laura had recovered herself: her smile was as sweet as ever, and as serene. "Was it your idea or Bernard's?"

"Mine. . . I say, Laura: Bernard is all right, isn't he?"

"In what way, all right?"

Lawrence reddened, regretting his indiscretion. "I've fancied his manner queer, once or twice."

"There is a close connection, of course, between the spine and the brain," said Laura quietly. "But my husband is perfectly sane. . . . Oh my dear Lawrence, of course I forgive you! what is there to forgive? I only wish I could come tonight, but I'm afraid it can't be managed—"

"She says it can't be managed," said Lawrence, standing aside for Laura to pass in. "Pitch into her, Bernard. Hear her talk like a woman of sixty! Are you frightened of the night air, Laura? Or would Chilmark chatter?"

"It might, if you and I went alone," Laura smiled.

"Make up a party then," suggested Lawrence. "Get the Bendishes to come too."

She shook her head. "They're dining with the Dean."

"And decanal dinner-parties can't be thrown over." When he made the suggestion, Lawrence had known that the Bendishes were dining with the Dean. "Some one else, then."

"Whom could I ask like this at the last moment? No, I won't go—thank you all the same. I'm not so keen on late hours and long train journeys as I used to be. Go by yourself and you can tell us all about it afterwards. Berns and I shall enjoy that as much as seeing it ourselves. Shan't we, Berns?" Clowes gave a short laugh: he could not have expressed his opinion more clearly if he had called his wife a fool to her face.

"You weren't so particular before you married me, my love. When you ran that French flat with Yvonne you jolly well knew how to amuse yourself."

"Girls do many things before they're married," said Laura vaguely. "I know better now."

"Oh, you know a lot. She ought to go, Lawrence. It'll do her good. Now you shall go, my dear, that's flat."

Lawrence began to wish he had held his tongue. He had his own ends to serve, but, to do him justice, he had not meant to serve them at Laura's expense. But he had still his trump card to play. "Surely we could find a chaperon?" he said gently, ignoring Bernard. "What about the Staffords? Hardly in Val's line, perhaps. But the child—little Miss Isabel—won't she do?"

To his relief, Laura's eyes lit up with pleasure. "Isabel? I never thought of her! Yes, she would love to come!—But, if she does, she must come as my guest. You would never have asked her of your own accord, and the Staffords are so proud, I'm sure Val wouldn't like you to pay for her." Again Bernard's short, sardonic laugh translated the silence of his cousin's constraint and dismay.

"Hark to her! I'll sort her for you, Lawrence. She shall go, and you shall be paymaster. Yes, and for the Stafford brat too. Lawrence and I don't understand these modern manners, my dear. When we take a pretty woman out we like to do the treating. Now cut along and see about the tickets, Lawrence. You can 'phone from the post office."

Lawrence had secured a box ten days ago, but he strolled out, thinking that the husband and wife might understand each other better when alone. As soon as he was out of earshot Bernard turned on Laura and seized her by the wrist, his features altering, their sardonic mask recast in deep lines of hate. "Why wouldn't you go up alone? That's what he wanted. Why have you saddled him with the little Stafford girl? You can't take her to dine in a private room."

"It was because I foresaw this that I refused. Why do you torment yourself by forcing me to go?"

"I? What do I care? Do you think I should shed many tears if you walked out of the house and never came back? Think I don't know he's your lover? you're uncommonly circumspect with your stable door! . . . A woman like you! Look here." He picked up the Persian dagger. "See it? That's been used before. I should like to use it on you. I should like to cut your tongue out with it. Don't be afraid, I'm not going to stab you."

"Afraid?" said his wife with her serene ironical smile. "My dear Bernard, you tempt me to wish you

were."

"Oh, not before tonight. Jolly time you'll have tonight, you and Lawrence . . . I can only trust you'll respect the Stafford child's innocence."

"Bernard! Bernard!"

"Don't you Bernard me. You can't take me in. Stop. Where are you off to now?"

"To tell Lawrence not to get the tickets. I shan't go with him."

"You will go with him," said Bernard Clowes, his fingers tightening on her wrist. "Stop here: come closer." He locked his arm round her waist. "Is he your lover yet, Lally? Tell me: I swear I won't kill you if you do. Are you on the borderland of virtue still, or over it?"

"Let me go," said Laura, panting for breath under his clenched grip. "I will not answer such questions. You know you don't mean one word of them. Take care, you're tearing my blouse. Oh, that frightful war! what has it done to you, to turn you from the man I married into what you are?"

"What am I?"

"A madman, or not far off it. End this horrible life: send him away. It's killing me, and as for you, if you were sane enough to understand what you're doing, you would blow your brains out."

"Likely enough," said Bernard Clowes.

He let her go. "Come back to me now, Laura." His wife leant over him, unfaltering, though she had known for some time that she was dealing with the abnormal. "Kiss me." Laura touched his lips. "That's better, old girl. I am a cross-grained devil and I make your life a hell to you, don't I? But don't—don't leave me. Don't chuck me over. Let me have your love to cling to. I don't believe in God, I don't believe in any other man, often enough I don't believe in myself, I feel, I feel unreal . . ." He stopped, shut his eyes, moved his head on the pillow, and felt about over his rug with the blind groping hands of a delirious, almost of a dying man. Laura gathered them up and held them to her heart. "That's better," said Bernard, his voice gaining strength as he opened his eyes on the beautiful still face bent over him. "Just now and again, in my lucid moments, I do—I do believe in you, old girl. You are just the one thing I have left. You won't forsake me, will you, ever? not whatever I do to you."

"Never, my darling."

"Seems a bit one-sided, that bargain," said Bernard.

He lay perfectly still for a little while, his great hands softly pressed against his wife's firm breast.

"And now get your hat and trot up to the village with Lawrence. Yes, I should like you to go tonight. It'll do you good. Give you a breath of fresh air after your extra dose of sulphur. Yes, you shall take Isabel. Then you'll be safe: I can't insult you if you and Lawrence weren't alone. Now run along, I've had enough emotions. But don't forget. Laura," he spoke thickly and with effort, turning his head away as he pushed her from him "yes, get out, I've had enough of you for the present—but don't forget all the same that you're the one thing on earth that ever is real to me."

Isabel was up a ladder in the orchard picking plums. Waving her hand to Laura and Lawrence Hyde, she called out to them to look the other way while she came down. It must be owned that neither Laura nor Lawrence obeyed her, and they were rewarded, while she felt about for the top rung, with an unimpeded view of two very pretty legs. Lawrence really thought she was going to fall out of the tree, but eventually she came safe to earth, and approached holding out a basket full of glowing fruit. "Though you don't deserve them," she said reproachfully, "because I could feel you looking at me. I did think I should be safe at this hour in the morning!"

"Do I see Val?" said Laura, screwing up her eyes to peer in through the slats of the green jalousies. "I'll go and talk him round, while you break the news to Miss Stafford. Such do's, Isabel! You don't know what dissipations are in store for you, if only Val will say yes." She like every one else elevated Val to the parental dignity vice Mr. Stafford deposed.

"He's come in for some lunch. He'll love to have you watch him eat," said Isabel. "What's it to be, Captain Hyde? A picnic?"

Isabel's imagination had never soared beyond a picnic. When Lawrence unfolded the London scheme her eyes grew round with astonishment and an awed silence fell on her. "Oh, it won't happen," she said, when she had recovered sufficiently to reply at all. "Nothing so angelically wonderful ever would

happen to me. I'm perfectly certain Val will say no. Now we've settled that, you can tell me all about it, because of course you and Laura will go in any case."

"But that's precisely what we can't do." Gently and imperceptibly Lawrence impelled her through the rose archway into the kitchen garden, where they were partly sheltered behind the walls of lilacs, a little thinner than they had been in June but still an effective screen. He had not found himself alone with Isabel for ten days. Since Val was with Laura, Lawrence drew the rather cynical conclusion that he could count on a breathing space, and he wondered if Isabel too were glad of it. She was in a brown cotton dress, her right sleeve still tucked up high on her bare arm: a rounded slender arm not much tanned even at the wrist, for her skin was almost impervious to sunburn. Above the elbow it was milk-white with a faint bloom on it, in texture not like ivory, which is a dead, cold, and polished material, but like a flower petal, one of those flowers that have a downy sheen on them, white hyacinths or tall lilies. Lawrence fixed his eyes on it unconsciously but so steadily that Isabel became aware of his admiration. She blushed and was going to pull down her sleeve, but checked herself, and turning a little away, so that she could pretend not to know that he was looking at her, raised her arm to smooth her hair, lifting it and pushing a loosened hairpin into place. After all . . . This was Isabel's first venture into coquetry. But it was half unconscious.

"Why can't you? oh, I suppose people would be silly. Major Clowes himself is silly enough for anything. Oh, I'm so sorry, I always forget he's your cousin! Is that why you want me to go?"

"No."

She laughed. "Never mind, you'll soon find some one else. What play is it?"

"She Promised to Marry."

"Oh ah, yes: that's by Moore, who wrote 'The Milkmaid' and 'Sheddon, M.P.' I've read some of his things. I liked them so, I made Rowsley give me them for my last birthday. They're quite cheap in brown paper. O! dear, I should love to see one of them on the stage!" Isabel gave a great sigh. "A London stage too! I've never been to a theatre except in Salisbury. And Hadow's is the one to go to, isn't it? Where they play the clever plays that aren't tiresome. Who's acting tonight?"

"Madeleine Wild and Peter Sennet."

"Have you ever seen them?"

Lawrence laughed outright. "I was at their wedding. Madeleine is half French: I knew her first when she was singing in a cafe chantant on the Champs Elysees. She is dark and pretty and Peter is fair and pretty, and Peter is the deadliest poker player that ever scored off an American train crook."

"Oh," said Isabel with a second sigh that nearly blew her away, "how I should love to know actors and actresses and people who play poker! It must make Life so intensely interesting!"

Behind her badinage was she half in earnest? Lawrence's eye ranged over the old pale walls of the vicarage, on which the climbing roses were already beginning to redden their leaves: over the lavender borders: over the dry pale turf underfoot and the silver and brown of the Plain, burnt by a hot summer. The fruit that had been green in June was ripe now, and down the Painted-Lady apple-trees fell such a cascade of ruby and coral-coloured apples, from high sprig to heavy bole, that they looked like trees in a Kate Greenaway drawing. But there was no other change. Life at Chilmark flowed on uneventful from day to day. He did not admonish Isabel to be content with it. "Should you like to live in Chelsea?"

Isabel shut her eyes. "I should like fifteen thousand a year and a yacht. Don't tell Jimmy, it would break his heart. He says money is a curse. But he's not much of a judge, dear angel, because he's never had any. What's your opinion—you're rich, aren't you? Has it done you any harm?"

"Oh, I am a fairly decent sort of fellow as men go."

"But would you be a nobler character if you were poor?" Isabel asked, pillowing her round chin on her palm and examining Lawrence apparently in a spirit of scientific enquiry. "Because that is Jimmy's theory, and merely to say that you're noble now doesn't meet the case. Do you do good with your money?"

"No fear! I encourage trade. I've never touched second rate stuff in my life."

"Oh, you are different!" Isabel exclaimed. They had been using words for counters, to mean at once less and more than they said, but under his irony she penetrated to a hard material egoism, as swiftly

as he had detected in her the eternal unrest of youth. "Val was right."

"What saith the Gospel according to St. Val?"

"That you were only a bird of passage."

Lawrence waited a moment before replying. "Birds of passage have their mating seasons." Once more Isabel, not knowing what to make of this remark, let it alone. "But I should like to possess Val's good opinion. What have I done to offend him? Can't you give me any tips?"

"It isn't so much what you do as what you are. Val's very, very English."

"But what am I?"

"Foreign," said Isabel simply.

"A Jew? Yes, I knew I should have that prejudice to live down. But I'm not a hall-marked Israelite, am I? After all I'm half English by birth and wholly so by breeding." Isabel was betrayed into an involuntary and fleeting smile. "Hallo! what's this?"

"Oh, Captain Hyde—"

"Go on."

"No: it's the tiniest trifle, and besides I've no right."

"Ask me anything you like, I give you the right."

Isabel blushed. "You must be descended from Jephthah!— O! dear, I didn't mean that!"

"Never mind," said Lawrence, unable to help laughing. "My feelings are not sensitive. But do finish—you fill me with curiosity. What shibboleth do I fail in?"

Faithful are the wounds of a friend. "Englishmen don't wear jewellery," murmured Isabel apologetic.

"Sac a papier!" said Lawrence. "My rings?"

He stretched out his hand, a characteristic hand, strong and flexible, but soft from idleness and white from Gaston's daily attentions: a diamond richly set in a cluster of diamonds and emeralds sparkled on the second finger, and a royal turquoise from Iran, an immense stone the colour of the Mediterranean in April, on the third. "Does Val object to them? Certainly Val is very English. My pocket editions of beauty! That diamond was presented by one of the Rothschilds in gratitude for the help old Hyde-and-seek gave him in getting together his collection of early English watercolours: as for the other, it never ought to have left the Persian treasury, and there'd have been trouble in the royal house if my father had worn it at the Court. Have you ever seen such a blue? On a dull railway journey I can sit and watch those stones by the hour together. But Val would rather read the Daily Mail"

"Every one laughs at them: Jack and Lord Grantchester, and even Jimmy."

"And you?" said Lawrence, taking off the rings:—not visibly nettled, but a trifle regretful.

Isabel knit her brows. "Can a thing be very beautiful and historic, and yet not in good taste?— It can if it's out of harmony: that's what the Greeks never forgot. Men ought not to look effeminate— Oh! O Captain Hyde, don't!"

Lawrence, standing up, had with one powerful smooth drive of the arm sent both rings skimming over the borders, under the apple trees, over the garden wall, to scatter and drop on the open moor. "And here comes Mrs. Clowes, so now I shall learn my fate. I thought Val would not leave us long together.— Well, Val, what is it to be? May the young lady come?"

Isabel also sprang up, changing from woman to child as Lawrence changed from deference to patronage. Their manner to each other when alone was always different from their manner before an audience. But this change, deliberate in Lawrence, had hitherto been instinctive and almost unconscious in Isabel. It was not so now, she fled to Val and to her younger self for refuge. What a fanfaronade! Why couldn't Captain Hyde have put the rings in his pocket? But no, it must all be done with an air—and what an air! Rings worth thousands—historic mementoes—stripped off and tossed

away to please—! And at that Isabel, enchanted and terrified, bundled the entire dialogue into the cellars of her mind and locked the doors on it. Later,—later,—when one was alone! "Oh, Val, say I may go!" she cried, clasping her hands on Val's arm, so cool and firm amid a spinning world.

[Footnote]

What actually happened later that afternoon was that Isabel, who had a practical mind, spent three-quarters of an hour on the moor hunting for the rings. The turquoise she found, conspicuous on a patch of smooth turf: the other was never recovered.

[End of Footnote]

"You may," said Val laughing. He disliked the scheme, but was incapable of refusing Laura Clowes: he gave her Isabel as he would have given her the last drops of his blood, if she had asked for them in that low voice of hers, and with those sweet eyes that never seemed to anticipate refusal. There are women—not necessarily the most beautiful of their sex—to whom men find it hard to refuse anything. And, consenting, it was not in Val to consent with an ill grace. "Certainly you may, if Captain Hyde is kind enough to take you!" Stafford's lips, finely cut and sensitive, betrayed the sarcastic sense of humour which he ruled out of his voice: perhaps the less said about kindness the better! "But do look over her wardrobe first, Laura: I'm never sure whether Isabel is grown up or not, but she could hardly figure at Hadow's in her present easy-going kit—"

He stopped, because Isabel was trying to waltz him round the lawn. In her reaction from a deeper excitement, she was as excited as a child. She released Val soon and hugged Laura Clowes instead, while Lawrence, looking on with his wintry smile, wondered whether she would have extended the same civility to him if she had known how much he desired it. . . . There were moments when he hated Isabel. Was she never going to grow up?

Not at present, apparently. "What must I wear, Laura? Do people wear evening dress? Where shall we sit? What time shall we get back? How are you going? What time must I be ready? Will you have dinner before you go or take sandwiches with you?"—how long the patter of questions would have run on it is hard to say, if the extreme naivete of the last one had not drowned them in universal laughter, and Isabel in crimson.

Mrs. Jack Bendish rode up while they were talking, slipped from her saddle, and threw the reins to Val without apology, though she knew there was no one but Val to take the mare to the stable. Yvonne was the only member of the Castle household who presumed on Val's subordinate position. She treated him like a superior servant. When she heard what was in the wind her eyes were as green as a cat's. "How kind of Captain Hyde!" she drawled, as Lawrence, irritated by her manner, went to help Val, while Isabel was called indoors by Fanny to listen to a tale of distress, unravel a grievance, and prescribe for anemia. "Some one ought to warn the child."

"Warn her of what?"

"Has it never struck you that Isabel is a pretty girl and Lawrence a good looking man?"

"But Isabel is too intelligent to have her head turned by the first handsome man she meets!" Yvonne looked as though she found her sister rather hopeless. "Dear, you really must be sensible!" Laura pleaded. "It's not as if poor Lawrence had tried to flirt with her. He never even thought of asking her for tonight till I suggested it!" This was the impression left on Laura's memory. "She isn't the sort of woman to attract him."

"What sort of woman would attract him, I wonder?" said Mrs. Jack, blowing rings of smoke delicately down her thin nostrils.

"Oh, when he marries it will be some one older than Isabel, more sophisticated, more a woman of the world. I like Lawrence immensely, but there is just that in him: he's one of the men who expect their wives to do them credit."

"Some one more like me," suggested Yvonne. "Or you." Her face was a study in untroubled innocence. Laura eyed her rather sharply. "But Lawrence isn't a marrying man. He won't marry till some woman raises the price on him."

"You speak as if between men and women life were always a duel."

"So It is." Laura made a small inarticulate sound of dissent. "Sex is a duel. Don't you know"—an infinitesimal hesitation marked the conscious forcing of a barrier: cynically frank as she was on most

points, Mrs. Bendish had always left her sister's married life alone:—"that—that's what's wrong with Bernard? Oh! Laura! Simpleton that you are. . . I'm often frightfully sorry for Bernard. It has thrown him clean off the rails. One can't wonder that he's consumed with jealousy."

In the stillness that followed Yvonne occupied herself with her cigarette. Mrs. Clowes was formidable even to her sister in her delicately inaccessible dignity.

"Had you any special motive in saying this to me now, Yvonne?"

"This theatre business."

"I don't contemplate running away with Lawrence, if that is what you mean."

"Wish you would!" confessed Mrs. Bendish frankly. "Then Bernard could divorce you and you could start fair again. I'm fed up with Bernard. I'm sorry for him, poor devil, but he never was much of a joy as a husband, and he's going from bad to worse. Think I'm blind? Of course he's jealous. High dresses and lace cuffs aren't the fashion now, Lal."

Her sister slowly turned back the frill from her wrist and examined the scarlet stain of Bernard's finger-print. "Does it show so plainly? I hope other people haven't noticed. Bernard doesn't remember how strong his hands still are."

"Doesn't care, you mean."

"Do you want me quite naked?" said Laura. "Well, doesn't care, then."

Yvonne was not accustomed to the smart of pity. She winced under it, and her tongue, an edge-tool of intelligence or passion, but not naturally prone to express tenderness, became more than ever articulate. "Sorry!" she said with difficulty, and then, "Didn't want to rake all this up. But I'm fond of you. We've always been pals, you and I, Lulu."

"Say whatever you like."

"Then—" she sat up, throwing away her cigarette—"I'm going to warn you. All Chilmark believes Lawrence is your lover."

"And do you?"

"No. I know you wouldn't run an intrigue."

"Thank you."

"But Jack and I both think, if you don't want to cut and run with him, you ought to pack him off. Mind, if you do want to, you can count me in, and Jack too. I'm not religious: Jack is, but he's not narrow. As for the social bother of it—marriage is a useful institution and all that, but it's perfectly obvious that one can get—over the rails and back again if one has money. There aren't twenty houses (worth going to) in London that would cut you if you turned up properly remarried to a rich man."

"Are you . . . recommending this course?"

"I'd like you to be happy."

"And what about Bernard?"

"Put in a couple of good trained nurses who wouldn't give him his head as you do, and he'd be a different man by the spring."

"He certainly would," said Laura drily. "He would be dead."

"Not he. He's far too strong to die of being made uncomfortable. As a matter of fact it would do him all the good in the world," pursued Yvonne calmly. "He cries out to be bullied. What's so irritating in the present situation is that though you let him rack you to pieces you never give him what he wants! You don't shine as a wife, my dear."

"It will end in my sending Lawrence away," said Laura with a subdued sigh. "I didn't want to because in many ways he has done Bernard so much good; no one else has ever had the same influence over him; besides, I liked having him at Wanhope for my own sake—he freshened us up and gave us different things to talk about, outside interests, new ideas. And after all, so far as Bernard himself is concerned, one is as good as another. He always has been jealous and always will be. But if all Chilmark credits us with the rather ignominious feat of betraying him, Lawrence will have to go."

"Lawrence may have something to say to that."

"He's not in love with me." Yvonne's eyes widened in genuine scepticism.—"Oh dear, as if I shouldn't know!" Laura broke out petulantly. Might not Yvonne have remembered that, in the days when they were living together in a French appartement, Laura's experience had been pretty nearly as wide as her own? "He is not, I tell you! nor I with him. But, if we were, I shouldn't desert Bernard. I do not believe in your two highly trained nurses. I don't think you much believe in them yourself. They might break him in, because nurses are drilled to deal with tiresome and unmanageable patients, but it would be worse for him, not better. He rebels fiercely enough now, but if I weren't there he would rebel still more fiercely, and all the rage and humiliation would have no outlet. You want me to be happy? We Selincourts are so quick to seize happiness! Father did it . . . and Lucian does it: dear Lulu! We both love him, but it's difficult to be proud of him. Yet he has good qualities, good abilities. He's far cleverer than I am, and so are you," Laura's tone was diffident, "but oh, you are wrong in thinking so much of mere happiness. There is an immense amount of pain in the world, and if one doesn't bear one's own share it falls on some one else. My life with Bernard isn't—always easy," she found a momentary difficulty in controlling her voice, "but he's my husband and I shall stick to him. The more so for being deeply conscious that a different woman might manage him better. No I don't mind your saying it. Oh, how often I've felt the truth of it! But, such as I am, I'm all he has."

