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A COMEDY OF MASKS

A Novel

by

ERNEST DOWSON and ARTHUR MOORE

1893

CHAPTER I

In that intricate and obscure locality, which stretches between the Tower and Poplar, a tarry region, scarcely suspected by the majority of Londoners, to whom the "Port of London" is an expression purely geographical, there is, or was not many years ago, to be found a certain dry dock called Blackpool, but better known from time immemorial to skippers and longshoremen, and all who go down to the sea in ships, as "Rainham's Dock."

Many years ago, in the days of the first Rainham and of wooden ships, it had been no doubt a flourishing ship-yard; and, indeed, models of wooden leviathans of the period, which had been turned out, not a few, in those palmy days, were still dusty ornaments of its somewhat antique office. But as time went on, and the age of iron intervened, and the advance on the Clyde and the Tyne had made Thames ship-building a thing of the past, Blackpool Dock had ceased to be of commercial importance. No more ships were built there, and fewer ships put in to be overhauled and painted; while even these were for the most part of a class viewed at Lloyd's with scant favour, which seemed, like the yard itself,

to have fallen somewhat behind the day. The original Rainham had not bequeathed his energy along with his hoards to his descendants; and, indeed, the last of these, Philip Rainham, a man of weak health, original Rainham had not bequeathed his energy along with his hoards to his descendants; and, indeed, the last of these, Philip Rainham, a man of weak health, whose tastes, although these were veiled in obscurity, were supposed to trench little upon shipping, let the business jog along so much after its own fashion, that the popular view hinted at its imminent dissolution. A dignified, scarcely prosperous quiet seemed the normal air of Blackpool Dock, so that even when it was busiest —and work still came in, almost by tradition, with a certain steadiness—when the hammers of the riveters and the shipwrights awoke the echoes from sunrise to sunset, with a ferocious regularity which the present proprietor could almost deplore, there was still a suggestion of mildewed antiquity about it all that was, at least to the nostrils of the outsider, not unpleasing. And when the ships were painted, and had departed, it resumed very easily its more regular aspect of picturesque dilapidation. For in spite of its sordid surroundings and its occasional lapses into bustle, Blackpool Dock, as Rainham would sometimes remind himself, when its commercial motive was pressed upon him too forcibly, was deeply permeated by the spirit of the picturesque.

Certainly Mr. Richard Lightmark, a young artist, in whose work some excellent judges were beginning already to discern, if not the hand of the master, at least a touch remarkably happy, was inclined to plume himself on having discovered, in his search after originality, the artistic points of a dockyard.

It was on his first visit to Rainham, whom he had met abroad some years before, and with whom he had contracted an alliance that promised to be permanent, that Lightmark had decided his study should certainly be the river. Rainham had a set of rooms in the house of his foreman, an eighteenth-century house, full of carved oak mantels and curious alcoves, a ramshackle structure within the dock-gates, with a quaint balcony staircase, like the approach to a Swiss chalet, leading down into the yard. In London these apartments were his sole domicile; though, to his friends, none of whom lived nearer to him than Bloomsbury, this seemed a piece of conduct too flagrantly eccentric—on a parity with his explanation of it, alleging necessity of living on the spot: an explanation somewhat droll, in the face of his constant lengthy absence, during the whole of the winter, when he handed the reins of government to his manager, and took care of a diseased lung in a warmer climate. To Lightmark, however, dining with his friend for the first time on chops burnt barbarously and an inferior pudding, residence even in a less salubrious quarter than Blackpool would have been amply justified, in view of the many charming effects—for the most part coldly sad and white—which the river offered, towards evening, from the window of his friend's dining-room.

After his first visit, he availed himself eagerly of Rainham's invitation to make his property the point of view from which he could most conveniently transfer to canvas his impressions; and he worked hard for months, with an industry that came upon his friend as a surprise, at the uneven outlines of the Thames warehouses, and the sharp-pointed masts that rose so trenchantly above them. He had generated an habit of coming and going, as he pleased, without consideration of his host's absences; and latterly, in the early spring—whose caprices in England Rainham was never in a hurry to encounter —the easel and painting tools of the assiduous artist had become an almost constant feature of the landscape.

Now, towards the close of an exceptionally brilliant day in the finish of May, he was putting the last touches to a picture which had occupied him for some months, and which he hoped to have completed for Rainham's return. As he stood on the wharf, which ran down to the river-side, leaning back against a crane of ancient pattern, and viewing his easel from a few yards' distance critically, he could not contemplate the result without a certain complacency.

"It's deuced good, after all," he said to himself, with his head poised a little on one side. "Yes, old Rainham will like this. And, by Jove! what matters a good deal more, the hangers will like it, and if it's sold—and, confound it! it must be sold—it will be a case of three figures."

He had one hand in his pocket, and instinctively—it may have been the result of his meditation—he fell to jingling some coins in it. They were not very many, but just then, though he was a young gentleman keenly alive to the advantages of a full purse, their paucity hardly troubled him. He felt, for the nonce, assured of his facility, and doubtless had a vista of unlimited commissions and the world at his feet, for he drew himself up to his full height of six feet and looked out beyond the easel with a smile that had no longer its origin in the fruition of the artist. Indeed, as he stood there, in his light, lax dress and the fulness of his youth, he had (his art apart) excuse for self-complacency. He was very pleasant to look upon, with an air of having always been popular with his fellows, and the favourite of women; this, too, was borne out by his history. Not a beautiful man, by any means, but the best type of English comeliness: ruddy-coloured, straight, and healthy; muscular, but without a suggestion of brutality. His yellow moustache, a shade lighter than his hair—which, although he wore it cropped,

showed a tendency to be curling—concealed a mouth that was his only questionable feature. It was not the sensitive mouth of the through and through artist, and the lines of it were vacillating. The lips, had they not been hidden, would have surprised by their fulness, contradicting, in some part, the curious coldness of his light blue eyes. All said, however, he remained a singularly handsome fellow; and the slight consciousness which he occasionally betrayed, that his personality was pleasing, hardly detracted from it; it was, after all, a harmless vanity that his friends could afford to overlook. Just then his thoughts, which had wandered many leagues from the warehouses of Blackpool, were brought up sharply by the noise of an approaching footstep. He started slightly, but a moment later greeted the new-comer with a pleasant smile of recognition. It was Rainham's foreman and general manager, with whom the artist, as with most persons with whom he was often in contact, was on excellent, and even familiar, terms.

"Look here, Bullen," he said, twisting the easel round a little, "the picture is practically finished. A few more strokes—I shall do them at home—and it is ready for the Academy. How do you like it?"

Mr. Bullen bent down his burly form and honoured the little canvas with a respectful scrutiny.

"That is Trinidad Wharf, sir, I suppose?" he suggested, pointing with a huge forefinger at the background a little uncertainly.

"That is Trinidad Wharf, Bullen, certainly! And those masts are from the ships in the Commercial Docks. But the river, the atmosphere—that's the point—how do they strike you?"

"Well, it's beautiful, sir," remarked Bullen cordially; "painted like the life, you may say. But isn't it just a little smudgy, sir?"

"That's the beauty of it, Bullen. It's impressionism, you Philistine!—a sort of modified impressionism, you know, to suit the hangers. 'Gad, Bullen, you ought to be a hanger yourself! Bullen, my dear man, if it wasn't that you *do* know how to paint a ship's side, I would even go so far as to say that you have all the qualifications of an Academician."

"Ah, if it comes to that, Mr. Lightmark, I dare say I could put them up to some dodges. I am a judge of 'composition.'"

"Composition? The devil you are! Ah, you mean that infernal compound which they cover ships' bottoms with? What an atrocious pun!" The man looked puzzled. "Bullen, R.A., great at composition; it sounds well," continued Lightmark gaily, just touching in the brown sail of a barge.

"I've a nephew in the Royal Artillery, sir," said Mr. Bullen; "but I fear he is a bad lot."

"Oh, they all are!" said Lightmark, "an abandoned crew."

His eyes wandered off to the bridge over which the road ran, dividing the dry dock from the outer basin and wharf on which they stood. A bevy of factory girls in extensive hats stuck with brilliant Whitechapel feathers were passing; one of them, who was pretty, caught Lightmark's eyes and flung him a saucy compliment, which he returned with light badinage in kind that made the foreman grin.

"They know a fine man when they see one, as well as my lady," he said. Then he added, as if by an afterthought, lowering his voice a little: "By the way, Mr. Lightmark, there was a young lady—a young person here yesterday—making inquiries."

Lightmark bent down, frowning a little at a fly which had entangled itself on his palette.

"Yes?" he remarked tentatively, when the offender had been removed.

"It was a young lady come after someone, who, she said, had been here lately: a Mr. Dighton or Crichton was the name, I think. It was the dockman she asked."

"Nobody comes here of that name that I know of," said Lightmark.

"Not to my knowledge," said Bullen.

"Curious!" remarked Lightmark gravely.

"Very, sir!" said Bullen, with equal gravity.

Lightmark looked up abruptly: the two men's eyes met, and they both laughed, the artist a little nervously.

"What did you tell her, Bullen?"

"No such person known here, sir. I sent her away as wise as she came. I hold with minding my own business, and asking no questions."

"An excellent maxim, Bullen!" said Lightmark, preparing to pack up his easel. "I have long believed you to be a man of discretion. Well, I must even be moving."

"You know the governor is back, sir?"

Lightmark dropped the paint-brush he was cleaning, with a movement of genuine surprise.

"I never knew it," he said; "I will run up and have a yarn with him.
I thought he wasn't expected till to-morrow at the earliest?"

"Nor he was, Mr. Lightmark. But he travelled right through from
Italy, and got to London late last night. He slept at the Great
Eastern, and I went up to him in the City this morning. He hasn't
been here more than half an hour."

"Nobody told me," said Lightmark. "Gad! I am glad. I will take him up the picture. Will you carry the other traps into the house, Bullen?"

He packed them up, and then stood a trifle irresolutely, his hand feeling over the coins in his pocket. Presently he produced two of them, a sovereign and a shilling.

"By the way, Bullen!" he said, "there is a little function common in your trade, the gift of a new hat. It costs a guinea, I am told; though judging from the general appearance of longshoremen, the result seems a little inadequate. Bullen, we are pretty old friends now, and I expect I shall not be down here so often just at present. Allow me—to give you a new hat."

The foreman's huge fist closed on the artist's slender one.

"Thank you, sir! You are such a facetious gentleman. You may depend upon me."

"I do," said Lightmark, with a sudden lapse into seriousness, and frowning a little.

If something had cast a shadow over the artist for the moment he must have had a faculty of quick recovery, for there was certainly no shade of constraint upon his handsome face when a minute later he made his way up the balcony steps and into the office labelled "Private," and, depositing his canvas upon the floor, treated his friend to a prolonged handshaking.

"My dear Dick!" said Rainham, "this is a pleasant surprise. I had not the remotest notion you were here."

"I thought you were at Bordighera, till Bullen told me of your arrival ten minutes ago," said Lightmark, with a frank laugh. "And how well——"

Rainham held up his hand—a very white, nervous hand with one ring of quaint pattern on the forefinger—deprecatingly.

"My dear fellow, I know exactly what you are going to say. Don't be conventional—don't say it. I have a fraudulent countenance if I do look well; and I don't, and I am not. I am as bad as I ever was."

"Well, come now, Rainham, at any rate you are no worse."

"Oh, I am no worse!" admitted the dry dock proprietor. "But, then, I could not afford to be much worse. However, my health is a subject which palls on me after a time. Tell me about yourself."

He looked up with a smile, in which an onlooker might have detected a spark of malice, as though Rainham were aware that his suggested topic was not without attraction to his friend. He was a slight man of middle height, and of no apparent distinction, and his face with all its petulant lines of lassitude and ill-health—the wear and tear of forty years having done with him the work of fifty—struck one who saw Philip Rainham for the first time by nothing so much as by his ugliness. And yet few persons who knew him would have hesitated to allow to his nervous, suffering visage a certain indefinable charm. The large head set on a figure markedly ungraceful, on which the clothes seldom fitted, was shapely and refined, although the features were indefensible, even grotesque. And his mouth, with its constrained thin lips and the acrid lines about it, was unmistakably a strong one. His deep-set eyes, moreover, of a dark gray colour, gleamed from under his thick eyebrows with a pleasant directness; while his smile, which some people called cynical, as his habit of speech most certainly was, was found by others extraordinarily sympathetic.

"Yes, tell me about yourself, Dick," he said again.

"I have done a picture, if that is what you mean, besides some portraits; I have worked down here like a galley slave for the last three months."

"And is the queer little *estaminet* in Soho still in evidence? Do the men of to-morrow still meet there nightly and weigh the claims of the men of to-day?"

Lightmark smiled a trifle absently; his eyes had wandered off to his picture in the corner.

"Oh, I believe so!" he said at last; "I dine there occasionally when I have time. But I have been going out a good deal lately, and I hardly ever do have time.... May I smoke, by the way?"

Rainham nodded gently, and the artist pulled out his case and started a fragrant cigarette.

"You see, Rainham," he continued, sending a blue ring sailing across the room, "I am not so young as I was last year, and I have seen a good deal more of the world."

"I see, Dick," said Rainham. "Well, go on!"

"I mean," he explained, "that those men who meet at Brodonowski's are very good fellows, and deuced clever, and all that; but I doubt if they are the sort of men it is well to get too much mixed up with. They are rather *outré*, you know; though, of course, they are awfully good fellows in their way."

"Precisely!" said Rainham, "you are becoming a very Solomon, Dick!"

He sat playing idly with the ring on his forefinger, watching the artist's smoke with the same curiously obscure smile. It had the effect on Lightmark now, as Rainham's smile did on many people, however innocent it might be of satiric intention, of infusing his next remarks with the accent of apology.

"You see, Rainham, one has to think of what will help one on, as well as what one likes. There is a man I have come to know lately—a very good man too, a barrister—who is always dinning that into me. He has introduced me to some very useful people, and is always urging me not to commit myself. And Brodonowski's is rather committal, you know. However, we must dine there together again one day, soon, and then you will understand it."

"Oh, I understand it, Dick!" said Rainham. "But let me see the picture while the light lasts."

"Oh, yes!" cried Lightmark eagerly. "We must not forget the picture." He hoisted it up to a suitable light, and Rainham stood by the bow-window, from which one almost obtained the point of view which the artist had chosen, regarding it in a critical silence.

"What do you call it?" he asked at last.

"'The Gray River,'" said Lightmark; then a little impatiently: "But how do you find it? Are you waiting for a tripod?"

"I don't think I shall tell you. By falling into personal criticism, unless one is either dishonest or trivial, one runs the risk of losing a friend."

"Oh, nonsense, man! It's not such a daub as that. I will risk your candour."

Rainham shrugged his shoulder.

"If you will have it, Dick—only, don't think that I am to be coaxed into compliments."

"*Is* it bad?" asked Lightmark sceptically.

"On the contrary, it is surprisingly good. It's clever and pretty; sure to be hung, sure to sell. Only you have come down a peg. The sentiment about that river is very pretty, and that mist is eminently pictorial; but it's not the river you would have painted last year; and that mist—I have seen it in a good many pictures now—is a mist that one can't quite believe in. It's the art that pays, but it's not the art you talked at Brodonowski's last summer, that is all."

Lightmark tugged at his moustache a little ruefully. Rainham had an idea that his ups and downs were tremendous. His mind was a mountainous country, and if he had elations, he had also depressions as acute. Yet his elasticity was enormous, and he could throw off troublesome intruders, in the shape of memories or regrets, with the ease of a slow-worm casting its skin. And so now his confidence was only shaken for a moment, and he was able to reply gaily to Rainham's last thrust:

"My dear fellow, I expect I talked a good deal of trash last year, after all"—a statement which the other did not find it worth while to deny.

They had resumed their places at the table, and Lightmark, with a half-sheet of note-paper before him, was dashing off profiles. They were all the same—the head of a girl: a childish face with a straight, small nose, and rough hair gathered up high above her head in a plain knot. Rainham, leaning over, watched him with an amused smile.

"The current infatuation, Dick, or the last but one?"

"No," he said; "only a girl I know. Awfully pretty, isn't she?"

Rainham, who was a little short-sighted, took up the paper carelessly. He dropped it after a minute with a slight start.

"I think I know her," he said. "You have a knack of catching faces.
Is it Miss Sylvester?"

"Yes; it is Eve Sylvester," said Lightmark. "Do you know them? I see a good deal of them now."

"I have known them a good many years," said Rainham.

"They have never spoken of you to me," said Lightmark.

"No? I dare say not. Why should they?" He was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at his ring. Then he said abruptly: "I think I know now who your friend the barrister is, Dick. I recognise the style. It is Charles Sylvester, is it not?"

"You are a wizard," answered the other, laughing. "Yes, it is." Then he asked: "Don't you think she is awfully pretty?"

"Miss Sylvester?... Very likely; she was a very pretty child. You know, she had not come out last year. Are you going?"

Lightmark had pulled out his watch absently, and he leapt up as he discovered the lateness of the hour.

"Heavens, yes! I am dining out, and I shall barely have time to dress. I will fetch my traps to-morrow; then we might dine together afterwards."

"As you like," said the elder man. "I have no engagements yet."

Lightmark left him with a genial nod, and a moment later Rainham saw him through the window passing with long impetuous strides across the bridge. Then he returned to his desk, and wrote a letter or two until the light failed, when he pushed his chair back, and sat, pen in hand, looking meditatively, vaguely, at the antiquated maps upon the walls.

Presently his eye fell on Lightmark's derelict paper, with its scribble of a girl's head. He considered it thoughtfully for some time, starting a little, and covering it with his blotting-paper, when Mrs. Bullen, his housekeeper, entered with a cup of tea—a freak of his nerves which made him smile when she had gone.

Even then he left his tea for a long time, cooling and untasted, while he sat lethargically lolling back, and regarding from time to time the pencilled profile with his sad eyes.

CHAPTER II

The period of Lightmark's boyhood had not been an altogether happy one. His earliest recollections carried him back to a time when he lived a wandering, desolate life with his father and mother, in an endless series of Continental hotels and *pensions*. He was prepared to assert, with confidence, that his mother had been a very beautiful person, who carried an air of the most abundant affection for him on the numerous occasions when she received her friends. Of his father, who had, as far as possible, ignored his existence, he remembered very little.

During these years there had been frequent difficulties, the nature of which he had since learned entirely to comprehend; controversies with white-waistcoated proprietors of hotels and voluble tradespeople, generally followed by a severance of hastily-cemented friendships, and a departure of

apparently unpremeditated abruptness.

When his mother died, he was sent to a fairly good school in England, where his father occasionally visited him, and where he had been terribly bullied at first, and had afterwards learned to bully in turn. He spent his holidays in London, at the house of his grandmother—an excellent old lady, who petted and scolded him almost simultaneously, who talked mysteriously about his "poor dear father," and took care that he went to church regularly, and had dancing-lessons three times a week.

His father's death, which occurred at Monaco somewhat unexpectedly, and on the subject of which his grandmother maintained a certain reserve, affected the boy but little; in fact, the first real grief which he could remember to have experienced was when the old lady herself died—he was then nineteen years old—leaving him her blessing and a sum of Consols sufficient to produce an income of about £250 a year.

The boy's inclinations leaned in the direction of Oxford, and in this he was supported by his only-surviving relative, his uncle, Colonel Lightmark, a loud-voiced cavalry officer, who had been the terror of Richard's juvenile existence, and who, as executor of the old lady's will, was fully aware of the position in which her death had left him, and her desire that he should go into the Church.

At one of the less fashionable colleges, which he selected because he was enamoured of its picturesque inner quadrangle, and of the quaint Dutch glass in the chapel windows, Lightmark was popular with his peers, and, for his first term, in tolerably good odour with the dons, who decided, on his coming up to matriculate, that he ought to read for honours. And he did read for honours, after a fashion, for nearly a scholastic year, after which an unfortunate excursion to Abingdon, and a boisterous re-entry into the University precincts, at the latter part of which the junior proctor and his satellites were painfully conspicuous, ended in his being "sent down" for a term. Whereupon he decided to travel, a decision prompted as much by a not unnatural desire to avoid avuncular criticism as by a constitutional yearning for the sunny South. Besides, one could live for next to nothing abroad.

During the next few years his proceedings were wrapped in a veil of mystery which he never entirely threw aside. Rainham, it is true, saw him occasionally at this time, for, indeed, it was soon after his first arrival in Paris that Lightmark made his friend's acquaintance, sealed by their subsequent journey together to Rome. But Rainham was discreet. Lightmark before long informed his uncle, with whom he at first communicated through the post on the subject of dividends, that he was studying Art, to which his uncle had replied:

"Don't be a d——d fool. Come back and take your degree."

This letter Dick had light-heartedly ignored, and he received his next cheque from his uncle's solicitors, together with a polite request that he would keep them informed as to his wanderings, and an intimation that his uncle found it more convenient to make them the channel of correspondence for the future.

At Paris it was generally conceded that, for an Englishman, the delicacy of Lightmark's touch, and the daring of his conception and execution, were really marvellous; and if only he could draw! But he was too impatient for the end to spend the necessary time in perfecting the means.

At Rome he tried his hand at sculpture, and made a few sketches which his attractive personality rather than their intrinsic merit enabled him to sell. The *camaraderie* of the Café Grecco welcomed him with open arms; and he was to be encountered, in the season, at the most fashionable studio tea-parties and diplomatic dances. Before long his talent in the direction of seizing likenesses secured him a well-paid post as caricaturist-in-chief on the staff of a Republican journal of more wit than discretion; and it was in this capacity that he gained his literary experience. On the eve of the suppression of this enterprising organ the Minister of Police thought it a favourable opportunity to express to Lightmark privately his opinion that he was not likely to find the atmosphere of Rome particularly salubrious during the next few months. Whereupon our friend had shrugged his shoulders, and after ironically thanking the official for his disinterested advice, he had given a farewell banquet of great splendour at the Grecco, packed up palettes and paint-boxes, and started for London, where his friends persuaded him that his talent would be recognised. And at London he had arrived, travelling by ruinously easy stages, and breaking the journey at Florence, where he sketched and smoked pipes innumerable on the Lung Arno; at Venice, where he affected cigarettes, and indulged in a desperate flirtation with a pretty black-eyed marchesa; at Monaco, where he gambled; and at Paris, where he spent his winnings, and foregathered with his friends of the Quartier Latin.

His empty pockets suggested the immediate necessity for work in a manner more emphatic than agreeable. His uncle, upon whom he called at his club, invited him to dinner, lectured him with considerable eloquence, and practically declined to have any more to do with the young reprobate,

which shook Lightmark's faith in the teaching of parables.

However, he set to work in the two little rooms beneath the tiles which he rented in Bloomsbury, and which served him as bedroom and studio; and for a few weeks he finished sketches by day, and wrote sonnets for magazines, and frivolous articles for dailies, by night. And, strange to say, though there were times when success seemed very hard to grasp, and when he was obliged to forestall quarter-day, and even to borrow money from Rainham—when that bird of passage was within reach—he sold sketches from time to time; he obtained commissions for portraits; and the editors occasionally read and retained his contributions.

In course of time he moved further west, to the then unfashionable neighbourhood of Holland Park, and devoted his energies to the production of a work which should make an impression at the Academy. It was his first large picture in oils, an anonymous portrait, treated with all the audacity and *chic* of the modern French school, of a fair-haired girl in a quaint fancy dress, standing under the soft light of Japanese lanterns, in a conservatory, with a background of masses of flowers.

And when it was finished, Rainham and the small coterie of artists who were intimate with Lightmark were generously enthusiastic in their expressions of approval.

"But I don't know about the Academy, old man," said one of these critics dubiously, after the first spontaneous outburst of discussion. "Of course it's good enough, but it's not exactly their style, you know. The old duffers on the Hanging Committee wouldn't understand it——"

And though Lightmark maintained his intention in the face of this criticism, the picture was never submitted to the hangers. Rainham brought a wealthy American ship-owner to see it, and when the committee sat in judgment, the work was already on the high seas on its way to New York.

After all, Lightmark owed his nascent reputation to work of a less important nature—a few landscapes which appeared on the walls of Bond Street galleries, and were transferred in course of time to fashionable drawing-rooms; a few portraits, which the uninitiated thought admirable because they were so "like." Moreover, he could flatter discreetly, and he took care not to bore his sitter; two admirable qualities in a portrait-painter who desires to succeed.

CHAPTER III

It was to one of his sitters that Lightmark owed his introduction to the Sylvesters. Charles Sylvester had been told that Lightmark was a man who would certainly achieve greatness, and he felt that here was an opportunity to add all hitherto missing leaf to his laurels, by constituting himself a patron of art, a position not often attained by young barristers even when, as in Sylvester's case, they have already designs upon a snug constituency.

Sylvester began by giving his *protégé* a commission to paint his mother's portrait, and before this work was finished a very appreciable degree of intimacy had sprung up between the Sylvester family and the young painter, who found no difficulty in gratifying a woman-of-the-world's passion for small-talk and fashionable intelligence—judiciously culled from the columns of the daily newspapers with the art of a practised wielder of the scissors and paste-brush.

With Miss Sylvester he had a less easy task. She was a girl who had from a very early age been accustomed to have her impressions moulded by her self-assertive elder brother; and he, at any rate at first, had been careful to show that he regarded Lightmark as an object of his patronage rather than as a friend who could meet him on his own exalted level. He had been known, in his earlier years, to speak somewhat contemptuously of "artists"; and, indeed, his want of sympathy with Bohemians in general had given Eve occasion for much wondering mental comment, when her brother first spoke of introducing the portrait-painter to the family circle.

However, brotherly rule over a girl's opinions is apt to be disestablished when she draws near the autumn of her teens; and after her emancipation from the schoolroom and short frocks, Miss Eve began to think it was time that she should be allowed to entertain and express views of her own. And after her first ball, an occasion on which her programme had speedily been besieged, and the *débutante* marked as dangerous by the observant mothers of marriageable sons and daughters—after this important function, even Charles had begun to regard his pretty sister with a certain amount of deference. He certainly had reason to congratulate himself on having so attractive a young person to pour out his coffee and compose his "buttonholes" before he started for chambers in the morning. Eve was at an age when the wild-rose tints of a complexion fostered by judicious walks and schoolroom teas had not yet yielded to the baneful influence of late dinners and the other orgies which society conducts in an

unduly-heated atmosphere. Her figure was still almost childishly slim, but graceful, and straight enough to defy criticism in the ball-room or the saddle. Her eyes were gray, with a curious, starry expression in their depths, which always suggested that the smile which was so often on her lips was quite ready to exaggerate the dimples in her cheeks. Her hair was refractory, from her own point of view; but Lightmark found the tangled brown masses, which she wore gathered into a loose knot high at the back of her shapely head, entirely charming, and suggestive, in a way, of one of Lancret's wood nymphs.

She could never bring herself to believe that her nose was pretty, although in the seclusion of her chamber she had frankly criticised her reflected image; and perhaps it *was* a trifle too small for most critics. Still, her admirers declared that, especially in profile, it was delightfully piquant, and vastly preferable to the uninteresting aquilines which adorned the countenances of her mother and brother. A provoking, childish, charming face, when all was said; it was not wonderful that Lightmark would fain put it upon canvas. And, indeed, so far as the young girl herself was concerned, he had already a conditional promise. She had no objection whatever to make, provided that Charles was first consulted; only she had no dress that would meet the occasion. And when Lightmark protested that the airy white garment, with here and there a suggestion of cream-coloured lace and sulphur ribbons, which she was wearing, was entirely right, she scouted the idea with scorn.

"This old frock, Mr. Lightmark," she exclaimed, with a pretty display of disdain for his taste, "why, I've worn the old thing for months! No; if Charles says I may have my portrait painted, I shall go straight off to Madame Sophie, and then you may paint me and send me to the Academy or Grosvenor in all my glory."

Lightmark had found it quite useless to protest, well as he knew that the ordinary French milliner can be warranted to succeed in producing a garment almost as unpaintable as a masculine black frock-coat.

On the afternoon of the day after Rainham's return to the dock, Lightmark was caressing his fair moustache upon the doorstep of the Sylvesters' house, No. 137, Park Street, West, a mansion of unpretending size, glorious in its summer coat of white paint, relieved only by the turquoise-blue tiles which surrounded the window-boxes, and the darker blue of the railings and front-door. He was calling ostensibly for the purpose of inquiring how Charles Sylvester liked the frame which he had selected for the recently-finished portrait; really in order to induce her brother to allow Eve to sit to him. Sounds as of discussion floated down the wide staircase; and when the servant opened the drawing-room door preparatory to announcing him, Lightmark heard—and it startled him—a well-remembered voice upraised in playful protest.

"No, 'pon my word, Mrs. Sylvester, my young scamp of a nephew hasn't done you justice, 'pon my soul he hasn't."

At first he felt almost inclined to turn tail; though he had long been aware that the Sylvesters were cognisant of his relationship to the somewhat notorious old Colonel, and that they knew him, as everyone did, he had never contemplated the possibility of meeting his uncle there.

And when he had shaken hands in a bewildered manner with Mrs. Sylvester and Eve, he perceived that his uncle was greeting him with an almost paternal cordiality.

"Why, Dick, my boy, 'pon my soul I haven't seen you for an age! You mustn't neglect your gouty old uncle, you know, Dick; when are you going to paint his portrait, in review order, eh? Not until you've painted Miss Eve here, I'll be bound."

The prodigal nephew needed all his by no means deficient stock of nerve to enable him to present an unmoved countenance to this unexpected attack of geniality. This, he thought, as he returned the other's greeting with as great a semblance of ease as he could muster—this was the uncle who had declined to recognise him when they met a few months ago, in the broadest daylight, in Pall Mall!

Presently, while he was trying to recover his equanimity by devoting himself to the cult of Eve, he heard the colonel whisper in a confidential undertone to their hostess:

"Devilish clever fellow, my nephew, y'know, though perhaps I oughtn't to say so. Those newspaper beggars think very highly of him—the critics, y'know, and all that; why, 'pon my soul, I was reading something about him only this morning at the club in the what's-his-name—the __Outcry__. Said he ought to be in the Academy."

"Yes," said Mrs. Sylvester sympathetically, "you are quite right to be proud of him, Colonel Lightmark. Charles thinks he is very clever, and he is *so* pleased with my portrait. We want him to paint Eve, you know, only—— Oh, do let me give you another cup of tea, Mr. Lightmark! Two lumps of sugar, I think?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Sylvester. Do you know, I have discovered that we have a mutual friend—that is to say, I found out not long ago, quite by accident, that my very good friend, Philip Rainham, has the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Oh, really!" said Eve delightedly; "do you know Philip—Mr. Rainham? And have you seen him lately? We haven't heard anything of him for weeks and weeks—not since Christmas, have we, mamma?"

"Ah!" answered Lightmark, smiling, and letting his eyes wander over the white expanse of the Colonel's waistcoat. "I don't wonder at that. You see, he has been nursing himself on the Riviera all the winter, lucky dog! He only came back last night. I saw him at his dock, you know, down the river—such a jolly old place. I have been sketching there, on and off, nearly all the spring. He lets me make myself quite at home."

"Take care, Dick, my boy," said the Colonel sententiously, fixing his black-rimmed eyeglass under the bushy white brow that shaded his right eye; "don't you let him entice you into that business. Don't pay nowadays! All the shipping goes up North, y'know. The poor old Thames is only used for regattas now, and penny steamers."

"How very nice for the Thames!" cried Eve. "Why, there's nothing I like more than regattas! I do so hope we shall go to Henley this year; but houseboats are so expensive, and it's no fun unless you have a houseboat. We had a punt last year, a sort of thing like a long butler's tray, and Charles got into fearful difficulties. You know, it looks so easy to push a punt along with a pole, but the pole has a wicked way of sticking in the mud at critical moments—when they are clearing the course, for instance. Oh, it was dreadful! Everybody was looking at us, and I felt like one of those horrid people who always get in the way at the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race!"

"Or the Derby dog, by Jove!" suggested the Colonel.

"I can sympathize with you fully, Miss Sylvester," said his nephew. "I shouldn't like to say how many times in the course of my first summer term at Oxford I found myself sprawling ignominiously in the Cherwell, instead of posing in a picturesque attitude in the stern of my punt. And one looked such a fool going up to college in wet things. But there aren't many regattas going on in the regions below London Bridge nowadays. It's not much like Henley or Marlow, though it's pretty enough in its way at times. You ought to get Rainham to invite you to the dock; you would create an impression on the natives, and of course he would be delighted. He's got a most amiable housekeeper, though I don't think she has heard of thin bread-and-butter; and I have discovered that his foreman is a judge of art—a regular Ruskin."

"And how is poor Philip, Mr. Lightmark?" asked Mrs. Sylvester tentatively. "You must bring him here very soon, and make him give an account of himself."

"Oh," said Lightmark vaguely, "he's looking pretty fit, though he doesn't like to be told so. I really believe he would be unhappy if he were in robust health. He finds his damaged lung such a good pretext for neglecting the dock; and if it got quite well, half the occupation of his life would be gone."