"You're a thousand times too good for him. Why are you so good?"

"I'm not good and no more is Lulu." Mrs. Bendish sighed, impressed perhaps by Laura's alien moralities, certainly by her determination. "However, if you won't you won't, and in a way I'm glad, selfishly that is, because of Jack's people. But in that case, dear girl, do get rid of Lawrence! The situation strikes me as fraught with danger. One of those situations where every one says something's sure to happen, and then they're all flabbergasted when it does."

"Bernard is not a formidable enemy," said Mrs. Clowes drily.
"But, yes, Lawrence must go. I'll speak to him tomorrow."

"Why not today?"

"It would spoil our evening."

"Give it up."

"And disappoint Isabel?"

"I don't like it."

"Nor I. But I was forced into it, and I can't break my word to Lawrence and the child. After all, there's no great odds between today and tomorrow. What can happen in twenty-four hours?"

CHAPTER XIII

In after life, when Isabel was destined to look back on that day as the last day of her youth, she recalled no part of it more clearly than wandering up to her own room after an early tea to dress, and flinging herself down on her bed instead of dressing. She slept next to Val. But while Val's room, sailor-like in its neatness, was bare as any garret and got no sun at all, Isabel's was comfortable in a shabby way and faced south and west over the garden: an autumn garden now, bathed in westering sunshine, fortified from the valley by a carved gold height of beech trees, open on every other side over sunburnt moorland pale and rough as a stubble-field in its autumn feathering of light brown grasses and seedling flowers afflicker in a west wind. Tonight however Isabel saw nothing of it, she lay as if asleep, her face hidden in her pillow: she, the most active person in the house, who was never tired like Val nor lazy like Rowsley! Conscience pricked her, but she was muffled so thick in happiness that she scarcely felt it: the fancies that floated into her mind frightened her, and yet they were too sweet to banish: and then after all were they wrong?

Always on clear evenings the sun flung a great ray across her wall, turning the faded pale green paper into a liquid gold-green like sunlit water, evoking a dusty gleam from her mirror, and deepening the shadows in an old mezzo tint of Botticelli's Spring which was pinned up where she could gaze at it while she brushed her hair. The room thus illumined was that of a young girl with little time to spare

and less money, and an ungrown individual taste not yet critical enough to throw off early loyalties. There were no other pictures, except an engraving of "The Light of the World," given her by Val, who admired it. There was a tall bookcase, the top shelves devoted to Sweet's "Anglo-Saxon Reader," Lanson's "Histoire de la litterature Francaise," and other textbooks that she was reading for her examination in October, the lower a ragged regiment of novels and verse—"The Three Musketeers," "Typhoon," "Many Inventions," Landor's "Hellenics," "with fondest love from Laura," "Une Vie" and "Fort comme la Mort" in yellow and initialled "Y.B." There were also a big table strewn with papers and books, and a chintz covered box-ottoman into which Isabel bundled all those rubbishing treasures that people who love their past can never make up their weak minds to throw away. She examined them all in the stream of gold sunlight as if she had never seen them before. It was time to get up and arrange her hair and change into her lace petticoats. If she did not get up at once she would be late and they would lose their train. And it seemed to her that she would die if they lost their train, that she never could survive such a disappointment: and yet she could not bring herself to get up and give over dreaming.

And what dreams they were, oh! what would Val say to them?—And yet again after all were they so wicked?—They were incredibly naif and innocent, and so dim that within twenty-four hours Isabel was to look back on them as a woman looks back on her childhood. She was not ignorant of the mysteries of birth and death. She had lived all her life among the poor, and knew many things which are not included in school curricula, such as the gentle art of keeping children's hair clean, how to divide a four-roomed cottage between a man and wife and six children and a lodger, and what to say when shown "a beautiful corpse": but she had never had a lover of her own. There were no marriageable men in Chilmark—there never are in an English village—and she was too young for Rowsley's brother officers, or they were too young for her. She had dreamed of fairy princes (blases-men-of-the-world, mostly in the Guards or the diplomatic service), but it was never precisely Isabel Stafford whom they clasped to their hearts—no, it was LaSignora Isabella, the star of Covent Garden, or the Lady Isabel de Stafford, a Duke's daughter in disguise. And Lawrence came to her in the mantle of these patrician ghosts.

But—and at this point Isabel hid her face on her arm—he was no ghost: he knew what he wanted and he meant to have it: and it was a far cry from visionary Heroes to Lawrence Hyde in the flesh, son of a Jew, smelling of cigar-smoke, and taking hold of her with his large, fair, overmanicured hands. A far cry even from Val or Jack Bendish: from the cool, mannered Englishman to the hot Oriental blood. When people were engaged they often kissed each other . . . but when it came to imagining oneself . . . one's head against that thick tweed . . . no . . . it must be one of the things that are safe to do but dangerous to dream of doing. Oh, never, never!—But she had been trained in sincerity: and was this cry sincere? Her mind was chaos.

And yet after all why dangerous? Even Laura, Val's adored Laura, had been engaged twice before she married Major Clowes: as for Yvonne, Isabel felt sure she had been kissed many times, and not by Jack Bendish only. Such things happen, then! in real life, not only in books. As for the cigars and the valet . . . and Val's warnings . . . one can't have all one wants in this world! It contains no ideal heroes: what was it Yvonne had once said? "Every marriage is either a delusion or a compromise." And Isabel had shortcomings enough of her own: she was irritable, lazy, selfish: read novels when she ought to have been at her lessons: left household jobs undone in the certainty that Val, however tired he was, would do them for her: small sins, but then her temptations were small! Take it by and large, she was probably no better than Captain Hyde except for want of opportunity. And how he would laugh if he heard her say so!

She liked him for laughing. She had been brought up in an atmosphere of scruple. Her father overworked his conscience, treating a question of taste as a moral issue, and drawing no line between great and small—like the man who gave a penny to a beggar and implored him not to spend it on debauchery. Charity and a sense of fun saved Val, but if more lenient to others he was ruthlessly stern to himself. Lawrence blew on Isabel like a breath of sea air. In her reaction she liked his external characteristics, his manner to servants, his expensive clothes and boots, all the signs of money spent freely on himself.

She even liked his politics. Isabel had been brought up all her life to talk politics. Mr. Stafford was a Christian Socialist, a creed which in her private opinion was nicely calculated to produce the maximum of human discomfort: and from a conversation between Hyde and Jack Bendish she had learnt that Hyde was all of her own view. There was no nonsense about him—none of that sweet blind altruism which, as Isabel saw it, only made the altruist and his family so bitterly uncomfortable without doing any good to the poor. The poor? She knew intuitively that servants and porters and waiters would far rather serve Hyde than her father. Mr. Stafford longed to uplift the working classes, but Isabel had never got herself thoroughly convinced that they stood in need of uplifting. Her practical common sense rose in arms against Movements that tried to get them to go to picture galleries instead of

picture palaces. Why shouldn't they do as they liked? Does one reform one's friends? Captain Hyde would live and let live.

And he was rich. Few girls as cramped as Isabel could have remained blind to that wide horizon, and she made no pretence of doing so: she was honest with herself and owned that she had always longed to be rich. No one could call her discontented! her happy sunny temper took life as it came and enjoyed every minute of it, but her tastes were not really simple, though Val thought they were. She had long felt a clear though perfectly good-humoured and philosophic impatience of her narrow scope. Hyde could give her all and more than all she had ever desired— foreign countries and fine clothes, books and paintings, and power apparently and the admiration of men . . . Isabel Hyde . . . Mrs. Lawrence Hyde . . . smiling she tried his name under her breath . . .and suddenly she found herself standing before the mirror, examining her face in its dusky shallows and asking of it the question that has perplexed many a young girl as beautiful as she—"Am I pretty?" She pulled the pins out of her hair and ran a comb through it till it fell this way and that like an Indian veil, darkly burnished and sunset-shot with threads of bronze. "Lawrence has never seen it loose," she reflected: "surely I am rather pretty?" and then "Oh, oh, I shall be late!" and Isabel's dreams were drenched and scattered under the shock of cold water.

Dreamlike the run through the warm September landscape: dreamlike the slip of country platform, where, while Lawrence took their tickets, she and Laura walked up and down and fingered the tall hollyhocks flowering upward in quilled rosettes of lemon-yellow and coral red, like paper lanterns lit by a fairy lamplighter on a spiral stair: and most dreamlike of all the discovery that the Exeter express had been flagged for them and that she was expected to precede Laura into a reserved first class carriage. It was not more than once or twice in a year that Isabel went by train, and she had never travelled but third class in her life. How smoothly life runs for those who have great possessions! How polite the railway staff were! The station master himself held open the door for the Wanhope party. Now she knew Mr. Chivers very well, but in all previous intercourse one finger to his cap had been enough for young Miss Isabel. Certainly it was agreeable, this hothouse atmosphere. "Shall you feel cold?" Lawrence asked, and Isabel, murmuring "No, thank you," blushed in response to the touch of formality in his manner. She felt what women often feel in the early stages of a love affair, that he had been nearer to her when he was not there, than now when they were together in the presence of a third person. She had grown shy and strange before this careless composed man lounging opposite her with his light overcoat thrown open and his crush hat on his knees, conventionally polite, his long legs stretched out sideways to give her and Laura plenty of room.

And Lawrence on the journey neither spoke to her nor watched her, though Isabel shone in borrowed plumes. There had been no time to buy clothes, and so Val, though grudgingly, had allowed Laura and Yvonne to ransack their shelves and presses for Cinderella's adornment. But one glance had painted her portrait for him, tall and slender in a long sealskin coat of Yvonne's which was rulled and collared and flounced with fur, her glossy hair parted on one side and drawn back into what she called a soup-plate of plaits. Once only he directly addressed her, when Laura loosened her own sables. "Do undo your coat, won't you? It's hot tonight for September."

"I'm not hot, thank you," said Isabel stiffly: but slowly, as if against her will, she opened the collar of her coat and pushed it back from her young neck and the crossed folds of her lace gown. The gown was very old, it had indeed belonged to Laura Selincourt: it was because Laura loved its soft, graceful, dateless lines that it had survived so long. She had seized on it with her unerring tact: this was right for Isabel, this dim transparency of rosepoint modelling itself over the immature slenderness of nineteen: and she and her maid Catherine and Mrs. Bendish had spent patient hours trying it on and modifying it to suit the fashion of the day. Laura had refused to impose upon Isabel either her own modish elegance or Yvonne's effect of the arresting and bizarre. "Isn't she almost too slight for it?" Yvonne had asked, and Laura for all answer had hummed a little French song—

'Mignonne allons voir si la rose
Qui ce matin avoit desclose
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil
A point perdu ceste vespree
I as plis de sa robe pourpree
Et son teint au votre pareil . . .'

She discerned in Isabel that quality of beauty, noble, spirited, and yet wistful, which requires a most expensive setting of simplicity. And that was why Isabel opened her coat. If Captain Hyde had admired her in her Chilmark muslin, what would he think of flounce and fold of rose-point of Alencon under Yvonne's perfumed furs? And then she blushed again because the yearning in his eyes made her wonder if he cared after all whether she wore lace or cotton. Everything was so strange!

Strangest of all it was, to the brink of unreality, that Laura evidently remained blind. But Laura was always blind. "Why, she never even sees Val!" reflected Isabel scornfully. And yet— suppose Isabel were deceiving herself? What if Captain Hyde were not in earnest? But her older self comforted her child's self: careless was he, and composed? "You were not always so composed, Lawrence," in her own mind the elder Isabel mocked him with her sparkling eyes.

Waterloo, lamplit and resonant: the pulsing of many lamps, the hurry of many steps, the flitting by of many faces under an arch of gloom: dark quiet and the scent of violets in a waiting car.

"What a jolly taxi!" Isabel exclaimed. "I never was in a taxi like this before. Is it a more expensive kind?"

"My dear Lawrence, you certainly have the art of making your life run on wheels!" said Laura smiling. "How many telegrams have you sent today?"

"If you do a thing at all you may as well do it in decent comfort," Lawrence replied sententiously. "Half past seven; that'll give us easy time! I booked a table at Malvani's, I thought you would prefer it to one of the big crowded shows."

"Are we going to have supper—dinner I mean—at a restaurant?" asked Isabel awestruck.

Lawrence smiled at her with irrepressible tenderness. "Did you think you weren't going to get anything to eat at all?" He forbore to remind her of her unfortunate allusion to sandwiches— for which Isabel was grateful to him. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Oh yes: but then I often am. Is Malvani's a very quiet place?"

Lawrence looked at Laura with a comical expression. "What an ass I was! Wouldn't the Ritz have been more to the point?"

"Never mind, sweetheart," said Laura. "Malvani's isn't dowdily quiet. It's the smartest of the smart, and there are always a lot of distinguished people in it. Dear me, how long it is since I've dined in town! Really it's great fun, I feel as if I had come out of a tomb—" she checked herself: but she might have been as indiscreet as she liked, for her companions were not listening. Laura was faintly, very faintly startled by their attitude—Hyde leaning forward in the half-light of the brougham to button Isabel's glove—but she was soon smiling at her own fancy. "Poor Isabel, poor simple Isabel!" She was only a child after all.

A child, but a very gay and winning child, when she came into Malvani's with her long swaying step, direct glance, and joyous mouth. A spirit of excitement sparkled in Isabel tonight, and every movement was a separate and conscious pleasure to her: the physical sensation of walking delicately, the ripple of her skirt over her ankles, the poise of her shoulders under their transparent veil. . . . Laura saw a dozen men turn to look after the Wanhope party, and took no credit for it, though not long ago she had been accustomed to be watched when she moved through a public room. But now she was better pleased to see Isabel admired than to be admired herself.

As they neared their reserved table a man who had been sitting at it rose with an amused smile. "Have you forgotten who I am, Laura?"

"One might as well be even numbers," Lawrence explained. "So, as I knew Selincourt was in town, I wired to him to join us."

A worn, fatigued-looking, but not ungentle rake of forty, Selincourt had stayed once at Wanhope, but the visit had not been a success: indeed Laura had been thankful when it ended before host and guest threw the decanters at each other's heads. That she was pleased to see him now there could be no doubt: she had taken him by both hands and was smiling at him as if she would have liked to fling decorum to the winds and kiss him. Lawrence also smiled but with a touch of finesse. His plan was working. Laura was going to enjoy herself: bon! he was truly fond of Laura and delighted to give her pleasure. But by it he would be left free to devote himself to Isabel.

It was to this end that he had planned the entire expedition. At Chilmark they met continually in the same setting, and he had no means of printing a fresh image of himself on her mind, but here he was free of country customs, a rich man among his equals, an expert in the art of "doing oneself well"—one of those who rule over modern civilization by divine right of a chequebook and a trained manner. Isabel had been brought up by High Churchmen, had she? Let them test what hold they had of her! Every aspect of their journey and of the supper-table at Malvani's, with its heady music and smell of rich food and wines, had been calculated to produce a certain effect—an intoxication of excitement and pleasure. And he set himself to stamp his own impression on Isabel, naming to her, in his soft, isolating

undertones, the notable men and women in the room, describing their careers, their finances, even their scandals—it amused him to watch her repress a start. It amused him still more to stand up and shake hands when the immense body and Hebraic nose of an international financier went by with two great ladies and a cabinet minister in tow. "One of my countrymen," Hyde turned to Isabel with a mocking smile. "I am a citizen of no mean city. Those—" with an imperceptible jerk of the head—"would lick the dust off his boots to find out what line the Jew bankers mean to take in the Syrian question. They might as well lick mine."

"Why, do you know?" breathed Isabel.

"Verily, O Gentile maiden." Lawrence grinned at her over his champagne. "I lunched Raphael last time I was in town and he told me all about it. But I shouldn't tell them. It isn't good for Gentiles to know too much about Weltpolitik. That's our show." He leant back in his chair and his hot eyes challenged her to call him a dirty Jew.

Selincourt caught his last remark and looked him up and down with a twinkling glance. He no longer wondered why Lawrence had spent his summer in the tents of Kedar—so differently do brothers look on their own and other men's sisters. But he knew men and things pretty well, and at a moment when Laura was speaking to Isabel he looked straight at Lawrence and touched his glass with a murmured, "Go slow, old man." The elder man had seen instantly what neither Mrs. Clowes nor Isabel had any notion of, that under his easy manner Hyde's nerves were all on edge. Lawrence started and stared at him, half offended: but after a moment his good sense extorted a grudging "Thanks." It warned him to be grateful for the hint, and he took it: a second glass of champagne that night would infallibly have gone to his head.

A darkened theatre, fantastically decorated in scarlet and silver: a French orchestra already playing a delicate prelude: a lively audience—a typical "Moor" audience—agreeably ready to be piqued and scandalized as well as amused.

All the plays Isabel had ever seen were Salisbury matinees of "As You Like It" and "Julius Caesar." It was not by chance that Hyde introduced her tonight to this filigree comedy, so cynical under its glittering dialogue. He could find no swifter way to present to her *le monde ou l'on s'amuse* in all its refined and defiant charm. He liked to watch her laugh, he laughed himself and gave a languid clap or two when Madeleine Wild made one of her famous entries, but his main interest was in his plan of campaign.

Yet chance can never be counted out. When the lights went up after the first act Lawrence found himself looking directly across the rather small and narrow proscenium at a lady in the opposite box. Who the devil was it?—The devil, with a vengeance! It was Mrs. Cleve.

CHAPTER XIV

Conscious to his fingertips that Selincourt was watching him with an amused smile, Lawrence returned Mrs. Cleve's nod with less than his usual ease. Her eye ranged on from Selincourt, to whom she waved a butterfly salute, over the rather faded elegance of Laura Clowes and the extremely youthful charms of Isabel: apparently she did not admire Lawrence's ladies: she spoke to her cavalier, an elderly, foreign-looking man with a copper complexion and curly dark hair, and they laughed together. What ensued between them was not difficult to follow. She made him a request, he rolled plaintive eyeballs at her, the lady carried her point, the gentleman left the box. Then—one saw it coming—she leaned forward till the diamonds in her plenitude of fair hair sparkled like a crown of flame, and beckoned Lawrence to join her.

He cursed her impertinence. Apart from leaving Isabel, he did not want to talk to Mrs. Cleve: he had forgotten her existence, and it was a shock to him to meet her again. Good heavens, had he ever admired her? That white *blanc-mange* of a woman in her ruby-red French gown, cut open lower than one of Yvonne's without the saying of Yvonne's wiry slimness? Remembering the summerhouse at Bingley Lawrence blushed with shame, not for his morals but for his taste: he was thankful to have gone no further and wondered why he had gone so far.—He had not yet realized that during three months among women of a different stamp his taste had imperceptibly modified itself from day to day.

But she had been his hostess. Impossible to refuse: and with a vexed word of apology to Laura he went out. "Dear me, what an opulent lady!" said Laura with lifted eyebrows. "Who's your friend, Lulu?"

Lucian drily named her. "Queen's Gate, and Sundays at the Metropole. They're shipping people, which is where the diamond ta-ra-ras come from. Oh yes, there's a husband, quite a nice fellow, crooked in the Flying Corps. No, I don't know who the chap is she's got with her. Some dusky brother. Not Cleve." He fell silent as Lawrence appeared in the opposite box.

It was an odd scene to watch in dumbshow. Mrs. Cleve shook hands, and Lawrence was held for more than the conventional moment. He remained standing till she pointed to her cavalier's empty chair: then dropped into it, but sat forward leaning his aim along the balcony, while she, drawn back behind her curtain, was almost drowned in shadow except for an occasional flash of diamonds, or an opaque gleam of white and dimpled neck. An interlude entirely decorous, and yet, so crude was the force of Philippa's personality, one would have had to be very young, or very innocent, to overlook her drift.

"Well, my darling," said Laura, "and what do you think of Madeleine Wild?" She did not wish Isabel to watch Mrs. Cleve. "Is she as nice as your Salisbury Rosalind?"

"Angelical!" said Isabel. "And isn't it luck for me, Royalty coming tonight? I've never seen any one Royal before. It's one of those evenings when nothing goes wrong."

Was not Isabel a trifle too guileless for this wicked world? She prattled on, Selincourt and Laura lending an indulgent ear, Selincourt, like any other man of his type, touched by her innocence, Laura faintly irritated: and meanwhile Isabel through her black lashes watched, not the Duchess of Cumberland's rubies, but those two in the opposite box. Between it and her stretched a beautiful woodland drop-scene, the glitter of the stalls, and the murmur of violins humming through the rising flames of the Feuerzauber . . . presently the Fire Charm eddied away and the lights went down, yet still Lawrence sat on though the interval was over. Across the semi-dark of a "Courtyard by Moonlight" it was hard to distinguish anything but the silhouette of his hand and arm, and Mrs. Cleve's fair hair and immense jewelled fan. What were they saying to each other in this public isolation where anything might be said so long as decorum was preserved?

Selincourt gave a little laugh as the curtain rose. "An old flame," he whispered to Laura, not dreaming that Isabel would understand even if she heard.

"What's an old flame?" asked Isabel, examining him with her brilliant eyes.

"Feuerzauber," said Selincourt readily. "It means fire spell. It's often played between the acts."

"Lucian, Lucian!" said his sister laughing.

"I don't know much about music," said Isabel. "Was it well played?"

"Ah! I know a lot about music," said Selincourt, looking at her very kindly. "No, it was rottenly played. But some fellers can't tell a good tune from a bad one."

Lawrence did not return till the middle of the third act, and offered no apology. He looked fierce and jaded and his eyes were strained. "Past eleven," he said, hurrying Laura into her coat while the orchestra played through the National Anthem, for which Selincourt stood stiffly to attention. "No time for supper, our train goes at 11:59, I hate first nights, the waits between the acts are so infernally long." Laura's eyebrows, faintly arched, hinted at derision. "Oh, it dragged," said Lawrence impatiently. "Let's get out of this."

It was a clear autumn night: the air was mild, and stars were burning overhead almost as brightly as the lamps in Shaftesbury Avenue. What a chase of lamps, high and low, like fireflies in a wood: green as grass, red as blood, or yellow as a naked flame! What a sombre city, and what a fleeting crowd! Isabel had never seen midnight London before. Coming out into the hurrying street roofed with stars, she was seized by an impression of a solitude lonelier than any desert, and dark, like the terror of an eerie sunset or a dry storm on the moor.

"These taxis are waiting for us," Lawrence had come up behind her and his hand was on her arm. "Will you bring your sister, Selincourt?— Miss Isabel, will you come with me?"

"Oh but—!" said Laura, startled. She was responsible to Val for Isabel, and she was not sure that either Val or Isabel would welcome this arrangement.

"Thank you," said Isabel, obediently getting into the second cab.

"Better come, dear," said Selincourt with a shrug, and Laura yielded, for it would have been tiresome to make Isabel get out again, and after all what signified a twenty minutes' run? Yet after the Cleve

incident she did not quite like it. Nor did Selincourt; Hyde's overbearing manner set his teeth on edge; but the gentle Lucian would sooner have faced a loaded rifle than a dispute. He agreed with Laura, however, that her fair Arcadian was a trifle too innocent for her years.

Alone with Isabel, Lawrence took off his hat and ran his fingers through his thick fair hair, so thick that it might have been grey, while the deep lines round his mouth began to soften as though fatigue and irritation were being wiped away. "Thank heaven that's over."

"I've enjoyed every minute of it," said Isabel smiling. "Thank you, Captain Hyde, for giving me such a delightful treat! If I weren't sleepy I should like to begin again."

"Oh, don't get sleepy yet," said Lawrence. He pulled up the fur collar of her coat and buttoned it under her chin. "I can't have you catching cold, or what will Val say? You aren't used to driving about in evening dress and we've a long run before us. And how I have been longing for it all the evening, haven't you? I didn't know how to sit through that confounded play. Yes, you can take in Selincourt and Laura but you can't take me in. I know you must have hated it as much as I did. But it's all right now." Sitting sideways with one knee crossed over the other, his face turned towards Isabel, without warning he put his arm round her waist. He had determined not to ask her to marry him till he was sure of her answer, but he was sure of it now, intuitively sure of it . . . the truth being that under his impassive manner impulse was driving him along like a leaf in the wind. "I love you, Isabel, and you love me. Don't deny it."

"Don't do that," said Isabel: "don't hold me."

"Why not? no one can see us."

"Take your arm away. I won't have you hold me. No, Captain Hyde, I will not. I am not Mrs. Cleve."

"Isabel!" said Lawrence, turning grey under his bronze.

"O! I oughtn't to have said that," Isabel murmured. She hid her face in her hands. "Oh Val— I wish Val were here!"

"My darling," they were among the dark streets now that border the river, and he leant forward making no effort to conceal his tenderness, "what is there you can't say to me or I to you? You're so strange, my Isabel, a child one minute and a woman the next, I never know where to have you, but I love the woman more than the child, and there's nothing on earth you need be ashamed to ask me. Naturally you want to be sure. . . . But there was nothing in it except that I hated leaving you, there never has been; I can't discuss it, but there's no tie, no—do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then, dearest darling of the world, what are you crying for?"

"I'm not crying." She tried to face him, but he was too old for her, and mingling in his love she discerned indulgence, the seasoned judgment and the fixed view. Struggling in imperfect apprehensions of life, she was not yet master of her forces— they came near to mastering her. In his eyes it was natural for her to be jealous. But she was not jealous. That passion can hardly coexist with such sincere and cool contempt as she had felt for Mrs. Cleve. What had pierced her heart and killed her childhood in her was terror lest Lawrence should turn out to have lowered himself to the same level. She knew now that she loved him, and too much to care whether he was Saxon or Jew or rich or poor, but he must—he must be what in her child's vocabulary she called "good," or if not that he must at least see good and bad with clear eyes: sins one can pardon, but the idea of any essential inferiority of taste was torture to her. And meanwhile Lawrence wide of the mark began to coax her. . "My own," his arm stole inside her coat again, "there's nothing to get so red about! Come, you do like me—confess now—you like me better than Val?"

"No, no," Isabel murmured, and slowly, though she had not strength to free herself, she turned her head away. "If you kiss me now I never shall forgive you."

"I won't, but why are you so shy? My Isabel, what is there to be afraid of?"

"You," Isabel sighed out. He was gratified, and betrayed it. "No, Lawrence, you misunderstand. I am not—not shy of you . . ." Under his mocking eyes she gave it up and tried again. "Well, I am, but if that were all I shouldn't refuse . . . I should like you to be happy. Oh! yes, I love you, and I'd so far rather not fight, I'd rather—" she waited a moment like a swimmer on the sand's edge, but his deep need of her carried her away and with a little sigh she flung herself into the open sea—"let you kiss me, because I

don't want anything so much as to make you happy, and I believe you would be, and besides I—I should like it myself. But I must know more. I must know the truth. She—Mrs. Cleve—"

"I've already given you my word: do you think I would lie to you?"

"No, I don't; they say men do, but I'm sure you wouldn't. I don't believe you ever would deceive me. But there have been other women, haven't there, since your wife left you?" Lawrence assented briefly. At that moment he would have liked to see Mrs. Cleve hanged and drawn and quartered. "Other women who were— who—with whom—"

"Must you distress yourself like this? Wouldn't it do if I promised to lay my record before Val, and let him be judge?"

"Would you do that?"

"If you wish it."

"Wouldn't you hate it?"

Lawrence smiled.

"And I should hate it for you," said Isabel. "No: no one can judge you for me and no one shall try. I know you better than Val ever would. No, if you're to be humiliated it shall be before me and me only." She brought the colour into his face. "There have been others, Lawrence?"

"My dear, I've lived the life of other men."

"Do all men live so?"

"Pretty well all."

"Does Val?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "His facilities are limited!"

"He did once—might again?"

"Couldn't we confine the issue to ourselves?"

"Are you afraid of my misjudging Val? I never should: my dearest darling Val is a fixed standard for me, and nothing could alter the way I think of him."

"Don't challenge luck," Lawrence muttered.

"I'm not, it's true. I'm surer of Val than I am of myself, or you, or the sun's rising tomorrow. All I want is to cheek you by him."

"Val is genuinely religious and a bit of an ascetic. I have no doubt that his life is now and will continue to be spotless. But that it was always so is most unlikely. Army subalterns during the war were given no end of a good time. And quite right too, it was the least that could be done for us: and the most, in nine cases out of ten: personally I had no use for munition workers in mud-coloured overalls, but I still remember with gratitude the nymphs who decorated my week end leaves."

Isabel shivered: the hand that he was holding had grown icy cold.

"There, you see!" said Hyde with his saddened cynicism. "You will have it all out but you can't stand it when it comes. You had better have left it to Val: not but what I'd rather talk to you, but I hate to distress you, and you're not old enough yet, my darling, to see these trivial things—yes, trivial to nine-tenths of the world: it's only the clergy, and unmarried women, and a small number of hyper-sensitives like Val, who attach an importance to them that they don't deserve. But you're too young to see them in perspective. Try to do it for my sake. Try to see me as I am."

"Well, show me then."

But what he showed her was not himself but the aspect of himself that he wished her to see—a very different matter. "I'm too old for you. I'm the son of a Jew, and a Houndsditch Jew at that. But I'm rich—what's called rich in my set—and when I marry I shan't keep my wife dependent on me. Ah! don't misunderstand me—yours is a rich manysided nature, and you're too intelligent to underrate the value of money. It means a wide life and lots of interests, books, pictures, music, travel, mixing with the men and women best worth knowing. You're ambitious, my dear, and as my wife you can build yourself up any social position you like. Farringay's not as big as Wharton, but on my soul it's more perfect in its

way. I've never seen such panelling in my life, and the gardens are admittedly the most beautiful in Dorsetshire. There are Sevres services more precious than gold plate, and if you come to that there's gold plate into the bargain. Can't I see you there as chatelaine, entertaining the county! You'll wear the sapphires my mother wore; the old man couldn't have been more happily inspired, they're the very colour of your eyes. And there'll be no price to pay, for since I'm a Jew and a cosmopolitan, and not a country squire, you'll keep your personal freedom inviolate. You'll give what you will, when you will, as you will. Any other terms are to my mind unthinkable—a brutalizing of what ought to be the most delicate of things. Heavens, how I hate a middleclass English marriage! Ah! but I'm not so accommodating as I sound, for you won't be a grudging giver; you're not an ascetic like Val, there's passion in you though you've been trained to repress it, you'll soon learn what love means as we understand it in the sunny countries. . . . Isabel, my Isabel, when we get away from these grey English skies you won't refuse to let me kiss you. . . ."

Isabel had ceased to listen. Without her own will a scene had sprung up before her eyes: an imaginary scene, like one of those romantic adventures that she had invented a thousand times before—but this was not romantic nor was she precisely the heroine. A foreign hotel with long corridors and many rooms: a door thoughtlessly left ajar: and through it a glimpse of Lawrence—her husband—holding another woman in his arms. It was lifelike, she could have counted the buds embroidered on the girl's blouse, their rose-pink reflected in the hot flush on Hyde's cheek and the glow in his eyes as he stooped over her. And then the imaginary Isabel with a pain at her heart like the stab of a knife, and a smile of inexpressible self-contempt on her lips, noiselessly closed the door so that no one else might see what she had seen, and left him. . . . It would all happen one day, if not that way, some other way; and he would come to her by and by without explanation—she was convinced that he would not lie to her—smiling, the hot glow still on his face, a subdued air of well-being diffused over him from head to foot—and then? The vision faded; her clairvoyance, which had already carried her far beyond her experience, broke down in sheer anguish. But reason took it up and told her that she would speak to him, and that he would apologize and she would forgive him—and that it would all happen again the next time temptation met him in a weak hour.

Faithful? it was not in him to be faithful: with so much that was generous and gallant, there was this vice of taste in him which had offended her that first morning on the moor and again at night in Laura's garden, and which now led him to make love to her when she was under his protection and while the scent of Mrs. Cleve's flowers still clung to his coat. And what love! if he had simply spoken to her out of his need of her, one would not have known how to resist, but it was he who was to be the giver, and what he offered was the measure of what he desired—a lesson in passion and a liberal allowance. . . .

"O no, no, no, I can't!" Isabel cried out, turning from him.
"Yes, I love you, but I don't trust you, and I won't marry you.
I'm too much afraid."

"Afraid of me?"

"Afraid of the pain."

"What pain?"

"And the—wickedness of it." Lawrence, frozen with astonishment—he had foreseen resistance, but not of this quality—let fall her hand. "Yes, we'll part now. We can part now. I love you, but not too much to get over it in a year or so; and you? you'll forget sooner, because I'm not worth remembering."

"Forget you?"

"Oh! yes, it's not as if you really cared for me; you wouldn't talk to me of money if you did. But I suppose you've known so many. . . . Val warned me long ago that you had not a good name with women."

"Val said that? Val!"

"And now you're angry with Val; I repeat what I oughtn't to repeat, and make mischief. Lawrence, this isn't Val's doing; it isn't even Mrs. Cleve's: it's my own cowardice. I daren't marry you."

"But why not?"

"You're not trying to be good."

"The language of the nursery defeats me, Isabel."

She flushed. "That means I've hurt you."

"Naturally."

"I can't help it." That was truer than he realized, for she could hardly help crying. She could not soften her refusal, because she was so shaken and exhausted by the strain of it that she dared not venture on more than one sentence at a time.

"I'm very sorry."

"But as my wife you could be as 'good' as you liked?"

"You would not leave me strength for it."

"I should corrupt you?"

"Yes, I think you would deliberately tempt me. . . . I think you have tonight."

"Do you care for no one but yourself?" he flung at her in his vertigo of humiliation and anger.

"No: I care for God."

"For God!" Lawrence repeated stupidly: "what has that to do with your marrying me?"

He heard his own betise as it left his lips, and felt the immeasurable depth of it, but he had not time to retract before every personal consideration was wiped from his mind by a cry from Isabel in a very different accent—"Lawrence! oh! look at the time!"

She pointed to the dial of an illuminated clock, hanging high in the soft September night. It was eight minutes to twelve. "What time did you say our train went?"

They were in Whitehall. Lawrence caught up the speaking tube. "Waterloo main entrance—and drive like the devil, please, we're late."

"I thought we had plenty of time?"

"So we had: so much so that I told the man to drive round and round for a bit."

"And have we still time?"

"No."

"We shan't lose the train?"

"Unless it's delayed in starting, which isn't likely."

"Will the others go on and leave us?"

"Hardly!"

"You don't mean that Laura won't get home till tomorrow? Oh!"

"No. But don't look so frightened, no one will blame you—the responsibility is mine entirely."

Isabel's lip curled. It was for Laura that she felt afraid and not for herself, and surely he might have guessed as much as that! "Did you do it on purpose?"

"No."

"I beg your pardon. That was stupid of me."

"Very," said Lawrence with his keen sarcastic smile.

At Waterloo he sprang out, tossed a sovereign to the driver, and made Isabel catch up her skirts and run like a deer. But before they reached the platform it was after twelve and the rails beyond were empty. Selincourt and Laura were waiting by the barrier, Selincourt red with impatience, Laura very pale.

"Are you aware you've lost the last train down?" said the elder man with ill-concealed anger, as Lawrence, shortening his step, strolled up in apparent tranquillity with Isabel on his arm. "What on earth has become of you? We've been waiting here for half an hour!"

"We were held up in the traffic," said Lawrence deliberately. Isabel turned scarlet. The truth would have been insupportable, but so was the lie. "Although it was no fault of mine, Laura, I'm more sorry

than I can say. Will you let me telephone for my own car and motor you down? I could get you to Chilmark in the small hours—long before the first morning train."

Laura hesitated: but Selincourt's brow was dark. The streets that night had not been unusually crowded, ample time had been allowed to cover any ordinary delay, and Isabel was cruelly confused. In his simple code Hyde had committed at least one if not two unpardonable sins—he had neglected one of the ladies in his care if he had not affronted the other.

"That wouldn't do at all," he said with decision. "You've been either careless or unlucky once, Lawrence. It might happen again."

It was a direct challenge, and cost him an effort, but it was not resented. "It would not. From my soul I regret this contretemps, Lucian. Do you settle what's to be done: you're Laura's brother, I put myself unreservedly in your hands."

"My dear fellow!" the gentle Lucian was instantly disarmed. "After all we needn't make a mountain out of a molehill—they'll know we're all right, four of us together!"

"At all events it can't be helped," said Mrs. Clowes, smiling at Lawrence with her kind trustful eyes, "so don't distress yourself. My sweet Isabel too, so tired!" she took Isabel's cold hand. "Never mind, Val won't let your father worry, and we shall be home by ten or eleven in the morning. It is only to go to an hotel for a few hours. Come, dear Lawrence, don't look so subdued! It wasn't your fault, so you mustn't trouble even if—"

"Even if what?"

"Even if Bernard locks the door in my face," she finished laughing. "He'll be fearfully cross! but I dare say Val will go down and smooth his ruffled plumage."

CHAPTER XV

"I do not like all this running about to places of amusement," said Mr. Stafford, rumpling up his curls till they stood on end in a plume. "If you or Rowsley were to visit a theatre I should say nothing. You're men and must judge for yourselves. But Isabel is different. I have a good mind to put my foot down once and for all. An atmosphere of luxury is not good for a young girl."

He stretched himself out in his shabby chair; a shabby, slight man, whose delicate foot, the toes poking out of a shabby slipper, looked as if it were too small to make much impression however firmly put down. Val, smoking his temperate pipe on the other side of the diningroom hearth, temperately suggested that the amount of luxury in Isabel's life wouldn't hurt a fly.

"One grain of strychnine will destroy a life: and one hour of temptation may destroy a soul for ever." Val bowed his head in assent. "Why are we all so fond of Isabel? Because she hasn't a particle of self-consciousness in her. A single evening's flattery may infect her with that detestable vice."

"She must grow up some time."

"More's the pity," retorted the vicar. "Another point: I'm not by any means sure I approve of that fellow Hyde. I doubt if he's a religious man." Val brushed away a smile. "He comes to church with Laura pretty regularly, but would he come if her influence were removed? I greatly doubt it." So did Val, therefore he prudently held his tongue. "I hate to be uncharitable," continued Mr. Stafford "but I doubt if he is even what one narrowly calls a moral man. Take Jack Bendish, now one can see at a glance that he's a good fellow, right-living and clean-minded. But Hyde doesn't inspire me with any such confidence. I know nothing of his private life—"

"Nor do I," said Val rather wearily. "But what does any man know of another man's private life? If you come to that, Jim, what do you know of Rowsley's—or mine?"

"Pouf, nonsense!" said Mr. Stafford.

At his feet lay a small black cat, curled up in the attitude of a comma. Before going on he inserted one toe under her waist, rapidly turned her upside down, and chucked her under her ruffled and indignant chin.

"Val, my boy, has any one repeated to you a nasty bit of gossip that's going about the village?"

"This violence to a lady!" Val held out his hand and made small coaxing noises with his lips. But Amelia after a cold stare walked away and sat down in the middle of the floor, turning her back and sticking out a refined but implacable tail. "There now! you've hurt her feelings."

"Of course there's nothing in it—on one side at least. But I can't help wondering whether Hyde . . . our dear Laura would naturally be the last to hear of it. But Hyde's a man of the world and knows how quickly tongues begin to wag. In Laura's unprotected position he ought to be doubly careful."

"He ought."

"But he is not. Now is that designed or accidental? We'll allow him the benefit of the doubt and call it an error of judgment. Then some one ought to give him a hint."

"Some one would be knocked down for his pains."

"D'you think he'd knock me down?" asked Mr. Stafford, casting a comical glance over his slender elderly frame.

"Hardly," said Val laughing. "But—no, Jim, it wouldn't do. Too formal, too official." His real objection was that Mr. Stafford would base his appeal on ethical and spiritual grounds, which were not likely to influence Lawrence, as Val read him. "But if you like I'll give him a hint myself. I can do it informally; and I very nearly did it as long ago as last June. Hyde is amenable to treatment if he's taken quietly."

Mr. Stafford, by temperament and training a member of the Church Militant, clearly felt a trifle disappointed, but he had little petty vanity and accepted Val's amendment without a murmur. "Very well, if you think you can do it better! I don't care who does it so long as it's done." The clock struck. "Half past eleven is that? Isabel can't be home before four. Dear me, how I hate these ridiculous hours, turning night into day!" As some correspondents put the point of a letter into a postscript, so the vicar in returning to his Church Times revealed the peculiar sting that was working in his mind. "And I don't — I do not like Isabel to make one of that trio—in view of what's being said."

"She is with Mrs. Clowes," said Val shortly, and colouring all over his face. Fling enough mud and some of it is sure to stick! If his unworldly father could think Laura, though innocent, so far compromised that Isabel was not safe in her care, what were other people saying? Val got up. "I shall walk down and smoke a pipe with Clowes. He won't go to bed till they come in."

The beechen way was dark and steep; roosting birds blundered out from overhead with a sleepy clamour of alarm-notes and a great rustle of leaf-brushed wings; one could have tracked Val's course by the commotion they made. On the footbridge dark in alder-shadow he lingered to enjoy the cool woodland air and lulling ripple underfoot. Not a star pierced to that black water, it might have been unfathomably deep; and though the village street was only a quarter of a mile away the night was intensely quiet, for all Chilmark went to bed after closing time. It was not often that Val, overworked and popular, tasted such a profound solitude. Not a leaf stirred: no one was near: under golden stars it was chilling towards one of the first faint frosts of the year: and insensibly Val relaxed his guard: a heavy sigh broke from him, and he moved restlessly, indulging himself in recollection as a man who habitually endures pain without wincing will now and then allow himself the relief of defeat.

For it is a relief not to pretend any more nor fight: to let pain take its way, like a slow tide invading every nerve and flooding every recess of thought, till one is pierced and penetrated by it, married to it, indifferent so long as one can drop the mask of that cruel courage which exacts so many sacrifices. Val was still only twenty-nine. Forty years more of a life like this! . . . Lawrence had once compared him to a man on the rack. But, though Lawrence knew all, Val had never relaxed the strain before him: was incapable of relaxing it before any spectator. He needed to be not only alone, but in the dark, hidden even from himself: and even so no open expression was possible to him, not a movement after the first deep sigh: it was relief enough for him to be sincere with himself and own that he was unhappy. But why specially unhappy now?

Midnight: the church clock had begun to strike in a deep whirring chime, muffled among the million leaves of the wood.

That trio were in the train now, Isabel probably fast falling asleep, Hyde and Laura virtually alone for the run from Waterloo to Chilmark.

A handsome man, Hyde, and attractive to women, or so rumour and Yvonne Bendish affirmed. If even Yvonne, who was Laura's own sister, was afraid of Hyde! . . . Well, Hyde was to be given the hint to take himself off, and surely no more than such a hint would be necessary? Val smiled, the prospect was not

without a wry humour. If he had been Hyde's brother, what he had to say would not have said itself easily. "Let us hope he won't knock me down," Val reflected, "or the situation will really become strained; but he won't—that's not his way." What was his way? The worst of it was that Val was not at all sure what way Hyde would take, nor whether he would consent to go alone. A handsome man, confound him, and a picked specimen of his type: one of those high-g geared and smoothly running physical machines that are all grace in a lady's drawingroom and all steel under their skins. What a contrast between him and poor Bernard! the one so impotent and devil-ridden, the other so virile, unscrupulous, and serene.