Mrs. Sylvester and Eve both protested laughingly against this somewhat heartless view of the case; and after declining an offer of the back seats of the carriage, which was already waiting at the door to take Mrs. Sylvester and her daughter for their anteprandial drive in the Park, and expressing their regret that they had not seen Charles, uncle and nephew took their leave together.

"Dick, my boy," said the colonel, when they were safely in the street, "you must come and dine with me. Not tonight; I am going to take Lady Dulminster to the French play. Let me have your address, or come and look me up at the club. I'm dev'lish glad you're getting on so well, my boy, though you were a fool not to stay up at Oxford and take your degree. After all, though, perhaps you aren't quite the cut for the Church or a fellowship, and—and the Sylvesters are dev'lish good people to know, Dick. Ta, ta! Don't forget to come and see me."

So saying, Dick's versatile uncle waved his cheroot by way of adieu, and clambered laboriously into a hansom.

"By Jove!" said the younger man blankly, "what a ridiculous old humbug it is! And how he used to frighten me in the old days with his confounded cavalry bluster! I rather think I *will* look him up: and I'll dine with him three times a week if he likes. Meanwhile, it's time for me to go and meet old Rainham, and take him round to Brodonowski's. What a ripping sunset!"

And he strolled light-heartedly through Grosvenor Square, the smoke of his cigarette fading away behind him.

CHAPTER IV

When Rainham pushed back the door of the dim little restaurant in Turk Street, Soho, he stood a moment, blinking his eyes a little in the sudden change from the bright summer sunshine, before he assured himself that his friend had not yet arrived. Half a dozen men were sitting about smoking or discussing various drinks. The faces of several were familiar to him, but there were none of them whom he knew; so he took his seat at a table near the door and ordered a vermouth to occupy him until Lightmark, whose unpunctuality was notorious, should put in an appearance. In the interim his eyes strayed round the establishment, taking stock of the walls with their rough decorations, and the *clientèle*, and noting, not without a certain pleasure, that during the six months in which he had been absent neither had suffered much alteration.

Indeed, to Philip Rainham, who had doubtless in his blood the taint of Bohemia, Brodonowski's and the enthusiasm of its guests had a very definite charm. They were almost all of them artists; they were all of them young and ardent; and they had a habit of propounding their views, which were always of the most advanced nature, with a vehemence which to Rainham represented all the disinterestedness of youth. Very often they were exceedingly well worth knowing, though in the majority of cases the world had not found it out. He knew very few of them personally; he had been taken there first by Lightmark, when the latter was fresh from Paris, and had been himself more in touch with them. But he had often sat smoking silently a little outside the main group, listening, with a deferential air that sat upon his age somewhat oddly, to their audacious propaganda.

In his mind he would sometimes contrast the coterie with certain artistic houses, more socially important, which he had from time to time frequented: where earnest-eyed women in graceful garments—which certainly afforded a rest to the eye—dispensed tea from a *samovar*, and discoursed discreetly of the current Academy and the most recent symptomatic novel.

The delight of a visible, orderly culture permeating their manners and their conversation was a real one, and yet, Rainham reflected, it left one at the last a trifle weary, a little cold. It seemed to him that this restaurant, with its perennial smell of garlic, its discoloured knife-handles, its frequentation of picturesque poverty, possessed actually an horizon that was somewhat less limited.

Indeed, the dingy room, its assemblage apart, had many traces of an artistic patronage. The rough walls were adorned, in imitation of the familiar Roman haunt, of which this was, so to speak, a colony, with a host of fantastic sketches: rapid silhouettes in charcoal, drawn for illustration or refutation in the heat of some strenuous argument; caricatures in the same medium, some of them trenchantly like, of the customers as well as of certain artistic celebrities, whose laurels Brodonowski's had not approved, varied here and there by an epigram or a doggerel couplet, damning the Philistine.

Rainham smiled as he recognised occasionally the grotesque travesty of a familiar face. Presently his eyes were arrested by a drawing which was new to him, a face of striking ugliness, offering advantages to the caricaturist of which, doubtless, he had not omitted to avail himself. It imposed itself on Rainham, for the savage strength which it displayed, and for an element in its hideousness which suggested beauty. He was still absorbed in the study of this face when Lightmark entered and took his place opposite him with a brief apology for his tardiness. He was dressed well, with a white orchid in his button-hole, and looked prosperous and rosy. Some light badinage on this score from his various acquaintances in the restaurant he parried with a good-humoured nonchalance; then he betook himself to consideration of the *menu*.

"I have been calling on your friends, the Sylvesters," he explained after a while, "and I could not get away before. My uncle was there, by the way. You have heard me speak of him?"

"Your uncle, who holds such a lax view of the avuncular offices?"

Lightmark smiled a little self-congratulatory smile.

"Ah, that's changed. The old boy was deuced friendly—gave me his whole hand instead of two fingers, and asked me to dine with him. I think," he went on after a moment, "the Sylvesters have been putting in a good word for me. Or perhaps it was Mrs. Sylvester's portrait which did the job."

"Ah," said Rainham, "you have painted her, have you?"

Their fish occupied them in silence. Lightmark, a trifle flushed from his rapid walk, smiled from time to time absently, as though his thoughts were pleasant ones. The older man thought he had seldom seen him looking more boyishly handsome. Presently his eyes again caught the head which had so struck his fancy.

"Is that yours, Dick?" he asked.

Lightmark followed the direction of his eyes to the opposite wall.

"I believe it is," he remarked, with a shade of deprecation in his manner. "It is Oswyn. Don't you know him?"

"I don't know him," said the other, sipping his thin Médoc. "But I think I should like to. What is he?"

"He will be here soon, no doubt, and then you will see for yourself. He is Oswyn! I knew him in Paris better than I do now. He was in B——'s studio; and B—— swore that he had a magnificent genius. He painted a monstrous picture which the Salon wouldn't hang; but B—— bought it, and hung it in his studio, where it frightened his models into fits. Last year he came to London, where he makes enough, when he is sober, by painting pot-boilers for the dealers, to keep him in absinthe and tobacco, which are apparently his sole sustenance. In the meanwhile he is painting a masterpiece; at least, so he will tell you. He is a virulent fanatic, whose art is the most monstrous thing imaginable. He is—but talk of the devil——"

He broke off and nodded to a little, lean man of ambiguous age, in a strained coat, who entered at this moment with a rapid lurching gait. He sat down immediately opposite them, under Lightmark's presentment, with which Rainham curiously compared him. And it struck him that there was something in that oddly repulsive figure which Lightmark's superficial crayon had missed. The long, haggard face was there, with its ill-kempt hair and beard; and the lips, which, when they parted in a smile that was too full of irony, revealed the man's uneven, discoloured teeth. Rainham lost sight of his uncouthness in a sense of his extreme power. His eyes, which were restless and extraordinarily brilliant, met Rainham's presently; and the latter was conscious of a certain fascination in their sustained gaze. In spite of the air of savagery which pervaded the man, it was a movement of sympathy which, on the whole, he experienced towards him. And it seemed as if this sentiment were reciprocal, for when the German youth, who was the cupbearer of the establishment, had taken Oswyn's order, and had brought him absinthe in a long glass, he motioned it abruptly to the opposite table. Then he crossed over and accosted Lightmark, whom he had not hitherto appeared to recognise, with a word of greeting. Lightmark murmured his name and Rainham's, and the strange, little man nodded to him not unamiably.

"I must smoke, if you don't mind," he said, after a moment.

They nodded assent, and he produced tobacco in a screw of newspaper from the pocket of his coat, and began rapidly to make cigarettes. Rainham watched the dexterous movements of his long nervous hands—the colour of old ivory—and found them noticeable.

"You are not an artist, I think," he suggested after a moment, fixing his curiously intent eyes on Rainham.

"No," admitted the other, smiling, "I am afraid I am not. I am only here on sufferance. I am a mender of ships."

"He is a connoisseur," put in Lightmark gaily. "It's an accident that he happens to be connected with shipping—a fortunate one, though, for he owns a most picturesque old shanty in the far East. But actually he does not know a rudder post from a jib-boom."

"I suppose you have been painting it?" said Oswyn shortly.

Lightmark nodded.

"I have been painting the river from his wharf. The picture is just finished, and on the whole I am pleased with it. You should come in and give it a look, Oswyn, some time. You haven't seen my new studio."

"I never go west of Regent Street," said Oswyn brusquely.

Lightmark laughed a little nervously.

"Oswyn doesn't believe in me, you know, Philip," he explained lightly. "It is a humiliating thing to have to say, but I may as well say it, to save him the trouble. He is so infernally frank about it, you know. He thinks that I am a humbug, that I don't take my art seriously, and because, when I have painted my picture, I begin to think about the pieces of silver, he is not quite sure that I may not be a descendant of Judas. And then, worst of all, I have committed the unpardonable sin: I have been hung at Burlington House. Isn't that about it, Oswyn?"

The elder man laughed his low, mirthless laugh.

"We understand each other, Dick; but you don't quite do yourself justice—or me. I have an immense respect for your talent. I feel sure you will achieve greatness—in Burlington House."

"Well, it's a respectable institution," said the young man soberly.

Oswyn finished his drink at a long, thirsty gulp, watching the young man askance with his impressive eyes. Rainham noticed for the first time that he had a curious trick of smiling with his lips only—or was it of sneering?—while the upper part of his face and his heavy brows frowned.

"By the way, Lightmark," he observed presently, "I have to congratulate you on your renown. There is quite a long panegyric on your picture in the *Outcry* this week. Do you know who wrote it?"

"Damn it, man!" broke out Lightmark, with a vehemence which, to Rainham, seemed uncalled for, "how should I know? I haven't seen the rag for an age."

There was an angry light in his eyes, but it faded immediately.

Oswyn continued apologetically:

"I beg your pardon. It must be very annoying to you to be puffed indiscreetly. But I fancied, you know ——"

Lightmark, flushing a little, interrupted him, laying his hand with a quick gesture, that might have contained an appeal in it, on the painter's frayed coat-sleeve.

"Your glass is empty, and we are about ready for our coffee. What will you take?"

Oswyn repeated his order, smiling still a little remotely, as he let the water trickle down from a scientific height to his glass, whipping the crystal green of its contents into a nebulous yellow. Rainham, who had listened to the little passage of arms in silence, felt troubled, uneasy. The air seemed thunderous, and was heavy with unspoken words. There appeared to be an under-current of understanding between the two painters which was the reverse of sympathetic, and made conversation difficult and volcanic. It caused him to remind himself, a trifle sadly, how little, after all, one knew of even one's nearest friend—and Lightmark, perhaps, occupied to him that relation—how much of the country of his mind remains perpetually undiscovered; and it made him wonder, as he had sometimes wondered before, whether the very open and sunny nature of the young painter, which was so large a part of his charm, had not its concealed shadows—how far, briefly, Lightmark's very frankness might not be a refinement of secretiveness?

If, however, a word here and there, a trait surprised, indefinable, led him on occasion to doubt of his dominant impression of Lightmark's character, these doubts were never of long duration; and he would dismiss them, barely entertained, even as a sort of disloyalty, to the limbo of stillborn fancies. And so now, with his accustomed generosity, he speedily flung himself into the breach, and did his best to drive the conversation into impersonal and presumably safer channels. He touched on the prospects of the Academy, of academic art, and art in general, and by-and-by, as Oswyn rose to the discussion, he became himself interested, and was actuated less by a wish to make conversation than to draw his new friend out. And as the artist leant forward, grew excited, with his white, lean face working into strange contortions—as he shot out his savage paradoxes, expounding the gospel of the new art a trifle thickly now, and rolling and as rapidly smoking perpetual cigarettes, he found him again strangely attractive.

He had flashes of insight, it seemed to Rainham; there was something in his caustic criticism which led him to believe that he could at another time have justified himself, defended reasonably and sanely a position that was at least tenable.

But the tide of his spleen invariably overtook him, and he abandoned exegesis for tirade. The *bourgeois*, limited scope of the art in vogue—this was the burden of his reiterated rabid attacks; art watered down to suit the public's insipid palate, and he quoted Chamfort furiously: "Combien de sots faut-il pour faire un public?"—the art of simpering prettiness, without root or fruit in life, the art of absolute convention. He ran over a list of successful names with an ever-growing rancour—artistic hacks, the crew of them, the journalists of painting—with a side glance at Lightmark, who sat pulling his flaxen moustache, looking stiff and nervous—he would hang the lot of them to-morrow if he had his way, for corrupters of taste, or, better still, condemn them to perpetual incarceration in the company of their own daubs. These people, in fine, the mutual admiration society of incompetents—where was their justification, where would they be in a decade or so? The hangers-on of the fashionable world, caring for their art as a means of success, of acquiring guineas or a baronetcy or a couple of initials, who dropped the little technique they possessed as soon as they had a competency, and foisted their

pictures most on people when they had forgotten how to paint. *Pompiers*, *fumistes*, makers of respectable *pommade*—as the painter's potations increased, his English became less fluent, and he was driven back constantly to the dialect of the Paris *ateliers*, which was more familiar to him than his mother tongue. Ah! how he hated these people and their thread-paper morality, and their sordid conception of art—a prettiness that would sell!

Rainham had heard it all before; it was full of spleen and rancour, unnecessarily violent, and, conceivably, unjust. But what he could not help recognising, in spite of his repulsion, was a certain nobility and singleness in the man, ruin as he was. Virtue came out of him; he had the saving quality of genius, and it was a veritable burning passion of perfection, which masqueraded in his spleen. His conception of art for the sake of art only might be erroneous, but it was at least exalted; and the instinct which drove him always for his material directly to life, rejecting nothing as common or unclean—in the violence of his revolt, perhaps dwelling too uniformly on what was fundamentally ugly —might be disputable, but was obviously sincere. The last notion which Rainham took away with him, when they parted late in the evening (Oswyn having suddenly lapsed from the eloquence to the incoherency of drunkenness), was a wish to see more of him. He had given him his card, and he waited until he had seen him place it—after observing it for some moments attentively with lack-lustre eyes— in the security of his waistcoat. And as the two friends walked towards Charing Cross, Rainham observed that he hoped he would call.

"He is a disreputable fellow," said Lightmark a little sullenly, "and an unprofitable acquaintance. You will find it less difficult to persuade him to make you a visit than to finish it." At which Rainham had merely shrugged his shoulders, finding his friend, perhaps for the first time, a little *banal*.

CHAPTER V

A day or two later, as Rainham sat in his river-bound office struggling, by way of luncheon, with the most primitive of chops, his eyes, wandering away from a somewhat mechanic scrutiny of the *Shipping Gazette*, fell upon the shifting calendar on the mantelpiece.

The dial noted Thursday; and he reminded himself that on that day his friend, Lady Garnett, had a perennial habit of being at home to her intimates, on the list of whom Rainham could acknowledge, without undue vanity, his name occurred high. There was a touch of self-reproach in his added reminder that a week had elapsed since his return, and he had not already hastened to clasp the excellent old lady's hand. It was an unprecedented postponement and an infringement of a time-honoured habit; and Rainham had for his habit all the respect of a man who is always indolent and often ill; though it must be admitted that to his clerks, who viewed the trait complacently, and to the importunate Bullen, who resented it, he seemed to be only regular in his irregularity. He decided that at least this occasion should not be allowed to slip; a free afternoon would benefit him. He was always rather lavish of those licenses; and it seemed to him that the tintinnabulation of teacups in Lady Garnett's primrose and gray drawing-room would be a bearable change from the din of a hundred hammers, which had pelted him through the open windows all the morning. They were patching a little wooden barque with copper, and he paused a moment in the yard, leaning on his slim umbrella to admire the brilliant yellow of the renewed sheets, standing out in vivid blots against the tarnished verdigris of the old. To pass from Blackpool to the West, however, is a tardy process; and when Rainham reached the spruce, little house in one of the most select of the discreet and uniform streets which adjoin Portman Square, he found the clatter of teacups for the most part over. There were, in fact, only two persons in the long room, which, with its open Erard, and its innumerable *bibelots*, and its plenitude of quaint, impossible chairs, seemed quite cosily exiguous. An old lady with a beautiful, refined face and a wealth of white hair, which was still charming to look at, sat in an attitude full of comfortable indolence, with a small pug in her lap, who bounced at Rainham with a bark of friendly recognition. A young lady, at the other side of the room (she was at least young by courtesy), who was pouring out tea, stopped short in this operation to greet the new visitor with a little soft exclamation, in which pleasure and surprise mingled equally. The old lady also looked up smiling. She seemed both good-natured and distinguished, and she had the air—a sort of tired complacency—of a person who has been saying witty things for a whole afternoon, and is at last in the enjoyment of a well-deserved rest. She extended both hands to Rainham, who held them for a minute in his own, silently smiling down at her, before he released them to greet her companion.

She was a tall, pale girl in a black dress, whom at first sight the impartial observer might easily declare to be neither pretty nor young. As a matter of fact, she was younger than she seemed, for she was barely five-and-twenty, although her face and manner belonged to a type which, even in girlhood, already forestalls some of the gravity and reserve that arrive with years. As for her beauty, there were

those who disputed it altogether; and yet even when one had gone so far as to declare that Mary Masters was plain, one had, in justice, to add that she possessed none the less a distinct and delicate charm of her own. It was a daisy-like charm differing in kind from the charm of Eve Sylvester, which was that of a violet or a child, perpetually perfuming the air. It could be traced at last—for she had not a good feature—to the possession of a pair of very soft, and shy, brown eyes, and of a voice, simply agreeable in conversation, which burgeoned out in song into the richest contralto imaginable, causing her to be known widely in society as "the Miss Masters who sings." Indeed, she had a wonderful musical talent, which she had cultivated largely. Her playing had even approved itself to the difficult Rubinstein; and, although she had a certain reputation for cleverness, the loss to society when she left the music-stool to mingle in it was generally felt not to be met by a corresponding gain; and, indeed, as a rule, people did not consider her separately. The generality were inclined simply to accept her, in relation to her aunt, Lady Garnett, with whom she had lived since she was a girl of sixteen, as any other of that witty old woman's impedimenta—her pug Mefistofèle, or her matchless enamels, or her Watteau fans. As she came towards him now with a cup in her hand, her pale face a little flushed, her dark hair braided very plainly and neatly above her high forehead, Rainham could not help thinking that she would make an adorable old maid.

"You look well, Mary," he remarked, holding her at arms' length critically, with the freedom of an old friend. "You look insultingly well—I hope you don't mean it."

"I am afraid I do," laughed the girl. "I wish I could say as much for you."

Rainham shook his head with burlesque solemnity, and sank down with his fragile cup into the most comfortable of the Louis Quinze chairs which he could select.

"It's delightful to be back again," he remarked, letting his eyes wander round the familiar walls. "I know your things by heart, Lady Garnett; there's not one of them I could spare. Thanks, Mary, no sugar; cream, if you please. After all, I don't know anyone who has such charming rooms. Let me see if there is anything new. Yes, those enamels; introduce me, Mary, please. Yes, they are very nice. By the way, I picked up some old point for you at Genoa, only I have not unpacked it yet. But the Gustave Moreau, where is that? Ah, I see you have shifted it over the piano. Yes, it is exactly the same; you are all precisely the same; it's delightful, such constancy—delightful! I take it as a personal compliment. But where are all the delightful people?"

Lady Garnett smiled placidly.

"The delightful people have gone. To tell you the truth, I am just a little glad, especially as you have dropped in from the clouds, or the Riviera di Ponente—which is it, Philip?"

"To be frank with you, from neither. I have it on my conscience to tell you that I have been back some days. I wanted to come here before."

"Ah well, so long as you have come now!" said the old lady.

"Your knock was mystifying, Philip," put in the girl presently; "we expected nobody else but the Sylvesters, and when we heard your solitary step our hearts sank. We thought that Charles Sylvester had taken it into his head to come by himself."

"He is a terrible young man," said Lady Garnett; "he is almost as limited as his mamma, and he takes himself more seriously. When he is with his sister one can tolerate him, but alone——"

She held up her thin wrinkled hands with a little gesture of elision, at which her expressive shoulders assisted. She was of French extraction, the last survivor of an illustrious family; and reconciled as she had become to England—for years she had hardly left London—a slight and very pretty accent, and this trick of her shoulders, remained to remind people that her point of view was still essentially foreign. Rainham, who had from his boyhood found England somewhat a prison-house, adored her for this trait. The quaint old woman, indeed, with her smooth, well-bred voice, her elaborate complexion, her little, dignified incongruities, had always been the greatest solace to him. She had the charm of all rococo things; she represented so much that had passed away, exhaling a sort of elegant wickedness to find a parallel to which one had to seek back to the days of the Regency. Of course, in society, she passed for being very devout; and, indeed, her little pieties, her unfailing attendance at Mass on days of Obligation, at the chapel of the French Embassy hard by, struck Rainham as most edifying. Really he perceived that her devout attitude was purely traditional, a form of good manners. She remained the same wicked, charming old Sadducee as before: her morocco-bound *paroissien* might appear on festivals and occasions; she still slept as often as not of nights with "Candide" under her pillow.

The knowledge of a certain sentiment which they shared towards the limitations of London (they were both persons strikingly without prejudice) lent a certain piquancy to their old-established

relations, an allusive flavour to their conversation—it was always highly seasoned with badinage—that puzzled many of their common acquaintance enormously.

Mary Masters, as a shy and serious maiden, fresh from a country parsonage, remembered well the astonishment, mingled with something not unlike awe, with which she had first heard them talk. Philip Rainham had been calling, as it might be now, when she arrived, and Lady Garnett had promptly introduced him to her as her godson, because, as she remarked lightly, if he is not, he ought to have been. To which Philip had replied, in a like humour, that it was all the same: if they hadn't that relation, at any rate their behaviour implied it.

It was a novelty in her small and serious experience to find herself in conjunction with such frivolity; she was almost inclined to be shocked. Nevertheless, in the ten years during which she had made her home in Parton Street, Mary Masters had surmounted her awe, if her astonishment still occasionally obtained. Neither her aunt nor Rainham had altered, nor had they grown perceptibly older.

Watching the latter to-day as he sat lolling back lazily, balancing his teacup, she was curiously reminded of her first impression of him; taking stock of her humorously, silently, in almost the same attitude, with the same sad eyes. And since Mary, too, had remained virtually unchanged, it is to the credit of the head of a particularly serious little daughter of the Puritans that she had ended by appreciating them both. In fact, she had discovered that neither of them was so frivolous as it appeared, or, at least, that there were visitors in Parton Street who seemed less frivolous, and whose frivolity shocked her more. Her shy brown eyes were penetrative, and often saw more than one would have imagined, and at last they believed that they had seen through the philosophic indifference of Lady Garnett's shrug, the gentle irony of Rainham's perpetual smile, the various masks of tragic comedians on a stage where there is no prompter, where the footlights are most pitiless, and where the gallery is only too lavish of its cat-calls at the smallest slip. Beneath it all she saw two people who understood each other as well as any two persons in the world. Did they understand each other so well that they could afford to trifle? She had an idea that their silences were eloquent, and that they might well be lavish of the crudity of speech. Oh, they pretended very well! The young girl found something admirable in the hard, polished surface which her aunt presented to the world: her rouge and her diamonds, her little bird-like air of living only in the present, of being intensely interested, of having no regrets—a manner to which Rainham responded so fluently with an assumption that she was right, that things were an excellent joke. After all, perhaps they pretended too much; at least, she found herself often, when they were present, falling away into reveries full of conjecture, from which, as happened now, she only awoke with a slight blush to find herself directly addressed.

"Wake up, Mary! we are talking of the Sylvesters. I was telling
Philip that his little friend Eve has become entirely charming."

"Yes," said Mary slowly; "she is charming, certainly. Haven't you seen her, Philip? You used to be constantly there."

Rainham assumed the air of reflection.

"Really, I believe I used, when Eve was in short frocks, and Charles conspicuously absent. Like Lady Garnett, I find the barrister exhausting. He is very unlike his father."

"We are going to Switzerland with them this summer, you know,
Philip? Will you join us?"

"Ah!" he put his cup down, not responding for a moment. "It would be delightful, but I am afraid impossible. You see, there's the dock; I have been away from it six months, and I shall have to repeat the process when the fogs begin. No, Lady Garnett, I won't be tempted."

She began to press him, and they fenced rapidly for some minutes, laughing. Rainham had just been induced to promise that he would at least consider the proposition, when the footman announced Mr. and Miss Sylvester. They came in a moment later; and while the barrister, a tall well-dressed man, with the shaven upper lip and neat whisker of his class, and a back which seemed to bend with difficulty, explained to Lady Garnett that his mother was suffering too much from neuralgia to come with them, Rainham resumed his acquaintance with the young girl. He had seen little of her during the past two years, and in the last of them, in which she had changed most, he had not seen her at all. It was with a slight shock, then, that he realized how completely she had grown up. He remembered her in so many phases of childhood and little girlhood, ranging up from a time when her speech was incoherent, and she had sat on his knee and played with his watch, to the more recent occasions when he had met her riding in the Park with her brother; and she had waved her little whip to him, looking particularly slim and pretty in the very trying costume which fashion prescribes for little girls who ride.

They had always been very good friends; she had been a most engaging little companion, and really, he reflected, he had been extremely fond of her. It gave him a distinct pain to reflect that their relation had, in the nature of things, come to an end. Gradually, as they talked, the young girl growing out of the first restraint of her shyness, and falling back into something of her old manner, the first painful impression of her entire strangeness left Rainham. In spite of her mature, little society air, her engaging attempts at worldliness, she was, after all, not so grown-up as she seemed. The child gleamed out here and there quite daintily, and as he indulged in reminiscence, and reminded her of some of their more remote adventures, her merriment found utterance very childishly.

"Our most tragical encounter, though, was with the monkey. Have you forgotten that? It was on one of your birthdays—you had a good many of them in Florence—I forget which it was. You must have been about ten. I had taken you to the Zoological Gardens, such as they were."

Her laughter rippled out softly again.

"I remember," she nodded, "it was dreadful."

"Yes," he said; "we were at the monkey-cage; you had grown tired of feeding the ostrich with *centesimi*."

"Oh, Philip!" she interrupted him; "I never, *never* would have done such a thing. It was you who used to give the poor bird *centesimi*. I only used to watch."

"Ah, you connived at it, anyhow," he went on. "Well, we were feeding the monkeys, this time with melon-seeds, when we somehow aroused the ire of a particularly ugly brute, who must have been distantly connected with a bull. Anyhow, he made a grab at the scarlet *berret* you were wearing, just missed your hair, and demolished the cap."

"I remember," she laughed. "You tied your handkerchief round my head, like an old peasant woman, and took me back in a carriage. And mamma was dreadfully angry about the cap, because she had bought it at Biarritz, and couldn't replace it in Italy. She thought you ought to have taken steps to get it back."

"Dear me!" said Rainham solemnly, "why didn't I think of it before?
I wonder if it's too late to do anything now."

The girl's laughter broke out again, this time attracting the attention of her brother, who was discussing the projected travels, with the aid of Bradshaw, at Mary Masters' side. He glanced at them askance, pulling at his collar in his stiff, nervous fashion a little uneasily.

"What a long time ago all that seems, Philip!" she remarked after a while.

He was silent for a moment examining his finger-nails intently.

"Yes," he said rather sadly; "I suppose it does. I dare say you wouldn't care much for the Zoo now?"

"Oh, I shouldn't mind," she said gaily, "if you will take me."

But a move had been made opposite, and Charles Sylvester, coming up to them, overheard this last remark.

"I think we must be off," he said, consulting his watch. "Where is
Rainham going to take you?"

"To Florence," she said, smiling, "to the Zoo."

"Ah, a good idea," he murmured. "Well, good-bye, Lady Garnett; good-day, Rainham. I am sorry to see you don't seem to have benefited much by your winter abroad. I almost wonder you came back so soon. Was not it rather unwise? This treacherous climate, you know."

"Yes," said Rainham; "I, too, think you are right. I think I had much better have stayed—very much better."

"Ah, well," he said, "you must take care of yourself, and give us a look in if you have time."

Eve looked up at him, flushing a little, as though she found her brother's formal politeness lacking in hospitality. She was struck then, as she had not been yet during her visit, by a curious lassitude in her old friend's face. It affected her with an unconscious pity, causing her to second her brother's somewhat chilly invitation more cordially.

The humour which had shone in Rainham's eyes while they had been talking seemed to have gone out suddenly, like a lamp, leaving them blank and tired. It shocked her to realize how old and ill he had become.

CHAPTER VI

Indolence and ill-health, in the opinion of many the salient points in Philip Rainham's character, had left him at forty with little of the social habit. The circle of his intimates had sensibly narrowed, and for the rest he was becoming more and more conscious that people whom one does not know exceedingly well are not worth knowing at all. The process of dining out two or three times a week in the company of two or three persons whose claims on his attention were of the slenderest he found a process attended with less and less pleasure the older he grew. There were few houses now which he frequented, and this year, when he had made an effort to devote a couple of evenings to the renewal of some acquaintance of the winter, and had discovered, as he had discovered anew each season, that the effort gave him no appreciable compensations for the disagreeables it involved, he made fresh resolutions of abstinence, and on the whole he kept them amazingly well.

For the most part, when he was not routed out by Lightmark (and since the young artist was in train to become a social acquisition this happened less frequently than of old), it was at Blackpool that he spent his evenings. He had, it is true, a standing invitation to dinner at Lady Garnett's when that old lady found herself at home; but Portman Square was remote, and evening dress, to a man with one lung in a climate which had so fickle a trick of registering itself either at the extreme top or bottom of the thermometer, presented various discomforts. His den behind the office—a little sitting-room with a bay-window facing Blackpool Reach, a room filled with books that had no relation to shipping, and hung round with etchings and pictures in those curiously-low tones for which he had so unreasonable an affection—was what he cherished most in London. He read little now, but the mere presence of the books he loved best in rough, uneven cases, painted black, lining the walls, caressed him. As with persons one has loved and grown used to loving, it was not always needful that they should speak to him; it was sufficient, simply, that they should be there. Neither did he write on these long, interminable evenings, which were prolonged sometimes far into the night. He had ended by being able to smile at his literary ambitions of twenty, cultivating his indolence as something choice and original, finding his destiny appropriate.

He spent the time in interminable reveries, sitting with a volume before him, as often as not unopened, smoking incessantly, and looking out of the window. The habit amused himself at times; it was so eminently symbolic of his destiny. Life, after all, had been to him nothing so much as that—a long looking out of window, the impartial spectatorship of a crowd of persons and passions from which he had come at last to seem strangely detached, almost as much as from this chameleon river, which he had observed with such satisfaction in all its manifold gradations of character and colour; its curious cold grayness in the beginning of an autumnal dawn; the illusion of warmth and depth which it sustained at noon, bringing up its burden of leviathans on the top of the flood; its sheen on moonless nights, when only little punctures, green and red and orange, and its audible stillness, reminded him that down in the obscurity the great polluted stream stole on wearily, monotonously, everlastingly to the sea. It was changeful and changeless. He thought he knew its effects by heart, but it had always new ones in reserve to surprise and delight him. He declared it at last to be inexhaustible. It was like a diamond on sunny days, flashing out light in every little ripple; in the late, sunless afternoon the light lay deeply within it, and it seemed jealous of giving back the least particle. He compared it then to an opal or a sapphire, which shine with the same parsimonious radiance.

One night, while he sat smoking in his wonted meditative fashion, he had a visitor—the painter Oswyn. He had almost forgotten his invitation, but he reminded himself of his first impression, and greeted him with a cordiality which the other seemed to find surprising. He took him into his sanctuary and found him whisky and a pipe; then he set himself to make the painter talk, a task which he found by no means arduous.

Oswyn was sober, and Rainham was surprised after a while at his sanity. He decided that, though one might differ from him, dissent from his premises or his conclusions, he was still a man to be taken seriously. His fluency was as remarkable as ever, and at first as spleenful; by-and-by his outrageous mood gave way, and, in response to some of Rainham's adroit thrusts, he condescended to stand on his defence. He could give a reasonable account of himself; was prepared clearly, and succinctly, and seriously with his justification. Rainham was impressed anew by his singleness, the purity of his artistic passion. His life might be disgraceful, indescribable: his art lay apart from it; and when he took up a brush an enthusiasm, a devotion to art, almost religious, steadied his hand.

"You may think me a charlatan," he said, with the same savage earnestness, "but I can tell you I am not. I may fail or I may succeed, as the world counts those things. It is all the same: I believe in myself. It is sufficient to me if I approve myself, and the world may go to damnation! What I care for is my idea!… yes, my idea, that's it! They can howl at me," he went on; "but they can never say of any stroke of my brush that I put it there for them. I could have painted pictures like Lightmark if I had cared, you know, but I did not care!"

"And yet he has great facility," said Rainham tentatively.

"He has more," said Oswyn bitterly, "or, at least, he had—genius. And he has deliberately chosen to go the wrong way, to be conventional. He can't plead 'invincible ignorance' like the others; he ought to know better. Well, he has his reward; but I can't forgive him."

Rainham shrugged his shoulders with something between a sigh and a laugh.

"Poor boy! he is young, you know. Perhaps he will live to see the errors of his ways."

"When he's an Academician, I suppose?" suggested the other ironically. "Do they ever see the errors of their ways? If they do they don't show it. No; he will marry a rich wife, and make speeches at banquets, and paint portraits of celebrities, for the rest of his days. And in fifty years' time people will say, 'Lightmark, R.A.? Who the devil was he?'"

By this time the young moon had risen, and its cold light shimmered on the misty river. Rainham refilled his pipe, and opened the window still more widely.

"By Jove, what a night!" he said. "What a night for a painter! I am sure you are longing to be out in it. I'm afraid there's nothing to show you in the dock at present; you must come down again when there's a ship coming in at night. I feel quite reconciled to the dock on those occasions. Shall we go for a stroll in the moonlight—and seek impressions?"

Oswyn's restless humour welcomed the suggestion, and he was already waiting, his soft felt hat in one ungloved hand, and a heavy, quaintly carved stick in the other.

They stood for some minutes on the little, square, pulpit-like landing, at the top of the creaking wooden staircase, which led down the side of the building from office to yard, listening to the faint drip of the water through the sluice-gates; the wail of a child outside the walls, and the pacing step of the woman who hushed it; the distant intermittent roar of the song which reached them through the often opened doors of a public-house. Presently the night-watchman lumbered out of his sentry-box by the gates, his dim lantern sounding pools of mysterious darkness, which were untouched by the solitary gas-lamp in the street outside, and which the faint moonlight only seemed to intensify.

Oswyn drew in a long breath of the cool, caressing air, momentarily straightening his bent figure. Then he gave a short laugh, which startled Rainham from the familiar state of half-smiling reverie to which he was always so ready to recur.

"The last time I saw the river like this," he said—"the last time I was down here at night, that is—was when I went with a Malay model of mine to his favourite opium den."

"You have not repeated the experiment?" asked Rainham absently.

"No; not yet, at any rate. It made my hand shake so damnably for a week afterwards that I couldn't paint. Besides, I doubt if I could find the place again. I couldn't get the Malay to come away at all; he is probably there still."

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the night-watchman hoarsely, when they reached the bottom of the difficult staircase, "there's been a young woman here asking for a gentleman of the name of Crichton. I told her there weren't no one of that name here, and Mr. Bullen, sir, he saw her, and sent her away. I thought I had better mention it to you, sir."

"Crichton? Crichton?" repeated Rainham indifferently. "I don't know anyone of that name. Some mistake, I suppose, or—— Well, sailors will be sailors! Thank you, Andrewes, that will do. Good-night—or, rather, we shall be back in half an hour or so." He turned to Oswyn, who had been hanging back to avoid any appearance of interest in the conversation, for corroboration. "You will come back, of course?"

"Rather late, isn't it? I think I had better catch some train before midnight, if there is one."

"Oh, there are plenty of trains," said Rainham vaguely. "We can settle that matter later. I can give you a bed here, you know, or a berth, at any rate."

As they stepped through the narrow opening in the gate, a dark form sprang forward out of the shadow, and then stopped timidly.

"Oh, Cyril!" cried a woman's plaintive voice. "Cyril! I knew you were here, and they wouldn't let me —— Ah, my God! it isn't Cyril after all…!"

The voice—and it struck Rainham that it was not the voice of a woman of the sort one would expect to encounter in the streets at that hour—died away in a broken sob, and the girl fell back a step, almost dropping the child she carried in her arms.

Her evident despair appealed to Rainham's somewhat inconveniently assertive sensibility.

He hesitated for a moment, glancing from the girl to Oswyn, and noting that the face, too, had a certain beauty which was not of the order affected by the women of Blackpool.

"Don't go," he said to Oswyn, who had withdrawn a few paces. "I won't keep you a moment!"

The baby in the woman's arms set up a feeble wail, and it was borne in upon Rainham's mind that the unhappy creature with the white face and pleading dark eyes had been waiting long.

"Didn't my foreman tell you that the—that the gentleman you asked for is not here?" he inquired gently. "No one here has ever heard of Mr. Crichton. I'm afraid you have made a mistake.… Hadn't you better go home? I'm sure it would be best for your child."

"Home?" echoed the girl bitterly. Then, changing her tone, "But I saw him here with my own eyes!" she pleaded. "I saw him at the window there not a week ago quite plain, and then they told me he wasn't here! I'm sure he would see me if he only knew—if he only knew!"

"He may have been here," suggested Rainham doubtfully. "There are a great many people here from day to day, and we don't always know their names. But I assure you he isn't here now."

The girl—for in spite of her pale misery she did not look more—drew her dark shawl more closely round herself and the child with a little, despairing shudder, glancing over her shoulder. Rainham let his eyes rest on the frail figure pityingly, and a thought of the river behind her struck him with a sudden chill.

He put his hand, almost surreptitiously, into his pocket.

"Where do you live?" he asked. "Near here?" The girl mentioned a street which he sometimes passed through when economy of time induced him to make an otherwise undesirable short-cut to the railway station. "Well," he said presently, "I can't keep my friend here waiting, you know. Come and see me to-morrow morning about midday, and I will see if I can help you. Only you must promise me to go straight home now! And"—here he dropped a coin quickly into her hand—"buy something for your child; you both look as if you wanted it."

The girl looked at him dumbly for a moment.

"I will come, sir, and—and thank you!" she said, with a quaver in her voice. And then, in obedience to Rainham's playfully threatening gesture, she turned away.

Rainham gazed after her until she had turned the corner.

"I'm sorry to have treated you to this—scene," he said apologetically, as he joined Oswyn, who was gazing over the narrow bridge. "I felt bound to do something for the girl, after she had been wasting all that time outside my gates. Did you notice what a pretty, refined face she had? I wonder who the man can be—Crichton, Cecil Crichton, wasn't it?… I never heard the name before. It doesn't sound like a sailor's name."

"Cecil Crichton?" echoed the other. "No … and yet it sounds familiar. Perhaps I am thinking of the Admirable, though he wasn't Cecil, as far as I remember. The old story, I suppose. Cecil Crichton—ah, Cyril Crichton?" he repeated. Then, dismissing the subject somewhat brutally, "Ah, well, it's no business of mine! Will you give me a light? Thanks!"

CHAPTER VII

At three o'clock Lightmark dismissed his model—an Italian, with a wonderfully fine torso and admirable capabilities for picturesque pose, whom he had easily persuaded to abandon his ice-cream barrow to sit

for him two or three times a week, acting the part of studio servant in the intervals.

"That will do, Cesare," he said, "*aspetto persone*; besides, you're shivering: I shall have you catching cold next, and I can't paint while you're sneezing. Yes, you're quite right, *è un freddo terribile*, considering that it's July. Off with you now, and come again at the same time on Friday. *Si conservi*—that's to say, don't get drunk in the interval; it makes you look such a brute that I can't paint you."

While the model transformed himself from a scantily-attired Roman gladiator into an Italian of the ordinary Saffron Hill description, Lightmark hastily washed his brushes, turned down his shirt sleeves, and donned the becoming velvet painting-jacket, which Mrs. Dollond had so much admired.

"I hope they won't notice Cesare's pipe," he said anxiously. "Even though he doesn't smoke here, it always seems to hang about. Perhaps I had better open the window and burn a pastille. And now, are we prepared to receive Philistia? Yes, I don't think the place looks bad, and—but perhaps Mrs. Sylvester mightn't like the gladiator. He certainly is deucedly anatomical at present. I'll go and leave him in Copal's studio, and then I can borrow his tea-things at the same time."

The studio was a lofty room on the ground-floor with an elaborately-devised skylight, and a large window facing north, through which a distant glimpse of Holland Park could be obtained. Lightmark had covered the floor with pale Indian matting, with a bit of strong colour, here and there, in the shape of a modern Turkish rug. For furniture, he had picked up some old chairs and a large straight-backed settee with grotesquely-carved legs, which, with the aid of a judicious arrangement of drapery, looked eminently attractive, and conveyed an impression of comfort which closer acquaintance did not altogether belie. Then there was the platform, covered with dark cloth, on which his models posed; the rickety table with many drawers, in which he kept brushes and colours; a lay figure, disguised as a Venetian flower-girl, which had collapsed tipsily into a corner; two or three easels; and a tall, stamped leather screen, which was useful for backgrounds. A few sketches, mostly unframed, stood in a row on the narrow shelf which ran along the pale-green distempered walls; and more were stacked in the corners—some in portfolios, and some with their dusty backs exposed to view. The palette which he had been using lay, like a great fantastic leaf, upon the table, amid a chaos of broken crayons, dingy stumps, photographs of sitters, pellets of bread, disreputable colour-tubes, and small bottles of linseed-oil, varnish, and turpentine. A sketch for Mrs. Sylvester's portrait, in crayons, was propped against the foot of an easel (Lightmark hoped that her son might buy it for his chambers); the canvas which he had prepared against the much-delayed sitting due from Miss Sylvester exposed its blank surface on another. A tall Japanese jar full of purple and yellow irises, a tribute to his expected guests, stood on the dusty black stove.

He had barely had time to arrange the borrowed tea-things, and to set a kettle on a little spirit-lamp behind the screen, when Mrs. Dollond and her husband were announced. He threw his black sombrero somewhat theatrically into a corner, and advanced with effusion to meet them. Mrs. Dollond had taken a decided interest in the young painter ever since the delightfully uncandid reflection of her by no means youthful beauty, which he had exhibited at the Grosvenor, had provoked so much comment among her friends.

She was a plump, little, fair-haired woman, with blue eyes, a very pink and white complexion, small hands, and a passion for dress with which people who had known her before her marriage, as a slim maiden devoted to sage-green draperies and square-toed shoes, declined to credit her, until they were told that she had, to put it plainly, grown fat—a development which compelled her to give up æstheticism and employ a *modiste*.

Her husband, who followed her into the room, carrying her impedimenta, wore the bored expression of the R.A. who is expected to admire the work of an outsider. He was the abject slave of his good-natured wife—she *was* good-natured, in spite of her love of scandal—and his only fault from her point of view, and his greatest one in the eyes of people in general, lay in an unfortunate habit of thinking aloud, a dangerous characteristic, which persons who are apt to find themselves in the position of critic should at any cost eradicate. Luckily, his benevolence was such that these outspoken comments were never really virulent, and not often offensive.

Mrs. Dollond seated herself smilingly on the least rickety chair, disposed of her veil with one neatly-gloved hand, and prepared a tortoiseshell eyeglass for action with the other.

"What a charming portrait!" she said, pointing with her plump index-finger to the sketch of Mrs. Sylvester. "Do I know the lady, I wonder? Oh! I do believe it's that Mrs. Sylvester."

"Yes," said Lightmark. "If you remember, you introduced me to her at the Academy soirée last year. I expect her here this afternoon, with her daughter. I am going to paint Miss Sylvester's portrait."

"Ah," said Mrs. Dollond mischievously, "and that accounts for the pastille. You never made such preparations when *I* sat to you. I suppose you thought that a painter's wife could not possibly object to tobacco."

"And she certainly doesn't, judging by her consumption of cigarettes!" interposed her husband.

"Hugh, I'm ashamed of you. You know I'm a martyr to asthma—and cigarettes aren't tobacco. But how old is Miss Sylvester? Is she pretty?"

"Don't ask me to describe her, Mrs. Dollond. Wait till you see her—she's coming, you know. What do you think of that river-scape, most reverend signor? It's one of the little things I've been doing down at Rainham's Dock—down at Blackpool."

The Academician tried to appear interested as he assumed the conventional bird-like pose of the picture-gazer, and surveyed the sketch.

"Very pretty—very pretty! I should hardly have thought it was the Thames, though. It isn't muddy enough. In fact, the whole scheme of colour is much too clean for London. Quite absurd! Not a bit like it! Eh, my dear, what was I saying? Oh yes, I like the effect of the sunlight on that brown sail immensely. It's really very clever, very clever."

Mrs. Dollond, who never knew what her husband would say next, welcomed the influx of a small throng of visitors with a sigh of relief.

The Sylvesters and Philip Rainham, arriving at the same time, found the little studio almost crowded. Besides the Dollonds there were two or three of the Turk Street fraternity; a young sculptor, newly arrived from Rome, with his wife; Dionysus F. Quain, an American interested in petroleum, who had patronized Lightmark also at Rome; and Copal, whose studio was in the same building, and who was manifestly anxious about his Chelsea teacups.

Mrs. Sylvester greeted her *protégé* with a flattering degree of warmth which was entirely absent from the stare and conventional smile with which she honoured Mrs. Dollond, and the somewhat impertinent air of patronage which she wore when one or two of the young artists were introduced to her. If they did not mind, Mrs. Dollond was inclined to be resentful, for the moment, at least; and, as a preliminary attack, she maliciously encouraged Eve, who, ensconced in a corner, blissfully unconscious of the maternal anxiety which the other matron had detected, was eagerly turning over the contents of a portfolio which she had unearthed from its lurking-place behind her chair.

Rainham was looking over her shoulder, admiring the charming poise of the girl's head, and the contours of her wrists and hands, as she submitted the drawings to his inspection. Charles Sylvester stationed himself close by, and devoted himself to buttonholing the American senator, to the obvious discomfort of his victim, whose knowledge of Pennsylvanian oil-wells was infinitely greater than his acquaintance with the rudiments of summary jurisdiction, as practised in his native State, and who, after hazarding a remark to the effect that Judge Lynch had long since retired from the Bench, had, as he would have put it, "pretty considerably petered out."

"I hope my daughter isn't indiscreet?" Mrs. Sylvester had hazarded, after catching Lightmark's eye on its return journey from a glance in the direction of the little group in the corner; and the young man had reassured her hastily, before misgivings had time to assail him, and when they did, he hoped for the best. For a painter's portfolio is, after all, hardly less confidential than a diary, and may be on occasion almost as compromising, in spite of the fact that the records it contains are written in cipher.

The sunlight, mellowed to a dull straw colour by its passage through London air, slanted in at the window, falling first on Charles Sylvester's handsome face, with its eminently professional, severely cut features, and the careful limitation of whisker, which seemed so completely in harmony with his shaven upper lip and the unsympathetic scrutiny of his double eyeglass; then, losing some of its brightness among the little ripples of brown hair which a gracious Providence had forbidden her hat to conceal, fell like a halo upon the pale green wall behind Eve's head.

The young artists—the "boys," as they would have called themselves—were circulating busily with teacups and *petits fours*, and the chatter of voices bore testimony to the preponderance of the Bohemian element. It is only the dwellers on the confines who lose their voices in the Temple of Art—a goddess who, to judge by her votaries, is not wont to take pleasure in silence.

"Oh," said Eve, in reply to one of Rainham's remarks, "is that Bordighera? What lovely blue water! and what perfectly delicious little fishing-boats! I should like to go there. Charles is going to take us to Lucerne in a week or two, you know, when the Long Vacation begins. But I suppose we shall hardly get to Italy."

"Yes, that's Bordighera"—with a sigh—"my happy hunting-ground. And the water is much bluer really—only don't tell Dick I said so. Yes, you ought to go there. If you stayed late enough you would have me dropping in on you one fine day, as soon as the fogs begin here. Happy thought! Why shouldn't we all winter out there?"

"That would be nice," said Eve, rather doubtfully; "but, you know, there's Charles—he would have to come back for the Law Courts in the autumn, and he would be so lonely all by himself. And—and there's my portrait. Mr. Lightmark wants to get that ready for next year's Academy; and I can't sit to him very often, as it is, because of *chaperons*, you know."

Meanwhile Lightmark was telling Mrs. Dollond, in a confidential undertone, some story of a fair American sitter, who, on his expressing himself dissatisfied with his efforts worthily to transfer her complexion to canvas, had at once offered to send her maid round to his studio with an assortment of her favourite *poudre de rose*. Dollond listened with an amused smile to a recital of the sculptor's impressions of the Salon, which he had taken on his way from Rome. Copal was making desperate efforts to count his precious teacups, a task which their scattered positions rendered distressingly difficult. Charles Sylvester was somewhat listlessly cross-examining a P.R.A. in embryo as to the exact meaning of "breadth" in a painting; and Mr. Quain had been making his way as unostentatiously as the creakiness of his boots would permit towards the door. Eve had despatched one of "the boys" in search of a portfolio to replace the one which she had exhausted, and another had been entrusted with the safe bestowal of her empty teacup. The new portfolio, when it arrived, proved to be filled, not as the others, with landscapes and waterscapes, but with studies from life—Capri fisher girls, groups of market people, Venetian boatmen, and hasty sketches for portraits.

Eve paused rather longer than usual over one of these, the picture of a pretty fair-haired girl, dressed as Pierrette, the general lack of detail and absence of background only making the vigorously outlined face more distinct.

"What a pretty girl, Philip!" said the young critic presently; "and how curiously she's dressed! What is she intended to represent? Is it a fancy dress?… Mr. Rainham, if you don't attend, I won't show you any more pictures."

"Tyrant," said Rainham absently, as he carried his eyes from the contemplative stare with which they had been regarding the vagaries of a butterfly on the skylight. "What have you found now?—Kitty, by Jove!"

He had no sooner uttered these last three words, in a very different tone to that of his previous idle remarks, than he cursed his indiscretion. It was a piece of *gaucherie* which he would find it hard to forgive in himself, and Lightmark might well resent it.

"Kitty?" asked Eve, with some surprise, "who is Kitty? Mr.
Lightmark, please tell us who this charming young lady, whom Mr.
Rainham calls Kitty, is, since he won't."

"Kitty?" repeated Lightmark, with only a momentary hesitation, which the suddenness of the query might well account for; "I'm afraid I don't quite remember. There are so many Kitties, you know. All models are either Kitty or Polly. But if Rainham says it's Kitty, depend upon it he's right. He's got a wonderful memory for faces, especially pretty ones.—Yes," he added mischievously, "you ask Rainham."

Mrs. Sylvester looked uneasy, and, to her subsequent disgust, began to press "dear Mrs. Dollond" to come and see her.

Charles, who had looked up sharply at the first mention of the name, which had so disturbed the usually imperturbable Rainham, fixed his interrogative glasses first on the latter and then on Lightmark, and finally let them rest, with an expression of inquiring censure, on Rainham, whose confusion savoured to his mind so unmistakably of guilt that "Gentlemen of the jury" rose almost automatically to his lips. Nor did Rainham's attempt to smooth matters assist him.

"I must have seen the girl at the studio," he said, "when Lightmark was painting her. It's certainly a striking likeness, and that's what astonished me, you know. Almost like seeing a ghost. Ah, that little fellow used to sit for Lightmark in Rome—little sunburnt ruffian. We picked him up on the Ghetto, almost starving, and he got quite an artistic connection before we left. He was positively growing too fat; prosperity spoiled him as a model."

"Really?" said Eve listlessly. "I don't think I want to look at any more drawings; one can have too much of a good thing, and it must be time for us to go. We're dining out, and Charles doesn't like dressing in a hurry. Yes, mamma is buttoning her gloves. Good-bye, Mr. Rainham. Shall we see you again before we go to Switzerland? Ah, well, let's hope so. Au revoir, Mr. Lightmark. If you really think

it's worth while for me to give you a solitary sitting next week——"

"If you would be so good. You see, I should have some ideas to go on with. Don't I deserve some reward, too, for allowing Rainham to monopolize you all the afternoon? And if you don't give me a sitting now, I'm afraid you will forget all about it when you come back to town; whereas, if we make a beginning, you will have to see it through—you will be compromised."

"What a stupid expression!" thought Mrs. Sylvester as the carriage rolled along the Kensington highroad.

Charles was unusually silent during the drive. The subject which occupied his thoughts was not one which he would have dreamed of ventilating even with his mother, and Eve's presence seemed to render the faintest allusion to it impracticable.

He had no great affection or even regard for Philip Rainham, whom he contemplated with that undefined disdain which a younger man so often feels for one who is too old to be on his own level, and too young to inspire reverence. The half-pitying regard which Mrs. Sylvester bestowed on the man who had been to her husband as a very dear younger brother had never furthered Rainham's advancement in her son's favour; and the manner in which Eve had centred her childish affections in Philip, who had made her his especial favourite, was even more prejudicial to his interests in that quarter. Hitherto, indeed, Sylvester's vague dislike had been so undemonstrative and immaterial that he would hardly have owned to it as such, and far less would he have acknowledged that he was, however unconsciously, feeling for a peg on which to hang it, for ground to support it; and yet from the first moment when the man's startled voice drew the questioning eyes upon his embarrassment, the judicial mind had been able to plume itself upon the penetration which had enabled it to detect something of doubtful odour about him from the first. "Kitty!" That word might explain so much—Rainham's long sojourns away from his business, for example.

Charles looked at Eve and frowned. Decidedly, thought the young moralist, the old intimacy must be discouraged. Nor did the fact that Rainham had been the source of his first brief, as well as of subsequent others, though it was not forgotten, suggest the advisability of a compromise; he even began to take a certain pride in the determination with which he was bringing himself to contemplate the sacrifice of so useful a friendship.

When they reached home there was barely time to dress for dinner, and Charles had no opportunity for a *tête-à-tête* discussion of the situation with his mother that evening. And as he breakfasted early next day and dined at the club, he had ample time in which to determine that, for the present, he would avoid anything in the shape of a family conference, and would content himself with keeping his eye on the *mauvais sujet*.

CHAPTER VIII

As soon as Lightmark and Rainham were left alone in the twilight of the studio, the former flung himself into a chair with a sigh of relief, and devoted himself to rolling and lighting a cigarette. Rainham picked up his hat, consulted his watch, with a preoccupation of mind which prevented him from noticing what the time was, and, refusing the proffered tobacco-pouch and the suggested whisky-and-soda, seemed about to go. Then he stopped, with his back turned towards his host and a pretence of examining a sketch.

"I'm sorry I made such an ass of myself about that study—that girl, you know," he said presently. "The fact is, I saw her the other day, and the coincidence was rather startling."

Lightmark blew a light cloud of smoke from his lips before he spoke.

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least, old man. You didn't implicate me, as it happened, though I'm afraid you got yourself into rather hot water. A poor devil of a painter must have models, and it's recognised, but men of business——! It's quite another thing. There's no possible connection between girls and dry docks." Then he added lightly, "Where are you going to dine to-night? Let's go to one of our Leicester Square haunts, or shall we get into a hansom and drive to Richmond? I've sold old Quain a picture, and I feel extravagantly inclined. What do you say? Under which *chef*? Speak, or let's toss up."

Rainham appeared to consider for a moment; then he sat down again.

"About that girl," he said; "I suppose you *do* remember something about her? She must have been very pretty when you painted her, though she's nothing wonderful now, poor thing! I don't want to

pump you, Dick, but she seems to have been pretty badly treated, and I want to see if I can't help her."

"Help her!" with a shrug. "For goodness' sake tell me: is it Don Quixote or Don Lothario that you are playing?"

"I should have thought you need hardly have asked," answered the other a little sadly. "I found the wretched creature waiting, with an equally wretched baby, both apparently not far from starvation, outside the dock the other night; and—well, I thought she might be waiting for you."

Lightmark threw the stump of his cigarette into a corner viciously, with a dangerous glance at the other.

"Why the devil should she have been waiting for me? Did she say she was waiting for me? How should a model know that I had been painting there? But I don't want to quarrel with you, and, after all you've done for me, I suppose you've a certain right to put yourself *in loco parentis*, and all that sort of thing. Tell me all you have found out about the girl—all she has told you, that is to say, and then I'll see what I can do."

This masterly suggestion seemed to Rainham both plausible and practical, and he proceeded to unfold the whole story of his first meeting with Kitty. When he reached the part of his narrative which brought out the girl's explanation that she was seeking to speak with a Mr. Crichton, Lightmark looked at him again covertly, with the same threatening light in his glance. Then, apparently reassured, he resigned himself again to listen, with a cigarette unlighted between his fingers.

"You say Oswyn heard the whole story?" he asked, when Rainham had finished. "Did the girl seem to know him? Or did *he* seem to have heard of this Crichton before?"

"No," said Rainham reflectively; "the girl didn't know Oswyn, though, on the other hand, he seemed certain that he had seen her face somewhere—probably in that study of yours, by the way; and he appeared to think that I ought to have heard of Crichton—Cyril Crichton. He told me that the man wrote clever, scurrilous articles on art and the drama for the *Outcry*. But I don't read English papers much. You see, our difficulty is that Cyril Crichton is obviously a nom de plume, and no one—not even the people at the *Outcry* office—know, or will say, who the man is; Kitty has tried. I suppose the editor knows all right, but he is discreet."

"Ah!" cried Lightmark. "Now I remember something about her. Have you got your hat? Let's get into a hansom and go and dine—I'm positively starving. I'll stand you a dinner at the Cavour—standing you a dinner will be such a new sensation; and new sensations are the only things worth living for. I will tell you about Kitty in the cab. What a beneficent old beggar you are!"

As they drove rapidly eastward along the High Street of Old Kensington, where the pale orange of the lamplight was just beginning to tell in the dusk, Lightmark explained how, some two years ago or more, he had been talking to a stranger in a railway carriage, and lamenting the difficulty of finding really pretty girls who would act as models; how the stranger had told him that he knew of such a one—a dressmaker's apprentice, or something of that sort, who found the work and hours too hard; and how, finally, Kitty had called at his studio—the old one in Bloomsbury—and had sat to him, perhaps half a dozen times, before vanishing from his knowledge. This account had been freely interspersed with exclamations on the beauty of the evening light in the Park, and the subtle charm of the hour after sunset, more exquisite in the clear atmosphere of Paris, but still sufficiently lovely even in London, and acknowledged by both of them to be one of the few compensations accorded to the dwellers in the much-abused Metropolis.

"I'm sorry," said Rainham penitently; "I had a stupid sort of idea that you were mixed up in the business somehow. I thought so even before I saw the sketch, because I couldn't understand whom else she could have been looking for at the dock. It's very mysterious."

"I shouldn't bother about the girl if I were you," replied the other light-heartedly. "Even if I had been mixed up with her, as you gracefully express it, *you* wouldn't have anything to do with it. I believe you think I've been playing the devil with her now, you old moralist! Hear me swear, by yon pale—— Dash it! there isn't a moon—well, by the cresset on the top of the Empire, that the young person in question has been my model for a brief space, and nothing more. Only my model in the strictest sense of the word. No, I'll pay the cab for once in a way."

When they had dined, sitting at their favourite table, which, from its position at the end, commanded a view of the bright exotic room, with its cosmopolitan contents, their wants cared for by the head-waiter, who adored Lightmark for his knowledge of his mother-tongue, recognising and being recognised by the forgotten of their acquaintance, who were also dining there, Lightmark proposed an adjournment to the little theatre in Dean Street hard by, where "Niniche" was being played for the last

time by a clever company from across the Channel.

"We must go to the theatre," he said, "unless you prefer a hall; I confess I'm sick of them. I haven't satisfied my ideas of extravagance nearly yet. We will go and sit in the stalls at the Royalty and see Jane May and the others; it will remind us of old days."

"But, my dear fellow," expostulated the other, "it's so late, and we're in morning dress. Let's go to-morrow night instead."

"Ah no! to-morrow I sha'n't be in the right mood. Never put off till to-morrow, you know. Our not being in evening dress won't matter a bit, they'll only think we're critics; and 'Niniche' doesn't begin till nine."

On their speedy arrival at the modest portals of the little theatre, Lightmark instructed his companion, with an air of mystery, to wait, and presently emerged, smiling, from a triumphant encounter with the gentleman presiding at the box-office.

"They had no stalls left," he whispered; "but they're going to put us in two chairs at the side."

The house, with the exception of the more popular places, was crowded; and the boisterous absurdity of the farce was at its height. Rainham at first felt quite disconcerted by the proximity of the ludicrous figure in bathing dress who was leaning over the footlights, and declaiming his woes with a directness of appeal to the audience which alone would have marked the nationality of the robust actor, who was creating so much mirth out of the extremely hackneyed situation. He had got into the wrong bathing-machine (Lightmark seemed to find it intensely amusing) and the trousers of the rightful occupant only came down to his knees. Rainham at first was disconcerted, and then he began to feel bored. He fell into a semi-comatose state of contemplation, from which he was only aroused by the cadence on his ear of one of the most charming voices he had ever heard. So he characterized it, to Lightmark's amusement, when they were discussing their cigarettes and the *jeune première* in the interval between the acts.

"Oh for an epithet to describe her!" said Lightmark, catching his friend's enthusiasm. "She isn't exactly pretty—yes, she *is* pretty, but she isn't beautiful! She's got any amount of what dramatic critics call *chic*. Don't shudder—I hate the word quite as much as you do, but it was inevitable. The only thing I feel sure about is that she's *espiègle*, and altogether delightful. And how funny that man is, or would be, if the authors had only given him a better chance! The fun of the piece is like those trousers—it only comes down to his knees."

"What I admire most is her voice," said the other inconsequently. "How is it that French actresses have such beautiful voices? Freedom from fogs can't be the only cause. And it's got all that delicious plaintiveness——"

"Yes," interposed Lightmark, "it's the voice of a true Parisian *femme de siècle, fin de siècle*. There's the bell, let's go and hear some more of it."

After the second act Lightmark, in whom the influence of the evening was beginning to manifest itself in the shape of a geniality which was absent in a great degree from his more serious hours, and which had undoubtedly won him more friends than the other slightly pugnacious phase of his temperament, decided that Niniche was really very like Miss Sylvester, only less beautiful, and asserted that he was confident that she was younger than the newspapers made out.

Later, before the two friends parted on the steps of the modest club, which included both in its list of town members, Lightmark assumed an air of mystery, sighed once or twice, and looked at his friend with an expression in which forgiveness, reproach, and the lateness of the hour were strangely commingled.

"Old boy," he said, bending his eyebrows with an effort towards gravity, "I'm really rather cut up about that business—you thinking I was playing the gay deceiver, and all that sort of thing, you know. It was unworthy of you, Philip—it was, really. Dash it! I've been in love for ever so long. All the summer, seriously; I'm going to get married—settle down, range myself. Cut all you rips of bachelors…. But perhaps she won't see it. Oh, Lord!… Damn it all. Why don't you congratulate me, eh?"

Rainham was growing more and more serious, and it was with a real heartache and a curious apprehension of a moral blow that he answered, as gaily as he could:

"You're going a little too fast, Dick. If you haven't asked the girl, it's rather too early for congratulations, however irresistible your attractions may be. Who—who is it, Dick?"

"Oh, come, you know well enough. Eve—I wonder if she'll let me call her Eve? Eve! Isn't it a pretty name?"

"I wish you hadn't told me this, Dick," said the other, with more of the familiar weariness in his voice. "Are you sure you mean it? I don't believe you've thought it out. Why, what do you suppose Mrs. Sylvester will say, and Charles Sylvester?"

"You think they won't have anything to do with a poor devil of an artist, I suppose? Right you are, sir; but when the poor devil has a rich and gouty uncle, who is disposed to be friendly…. See? I think that alters the complexion of the case. You know, the Sylvesters are awfully well connected, and so on, but they haven't got much money. Mrs. Sylvester has a life annuity, and Charles—whom I always want to call 'Chawles,' because he's so pompous—has got his professional income. And Eve has got a little, enough to dress her, I should think. 'Payable quarterly on her attaining the age of twenty-one years, or marrying under that age, whichever shall first happen.' I've looked it all up at Somerset House. Last will and testament of Sylvester Charles Sylvester, Esq. I know they're rather ambitious, and wouldn't look at me if it wasn't for the Colonel. But the Colonel is a solid fact, and I've no doubt they think he's richer than he is. And I am making money, though you mightn't think it."

"I don't believe Mrs. Sylvester has thought about it at all," said Rainham doubtfully. "Eve is so young, and young artists are never looked on as marrying men. Take my advice and think about it."

"*You* call her Eve, do you? Ah, well, I won't be jealous of you, old boy. You shall come to the wedding and be best man; or no, the Colonel will be best man, I suppose? I can imagine him returning thanks for the bridesmaids in the most dazzling white waistcoat that was ever starched. Good-night; see you again soon."

"I don't know how it is," thought Rainham, as he walked up Old Compton Street, on his way to the attic near the British Museum which he rented when he was in England, for use on occasions of this kind. "It's very stupid of me, but I can't bear the idea of Eve marrying. A species of jealousy, I suppose; not ordinary jealousy, of course. And yet why not? I have never thought of her as anything but a child … why shouldn't Lightmark marry her? Eve's young, and good-looking, and sure to get on; and I'm a selfish old wreck. Yes, he shall marry her, and I will buy his pictures." Still, he shook his head even as he formulated this generous solution of the question, and could not induce himself to regard the position with equanimity, though he sat up till broad daylight wrestling with it. "I wonder if I am in love," he said, with a bitter laugh, as he shook the ashes out of his last pipe.

CHAPTER IX

The upper end of the Park is never so fashionably frequented as its southern regions, and Rainham, whose want of purpose had led him past gay carpet-beds and under branching trees nearly to the Marble Arch, was hardly surprised to recognise among the heterogeneous array of promenaders, tramps, and nursemaids, whom the heat of the slanting sun had prompted to occupy the benches dotted at intervals along the Row, a face whose weary pallor caused him a pang of self-reproach—Kitty!