Val stirred restlessly and gripped the rail of the bridge between his clenched hands. His mind was a chaos of loose ends and he dared not follow any one of them to its logical conclusion. What was he letting himself think of Laura? Such fears were an insult to her clear chastity and strength of will. Or, in any event, what was it to him? He was Bernard's friend, and Laura's but he was not the keeper of Bernard's honour. . . . But Hyde and Laura . . . alone . . . the train with its plume of fire rushing on through the dark sleeping night. . . .

"In manus tuas . . ." Val raised his head, and shivered, the wind struck chill: he was tired out. Yet only a second or so had gone by while he was indulging himself in useless regrets for what could never be undone, and still more useless anxiety for a future which was not only beyond his control but outside his province as Bernard's agent. That after all was his status at Wanhope, he had no other. It was still striking twelve: the last echo of the last chime trembled away on a faint, fresh sough of wind. . . . A lolloping splash off the bank into the water—what was that? A dark blot among ripples on a flat and steely glimmer, the sketch of a whiskered feline mask . . . Val made a mental note to speak to Jack Bendish about it: otters are bad housekeepers in a trout stream.

"Hallo! Good man!" Major Clowes was on his back in the drawingroom, in evening dress, and playing patience. "I've tried Kings, Queens and Knaves, and Little Demon, and Fair Lucy, and brought every one of 'em out first round. Something must be going to happen." With a sweep of his arm he flung all the cards on the floor. "What do you want?"

"A pipe," said Val, going on one knee to pick up the scattered pack. "I looked in to see how you were getting on. Aren't you going to bed?"

"Not before they come in."

"Nor will Jimmy, I left him sitting up for Isabel. You're both of you very silly, you'll be dead tired tomorrow, and what's the object of it?"

"To make sure they do come in," Bernard explained with a broad grin. Val sprang up: intolerable, this reflection of his own fear in Bernard's distorting mirror! "Ha ha! Suppose they didn't? Laura was rather fond of larks before she married me. She was, I give you my word—she and the other girl. You wouldn't think it of Laura, would you? Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But she might like a fling for a change. Who'd blame her? I'm no good as a husband, and Lawrence is a picked specimen. Quelle type, eh?"

"Very good-looking."

"Very good-looking!" Bernard mocked at him. "You and your Army vocabulary! And I'm a nice chap, and Laura's quite a pretty woman, and this is a topping knife, isn't it, and life's a jolly old beano—Pity I can't get out of it, by the by: if physiology is the basis of marriage, those two would run well in harness."

"There's an otter in the river," remarked Val, examining the little dagger, the same that Lawrence had given Bernard. "I heard him from the bridge. They come down from the upper reaches. Remind me to tell Jack, he's always charmed to get a day's sport with his hounds." He laid the dagger on a side-table.

"Have one of my cigars? You can't afford cigars, can you? poor devil! They're on that shelf. Not those: they're Hyde's." Val put back the box as if it had burnt his fingers. "Leaves his things about as if the place were a hotel!" grumbled Major Clowes. "That's one of his books. Pick it up. What is it?" Val read out the title. "Poetry? Good Lord deliver us! Do you read poetry, Val?"

"I occasionally dip into Tennyson," Val replied, settling himself in an easy chair. "I can't understand modern verse as a rule, it's too clever for me, and the fellows who write it always seem to go in for such gloomy subjects. I don't like gloomy books, I like stuff that rests and refreshes you. There are enough sad things in life without writing stories about them. I can read the 'Idylls of the King,' but I can't read Bernard Shaw."

"Nor anybody else," said Bernard. He fixed his eyes on Val: eyes like his cousin's in form and colour,

large, and so black under their black lashes that the pupil was almost indistinguishable from the iris, but smouldering in a perpetual glow, while Hyde's were clear and indifferent. "You're a good sort to have come down to look after me. I don't feel very brash tonight. Oh Val! oh Val! I know I'm a brute, a coarse-minded, foul-mouthed brute. I usedn't to be. When I was twenty-five, if any man had said before me what I say of Laura, I'd have kicked him out of his own house. Why don't you kick me?"

"I am not violent."

"Ain't you? I am." He flung out his arm. "Give me your hand." Val complied, amused or touched: as often happened when they were alone, he remained on the borderline. But it was taken in no affectionate clasp. Bernard's grip closed on him, tighter and tighter, till the nails were driven into his palm. "Is that painful?" Clowes asked with his Satanic grin. "Glad of it. I'm in pain too. I've got neuritis in my spine and I can't sleep for it. I haven't had any proper sleep for a week.—Oh my God, my God, my God! do you think I'd grumble if that were all? I can't, I can't lie on my back all my life playing patience or fiddling over secondhand penknives! I was born for action. Action, Val! I'm not a curate. I'd like to smash something—crush it to a jelly." Val mincingly pointed out that such a consummation was not far off, but he was ignored. "Oh damn the war! and damn England too—what did we go to fight for? What asses we were! Did we ever believe in a reason? Give me these ten years over again and I wouldn't be such a fool. Who cares whether we lick Germany or Germany licks England? I don't."

"I do."

Bernard stared at him, incredulous. "What—'freedom and honour' and all the rest of it?"

"In a defensive war—"

"Oh for God's sake! I've just had my supper."

"—any man who won't fight for his country deserves to be shot."

"You combine the brains of a rabbit with the morals of a eunuch."

Val crossed his legs and withdrew his cigar to laugh.

"Ah! I apologize." Clowes shrugged his shoulders. "'Eunuch' is the wrong word for you—as a breed they're a cowardly lot. But I used the term in the sense of a Palace favourite who swallows all the slop that's pumped into him. 'Lloyd George for ever and Britannia rules the waves.' Dare say I should sing it myself if I'd come out covered with glory like you did."

"I met Gainsford today. He says the longacre fences ought to be renewed before winter. Parts of them are so rotten that the first gale will bring them down."

"Damn Gainsford and damn the fences and damn you."

"Really, really!" Val stretched himself out and put his feet up.

"You're very monotonous tonight."

"And you, you're tired: I wear you both out, you and Laura—and yet you're the only people on earth. . . Why can't I die? Sometimes I wonder if it's anything but cowardice that prevents me from cutting my throat. But my life is infernally strong in me, I don't want to die: what I want is to get on my legs again and kick that fellow Hyde down the steps. What does he stop on here for?"

"Well, you're always pressing him to stay, aren't you? Why do you do it, if this is the way you feel towards him?"

"Because I've always sworn I'd give Laura all the rope she wanted," said Clowes between his teeth. "If she wants to hang herself, let her. I should score in the long run. Hyde would chuck her away like an old shoe when he got sick of her." There was a fire not far from madness burning now in the wide, dilated eyes. "Afterwards she'd have to come back, because those Selincourts haven't got twopence between the lot of them, and if she did she'd be mine for good and all. Hyde would break her in for me."

"You don't realize what you're saying, Berns, old man. You can't," said Val gently, "or you wouldn't say it. It is too unutterably beastly."

"Ah! perhaps the point of view is a bit warped," Bernard returned carelessly to sanity. "It shocks you, does it? But the fact is Laura has the whip hand of me and I can't forgive her for it. She's the saint and I'm the sinner. She's a bit too good. If Hyde broke her in and sent her home on her knees, I should have the whip hand of her, and I'd like to reverse the positions. Can you follow that? Yes! A bit warped, I own. But I am warped— bound to be. Give the body such a wrench as the Saxons gave mine and you're

bound to get some corresponding wrench in the mind."

"That's rank materialism."

"Bosh! it's common sense. Look at your own case! Do you never analyze your own behaviour? You would if you lay on your back year in year out like me. You're maimed too."

"No, am I?" Val reached for a fourth cushion. "Think o' that, now."

"Or you wouldn't be content to hang on in Chilmark, riding over another man's property and squiring another man's wife. The shot that broke your arm broke your life. You had the makings of a fine soldier in you, but you were knocked out of your profession and you don't care for any other. With all your ability you'll never be worth more than six or seven hundred a year, for you've no initiative and you're as nervous as a cat. You're not married and you'll never marry: you're too passive, too continent, too much of a monk to attract a healthy woman. No: don't you flatter yourself that you've escaped any more than I have. The only difference is that the Saxons mucked up my life and you've mucked up your own. You fool! you high-minded, over-scrupulous fool! . . . You and I are wreckage of war, Val: cursed, senseless devilry of war.— Go and play a tune, I'm sick of talking."

Val was not any less sick of listening. He went to the piano, but not to play a tune. Impossible to insult that crippled tempest on the sofa with the sweet eternal placidities of Mozart or Bach. His fingers wandered over the lower register, improvising, modulating from one minor key to another in a cobweb of silver harmony spun pale and low from a minimum of technical attention. For once Bernard had struck home. "The shot that broke your arm broke your life." Stripped of Bernard's rhetoric, was it true?

Val could not remember the time when his ambition had not been set on soldiering: regiments of Hussars and Dragoons had deployed on his earliest Land of Counterpane: he had never cared for any other toys. But as soon as war was over he had resigned his commission, a high sense of duty driving him from a field in which he felt unfit to serve. He had pitilessly executed his own judgment: no man can do more. But what if in judgement itself had been unhinged—warped—deflected by the interaction of splintered bone and cut sinew and dazed, ghost-ridden mind? Have not psychologists said that few fighting men were strictly normal in or for some time after the war?

If that were true, Val had wasted the best years of his life on a delusion. It was a disturbing thought, but it brought a sparkle to his eyes and an electric force to his fingertips: he raised his head and looked out into the September night as if there was stirring in him the restless sap of spring. After all he was still a young man. Forty years more! If these grey ten years since the war could be taken as finite, not endless: if after them one were to break the chain, tear off the hair shirt, come out of one's cell into the warm sun—then, oh then—Val's shoulders remembered their military set—life might be life again and not life in death.

"What the devil are you strumming now?"

"Tipperary."

"That's not much in your line."

"Oh! I was in the Army once," said Val. "You go to sleep."

He had his wish. The heavy eyelids closed, the great chest rose and fell evenly, and some—not all—of the deep lines of pain were smoothed away from Bernard's lips. Even in sleep it was a restless, suffering head, but it was no longer so devil-ridden as when he was talking of his wife. Val played on softly: once when he desisted Bernard stirred and muttered something which sounded like "Go on, damn you," a proof that his mind was not far from his body, only the thinnest of veils lying over its terrible activity. David would have played the clock round, if Saul would have slept on.

Saul did not. He woke—with a tremendous start, sure sign of broken nerves: a start that shook him like a fall and shook the couch too. "Hallo!" he came instantly into full possession of his faculties: "you still here? What's the time? I feel as if I'd been asleep for years. Why, it's daylight!" He dragged out his watch. "What the devil is the time?"

Val rose and pulled back a curtain. The morning sky was full of grey light, and long pale shadows fell over frost-silvered turf: mists were steaming up like pale smoke from the river, over whose surface they swept in fantastic shapes like ghosts taking hands in an evanescent arabesque: the clouds, the birds, the flowers were all awake. The house was awake too, and in fact it was the clatter of a housemaid's brush on the staircase that had roused Bernard. "It's nearly six o'clock," said Val. "You've had a long sleep, Berns. I'm afraid the others have missed their train."

"Missed their train!"

"First night performances are often slow, and they mayn't have been able to get a cab at once. It's tiresome, but there's no cause for anxiety."

"Missed their train!"

"Well, they can't all have been swallowed up by an earthquake! Of course fire or a railway smash is on the cards, but the less thrilling explanation is more probable, don't you think, old man?"

"Missed the last train and were obliged to stay in town?"

"And a rotten time they'll have of it. It's no joke, trying to get rooms in a London hotel when you've ladies with you and no luggage."

"You think Laura would let Hyde take her to an hotel?"

"Well, Berns, what else are they to do?" said Val impatiently.
"They can't very well sit in a Waterloo waitingroom!"

"No, no," said Clowes. "Much better pass the night at an hotel. Is that what you call a rotten time? If I were Lawrence I should call it a jolly one."

Val turned round from the window. "If I were Hyde," he said stiffly, "I should take the ladies to some decent place and go to a club myself. You might give your cousin credit for common sense if not for common decency! You seem to forget the existence of Isabel."

"Oh, all right," said Bernard after a moment. "I was only joking. No offence to your sister, Val, I'm sure Laura will look after her all right. But it is a bit awkward in a gossippy hole like Chilmark. When does the next train get in?"

No man knows offhand the trains that leave London in the small hours, but Val hunted up a timetable—its date of eighteen months ago a pregnant commentary on life at Wanhope—and came back with the information that if they left at seven-fifteen they could be at Countisford by ten. "Too late to keep it quiet," he owned. "The servants are a nuisance. But thank heaven Isabel's with them."

"Thank heaven indeed," Bernard assented. "Not that I care two straws for gossip myself, but Laura would hate to be talked about. Well, well! Here's a pretty kettle of fish. How would it be if you were to meet them at the station? I suppose they're safe to come by that train? Or will they wait for a second one? Getting up early is not Laura's strong point at the best of times, and she'll be extra tired after the varied excitements of the night."

Val examined him narrowly. His manner was natural if a trifle subdued; the unhealthy glow had died down and his black eyes were frank and clear. Nevertheless Val was not at ease, this natural way of taking the mishap was for Bernard Clowes so unnatural and extraordinary: if he had stormed and sworn Val would have felt more tranquil. But perhaps after the fireworks of last night the devil had gone out of him for a season? Yet Val knew from painful experience that Bernard's devil was tenacious and wiry, not soon tired.

"They might," he said cautiously, "but I shouldn't think they will. Laura knows you, old fellow. She'll be prepared for a terrific wiggling, and she'll want to get home and get it over." A dim gleam of mirth relieved Val's mind a trifle: when the devil of jealousy was in possession he always cast out Bernard's sense of humour, a subordinate imp at the best of times and not of a healthy breed. "Besides, there's Isabel to consider. She'll be in a great state of mind, poor child, though it probably isn't in the least her fault. By the bye, if there's no more I can do for you, I ought to go home and see after Jim. He expressed his intention of sitting up for Isabel, and I only wonder he hasn't been down here before now. Probably he went to sleep over his Church Times, or else buried himself in some venerable volume of patristic literature and forgot about her. But when Fanny gets down he'll be tearing his hair."

"Go by all means," said Bernard. "You must be fagged out, Val; have you been at the piano all these hours? How you spoil me, you and Laura! Get some breakfast, lie down for a nap, and after that you can go on to Countisford and meet them in the car."

"All right!" In face of Bernard's thoughtful and practical good humour Val's suspicions had faded. "Shall I come back or will you send the car up for me?" Neither he nor Clowes saw anything unusual in these demands on his time and energy: it was understood that the duties of the agency comprised doing anything Bernard wanted done at any hour of day or night.

"I'll send her up. Stop a bit." Clowes knit his brows and looked down, evidently deep in thought. "Yes,

that's the ticket. You take Isabel home and send Lawrence and Laura on alone. Drop them at the lodge before you drive her up. She'll be tired out and it's a good step up the hill. And you must apologize for me to your father for giving him so much anxiety. Lawrence must have been abominably careless to let them lose their train: they ought to have had half an hour to spare."

"He is casual."

"Oh very: thinks of nothing but himself. Pity you and he can't strike a balance! Good-bye. Mind you take your sister straight home and apologize to your father for Hyde's antics. Say I'm sorry, very sorry to mix her up in such a pickle, and I wouldn't have let her in for it if it could have been avoided. Touch the bell for me before you go, will you? I want Barry."

Val let himself out by the window and the impassive valet entered. But it was some time before Bernard spoke to him.

"Is that you, Barry? I didn't hear you come in."

"Now what's in the wind?" speculated Barry behind his professional mask. "Up all night and civil in the morning? Oh no, I don't think."

"Shall I wheel you to your room, sir?"

"Not yet," said Clowes. He waited to collect his strength. "Shut all those windows." Barry obeyed. "Turn on the electric light . . . Put up the shutters and fasten them securely . . . Now I want you to go all over the house and shut and fasten all the other ground floor windows: then come back to me."

"Am I to turn on the electric light everywhere, sir?" Barry asked after a pause.

"Where necessary. Not in the billiard room; nor in Mrs. Clowes' parlour." Barry had executed too many equally singular orders to raise any demur. He came back in ten minutes with the news that it was done.

"Now wheel me into the hall," said Clowes. Barry obeyed. "Shut the front doors. . . . Lock them and put up the chain."

This time Barry did hesitate. "Sir, if I do that no one won't be able to get in or out except by the back way: and it's close on seven o'clock."

"You do what you're told."

Barry obeyed.

"Now wheel my couch in front of the doors."

"Mad as a March hare!" was Barry's private comment. "Lord, I wish Mr. Stafford was here."

"That will do," said Clowes.

He settled his great shoulders square and comfortable on his pillow and folded his arms over his breast.

"I want you to take an important message from me to the other servants. Tell them that if Mrs. Clowes or Captain Hyde come to the house they're not to be let in. Mrs. Clowes has left me and I do not intend her to return. If they force their way in I'll deal with them, but any one who opens the door will leave my service today. Now get me some breakfast. I'll have some coffee and eggs and bacon. Tell Fryar to see that the boiled milk's properly hot."

Barry, stupefied, went out without a word, leaving the big couch, and the big helpless body stretched out upon it, drawn like a bar across the door.

CHAPTER XVI

It was a fatigued and jaded party that got out on the platform at Countisford. The mere wearing of evening dress when other people are at breakfast will damp the spirits of the most hardened, and even Lawrence had an up-all-night expression which reddened his eyelids and brought out the lines about his

mouth. Isabel's hair was rumpled and her fresh bloom all dimmed. Laura Clowes had suffered least: there was not a thread astray in her satin waves, and the finished grace of her aspect had survived a night in a chair. But even she was very pale, though she contrived to smile at Val.

"How's Bernard?" were her first words.

"All serene. He slept most of the time. I was with him, luckily. We guessed what had happened. You missed your train?" In this question Val included Lawrence.

"It was my fault," said Lawrence shortly. It was what he would have said if it had not been his fault.

"It was nobody's fault!" cried Laura. "We were held up in the traffic. But Lawrence is one of those people who will feel responsible if they have ladies with them on the Day of Judgment, won't you, Lawrence?"

"I ought to have left more time," said Lawrence impatiently.
"Let's get home."

In the car Val heard from Laura the details of their misadventure. Selincourt had waited with the women while Lawrence secured rooms for them in a Waterloo hotel: when they were safe, Lawrence had gone to Lucian's rooms in Victoria Street, where the men had passed what remained of the night in a mild game of cards. They had all breakfasted together by lamplight at the hotel, and Selincourt had seen his sister into the Chilmark train. Nothing could have been more circumspect— comically circumspect! between Selincourt and Isabel and the chambermaid, malice itself was put to silence. But Lawrence was fever-fretted by the secret sense of guilt.

At the lodge gates Val drew up. "It's preposterous, but I'm under Bernard's express orders to drive Isabel straight home. I don't know how to apologize for turning you and Hyde out of your own car, Laura!" No apology was needed, Laura and Lawrence knew too well how direct Bernard's orders commonly were to Val. Lawrence silently offered his hand to Mrs. Clowes. The morning air was fresh, fog was still hanging over the river, and the sun had not yet thrown off an autumn quilting of cloud. Touched by the chill of dawn, some leaves had fallen and lay in the dust, their ribs beaded with dark dew: others, yellow and shrivelling, were shaken down by the wind of the car and fluttered slowly in the eddying air. Laura drew her sable scarf close over her bare neck.

"What I should like best, Lawrence, would be for you to go home with Isabel and make our excuses to Mr. Stafford. Would you mind? Or is it too much to ask before you get out of your evening dress?"

"I should be delighted," said Lawrence, feeling and indeed looking entirely the reverse. "But Miss Isabel has her brother to take care of her, she doesn't want me." Isabel gave that indefinable start which is the prelude of candour, but remained dumb. "I don't like to leave you to walk up to Wanhope alone." This, was as near as in civilized life he could go to saying "to face Clowes alone."

"The length of the drive?" said Laura smiling. "I should prefer it. You know what Berns is." This was what Lawrence had never known. "If he's put out I'd rather you weren't there."

"Why, you can't imagine I should care what Bernard said?"

Laura struck her hands together.—"There! There!" she turned to Val, "can you wonder Bernard feels it?"

"I beg your pardon," said Lawrence from his heart.

"No, the contrast is poignant," said Val coldly.

"Dear Val, you always agree with me," said Laura. "Take Captain Hyde home and give him some breakfast. I'd rather go alone, Lawrence: it will be easier that way, believe me."

It was impossible to argue with her. But while Val wheeled and turned in the wide cross, before they took their upward bend under the climbing beechwood, Lawrence glanced over his shoulder and saw Mrs. Clowes still standing by the gate of Wanhope, solitary, a wan gleam of sunlight striking down over her gold embroideries and ivory coat, a russet leaf or two whirling slowly round her drooping head: like a butterfly in winter, delicate, fantastic, and astray.

Breakfast at the vicarage was not a genial meal. Val was anxious and preoccupied, Isabel in eclipse, even Mr. Stafford out of humour—vexed with Lawrence, and with Val for bringing Lawrence in under the immunities of a guest. Lawrence himself was in a frozen mood. As soon as they had finished he rose: "If you'll excuse my rushing off I'll go down to Wanhope now."

"By all means," said Mr. Stafford drily.

"Good-bye," said Isabel, casting about for a form of consolation, and evolving one which, in the circumstances, was possibly unique: "You'll feel better when you've had a bath."

"I'll walk down with you to Wanhope" said Val.

"You? Oh! no, don't bother," said Lawrence very curtly. "I can manage my cousin, thanks."

But Val's only reply was to open the door for him and stroll with him across the lawn. At the wicket gate Hyde turned: "Excuse my saying so, but I prefer to go alone."

"I'm not coming in at Wanhope. But I've ten words to say to you before you go there."

"Oh?" said Lawrence. He swung through leaving Val to follow or not as he liked.

"Stop, Hyde, you must listen. You're going into a house full of the materials for an explosion. You don't know your own danger."

"I dislike hints. What are you driving at?"

"Laura."

"Mrs. Clowes?"