For the last few days, since his encounter with her portrait at Lightmark's studio, he had scarcely given her troubles a thought. When the girl saw him, after a startled look and movement, she seemed to shrink still further into the folds of her rusty black cloak, and, to avoid meeting Rainham's eyes, bent her head over the child who was seated at her side. He found something irresistibly charming and pathetically generous in the girl's spontaneous denial of any claim to his notice, although, except that he had promised to let her know anything he might learn of the whereabouts of the father of her child, he would have found it hard to establish in the mind of an outside critic that any such claim in fact existed.

"Well, my poor child," he said softly, as he dropped into one of the vacant seats on the same bench, "how goes it with you and the little one?"

"Oh, sir, you shouldn't speak to me—not here. Anyone might see you.
Pray go. I know I shall get you into trouble, and you so kind!"

These words were spoken in a rapid, frightened whisper, and with an apprehensive glance at the intermittent stream of carriages passing within a few yards of them. Rainham shrugged his shoulders pitifully, but found it rather difficult to say anything. Certainly, his reputation was running a risk, and he felt that his indifference was somewhat exceptional.

"I'm sorry to say I've got no news for you," he said presently, after a silent pause, during which he

had observed that the wide-eyed child was really far prettier than many who (as he had been assured by the complacent matrons who exhibited them) were "little cherubs," and that it was as scrupulously cared for as the little cherubs, even in their exhibition array. "I haven't been able to discover anything; but you mustn't despair, we shall find him sooner or later."

The girl glanced at him irresolutely, and then dropped her eyes again, leaning over the child.

"It's no good, sir," she said. "I'm only sorry to have given you so much trouble already. He won't come back—he's tired of me. He could find me if he wanted to, and watching and hunting for him like this would only set him more and more against me."

Rainham, as he listened to her, rather puzzled by her sudden change of attitude since their last interview, was forced to admit mentally that her reasoning, if it lacked spontaneity, was, at all events, indisputably sound; and while he found himself doubting whether the victim was not better versed in worldliness than he had at first suspected, he still felt a curious reluctance which, though he was half ashamed of his delicacy, prevented him from suggesting that, sentimental reasons apart, the betrayer still ought to be discovered, if only in order to force him to provide for the maintenance of his child. It hardly, perhaps, occurred to him that he, after all, would be the person who would suffer most, and he certainly did not for an instant credit the girl with any ulterior designs upon his purse.

"Oh, I don't know," he said feebly. "Perhaps he does not know where you are. And I dare say, if he saw the child——"

"The child?" echoed the woman bitterly. "That's just the worst of it!"

Rainham sighed, forced again to acknowledge his lower standing in the wisdom of the world. He would have given a great deal to be able to get up and go.

"Then you don't want me to employ a detective, or to advertise, or—or to make an appeal to the editor of the *Outcry*?"

Mrs. Crichton seemed to welcome the opportunity afforded by this direct questioning.

"No," she said, "I think it would be better not. I don't want to seem ungrateful, sir—and I'm sure I thank you very, very much for all you have done for me—but I think you had better take no more trouble about it. If I can get work I shall do all right."

In spite of the girl's evident attempt to pull herself together, her voice was less brave than her words, and they conveyed but little assurance to the listener. He shrugged his shoulders somewhat impatiently: the interview was beginning to tell upon his nerves.

"Of course, it's for you to decide, and I suppose you have thought it well out, and have good reason for this alteration of purpose. But when you talk about work——?"

He finished his sentence with a note of inquiry and a half apologetic glance at her slight form and frail, white fingers.

"I haven't always been a model," she explained with some dignity. "Would to God I never had! I can sew better than most, and I can work a type-machine. That's what I used to do before he came. But type-writing work isn't so easy to get as it was, and I am out of practice."

It occurred to him for a moment to ask the girl whether she could remember sitting for Mr. Lightmark, but he felt that Dick might resent the introduction of his name; and, remembering that she had told him that, for a time, before her health gave way, her artist patrons had been numerous, he dismissed the idea as not likely to be profitable.

As they spoke, she with her mournful eyes turned on Rainham's sympathetic face, he absently following the movements of the child as it laboriously raised a small edifice of gravel-stones on the seat between them, neither of them noticed the severely correct figure in the frock-coat and immaculate hat who passed close behind with observant eyeglass fixed upon the little group, and with an air which, after the first flush of open-mouthed surprise, was eloquently expressive of regretful indignation and the highest motives.

Charles Sylvester continued his walk for a distance of about fifty paces, and then seated himself in a position to command a view of the persons in whom he was interested.

"I don't like watching Rainham like this," he said to himself; "but it's a duty which I owe to society."

That the man was Rainham was as obvious as that the woman he was talking to was of a far lower

rank in life than his own. And then there was the child!

"By Jove!" said Sylvester sententiously, "it's worse than I thought. People really ought to be warned. I suppose it's that girl he was talking about at the studio the other day; and he tried to shift her on to Lightmark. What a hypocrite the man must be!"

He was not, however, for long called upon to maintain, in the interests of society, his position of espionage; for Rainham, warned of the lapse of time by the clock which adorns the Park lodge, presently became aware that, if he was to fulfil his intention of calling on Mrs. Sylvester, he had no time to spare; and when he rose from his seat Charles Sylvester thought it advisable to resume the walk which his zeal had induced him to interrupt.

CHAPTER X

After all, he need not have hurried. Mrs. Sylvester was out, he was told by the butler, who proceeded to suggest, with the freedom of an old friend, that he should make his way upstairs and find Miss Eve.

"Yes, I think I will, Phelps," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "if she is disengaged."

"Miss Eve is in the music-room playing, I think, sir. Will you go up?"

They found the room empty, however, though an open violin-case on the table and a music-stand, on which leaflets of Schubert fluttered fitfully in the light breeze that entered through the open window, testified to its recent occupation.

While the butler left Rainham, with apologies, to make further search, the latter stood, hat in hand, making a survey of the little wainscoted room, which he remembered as the schoolroom. Indeed, though the name, in deference doubtless to Eve's mature age, had been altered, it still retained much of its former aspect. From the little feminine trifles lying about, scraps of unfinished crewel-work and embroidery, and the fresh flowers in the vases, he gathered that it was still an apartment which Eve frequented. He recognised her cage of love-birds hanging in the window; the cottage piano with its frontal of faded silk, on which he could remember her first painful struggles with Czerny and scales; the pictures on the walls, many of them coloured reproductions from the Christmas numbers of the illustrated papers; the ink-stained tablecloth on the round table in the centre. He examined the photographs on the mantelpiece with a smile—Charles in his wig and gown, and Mrs. Sylvester with her pretty, faded face, gazed at each other, with a curious likeness in their disparity, from a double frame in the centre; the spectacled profile of the eminently respectable woman who had superintended Miss Eve's studies held another place of honour; and, opposite, Rainham recognised a faded photograph of himself, taken six years before in Rome. He turned from these to the bookshelves, which seemed to be filled with relegations from the rest of the house—children's story-books in tarnished bright covers and dilapidated school-books. He took down one of these latter and examined it absently, with a half-sigh. He had it still in his hand when the young girl fluttered in, looking very cool and fresh in her plain, white dress with a broad sash of apple-green ribbon.

"I thought you were never coming to see us again, Philip," she said reproachfully, as she held out her little hand to him. "What possessed them to bring you here? It's awfully untidy."

"Phelps had an idea you were making music," he explained; "and, for the untidiness, I suppose he remembered that I was used to it of old."

"Yes, it's just the same. It is an untidiness of years, and it is hopeless to cope with it. What *have* you got there?"

He turned the book round to acquaint himself.

"Ollendorf's 'Elementary German Grammar,'" he said with a smile; "it's an interesting work."

She made a little *moue* expressive of disapproval.

"Ah, how nice it is to have done with all that, Philip! You can't believe how glad I am to be 'finished'; yes, I am finished now. I don't even have masters, and Miss Murison has gone away to Brighton and opened a school for young gentlemen. Poor little wretches! how sorry I am for them! Do you remember Miss Murison, Philip?"

She had sunk down into an arm-chair, and Rainham stood, his stooping shoulders propped against the mantelpiece, smiling down at her.

"Yes, I remember Miss Murison; and so you are glad her reign has come to an end, Eve? Well, I suppose it is natural."

She nodded her pretty head.

"Just a little, Philip. But how tired you look! Will you have some tea? I suppose you have just come from Blackpool?"

His face darkened suddenly, and the smile for a moment died away.

"No," he said shortly, "I have been in the Park."

"Well," she remarked after a moment, "you must have some tea, anyhow. Of course you will wait and see mamma; she has gone to the Dollonds' 'at home,' you know. I an all alone. If you like, we will have it in here, as we did in the old days—a regular schoolroom tea."

"It will be charming," said Rainham, seating himself; "it will only want the Murison to complete the illusion."

"Oh, it will do just as well without her," said Eve, laughing; "ring the bell, please."

Rainham sat back watching her with far-away eyes, as she moved lightly about, giving her orders with a childish imperiousness, and setting out the little tea-table between them.

"It is delightful," he said again, when they were once more alone and he had accepted a well-creamed cup and a waferlike *tartine*; "and I feel as if I had turned back several years. But how is it, by-the-bye, that you have not gone to the Dollonds'?"

She laughed up at him merrily.

"Because I have had much more important things to do. I have been with my dressmaker. I am going to a dance to-night, and I have had a great deal of bother over my new frock. But it is all right now, and I shall wear it to-night; and it is perfectly sweet. Oh, you have never seen me at a party yet, Philip."

"Never? My dear child, I have danced with you at scores."

"Oh yes, at children's parties; but never since I have grown up—'come out,' I mean. Oh, Philip, is there anything in life so delightful as one's first ball? I wish you would come out with us sometimes. I should like to dance with you again now."

"Ah," he said, "my dancing days are over. I am a wallflower, Eve, now; and my only use at balls is to fetch and carry for the chaperons."

"Philip!" she cried reproachfully, "what a dreadful thing to say!
Besides, you used to dance so splendidly."

"Did I?" he asked; "I expect you would be less lenient now. Yes, I will have another cup, please."

She filled it, and he took it from her in silence, wondering how he could least obtrusively gain the knowledge of her mind he sought. He had said to himself that if he could find her alone, it would be so easy; just a word, an accent, would tell him how far she really cared. But now that she was actually with him, it had become strangely difficult. Very sadly he reflected that she had grown out of his knowledge; away from her, she rested in his memory as a child whom he could help. The actual presence of this young girl with the deep eyes, in the first flush of her womanhood, corrected him; an intolerable weight sealed his tongue, forbidding him to utter Lightmark's name, greatly as he desired. He racked himself for delicate circumlocutions, and it was only at last, by a gigantic effort, when he realized that the afternoon waned, while he wasted an unique occasion in humorous commonplace, that he broke almost brutally into Eve's disquisitions on her various festivities to ask, blushing like a girl, if Lightmark's picture progressed.

"I have had only a few sittings," she admitted, "and I expect they will be the last here. Perhaps they will be continued abroad. You know Mr. Lightmark is going to meet us in Switzerland, perhaps."

"You will like that?" suggested Rainham gravely.

She looked into her cup, beating a tattoo on the carpet with her little foot nervously.

"Yes," she said, after a minute, "I think so."

There was nothing in her words, her tone, to colour this bare statement of a simple fact. Only a

second later, as if in a sudden need of confidence, a resumption of her old childish habit towards him, she raised her eyes to his, and in their clear, gray depths, before they drooped again beneath the long lashes, he read her secret. No words could have told him more plainly that she loved Lightmark—that Dick had merely to speak. Their silence only lasted a moment; but it seemed to Rainham, who had not shifted his position or moved a muscle, that it stretched over an interminable space of time. It was curiously intangible, and yet even then he realized that it would remain with its least accessories in his mind one of those trivial, indelible photographs which last a lifetime. The smell of mignonette that spread in from the window-box through the turquoise-blue Venetian blinds; the chattering of the love-birds; the strains of a waltz of Waldteufel's floating up from a German band in the street below—they ran into a single sensation that was like the stab of cold steel. He sat staring blankly at the tattered bookshelves, playing mechanically with his teaspoon; and presently he became aware that the young girl was talking, was telling him the route they should take next week, and the name of the hotel they were going to at Basel.

"Yes," he hazarded, and "Yes," and "Yes," his smiling lips belying the lassitude of his eyes. Actually, he looked out and beyond her, at another Eve, to whom he now paid his adieux. It was the dainty little figure of her childish self which he saw, with its bright, long hair, and its confiding eyes, and its caressing little ways, in the deepening shadows between the bookshelves—and for the last time. It vanished like a shadow, smiling mockingly, and he knew it would never return. In its place abode henceforth the image of this stately maiden, comely and desirable, with the profound eyes which lighted up—for Dick. An unaccountable sense of failure stole over Rainham—unaccountable because he could lay his finger upon no tangible cause of his discomfiture.

CHAPTER XI

The little town was brilliant with September sunshine; the blue smoke spired almost unbroken into the bluer vault above, and the cream-coloured façades of the houses, with their faded blue shutters and verandas, the gay striped awnings of the little fleet of rowing boats, the gray of the stone parapet, and the dull green of the mountainous opposite shore, were mirrored steeply in the bight of narrowing, sunlit lake. The wide, dusty esplanade was almost empty, except at the corners, where voluble market women gossiped over their fruit-baskets, heaped with purple-brown figs, little mountain-born strawberries, sweet, watery grapes, green almonds, and stupendous pears. At rare intervals a steamboat, bright and neat as a new toy, trailed a long feather of smoke from the foot of the Rigi, shed a small and dusty crowd into the sleepy town, and then bustled back, shearing the silken flood and strangely distorting its reflections.

"The worst of Lucerne," said Mrs. Sylvester—"the worst of Lucerne is that one can't escape from Mount Pilatus and the Lion. The inhabitants all think that Pilatus regulates the weather, and they would certainly give their Lion the preference over the Venus of Milo."

They were all sitting on the terrace in front of the Schweitzerhof; Lady Garnett and Mary, Mrs. Sylvester and Eve. Lady Garnett and her companion were but newly arrived, and, as birds of passage, preferred the hotel to a *pension*. The Sylvesters had been staying in the quaint, rambling town for nearly a fortnight. It was their usual summer resort, and although the spring of each year found them deciding to go elsewhere for a change, in the end they nearly always proved faithful to the familiar lake. Their *pension*—they regarded it almost as a country house—was such an inducement! The Pension Bungay was maintained by an old servant of the family, who, when he began to find the duties of butler too exacting for his declining years, gave a warning, which applied also to one of his fellow-servants, the cook, to wit, a lady of Continental origin, who had consented to become Madame Bungay; and the pair, having souls above public-houses, and relying on their not inconsiderable connection among the servants of Mayfair, had boldly and successfully launched into an independent career as sole proprietors and managers of the Pension Bungay, Lucerne.

"Yes," said Lady Garnett sympathetically; "I suppose Pilatus *is* rather monotonous. It's rather too near, I think. It ought to be far away, and covered with snow, more like the Jungfrau, which we have been worshipping at Interlaken, where, by the way, there are positively more Americans than natives."

"Oh," Mrs. Sylvester chimed in, "isn't it dreadful the way they overrun Europe nowadays! There are two American families staying at our *pension*, and you see them everywhere."

"I think I rather like them. They amuse me, you know, and somehow, though it may be disloyal for me, as a naturalized Englishwoman, to say so, as a rule they comport themselves much better than the ordinary British tourist. Of course, the country is not so accessible for the Americans; it's out of the reach of their cheap excursionists. But how opportune that curious tower is, and the bridge! of course,

it's correct to admire them?"

Mary Masters and Eve, who had been quietly discussing *chiffons*, got up from their chairs with a preconcerted air.

"We are so tired of sitting still," said the former, balancing herself with an air of indecision, and giving Mrs. Sylvester time to note the admirable taste of her simple, maize-coloured travelling dress, which did not suffer from contrast with the younger girl's brighter and more elaborately charming toilette. "Miss Sylvester wants to show me the uncatchable trout in the lake, and I want to go and see if the salon is empty, so that I can try the piano; and we can't decide which to do. I suppose, Mrs. Sylvester, that the hotel is more within the bounds of propriety?"

"Oh, well," said Eve, laughing, "I don't care; anyhow, let's go and find the piano. Only, there is sure to be some one there already."

"By the way," said Lady Garnett, when the girls had vanished into the building, "of course you know that Philip Rainham's friend—the young man who paints and has a moustache, I mean—is here, or will be very shortly? He was staying at our hotel at Berne."

"Mr. Lightmark, I suppose?" answered the other, without showing her surprise except in her eyes. "We told him that we were coming to Lucerne, and it was more or less arranged."

"Ah, yes," interposed Lady Garnett; "am I indiscreet in suggesting an exceptional attraction?"

Mrs. Sylvester merely looked mysterious, and Lady Garnett was encouraged to continue.

"Your daughter is very beautiful. This Mr. Lightmark has been painting her portrait, *n'est ce pas*? I should think it ought to be a success. Am I to congratulate him?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Sylvester hurriedly, "dear Lady Garnett, it hasn't gone so far as that."

"The portrait?" murmured the other innocently. "Ah, I'm afraid you misunderstood me."

Mrs. Sylvester cast a meaning glance in the direction of Eve, who, sauntering along the terrace with Mary, was now behind their seat, and the conversation, which promised to become interesting, dropped, while Mary explained that they had found the music-stool occupied by a lady, who was superfluously protesting her inability to sing "the old songs"—the person who always *did* monopolize hotel pianos, as Mary laughingly asserted.

Two days later Lightmark presented himself at the Pension Bungay. He had come to Lucerne with the fixed purpose of definitely proposing marriage to Eve. He was far too worldly-wise to fail to perceive that, so far at least, Mrs. Sylvester had certainly taken no trouble to discourage his pretensions. His attentions, he argued, had been by no means obscure; his studio had been singularly honoured by the presence of Miss Sylvester and her mother, for the purposes of the portrait; he had even been granted a sitting at the house in Park Street, when a less rigid supervision had been exercised, and when, in the absence of the mother, he had been able to assure himself that the girl was far from despising his adoration. Before leaving town he had dined with his uncle, the Colonel, at his club, and the veteran had spontaneously and strenuously urged the step, and even thrown out promising hints as to settlements. He broke in upon the little circle at the hour of afternoon tea, and Eve found his gray travelling suit, and the bronze of his complexion, exceedingly becoming. He announced that he had come to stay for a week or two; he was going to make some sketches, and he couldn't tear himself away from that delightful bridge, and his lodgings!

"My dear fellow," he said to Charles Sylvester, with an air of familiarity which gave one an insight as to the advance the artist had made in his relations with the family, "you must come and see my diggings. The most delightful old hostelry in Europe. Built straight up out of the lake, like the castle of Chillon. It's called the *Gasthof zum Pfistern*. I could fish out of my bedroom window. I assure you, it's charming. You must come and dine with me there. I hope you ladies will so far honour me?"

This project, however, fell through, and by way of compensation Lightmark and Charles enjoyed the privilege of entertaining the party, including Lady Garnett and Miss Masters, at Borghoni's; after which the younger people chartered a boat, and floated idly about the star-reflecting lake, while the dowagers maintained a discreet surveillance from their seat on the esplanade.

Of this last incident it may be said that Lightmark and Eve found it altogether delightful, the latter especially being struck by the romance of the situation; while Charles was inclined to be ponderously sentimental, and Miss Masters afterwards confessed to having felt bored.

In the course of the next day Lightmark had the privilege of a confidential interview with the mother

of his adored. Mrs. Sylvester had fully armed herself for the occasion, and presented an edifying example of matronly affection and prudence.

"Of course, I was not altogether unprepared for this, Mr. Lightmark. In fact, I may as well own that I have talked it over with my son, and we agreed that the whole question resolved itself into—ah—into settlements. You must not think me mercenary." This was said with a dignified calm, which made the idea preposterous. "If you can"—here she seemed to refer to some mental note-book—"ah—satisfy Charles on that point, I am sure that it will give me great pleasure to regard you as a prospective son-in-law. Of course, you know, I can't answer for Eve, or Charles."

"Ah, my dear lady," said the other, gracefully overwhelmed, "if I may count on your good offices I am very fortunate."

That evening, as the two men sat discussing their cigars and coffee, Lightmark listened with wonderful patience to a disquisition on the subject of—he couldn't afterwards remember whether it was Strikes or the Sugar Bounty. He was rather afraid of the necessary interview with Charles. It would require some tact, and he was prepared to find him unpleasantly exacting as arbiter of his pecuniary status.

"You ought to be in the House, by Jove! that's your line, Sylvester, with a clever wife, you know, to do the canvassing for you" ("and write your speeches," he mentally added).

The other owned that he had thought of it.

"But the wife," he added, with an attempt at levity, "that's the difficulty!"

And the connection of a subsequent remark with this topic, though some conversation intervened, did not escape his astute companion, and he was careful to sing Miss Masters' praises with an absence of allusiveness, which showed the actor. Then he threw away the stump of his cigar, and mentally braced himself.

"You have seen a good deal of me lately," he said. "I want to ask you if you have any objection to me as a possible brother-in-law; in fact, I want to marry your sister."

"Yes?" said the other encouragingly.

"I have, as you may know, spoken to Mrs. Sylvester about it, and I believe she will—that is to say, I think she has no personal objection to me."

"Oh, of course, my dear fellow, my mother and I are flattered, quite flattered; but you will understand our anxiety that we should run no risk of sacrificing any of the advantages she has enjoyed hitherto. May I ask, er——"

"What is my income from all sources?" suggested Lightmark rather flippantly. "Well, I have to confess that my profession, in which I am said to be rising, brings me in about four hundred and fifty a year, in addition to which I have a private income, which amounts to, say, three hundred; total, seven hundred and fifty." Then, seeing that Charles looked grave, he played his trump card: "And I ought to add that my uncle, the Colonel, you know, has been good enough to talk about making me an allowance, on my marrying with his approval. In fact he is, I believe, prepared to make a settlement on my marriage with your sister."

Charles Sylvester pronounced himself provisionally satisfied, and it was arranged that he should communicate with Colonel Lightmark, and that meanwhile the engagement should not be made public.

Eve was standing on the little balcony, appertaining to the sitting-room which had been dedicated to the ladies as a special mark of favour by the proprietor of the *pension*, and Lightmark hastened to join her there; and while Charles and his mother played a long game of chess, the two looked out at the line of moonlit Alps, and were sentimentally and absurdly happy.

"Mrs. Sylvester," said Lightmark, when that lady thought it advisable to warn her daughter that there was a cold wind blowing off the lake, "we have arranged that a certain portrait shall figure in the Academy catalogue next spring as 'Portrait of the Artist's Wife.'"

After which Mrs. Sylvester began to call him Richard, and Charles became oppressively genial: a development which led the embarrassed recipient of these honours to console himself by reflecting that, after all, he was not going to marry the entire family.

"*Ma cherie*," said Lady Garnett, as the Paris train steamed out of Lucerne on the afternoon of the next day but one, "do you know that I feel a sensation of positive relief at getting away from those people?

Eve is very *gentille*, but lovers are *so* uninteresting, when they are properly engaged; and the excellent Charles! My child, I am afraid you have been very cruel."

"Cruel, aunt?" said Mary, with a demure look of astonishment. "I like Eve very much, and I suppose Mr. Lightmark must be nice, because he's such a friend of Philip's. But I don't quite like the way he talks about Philip, and ... he's very clever."

"Yes," said the old lady drowsily; "he's cleverer than Philip."

"He may be cleverer, but——" Mary began with some warmth, and paused.

Her companion opened her eyes widely, and darted a keen glance at the girl. Then, settling herself into her corner:

"My dear child, to whom do you say it?"

It was eminently characteristic of Lady Garnett that, even when she was sleepy, she understood what people were going to say long before the words were spoken, and, especially with her familiars, she had a habit of taking her anticipations as realized.

Mary found something embarrassing in the humour of the old lady's expression, and devoted herself to gazing out of the window at the mountain-bound landscape, in which houses, trees, and cattle all seemed to be in miniature, until the sound of regular breathing assured her that the inquisitive eyes were closed.

CHAPTER XII

During the long, hot August, which variously dispersed the rest of their acquaintances, the intimacy of that ill-assorted couple, the bird of passage Rainham, and Oswyn the artist, was able to ripen. They met occasionally at Brodonowski's, of which dingy restaurant they had now almost a monopoly; for its artistic session had been prorogued, and the "boys" were scattered, departing one by one, as their purses and inclinations prompted, to resume acquaintance with their favourite "bits" in Cornwall, or among the orchards and moors of Brittany, to study mountains in sad Merioneth, or to paint ocean rollers and Irish peasants in ultimate Galway. On the occasion of their second meeting, Rainham having (a trifle diffidently, for the painter was not a questionable man) evinced a curiosity as to his summer movements, Oswyn had scornfully repudiated such a notion.

"Thank God!" he cried, "I have outworn that mania of searching for prettiness. London is big enough for me. My work is here, and the studies I want are here, and here I stay till the end of all things. I hate the tame country faces, the aggressive stillness and the silent noise, the sentiment and the sheep of it. Give me the streets and the yellow gas, the roar of the City, smoke, haggard faces, flaming omnibuses, parched London, and the river rolling oilily by the embankment like Styx at night when the lamps shine."

He drew in a breath thirstily, as though the picture were growing on canvas before him.

"Well, if you want river subjects you must come and find them at Blackpool," said Rainham; and Oswyn had replied abruptly that he would.

And he kept his word, not once but many times, dropping down on Rainham suddenly, unexplainedly, after his fashion, as it were from the clouds, in the late afternoon, when the clerks had left. He would chat there for an hour or two in his spasmodic, half-sullen way, in which, however, an increasing cordiality mingled, making, before he retired once more into space, some colour notes of the yard or the river, or at times a rough sketch, which was never without its terse originality.

Rainham began to look forward to these visits with a recurring pleasure. Oswyn's beautiful genius and Oswyn's savage humours fascinated him, and no less his pleasing, personal ambiguity. He seemed to be a person without antecedents, as he was certainly without present ties. Except that he painted, and so must have a place to paint in, he might have lodged precariously in a doss-house, or on door-steps, or under the Adelphi arches with those outcasts of civilization to whom, in personal appearance, one might not deny he bore a certain resemblance. To no one did he reveal his abiding-place, and it was the merest tradition of little authority that a man from Brodonowski's had once been taken to his studio. By no means a perspicuous man, and to be approached perhaps charily; yet Rainham, as his acquaintance progressed, found himself from time to time brought up with a certain surprise, as he discovered, under all his savage cynicism, his overweening devotion to a depressing theory, a very real vein of refinement, of delicate mundane sensibility, revealed perhaps in a chance phrase or diffidence,

or more often in some curiously fine touch to canvas of his rare, audacious brush. The incongruities of the man, his malice, his coarseness, his reckless generosity, gave Rainham much food for thought. And, indeed, that parched empty August seemed full of problematical issues; and he had, on matters of more import than the enigmatic mind of a new friend, to be content at last to be tossed to and fro on the winds of vain conjecture.

Lightmark and the Sylvesters occupied him much; but beyond a brief note from Mrs. Sylvester in Lucerne, which told him nothing that he would know, there came to him no news from Switzerland. In the matter of the girl whom he had befriended, recklessly, he told himself at times, difficulties multiplied. A sort of dumb devil seemed to have entered into her, and, with the best will in the world, it was a merely pecuniary assistance which he could give her, half angry with himself the while that his indolent good nature (it appeared to him little else) forbade him to cast back at her what seemed a curious ingratitude almost passing the proverbial feminine perversity, and let her go her own way as she would have it. On two occasions, since that chance meeting in the Park, he had called at the lodging in which he had helped her to install herself; and from the last he had come away with a distinct sense of failure. Something had come between them, an alien influence was in the air, and the mystery which surrounded the girl, he saw with disappointment, she would not of her own accord assist to dissipate. And yet there was nothing offensive in her attitude, only it had changed, lacked frankness.

One afternoon, finding that he could leave the dock early, he made another effort. He stopped before one in a dingy row of small houses, uniformly depressing, in a street that ran into the Commercial Road, and rang the bell, which tinkled aggressively. A slatternly woman, with a bandage round her head and an air of drunken servility, responded to his inquiry for "Mrs. Crichton" by ushering him into a small back parlour, in which a pale girl in black sat with her head bent over a typewriter. She rose, as he came in, a little nervously, and stood, her thin hands clasped in front of her, looking up at him with expectant, terrified eyes.

"I am sorry to alarm you," he said stiffly. "I came to see if I could do anything for you, and to tell you once more that I can do nothing for you unless you are open with me, unless you help me."

The woman looked away to where the child sat, in a corner of the small room, playing with some disused cotton reels.

"You are very kind, sir," she said in a low, uneasy voice; "but I want nothing, we want very little, the child and I; and with what your kindness in getting me the machine helps us to, we have enough."

"You don't want to be reinstated, to get back your lover, to have your child acknowledged?"

The girl flushed; her hands, which were still locked together, trembled a little.

"I don't want for nothing, sir, except to be left alone."

Then she added, looking him straight in the face now, with a certain rude dignity:

"I wouldn't seem ungrateful, sir, for your great kindness. I think you are the best man I ever met. Oh, believe me, I am not ungrateful, sir! But it is no good, not a scrap, though once I thought it. We must get along as we can now, the child and I—shame and all."

She sighed, gazed intently for a silent minute at the keys of the elaborate machine before her, and then continued, speaking very slowly, as if she were afraid of drawing too largely on her newly-found candour.

"Why should I keep it from you? It makes me feel a liar every time I see you. I will be quite plain with you, sir; perhaps the truth's best, though it's hard enough. I've seen him; that's why I couldn't tell you any more. And it's all over and done, and God help us! We must make the best of it. You see, sir, he is married," said the girl, with a sharp intonation in her voice like a sob.

Rainham had sunk into a chair wearily; he looked up at her now, drawing a long breath, which, for some reason he could not analyse, was replete with relief.

"Married?" he ejaculated; "are you sure?"

"Sure enough," said Kitty Crichton. "He told me so."

"Do you care for this fellow?" he asked curiously after a while.

The flush on her face had faded into two hectic spots on either cheek; there was a lack of all animation in her voice, whether of hope or indignation; she had the air of a person who gave up, who was terribly tired of things.

"Care?" she echoed. "I don't rightly know, sir; I think it's all dead together—love and anger, and my good looks and all. I care for the child, and I don't want to harry or hunt him down for the sake of what has been,—that's all."

He regarded her with the same disinterested pity which had seized him when he saw her first. There were only ruins of a beauty that must have once been striking. As he watched her a doubt assailed him, whether, after all, he had not been deceived by a bare resemblance; whether, in effect, she had ever been actually identical with that brilliant Pierrette whose likeness had so amazed him in Lightmark's rooms.

"By the way," he asked suddenly, "you told me you have been a model: did—was this man a painter? Has he ever painted you?"

The girl fell back a step or two irresolutely.

"Ah! why do you trouble so? What does it matter?" Then she added faintly, but hurriedly stumbling over her words:

"He wasn't a painter—only for amusement; he didn't exhibit. He was a newspaper writer. But he couldn't get work, and got a place in a foreign-going steamer, to keep accounts, I think. That was afterwards, and that's why I looked for him at your dock. They told me the ship had been there, but it wasn't true. Ah! let me be, sir, let me be!"

She broke off hastily, clasping her hands across her breast.

The story, though incoherent, was possible; Rainham could see no motive for her deceiving him, and yet he believed she was lying. He merely shrugged his shoulders, with a rising lassitude. He seemed to have been infected by her own dreariness, to labour under a disability of doing or saying any more; he, too, gave it up. He wanted to get away out of the dingy room; its rickety table and chairs, its two vulgar vases on the stained mantel, its gross upholstery, seemed too trenchantly sordid in the strong August sun. The child's golden head—she was growing intelligent now, and strong on her legs—was the one bright spot in the room. He stopped to pat it with a great pity, a sense of too much pathos in things flooding him, before he passed out again into the mean street.

CHAPTER XIII

September set in cold, with rain and east winds, and Rainham, a naturally chilly mortal, as he handed his coat to Lady Garnett's butler, and followed him into the little library, where dinner was laid for three, congratulated himself that a seasonable fire crackled on the large hearth.

"I hardly expected you back yet," he remarked, after the first greetings, stretching out his hands to the blaze; "and your note was a welcome surprise. I almost think we are the only people in town."

Lady Garnett shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of rich tolerance, as one who acknowledged the respectability of all tastes, whilst preferring her own.

"London has its charm, to me," she remarked. "We are glad to be back. I am getting too old to travel—that terrible crossing, and the terrible people one meets!"

Rainham smiled with absent sympathy, looking into the red coals.

"You must remember, I don't know where you have been. Tell me your adventures and your news."

"I leave that to Mary, my dear," said the old lady.

And at that moment the girl came in, looking stately and older than her age in one of the dark, high-cut dresses which she affected. She shook hands with Rainham, smiling; and as they went to table he repeated his question.

"It is difficult," she said; "we seem to have been everywhere. Oh, we have been very restless this year, Philip. I think we were generally in the train. We tried Trouville——"

"Detestable!" put in Lady Garnett with genial petulance; "it was too small. Half the world was crowded into it; and it was precisely the half-world——"

"I can imagine it," interrupted Rainham, with his grave smile; "and then?"

"Then we thought of Switzerland," continued the young girl. "We went to Geneva. We were almost dead when we arrived, because we had to go a very roundabout way to avoid Paris; we could not go to Paris, because we were afraid of seeing the Republic. It was very hot in Geneva. No place ever was so hot before. We lay on the sofa for three days, and then we were strong enough to run away."

"It was purgatorial!" said the elder lady; "it was full of English governesses and Swiss pastors."

"Then we went to look for cool places, and we had a charming week at Interlaken, and looked longingly at the Jungfrau, and contemplated the ascent."

Lady Garnett laughed her quaint, little laugh.

"Interlaken might have sufficed, my dear; but, unfortunately—it was one of Mary's ridiculous economies—we went to a *pension*; and we fell into the hands of an extraordinary woman with a fringe and a Bible, a native of North America, who endeavoured to persuade me that I was a Jewess."

"No, no!" laughed Mary, "not quite so bad as that. It was one of the other tribes she would have us belong to—one of the lost tribes. It was not personal."

"Ah, *Dieu merci*! if they are lost," ejaculated her aunt; "but you are wrong; it was most personal, Mary."

"I will do her the justice to add that she only suggested it once," continued the girl with a smile of elision. "However, we had to flee from her; and so we came to Lucerne."

"That was worst of all," said Lady Garnett, arching her delicate eyebrows; "it was full of lovers."

The solemn butler had placed a pair of obdurate birds before Rainham, which engrossed him; presently he looked up, remarking quietly:

"Did you see the Sylvesters?"

"Ah yes! we saw the Sylvesters; we walked with the Sylvesters; we drank tea with the Sylvesters; we made music with the Sylvesters; we went on the lake with the Sylvesters. That handsome artist, Mr. Lightmark, is it not, Mary? was there, making the running with Miss Eve. The marriage seems to be arranged."

She shrugged her shoulders; the precise shade of meaning in the gesture escaped Rainham; he looked over to Mary inquiringly.

"They seem very much attached to each other," she remarked.

"Oh, they were imbecile!" added Lady Garnett; "try the Moselle, my dear, and leave that terrible sweet stuff to Mary. Yes, I was glad to come away from Lucerne. Everything is very bad now except my Constant's *vol-au-vent*, which you don't seem to have tried; but lovers are the worst of all. Though I like that young man, Lightmark; he is a type that interests me; he seems——"

She looked round the room vaguely, as if the appropriate word might be lurking in some angle of the apartment; finally, the epithet proving difficult, she abandoned the search.

"*Il ira loin*!" she said tersely; "he flatters me discreetly, as they did when I was young, before the Republic."

The silent, well-trained man handed round caviare and olives; Mary trifled with some grapes, her brow knitted a little, thoughtfully. Lady Garnett poured herself a glass of maraschino. When they were left alone, the girl remarked abruptly:

"I am not sure whether I quite like Mr. Lightmark; he does not seem to me sincere."

Lady Garnett lifted up her hands.

"Why should he be, my dear? sincerity is very trying. A decent hypocrisy is the secret of good society. Your good, frank people are very rude. If I am a wicked old woman, it is nobody's business to tell me so but my director's."

Mary had risen, and had come over to the old lady's side.

"But then, you are not a wicked old woman, my aunt," she observed gently.

"Ah!" she threw back, "how do you judge? Do me the justice to believe, *chèrie*, that, if I tell you a good deal, there is a good deal, happily, which I don't tell you."

She pushed a box of cigarettes, which the man had placed on the table, toward Rainham. He took one and lit it silently, absently, without his accustomed protests; the girl looked up smiling.

"That means that you want your *tête-à-tête*, Aunt Marcelle? I know the signal. Well, I will leave you. I want to try over that new march of Liszt's; and I expect, by the time I have grappled with it, you will be coming up for your coffee."

"You are a good girl," answered the elder lady, stroking her hand. "Yes, run away and make music! When Philip and I have had enough scandal and frivolity, we will come and find you; and you shall play us a little of that strange person Wagner, who fascinates me, though you may not believe it."

It was a habit of the house, on occasion of these triangular dinner-parties, that Lady Garnett should remain with Rainham in the interval which custom would have made him spend solitary over his wine. It was a habit which Mary sacredly respected, although it often amused her; and she knew it was one which her aunt valued. And, indeed, though the two made no movement, and for a while said nothing, there was an air of increased intimacy, if it were only in their silence, when the door had closed on the girl and left them together. Presently Lady Garnett began holding up her little glass of crystal maraschino that vied in the light of the candelabra with the diamonds on her fingers.

"I had a conversation with that wearisome young man Charles Sylvester at Lucerne, Philip; he tried to sound me as to Mary's prospects and the state of her affections."

Rainham looked up with quiet surprise.

"Do you mean to say——?" he queried.

"It is very obvious," she answered quickly; "I saw it long ago. But don't imagine that he got much out of me. I was as deep as a well. But what do you think of it?"

"I hope they will be happy," he answered absently. She arched her expressive brows, and he coloured, recollected himself. "I beg your pardon," he said hastily; "I confess I was thinking of something else. You were talking of Mary; why should it not do? Does she care about him?"

His companion laughed, and her laugh had more than its wonted suggestion of irony.

"My dear Philip, for a clever man you can be singularly dense! Care for him! of course she does not."

"She might do worse," he said; "Sylvester is not very bright, but he works hard, and will succeed after a fashion. His limitations dovetail conveniently with his capacities. What do you intend to do?"

"Do I ever interfere in these things? My dear, you are remarkably dull to-night. I never make marriages, nor prevent them. With all my faults, match-making is not one of them. I think too ill of life to try and arrange it. You must admit," she added, "that, long as I have known you, I have never tried to marry you?"

"Ah, that would have been too fatuous!" he remarked lightly.

They were both silent for a while, regarding each other disinterestedly; they appeared to be following a train of thought which led no whither; presently Lady Garnett asked:

"Are you going abroad this year?"

"Yes," he said, "as soon as I can—about the middle of October; to
Mentone or Bordighera, I suppose."

"Do you find them interesting? Do they do you much good?"

He smiled rather listlessly, ignoring her second question.

"I confess," he said, "it becomes rather a bore. But, I suppose, at my time of life one finds nothing very interesting. The mere act of living becomes rather a bore after a time."

"I wonder what you are thinking about, Philip?" she asked meditatively; "something has annoyed you to-night; I wonder if you are going to tell me."

He laughed.

"Do we ever tell each other our annoyances? I think we sit and look at each other, and discover them. That is much more appropriate."

"You take things too seriously," she went on; "my dear, they are really not worth it. That is my settled

conviction."

She sat and sipped her liqueur appreciatively, smiling good-humouredly, and Philip could not help regarding her with a certain admiration. Her small, sharp, subtile face, beneath its mask of smiling indifference, looked positively youthful in the judicious candle-light; only the little, bird-like, withered hands bore the stigmata of age. And he could not conceive her changing; to the last, those tell-tale hands apart, she would be comely and cynical, and would die as she had lived, secure "in the high places of laughter"—a laughter that, for all its geniality, struck him at times as richly sardonic—in the decent drapery of her fictitious youth; in a decorous piety, yet a little complicated, in the very reception of the last rites, by the amiable arching of her expressive eyebrows.

"You are wonderful," he exclaimed, after an interval, "wonderful; that was what I was thinking."

She smiled disinterestedly.

"Because you don't understand me? My dear, nothing is so easy as mystification; that is why I don't return the compliment. Yourself, you know, are not very intelligible to-night."

He looked away frowning, but without embarrassment; presently throwing up his hands with a little mock gesture of despair, he remarked:

"I should be delighted to explain myself, but I can't. I am unintelligible to myself also; we must give it up, and go and find Mary."

"Ah no! let us give it up, by all means; but we will not join Mary yet; smoke another cigarette."

He took one and lit it, absently, in the blue flame of the spirit-lamp, and she watched him closely with her bright, curious eyes.

"You know this Mr. Lightmark very well, don't you, Philip?"

"Intimately," he answered, nodding.

"You must be pleased," she said. "It is a great match for him, a struggling artist. Can he paint, by the way?"

"He has great talent." He held his cigarette away from him, considered the ash critically. "Yes, he can certainly paint. I suppose it is a good thing—and for Eve, too. Why should it not be?"

"He is a charming young man"—she spoke judicially—"charming! But in effect Mary was quite right; she generally is—he is not sincere."

"I think you are wrong," said Rainham after a moment. "I should be sorry to believe you were not, for the little girl's sake. And I have known him a long time; he is a good fellow at bottom."

"Ah!" cried Lady Garnett with a little, quick gesture of her right hand, "that is precisely what he is not. He exaggerates; he must be very secret; no one ever was so frank as he seems to be."

"Why are you saying all this to me?" the other asked after a moment.
"You know I should be very sorry; but what can I do? it's arranged."

"I think you might have prevented it, if you had cared; but, as you say, it is too late now."

"There was no way possible in which I could have prevented it," he said slowly, after an interval which seemed to strike them both as ponderous.

"That was an admission I wanted," she flashed back. "You *would* have prevented it—you would have given worlds to have prevented it."

His retort came as quickly, accented by a smile:

"Not a halfpenny. I make no admissions; and I have not the faintest idea of what you are driving at. I am a pure spectator. To quote yourself, I don't make marriages, nor mar them; I think too ill of life."

"Ah no!" she said; "it is that you are too indolent; you disappoint me."

"It is you, dear lady, who are inconsistent," he cried, laughing.

"No, you disappoint me," she resumed; "seriously, my dear, I am dissatisfied with you. You will not assert yourself; you do nothing; you have done nothing. There never was a man who made less of his life."

He protested laughingly:

"I have had no time; I have been looking after my lungs."

"Ah, you are incorrigible," she exclaimed, rising; "let us go and find Mary. I give you up; or, rather, I give myself up, as an adviser. For, after all, you are right—there is nothing worth doing in this bad world except looking after one's lung, or whatever it may be."

"Perhaps not even that," said Philip, as he followed her from the room; "even that, after a time, becomes monotonous."

CHAPTER XIV

It occurred to Lightmark one evening, as he groped through the gloom of his studio, on his way to bed, after assisting at a very charming social gathering at the Sylvesters', that as soon as he was married he would have to cut Brodonowski's. The reasons he gave himself were plausible enough, and, indeed, he would have found himself the only Benedict among this horde of wild bachelors. The informal circle was of such recent association that, so far, no precedent for matrimony had occurred, and it was more than doubtful how the experiment might be received. In any case, he told himself, he could not be expected to introduce people like Oswyn and McAllister to his wife—or, rather, to Mrs. Sylvester's daughter. Oswyn was plainly impossible, and McAllister's devotion to tobacco so inordinate that it had come to be a matter of common belief that he smoked short pipes in his sleep.

Then he had dismissed the subject; the long, pleasant holiday in Switzerland intervened, and it was only on his return, late in the autumn, that the question again presented itself, as he turned from the threshold of the house in Park Street, where he had been dining, and half unconsciously took the familiar short cut towards Turk Street. He paused for a deliberate instant when he had hailed the first passing hansom, and then told the man to drive to Piccadilly Circus.

"I *must* go there a few times more, if only to break it off gently," he reflected, "and I want to see old Rainham. It is stupid of me not to have written to him—yes, stupid! Wonder if he has heard? I mustn't give *him* up, at any rate. We'll—we'll ask him to dinner, and all that sort of thing. And what the deuce am I going to send to the Academy? Thank goodness, I have enough Swiss sketches to work up for the other galleries to last me for years. But the Academy——"

Then he lost himself in contemplative enjoyment of the familiar vista of Regent Street, the curved, dotted lines of crocus-coloured lamps, fading in the evening fog, the flitting, ruby-eyed cabs, and the calm, white arc-lights, set irregularly about the circus, dulling the grosser gas. He owned to himself that he had secretly yearned for London; that his satisfaction on leaving the vast city was never so great as his joy on again setting foot upon her pavements.

The atmosphere of the long, low room, with its anomalous dark ceiling and grotesquely-decorated walls, was heavily laden with the incense of tobacco and a more subtile odour, which numbered among its factors whisky and absinthe. The slippered, close-cropped waiter, who, by popular report, could speak five languages, and usually employed a mixture of two or three, was still clearing away the débris of protracted dinners; and a few men sat about, in informal groups, playing dominoes, chatting, or engrossed in their Extra Specials. The fire shone cheerfully beneath the high mantel, and the pleasant lamplight lent a mellow glow, which was vaguely suggestive of Dutch interiors, as it flickered on the dark wooden floor, and glanced from the array of china on the dresser in the corner.

When Lightmark entered, closing the door briskly on the foggy, chill October night, he was greeted warmly and demonstratively. The fraternity which made Brodonowski's its head-quarters generously admired his genius, and, for the most part, frankly envied his good-fortune. The younger men respected him as a man who had seen life; and the narratives with which he occasionally favoured them produced in such of his hearers feelings very different to those which older men, like Oswyn, expressed by a turn of the eyebrow or a shrug. They were always ready enough to welcome him, to gather round him, and to drink with him; and this, perhaps, expresses the limits of their relation.

"Lightmark, by Jove!" cried one of them, waving his pipe in the air, as the new-comer halted in the low doorway, smiling in a rather bewildered manner as he unbuttoned his overcoat. "Welcome to the guerilla camp! And a dress suit! These walls haven't enclosed such a thing since you went away. This is indeed an occasion!"

Lightmark passed from group to group, deftly parrying, and returning the chorus of friendly thrusts, and shaking hands with the affability which was so characteristic a feature of his attitude toward them.

The man he looked for, the friend whom he intended to honour with a somewhat tardy confidence of his happiness, was not there. When he asked for Rainham, he was told that "the dry-docker," as these flippant youngsters familiarly designated the silent man, whom they secretly revered, had gone for an after-dinner stroll, or perchance to the theatre, with Oswyn.

"With Oswyn?" queried Lightmark, with the shadow of a frown.

"Oh, Oswyn and he are getting very thick!" said Copal. "They are almost as inseparable as you two used to be. I'm afraid you will find yourself cut out. Three is an awkward number, you know. But when did you come back? When are you going to show us your sketches? And how long did you stay in Paris?... You *didn't* stop in Paris? This won't do, you know. I say, Dupuis, here's a man who didn't stop in Paris! Ask him if he wants to insult you."

"Ah, mon cher!" expostulated the Frenchman, looking up from his game of dominoes, "I would not stop in London if I could help it."

"Oh, shut up, Copal!" said Lightmark good-humouredly. "I was with ladies—Dupuis will sympathize with me there, eh, *mon vieux*?—and they wanted to stay at Lucerne until the last minute. So we came straight through."

"Then you haven't seen Sarah in 'Cleopatra,' and we were relying on you for an unvarnished account. Ladies, too! See here, my boy, you won't get any good out of touring about the Continent with ladies. Hang it all! I believe it'll come true, after all?"

"Very likely—what?"

"Oh, well, they said—I didn't believe it, but they said that you were going to desert the camp, and prance about with corpulent R.A.'s in Hanover Square."

"And so would we all, if we got the chance," said McAllister cynically.

And after the general outcry which followed this suggestion, the conversation drifted back to the old discussion of the autumn shows, the pastels at the Grosvenor, and the most recent additions to the National Gallery.

When at last Rainham came into the room, following, with his habitual half-timid air, the shambling figure of the painter Oswyn, it struck Lightmark that he had grown older, and that he had, as it were, assimilated some of the intimate disreputability of the place: it would no longer have been possible to single him out as a foreign unit in the circle, or to detect in his mental attitude any of the curiosity of the casual seeker after new impressions, the Philistine in Bohemia. There was nothing but pleasure in the slight manifestation of surprise which preceded his frank greeting of Lightmark, a greeting thoroughly English in its matter-of-fact want of demonstrativeness, and the avoidance of anything likely to attract the attention of others.

Oswyn seemed less at his ease; there was an extra dash of nervous brusqueness in the sarcastic welcome which he offered to the new-comer; and although there was a vacant seat in the little circle, of which Copal and Lightmark formed the nucleus, and to which Rainham had joined himself, he shuffled off to his favourite corner, and buried himself in "Gil Blas" and an abnormally thick cloud of tobacco-smoke.

Rainham gazed after him for a moment or two with a puzzled expression.

"Amiable as ever!" said Lightmark, with a laugh. "Poor old beggar! Have a cigarette? You ought to give up pipes. Haven't you been told that cigarettes are—what is it?—'the perfect type——?'"

"Oh, chestnuts!" interposed Copal, "that's at least six months old. And it's rot, too! Do you know what McAllister calls them? Spittle and tissue. Brutal, but expressive. But I say, old man, won't Mrs. Thingumy drop on you for smoking in your dress-coat? Or—or—— No, break it to me gently. You don't mean to say that you possess *two*? I really feel proud of having my studio next door to you."

"Copal is becoming quite an humorist," Lightmark suggested in an impartial manner. "What a wag it is! Keep it up, my boy. By the way, Mrs. Grumbit has been talking about your 'goings on,' as she calls them: she's apparently very much exercised in her mind as to the state of your morals. She told me she had to take you in with the matutinal milk three times last week. She wants me to talk to you like a father. It won't do, you know."

"I should like to hear you, Dick," said Rainham lazily. "Fire away!
But who is Mrs. Grumbit?"

"Oh, she's our housekeeper—the lady who dusts the studio, you know, and gives the models tea and good advice. She's very particular as to the models: she won't let us paint from any who don't come up to her standard of propriety. And the worst of it is that the properest girls are always the ugliest. I don't know——"

"Before you proceed with this highly original disquisition," interrupted Copal, "I think you ought to be warned that we have recently formed a Society for the Protection of Reputations, models' and actresses' in particular. It was McAllister's idea. You now have the honour of being in the headquarters, the committee-room of the society, and anything like slander, or even truth, will be made an example of."

"Don't you find it rather difficult to spread your sheltering wings over what doesn't exist?" hazarded Lightmark amusedly.

"Ah, I knew you would say that! You see, that's just where we come in. We talk about their morals and reputations until they begin to imagine they have some, and they unconsciously get induced to live up to them. See? It's rather mixed, but it works beautifully. Ask the vice-president! Rainham holds that proud office. I may remark that I am treasurer, and the subscription is half a guinea, which goes towards the expenses of providing light refreshments for the,—the beneficiaries."

"This is really very interesting! Rainham vice-president, too! I thought he looked rather—rather worn by the cares of the office. You must make me a member at once. But who's president?"

"President? Who *is* president, McAllister? I really forget. You see, whenever the president is caught speaking too candidly of any of our clients' characters, we pass a vote of censure, and depose him, and he has to stand drinks. The competition isn't so keen as it used to be. If you would like to stand—for the office, I mean—I dare say there will be an opening soon.... Well, I must be off: I'm afraid of Mrs. Grumbit, and—yes, by Jove!—I've forgotten my latchkey again! Of course you're not coming yet, Dick? Come and breakfast with me to-morrow. Good-night, you fellows!"

"Copal has been in great form to-night," said Lightmark, after the door had closed on him, getting up and stretching himself. "What does it mean? Joy at my return? Fatted calf?"

"No doubt, my boy, no doubt," growled McAllister humorously, on his way to the door. "But you must bear in mind, too, the circumstance that the laddie's just sold a picture."

"Good business!" ejaculated Lightmark, as he reflected to himself that perhaps that despaired-of fiver would be repaid after all.

About midnight most of the men left. Rainham remained, and Lightmark, who professed himself too lazy to move. Rainham lapsed into his familiar state of half-abstraction, while his friend cross-examined a young sculptor fresh from Rome.

At the next table Oswyn was holding forth, with eager gesticulations and the excitement of the hour in his eyes, on the subject of a picture which he contemplated painting in oils for exhibition at the Salon next year. Rainham had heard it all before; still, he listened with a keen appreciation of the wonderful touch with which the little, dishevelled artist enlarged on the capabilities of his choice, the possibilities of colour and treatment. The picture was to be painted at the dock, and the painter had already achieved a daringly suggestive impression in pastels of the familiar night-scene which he now described: the streaming, vivid torches, their rays struggling and drowning in the murky water, glimmering faintly in the windows of the black warehouse barely suggested at the side; the alert, swarming sailors, busy with ropes and tackle; and in the middle the dark, steep leviathan, fresh from the sea-storms, growing, as it were, out of the impenetrable chaos of the foggy background, in which the river-lights gleamed like opals set in dull ebony.

When the tide of inspiration failed the speaker, as it soon did, Lightmark continued to look at him askance, with an air of absent consideration turning to uneasiness. There was a general silence, broken only by the occasional striking of a match and the knocking of pipe against boot-heel. Soon the young sculptor discovered that he had missed his last train, and fled incontinently. Oswyn settled himself back in his chair, as one who has no regard for time, and rolled a cigarette, the animation with which he had spoken now only perceptible in the points of colour in either cheek. Rainham and Lightmark left him a few minutes later, the last of the revellers, drawing the cat with the charred end of a match on the back of an envelope, and too deeply engrossed to notice their departure.

The fog had vanished, and the moon shone softly, through a white wreath of clouds, over the straggling line of house-tops. The narrow, squalid, little street was deserted, and the sound of wheels in the busier thoroughfare at the end was very intermittent.

Lightmark buttoned his gloves deliberately, and drew a long breath of the night air before he broke the silence.

"It's on occasions like this that I wish Bloomsbury and Kensington lay in the same direction—from here, you know; we should save a fortune in cab-fares.... But—but that wasn't what I wanted to say. Philip, my dear fellow, congratulate me."

He paused for a minute looking at the other curiously, with something of a melodramatic pose. Rainham had his face turned rather away, and was gazing at the pale reflection of the moonlight in one of the opposite windows.

"I know," he said simply. "I *do* congratulate you—from the bottom of my heart. And I hope you will make her happy." Then he turned and looked Lightmark in the face. "I suppose you *do* love her, Dick?"

"I suppose I do. But how the deuce did you know anything about it? I have been blaming myself, needlessly it appears, for not letting you hear of it. Has it—has it been in the papers?"

Rainham laughed in spite of himself.

"Approaching marriage of a celebrated artist? No, Dick, I don't think it has. Lady Garnett told me more than a week ago."

"Oh," said Dick blankly. "I—I'm much obliged to her. I thought perhaps it was the Colonel; I wrote to him, you know, and I thought he was a discreet old bird. But how did Lady Garnett know?"

"She seemed to think it was no secret," said Rainham, with a suggestion of apology in his tone; "and, of course, she knows that I am——"

"My best friend," interposed the other impulsively. "So you are. And I ought to have told you; I was a brute. And I feel like the devil about it.... Well, it can't be helped. Will you have this cab, or shall I?"

Rainham drew back with a gesture of abnegation, as the driver reined the horse back upon its haunches with a clatter.

"I'm going to walk, I think. Only up to Bloomsbury, you know.
Good-night, Dick. I hope you'll be very happy, both of you."

When the cab drove off, Rainham stood still for a minute and watched it out of sight. Then he started and seemed to pull himself together.

"I wish I knew!" he said aloud to himself, as he stepped rapidly towards the East. "Well, we'll be off to Bordighera now, *mon vieux*. We've lost Dick, I think, and we've lost——"

The soliloquy died away in a sigh and a pathetic shrug.

CHAPTER XV

A day or two later, when Rainham called in the afternoon at the Kensington studio to announce his approaching flight from England, he found Mrs. Sylvester and Eve in occupation, and a sitting in progress. His greeting of Eve was somewhat constrained. He seemed to stumble over the congratulations, the utterance of which usage and old acquaintance demanded; and he was more at his ease when the ice was fairly broken.

"I expected to find you here," he said, addressing Mrs. Sylvester. "I have been to your house, and they told me you would probably be at the studio—*the* studio—so I came on."

"Good boy, good boy!" said Lightmark, with as much approbation in his voice as the presence of the stick of a paint-brush between his teeth would allow. "You'll excuse our going on a little longer, won't you? It'll be too dark in a few minutes."

"You don't look well, Philip," remarked Mrs. Sylvester presently, with a well-assumed air of solicitude. "You ought to have come to Lucerne with us, instead of spending all the summer in town."

"Yes; why *didn't* you, Philip?" cried Eve reproachfully. "It would have been so nice—oh, I'm so sorry, Dick, I didn't mean to move—you really ought to have come."

"Well, there was the dock, you see, and business and all that sort of thing. I can't always neglect

business, you know."

Lightmark asserted emphatically that he *didn't* know, while, on the other hand, Mrs. Sylvester was understood to remark, with a certain air of mystery, that she could quite understand what kept Philip in town.

"Don't you think I might have been rather—rather a fifth wheel?" suggested Rainham feebly, entirely ignoring Mrs. Sylvester's remark, to which, indeed, he attached no special meaning.

"Spare our blushes, old man," expostulated Dick. "It would have been awfully jolly. You would have been such a companion for Charles, you know," he added, with a malicious glance over his shoulder. "Oh dear! fog again. I think I must release you now, Eve. Tell me what you think of the portrait, now that I've worked in the background, Philip. Mrs. Sylvester, now don't you think I was right about the flowers?"

There was, in fact, a charming, almost virginal delicacy and freshness of air and tone about the picture. The girl's simple, white dress, with only—the painter had so far prevailed over the milliner,—only a suggestion of bright ribands at throat and waist; the quaint chippendale chair, the sombre Spanish leather screen, which formed the background, and the pot of copper-coloured chrysanthemums, counterparts of the little cluster which Eve wore in the bosom of her gown, on a many-cornered Turkish table at the side: it had all the gay realism of modern Paris without losing the poetry of the old school, or attaining the hardness of the new.

Rainham looked at it attentively, closely, for a long time. Then he said simply:

"It's the best thing you have done, Dick. It will be one of the best portraits in the Academy, and you ought to get a good place on the line."

"I'm so glad!" cried Eve rapturously, clasping her hands. "On the line! But," and her voice fell, "it isn't to go to the Academy. Mamma has promised Sir—Dick is going to send it to the Grosvenor. But it's pretty much the same, isn't it? Oh, now show Philip the sketch you have made for your Academy picture," she added, pointing to a board which stood on another easel, with a protecting veil over the paper which was stretched upon it. "You know *he* can tell us if it's like the real thing."

"If it's the Riviera, or—or dry docks," added Rainham modestly.

But Lightmark stepped forward hastily, after a moment's hesitation, and put his hand on the drawing just as Eve was preparing with due ceremony to unveil it.

"Excuse me, I don't want to show it to Rainham yet. I—I want to astonish him, you know."

He laughed rather uneasily, and Eve gave way, with some surprise in her eyes, and a puzzled cloud on her pretty brow, and went and seated herself on the settee at her mother's side.

"He's afraid of my critical eye, Mrs. Sylvester," said Rainham gravely. "That's what it is. Well, if you don't show it me now, you won't have another opportunity yet awhile."

"That's it, Eve," exclaimed Lightmark hastily. "I'm afraid of his critical what's-his-name. You know he can be awfully severe sometimes, the old beggar, and I don't want him to curl me up and annihilate me while you're here."

"I don't believe he would, if it were *ever* so bad," said Eve, only half satisfied. "And it isn't; it's awfully good. But it's too dark to see anything now."

"By Jove, so it is! Mrs. Sylvester, I'm awfully sorry; I always like the twilight myself. Rainham, would you mind ringing the bell. Thanks. Oh, don't apologize; the handle always comes off. I never use it myself, except when I have visitors. I go and shout in the passage; but Mrs. Grumbit objects to being shouted for when there are visitors on the premises. Great hand at etiquette, Mrs. Grumbit is."

The lady in question arrived at this juncture, fortified by a new and imposing cap, and laden with candles and a tea-tray, which she deposited, with much clatter of teaspoons, on a table by Mrs. Sylvester's side.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grumbit. And now will you come to a poor bachelor's assistance, and pour out tea, Mrs. Sylvester? And I'm very sorry, but I haven't got any sugar-tongs. I generally borrow Copal's, but the beggar's gone out and locked his door. You ladies will have to imagine you're at Oxford."

Mrs. Sylvester looked bewildered, and paused with one hand on the
Satsuma teapot.

"Don't you know, mamma, it isn't—form, don't you say? to have sugar-tongs at Oxford? It was one of the things Charles always objected to. I believe he tried to introduce them, but people always threw them out of the window. *I* think they're an absurd invention."

Rainham, as he watched her slender fingers with their dimpled knuckles, daintily selecting the most eligible lumps out of the cracked blue-and-white china teacup which did service for a sugar-basin, unhesitatingly agreed with her; though Mrs. Sylvester seemed to think her argument that sugar-tongs could be so pretty—"Queen Anne, you know"—entirely unanswerable.

It was not until Mrs. Grumbit broke in upon the cosy little party to announce that the ladies' carriage was at the door that Rainham remembered the real object of his expedition.

Then, when Eve, warmly wrapped in her furs, and with the glow of the firelight still in her face, held out a small gloved hand with a smiling "Au revoir, Philip," he shook his head rather sadly.

"I'm afraid it must be good-bye—for some time, at least. I came to tell you that I am on the wing again. Doctor's orders, you know. I shall be in Bordighera on Friday, I expect."

"And to-day's Tuesday," complained Eve.

"And I was just going to ask you to dine with us, one day soon," expostulated her mother.

"You must come over at Christmas, old man," said Dick cheerfully. "For the wedding, you know. You've got to give me away, and be bridesmaid, and all that sort of thing."

Rainham shook his head again.

"I'm afraid not. You don't know my doctor. He wouldn't hear of it. No, you won't see me in town again before May, unless there's a radical reform in the climate."

"Couldn't—couldn't we put it off till May?" suggested Eve naïvely.

But the suggestion was not received with anything approaching enthusiasm.

"Good-bye, Philip," said Eve again, when her lover was handing Mrs. Sylvester into the little brougham. "Mind you take great care of yourself."

Rainham returned the frank pressure of her hand.

"Good-bye," he said.

CHAPTER XVI

After all, Philip Rainham loitered on his way South. He spent a week in Paris, and passing on by way of the Mont Cenis, lingered in Turin, a city with a treacherous climate and ugly rectangular streets, which he detested, out of sheer idleness, for three days. On the fourth, waking to find winter upon him suddenly, and the ground already dazzling from a night's snow, he was seized with panic—an ancient horror of falling ill in strange places returning to him with fresh force, as he felt already the chill of the bleak plains of Piedmont in his bones. It sent him hurrying to his destination, Bordighera, by the first train; and it was not too soon: the misused lung asserted itself in a hæmorrhage, and by the time he reached the fair little town running out so coquettishly, amid its olive yards and palm-trees, into the blue Mediterranean, he was in no proper temper to soliloquize on its charms.

The doctor had a willing slave in him for three weeks; then he revolted, and found himself sufficiently cured to sit when the sun shone—and sometimes when it did not—covered in a gray shawl, smoking innumerable cigarettes on a green, blistered seat in the garden of his hotel. He replied to the remonstrating that he had been ill before this bout, and would surely be ill again, but that temporarily he was a well man. It was only when he was alone that he could afford to admit how savage a reminder of his disabilities he had received. And, indeed, his days of captivity had left their mark on him—the increased gauntness of his figure apart—in a certain irritation and nerve distress, which inclined him for once to regret the multitude of acquaintance that his long habit of sojourning there had obtained. The clatter of English tongues at *table d'hôte* began to weary him; the heated controversy which waged over the gambling-tables of the little principality across the bay left him arid and tired; and the gossip of the place struck him as even more tedious and unprofitable than of old. He could no longer feign a decent interest in the flirtations of the three Miss Smiths, as they were recounted to him nightly by Mrs. Engel, the sympathetic widow who sat next to him, and whose sympathy he began, in the

enlightenment of his indisposition, to distrust.

The relief with which he hailed the arrival of the post and a budget of letters from England surprised himself. It struck him that there was something feverish and strange in this waiting for news. Even to himself he did not dare to define his interest, confessing how greatly he cared.