"Naturally," said Val with a faint smile. "You know as well as I do how pointless that correction is. You imply by it that as I'm not her brother I've no right to meddle. But I told you in June that I should interfere if it became necessary to protect others."

"And since when, my dear Val, has it become necessary? Last night?"

"Well, not that only: all Chilmark has been talking for weeks and weeks."

"Chilmark—"

"Oh," Val interrupted, flinging out his delicate hands, "what's the good of that? Who would ever suggest that you care what Chilmark says? But she has to live in it."

The scene had to be faced, and a secret vein of cruelty in Lawrence was not averse from facing it. This storm had been brewing all summer.—They were alone, for the beechen way was used only as a short cut to the vicarage. Above them the garden wall lifted its feathery fringe of grass into great golden boughs that drooped over it: all round them the beech forest ran down into the valley, the eye losing itself among clear glades at the end of which perhaps a thicket of hollies twinkled darkly or a marbled gleam of blue shone in from overhead; the steep dark path was illumined by the golden lamplight of millions on millions of pointed leaves, hanging motionless in the sunny autumnal morning air which smelt of dry moss and wood smoke.

"And what's the rumour? That I'm going to prevail or that I've prevailed already?"

"The worst of it is," Val kept his point and his temper, "that it's not only Chilmark. One could afford to ignore village gossip, but this has reached Wharton, my father—Mrs. Clowes herself. You wouldn't willingly do anything to make her unhappy: indeed it's because of your consistent and delicate kindness both to her and to Bernard that I've refrained from giving you a hint before. You've done Bernard an immense amount of good. But the good doesn't any longer counterbalance the involuntary mischief: hasn't for some time past: can't you see it for yourself? One has only to watch the change coming over her, to look into her eyes—"

"Really, if you'll excuse my saying so, you seem to have looked into them a little too often yourself."

Val waited to take out his case and light a cigarette. He offered one to Hyde—"Won't you?"

"No, thanks: if you've done I'll be moving on."

"Why I haven't really begun yet. You make me nervous—it's a rotten thing to say to any man, and doubly difficult from me to you—and I express myself badly, But I must chance being called impertinent. The trouble is with your cousin. If you had heard him last night. . . . He's madly jealous."

"Of me? Last night?" Lawrence gave a short laugh: this time he really was amused.

"Dangerously jealous."

"There's not room for a shadow of suspicion. Go and interview Selincourt's servant if you like, or nose around the Continental."

"Well," said Val, coaxing a lucifer between his cupped palms, "I dare say it'll come to that. I've done a good deal of Bernard's dirty work. Some one has to do it for the sake of a quiet life. His suspicions aren't rational, you know."

"I should think you put them into his head."

"I?" the serene eyes widened slightly, irritating Lawrence by their effect of a delicacy too fastidious for contempt. For this courtesy, of finer grain than his own sarcasm, made him itch to violate and soil it, as mobs will destroy what they never can possess. "Need we drag in personalities? He was jealous of you before you came to Wanhope. He fancies or pretends to fancy that you were in love with Mrs. Clowes when you were boy and girl. We're not dealing with a sane or normal nature: he was practically mad last night—he frightened me. May I give you, word for word, what he said? That he let you stay on because he meant to give his wife rope enough to hang herself."

"What do you want me to do?" said Lawrence after a pause.

"To leave Wanhope."

More at his ease than Val, in spite of the disadvantage of his evening dress, Lawrence stood looking down at him with brilliant inexpressive eyes. "Is it your own idea that I stayed on at Wanhope to make love to Laura?"

"If I answer that, you'll tell me that I'm meddling with what is none of my business, and this time you'll be right."

"No: after going so far, you owe me a reply."

"Well then, I've never been able to see any other reason."

"Oh? Bernard's my cousin."

"Since you will have it, Hyde, I can't see you burying yourself in a country village out of cousinly affection. You said you'd stay as long as you were comfortable. Well, it won't be comfortable now! I'm not presuming to judge you. I've no idea what your ethical or social standards are. Quite likely you would consider yourself justified in taking away your cousin's wife. Some modern professors and people who write about social questions would say, wouldn't they, that she ought to be able to divorce him: that a marriage which can't be fruitful ought not to be a binding tie? I've never got up the subject because for me it's settled out of hand on religious grounds, but they may not influence you, nor perhaps would the other possible deterrent, pity for the weak—if one can call Bernard weak. It would be an impertinence for me to judge you by my code, when perhaps your own is pure social expediency—which would certainly be better served if Mrs. Clowes went to you."

"Assuming that you've correctly defined my standard—why should I go?"

Val shrugged his shoulders. "You know well enough. Because Mrs. Clowes is old-fashioned; her duty to Bernard is the ruling force in her life, and you could never make her give him up. Or if you did she wouldn't live long enough for you to grow tired of her—it would break her heart."

"Really?" said Lawrence. "Before I grew tired of her?"

He had never been so angry in his life. To be brought to book at all was bad enough, but what rankled worst was the nature of the charge. Sometimes it takes a false accusation to make a man realize the esteem in which he is held, the opinions which others attribute to him and which perhaps, without examining them too closely, he has allowed to pass for his own. Lawrence had indulged in plenty of loose talk about Nietzschean ethics and the danger of altruism and the social inexpediency of sacrificing the strong for the weak, but when it came to his own honour not Val himself could have held a more conservative view. He, take advantage of a cripple? He commit a breach of hospitality? He sneak into Wanhope as his cousin's friend to corrupt his cousin's wife? What has been called the pickpocket form of adultery had never been to his taste. Had Bernard been on his feet, a strong man armed, Lawrence might, if he had fallen in love with Laura, have gloried in carrying her off openly; but of the baseness of which Val accused him he knew himself to be incapable.

"Really?" he said, looking down at Val out of his wide black eyes, so like Bernard's except that they concealed all that Bernard revealed. "So now we understand each other. I know why you want me to go

and you know why I want to stay."

"If I've done you an injustice I'm sorry for it."

"Oh, don't apologize," said Lawrence laughing. His manner bewildered Val, who could make nothing of it except that it was incompatible with any sense of guilt.

"But, then," the question broke from Val involuntarily, "why did you stay?"

"Why do you?"

"I?"

"Yes, you. Did it never strike you that I might retort with a *tu quoque*?"

"How on earth—?"

"You were perhaps a little preoccupied," said Lawrence with his deadly smile. "I suggest, Val, that whether Clowes was jealous or not—you were."

"I?"

"Yes, my dear fellow:" the Jew laughed: it gave him precisely the same satisfaction to violate Val's reticence, as it might have given one of his ancestors to cut Christian flesh to ribbons in the markets of the East: "and who's to blame you? Thrown so much into the society of a very pretty and very unhappy woman, what more natural than for you to—how shall I put it?—constitute yourself her protector? Set your mind at rest. You have only one rival, Val—her husband."

He enjoyed his triumph for a few moments, during which Stafford was slowly taking account with himself.

"I'm not such a cautious moralist as you are," Lawrence pursued, "and so I don't hold a pistol to your head and give you ten minutes to clear out of Wanhope, as you did to mine. On the contrary, I hope you'll long continue to act as Bernard's agent. I'm sure he'll never get a better one. As for Laura, she won't discover your passion unless you proclaim it, which I'm sure you'll never do. She looks on you as a brother—an affectionate younger brother invaluable for running errands. And you'll continue to fetch and carry, enduring all things from her and Bernard much as you do from me. When I do go—which won't be just yet—I shan't feel the faintest compunction about leaving you behind. I'm sure Bernard's honour will be as safe in your hands as it is in mine."

And thus one paved the way to pleasant relations with ones brother-in-law. The civilized second self, always a dismayed and cynical spectator of Hyde's lapses into savagery, raised its voice in vain.

"You seem a little confused, Val—you always were a modest chap. But surely you of all men can trust my discretion—?"

"That's enough," said Val. He touched Hyde's coat with his finger-tips, an airy movement, almost a caress, which seemed to come from a long way off. "Lawrence, you're hurting yourself more than me."

It was enough and more than enough: an arrest instant and final. Later Lawrence wondered whether Val knew what he had done, or whether it was only a thought unconsciously made visible; it was so unlike all he had seen of Val, so like much that he had felt.

It put him to silence. Not only so, but it flung a light cloud of mystery over what had seemed noontide clear. Since that first night when he had watched in a mirror the disentangling of Laura's scarf, Lawrence had entertained no doubt of Val's sentiments, but now he was left uncertain. Val had translated himself into a country to which Lawrence could not follow him, and the light of an unknown sun was on his way.

Lawrence drew back with an impatient gesture. "Oh, let's drop all this!" The civilized second self was in revolt alike against his own morbid cruelty and Val's escape into heaven: he would admit nothing except that he had gone through one trying scene after another in the last eighteen hours, and that Val had paid for the irritation produced successively by Mrs. Cleve, Isabel, a white night, and a distressed anxious consciousness of unavowed guilt. "We shall be at each other's throats in a minute, which wouldn't suit either your book or mine—you've no idea, Val, how little it would suit mine! I'm sorry I was so offensive. But you wrong me, you do indeed; I'm not in love with Laura, and, if I were, the notion of picking poor Bernard's pocket is absolutely repugnant to me. Social expediency be hanged! What! as his guest?— But let's drop recrimination; I had no right to resent what you said after forcing you to say it, nor, in any case, to taunt you . . . I beg your pardon: there! for heaven's sake let's leave it at that."

"Will you release me from my parole?"

"Yes, and wish to heaven I'd never extracted it. I had no right to impose it on you or to hold you to it. But don't give yourself away, Val, I can't bear to think of what you'll have to face. It will be what you once called it—crucifixion."

"No, freedom," said Val. "After all these years in prison." He put up his hand to his head. "The brand—the—What's the matter?" Lawrence had seized his arm. "Am I—am I talking rubbish? I feel half asleep. But one night's sitting up aughtn't to— Oh, this is absurd! . . ."

Lawrence waited in the patience of dismay. It was no excuse to plead that till then he had not known all the harm he had done; men should not set racks to work in ignorance of their effect on trembling human nerves.

"That's over," said Val, wiping his forehead. "Sorry to make a fuss, but it came rather suddenly. Things always happen so simply when they do happen."

"Are you going to confess?"

"Oh yes. I ought to have done it long ago. In fact last night I made up my mind to break my parole if you wouldn't let me off, but I'd rather have it this way. Remains only to choose time and place: that'll need care, for I mustn't hurt others more than I can help. But I wouldn't mind betting it'll all be as simple as shelling peas. The odds are that people won't believe half I say. They'll have forgotten all about the war by now, and they'll make far too much allowance for my being only nineteen."

"And for a voluntary confession: that always carries great weight. They would judge you very differently if it had come out by chance. Rightly, too: if you're going to make such a confession at your time of life, it will be difficult for any one to call you a coward."

"Thank you!" Val shrugged his shoulders with the old indolent irony. "But moral courage was always my long suit."

"How young you still are!" said Lawrence smiling at him, "young enough to be bitter. But you're under a delusion. No, let me finish— I'm an older man than you are, I've seen a good deal of life, and I had four years out there instead of six weeks like you. So far as I can judge you never were a coward. Thousands and hundreds of thousands of men broke down like you, but they were lucky and it wasn't known, or at all events it wasn't critical. Their failure of nerve didn't coincide with the special call to action. You would have redeemed yourself if you had been able to stick to your profession. You have redeemed yourself: and you'd prove it fast enough if you got the chance, only of course in these piping times of peace unluckily you won't." He coloured suddenly to his temples. "Good God, Val! if there were any weakness left in you, could you have mastered me like this?"

CHAPTER XVII

The quickest way to Wanhope was by High Street and field path. But Lawrence to avoid the village entered the drive by the lodge, through iron gates over which Bernard had set up the arms and motto of his family: FORTIS ET FIDELIS, faithful and strong. Winding between dense shrubs of rhododendron under darker deodars, the road was long and gloomy, but Lawrence was thankful to be out of sight of Chilmark. He hurried on with his light swinging step—light for his build—his tired mind vacant or intent only on a bath and a change of clothes, till in the last bend, within a hundred yards of Wanhope he came on Mrs. Clowes.

He never could clearly remember his first sight of her, the shock was too great, but as he came up she put out her hands to him and he took them in his own. She was still in her evening dress but without cloak or fur, which had probably slipped off her shoulders: they were bare, and her beautiful bodice was torn. "Oh, here you are," she said with her faint smile. "I was afraid you would come by the field." She looked down at herself and made a weak and ineffective effort to gather her loosened laces together. "I'm—I'm not very tidy, am I?"

Lawrence was carrying an overcoat on his arm. He put her into it, and, as she did not seem able to cope with it, buttoned it for her. "What has happened, dear?"

"Bernard has turned me out," said Laura with the same piteous, bewildered smile. "Indeed he never

let me in. I went home soon after you left me. The door was shut, I tried the window, but that was shut too, so I had to go back to the door. I couldn't open it and I rang. He answered me through the door, 'Who's there?' She ended as if the motive power of speech had died down in her.

"And you—?"

"Oh, I said, 'It's I—Laura.'"

"Go on, dear," Lawrence gently prompted her.

"I said 'I'm your wife.' He said 'I have no wife.' And he called me—coarse names, words I couldn't repeat to any one. I couldn't answer him. Then he said 'Where's Hyde? Are you there, Hyde?' and that you were a coward or you wouldn't stand by and hear him calling me a—what he had called me. So I told him you weren't there, that you had gone back with Isabel and Val. He said: after you had had all you wanted out of me—I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. Go on, dear: tell me all about it."

"But ought I to?" said Laura, raising her dimmed eyes to his face. "It's such a horrible story to tell a man, especially the very man who—I feel so queer, Lawrence: don't let me say anything I ought not!"

"Laura dear, whatever you say is sacred to me. Besides, I'm your cousin by marriage, and it's my business to think and act for you: let me help you into this alley." A little further on there was a by-path through the shrubberies, and Lawrence drew her towards it, but her limbs were giving way under her, and after a momentary hesitation he carried her into it in his arms. "There: sit on this bank. Lean on me," he sat down by her. "Is that better?"

"Oh yes: thank you: I'm so glad to be out of the drive," said Laura, letting her head fall, like a child, on his shoulder. "I seem to have been there such a long while. I didn't know where to go. Once a tradesman's cart drove by, the butcher's it was: you know Bernard gets so cross because they will drive this way to save the long round by the stables. He stared at me, but I didn't know what to do." Lawrence repressed a groan: it would be all over the village then, there was no help for it. "Where was I to go in these clothes? I did wish you would come, I always feel so safe with you."

Lawrence silently stroked her hair. His heart was riven. "So safe?" and this was all his doing.

"Was the door locked?"

"Yes."

"And he refused to open it?"

"No, he did open it."

"He did open it, do you say?"

"Yes, because—oh, my head."

"You aren't hurt anywhere, are you?" asked Lawrence, feeling cold to his fingertips.

"No, no," she roused herself, dimly sensible of his anxiety, "it's only that I feel faint, but it's passing off. No, I don't want any water! I'd far rather you stayed with me. It's such a comfort to have you here." Lawrence was speechless. Her hands went to her hair. "Oh dear, I wish I weren't so untidy! Never mind, I shall be all right directly: it does me more good than anything else just to tell you about it."

"Well, tell me then."

"The door was locked," she continued languidly but a thought more clearly, "and the chain was up and Bernard's couch was drawn across inside. He must have got Barry to wheel it over. When I begged him to let me in he unlocked the door but left it on the chain so that it would only open a few inches. I tried to push my way in, but he held me back."

"Laura, did he strike you?"

"No, no," said Laura with greater energy than she had yet shown. Lawrence drew a breath of relief. He had felt a horrible fear that her faintness might be the result of a blow or a fall. "Oh, how could you think that? All he did was to put his hand out flat against my chest and push me back."

"But your dress is torn" said Lawrence, sickening over the question yet feeling that he must know all.

"His ring caught in it. These crepe de chine dresses tear if you look at them."

"Well, did you give it up after that?"

"No, oh no: I never can be angry with Berns because it—it isn't Berns really," she glanced up at Lawrence with her pleading eyes. "It's a possession of the devil. He suffers so frightfully, Lawrence: he never ceases to rebel, and no one can soothe him but me. So that I hadn't the heart to leave him. You'll think it poor-spirited of me, but I—I can't help loving the real Bernard, a Bernard you've never seen. So I waited because—I never can make Yvonne understand—I am so sorry for him: he hurts himself more than me—"

Lawrence started. The echo struck strangely on his ear. "I understand."

"You always understand. So I tried again; I said: would he at least let me go to my room and change my clothes and get some money. But he said it was your turn to buy my clothes now. When I'd convinced myself that he was unapproachable, I thought of trying to get in by a side door or through the kitchen. It would have been ignominious, but anything was better than standing on the steps; Bernard was talking at the top of his voice, and the maids were at the bedroom windows overhead. I didn't look up but I saw the curtains flutter."

"Servants don't matter much. But you did quite right. What happened?"

"He held me by the arm as I turned to go, and told me that all the doors and windows were locked and that he had given orders not to admit me: not to admit either of us."

"Either you or—?"

"Yourself. If we liked to stay out all night together we could stay out for ever."

"And then?"

"Don't ask me." She shuddered and drooped, and the colour came up into her face, a rose-pink patch of fever. "I can't remember any more."

"He must have gone raving mad."

"He is not mad, Lawrence. But he has indulged his imagination too long and now it has the mastery of him," said Laura slowly. "It's fatal to do that. 'Withstand the beginning: after-remedies come too late.' Ever since you came he's been nursing an imaginary jealousy of you: though he knew it was imaginary, he indulged it as though it were genuine: and now it has turned on him and got him by the throat. Oh, he is so unhappy? But what can I do?"

What, indeed? Lawrence, recalling Val's warning, subdued a curse or a groan. "A house full of the materials for an explosion." And he had lived in that house—blind fool!—week after week and had noticed nothing! "Why—why did no one warn me before?" he stammered. "My poor Laura! Why didn't you send me away?"

"But if it hadn't been you it would have been someone else!" said Mrs. Clowes simply. "At one time it was Val: then it was Dr. Verney's junior partner, who attended me for influenza while Dr. Verney was away: and once it was a young chauffeur we had, who happened to be a University man. I did get rid of him, because he found out, and that made everything so awkward. But I couldn't get rid of Val, and in many ways I was most unwilling to let you go,—you did him so much good. But I'd made up my mind to turn you out: Yvonne was at me—" she paused—"yes, it really was only yesterday! I promised her to speak to you this morning. Well, I've done it!"

"Did you explain to Bernard that Selincourt and Isabel were with us all the time?"

"He talked me down."

"He must be made to listen to reason."

"He won't: not yet. Later, perhaps, but not in time to save the situation. Never mind, you're not married, and if he does divorce me people will only say 'Another Selincourt gone wrong.'" A dreary and rather cynical gleam of humour played over Laura's lips. "I'm sorry mainly for Yvonne, Jack's people are so particular; they hated the marriage, and now, when she's lived it all down and made them fond of her, I must needs go and compromise myself and drag our wretched family into the mud again!"

"Good heavens! he can't propose to divorce you?"

"He said he would."

Bit by bit it was all coming out, the cruel and sordid drama played before an audience of housemaids,

as one admission led to another and her strength revived for the ordeal. Lawrence shuddered and sat silent, trying to gauge the extent of the mischief. "What can I do?" said Laura. She looked down at herself and blushed again. "I do feel so—so disreputable in these clothes. I haven't even been able to wash my face and hands or tidy my hair since I left the hotel."

"Have you been wandering about in the drive all this time?"

"I suppose so. I was afraid to go into the road in such a pickle."

"These infernal clothes!" Lawrence burst out exasperated. Their wretched plight was reduced to farce by the fact that they were locked out of their bedrooms, unable to get at their wardrobes, their soaps and sponges and brushes, his collars, her hairpins, all those trifles of the toilette without which civilized man can scarcely feel himself civilized. Most of these wants the vicarage could supply; but to reach the vicarage they had to cross the road. Lawrence got up and stood looking down at Laura. "Can you trust your maid?"

"Trust her? I can't trust her not to gossip. She's a nice girl and a very good maid, but I've only had her a year."

"Silly question! One doesn't trust servants nowadays. My man's a scamp, but I can depend on him up to a certain point because I pay him well. Anyhow we must make the best of a bad job. If I cut straight down from here I shall get into the tradesmen's drive, shan't I?"

"But you can't go to the back door!"

"Apparently I can't go to the front," said Lawrence with his wintry smile. He promised himself to go to the front by and by, but not while Laura was shivering in torn clothes under a bush.

"But what are you going to do?"

"Simply to get us a few necessaries of life. You can't be seen like this, and you can't stand here forever, catching cold with next to nothing on: besides, you've had no food since five o'clock this morning—and not much then."

"But the servants—if they have orders—"

"Servants!" He laughed.

"But you don't mean to force your way in?"

"Not past Bernard, dear. Don't be afraid: I shall skulk in by the rear."

It was easy to say "Don't be afraid": doubly easy for Lawrence, who had never known Bernard's darker temper. But there was no coward blood in Mrs. Clowes, and she steadied herself under the rallying influence of Hyde's firm look and tone.

"Go, then, but don't be long. And, Lawrence promise me. . ."

"Anything, dear."

"You won't touch Bernard, will you?" Lawrence was dumb, from wonder, not from indecision. "No one can do that," said Laura under her breath. "Oh, I know you wouldn't dream of it. But yet—if he insulted you, if he struck you . . . if he insulted me. . . ?"

"No, on my honour."

He touched her hand with his lips—a ceremony performed by Lawrence only once beforehand in what different circumstances!— and left her: more like a winter butterfly than ever, with her shining hair, pale face, and gallant eyes, and the silver threads of her embroidered skirt flowing round her over the sunburnt turf.