Lightmark's epistles just then were frequent and brief. The marriage was definitely fixed; the Colonel, his uncle, had been liberal beyond his hopes: a house in Grove Road of some splendour had been taken for the young couple, who were to install themselves there when the honeymoon, involving a sojourn in Paris and a descent into Italy, was done. Hints of a visit to Rainham followed, which at first he ignored; repeated in subsequent epistles with a greater directness, their prospect filled him with a pleasure so strangely mixed with pain that his pride took alarm. He thought it necessary to disparage the scheme in a letter to Lightmark, of a coldness which disgusted himself. Remorse seized him when it had been despatched, and he cherished a hope that it might fail of its aim. This, however, seemed improbable, when a fortnight had elapsed and it had elicited no reply. From Lady Garnett, at the tail of one of those long, witty, railing letters, in which the old lady excelled, he heard that the marriage was an accomplished fact, and the birds had flown. Mrs. Lightmark! the phrase tripped easily from his tongue when he mentioned it at dinner to his neighbour, Mrs. Engel, to whom the persons were known. Later in his room, face to face with the facts which it signified, he had an intolerable hour. He had extinguished his candle, and sat, partially undressed, in a mood of singular blankness by the fire of gnarled olive logs, which had smouldered down into one dull, red mass; and Eve's face was imaged there to his sick fancy as he had seen it last in Dick's studio in the vague light of an October evening, and yet with a certain new shadow, half sad and half reproachful, in the beautiful eyes. After all, had he done his best for the child? Now that this thing was irrevocable and complete, a host of old misgivings and doubts, which he had believed long ago banished, broke in upon him. He had only asked that she should be happy—at least, he said, it had never been a question of himself. He certainly knew nothing to Lightmark's discredit, nothing which could have justified him in interfering, even if interference could have prevailed. The two had fallen in love with one another, and, the man not being visibly bad, the marriage had come about; was there more to say? And yet Rainham's ill-defined uneasiness still questioned and explored. A hundred little episodes in his friendship with the brilliant young painter, dismissed as of no import at the time, returned to him—instances, as it seemed now to his morbid imagination, in which that character, so frank and so enigmatic, rang scarcely true. And suddenly the tragical story of Kitty Crichton intruded itself before him, with all its shameful possibilities. Could Lightmark have lied to him? Had not his sudden acquiescence in the painter's rendering of the thing implied a lack of courage—been one of those undue indolences, to which he was so prone, rather than any real testimony of his esteem? Would not a more rigorous inquiry, a little patient investigation into so curious a coincidence, have been the more seemly part, as much for his friend's sake as for Eve's, so that this haunting, intolerable doubt might have been for ever put away—as surely it would have been? The contrary issue was too horrible for supposition. And he ended by mocking at himself with a half-sigh for carrying fastidiousness so far, recognising the mundane fitness of the match, and that heroic lovers, such as his tenderness for the damsel would have had, are, after all, rare, perhaps hardly existing out of visions in a somewhat gross world, where the finest ore is not without its considerable alloy.

Two days later, as he sat upon his wonted seat, in lazy enjoyment of the midday sun, a *vetturino*, heralded far down the road by the jingle of his horse's bells, deposited a couple at the door whose faces were familiar. At *table d'hôte*, though he was separated from the new-comers by half a dozen covers, he had leisure to identify them as the Dollonds; and by-and-by the roving, impartial gaze of the Academician's wife encountering him, he could assure himself that the recognition was mutual. They came together at the end of *déjeuner*, and presently, at Mrs. Dollond's instigation, started for a stroll through the olives towards the old town.

"Are you wintering here?" he asked after a moment, feeling that an affirmative answer would hardly be to his taste.

But Mrs. Dollond, with an upward inclination of her vivacious shoulders, repudiated the notion. A whim of her own, she explained to Rainham confidentially, as they came abreast in the narrowing path, while Mr. Dollond strolled a little behind, cutting down vagrant weeds absently with his heavy oak stick.

"Hugh wanted a month's holiday; and I wanted"—she dropped her voice, glancing over her shoulder with an air of mock mystery—"yes, Mr. Rainham, you must not be shocked, but I wanted a fortnight at Monte Carlo; and so I may as well tell you that our destination is there. We came from San Remo this morning, meaning to drive over right away; but this place was so pretty that Hugh insisted on staying."

Rainham helped her up a difficult terrace, and remarked urbanely that he was in fortune's way.

She threw him a brilliant smile.

"Ah, Mr. Rainham, if we had only known that you were here! then we might have arranged differently; we could have stayed here pastorally, and driven up to that delightful little place on the hill. Tell me, how is it called?"

She pointed with her scarlet parasol—they had emerged now on to the main road—at a little, turreted town perched far above them on the brow of an olive-crested hill.

"It is Sasso," said Rainham. "I should have been delighted to come with you, but I am afraid it is out of the reach of carriages, and of invalids. You might go there on a mule."

"Oh no!" she laughed; "I think on the whole we shall be more comfortable at the Hôtel de Paris. Can't we induce you to come with us now?"

Rainham lifted his eyebrows, smiling a little and groping vaguely for an excuse, while Mrs. Dollond turned to her husband with a look which demanded corroboration of her speech.

"Yes, Mr. Rainham, do come, if you possibly can," supplemented Mr. Dollond, coming forward in burlesque obedience. "We are boring each other horribly—I can answer for myself—and it would be an act of real charity."

"Well, Hugh, I am ashamed of you! You really ought not to say such things. If you can't behave better than that, you may go on maltreating those thistles. I declare we have left a regular trail of heads in our wake,—like the Revolution, or Judge Jeffreys."

"Bloody Jeffreys!" suggested Mr. Dollond mildly.

His wife turned to Rainham with the little despairing gesture which she reckoned one of her most effective mannerisms.

"Is not he dreadful? But you *will* come, Mr. Rainham? I am sure you know all about systems, and—and things. You know I insist on winning; so I must have a system, mustn't I?"

"Ah, Mrs. Dollond," said her companion humorously, "you remind me that the only system I have is a very bad one. I am afraid my doctor would not trust me with it at Monaco."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Dollond reflectively; "but you need not gamble, you know! You can help me, and see that I don't get cheated. Hugh and I will see your doctor, and promise to take care of you. Hugh shall carry your shawl—he likes carrying shawls."

"He is getting used to it," interposed her husband dryly.

"Ah, well, that is settled," continued the lady gaily, leaving her victim no time to formulate more than the lamest of protests.

By this time they had reached the middle of the cape, and they stood for a moment by the lazy fountain looking down at the Marina straggling below the palms; and beyond, at the outline of the French coast, with white Mentone set in it, precisely, like a jewel.

"The dear little place!" cried Mrs. Dollond in a rapture; "I suppose Monaco is behind that cape. I wish we could see it. And it would not look a bit wicked from here. I declare, I should like to live there!"

"I've no doubt you would, my dear!" said her husband; "but you sha'n't, so long as I have any voice in the matter. I don't get so much for my pictures that I can afford to contribute to M. Blanc's support."

Rainham followed the direction of her eyes absently. "I have half a mind to go with you after all," he said.

"Of course," said Mrs. Dollond; "it will do you worlds of good; we will drive you over with us to-morrow. And now, Mr. Rainham, if you don't mind, I think we will sit down. I can see that Hugh is getting out his sketch-book."

She sank down as she spoke upon one of the rough stone seats which are scattered about the cape. Mr. Dollond had ensconced himself behind them, and was phlegmatically starting on a rough study of the old town, which rose in a ragged, compact mass a hundred yards away, with its background of sad olives and sapphire sky.

Rainham followed the lady's example, tired himself by their scramble under the hot sun, and contented himself for a while by turning a deaf ear and polite, little mechanical gestures to her

perennial flow of inconsequent chatter, which seemed quite impervious to fatigue, while he rested his eyes on the charming prospect at their feet; the ragged descent of red rocks, broken here and there by patches of burnt grass and pink mallows, the little sea-girt chapel of St. Ampelio, and the waste of violet sea. His inattentive ear was caught at last by the name of Lightmark occurring, recurring, in the light eddy of his companion's speech, and he turned to her with an air of apologetic inquiry.

"Yes," Mrs. Dollond was observing, "it was quite a grand wedding; rather pretentious, you know, we thought it, for the Sylvesters—but, oh, a great affair! We stayed in London for it, although Hugh wanted to take a holiday. I could tell you all about the bridesmaids' dresses, and Mrs. Lightmark's, but I suppose you would not care. She looked very charming!"

"Yes?" said Rainham, with a curious light in his averted eyes. Then he added, somewhat abruptly, "Brides always do, I suppose?"

"Of course, if they have a good dressmaker. And the presents—there was quite a show. Your pearl necklace—how I envied her that! But, after all, weddings are so much alike."

"I have never been to one," said the other absently.

"Ah, then you ought, if only to get a little experience before your own time comes, you know. Yes, you really ought to have been there. It was quite a foregone conclusion that you would be best man. It was so funny to see Colonel Lightmark in that *rôle*, with that young Mr. Sylvester giving away the bride. It would have been so much better if they could have changed parts."

"I am sorry to interrupt you," said Mr. Dollond, getting up and putting away his sketch-book; "I can't sketch; the place is full of locusts, and they are getting into my boots."

Mrs. Dollond started up, shaking her skirts apprehensively, with an affectation of horror.

"How I do hate jumping things! And, anyhow, I suppose we ought to be getting back to our hotel, or we shall be late for dinner. You don't know what Hugh can be like when one is late for dinner. He is capable of beginning without me."

Rainham had risen with a ready response to her words, bordering almost on the ludicrous; and half an hour later he was congratulating himself that at least six seats intervened between his place and that of Mrs. Dollond at the dinner-table.

And yet on the morrow he found himself, and not without a certain relief, sitting beside the mundane, little lady, and turning to her incessant ripple of speech something of the philosophic indifference to which her husband had attained, while a sturdy pair of gaily-caparisoned horses, whose bells made a constant accompaniment, not unpleasing in its preciseness, to the vagueness of Rainham's thought, hurried them over the dusty surface of the Cornice.

Certainly the excursion into which he had been inveigled, rather from indolence than from any freak of his inclination, afforded him, now that it was undertaken, a certain desultory pleasure to which he had long been a stranger. Into the little shrug, comic and valedictory, of Mrs. Dollond's shoulders, as they passed the *Octroi*, a gesture discreetly mocking of the conditions they had left, he could enter with some humour, the appreciation of a resident who still permitted himself at times the licence of a casual visitor on his domain.

"Tell me," Mrs. Dollond had asked, as they rattled out of the further gate of Ventimiglia, "why did the excellent lady who tried to monopolize conversation in the *salon* last night appear so scandalized when I told her where we were going? Was I—surely now, Mr. Rainham, I was not indiscreet?"

"Ah, Mrs. Dollond," said Rainham humorously, "you know it was a delicate subject. At our hotel we don't recognise Monte Carlo. We are divided upon the other topics in which we are interested: the intrigues of the lawn tennis club, and the orthodoxy of the English chaplain. But we are all orthodox about Monte Carlo, and Mrs. Engel is the pillar of our faith. We think it's——"

"The devil?" interrupted Mr. Dollond, bending forward a little, with his bland smile.

"Precisely," said Rainham; "that is what Mrs. Engel would say. Oh no, Mrs. Dollond, we don't drive over to Monte Carlo from Bordighera. At Mentone it is more regular; you see, you can get there from Mentone pretty much by accident. But from Bordighera it has too much the appearance of being a preconcerted thing."

"It was particularly preconcerted here," put in the Academician with a yawn, and Mrs. Dollond remarked innocently that people who wintered in these places must have very singular ideas.

The prospect was increasing in beauty as they wound their way along the historical road, now rendered obscure by the thick groves of olives on either side, now varied by little glimpses of the sea, which again they skirted from time to time, and so nearly that, as Mrs. Dollond remarked, it was like driving along the sands. Rainham identified spots for them as the prospect widened, naming sea-girt Mortola with its snug château, Mentone lying placidly with its two bays in the westering sun, and, now and again, notorious peaks of the Alpes Maritimes which bounded the horizon beyond. At the frontier bridge of St. Louis, where they alighted to meet the requirements of the Douane, even Mrs. Dollond's frivolity was changed into silent admiration of the savage beauty of the gorge. They stood for a while leaning upon the desolate bridge, turning reluctantly from the great beetling rocks of the ravine above to gaze with strange qualms into the yawning precipice beneath. Rainham pointed out the little thread of white which was the one dangerous pathway down the gorge, confessing his sympathy with the fatal fascination with which it had filled so many—he mentioned the name of a young Englishman staying at Mentone the year before amongst the number—at the ultimate cost of their lives.

"Horrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Dollond, retreating to the carriage, which awaited them on the French side of the bridge. "I shall dream of it to-night."

"I have dreamt of it," said Rainham simply. "When I was a boy I used to dream of climbing to the edge of the world and falling over. Nowadays, I dream of dropping over the Pont St. Louis: the sensation is much the same."

"A very disagreeable one, I should think," said Mrs. Dollond, settling herself in her wraps with a little shudder.

"No," said Rainham, with a smile. "I think, Mrs. Dollond, it was rather nice: it was the waking up which was disagreeable."

They made their breakfast—a very late one—at Mentone, and dawdled over it, Mr. Dollond having disappeared at the last moment, and been found, after a lengthy search, sketching, in serene disregard of the inappropriateness of the occasion, a doorway in St. Michele.

When at last they drove into the principality, the evening was well advanced. Even the irrepressible Mrs. Dollond was not to be enticed by the brilliant windows of the Casino from the sofa upon which she had stretched herself luxuriously, when their extensive dinner was at an end; and Rainham with a clear conscience could betake himself immediately to bed. But, in spite of his fatigue, he lay for a long time awake; the music of the concert-room, the strains of M. Oudshorn's skilful orchestra, floated in through the half-closed *persiennes* of his room, and later mingled with his dreams, tinging them, perhaps, with some of that indefinable plaintiveness, a sort of sadness essentially ironical, with which all dance music, even the most extravagant, is deeply pervaded.

A week later, as from the window of the receding Italian train he caught a last glimpse of the Dollonds on the crowded platform, he waved a polite farewell to them with a sensible relief. It was a week in which Mrs. Dollond had been greatly on his hands, for her husband had made no secret of the willingness with which he had accepted Rainham's escort for the indefatigable lady amongst the miscellaneous company of the tables, leaving him free to study the picturesque in the less heated atmosphere which he preferred. And a week of Mrs. Dollond, as Rainham was obliged to confess, was not good for any man to undergo.

Nor was Mrs. Dollond's verdict upon their acquaintance, who had become for the space of seven days an intimate, more complimentary.

"I suppose he was better than nobody," she remarked with philosophy as they made their way up the terrace. "He looked after my stakes, and did not play much himself, and was always at hand; but he was really very dull."

"Better than me, I suppose you mean, my dear?" suggested her husband humorously. "Was he so dull? You ought to know; I really have hardly spoken to him."

"Don't be absurd!" she remarked absently. Then she said a little abruptly: "It seems funny, now that one knows him, that there should be those stories."

"Stories? About Rainham?"

Her husband glanced at her with some surprise.

"Yes," she said. "Of course, you never know anything; but he is talked about."

"Ah, poor man!" said Mr. Dollond. "What has he done?"

Mrs. Dollond's fair eyebrows were arched significantly, and Mrs. Dollond's gay shoulders shrugged with a gesture of elision, in which the essence of many scandals, generated and discussed in the discreet undertones of the ladies' hour, was nicely distributed.

"Don't be dense, Hugh! It is quite notorious!"

Mr. Dollond laughed his broad, tolerant laugh.

"Well," he said, "I should never have thought it."

Rainham, reaching his hotel the same afternoon, met Mrs. Engel in the hall; her formal bow, in which frosty disapproval of the sin, and a widow's tenderness for the middle-aged sinner, if repentant, were discreetly mingled, amused if it scarcely flattered him. He was still smiling at his recollection of the interview when the Swiss porter, accosting him in elaborately bad English, informed him that a lady and gentleman, who had left on the previous evening, had made particular inquiries after him. The name, he confessed, escaped him, but if Monsieur pleased—— He produced the visitors' book, in which Rainham read, scarcely now with surprise, the brief inscription, "Mr. and Mrs. Lightmark, from Cannes."

CHAPTER XVII

There was a ceaseless hum of voices in the labyrinth of brilliant rooms, with their atmosphere of transient spring sunshine and permeating, faint odour of fresh paint. Few people came to see the pictures, which covered the walls with a crude patchwork of seas and goddesses, portraits and landscapes: all that by popular repute were worth seeing had been exhibited already to the people who were now invited to view them,—at the studios on Show Sunday, and on the Outsiders' Day. One entered the gloomy gates of Burlington House on the yearly occasion of the Private View because it was, socially, a great public function, in order to see the celebrities, who were sure to be there, from the latest actress to the newest bishop. In one corner a belated critic endeavoured to scratch hasty impressions on his shirt-cuff or the margin of a little square catalogue; in another an interested dealer used his best endeavours to rivet a patron's attention on the merits of his speculative purchase. The providers of the feast were not so much in evidence as their wives and daughters; the artist often affects to despise the occasion, and contents himself with a general survey—frequently limited to his own pictures—on Varnishing Day.

The Hanging Committee had dealt kindly with Lightmark's Academy picture. When it was passed in review before these veterans, after a long procession of inanely smiling portraits, laboured, wooden landscapes, and preternaturally developed heroes, the expression of satiated boredom and damnation of draughts, which variously pervaded the little row of arbitrators, was for a moment dissipated. There was a movement of chairs, followed by an exchange of complimentary murmurs; and the picture was finally niched into a space which happened to fit it between two life-size portraits on the line in one of the smaller rooms.

On the fashionable afternoon Lightmark's work was never without the little admiring crowd which denotes a picture of more than usual interest. The canvas, which had loomed so large in the new studio in Grove Road, was smaller than many of its neighbours, but its sombre strength of colour, relieved by the pale, silvery gold of its wide frame, and the white dresses of the ladies portrayed in the pictures on either side, made it at once noticeable.

The critics next day referred to it as a nocturne in black and gold, and more than one of the daily journals contained an enthusiastic description of the subject—an ocean-steamer entering a Thames graving-dock at night-time, with torch-light effects; and a mist on the river.

Eve fluttered delightedly from room to room with her mother, recurring always to the neighbourhood of her husband's picture, and receiving congratulations by the score. It had been a disappointment to her when her husband, at the eleventh hour, expressed his inability to be present; but even Mrs. Sylvester's remonstrances had failed to move him, and the two ladies had come under the Colonel's escort.

"I didn't know your husband was so nervous," said Mrs. Dollond sceptically. "Is this the effect of matrimony?… Oh, Mrs. Lightmark, do look at that creature in peacock blue! Did you ever see such a gown? Have you seen my husband's pictures? He's got one in every room, nearly. Between you and me, they're all of them pretty bad; but so long as people don't know any better, and buy them, what does it matter? Ah, Colonel Lightmark, how do you do? Of course I've seen your nephew's picture. I've been saying all sorts of nice things about it to Mrs. Lightmark."

"It's pretty good, I suppose," suggested the Colonel radiantly. "Have you seen the *Outcry* this week? There's no end of a good notice about it, and about your husband's pictures, too."

"Really? I wonder who wrote it. I must ask him to dinner, if he's respectable. We never read critiques nowadays. They're so dreadfully rude to Academicians, you know—always talking about 'pot-boilers,' and suggesting that they ought to retire on their laurels. As if laurels were any good! One can't keep a carriage on laurels."

"No, by Jove! it wouldn't be good for the horses. I say, though,
Mrs. Dollond, is one supposed to go through all the rooms?"

"Oh yes," replied the lady composedly; "all except the water-colours, and sculpture, and architecture. One only goes there to flirt, as a rule. Personally, I always get up the pictures from 'Academy Notes,' when I haven't seen them at the studios, you know. Yes; I should like some tea, please, since Mrs. Lightmark has deserted you. Is that Lady Garnett with her? What lovely white hair! I wonder where she gets it."

Lady Garnett shrugged her shoulders a little petulantly after she had made the ghost of a return to Mrs. Dollond's airy greeting.

"My dear," she said, turning to Eve confidentially, "may I confess to you that I am not altogether too fond of that woman? Is she a great friend of yours, or don't you know her well enough to abuse her? I like the husband; he amuses me, though he is rather a bear. Otherwise, I should not see very much of Mrs. Dollond, I promise you."

Eve smiled at the thought of Mr. Dollond's eccentricities, and then her face grew rather grave.

"Shall we go into the lecture-room?" she suggested. "It is cooler there among the statues, and perhaps we shall be able to sit down."

The old lady assented with alacrity.

"Yes," she said; "by all means let us leave these painty pictures, and we will have a chat; you shall tell me of your wanderings. Apropos, did you see anything of our friend Philip? His last letter—a long time ago; he is becoming a bad correspondent—struck me as rather *triste*, even for him. I'm afraid he is not well."

"Yes," said Eve slowly; "we went over to Bordighera one day while we were at Cannes, and we stayed a night at the hotel, but we didn't see Mr. Rainham. He had gone over to Monte Carlo."

"Ah, poor fellow, what an idea! I wonder what dragged him there."

Eve looked at the old lady questioningly for a minute.

"I think he went with the Dollonds," she answered gravely.

"Ah, my dear, no wonder his letter was dull! Then you didn't see him? Well, I suppose he will come back soon. You mustn't be jealous of him, you know. He is very much *lié* with your husband, isn't he?"

"I don't suppose he will see quite so much of him now."

There seemed to be a trace of weariness in the girl's voice as she answered, and Lady Garnett glanced at her sharply before she let her eyes continue their task of wandering in a kind of absent scrutiny of the sculptured exhibits in the room.

"But of course not.... How terrible all these great plaster figures are, and the busts, too! They are so dreary, they have the air of being made for a cemetery. Don't they make you think of tombstones and mausoleums?"

Eve looked at her a little wonderingly.

"Are they very bad? Do you know, I rather like them. Not so much as the pictures, of course; but still I think some of them are charming, though I am rather glad Dick isn't a sculptor. Don't you like that? What is it—Bacchus on a panther?"

"My dear, you are quite right," said the old lady decisively, dropping her tortoise-shell lorgnon into her lap, and suppressing a yawn. "Only, it is you who are charming! I must go to the Grosvenor as soon as it opens to see if your clever husband, who seems to be able to paint everything and everybody, has done you justice.... But you mustn't sit talking to an old grumbler like me any longer. Go back to your picture; Mr. Dollond will pilot you. And if you encounter Mary on the way, tell her that a certain

discontented old lady of her acquaintance wants to be taken home. Au revoir."

About five minutes later Mary Masters found her aunt half asleep. The paint had made her stupid, she said. She could understand now why painters did not improve as they grew older; it was the smell of the paint.

"Ah," she said, as they passed out into the busy whirl of Piccadilly, "how glad I shall be to get back to my Masons and Corots. Though I like that pretty little Mrs. Lightmark.... Poor Philip! Now tell me whom you saw. Charles Sylvester, of course? But no, I am too sleepy now; you shall tell me all about it after dinner."

It was six o'clock before the Colonel was able to deposit his bulky, military person rather stiffly on a cushioned seat, and to remove his immaculate silk hat, with an expression of weary satisfaction. He had devoted all the sunny spring afternoon, (when he might have been at Hurlingham, or playing whist at the "Rag"), to making his way, laboriously and apologetically, from room to room in search of friends and acquaintances, whom, when found, he would convoy strategically into the immediate vicinity of No. 37 in the First Room.

"My nephew's picture," he explained; "nice thing! I don't know much about painting" (he called it paintin') "and art, and all that sort of thing, but I believe it's about as good as they make them."

He had accepted all the inconsistent, murmured criticism almost as a personal tribute; and for the greater part at least of the afternoon his beaming face had completely belied the discomfort occasioned by his severe frock-coat and tightly-fitting patent-leather boots; and his yearning for a comfortable chair, with a box of cigars and a whisky-and-seltzer at his elbow, had been suppressed, rigidly and heroically.

"I suppose it's devilish good," he thought, as he sat waiting for the rest of his party. "People seem to admire those splashes of yellow and black, and all those dirty colours. Personally, I think I prefer the girl in white next door. Hullo, there's Eve!"

"Don't get up, Colonel," said Mrs. Sylvester; "we want to sit here for a little and hear what people say about Richard's picture. They make such amusing remarks sometimes! Not always complimentary; but, then, they often don't know anything about art."

"Yes," said Eve, seating herself, with a delicate consideration for the new dress, which the occasion had demanded, between the Colonel and her mother; "we heard someone say that the flesh in that big Roman picture with the temple, you know—I can't pronounce the name—was like cotton wool—pink cotton wool! Oh, and that the girl in black, with the yellow fan, whose portrait is in the big room, must be at least eight feet high!"

"Now, how the dickens could he tell that!" interposed the Colonel.

"Oh, he was talking very learnedly, about heads and things. How provoking of that old gentleman in the gold spectacles! Standing just in front of Dick's picture with his back to it. He looks just exactly like a millionaire, and he won't look, and he's preventing other people from looking! Do turn him round, uncle, or move him on, or something!"

"Do you see that man there?" whispered Mrs. Sylvester presently, "the tall man with the sandy hair and beard? I think he's a painter. He said just now that Richard's picture was amazingly good, and that he thought he knew where he got the idea from."

"Why, of course," said the Colonel carelessly; "Dick got the idea from that beggar what's-his-name's dock—and a thundering good idea too! I wonder what time they close? Perhaps——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Sylvester, buttoning her gloves, "I suppose we had better go."

The room was nearly empty when McAllister passed before his friend's picture again, after a satisfactory interview with a gentleman from Bond Street on the subject of one of his own. McAllister, whose criticism Mrs. Sylvester had overheard and reported, had recently been elected Associate, owing the honour, according to some malicious people, more to his nationality than to his merit as a painter of cattle and landscapes. The *Outcry*, indeed, with reference to this promotion, and the continued neglect of older artists of greater public repute, had suggested, with its usual impertinence, that the motto of *Lasciate ogni speranza*, which was reported in certain circles to be almost visibly inscribed over the door of the Academicians' Committee-room, should be supplemented by the legend, "No English need apply."

"It's good," he said reflectively, as he stopped in front of the picture, with something like a chuckle on

his lips, and a twinkle in his shrewd, gray eyes. "More than good. You can see the clever French trick in every line of it, and they'll call it one of the pictures of the year. So it is, though there are dozens in the vaults downstairs worth two of it. But I thought this was Oswyn's subject? He was always talking about it. Well, I should like to see what he would have made of it!"

CHAPTER XVIII

As the clock struck five Rainham looked up with an air of relief, flipping negligently across the table the heap of papers which had occupied him since lunch-time.

"We must go into this some other time, Bullen," he remarked with a certain petulance. "I confess things look rather bad; but I suppose they can hold over till to-morrow?"

The foreman assented dubiously, gathering together the despised sheets, and preparing for departure.

"I've done my best, sir," he said a little sullenly; "but it is difficult for things to go smoothly when the master is always away; and you never will take no notice of business letters, you know, sir."

"Yes, yes," said Rainham wearily; "I am sure you have, Bullen. If I go into the Bankruptcy Court, as you so frequently prophesy, it will be entirely my own fault. In the meantime you might tell your wife to send me up some tea—for two, Bullen, please. Mr. Oswyn will be up presently."

The man retired, shutting the door with some ardour. Rainham rose, and, with the little, expansive shrug with which he usually discarded his commercial worries, wandered towards the window. The dock was empty and desolate: the rain, which had prevailed with a persistent dreariness since the morning, built morasses at regular intervals along the dock-side, splashed unceasingly into the stagnant green water which collected in slack seasons within the dock-gates. The dockman stood, one disconsolate figure in the general blankness, with his high boots and oilskins, smoking a short clay pipe by the door of the engine-room; and further out, under the dripping dome of an umbrella, sat Oswyn in a great pea-jacket, smoking, painting the mist, the rain, the white river with its few blurred barges and its background of dreary warehouses, in a supreme disregard of the dank discomfort of his surroundings.

Rainham had tapped three times against the streaming pane before he succeeded in attracting his attention, and then the painter only responded to the wonted signal by an impatient, deprecating flourish of the hand which held the palette. The tea was already simmering on the rickety table in the bow-window, when Oswyn, staggering under his impedimenta, climbed the staircase, and shouldered his way familiarly into the room.

"How fearfully wet you must be!" said his host lazily from the depths of an arm-chair. "Help yourself to a pair of slippers and a dry coat, and have some tea. It's strong enough even for you by this time."

The other had disembarrassed himself of his dripping jacket and overalls, and now kicked off his shoes, with a short laugh. He was never a great talker in the daytime, and the dreary charm of the river world outside was still upon him. He dropped the sketch upon which he had been working rather contemptuously against the wall, where Rainham could see it, and selected a pair of slippers from quite a small heap in the corner by the fireplace.

"I don't mind *your* seeing my work, because you don't talk about it," he said, glancing at Rainham quickly. "I hate people who try to say complimentary things; they don't often mean them, and when they do they talk absolute rot."

"Yes," said the other sympathetically. "Shall I put a slice of lemon in your tea? I suppose I must live up to my reputation and say nothing about your sketch. But I must have it when it's finished! It's always most embarrassing to have to pay personal compliments, though I suppose some people like them."

The painter grunted inarticulately between two sips of tea.

"Like them! Don't your society artists and authors simply wallow in them? Have you got any cigarettes, or papers? I dropped mine into a puddle. Ah, thanks.... That's a pretty face. Whose is it?"

The cigarette case, which Rainham handed to his guest, was a well-worn leather one, a somewhat ladylike article, with a photograph fitted into the dividing flap inside. Before answering the question he looked at the photograph absently for a moment, when the case had been returned to him.

"It's not a very good photograph. It's meant for—for Mrs. Lightmark, when she was a little girl. She gave me the case with the portrait years ago, in Florence."

Oswyn glanced at him curiously and shrewdly through a thin haze of blue smoke, watching him restore the faded, little receptacle almost reverentially to the breast-pocket of his coat.

"Have you been to the Chamber of Horrors?" he asked suddenly, after a silent pause, broken only by the ceaseless lashing of the window by the raindrops.

Rainham looked up with a start, half puzzled, seeking and finding an explanation in the faint, conscious humour which loosened the lines about the speaker's mouth.

"The Chamber of—— Do you mean the R.A.? You do, you most irreverent of mortals! No, I have not been yet. Will you go with me?"

"Heaven forbid! I have been once."

"You have? And they didn't scalp you?"

"I didn't stay long enough, I suppose. I only went to see one picture—Lightmark's."

"Ah, that's just what I want to see! And you know I still have a weakness for the show. I expect you would like the new Salon better."

"There are good things there," said Oswyn tersely, "and a great many abominations as well. I was over in Paris last week."

Rainham glanced at him over his cup with a certain surprise.

"I didn't know you ever went there now," he remarked.

"No, I never go if I can help it. I hate Paris; it is *triste* as a well, and full of ghosts. Ghosts! It's a city of the dead. But I had a picture there this time, and I went to look at it."

"In the new Salon?"

"In the new Salon. It was a little gray, dusky thing, three foot by two, and their flaming miles of canvas murdered it. I am not a scene-painter," he went on a little savagely. "I don't paint with a broom, and I have no ambition to do the sun, or an eruption of Vesuvius. So I doubt if I shall exhibit there again until the vogue alters. Oh, they are clever enough, those fellows! even the trickiest of them can draw, which is the last thing they learn here, and one or two are men of genius. But I should dearly like to set them down, *en plein air* too, if they insist upon it, with the palette of Velasquez. I went out and wandered in the Morgue afterwards, and I confess its scheme of colour rested my eyes."

"Do I know your picture?" asked Rainham to change the subject, finding him a little grim. "Is it the thing you were doing here?"

Oswyn's head rested on one thin, colour-stained hand which shaded his eyes.

"No," he said with a suggestion of constraint, "it was an old sketch which I had worked up—not the thing you knew. I shall not finish that——"

"Not finish it!" cried Rainham. "But of course you must! why, it was superb; it promised a masterpiece!"

"To tell you the truth," said Oswyn, "I can't finish it. I have painted it out."

Rainham glanced at him with an air of consternation, of reproach.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you are impossible! What in the world possessed you to do such a mad thing?"

The painter hesitated a moment, looking at him irresolutely beneath his heavy, knitted brows.

"I meant to tell you," he said, after a while; "but on the whole I think I would rather not. It is rather an unpleasant subject, Rainham, and if you don't mind we will change it."

Oswyn had risen from his chair, with his wonted restlessness, and was gazing out upon the lazy, evening life of the great river. The monotonous accompaniment to their conversation, which had been so long sustained by the drip and splash outside, had grown intermittent, and now all but ceased; while a faint tinge of yellowish white upon the ripples, and a feathery rift in the gray dome of sky, announced

a final effort on the part of the setting sun.

The yard door swung noisily on its hinges, and a light step and voice became audible, and the sound of familiar conference with the dockman. Rainham lifted his head inquiringly, and Oswyn, shrugging his shoulders, left the window and regained his seat, picking up his sketch on the way.

"Yes," he said in answer to a more direct inquiry on the other's part, "I think it was Lightmark."

Almost as he spoke there was a step on the stair, followed by a boisterous knock at the door, and Dick entered effusively.

"Well, *mon vieux*, how goes it? Why, you're all in the dark! They didn't tell me you were engaged.... Oh, is that you, Oswyn? How do you do?"

"Quite an unexpected pleasure?" suggested Oswyn sardonically, nodding over his shoulder at the new-comer from his seat by the fire.

Rainham's greeting had been far more cordial, and he still held his friend's hand between his own, gazing inquiringly into his face as if he wished to read something there.

"Yes, I am back, you see," he said presently, when Dick had found himself a chair. "I have been here two days, and I was just beginning to think of looking you up. I was very sorry to miss you at Bordighera. How is Eve? It's very good of you to come all this way to see me; you must be pretty busy."

"Oh, Eve is tremendously well! Thanks, no, I won't have any tea, but you might give me a whisky-and-soda. I had to come down into these wilds to look at a yacht which we think of taking for the summer. Quite a small one," he added half apologetically, as he detected the faint, amused surprise in the other's expression; "and as I found myself here, with a few minutes to spare before my train goes, I thought I would look in on the off chance of finding you. How is business just now? The dock didn't strike me as looking much like work as I came in. Pretty stagnant, eh?"

Rainham shook his head.

"Oh, it's much as usual—perhaps a little more so! Bullen continues to threaten me with bankruptcy, but I am getting used to it. Threatened men live long, you know."

"Oh, you're all right!" answered Dick genially. "As long as Bullen looks after you, you won't come to grief."

While the two were thus occupied in reuniting the chain of old associations, Oswyn had been silently, almost surreptitiously, preparing for departure; and he now came forward awkwardly, with his hat in one hand and the tools of his trade under his arm.

"May I leave some of these things, here, or will they be in your way?"

"But you're not going?" said Rainham, rising from his seat with a constraining gesture; "why, don't you remember we were going to dine together? Dick will stay too, *n'est ce pas*? It will be like old times. Mrs. Bullen has been preparing quite a feast, I assure you!"

Oswyn paused irresolutely.

"Don't let me drive you away," said Dick. "In any case I'm going myself in a few minutes. Yes," he added, turning to Rainham, "I'm very sorry, but I've got to take my wife out to dinner, and I shall have to catch a train in, let me see, about ten minutes."

"Really? Well, then, clearly you must sit down again, Oswyn; I won't be left alone at any price. That's right. Now, Dick, tell me what you have been doing, and especially all about your Academy picture; I haven't seen even a critique of it. Of course it's a success? Have you sold it?"

"Oh, spare my modesty!" protested Lightmark somewhat clumsily, with a quick glance at Oswyn. "It's all right, but we mustn't talk shop."

"Yes, for God's sake spare his modesty!" supplemented the other painter almost brutally. "Look at his blushes. It isn't so bad as all that, Lightmark."

"I don't even know the subject," pursued Rainham. "You might at least tell me what it was. Was it the canvas which you wouldn't show me, just before I went away—at the studio? The one about which you made such a mystery——?"

"Oh bosh, old man!" interrupted Dick hurriedly, "I never made any mystery. It—it wasn't that. It's

quite an ordinary subject, one of the river scenes which I sketched here. You had better go and see it. And come and see us. You know the address. I must be off!"

"Wait a minute," interposed Oswyn, with a cadence in his voice which struck Rainham as the signal of something surpassing his wonted eccentricity. "Don't go yet. I said just now, Rainham, that I wouldn't tell you why I had painted out that picture, the picture which I had been fool enough to talk about so much, which I had intended to make a masterpiece. Well, I have changed my mind. I think you ought to know. Perhaps you would prefer to tell him?" he added, turning savagely to Lightmark, and speaking fast and loud with the curious muscular tremor which betokens difficult restraint. "No? Of course you will have the impudence to pretend that the conception was yours. Yes, curse you! you are quite capable of swearing that it was all yours—subject and treatment too.... But you can't deny that you heard me talking of the thing night after night at the club, when I have no doubt you hadn't even begun on your bastard imitation. One of the pictures of the year as they call it, as you and your damned crew of flatterers and critics call it...."

He stopped for breath, clutching at the table with one hand and letting the other, which had been upraised in denunciation, fall at his side. He had meant to be calm, to limit himself strictly to an explanation; but in the face of his wrong and the wrong-doer the man's passionate nature had broken loose. Now, when he already half repented of the violence with which he had profaned the house of his friend, his eyes fell upon Rainham, and he felt abashed before the expression of pain which he had called into the other's face.

"I don't know what all this means," said Rainham wearily, turning from Oswyn to Dick as he spoke; "but surely it is all wrong? Be quiet, Dick; you needn't say anything. If Oswyn is accusing you of plagiarism, of stealing his ideas, I can't believe it. I can't believe you meant to wrong him. The same thing must have occurred to both of you. Why, Oswyn, surely you see that? You have both been painting here, and you were both struck in the same way. Nothing could be simpler."

Now Lightmark seemed to assume a more confident attitude, to become more like himself; and he was about to break the chain of silence, which had held him almost voiceless throughout Oswyn's attack, when Rainham again interrupted him.

"I am sure you needn't say anything, Dick. We all know Oswyn; he—he wasn't serious. Go and catch your train, and forget all about it."

The first words which Rainham spoke recalled to Oswyn the powerful reason which had determined him to preserve his old neutrality, and to make an offering of silence upon the altar of his regard for the only man with whom he could feel that he had something in common. If his vengeance could have vented itself upon a single victim, it would have fallen, strong and sure; but it was clear to his calmer self that this could not be; the consequences would be too far-reaching, and might even recoil upon himself. After all, what did it matter? There was a certain luxury in submission to injustice, a pleasure in watching the bolt of Nemesis descend when his hands were guiltless of the launching. And as he struggled with himself, hunting in retrospect for some excuse for what his passion railed at as weakness, a last straw fell into the scale, for he thought of the faded portrait in the cigarette-case.

CHAPTER XIX

"My dear," said Lady Garnett, accepting a cup of tea from the hands of her niece, and regarding her at the same time, from her low cushioned chair, with a certain drollery, "do you know that it is exactly one week since Mr. Sylvester called?"

Mary Masters' head was bent a little over her long *Suède* gloves—they had just returned from their afternoon drive in the Park—and she paused to remove her hat and veil before she replied.

"And it is at least three weeks since Mr. Rainham was here."

"Ah, poor Philip!" remarked the old lady, "he is always irregular; he may come, or he may not. I must ask him to dinner, by the way, soon. But I was talking of Mr. Sylvester, who is a model of punctuality. (Give me a piece of *baba* for Mefistofèle, please!) Mr. Sylvester was here last Saturday, and the Saturday before that. I think it is highly probable, Mary, that we shall be honoured with a visit from Mr. Sylvester to-day."

"I hope not!" said the girl with some energy. "I have a couple of songs that I must positively try over before to-night. Surely, it is a little late too, even for Mr. Sylvester."

"It is barely half-past five," said Lady Garnett, lazily feeding her pug, "and he knows that we do not dine till eight. Resign yourself, *chèrie*; he will certainly come."

She glanced across at the young girl, pointing, with her keen gaze, words which seemed trivial enough. And Mary, her calm forehead puckered with a certain vague annoyance which she disdained to analyse, understood perfectly all that the elder lady was too discreet to say. She sat for a little while, her hands resting idly in her lap, or smoothing the creases out of her long, soft gloves. Then she rose and moved quickly across to Lady Garnett's side, knelt suddenly down by her chair.

"Ah, my aunt!" she cried impulsively, "tell me what is to be done?"

Lady Garnett glanced up from the novel into which she had subsided; she laid it on the little tea-table with a sigh of relief at this sudden mood of confidence, coming a little strangely amidst the young girl's habitual reticence.

"We will talk, my dear," she said, "now you are practical. I suppose, by the way, he has not proposed?"

Mary shook her head.

"That is it, Aunt Marcelle! That is exactly what I want to prevent.
Is—is he going to?"

Lady Garnett smiled, and her smile had a very definite quality indeed.

"I would not cherish any false hopes, my dear. Charles Sylvester is a young man—not so very young though, by the way—whose conclusions are very slow, but when they arrive, *mon Dieu*! they are durable. I am sure he is terribly tenacious. It took him a long time to conclude that he was in love with you; at first, you know, he was a little troubled about your fortune, but at last he came to that conclusion—at Lucerne."

"Oh, at Lucerne!" protested the young girl with a nervous laugh.
"Surely not there!"

"It was precisely at Lucerne," continued Lady Garnett, "that he decided you would make him an adorable wife, and, in effect, it was a considerable piece of wisdom. And since then his conclusions have been more rapid. The last has been that he will certainly marry you—with or without a *dot*—before the elections. You are serious, you know, my dear, though not so serious as he believes; you are a girl of intelligence, and he is going to stand for some place or other, and candidates with clever wives often obtain a majority over candidates who are clever but have no wives. Yes, my dear, he is certainly going to propose. You may postpone it by the use of great tact for a month or so; you will hardly do so for longer."

"I don't want to postpone it," said Mary ruefully; "if it be inevitable, I would sooner have it over."

"It will never be over," remarked Lady Garnett decisively. "Did I not say that he was tenacious —*comme on ne l'est plus*? You may refuse him once—twice; it will all be to go over again and again, until you end by accepting him."

"Oh, Aunt Marcelle!" protested the young girl, with little flush of righteous wrath.

"After all," continued the elder lady, ignoring her interruption, "are you so very sure that—that it would not do? There are many worse men in the world than Sylvester. Both *my* husbands were profligates, in addition to being fools. At any rate, this dear Charles is very correct. And remember, the poor man is really in love with you."

"I know," said Mary plaintively; "that is why I am so sorry. He is a good man, a conscientious man, and a gentleman; and really, sometimes lately, he has been quite simple and nice. Only——"

Lady Garnett completed the sentence for her with an impartial shrug.

"Only he is perfectly ridiculous, and as a lover quite impossible? My dear, I grant it you with all my heart, and I think he has all the qualities which make an excellent husband."

As the young girl was still silent, unconvinced, she went on after a little while:

"You know, Mary, I have never tried to marry you. Frankly, my dear, I do not believe very much in pushing marriages. My own, and most others that I have known intimately, might have been very reasonably made—let us say—in purgatory. But a girl must marry some time or other, if she be rich. And you will have plenty of money, my poor child! You shall do exactly as you please, but I must admit

that Charles is a most unobjectionable *parti*. After all, there is only one other man I would sooner give you to, Mary, and he is impossible."

"Aunt Marcelle! Aunt Marcelle!" pleaded the young girl faintly, her dark head bent very low now over the arm of the chair.

Lady Garnett had been talking so far in a somewhat desultory fashion, interspersing her words with brief caresses to the pug who was curled up in her lap. Now she put down the little dog with a brusqueness which hurt his dignity; he pawed fretfully at Mary's dress, and, attracting no attention, trotted of to his basket on the rug, where he settled himself with a short growl of discontent. And Lady Garnett, with a sudden change of tone and a new tenderness in her voice, just stooped a little and touched the young girl's forehead with her thin lips.

"My poor child!" she said, "my dear little Mary! Did you suppose I didn't know? Did you think I was blind, as well as very old, that I shouldn't see the change in you, and guess why?"

"Ah!" cried the girl with a break in her voice. "What are you saying? What do you make me say?"

"Nothing! nothing!" said the old lady; "you need not tell me anything. It is only I who tell you—like the old immortal in Daudet, *J'ai vu ça moi*!—and it will pass as everything passes. That is not the least sad part, though now you will hardly believe it. You see, I don't lie to you; I tell you quite plainly that it is no good. Some men are made so—*vois tu, ma chèrie*!—to see only one woman, an inaccessible one, when they seem to see many, and *he* would be like that. Only it is a pity. And yet who would have foreseen it—that he should charm you, Mary? He so tired and old and *usé*—for he is old for you, dear, though he might be my son—with his humorous, indolent, mocking talk, and his great, sad eyes. It's wicked of me, Mary, but I love you for it; so few girls would have cared, for he *is* a wretched match. And I blame myself, too."

"Because I am foolish and utterly ashamed?" cried the girl from her obscurity, in a hard, small voice which the other did not know.

"Foolish!" she exclaimed. "Well, we women are all that, and some men—the best of them. But ashamed? Because you have a wise mother, my darling, who guesses things? I have never had any children but you and him. And no one but I can ever know. No; I was sorry because I had to hurt you. But it was best, my dear, because you are so strong. Yes, you are strong, Mary!"

"Am I?" said the girl wearily. "What is the good of it, I wonder?
Except that it makes one suffer more and longer."

"No," said Lady Garnett. "It makes one show it less, and only that matters. Aren't we going to Lady Dulminster to-night? Ah, my dear, the play must go on; we mustn't spoil the fun with sour faces, masks, and dominos except now and then! Believe me, *chèrie*, underneath it all we are much the same—very sad people. Only it wouldn't do to admit it. Life would be too terrible then. So we dance on and make believe we enjoy it, and by-and-by, if we play hard enough, we do believe it for a minute or two. From one point of view, you know, it is rather amusing."

Mary looked up at last; her eyes, shining out of the white face, seemed to have grown suddenly very large and bright.

"Does it go on always, Aunt Marcelle?" she asked with a child's directness.

"Always!" said Lady Garnett promptly. "Only there are interludes, and then sometimes one guest steals away with his bosom friend into a corner, and they look under each other's masks. But it isn't a nice sight, and it mustn't happen very often, else they wouldn't be back in their places when the music began. Ah, my child!" she broke off suddenly, "I am talking nonsense to amuse you, and making you sadder all the time. But you know I think nobody was ever consoled by consolations unless it were the consoler."

She drew the girl's blank face towards her, clasped the smooth brown head against her breast with two bird-like hands on which the diamonds glittered.

"Cry, my dear!" she said at last; "that is the best of being young—that gift of tears. When one is old one laughs instead; but ah, *mon Dieu*! it is a queer kind of laughter."

They sat locked together in silence until the room was quite dark, lit only by the vague lamplight which shone in through the fine lace curtains from the street. Then Mary rose and played a little, very softly, in the darkness, morsels of Chopin, until the footman came in with a bright lamp, announcing that dinner was on the table. And Charles Sylvester had not arrived.

He atoned for this breach of his habit, however, on the morrow by making an early call upon the two ladies, whom he found alone, immediately after luncheon. He was very clean shaven, very carefully dressed, and with his closely buttoned frock-coat and his irreproachable hat, which he held ponderously in his hand during his protracted visit, he had the air of having come immediately from church.

Lady Garnett taxed him with this occupation presently, suppressing her further thought that he looked still more like an aspirant to matrimony, and Charles admitted the impeachment; he had been in the morning with his sister, Mrs. Lightmark, to the Temple Church. His severe gaze was turned inquiringly upon Mary. Lady Garnett responded for her a little flippantly.

"Oh, Mary went nowhere this morning, Mr. Sylvester—not even to the church parade. We were very late last night, at Lady Dulminster's. London grows later and later; we shall be dining at midnight soon."

"I should like to go to the Temple Church sometimes," said Mary, "because of the singing, only it is so very far."

Charles Sylvester bent forward with bland satisfaction; he had it so obviously on the tip of his tongue that he would be charmed to be her escort, that the girl hastened to interrupt him.

"You were not at Lady Dulminster's, Mr. Sylvester? We quite expected to see you."

"If I had known that you were to be there!" he exclaimed. Then he added: "I had a card, and, indeed, I fully intended to look in. But one is always so pressed for time just before the long vacation, and yesterday I was quite exhausted. Did you see any of my people?"

"Yes," said Mary, "Eve was there; we expected her to play. It is a very musical house."

"Ah, yes! I have heard so from my sister, and from Colonel Lightmark. He says that Lady Dulminster is really a most accomplished woman."

"He looks as if he found her charming," put in Lady Garnett with a shrug. Then she added, suppressing a yawn, her thin fingers dallying regretfully with the leaves of her novel: "I suppose your exertions are nearly over, Mr. Sylvester. You will be going away soon?"

He shook his head gravely.

"I fear not for long. I may have a week's cruise with my brother-in-law—you know, he has a yacht for the summer—but my labours are only beginning. I have the elections in view. You agree with me, no doubt, Lady Garnett, that the Government is bound to go to the country in the autumn; you know, of course, that I am thinking of standing for——"

"I congratulate you in advance, Mr. Sylvester! I am sure you will get in, especially if you have your sister down to canvass."

"I am afraid Eve is not sufficiently interested in politics to be of much assistance," said the candidate. Then he went on, a little nervously, pulling at his collar: "You will wish me success, Miss Masters?"

"Oh, yes!" said the girl hastily; "I am sure we both wish you that, Mr. Sylvester. We shall be most interested, shall we not, Aunt Marcelle?"

Lady Garnett came to her assistance with smiling promptitude.

"Of course, Mr. Sylvester; we will even wear your colours, if they are becoming, you know; and I am sure you would not fight under any others. And, mind, we will have no reforms—unless you like to try your hand on the climate. But nothing else! You are so fond of reforming, you English—even the most Conservative of you—that I live in constant fear of being reformed away. I hope, Mr. Sylvester, you are more Conservative than that."

Charles Sylvester flushed a little; he cleared his throat elaborately before he replied:

"I fear I have failed to make myself understood, Lady Garnett; in no sense do I call myself a Conservative, though I am prepared to vote with the party on the Irish Question. I am a Liberal Unionist, Lady Garnett. I may almost call myself a Radical Unionist. My views on the emancipation of labour, for instance, are quite advanced. I am prepared——"

Mary interrupted him, absently, demurely, with a little speech that appeared to be a quotation.

"Labour is a pretty beast in its cage to the philanthropic visitor with buns; its temper is better understood of the professional keeper."

Lady Garnett arched her eyebrows pensively; Charles looked surprised, displeased; Mary hastened to explain, blushing a little:

"I beg your pardon! the phrase is Mr. Rainham's. I believe it is the only political principle he has."

Charles's displeasure at the maxim cooled to lofty disdain of its author.

"Ah, yes!—pretty, but cynical, as I should say most of Mr.
Rainham's principles were."

Lady Garnett was aroused out of her state of vacant boredom for the first time into a certain interest. Mary sat, her hands clasped in her lap, the flush just dying away out of her pale cheeks, while Mr. Sylvester embarked upon an elaborate disquisition of his principles and his programme—it might have been an expansion of his Parliamentary address—which the elder lady, whom a chance phrase had started upon a new line of thought, scarcely considered.

Does he know? she asked herself. Has this rather stupid young man grown suddenly acute enough to be jealous? Certainly there had been a flash, a trace of curious rancour in his brief mention of Rainham's name, for which it was scarcely easy to account. That the two men, in spite of their long juxtaposition, had never been more than acquaintances, had never been in the least degree friends, she was perfectly well aware; it was not in the nature of either of them to be more intimately allied.

Rainham's indolent humour and fantastic melancholy, his genial disregard of popularity or success, could not but be displeasing to a man so precise and practical as the barrister. Only now she had scented, had dimly perceived beneath his speech, something more than the indefinable aversion of incompatible tempers, a very personal and present dislike. Had things passed between them, things of which she was ignorant? Was the sentiment, then, reciprocal? She hardly believed it: Rainham's placid temper gave to his largest hostilities the character merely of languid contempt; it was not worth the trouble to hate anyone, he had said to her so often—neither to hate nor to love. She could imagine him with infidelities on occasion to the last part of his rule; yes, she could imagine that—but for hatred, no! he had said rightly he was too indolent for that. It must be all on one side, then, as happens so frequently in life with love and hate, and the rest—all on one side. And the barrister had risen to take his leave before her reflections had brought her further than this.

CHAPTER XX

It must be admitted that when Lady Garnett insinuated, for the benefit of her half-incredulous inward counsellor, that Charles Sylvester, in spite of his almost aggressive panoply of self-assurance, had been smitten by the fever of jealousy, she fully sustained her reputation for perspicacity. Her conclusions were seldom wrong, and, indeed, the barrister, although he had professional motives for endeavouring to cloak himself with something of the wisdom of the serpent, was characterized far more by the somewhat stolid innocence of that proverbially moral, but less interesting creature, the dove; and it was an easy task for a keen observer, such as her ladyship undoubtedly was, to read him line upon line, like the most clearly printed of books. As in the case of a book, what one read was not always intelligible, and it might even on occasion be necessary to read between the obvious lines; but in this particular instance the page contained no cryptogram, and the astute old lady had read it without her spectacles.

Charles was jealous; he had not insulted himself by admitting it even for an instant, but he was jealous; and his jealousy was more than the roving fever of all lovers, in that it had a definite, tangible object.

It would have been contrary to his nature to allow either his love or the ensuing passion to interfere in any way with his professional duties or instincts; he was a lawyer, and an embryo Member of Parliament first, a man afterwards; and it was not until late in the afternoon of the day which followed his last recorded interview with Lady Garnett and her niece that he dismissed from his brain the complexities of "Brown and another *versus* Johnson," and drew from an orderly mental pigeon-hole the bundle of papers bearing the neat endorsement, "*Re* Miss Masters." When, to the ecstatic joy of his clerk, he had withdrawn himself from his chambers in Paper Buildings, and was walking briskly along the dusty Embankment in the direction of his club, he found himself, by a sequence which was natural, though he would have been the last to own it, already thinking of Rainham, and wondering, with a trace of dignified self-reproach, whether he had not been guilty of some remissness in the performance of his

duty towards society, in the matter of that reprehensible individual and his aberrations from the paths of virtue. He did not stop to question himself too strictly as to the connection between his matrimonial aspirations and Rainham's peccadilloes; but he was able to assure himself that the assertion of his principles demanded a closer investigation, a more crucial analysis of certain ambiguous episodes.

"Supposing," he argued, "supposing Rainham had given signs of a desire to marry my sister, or my cousin, or any other girl in whom I was interested, or, in short, whom I knew, it would obviously have been my duty, before giving my consent or approval, to find out all about his relations with that girl, that person whom I saw with him in the park—ah, yes! Kitty, that was her name. And, in a way, don't I owe far more to society in general than I do to any of my immediate friends in particular? Well, then I ought to know more about Kitty, so as to be prepared in case—that is, for emergencies.... Why, for all I know, I may have been suspecting Rainham all this time quite unjustly. I'm sure I hope so." Here he shook his head sorrowfully. "But I'm afraid there's not much chance of that. The question remains, how am I to find out anything? It's no good asking Rainham; that goes without saying. It would be equally useless to try Lightmark: they're as thick as thieves, and he's not the sort of man to be pumped very easily. And yet, if Rainham's friends are out of the question, what's to be done? He hasn't got any enemies—that sort of man never has, except himself. How can I get hold of the girl? I suppose some people would set a detective to watch Rainham, and so on; but that's not to be thought of, in this case." He stopped close to Cleopatra's Needle, and frowned abstractedly over the stone parapet, absently following the struggles of a boy who was laboriously working a great, empty lighter across the wide, smoke-coloured river at a narrow angle with the shore. An idea suggested itself in flattering colours for a moment: he might pay a visit to the little restaurant or club in Turk Street, the shady place with a foreign name which he had forgotten. At the expense of a little tact, he might very probably succeed in inducing some of the careless, disreputable young artists who formed the frequentation of the place to talk about Rainham's amours. It even occurred to him that at a late hour Kitty herself might be seen there, dancing a can-can with Rainham, or singing songs with a riotous chorus. But in spite of this prospect, the notion was not sufficiently attractive. He had not enjoyed his introduction to the eccentric fraternity, on the occasion when he had been fired by Lightmark's early enthusiasm about the place to request to take him there to dine. He had felt, almost as much as the men to whom he was introduced, that he had no business there, that he was an outsider; he had even been snubbed. "And, after all," he said impatiently, resuming his homeward direction, "though I've got enough evidence to damn him twice over in the eyes of any man in the world, I suppose it wouldn't be enough to convince a woman, if she believed in him. I must get hold of Kitty—it's the only way to arrive at a certainty."

After much deliberation to the same effect, he determined, somewhat reluctantly, that there was nothing for it but to endeavour to enlist the sympathies of one of Rainham's more intimate friends. He had recurred by this time to the unstable hypothesis that he was acting primarily in Rainham's interest, that his real motive was to arrive at the truth on the chance that it might be favourable to his unadmitted rival. It only remained for him to select out of the limited material at his disposal the man whom he should invite to enter upon this alliance. And when he reached the gloomy library of the eminently respectable club, where he was accustomed, before dining, to study the evening papers and to write his letters, the choice had been made; and after one or two abortive efforts, he composed to his satisfaction a diplomatic epistle, which he addressed to Oswyn (with whom he enjoyed a nodding acquaintance) at the restaurant in Turk Street.

Late in the afternoon of the next day Sylvester sat alone and expectant before a pile of temporarily neglected papers, telling himself that Rainham ought to be very grateful for these strenuous efforts in the interests of his injured reputation. He was beginning to wonder nervously whether Oswyn would fail him, when he heard a knock at the outer door, followed by an unfamiliar step, and the clerk announced that a gentleman wished to see him by appointment on private business. The barrister rose from his seat with a portentous display of polite, awkward cordiality, and motioned his guest into a chair.

"It's extremely good of you to take the trouble to come," he said tentatively.

"That depends upon what you want of me," answered Oswyn shrewdly. "You said in your note that it was on a matter of vital importance to a friend of mine. I haven't so many friends that I can afford to shirk a little trouble in a matter which vitally concerns one of them. May I ask, in the first place, who is the friend?"

Sylvester picked up the open brief which lay before him on the table, and folded it scrupulously.

"Philip Rainham," he answered, and then shot a quick glance at
Oswyn.

"Rainham?" echoed the other with an air suggestive at once of surprise and relief, as if, perhaps, he had been expecting to hear another name. "You are right, he is a friend," he added simply. "What can I

do for him?"

"Well, the fact is, I'm afraid he's got into difficulties—a scrape, an imbroglio, with a woman!"

The painter lifted his expressive eyebrows incredulously.

"Since I last saw him—three days ago?"

"Oh, dear, no; the thing's been going on, I should say, for quite a long time—more than a year to my knowledge."

Oswyn reflected for a moment, gazing at Sylvester with some suspicion.

"I don't think it troubles him much," he said brusquely. "Is it any business of mine—or of yours? Has he spoken to you about it?"

Sylvester uttered a hasty negative.

"Oh, no! He is not the sort of man who would. But other people talk. You see, I'm afraid there's some sort of black-mail going on, and he oughtn't to submit to it. His friends oughtn't to allow it. If—if one could see the woman and frighten her a little——"

"Is that what you wanted me for?" asked Oswyn impatiently. "If so, allow me——"

The other hastened to reassure him.

"Oh, no, not at all. But I thought you might be able to tell me where the person is to be found, her address, or something about her. I understand that she was a model; you probably know her…."

The painter shrugged his shoulders.

"Who is she? What is her name?"

"Kitty—that's all I know."

"Kitty? Kitty Crichton, I suppose."

A light dawned on him; the name opened a door to many forgotten trivial incidents. He did not speak again for a minute, and when he broke the silence there was a harder tone in his voice, and he rose from his chair at the same time.

"I don't see how this can concern me, or you, either. You must pardon me if I say that I dislike meddling, and people who meddle."

Sylvester blushed hotly.

"You don't suppose I want to do him anything but good," he said diplomatically, trying to convince himself that he was not damaging the reputation for perfect candour which he hoped that he enjoyed. "It's not a pleasant task, but there are circumstances in which one has to sacrifice one's scruples—one's feelings."

Oswyn glanced at him again, with some contempt in the lines of his worn face.

"Excuse me if I refrain from sounding your motives."

Then he paused, fingering his soft felt hat. Suddenly his face was illumined by a remarkably grim smile, and it became evident to the man who was watching him so anxiously that there had occurred some change in his mental perspective.

"I don't quite understand why you brought me into this," he added, the smile still hovering very lightly on his lips. "However, under the circumstances, I think I can't do much harm by putting you in the way of finding Mrs. Crichton. Let me recommend you to inquire for her at the office of the *Outcry*, the newspaper—she used to work for it, I believe—in Took's Court. They will know her address there. Took's Court—it's only a few minutes' walk from here. Thanks, I can find my way out…."

"I suppose that was rather a stupid thing to do," he said regretfully, as he stopped in the doorway below to light a cigarette, "though not such a *bêtise* as his, *mon dieu*!… But I couldn't resist the temptation. Now, I wonder if he's clever enough to find out the truth?"

CHAPTER XXI

The night was dark and still—so dark that above the tree-tops all was a soft, abysmal blank, so still that the Japanese lanterns scarcely swung on their strings among the apple-trees, and the leaves almost forgot to rustle. From the tent in the corner of the little garden (little, but large for a garden in London) the quaint, rapturous music of the Hungarian band floated in fitful extravagance, now wildly dominating, now graciously accompanying the murmur of many voices, the mingled pace of feet, and the lingering sweep of silken skirts upon the shadowed grass. The light streamed in broad, electric rays from the open windows of the low, wide house, and from the tall double doors of the studio, which had been added at the side, broken continually by the silhouettes of guests who entered the rooms or sought the cooler air outside, and dulling to the quiet glow of old stained glass the rich radiance of the fantastic coloured lanterns.

It was one of the series of summer evenings on which, according to the cards which had been so widely circulated, Mr. and Mrs. Lightmark were "at home" to their friends and to their friends' friends; and Rainham, who was a late arrival at the elaborate house in Grove Road, was able after a time to recognise many familiar faces, some of them almost forgotten, among those who had elected to be present. The rooms, in spite of the outlet afforded by the garden, were all surprisingly full; and after a hurried exchange of greetings, which Eve's duties as hostess had compelled her to curtail, he had passed through a jungle of brilliant toilettes and unfamiliar figures into the newly-built, bright studio, where he had been told that he would find his friend. He had abundant leisure to corroborate the first impression of a splendour for which he was hardly prepared, which had seized him when he entered the hall and surrendered his coat to a courteous servant in livery, before Lightmark, radiant and flushed with success, singled him out in the corner to which he had retreated in loneliness.

"So glad to see you, old man! we were hoping you would turn up. Better late than never. Isn't it a crush? I assure you our evenings are becoming quite an institution. You will find scores of people you know here. Excuse my leaving you. Not much like the old studio days, eh? Afternoon tea with Copal's cups and saucers, and Mrs. Thingumy's tea-cakes. Your friend Lady Garnett is here somewhere—I'll be shot if I know where. Try the garden; you can get out this way. See you again later."

"All right, Dick," he answered with equanimity, smiling with a little inward amusement; "you look after your people. I will find my way about."

As he made his way discreetly among the little groups of people who strolled processionally along the gravel walks and beneath the trees, or disposed themselves in basket chairs upon the lawn, feeling himself vaguely exhilarated by the not too abstruse music of the posturing fiddlers, his eyes caressed by the soft glow of the Japanese lanterns, strung like antique jewelled necklets against the almost tangible blackness of the night, he found himself listening with an half-malicious amusement to the commonplace of the conversational formulæ affected by the young world of society, the well-worn, patched-up questions, the anticipated answers. It was very little changed since the time when he had not yet emancipated himself from the dreary bondage of such functions. It was croquet then, lawn-tennis now; for the rest only the names were different. Presently he encountered McAllister, a solitary wanderer like himself, and they found themselves seats before long in the darkest corner of the garden, where a few chairs had been placed, outside the radius of the lanterns, underneath a weeping willow.

"And they say painting doesn't pay," said the Scotchman, extending his long hands comprehensively, with a quiet chuckle. "And I'm not saying that it does, mind you, when a man has notions like that queer, cantankerous devil Oswyn. He wouldn't make anything pay in this world. But if a man's clever and canny, and has the sense to see on which side his bread's buttered … why, it's just easier than nothing. And to think that the laddie isn't even an Associate."

"Yes. I suppose he's getting on pretty well," suggested Rainham, with a lazy enjoyment of this frank worldliness.

"Getting on! Doesn't it look like it? Isn't he entertaining his friends like—like a Rothschild? You know, of course, that he has sold his Academy picture, and next year's as well—and four figures for each of them?"

"Yes; and he's commissioned to paint a life-size portrait of the Hereditary Grand-Duchess of Oberschnitzelsteinwurst—an undertaking, by the way, for which I don't envy him. Oh, Dick's all right! What have you got in the Academy this year, by the way? I'm ashamed to say I haven't been there yet."

"You haven't! But you have seen Lightmark's picture? No? Well, it's a fine thing, and just as clever as —— But, mind you, I'm not prepared to say that Oswyn wouldn't have made something better out of it."

"Yes," said Rainham slowly, with the chill of the old misgiving about his heart, as he remembered the

stormy encounter at the dock, with the haunting shadow of doubt in his mind, laboriously dismissed as an offence against his loyalty. "It seems to me that Oswyn has more real genius in his little finger than Dick has in his whole body; I am sure of it. It was a pity that they should both have chosen the same subject, especially as their ideas, as to colour and treatment and so on, are so much the same. But, of course, Dick had a perfect right to finish and exhibit his picture, even if he knew that Oswyn was thinking of the same thing."

McAllister assented hastily.

"No doubt, no doubt; though Oswyn was just wild about it—you know his uncivilized ways—and I must admit I was a bit astonished myself, at first, when I saw the picture at Burlington House with Lightmark's signature to it. But then I didn't know anything of the rights of the case. He's a queer, cantankerous devil, and he's always being wronged, according to his own accounts, and not only by the critics. No one pays much attention to what he says nowadays. It's just that absinthe and the cigarettes that are the ruin of him, day and night. Poor devil! why can't he stick to whisky and a pipe, like a decent Christian!"

"His queerness is all on the surface," said Rainham gravely. "You have to dig pretty deep to find out what he's really worth."

Just then Eve hurried towards them through the trees, looking about her with an air of hesitation, carrying the train of her pale-gray brocade dress over one bare, girlish arm.

"Is that you, Mr. McAllister?" she asked, recognising first in the darkness the gaunt figure and tawny beard of the Scotchman. "Oh, and Mr. Rainham too! This is really very wrong of you, monopolizing each other in this way. And don't you know," she added laughingly, "that this corner is especially dedicated to flirtations? You must really come and do your duty. Mr. McAllister, won't you take Miss Menzies in to have some supper? You know her, I think—a compatriot, isn't she? You will find her close to the tent. And you," she pursued, turning to Rainham, "you must take some one in, you know. Will you come this way, please, and I will introduce you to somebody. I am so sorry I was not at home when you called the other day," she said conventionally, as they edged their way by degrees towards the house.