Wanhope was an old-fashioned house, and the domestic premises were much the same as they had been in the eighteenth century, except that Clowes had turned one wing of the stables into a garage and rooms for the chauffeur. He kept no indoor menservants except Barry, the groom and gardener living in the village, while three or four maids were ample to wait on that quiet family. Pursuing the tradesman's drive between coach-house, tool shed, coal shed, and miscellaneous outbuildings, Lawrence emerged on a brick yard, ducked under a clothes-line, made for an open doorway, and found himself in the scullery. It was empty, and he went on into a big old-fashioned kitchen, draughty enough with its high roof and blue plastered walls. Here, too, there was not a soul to be seen: a kettle was furiously boiling over on the hob, a gas ring was running to waste near by, turned on but left unlit and

volleying evil fumes. His next researches carried him into a flagged passage, on his right a sunlit pantry, on his left a dingy alcove evidently dedicated to the trimming of lamps and the cleaning of boots. He began to wonder if every one had run away. But no: a sharp turn, a couple of steps, and he came on an inner door, comfortably covered with green baize, through which issued a perfect hubbub of voices all talking at once. He listened long enough to hear himself characterized by a baritone as a stinking Jew, and by a treble as not her style and a bit too gay but quite the gentleman, before he raised the latch and stepped in.

His appearance produced a perfect hush. Except Barry and his own valet they were all there, the entire domestic staff of Wanhope: and to face them was not the least courageous act that Lawrence had ever performed. It was a large, comfortable room, lit by large windows overlooking the kitchen garden; a cheerful fire burnt in the grate this autumn morning, and in a big chair before it sat a cheerful, comely person in a print gown, in whom he recognized Mrs. Fryar the cook. Gordon the chauffeur, a pragmatic young man from the Clyde, in this levelling hour was sitting on the edge of the table with a glass of beer in his hand. Caroline, the Baptist housemaid, held the floor: she was declaiming, when Lawrence entered, that it was a shame of Major Clowes and she didn't care who heard her say so, but apparently Lawrence was an exception, for like all the rest she was instantly stricken dumb as the grave.

Lawrence remained standing in the open doorway. He would have given a thousand pounds to be in morning attire, but no constraint was perceptible in the big, careless, impassive figure framed against the sunlit yard.

"Are you Mrs. Clowes's maid?" he singled out a tall, rather stiff, quiet-looking girl in the plain black dress of her calling. "Is your name Catherine? I want to speak to you."

She stood up—they were all standing by now except Gordon—but she looked at him very oddly, as if she were half frightened and half inclined to be familiar. "I suppose you can tell me where my lady is, sir?"

"She is waiting for you," said Lawrence. "I say that I want to speak to you by yourself. Come in here, please." Catherine continued to look as if she felt inclined to flounce and toss her head, but under his cold and steady eyes she thought better of it and followed him into the pantry. Lawrence shut the door.

"I'd have gone to my lady, sir, if I'd known where she was."

"You're going to her now," said Lawrence. "I want you, please, to run up to her room and fetch some clothes, the sort of clothes she would wear to go out walking: you understand what I mean? A jacket and dress and hat, walking boots, a veil—" Catherine intimated that she did understand: much better than any gentleman, her smile implied.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "what you would like is for me to pack a small box for her, sir? My lady will want a lot of things that gentlemen don't think of: underskirts and—"

"Good God, what do I care?" said Lawrence impatiently. "No, nothing of that sort: take just what she wants to change out of evening dress into morning dress. It'll be only for a few hours. Go and get them, and be as quick and quiet as you can. Say nothing to Major Clowes." He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Are you a decent girl, I wonder?"

She drew up and for the first time looked him straight in the eyes. "If you mean, sir, that you're going to take my poor lady away, why, I think it's high time too. I was always brought up respectable, but when it comes to a gentleman calling his own married wife such names, why, it's time some one did interfere. I heard him with my own ears call her a—"

"That'll do," said Lawrence.

"And struck her, that he did, which you ought to know," Catherine persisted eagerly: "put his arm out through the door and gave her a great blow! and it's not the first time neither. Many's the night when I've undressed my lady but perhaps you've seen for yourself—"

She stopped short and put her hand over her mouth.

"Go and get the things," said Lawrence, "then wait for me in the yard."

Catherine retired in disorder and Lawrence followed her out. He found Barry waiting to speak to him. "Where's my man?" Lawrence asked. "Send him to me, will you?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but are you going to speak to Major Clowes?"

"Why?"

Barry looked down. "His orders was that you weren't to be admitted, sir."

"How is Major Clowes?"

"Very queer. I took it on myself to send for the doctor, but he was out: but they sent word that he'd step round as soon as he came in. I'd have liked to catch Mr. Val, but he slipped off while I was waiting on the Major."

"But Major Clowes isn't ill?"

"Oh no, sir. But I don't care for so much responsibility."

"Shall I have a look at him?"

"Oh no," a much more decided negative. "I wouldn't go near the Major, sir, not if I was you."

"Why, what's the matter with him?" Lawrence asked curiously. But Barry refused to commit himself beyond repeating that the Major was very queer, and after promising to send Val to the rescue Lawrence dismissed him, as Gaston came hurrying up. Something suspiciously like a grin twinkled over the little Frenchman's face when he found his master waiting for him on the sill of Caroline's pantry, silhouetted against row on row of shining glass and silver, and wearing at noon-day the purple and fine linen, the white waistcoat and thin boots of last night. But his French breeding triumphed and he remained, except for that one furtive twinkle, the conscientious valet, nescient and urbane. Lawrence did not give him even so much explanation as he had given Catherine. "Is there a back staircase?" he asked, and then, "Take me up by it. I'm going to my room."

Gaston led the way through the servants' hall. Lawrence, following, had to fight down a nausea of humiliation that was almost physical: he had never before done anything that so sickened him as this sneaking progress through the kitchen quarters in another man's house. At length Gaston, holding up a finger to enjoin silence, brought him out on the main landing overlooking the hall.

There was no carpet on the polished floor but Lawrence when he chose could tread like a cat. He stepped to the balustrade. It was as dark as a dark evening, for the great doors were still fast shut, and what scanty light filtered through the painted panes was absorbed, not reflected, by rafted roof, panelled walls, and Jacobean stair. But as he grew used to the gloom he could distinguish Bernard's couch and the powerful prostrate figure stretched out on it like a living bar. Bernard's arms were crossed over his breast: his features were the colour of stone: he might have been dead.

Lawrence was startled. But he could do no good now, and the Frenchman was fidgeting at his bedroom door. Later . . .

Secure of privacy Gaston's decorum relaxed a trifle, for it was clear to him that confidences must be at least tacitly exchanged: M'sieur le capitaine could not hope to keep him in the dark, there never was an elopement yet of which valet and lady's maid were not cognizant. Like Catherine, "You wish I pack for you, Sare?" he asked in his lively imperfect English. He was naturally a chatterbox and brimful of a Parisian's salted malice, even after six years in the service of Captain Hyde, who did not encourage his attendants to be communicative.

Lawrence was tearing off his accursed evening clothes. (All day it had been the one drop of sweetness in his bitter cup that he had borrowed Lucian's razor and shaved in Lucian's rooms.) "Get me a tweed suit and boots."

Gaston frowned, wrinkling his nose: if M'sieur imagined that that nose had no scent for an affair of gallantry—! But still he persisted, even he, though the snub was a bitter pill: himself a gallant man, could allow for jaded nerves. "You wish I pack, yes?" he deprecated reticence by his insinuatingly sympathetic tone.

"No," said Lawrence, tying his tie before a mirror. "I'm coming back."

"'Ere? Back—so—'ere, m'sieur?"

"Yes, before tonight."

It was more than flesh and blood could stand. "Sir Clowes 'e say no," remarked Gaston in a detached and nonchalant tone, as he gathered up the garments which his master had strewn over the floor. "'E verree angree. 'E say 'Zut! m'sieur le capitaine est parti!—il ne revient plus."

"Gaston." The Frenchman turned from the press in which he was hanging up Lawrence's coat. "You're a perfect scamp, my man," Lawrence spoke over his shoulder as he ran through the contents of a pocketbook, "and I should be sorry to think you were attached to me. But your billet is comfortable, I believe: I pay you jolly good wages, you steal pretty much what you like, and you have the additional pleasure of reading all my letters. Now listen: I'm coming back to Wanhope before tonight and so is Mrs. Clowes. I'm not going to run away with her, as Major Clowes gave you all to understand. What you think is of no importance whatever to any one, what you say is equally trilling, but I don't choose to have my servant say it: so, if you continue to drop these interesting hints, I shall not only boot you out, but" —he turned "I shall give you such a thrashing in the rear, Gaston—in this direction, Gaston—that you won't be able to sit down comfortably for a month."

"M'sieur is so droll," murmured Gaston, removing himself with dignified agility and an unabashed grimace.

Lawrence let himself out by the back stairs again and the kitchen —now in a state of great activity, the gas ring lit and preparations for lunch going on apace—and forth into the yard. Out in the open air he drew a long breath: safe in tweeds and a felt hat, he was his own man again, but he felt as though he had been wading in mud. The mystified Catherine followed him at a sign into the drive. There Hyde stood still. "Take that path to the left. You'll find your mistress waiting for you. Help her to dress, and tell her I shall be at the lodge gates when she's ready. And, Catherine—"

He paused, feeling an almost insuperable distaste for his job. But it had to be done, the girl must not find him tight with his money: that she would hold her tongue was beyond expectation, but if well tipped at least she might not invent lies. It went against the grain of his temper to bribe one of Bernard's maids, but fate was not now consulting his likes or dislikes. He thrust his hand into his pocket—"Look after your mistress, will you?"

The respectably brought up Catherine turned scarlet. She put her hand behind her back. "I'm sure, sir, I don't want your money to make me do that!"

"If you prick us shall we not bleed?" It was the first time that Lawrence had ever discovered a servant to be a human being: and his philosophical musings were chequered, till he moved out of earshot, by the clamour of Catherine's irrepressible dismay. "Oh madam!" he heard, and, "Well, if I ever—" and then in a tone suddenly softened from horror to sympathy, "there now, there, let me get your dress off" From Mrs. Clowes came no answer, or none audible to him.

Laura joined him in ten minutes' time, neatly dressed, gloved, and veiled, her hair smoothed—it had never been rough so far as Lawrence could observe—her complexion regulated by Catherine's powder puff. "Are you better?" said Lawrence, examining her anxiously: "able to walk as far as the vicarage?"

"The vicarage?"

"Wharton's too far off. You're dead tired: You'll have to lie down and keep quiet. Isabel will look after you." It speaks to the complete overthrow of Lawrence's ideas that for the last hour he had not recollected Isabel's existence. "And we shall have to wait till Bernard raises the siege: one can't bawl explanations through a keyhole. Besides, I must wire to Lucian." He slipped his hand under her arm. "Would you like this good girl of yours to come with you?"

"I will come, madam, directly I've fetched my hat," said Catherine eagerly. "You must have some one to look after you, and your hair never brushed and all."

But Laura shook her head, Catherine must not defy her master. "If you want to please me," she said not without humour "—I can't help it, Lawrence—try to look after Major Clowes. You had better not go near him yourself, because as you know he isn't very pleased with me just now, but see that Mrs. Fryar sends him in a nice lunch and ask Barry to try to get him to eat it. I ordered some oysters to come this morning, and Major Clowes will enjoy those when he won't touch anything else."

Catherine watched her lady up the road with a disappointed eye. It was a tame conclusion to a promising adventure. Although respectably brought up, her sympathies were all with Captain Hyde: she had foreseen herself, the image of regretful discretion, sacrificing her lifelong principles to escort Mrs. Clowes to Brighton, or Switzerland, or that place where they had the little horses that Mr. Duval made such a 'mysterious joke about—it would have been amusing to do foreign parts with Mr. Duval. But when Laura took the turning to the vicarage Catherine was invaded by a creeping chill of doubt. Was it possible that Captain Hyde was not Mrs. Clowes's lover after all?

"I know which I'd choose," she said to Gordon. "I've no patience with the Major. Such a way to behave! and my poor lady with the patience of an angel, putting up and putting up— No man's worth it, that's what I say."

"Well, it is a bit thick," said Gordon: "calling his own wife a—"

"Mr. Gordon!"

The son of the Clyde was a contentious young man, and a jealous one. "You didn't seem to mind when the French chap was talking about a fille de joy. What d'ye suppose a fille de joy is in English? but there's some of us can do no wrong."

"French sounds so much more refined," said Catherine firmly.

CHAPTER XVIII

Inaction was hard on Lawrence. He hated it: and he was not used to it: his impulse was to go direct to Wanhope and break down the door: but it was not to be done. When he reached the vicarage Mr. Stafford had gone out after an early lunch to take a wedding in Countisford, while Val had been obliged to ride over to a neighbouring farm. Leaving Laura to Isabel, who startled him by her cool "So Major Clowes has done it at last?" he hurried down to the post office to telephone to Selincourt (aware on his way that every eye was staring at him: no doubt the tale was already on every lip), but Selincourt too was out, and he had to be content with despatching colourless duplicate telegrams to his rooms and club. From a hint let fall during the night he was aware that no more than the most laconic wire would be needed, but he fretted under the delay, which meant that Selincourt could not arrive before six o'clock. After that he would have liked to go to Wharton, but dared not, for, though Jack's grandfather was what Yvonne called a Romantic, the Grantchesters were old-fashioned straightlaced people who had better not hear of the scandal till it was over. No, till Selincourt and Val appeared there was no more to be done, and Lawrence, returned to the vicarage and flung himself into a chair to wait. He dreaded inaction: inaction meant thought: and thought meant such bitter realities as he knew not how to stand up against: but what he liked or disliked was no longer to the point.

In that easy-going household, where comfort was obtained at the expense of appearances, there was always a diningroom fire in cold weather, and on this September morning the glow of the flames had a lulling effect. Dead tired, he dropped asleep, to be roused by the feeling that there was some one in the room. There was, it was Isabel; and in the drugged heaviness that follows daylight slumber Hyde simply held out his arms to her in oblivion of last night. "Oh, oh!" said Isabel smiling at him and touching his palms with the tips of her fingers, "were you dreaming of me?" Hyde drew back, a deep flush covering his face. What had changed Isabel? she was pure fascination. "I've been watching you a long time while you were asleep. I thought you would never wake. You're so, so tired! Here's a cup of coffee for you."

"Thank you," said Lawrence, entirely subdued.

He still felt half dazed: confused and shy, emotions the harder to disguise because they were so unfamiliar: and restless under Isabel's merry eyes. How near she was to him, the leaping flames flinging a dance of light and shadow over her silk shirt, and the bloom on her cheek, and the dark hair parted on one side (a boyish fashion which he had always disliked) and waved over her head! So near that without rising he could have pressed his lips to that white throat of hers. . . . Last night it had been beauty clouded, beauty averse, but this morning it was beauty in the most delicate and derisive and fleeting sunlight of pleasure; and the temperament of his race delivered Lawrence hand and foot into its power. The deep waters went over him and he ceased to struggle—"Isabel," he heard himself saying in a level voice but without his own volition, "should you mind if I were to kiss you?"

What a banality to ask of a woman, his second self scoffed at him: a woman who should be kissed or left alone, but never asked for a kiss!

"Not very much," said Isabel, presenting her smooth cheek. "Not if it would do you any good."

Oh irony, oh disenchantment! "Thank you." He curbed his passion and sat still. "I am not Val."

"Shut your eyes then."

He held his breath: the thick beating of his heart was like a muffled hammer.

"This isn't the way I kiss Val."

"Isabel!" exclaimed Lawrence. He held out his arms again but they closed on the empty firelight: she

had gone dancing off, the most fugitive, the most insubstantial of mistresses, nothing left of her to him but the memory of that moth's wing touch.

"Isabel, come here!" He, sprang to his feet. From the other end of the room Isabel turned round, wistful, her head bent, glancing up at him under her eyelashes.

"Oh must you have me?—all of me? Oh Lawrence!—well then—"

She advanced step by step, slowly. Lawrence waited, convinced that if he tried to seize her she would be gone, such a vague thistledown grace there was in her slender immaturity. He waited and Isabel came to him, drifted into his arms, was lying for a moment on his breast, and then, "Let me go: dearest, don't hold me!"

He kept her long enough to ask "But are you mine?"

"Yes," said Isabel, sighing.

"This is a grudging gift, Isabel."

"Oh no," she whispered, "not grudging. All my heart: all of me. Only don't hold me, I'm still afraid."

"Of me?"

"Yes: now are you triumphant?" She escaped.

"Will you sit down in a chair, you sprite, and let me kneel at your ladyship's feet?"

"No—yes—No, you too sit down." Then as Lawrence, enchained, relapsed into the deep easy chair by the fire, she came behind and leant over him, wreathing her arms over his shoulders. "There: now lie still: so: is that cosy for you? Now will you go to sleep?"

"Circe . . ."

"You don't feel as though you were going to sleep."

"Mon Dieu!" Lawrence murmured under his breath.

"Don't say that," her voice was so soft that it was like the voice of his own heart speaking to him, "it isn't a proper reply to make when a lady says she loves you."

"Oh! provided that you do love me—!"

She took his temples between her fingertips and again her enchanting caress brushed his lips. Lawrence lay helpless. It was like receiving the caresses of a fairy: a delight and a torment, a serenity and a flame. "I love you. I will marry you. I shall be a most exacting wife, 'December when I wed.' Very soon you'll wish you had never set eyes on me. You'll have to marry Val too and all the family." Her long lashes were fluttering against his cheek. "As you're thirty-six and I'm only nineteen, you'll have to be very docile or I shall tell you you're ungenerous."

"Presuming on my income, as you said—was it last night?"

"When you were free. Does it seem so long ago?" She gave a little laugh, airy and sweet. "Oh poor Benedict! Would you like to cry off? Let me see: you may scratch any time before I tell Val, which will be when he comes in at five o'clock. Now then?"

This mention of Val was like a dash of cold water, and Lawrence tried to rouse himself. "Will you be serious for half a second, you incarnation of mischief?"

"No—yes—no, I don't want to be serious," she turned in his arms and the Isabel of last night pierced him with her dark, humid, brilliant eyes. "I want to forget. Make me forget!"

"Forget what?"

"Other women."

"There are no other women, Isabel."

"There have been.—Lawrence!" the scent of the honeysuckle pinned into her blouse seemed to narcotize all his senses with its irresistible sweetness, "you will be true to me, won't you? You won't love other women now? Say you never wanted to kiss any of them so much as— Oh!" Drunk with her

Circean cup, Hyde was more than willing to convince her, but in a fashion of his own. Isabel gave a little sigh and faded out of his clasp: he tried to seize her but she was gone, leaving only the scent of bruised petals and the memory of a silken contact. "You're so—so stormy," the gossamer voice mocked him with its magic of youth and gaiety. "Val says—"

"Isabel, I'm sick of that formula. You're going to marry me, not Val."

"—You're not one-third English."

"I've lived in countries where they knew how to manage women," Lawrence muttered.

"With a whip?"

"No."

"What a pity!"

"No, the other method is more effective."

"You terrify me," her eyes were sparkling now like a diamond. "Don't fling any more of those dark threats at me or I shall never marry you at all. Some day you'll be madly jealous of me like Major Clowes—you are like him: you could be just as brutal: and I'm not like Laura—and you'll lure me out of England and wreak a mysterious vengeance."

"I wish we were out of England now."

"So do I. Oh Lawrence, I'd sell my soul to go to Egypt!"

"Red-hot days and blue sands in the moonlight. Shall I take you there for our honeymoon?"

"Or Spain: or Sicily: or what about Majorea?— Let's slip off alone in a *nom de plume* and an aeroplane to some place where no one ever goes, all roses and lemon thyme and honey-coloured cliffs and a bay of blue sea—"

"Should you like to be alone with me?"

"Yes ... why not?"

"Good!" said Hyde laughing. "I see no reason if you don't." He put his hand before his eyes, which were throbbing as though he had looked too long at a bright light. But Isabel pulled down his wrist. "Don't do that. I like to watch your eyes. I allow no reserves, Lawrence. And isn't it rather too late to lock the door? I've seen you—"

"Isabel!" He freed himself and stood up. "I beg your pardon, but you must not— I can't stand—" His face was burning. Isabel had not realized—it is difficult for a young girl to realize, convinced of her own insignificance—how deeply his pride had been cut overnight, but she was under no delusion now. He was hot with shame and anger, and had to wait to fight them down before he could go on. "Nineteen are you—or nine? I can't play with you today. Make allowance for me, dearest! I'm in a most difficult position. I've done incalculable mischief, and, to tell you the truth, I shouldn't have chosen to raise this subject again till I'm clear of it. Your people may very fairly object. My cousin is threatening a divorce action. He's mad: and no decent lawyer would take his case into court: but the fact remains that poor Laura has been turned out of doors, and for that I am, in myself-centred carelessness, to blame. You won't misunderstand me, will you, if I say that while this abominable business is hanging over me we can't be formally engaged? Val must be told—nothing would induce me to keep him in the dark for an hour. But for all that I shan't know how to face him. What! ask him for you, and in the same breath tell him that Laura has been turned adrift because I've compromised her? If I were Val there'd be the devil and all to pay. In the meantime I must—I must be sure of you. But you change like the wind: last night you refused me, and to-day . . ." He walked over to the window and stood looking out into the garden, fighting down one of those tremendous storms of memory which swept over him from time to time and made the present seem absolutely one with the past.

"What's the matter?"

He turned, but his voice was thick. "Last time I trusted a woman she betrayed me."

"You're thinking of your wife."

"I often think of her," Hyde said savagely, "and wonder if all women are tarred with the same brush."

"Oh, that is brutal," said Isabel, paling: "but you're tired out."

It was true, he was too tired to rest: heartsick and ashamed, painfully aware of the immense harm he had done and uncertain how to mend it. This sense of guilt was the more harassing because he was not in the habit of regretting his actions, good or bad: but now he could no longer fling off responsibility: it was riveted on him by all the other emotions which Wanhope had evoked, pity for Bernard, and affection for Laura, and humility before Val.

Among the lilacs a robin was singing his delicate and bold welcome to autumn, and over the window a branch of red roses nodded persistently and rhythmically in a draught of wind. Lawrence stood looking out into the garden of which he saw nothing, and Isabel, watching him, felt tears coming into her own eyes, the tears of that unnerving pity which a woman feels for the man she loves, when she has never before seen him in defeat or depression. No wonder he thought her fickle! How could he read what was dark to her?

Isabel had not deliberately altered her mind in the night. She had lain down free and risen up bound, waking from sound sleep, the sleep of a child, to find that the silent inner Court of Appeal had reversed her verdict while she slept. Her first thought had been, "I'm going to marry Lawrence!" For he needed her: that was what she had forgotten last night: by his parade of wealth he had defeated his own ends, but, her first anger over, she had realized that one should no more refuse a man for being rich, than accept him. Far other were the grounds on which that decision had to be made. It had been pity that carried Isabel away. Perhaps in any case she could not have held out for long.

Did she expect to be happy? Scarcely, for she did not trust him enough to be frank with him. Sophisticated men soon tire of candid women: it was in this faith that Isabel had clouded herself in such an iridescence of mystery and coquetry, laughing when she felt more inclined to cry, eluding Lawrence when she would rather have rested in his arms. Roses and steel: innocence in a saffron scarf: ascendancy won and held only by surrender: such was to be the life of the woman who married Lawrence Hyde, as she had seen it long ago on a June evening, and as, with some necessary failings for human weakness, she carried it out to the end. If any moralities at all were to be fulfilled in their union, it was for her to impose them, for Hyde had none. Within the limits of his code of honour he would simply do as he liked. And with nine-tenths of her nature Isabel would have liked nothing better than to shut her eyes and yield to him as all her life she had yielded to Val, for she too loved red roses and sunshine and the pleasure of the senses: but her innermost self, the warder of her will, would rather have died than yield, she the child of an ascetic and trained in Val's simple code of duty.

But there should be compromise: one must not—one need not—cheat him of the pride of his manhood. Isabel's heart ached for her lover. She could not defend herself against him any longer, and in her yielding the warder of her will whispered, "You may yield now. Not to be frank with him now would be unfair as well as unkind."

She came softly to him in the window, and instantly by some change of tension Lawrence discovered to his delight that Circe had vanished. His mistress was his own now, a girl of nineteen who had promised to be his wife, and he was carried beyond doubt or anger by the rush of tenderness which went over him when he began to taste the sweetness of his victory. "Have I won you?" he whispered, his voice as unsteady as a boy's in his first passion. "You won't fail me?"

"Oh never! never!"

"You have the most beautiful eyes in the world. I believe one reason why I always secretly liked Val was that his eyes reminded me of yours. I can't stand it when he looks at me under your eyelashes. I always want to say 'Here take it Val.'"

"Take what?"

"Anything he wants. I'm going to extend a protecting wing over my young brother-in-law. He shall not, no, I swear he shall not come to grief. I can't stand it, he's too like you. When did you first fall in love with me?"

"When did you?"

"The night you went to sleep in the garden at Wanhope."

"Oh! when you kissed me?"

"When I—?"

Isabel was speechless.

"How do you know I kissed you, Isabel? I thought you were asleep."

"So I was," said Isabel, blushing deeply. "Oh! Captain Hyde, I wasn't pretending! But I woke up directly after, and heard a rustling in the wood, and I—I knew, don't ask me: I could feel -"

"This?"

"Yes," Isabel murmured, resigning herself.

"How strange!" said Lawrence under his breath. "You were asleep and you felt me kiss you?"

She looked up at him through her eyelashes. "Is that so strange?"

"Rather: because I never did kiss you."

"Not?"

"No: I bent over you to do it, but you were so defenceless and so young, I didn't dare.— Isabel! my darling! what have I done?"

The first days of love are supposed to be blind days, but too often they are days of overstrained criticism, when from very fear each sees slips and imperfections even where they do not exist. The discovery that she had misjudged Hyde was an exquisite joy to Isabel. This trivial, crucial scruple, of morality or taste, whichever one liked to call it, was the sign of a chastity of mind which could coexist, it seemed, with the coarse and careless sins that he had never denied. After all no marriage on earth is perfect, and husbands as well as wives have to make allowances; but as years go on, and affection does its daily work, the rubs are less and less felt, till the time comes when deeper wisdom can look back smiling on the fears of youth. Isabel at nineteen did not possess this wisdom but she had youth itself.

The flames crackled low on the hearth: the wind, a small autumn wind, piped weakly round white wall and high chimneypot: outside in the garden late roses were shedding their petals loosened by a touch of frost in the night. "Tears because you mistrusted me?" said Hyde in his soft voice. "But why should the Gentile maiden trust a Jew?"

CHAPTER XIX

Riding back from Liddiard St. Agnes in the low September sunshine, Val became aware of something pleasantly pictorial in the landscape. It was a day when the hills looked higher than usual, the tilt of the Plain sharper, the shadows a darker umber, the light clearer under a softly-quilted autumn sky. When he crossed a reaped cornfield, the pale golden stalks of stubble to westward were tipped each with a spark of light, so that all the upland flashed away from him toward the declining sun.

In his own mind there was a lull which corresponded with this clear quietness of Nature: a pleasant vacancy and a suspension of personal interest, so that even his anxiety about Laura was put at a little distance, and he could see her and Bernard, and Lawrence himself, like figures in a picture, hazed over by a kind of moral sunlight—the Grace of God, say, which from Val's point of view shapes all our ends:

I do not ask to see
The distant scene: one step enough for me,

this courage came to Val now without effort, and not for himself only, which would have been easy at any time, but for Laura in her difficult married life, and for those other beloved heads on which he was fated to bring disgrace—his father, Rowsley, Isabel: come what might, sorrow could not harm them, nor fear annoy. How quiet it was! the quieter for the wrangling of rooks in the border elms, and for the low autumn wind that rustled in the hedgerows: and how full of light the sky, in spite of the soft bloomy clouds that had hung about all day, imbrowning the sunshine! far off in the valley doves were grieving, and over the reaped and glittering cornstalks curlews were flying and calling with their melancholy—shrill wail, an echo from the sea, while small birds in flocks flew away twittering as he rode up, and settled again further on, and rose and settled again, always with a clatter of tiny wings. Evening coming on: and winter coming on: and light, light everywhere, and calm, over the harvest fields and the darkened copses, and the far blue headlands that seemed to lift themselves up into immeasurable serenities of sky.

It was lucky for Val that he was able to enjoy this quiet hour, for it was soon over. When he crossed the turf to the diningroom window, the fire had burnt down into red embers and not much light came in from out of doors under that low ceiling, but there was enough to show him Isabel in Lawrence's arms. Fatality! He had not foreseen it, not for a moment: and yet directly he saw it he seemed to have known it all along. After a momentary suspension of his faculties, during which his ideas shifted much as they do when an unfamiliar turns into a familiar road, Val tapped on the glass and strolled in, giving his young sister one of his light teasing smiles. "Am I to bestow my consent, Isabel?"

"Oh Val!— Don't be angry, or not with Lawrence anyhow, it wasn't his fault."

Isabel disengaged herself but without confusion. Her brother watched her in increasing surprise. Rosy and sparkling, she seemed to have grown from child to woman in an hour, as after a late spring the first hot day brings a million buds into leaf.

"Are you startled?" she asked, holding up her cheek for a kiss.

"Not so much so as I should have been twenty-four hours ago. No, I didn't guess—not a bit; I suppose brothers never expect people to want to marry their sisters. We know too much about you."

"Better run off to the nursery, Isabel," said Lawrence. Isabel made him a little smiling curtsy eloquent of her disdain—it was so like Captain Hyde to be saucy before Val!—and slipped away. When Lawrence returned after holding open the door for her, he found a certain difficulty in meeting Val's eyes.

"And this then is the mysterious attraction that has kept you at Wanhope all the summer? Wonderful! What will Mrs. Jack say? But I suppose nineteen, for forty, has a charm of its own."

Lawrence was not forty. But he refused to be drawn. "She is very beautiful."

"Oh, very," Val was nothing if not cordial. "But her face is her fortune. I needn't ask if you can keep her in the state to which she's accustomed," his eye wandered over the dilapidated vicarage furniture, "or whether your attentions are disinterested. Evidently you're one of those men who like their wives to be dependent on them— Dear me!"

"Damn the money!" said Lawrence at white heat. "Jew I may be, but it's you and Isabel that harp on it, not I."

"Come, come!" Val arched his eyebrows. "So sorry to ruffle you, but these questions are in all the etiquette books and some one has to ask them. If you could look on me as Isabel's father—?"

It was too much. Angry as he was, Lawrence began to laugh. "No, I won't look on you as Isabel's father," he had regained the advantage of age and position, neutralized till now by Val's cooler self-restraint. "I won't look on you as anything but a brother-in-law; a younger brother of my own, Val, if you can support the relation. Won't you start fresh with me? I've not given you much cause to think well of me up to now, but I love Isabel, and I'll do my best to make her happy. I might find forgiveness difficult if I were you, but then," for his life he could not have said whether he was in earnest or chaffing Val, "I'm a Jew of Shylock's breed and you're a Christian."

"But, my dear fellow, what is there to forgive? We're only too delighted and grateful for the honour done us: it's a brilliant match, of course, far better than she could expect to make." A duller man than Lawrence could not have missed the secret silken mischief. "And to me, to all of us, you're more than kind; it's nice to feel that instead of losing a sister I shall gain a brother."

"You are an infernal prig, Val!"

"Oh," said Val, this time without irony, "It's easy for you to come with an apology in one hand and a cheque in the other."

He turned away and stood looking out into the garden. In the lilac bushes over the lawn Isabel's robin was still singing his winter carol, and the atmosphere was saturated with the smell of wet, dead leaves, the poignant, fatal smell of autumn. "There's winter in the air tonight," said Val half aloud.

"What?" said Lawrence startled.

"I say that life's too short for quarrelling." He held out his hand. "But be gentle with her, she is very young.— Yes, what is it, Fanny?"

"Major Clowes's compliments, sir, and he would be glad to see

Captain Hyde as soon as convenient."

At Wanhope half an hour later the sun had gone down behind a bank of purple fog, and cloud after cloud had put off its vermilion glow and faded into a vague dimness of twilight: house and garden were quiet, except for the silver rippling of the river which went on and on, ceaselessly fleeting over shallows or washing along through faded sedge. These river murmurs haunted Wanhope all day and night, and so did the low river-mists: in autumn by six o'clock the grass was already ankle deep and white as a field of lilies.

The tall doors were wide open now: no lamps were lit, but a big log fire blazed on the hearth, and through the empurpled evening air the house streamed with flame-light, flinging a ruddy glow over leafless acacia and misty turf. Stretched on his couch in a warm and dark angle by the staircase, Clowes was busy with his collection, examining and sorting a number of small objects which were laid out on his tray: sparks of light winked between his fingers as iron or gold or steel turned up a reflecting edge. His face as white as his hands, the wide eyes blackened by the expansion of their pupils, he looked like a ghost, but a ghost of normal habits, washed and shaved and dressed in ordinary tweeds.

"Hullo, Bernard."

"Good evening, Lawrence. Oh, you've brought Val and— Selincourt, is it? What years since we've met, Selincourt! Very good of you to come down, and I'm delighted to see you, one can't have too many witnesses. Mild evening, isn't it? Leave the doors open, Val, Barry has made up an immense fire, big enough for January. Now sit down all of you, will you? I shan't keep you long."

Propped high on cushions, he lay like a statue, his huge shoulders squared against them as boldly as if he were in the saddle. Lawrence, so like him in frame and colouring, stood with his back to the hearth: Selincourt with his tired eyes and grey hair sat near the door, one hand slipped between his crossed knees: Val preferred to stay in the background, a spectator, interested and deeply sympathetic, but a trifle shadowy. They were three to one, but the dominant personality was that of the cripple.

"It's with you, Lawrence, that I have to do business. You passed last night with my wife."

The heavy voice was deadened out of all heat except grossness. How had Clowes spent the last twelve hours? In reliving over and over again his wife's fall: defiling her image and poisoning his own soul with emanations of a diseased mind, from which Selincourt, a straightforward sinner, would have turned in disgust. Men of strong passions like Bernard need greater control than Bernard possessed to curb what they cannot indulge: and a mind full of gross imagery was nature's revenge on him for a love that had been to him "hungry, and barren, and sharp as the sea." But for the friend, the brother, and the lover it was difficult to grant him such allowances as would have been made by a physician.

"That'll do," said Lawrence, raising his hand. "Your wife is innocent. Send any one you like to the hotel—private detective if you like—and find out what rooms Miss Stafford and Laura had, or whether Selincourt and I stayed five minutes in the place after the ladies went upstairs."

"So Laura said this morning."

"There's no loophole for suspicion. I went back with Selincourt to his rooms and we sat up the rest of the night smoking and playing auction piquet. He won about five pounds off me. Ask him: he'll confirm it."

"That's what he came for, isn't it?" Bernard smiled. "My good chap, think I don't know that if you gave him a five pound note to do it Selincourt would hold the door for you?"

Selincourt's pale face was scarlet. "I say she shall not return to him!" he broke out loudly. "If this is a specimen of what he'll say to us, what does he say to her?"

"No offence, no offence," Bernard bore him down, insolent and jovial. "'The Lord commended the unjust steward.' I foresaw that Lawrence would lie through thick and thin, and if I'd given it a thought either way I should have known you'd be brought down to back him up. And quite right too to stand by your sister—the more so that all you Selincourts are as poor as Church rats and naturally don't want your damaged goods back on your hands. But don't get huffy, keep calm like me. You deny everything, Lawrence. Quite right: a man's not worth his salt if he won't lie to protect a woman. Laura also denies everything. Quite right again: a woman's bound to lie to save her reputation. But the husband also has his natural function, which is to exercise a decent incredulity. Perhaps it's a bit difficult for you to enter into my feelings. You're none of you married men and you don't know how it stings a man up when his wife makes him a— Hallo!"

"What?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"Go on," said Lawrence, flinging himself into a chair: "if you have a point, come to it. I'm pretty well sick of this."

"So it seems," said Bernard staring at him. "Is it the good old-fashioned English word that you can't stomach? All right, after tonight I shan't offend again. That's my point and I'm coming to it as fast as I can. I won't have any one of the lot of you near me again except Val: I acquit him of complicity: he probably believes Laura innocent. Don't you, Val?"

"There's no evidence whatever against her, outside your imagination, old man."

"You're in love with her yourself," Bernard retorted brutally. Val started, it was the second time in twelve hours. "Oh! think I haven't seen that? There's not much I don't see, that goes on around me. Cheer up, I'm not really jealous of you. Laura never cared that for you. She was my wife for ten days, after all: it takes a man to master her."

"What he wants is a medical man," said Lawrence to Selincourt in a low voice. He dared not look at Val.

"After tonight neither Selincourt nor you, Lawrence nor your lady friend will darken my doors again. Try it on and I'll have you warned off by the police."

"Bernard, you over-rate the attractions of your society."

"Pass to my second point. I don't propose to divorce Laura."

"You couldn't get a divorce, you ass: you've no case."

"But equally I don't propose to take her back. If she lives alone and conducts herself decently I'll make her an allowance—say four or five hundred a year. If she lives with a lover or tries to force her way in here I won't give her a stiver. Now, Selincourt, you had better use your influence or you'll have her planted on you directly Lawrence gets sick of her. If she goes from me to Lawrence she can go from Lawrence on the streets for all I—shut that door, Val!—Keep her out!"

"Laura! go away!" cried Selincourt. The scene was rising into a nightmare and his nerves shivered under it. But he was too late. The wide doorway had filled with people: Laura with her satin hair, her flying veil, her ineffaceable French grace of air and dress: Isabel bare-headed, very pale and reluctant: and Mr. Stafford, who had come down to exercise a moderating influence in the direction of compromise. Isabel edged round towards Lawrence, while Mr. Stafford stood glancing from one to another with keen authoritative eyes, waiting a chance to strike in. But Laura after her long sleep had recovered her fighting temper and was no longer content to remain a cipher in her own house. She smiled and shook her head at Lucian, reddening under her dark skin.

"Bernard, have they told you the truth yet? No, I thought not, Lawrence was too shy." High spirited, for all her sensitiveness, she laid her slight hand on her husband's wrist. "Did you think if Lawrence stayed on at Wanhope it must be because he admired me? You forget that there are younger and prettier women in Chilmark than I am. Lawrence is going to marry Isabel. It's a romantic tale," was there a touch of pique in Laura's charming voice? "and I'm afraid they both of them took some pains to throw dust in our eyes. I've only this moment learnt it from Isabel." Yes, undeniably a trace of pique. Women like Laura, used to the admiration of men however innocent, cannot forego it without a sigh. She did not grudge Isabel her happiness or even envy it, and she had never believed Lawrence to be in love with herself, and yet this courtship that had gone on under her blind eyes produced in her a faint sense of irritation, of male defection that had made her look a little silly. She was aware of it herself and faintly amused and faintly ashamed. "My time for romantic adventure has gone by. Oh my poor Berns, you forget that I'm thirty-six!"

Here was the authentic accent of truth. Clowes heard it, but he had got beyond the point where a man is capable of saying "I was wrong, forgive me." At that moment he no longer desired Laura to be innocent, he would have preferred to justify himself by proving her guilty. "Take your damned face out of this," he said, enveloping her in an intensity of hate before which Laura's delicate personality seemed to shrivel like a scorched leaf. "Take it away before I kill you." He struck her hand from his wrist and dashed himself down on the pillow, his great arms and shoulders writhing above the marble waist like some fierce animal trapped by the loins. "Oh, I can't stand it, I can't stand it . . ."

"Oh dear, this is awful," said Selincourt weakly. He got up and stood in the doorway. Despair is a terrible thing to watch. Not even Lawrence dared go near Bernard. It was the priest, inured to scenes of grief and rebellion, who came forward with the cold strong common sense of the Christian stoic. "But

you will have to stand it," said Mr. Stafford sternly, "it is the Will of God and rebellion only makes it worse. After all, thousands of men of all ranks have had to bear the same trial and with much less alleviation. You know now that your wife is innocent and is prepared to forgive you." It did not strike Mr. Stafford that men like Bernard Clowes do not care to be forgiven by their wives. There was no confessional box in Chilmark church. "You have plenty of interests left and plenty of friends: so long as you don't alienate them by behaving in such an unmanly way. Lift him, Val.— Come, Major Clowes, you're torturing your wife. This is cowardice—"

"Like Val's, eh?"

"Like—?"

"Like your precious Val behaved ten years ago." Clowes raised himself on his elbows. "Aha! how's that for a smack in the eye?"

"Val, my darling lad," said Mr. Stafford, stumbling a little in his speech, "what—what is this?"

"Poor chap!" Clowes gave his curt "Ha ha!" as he reached out a long arm to turn on all the lights. "Who was that chap, Hercules was it, that pulled the temple on his own head? By God, if my life's gone to pieces, I'll take some of you with me. You, Val, I was always fond of you: tell your daddy, or shall I, what you did in the Great War?"

"Bernard. . . ."

"Can't stand it, eh? But, like me, you'll have to stand it. Come, come, Val, this is cowardice—"

"Lawrence, don't touch him: let it come."

But no one dared touch Clowes. "Before his sister!" Selincourt muttered. He had no idea what was coming but Val's grey pallor frightened him. "And the old man!" Lawrence added with clenched hands. Clowes ignored them both. He held the entire group in subjection by sheer savage force of personality.

"Simple little anecdote of war. Dale, you remember, was a brother officer of mine. He was shot in a raid and left hanging on the German wire. In the night when he was dying another chap in our regiment, that had been lying up all day between the lines with a bullet in his ribs, crawled across for him. The Boches opened fire but he got Dale off and started back. Three quarters of the way over they found a third casualty, a subaltern in the Dorchesters. This chap wasn't hurt but he was weeping with fear. He had gone to ground in a shellhole during the advance and stayed there too frightened to move. The Winchester man was by now done to the world. He kicked the Dorchester to his feet and ordered him to carry on with Dale. The Dorchester pointed out that if he turned up without a scratch on him, he would probably be shot by court martial, so the other fellow by way of pretext put a shot through his arm. 'Now you can tell 'em it was you who fetched Dale.' 'Oh I can't, I'm frightened,' says the Dorchester boy. 'By God you shall,' says the other, 'or I'll put a second bullet through your brains.' Now, Val, you finish telling us how you did the return trip in tears with Dale on your shoulders and Lawrence at your heels chivying you with a revolver."

"You unutterable devil," said Lawrence under his breath, "who told you that?"

Bernard grinned at him almost amicably. He had got one blow home at last and felt better. "Why, I've always known it. Dale told me himself. He lived twenty minutes after you got him in."

"Val," said Mr. Stafford, "this isn't true?"

"Perfectly true, sir."

Undefended, unreserved, stripped even of pride, Val stood up before them all as if before a firing party, for the others had involuntarily fallen back leaving him alone. . . . To Lawrence the silence seemed endless, it went on and on, while through the open doorway grey shadows crept in, the leafy smell of night and the liquid river-murmur so much louder than it could have been heard by day. Suddenly, as if he could not stand the strain any longer, Val covered his eyes with his hands. The movement, full of shame galvanized Lawrence into activity. But he had not the courage to approach Val. He had but one desire which was to get out of the house.

"Bernard, if you weren't a cripple I'd put the fear of God into you with a stick" He stood near the door eyeing his cousin with a cold dislike more cutting than anger. "You're as safe as a woman. But I'm through with you. I'll never forgive you this, never. I'm going: and I shall take your wife with me." He turned. "Come, Laura—"

"Take care, Lawrence!" cried Isabel.

She spoke too late. Bernard's hand was already raised and a glint of steel shone between his fingers. No one was near enough to disarm him. Unable to move without exposing Laura, Lawrence mechanically threw up his wrist on guard, but the trick of Bernard's left-handed throw was difficult to counter, and Lawrence was bracing himself for a shock when Val stepped into the line of fire. Selincourt uttered an exclamation of horror, and Val reeled heavily. "For me!" said Lawrence under his breath. He was by Val in a moment, bending over him, tender and protecting, an arm round his shoulders. "Are you hurt, Val? What is it, old man?"

Stafford had one hand pressed to his side. "He meant it for you," he said, grimacing over the words as if he had not perfect control of his facial muscles. "Take care. Ah! that's better." Selincourt with a sweep of his arm had sent the remaining contents of the swing-tray flying across the floor. There was no need of such violence, however, for the devil had gone out of Bernard Clowes now. Deathly pale, his eyes blank with startled fear, his great frame seemed to break and collapse and he turned like a lost child to his wife: Laura—Laura . . ."

"I'm here, my darling." In panic, as if the police were already at the door, Laura fell on her knees by the low couch. Come what might he was still her husband, still the man she loved, to be defended against the consequences of his own acts irrespective of his deserts. There was much of the wife but more of the mother in the way she covered him with her arms and breast. "No one shall touch you, no one. It was only an accident, you never meant it, and besides Val's only a little hurt—"

Val, still with that wrenched grimace of pain, turned round and leant against Lawrence. "Get me out of this," he said weakly. "Invent some story. Anything, but spare her. Get me out, I'm going to faint."

Between them, Lawrence and Selincourt carried him out and laid him on the steps. No one else paid any attention. Laura was taken up with Bernard. Mr. Stafford had shuffled over to the fire and was stooping down to warm his fingers while Isabel tried brokenly to soothe the anguish from which old and tired hearts rarely recover. She was more frightened for him than for Val, and the grief she felt for him was a grief outside herself, which could be pitied and comforted, whereas the blow that had fallen on Val seemed to have fallen on her own life also, withering where it struck. She suffered for her father but with Val, and this intensity of communion hardened her into steel, for it seemed as weak and vain to pity him as it would have been to pity herself if she like him had fallen under the stress of war. The weak must first be served—later, later there would be time to pity the strong.

She did not realize that for Val, whom instinctively she still classed among the strong, time and opportunity were over. He fainted before they got him out into the air, and his hand fell away from his side, and then they saw what was wrong. He had been stabbed: stabbed with the Persian dagger that Lawrence himself had given Bernard. Val had taken it under his left breast, and it was buried to its delicate hilt. When Lawrence opened his coat and shirt there was scarcely any blood flowing: scarcely any sign of mischief except his leaden pallor and the all-but-cessation of his pulse. "Internal haemorrhage," said Lawrence. He drew out the weapon, which came forth with a slow sidelong wrench of its curved blade: a gush of blood followed, running down over Val's shirt, over his shabby coat, over the steps of Wanhope and the dry autumn turf. Lawrence held the lips of the wound together with his hand. "Go and find Verney, will you? Mind, it was an accident. Don't be drawn into giving any details. We must all stick to the same story."

"But—but" Selincourt could not frame a coherent question with his pale frightened lips: "you don't—you can't think—"

"That he's dying? He won't see another sun rise."

"But do they—do they—in there—understand?"

"Oh for them," said Lawrence with his bitter ironical smile, "he died five minutes ago."

This then was the end. Waiting in the autumn twilight with Val's head on his arm Lawrence tried to retrace the steps by which it had been reached. Bernard's revenge had struck blind and wild as revenge is apt to strike, but it had helped to bring the wheel full circle. Val's expiation was complete. In his heart Lawrence knew that his own was complete also. In breaking Val's life he had permanently scarred his own.

And the night when it had all begun came back to him, a March night, quiet and dark but for the periodical fanbeam of an enemy searchlight from the slope of an opposite hill: a mild rain had been falling, falling, ceaselessly, plashingly, over muddy ploughland or sere grass, over the intricacy of trenchwork behind the firing lines and the dreary expanse of no man's land between them: falling over wire entanglements from which dangled rags of uniform and rags of flesh: falling on faces of the

unburied dead that it was helping to dissolve into, their primal pulp of clay. War! always war! and no theatre of scarlet and gold and cavalry charges, but a rat's war of mud and cold and fleas and unutterable, nerve-dissolving fatigue. Not far off occasionally the rustle of clothes or the tinkle of an entrenching tool, as a sleeper turned over or the group sentry shifted arms on the parapet; and always in a lulling undertone the plash of rain on grass or wire, and the heavy breathing of tired men. For four years these nocturnal sounds of war had been familiar in the ears of Lawrence Hyde. He could hear them now, the river-murmur repeated them. And then as now he had taken young Stafford's head on his arm, the boy lying as he had lain for eighteen hours, immovable, the rain running down over his face and through his short fair hair.

He had failed . . . Lawrence recalled his own first near glimpse of death, a fellow subaltern hideously killed at his side: he had turned faint as the nightmare shape fell and rose and fell again, spouting blood over his clothes: contact with elder men had steadied him. By night and alone? Well: even by night and alone Lawrence knew that he would have recovered himself and gone on. It was no more than they all had to fight through, thousands of officers, millions of men. Val had failed. . . . Yet how vast the disproportion between the crime and the punishment! Endurance is at a low ebb at nineteen when one's eyelids are dropping and one's head nodding with fatigue. Oh to sleep—sleep for twelve hours on a bed between clean sheets, and wake with a mind wiped clear of bloody memories! . . . memories above all . . . incommunicable things that even years later, even to men who have shared them, cannot be recalled except by a half-averted glance and a low "Do you remember—?" like frightened children holding hands in the dark of the world. . . . Had any one of them kept sane that night—those many nights? . . . But how should a civilian understand?

He felt Val's heart. It was beating slower and slower. If one could only have one's life over again! but the gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.

CHAPTER XX

It was one March evening six months later, one of those warm, still, sunshot-and-grey March evenings when elm-root are blue with violets and the air is full of the faint indeterminate scent of tree flowers, that Lawrence brought his bride home to Farringay. March weather is uncertain, and he preferred to go where he could be sure of comfort, while Isabel, having once consented to be married, left all arrangements to him. It was eight o'clock before they reached the house, and Isabel never forgot the impression which it made on her when she came in out of the bloomy twilight; warm and dim and smelling of violets that were set about in bowls on bookcase and cabinet, while the flames of an immense wood fire on an open hearth flickered over the blue and rose of porcelain or the oakleaf and gold of morocco. She stood in the middle of an ocean of polished floor and looked round her as if she had lost her way in it, till Lawrence came to her and kissed her hands. "Isabel, do you like the look of your new home?"

"Very much. Thank you."

"May I take off your furs for you?" Getting no answer he took them off. Framed in the sable cap and scarf that Yvonne had given her Isabel still parted her hair on one side, a fashion which Lawrence had grown to admire immensely, but her young throat and the fine straight masque of her features were thin and she had lost much of her colour since the autumn. Lawrence held her by the wrists and stood looking down at her, compelling her to raise her eyes, though they soon fell again with a flutter of the sensitive eyelids. "Are you tired, sweetheart?"

"Oh no, thank you."

"Cold?"

"Not now."

"Frightened?"

"A little."

"You wouldn't rather I left you for a little while?"

Isabel almost imperceptibly shook her head, but with a shade of mockery in her smile which

prevented Lawrence from taking her in his arms. "Am I an unsatisfactory wife? Will you soon be tired of me? No, not yet," she said, moving away from him to put down her gloves and muff. "I've hardly had time to thank you for my presents yet. Oh Lawrence, how you spoil me!" She held up her watch to admire the lettering on its Roman enamel. "'I.H.' Does that stand for me—am I really Isabel Hyde? And are those sapphires mine, and can I drink my tea out of this roseleaf Dresden cup? It does seem strange that saying a few words and writing one's name in a book should make so much difference."

"Regretful?"

"A little oppressed, that's all. I shall soon get used to it. If you were not you I should hate it. But there's something essentially generous and careless in you, Lawrence, that makes it easy to take from you. Come here." He came to her. "Oh, I've made you blush!" said Isabel, naively surprised. Under her rare and unexpected praise he had coloured against his will. "Oh foolish one!" She kissed him sweetly. "Lawrence, are you sorry Val died?" Lawrence freed himself and turned away. It was six months since Val's death, but he still could not bear to think of it and he had scarcely spoken of it to Isabel.

There had been no protracted farewell for Val. He had died in Lawrence's arms on the steps of Wanhope without recovering consciousness, while Verney stood by helpless, and Isabel, by a stroke of irony, tried to convince poor agonized Laura Clowes that the law should not touch her husband. It had not done so. He had been saved mainly by the unscrupulous concerted perjury of Lawrence and Selincourt, who swore that Val had stumbled and fallen by accident with the dagger in his hand, while Verney confined himself to drily agreeing that the wound might have been self-inflicted. In the absence of any contrary evidence the lie was allowed to pass, but perhaps it would hardly have done so if it had not been universally taken for a half-truth. The day before the inquest there appeared in the Gazette a laconic notice that Second Lieutenant Valentine Ormsby Stafford, late of the Dorchester Regiment, had been deprived of his distinction on account of circumstances recently brought to light. After that, no need to ask why Val should have had a dagger in his hand! A jury who had known Val and his father before him were not anxious to press the case; and perhaps even the coroner was secretly grateful for evidence which spared him the pain of calling Mr. Stafford.

Except in Chilmark, the scandal scarcely ran its nine days, but there of course it raged like a fire, and no one was much surprised when the vicar resigned his living and crept away to a bed-sittingroom in Museum Street, a broken old man, to spend the brief remainder of his life among black letter texts and incunabula. He could have borne any sin in the Decalogue less hardly than a breach of the military oath. He stopped Isabel, Rowsley, Lawrence himself when they tried to plead for Val. "I am not angry," he said feebly. "If my son were alive I wouldn't shut my door on him. But it's better as it is." He even tried to persuade Isabel to break with Lawrence. "Captain Hyde is an honourable man and no doubt considers himself bound to you, so you mustn't wait for him to release himself. It is very sad for you, my dear, but you belong to a disgraced family now and you must suffer with the rest of us." Isabel agreed, and returned her engagement ring. Followed a rather fiery scene, in which Lawrence lost his temper, and Isabel wept: and finally Mr. Stafford, finding Lawrence obdurate, broke down and owned that his one last wish was to see his daughter happily married. He refused to take her to Bloomsbury. She stayed with Rowsley or at the Castle till Lawrence brought her to Farringay.

So there were changes at Chilmark, for the parish went to a hot-tempered Welshman with a wife and six children, and Wanhope was let to an American steel magnate, and Mrs. Jack Bendish, always mischievous when she was unhappy, embroiled them with each other first and then quarrelled with both. Yes, Wanhope was let: a fortnight after Val's death Major Clowes went by car to Cornwall with his wife for a change of air after the shock. He was reported to have stood the journey very well, but Laura's letters were not expansive.

Nor was Isabel: nor any other of those who had been eyewitnesses of the tragedy at Wanhope. The memory of it cast a shadow and a silence. Lawrence had never discussed it with Isabel; nor with Selincourt, except in a hurried whispered interchange of notes to avoid discrepancy in their evidence; nor with Bernard . . . the murderer. Since the night when he carried Val dead over the vicarage threshold Lawrence had not seen his cousin. He had seen Laura and tried to comfort her, but what could one say? It was murder. Had it not been for Laura he would have left Clowes to stand his trial. Even for her sake he would not have kept the secret if Rowsley, to whom alone it was revealed, had not given his leave, in the dim blinded room where revenge and anger seemed small things, and Val's last words, almost unremarked at the time, took on the solemn force of a dying injunction. The grey placidity of Val's closed eyelids and crossed hands was the last memory that Lawrence would have chosen to evoke on his wedding night.

"Come and get warm," said Isabel. She saw that she had startled and distressed her husband, and she drew him down into an immense armchair by the fire, a man's chair, spacious and soft. "Is there room for me too?" She slipped into it beside him and threw her arms round his neck. Lawrence held her

lightly and passively. Not once during their engagement had she so surrendered herself to him for more than a moment, and he dared not take advantage of his opportunities for fear of losing her again. But Isabel smiled at him with shut eyes. "All my heart," she murmured; "don't be afraid, I'm not going to slip through your fingers now . . . I love you too, too much . . . Val would say it was wrong to care so much for any one."

Val again! Lawrence lifted her eyelashes with his finger. "Isabel, why are you haunted by Val now? I don't want you to think of any one but me."

"Are you jealous of the dead?"

"Not I!" his voice rang out harsh with passion: "with you in my arms why should I be jealous of any one in heaven or earth?"

"Val would say that was wrong too. . . . Lawrence, do you remember your first wedding night?"

"Well enough."

"Was Lizzie beautiful?"

"I thought so then. She was a tall, well-made piece: black hair, blue eyes, buxom and plenty of colour. I was shy of her because— it's a curious fact—she was my first experience of your sex: but she was not shy with me, though I believe she too was— technically—innocent. Even at the time I was conscious of something wanting—some grace, some reserve, some economy of effect. She was of a coming-on disposition, very amorous and towardly."

"Val would call that coarse."

"Probably. Do you object? You asked for it."

"Not a bit. I don't mind your telling me any thing that's a fact. Bad thoughts are different, but facts, good or bad, coarse or refined, are the stuff the world's made of, and why should we shut our eyes to them? I like to take life as it comes without expurgation. Lawrence, Lizzie never had any children, did she?"

"By me?"

"Yes."

"No, our married life didn't last long. I should have warned you, my dear, if I had had any responsibilities of that description."

"So you would—I forgot that." Isabel lay silent a moment, nestling her closed eyelids against his throat. "Lawrence, my darling, I don't want to hurt you; but tell me, did she have any children after she left you?"

"Yes—one, a boy: Rendell's."

"What became of him after Rendell died?"

"When it became impossible to leave him with Lizzie I sent him to school. He spends his holidays with my agent here at Farringay. He's quite a nice little chap, and good looking, like Arther, and by the gossip of the neighbourhood I'm supposed to be his father. Do you mind leaving it at that? It's no worse for him and less ignominious for me."

"Nothing in what I've heard of your married life is ignominious for you. So you brought up Rendell's child? Essentially generous . . . Kiss me." Isabel's pale beauty glowed like a flame. A Christian malagre lui and very much ashamed of it, Lawrence gave her the lightest of butterfly kisses, one on either eyelid. "Oh, I suppose you'll say I am—what was it?—towardly too," murmured Isabel. "Don't you want to kiss me?" He shook his head. Isabel, a trifle startled, opened her eyes, but was apparently satisfied, for she shut them again hurriedly and let her arm fall across them. "We'll go and see Rendell's boy tomorrow. You shall take me. I can say what I like to you now, can't I? . . . Shall you like to have one of our own?"

"Isabel, Isabel!"

"But it's perfectly proper now we're married! Oh Lawrence, it'll so soon come to seem commonplace — I want to taste the strangeness of it while I'm still near enough to Isabel Stafford to realize what a miracle it'll be. Our own! it seems so strange to say 'ours.'"

"I don't want any brats to come between you and me."

"Aren't you always in your secret soul afraid of life?"

"Afraid of life—I?"

"You have no faith . . . Everything we possess—your happiness, our love, the children you'll give me—don't you hold it all at the sword's point? You're afraid of death or change?"

"Yes."

"How frank you are!" Isabel smiled fleetingly. "Aren't there any locked doors?—no?—I may go wherever I like?—Lawrence, are you sorry Val's dead?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, not Val again!"

"One locked door after all?"

"I was fond of him," said Lawrence with difficult passion. "He told me once that I broke his life, it was no one's doing but mine that he had to go through the crucifixion of that last hour at Wanhope, and he was killed for me." He left her and went to the window, flung it up and stood looking out into the night. "I'd have given my life to save him. I'd give it now—now."

"I heard from Laura this morning."

"I wonder she dared write to you."

"Major Clowes is wonderfully better. He drives out with her every day and mixes with other people in the sanatorium and makes friends with them. He's been sleeping better than he has ever done since his accident."

"Good God!"

"He has been having a new massage treatment, and there's just a faint hope that some day he may be able to get about on crutches."

Lawrence had an inclination to laugh. "That's enough," he said, shuddering. "I don't want to hear any more."

"She sent a message to you."

"Well, give it to me, then."

"Don't let Lawrence suppose that Bernard has gone unpunished."

"He should have stood his trial," said Lawrence thickly. "It was murder."

He understood all that Laura's laconic message implied. Bernard reformed was Bernard broken by remorse: if he had shot himself—which was what Lawrence had anticipated—he would have deserved less pity. Yet Lawrence would have liked some swifter and less subtle form of punishment.

Out of doors in the garden an owl was hooting and the night air breathed on him its perfume of lilac and violets. How quiet it was and how fragrant and dim! one could scarcely distinguish between the dewy glimmer of turf and the dark island-like thickets of guelder-rose and other flowering shrubs. It was one of those late spring nights that are full of the promise of summer; but for Val there were no summers to come. His death had been as quiet as his life and without any struggle; his head on Lawrence's arm, he had stretched himself out with a little sigh, and was gone. Lawrence with his keen physical memory could still feel that light burden leaning on him. Isabel too had memories she was afraid of, the watch ticking on the dead man's wrist was one of them. Many tears had been shed for Val, some very bitter ones by Yvonne Bendish, but none by Lawrence or by Isabel. It was murder: a flash of devil's lightning, that withered where it struck.

Isabel turned in her chair to watch her husband. He had brought her straight into the drawingroom without staying to remove his leathern driving coat, which set off his big frame and the drilled flatness of his shoulders; everything he wore or used was expensive and fashionable. There came on her suddenly the impression of being shut up alone with a stranger, a man of whom she knew nothing except that in upbringing and outlook he was entirely different from her and her family. The room seemed immense and Hyde was at the other end of it. Suddenly he turned and came striding back to Isabel. Her instinct was to defend herself. She checked it and kept still, her arms and hands thrown out motionless along the arms of the chair in which her slight figure was lying in perfect repose. Lawrence

tenderly took her head between his finger-tips and kissed her mouth. "Why did you raise a ghost you can't lay?" he said. "My cousin killed your brother." Isabel smiled at him without moving. Her eyes were mysteriously full of light. Lawrence knelt down and threw his arms round her waist and let his head fall against her bosom. What strength there was in this immature personality neither yielded nor withdrawn! Lawrence was entirely disarmed and subdued. He uttered a deep sigh and gave up to Isabel with the simplicity of a child the secret of his tormented restlessness. "I am unhappy, Isabel."

"I know you are, my darling, and that's why I raised the ghost. What is it troubles you?"

"My own guilt. I never knew what remorse meant before, but your Christian ethics have mastered me this time. I had no right to extract that promise from Val."

"No. Why did you? It seems so motiveless."

"Because it amused me to get a man into my power." Isabel felt him shuddering. "Is this what you call the sense of sin? I used to hear it described as a theological fiction. But it tears one's heart out. Bernard killed him: but who put the weapon into Bernard's hand?"

"Val did."

"I don't understand you."

"The original fault was Val's, and you and Major Clowes were entangled in the consequences of it. Let us two face the truth once and for all! Val can stand it—can't you, Val? . . . He broke his military oath. He deserved a sharp stinging punishment, and if you had reported him he would have had it; perhaps a worse one than you exacted, except for that last awful hour at Wanhope, and for that Major Clowes, not you, was responsible. Oh, I won't say he deserved precisely what he got! because judgment ought to be dispassionate, and in yours there was an element of cruelty for cruelty's sake; wasn't there? You half enjoyed it and half shivered under it . . ."

"More than half enjoyed it," said Hyde under his breath.

"But I do not believe that was your only motive. I think you were sorry for Val. Haven't I seen you watching him at Wanhope? with such a strange half-unwilling pity, as if you hated yourself for it. Oh Lawrence, it's for that I love you!" Lawrence shook his head. He had never been able to analyse the complex of feelings that had determined his attitude to Val. "Well, in any case it was not your fault only. A coward is an irresistible temptation to a bully."

"Do you call Val a coward? Nervous collapses were not so uncommon as you may have gathered from the Daily Mail."

"Did Major Clowes describe the scene truthfully?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever break down like Val?"

"I was older."

"There were plenty of boys of nineteen, officers and men. Did you ever know such another case so complete, so prolonged?"

"I've commanded a firing party."

"For cowardice?"

"For cowardice."

"A worse exhibition than Val's?"

"Isabel, you are pitiless!"

"Because Val deserves justice not mercy. It's his due: he died to earn it."

Hyde was silent, not thoroughly understanding her.

"He wasn't a coward when he died," said Isabel with her sweet half melancholy smile. "He fought under a heavy handicap, and won: he paid his debt, paid it to the last farthing; and now do you grudge him his sleep? He hates him, that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer. . . ." Her beautiful voice dropped to a murmur which was almost lost in the rustling of flames on the hearth

and the stir of wind among budded branches in the garden.

The clock struck ten and Lawrence raised his head. "It's growing late, Isabel. Aren't you tired?"

"A little. I got up at five to say good-bye to all the animals."

"All the—?"

"My cocks and hens and Val's mare and Dodor and Zou-zou and Rowsley's old rabbits. They're at the Castle, don't you remember? Jack Bendish offered to take charge of them when we turned out of the vicarage."

"I hope you put your pinafore on," said her husband.

He took her by the hands and raised her to her feet, and Isabel with irreproachable docility began to collect her scattered belongings, her sable scarf and mull and veil. Lawrence forestalled her. "Mayn't I even carry my own gloves?" Isabel pleaded. "No, you're so slow," said Lawrence laughing down at her. Isabel's cheeks flew their scarlet flag before the invading enemy. "Isabel," Lawrence murmured, "are you shy of me?"

"A little. I'm only twenty," Isabel excused herself.

"And I'm not gentle. I shall brush the bloom off. . . . Yet I love the bloom."

He went to close the window. A breath of night wind shook through the bushes on the lawn and blew off a snow of petals through the soft air. He was not a believer in the immortality of the soul, but tonight he would have given much to know that Val was near him, a spirit of smiling tenderness. But no: the night was empty of everything except moonlight and petals and the sighing of wind over diapered turf. Youth passes, and beauty, and bloom: it is of the essence of their sweetness that they cannot last. Yet, while they last, how sweet they are!

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