"Yes; I seem to have an unfortunate capacity for missing you nowadays. At Bordighera, for instance. I have certainly had no luck at all lately. I haven't even had an opportunity of telling you how charming I find your house."

"Ah!" said Eve vaguely, her eyes wandering over the people who were grouped upon the gravel walk and under the veranda outside the windows of the supper-room, "we really seem to see nothing of you now. Oh, let me introduce you to Mrs. Gibson—Mrs. Everett P. Gibson. She's American; you'll find her very amusing."

Rainham followed her obediently, thinking, with a quickly repressed passion of regret, of the child who would have confided to him her latest impressions of sorrow, of joy; finding something, which hardly emanated from himself, which made it seem difficult for him to gather up the threads of the old, charming intimacy with this new Eve—this woman, with her pretty, dignified bearing, and self-possessed, almost cold attitude. The introduction was duly effected, and for the next half-hour Rainham devoted himself heroically to the mental and physical entertainment (he was not obliged to do much talking) of the American lady, who hailed from the Far West, and lectured him volubly, with an exorbitant accent and a monotony of delivery, which began to tell on his nerves to an alarming degree, on her impressions of Europe, and especially England; the immense superiority of gas as a cooking and heating agent; the phenomenal attainments of her children; and the antiquities of Minneapolis.

After supper he found himself listening to the band in the garden with a sentimental young lady, who made him fully conversant with her adoration of moonlit nights, waltzing, the latest tenor, and the scenery of Switzerland.

It was already growing late, and people had begun to leave, when it struck him that, through no active fault of his own, other than a certain complaisant indolence, he had as yet exchanged only the briefest of greetings with Lady Garnett, while of Miss Masters only a glimpse had been vouchsafed to him, at the further end of the crowded supper-room. He wandered into the studio, where a little, intimate party had assembled around an easel, and he was fortunate enough in a few minutes to find himself invited to take possession of a vacant seat precisely by Mary's side.

"Oh, you wicked person!" said Mary reproachfully. "Why do you never come to see us? and where have you been hiding yourself all the evening?"

Rainham laughed gently.

"I feel rather guilty, I own; but you know there is an execrable proverb which says, 'Duty first, and pleasure afterwards.' I have been living up to it, that's all. If you only knew how I have been longing to talk to somebody who wouldn't ask me whether the music didn't fill me with a passionate desire to dance! And how good it is to be with a person who doesn't ask you whether you play much lawn-tennis, or whether you prefer London to the country on the whole. Ah, Mary! I consider myself a model of self-denial; but I am rewarded now."

"That's rather pretty for you," answered the girl approvingly; "and you are forgiven, though you have still to make your peace with Aunt Marcelle. Tell me what you have been doing, and what you have been reading…."

The conversation drifted on, now and again becoming general, and including the rest of the circle, but always recurring and narrowing into the deeper stream of their old intimacy.

"You are the only really satisfactory people I know," he said presently—"the only people who know how to enjoy life, so far as it is to be enjoyed."

"You mustn't give me any credit for it; it's all Aunt Marcelle's doing. But I don't think I know what you mean exactly. Perhaps we oughtn't to feel flattered?"

"I mean, you are the only people who understand that happiness doesn't depend on what one does or doesn't do—that it all depends on the point of view."

"The way of looking at life generally?" she hazarded.

"Precisely. True philosophy only admits one point of view—from outside. Aren't we always being told that life is only a play? Well, we clever people are the spectators, the audience. We look at the play from a comfortable seat in the stalls; and when the curtain drops at the end, we go home quietly and—sleep."

Mary looked at him for a moment silently.

"I'm not at all sure that we ought to feel flattered! You consider that you and I and her ladyship are spectators, then. Isn't it very selfish?"

"More or less. Of course, it's impossible to do the thing thoroughly without being absolutely selfish—a hermit, in fact. I sometimes think I was intended for a hermit."

Mary sighed covertly, though the smile still lingered in her brown eyes.

"I'm afraid I only take a kind of sideways view of things. I should like to—to——"

"To go up in a kind of moral balloon," suggested Rainham laughingly, "and get a bird's-eye view of life?"

"Exactly; and drift about. Only then one would never get really interested in anything or anybody. I should want someone else in the balloon."

"You must take me," said Rainham, still smiling.

Mary looked at him quickly, and then turned away, shivering a little.

"What nonsense we are talking!" she said suddenly. "And I'm afraid it isn't even original nonsense. We don't, really, want to be selfish, and we're not; you needn't pretend you are. And isn't it getting very, very late? Don't you think Mrs. Lightmark looks as if we ought to go? I don't mean that she looks inhospitable. But isn't she rather pale and tired? This sort of thing doesn't seem to suit her as well as her husband. Yes, I must really go."

When Miss Masters had deserted him, after extracting a promise that he would take an early opportunity of paying his over-due respects to her aunt, and had gone with Mrs. Lightmark in search of the old lady, Rainham made his adieux, leaving Lightmark still radiant, and protesting hospitably against such early hours; and as he walked homewards, with a cigar unlighted between his lips, he smiled rather bitterly, as he thought how little he was able to adhere to the tenets of his philosophy. Why else should he regret so much and so often the act which had been rung down when … And how many more acts and scenes were there to be?

"Well, I suppose one must stay to the end," he said finally. "One isn't obliged to sit it out, but the audience are requested to keep their seats until the fall of the curtain. Yes, leaving early disturbs the other spectators."

While Lady Garnett was being wrapped up with the attention due to her years and dignity, Mary and Eve sat talking in the hall, a square, wainscoted little room, hung with pale grass matting, and decorated brightly with quaint Breton faïence and old brass sconces.

"I was so glad to see Philip here to-night," Mary was saying, while Eve fastened for her the clasp of a refractory bracelet. "We were afraid he was becoming quite a recluse, and that must be so bad for him!"

"Almost as bad as too much society."

"Yes; it's only another form of dissipation."

"I'm not sure that it isn't better to have too much of other people's society than too much of one's own."

"I don't think I ever regarded him from a—a society point of view. You know what I mean—like Colonel Lightmark, for instance. When I was a child I always thought of him as a sort of fairy godmother—a person who was always dropping from the clouds to take one for drives in the country, or with a box for the pantomime."

Eve laughed at herself, and then sighed. Mary looked at her curiously for a moment, finding something cold, a trace of weariness or disdain in the clear voice and the pretty, childish face.

"Philip was always like that, the kindest—— He has always been quite a hero for me—a kind of Colonel Newcome." Then she broke off rather suddenly, finding Eve in turn looking at her inquiringly. "Isn't it curious that we should both have known him so long without knowing each other?"

"I suppose it was because we all lived so much abroad. And I don't think Philip talks about his friends very much...."

Lady Garnett interrupted the *tête-à-tête* conversation at this point, and when her little brougham had rolled away, and a few other late guests had left Eve alone with her husband, she sat for a few minutes in the deserted drawing-room, among a wilderness of empty chairs, meditating, with her chin resting on one hand, and her eyes absently contemplating the scattered petals of a copper-coloured rose, which had fallen from some dress or bouquet upon one of the Oriental rugs which partly covered the parquet floor.

"Dick," she said presently to her husband, who was leaning against the rails of the veranda, lazily enjoying a final cigarette, "did it ever strike you that Philip Rainham was in love with anybody?"

Lightmark turned and gazed at her through the open window wonderingly, almost suspiciously, and then broke into a laugh.

"Or that anyone was in love with him?" she pursued gravely.

"I don't think I ever noticed it," he answered, with another display of mirth. "What have you discovered now, little matchmaker?"

"Not much. I was only thinking.... What a pity Charles wasn't here to-night!"

"Oh, you little enigma! Is it that dear Charles who is to be pitied, or who? We, for instance?"

But Eve assumed a superior air, and Lightmark, who hated riddles, dismissed the subject and the end of his cigarette simultaneously.

CHAPTER XXII

One afternoon, three months later, Rainham, finding himself in the neighbourhood of Parton Street, took the occasion of knocking at Lady Garnett's door, and found, somewhat to his surprise, that the two ladies were returned. Introduced into their presence—they were sitting in the library, in close proximity to a considerable fire—he learnt that their summer wanderings that year had been of no extensive nature, and that they had come into residence a week ago.

They had spent a month in a country house in Berkshire, the old lady told him presently, adding, with an explanatory grimace, that it was a house which belonged to a relation—the sort of place where one had to visit now and again; where a month went a very long way; where one had to draw largely on one's courtesy—on one's hypocrisy (if he preferred the word), not to throw up the cards at once, and

retire after the first week.

Rainham gathered from her resigned animadversions that the relations must be by marriage only: there was no Gallic quality in the atmosphere she described.

It was a very nice house—Jacobean, she believed—or, rather, it would have been nice if they had had it to themselves. Unfortunately, it was very full: there were a great many stupid men who shot all day, and as many stupid women who talked scandal and went to sleep after dinner; also there were several pairs—or did one say "brace"?—of young people who flirted, but they lived in the conservatories. When one did not go to sleep after dinner, one played round games, or baccarat. She herself had refused to play, although they had wished to make her; personally, she preferred to go to sleep, or to listen to Mary's music. Yes, Mary was more fortunate: they had a very good piano, and an organ. Mary's music was a great success, although her admirers were apt to confuse Offenbach with Chopin; and some of the women appeared to think it was not quite ladylike to play so well, with such a professional manner. Still, Mary's music was a success, and that was more than could be said of her own conversation. That had been a distinct failure! They seemed to think she wished to make fun of things—of sacred things, the game laws, and agriculture, and the Established Church. Of course, she had no such intention: it was only that she wished for information, for instruction in these difficult national institutions, which, long as she had made her home in England, she feared she would never thoroughly comprehend.

Mary had sat silently, with her hands clasped across her knees, while her aunt placidly poured forth these and similar comments (which were interspersed by questions and sympathetic monosyllables from Rainham), not so much acrimoniously, as in the tone of the humorous reporter, who is too indifferent to be actuated by a sense of injury.

The girl struck him as having grown tired and listless—more listless than a merely physical fatigue would warrant. He interrupted now to ask her with a touch of compassion if she too had been very much bored.

Her fine eyes were averted as she answered him, smiling a little:

"I am rather glad to be back. It was a pretty place, and the gardens were charming, when it did not rain."

Lady Garnett was overheard to murmur into the black ear of
Mefistofèle that it always rained.

"But on the whole—yes, I was rather bored," the girl continued abruptly.

"The rain and the round games and the people?" Rainham echoed. "You have my sympathy."

"I believe I rather liked the round games," said Mary, with a little laugh. "They were less tiresome than the rest; and the organ was a great solace; it was very perfect."

"Ah, yes, she liked the round games," put in Lady Garnett; "and if two of her admirers had played them more, and turned over her music less, the organ might have been a greater solace."

"They were very foolish," sighed the girl rather wearily.

"Mr. Sylvester was there for the last fortnight," continued Lady Garnett, with some malice. "He succeeded Lord Overstock, as Mary's musical acolyte. In revenge, Lord Overstock wished to teach her baccarat, and Mr. Sylvester remonstrated. It was sublime! It was the one moment of amusement vouchsafed me."

Mary flushed, locking her hands together nervously, with a trace of passion.

"It was ridiculous! intolerable! He had no right——!"

Lady Garnett bent forward, taking her hand.

"Forgive me, *chérie*! I did not mean to annoy you…. You can imagine how glad we were to see you," she added, with a sudden turn to Rainham. "It was charming of you to call so soon; you could hardly have expected to find us."

"You must not give me too much credit. I happened to be quite near, in Harley Street. I could not pass without inquiring."

"Ah, well," she said, "since you are here——"

She was looking absently away from him into an antique, silver basket which lay on the little table by

her side, in which were miscellaneous trifles, odd pieces of lace, thimbles which she never used, a broken fan, a box of chocolates.

"Mary, my dear," she said quickly, "I am so stupid! The old *bonbonnière*, with the brilliants? I must have left it on my dressing-table, or somewhere. That new housemaid—we really know nothing about her—it would be such a temptation. Would you mind——"

"Is this——" Rainham began, and stopped short.

Lady Garnett's brilliant eyes, and a little admonitory gesture of one hand, restrained him. When the girl had shut the door behind her, the elder lady turned to him with a quaint smile.

"Is that it? Of course it is, my friend. You are singularly obtuse: a woman would have seen through me at once."

"I beg your pardon," said Rainham, somewhat mystified. "You mean it was a pretext?"

"It was for you that I made it," she replied with dignity. "What was it you came to say?"

The other was silent for a moment, cogitating. When he looked up at last, meeting her eyes, it was with something like a shiver, in a tone of genuine dismay, that he remarked:

"Dear lady, there are times when you terrify me. You see too much.
It is not—no, it is not human. I had meant to tell you nothing."

He stopped short, lowering his voice, and looking from the depths of his low chair into the red fire.

"It is not necessary, Philip," she continued presently, "that you should tell me; only, if you will be so secret, you should wear smoked glasses. Your eyes were so speaking that I was afraid—yes, afraid—when you came into the room. They looked haunted; they had the air of having seen a ghost!"

"It was a very respectable ghost," he said grimly, "with a frock-coat and a bald head. You know Sir Egbert, I suppose?"

"Only by name. I imagined that he was your spectre, when you spoke of Harley Street. Does he send you South again?"

"No," said Rainham shortly; "he thinks it would be inexpedient—that was his phrase, inexpedient—in an hotel, you know, and all that.... I was obliged to him, because in any case it would have been inconvenient to me to be abroad this year. I suppose, though, that if it would have done me any good I should have gone; but I have a great deal to arrange."

He went on composedly to tell her of the most important of these arrangements—the disposal of his business. He had systematically neglected it for years, he explained, and it had ended by going to the dogs. So long as his foreman was there, that had not mattered so much; but Bullen had decided to desert him, and very wisely. He had accepted an offer to manage the works of a firm of North-Country shipbuilders; he was to shake the dust of Blackpool from off his feet in a very few months, and would probably make his fortune. And as he himself was not equal to bearing his incubus alone, he had put it in the market. A brand new company had bought it—that is to say, they had made him an offer—a ridiculously inadequate one, he was told, but which he was determined to accept; at any rate, it would leave him enough, when everything was paid, to live upon, for the rest of his life. The legal preliminaries were now being settled: they appeared to be interminable; but as in the meantime the dock-gates were shut, and the clerks had departed, he could not, so far as he saw, be losing money; that was a consolation.

He had not come to the end of his disquisition before he discovered that he spoke to deaf ears. The old lady for once was inattentive: she had sat screening her face from the fire with a large palm fan while he unburdened himself, and she began now with a certain hesitation:

"My pretext, Philip! When I said that I made it for you it was only half true. In effect, my dear, I had something to tell you—something disagreeable."

"Concerning me?" he asked.

"Certainly," she said—"something I have heard."

He looked vaguely across at her, finding her obscurity a little strained, waiting for her to speak. The silence that intervened was beginning to harass him, when she said suddenly:

"I will be quite plain. I think you ought to know. There is a scandal abroad about you—about you and

some woman."

"Some woman!" he repeated blankly. "What woman?" He leant back in his chair, laughing his pleasant, low laugh. "I am sorry," he said, "I can't be as seriously annoyed as I ought; it is too foolish. My conscience really does not help me to discover her—this woman. Do you know any more?"

She shook her head.

"It is not a nice story," she said. "No, I have heard no name; only the story is current. I have heard it from three sources. I thought you had better know of it."

"Thank you," he answered, rising to go. "Yes, it is a thing one may as well know. It is very kind of them, these people, to take such trouble, to be sufficiently interested. Upon my honour, I do not know that I very much care. After all, what does it matter?"

"Nothing to me," said Lady Garnett, with a little shrug of disdain—"nothing, *Dieu me pardonne*! even if it were true."

"Well, good-bye," he said.

As he held her hand for a moment between his own he thought it trembled slightly.

"Ah, no!" she said quickly; "it is a phrase I decline. Come and see me soon. I am an old woman, my friend, and I have outlived my generation. I have said too many good-byes in my time. It is *au revoir*."

"With all my heart," he said, smiling. "*Au revoir*."

Her quaint intimation—that was the manner in which he characterized it—was already dismissed from his mind when he emerged into the street.

He had too many graver preoccupations to be greatly troubled by this grotesque slander. Going on his way, however—a temporary cessation of the soft, persistent rain which had been falling for most of the day suggested a walk—a chance recollection brought him to a sudden stop, changing his indifference for a moment into the shadow of pale indignation. How dull of him not to have guessed at once! it must be that unfortunate girl, Kitty Crichton, with whom busybodies were associating his name. He wondered how they had discovered her, and by whom the stupid story had been set afloat. The baselessness of the scandal, conjoined with his immense apathy just then as to anything more that the malice of men could do, inclined him to amusement, the more so as he reflected how many months it was since the girl and her wretched history had passed from his ken. He had found her gone on his return from Italy in the spring, leaving no address and but the briefest acknowledgment of his good-will in a note, which stated that she had no longer any excuse for imposing on his kindness—had found friends. The letter closed, as he imagined, a painful history, which, since his service had been, after all, so fruitless, he could see ended with relief. To his interpretation, the girl had recovered her scoundrel journalist, or at least compelled him to contribute to her support; and after all, as it seemed, he had not done with her yet, though the fashion of her return was ghostly and immaterial enough. The subject galled him; there were always dim possibilities lurking in the background of it which he refused to contemplate; he dismissed it. His meditation had carried him through the bustle of Oxford Street to the Marble Arch, and, the weather still encouraging him, he decided to turn into the Park. Many rainy days had made the air exceedingly soft, and in his enjoyment of this unusual quality, and of the strangely sweet odour of the wet earth and mildewing leaves, he forgot for a while a certain momentous sentence of Sir Egbert Rome's, which had jingled in his head all that afternoon. Presently it tripped him up again, like the gross melody of a music-hall song, and caused him to drop absently upon the first seat, quite unconscious that it was in an unwholesome condition of moisture. He had turned his back on the brilliant patches of yellow and copper-coloured chrysanthemums on the flower-plots facing Park Lane, and he looked westwards over a wider expanse of grass and trees: the grass bestrewed with bright autumnal leaves, the trees obscured and formless, in a rising white mist, through which a pale sun struggled and was vanquished. He had never been in a fitter mood to appreciate the decay of the year, and suddenly he was seized, in the midst of his depression, with an immense thrill, almost causing him to throw out his arms with an embracing gesture to the autumn, the very personal charm, the mysterious and pitiful fascination of the season whose visible beauty seems to include all spiritual things. It cast a spell over him of a long mental silence, as one might say, in which all definite thought expired, from which he aroused himself at last with a shrug of self-contempt, to find inexplicable tears in his eyes. And just then an interruption came, not altogether unwelcome, in the greeting of a familiar voice. It was Lightmark, who had discovered him in the course of a rapid walk down the Row, and had crossed over the small patch of intervening grass to make his salutations.

"I knew you by your back," he remarked, after they had shaken hands—"the ineffable languor of it; and, besides, who else but you would sit for choice on an October evening in such a wretched place?"

He looked down ruefully at his patent leather shoes, which the damp grass had dulled.

Rainham smiled vaguely; he needed an effort to pull himself together, to collect his energies sufficiently to meet the commonplace of conversation, after the curious detachment into which he had fallen; and he wondered aimlessly how long he had been there.

"I suppose, like everyone else, Dick," he remarked after a while, "it is the weather which has brought you home at such an unfashionable date."

"Yes," answered Lightmark; "it was very poor fun yachting. I shall stay in town altogether next year, I think. And you—you are not looking particularly fit; what have you done with yourself?"

"Oh, I am fit enough," said Rainham lightly; "I have been in London, you see."

"Well, I can't let you go now you are here. Won't you dine with us?
Or rather—no, I believe we dine out. Come back and have some tea;
Eve will be enchanted. I really decline to sit in that puddle."

Rainham rose slowly.

"Perhaps I will," he said. "I would have called before, if I had thought there was the least chance of finding you. And how do things go?"

As they strolled along through the deserted Park, and Lightmark entertained his friend with an extravagant narration of their miseries on the *Lucifer*, the chronic sea-sickness of the ladies, the incapacity and intoxication of the steward, and the discontent of everybody on board—he spoke as if they had entertained a considerable party—Rainham's interested eyes had leisure to note a change in him, not altogether unexpected. He presented the same handsome, well-dressed, prosperous figure; and yet prosperity had in some degree coarsened him. The old charm of his boyish carelessness had been succeeded by a certain hard assurance, an air of mundane, if not almost commercial shrewdness, which gave him less the note of an artist than of a successful man of business. And where the old Lightmark, the Lightmark of the Café Grecco days, broke out at times, it was less pleasantly than of old, in a curious recklessness, a tendency, which jarred on Rainham's susceptible nerves, to dilate with a vanity which would have been vulgar, had it not been almost childish, on his lavish living, the magnitude of his expenditure.

"You must find that sort of thing rather a tax?" he asked tentatively, after a description which struck him as unnecessarily exuberant of a hospitality in the summer.

"Oh, it pays in the long run," remarked the other easily, "to keep open house and go everywhere. Thank Heaven, the uncle is liberal! I admit we have been going at rather a pace lately. But, then, I can knock off a couple of pictures as soon as I have a little time, which will raise the wind again. I know what the public wants, bless it!"

Rainham shrugged his shoulders rather wearily.

"Poor public! If it wants art made in that spirit, it is worse than
I believed."

Lightmark looked askance at him, frowning a little, pulling at his long moustache. He was absorbed for some time—they had turned into the Edgware Road, and the soft rain had begun again—in ineffectual pursuit of cabs. When at last he had caught a driver's eye, and they had settled themselves on the cushions of a hansom, he turned abruptly to his companion to ask him if he had seen the Academy before it closed.

"You recognised your domain?" he asked lightly, when the other had responded in the affirmative —"in my picture, I mean?"

He spoke quickly, in his accustomed blithe habit; it might have been merely a morbid fancy of Rainham's which traced a note of anxiety, of concealed uneasiness, in his accent, that the bare question scarcely justified.

Rainham paused a moment: it was not only a passing thought of Oswyn's acrimony, and of the difficult minutes during which he had been thrown across Lightmark at the Dock, that constrained him; it was rather the recollection of his own careful scrutiny of the disputed canvas, when he had at last dragged himself with a disagreeable sense of moral responsibility into Burlington House, and had come away at last strangely dissatisfied. Acquitting Dick of any conscious plagiarism, of a breach of common honesty, he was disagreeably filled with a sense of the work's immeasurable inferiority to Oswyn's ruined masterpiece. It was clever, and audacious, and striking; it had had the fortune to be splendidly

hung, and that was all, for all his goodwill, he could say. And since, after all, that was so little, would strike his friend as but a cold tribute after the panegyrics of the morning papers, he preferred to say nothing, deftly dropping the subject, and responding to the first half of his friend's question alone.

"My domain, Dick? Ah, I forgot; you can hardly have heard that it is my domain no longer—or ceases to be very shortly. That has come to an end; I have sold it."

Lightmark whistled softly.

"Well, you surprise me! Of course I am glad; we will be glad too. We shall see more of you now, I suppose? or will you live abroad?"

"Abroad?" echoed Rainham absently. "Oh, yes, very probably. But tell me, how is—Eve?"

"As we seem to be arriving, I think I will let her tell you herself."

They descended, and Rainham waited silently while his friend discharged the cabman, and let him in with his latch-key into the bright, spacious hall. Then, after glancing into the empty drawing-room, Lightmark preceded him up the thick carpeted stairs, on which their footsteps scarcely sounded, and stopped at the door of Eve's boudoir, through which a woman's voice, speaking rather rapidly, and, as it struck him, in a key of agitation, fell upon Rainham's ear with a certain familiarity, though he was sure it was not Eve's, and could not remember when or where he might have heard it. After a moment they went in.

CHAPTER XXIII

There are occasions when thought is terribly and comprehensively sudden: the rudimentary processes of reasoning, by analogy and syllogism, so slow and so laborious, turn to divination. We have an occult vision, immediate and complete, into the obscure manner of life, and crowd an infinity of discovery into a very few seconds. It was so with Philip Rainham now. Lightmark had scarcely closed the door, against which he now stood in a black silence, with the air of a man turned to stone; Rainham's eyes had only fallen once upon the two figures on the sofa—Eve crushed in a corner, a sorrowful, dainty shape in the silk and lace of her pretty tea-gown, with the white drawn face of a scared child; Kitty Crichton, in her cloak and hat, bending forward a little, the hectic flush of strong excitement colouring her checks, that were already branded by her malady—when he underwent a moral revolution. He had no more to learn. He glanced at Lightmark curiously, almost impartially, his loathing strangely tempered by a sort of self-contempt, that he should have been so deluded. The clumsy lies which this man had told him, and which he in his indolent charity had believed! All at once, and finally, in a flash of brutal illumination, he saw Lightmark, who had once been his friend, as he really was, naked and unclean. It stripped him of all his superficial qualities; the mask of genial good-nature, the air of good-fellowship, under which his gross egoism lay concealed that it might be more securely mischievous when it went loose. His amiability was an imposture, a dangerous harlequinade; the man was bad. It was a plausible scoundrel, a vulgar profligate with a handsome face and a few cheap talents—had he not been reduced to stealing the picture of his friend?—whom these two women had loved, to whom one of them was married. Ah, the sting of it lay there! Good or bad, he was Eve's husband, and she was his wife, bound to him until the end. And then, for the first time, seeing her there, helpless and terrified, in her forlorn prettiness, he deceived himself no longer, wrapped up his tenderness for the woman, his angry pity for her misery that was coming, in no false terms. Such self-deception, honest as it had been, was no longer possible. He knew now that he loved her, and all that his love had been—the very salt and savour of life to him, the one delicious and adorable pain relieving the gray *ennui* of the rest of it, to remain with him always (even, as it seemed now, in the very article of death) as a reminder of the intolerable sweetness which life, under other conditions, might have contained. And inexplicably, in the midst of his desolation, his heart sang a sort of fierce pæan: as a woman, delivered of a man-child, goes triumphing to meet the sordidness of death, so was there in Rainham's rapid acceptance of his fruitless and ineffectual love a distinct sense of victory, in which pain expired—victory over the meanness and triviality of modern life, which could never seem quite mean and trivial again, since he had proved it to be capable of such moments; had looked once—and could so sing his "Nunc Dimittis"—upon the face of love. And it all happened in a second, and in a further second—for his thought, quickened by the emergency, still leapt forward with incredible swiftness—a great audacity seized Philip Rainham, to save the beloved woman pain. The devil would be at him later, would beset him, harass him, madden him with hint and opportunity of profiting by Lightmark's forfeiture. But the devil's turn was not yet; he was filled only with his great and reverent love, his sublime pity for the little tragical figure in front of him, whose house of painted cards tumbled. Well! he might save it for her for a little longer—at least, there was one desperate chance which he would try.

He had lived too long, unconsciously, in the habit of seeking her happiness, that it should fail him now in her evil hour, in the first flush of his new consciousness (ah, yes, there was beauty in that, and victory!), for any base personal thought or animosity against the man. He would have given her so easily his life; should he grudge her his reputation? The reputation of a man with one foot in the grave —what did it matter? And it all came about in a few seconds.

Before any one of that strange company had found time to speak, Rainham had grasped the situation, knew himself at last and the others, and was prepared, scarcely counting the cost, with his splendid lie. He made a step forward, then stopped suddenly, as if he were bracing himself for a moral conflict. His face was very white and rigid, his mouth set firmly; and the other three watched him with a strange expectancy depicted on all their countenances, amidst the various emotions proper to each of them; for he alone had the air of being master of the situation. And his resolve had need to be very keen, for just then Eve did a thing which might have wrecked it. She rose and came straight towards him; her pretty, distressed face was raised to his, still, in spite of its womanly anguish, with some of the pleading of a frightened child, who runs instinctively in its extremity to the person whom it knows best; and she gave him her two little trembling hands, which he held for a moment silently.

"Philip," she said, in a low, constrained voice—"Philip, I have known you all my life—longer than anyone. You were always good to me. Tell me whether it's true or not what this woman has told me. Philip, I shall die if this be true!"

He bent his head for a moment. He had a wild longing to give up, simply to clasp her in his arms and console her with kisses and incoherent words of tenderness, as he had done years ago, when she was a very small child, and ran to him with her tear-stained cheeks, after a difficulty with her governess. But he only put her away from him very quietly and sadly.

"It is not true," he said quietly, "if it is anything against your husband."

The girl on the sofa, Kitty Crichton, rose; she made a step forward irresolutely, seemed on the point of speaking, but something in Rainham's eyes coerced her, and Eve was crying. He continued very fast and low, as though he told with difficulty some shameful story, learnt by rote.

"I tell you it is not true. Lightmark," he added sternly, "there has been a mistake—you see that—for which I apologize. Wake up, for God's sake! Come and see after your wife; some slander has upset her. This woman is—mine; I will take her away."

The girl trembled violently; she appeared fascinated, terrified into a passive obedience by Rainham's imperious eyes, which burnt in his white face like the eyes of a dying man. She followed, half unconsciously, his beckoning hand. But Eve confronted her before she reached the door.

"Whom am I to believe?" she cried scornfully. "Why did you say it?
What was the good of it—a lie like that? It is a lie, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes!" said the girl hysterically, "it seems so. Oh, let me go, madam! I'm sorry I told you. I'll trouble nobody much longer. Call it a lie."

She threw out her hands helplessly; she would have fallen, but Rainham caught her wrist, drew her toward him, supporting her with an arm.

"Come," he said firmly, "this is no place for us."

Eve regarded them all strangely, vaguely, the terror gradually dying out of her eyes—Lightmark expressionless and silent, as he had been all through the interview; the woman trembling on Rainham's arm, who stood beside her with his downcast eyes, the picture of conscious guilt. A curious anguish too pale to be indignation plucked at her heart-strings—anguish in which, unaccountably, the false charge against her husband was scarcely considered; that had become altogether remote and unreal, something barely historical, fading already away in the dim shadows of the past. What hurt her, with a dull pain which she could not analyse, was the sudden tarnishing of a scarcely-admitted ideal by Rainham's deliberate confession, making life appear for the moment intolerably sordid and mean. Would she have owned to herself that, with an almost unconscious instinct, she had judged these two men all along by a different standard? Hardly: she loved her husband, and her marriage had not yet dissipated the memory of those golden days of illusion preceding it, in which her love had been of a finer kind. Only that time, in which it would have been impossible for her to judge him, in which he could only do right in her eyes, was gone. Occasions had arrived when they had inevitably to differ, on which the girl had gently acquiesced—if not without a touch of scorn—in his action, but had not felt obliged to accept his point of view. There had been times when her pride had suffered—for underneath her childish exterior, her air of being just a dainty little figure of Watteau, she had a very sensitive and delicate pride of her own—and then, if she had succeeded in forgiving Lightmark, it had not been

without an effort which had made it difficult for her to pardon herself. Sometimes, though she would scarcely have confessed it, her husband's mere approbativeness had almost shocked her. It was good, no doubt, to be popular, harmless even, to care for popularity—at least, one's traditions declared nothing to the contrary; but to care so exorbitantly as Lightmark appeared to do, to sacrifice so much to one's enthusiasm for pleasing inferior people—people whom, behind their backs, one was quite ready to tear to pieces, allowing them neither intelligence nor virtue—in just that there seemed to her some flaw of taste that was almost like a confession of failure. Surely she loved him, and was ready to forgive him much: not for worlds would she have confessed to disillusion. And yet, now and again, when the rush and ostentation of their new life, with its monotony of dinners and dances—so little like that which she had anticipated as the future lot of a painter's wife—had left her rather weary, a trifle sad, she had thought suddenly of her old friend Philip Rainham, and the thought had solaced her. There is a sort of pleasure, even when one is married to the most amiable of husbands, and is getting quite old—very nearly twenty—in turning from time to time to a person who has known one in the very shortest of frocks, and whose intimate connection with chocolates and "treats" is among one's earliest traditions. She made no contrasts; and yet when occasionally on one of those afternoons—there seemed to be so many of them—when she was "at home," when her bright, large drawing-room was fullest, and she was distracted to find herself confusing, amidst the clatter of teacups, dear Mrs. Henderson, who painted wild-flowers so cleverly, with dear Lady Lorimer, who was going on the stage, she looked up and saw Rainham hovering in the near distance, or sitting with his teacup balanced in one long white hand as he turned a politely tolerant ear to the small talk of a neighbour, she felt strangely rested. Trouble or confusion might come, she told herself, and how suddenly all these charming people, who were so surprisingly alike, and whose names were so exasperatingly different, would disappear. Dear Mrs. Henderson and dear Lady Lorimer, and that odious Mrs. Dollond—what was she saying to Dick now which had to be spoken with an air of such exaggerated intimacy in so discreet an undertone?—how swiftly they would all be gone, like the snows of last year! Only Philip Rainham, she was sure, would be there still, a little older, perhaps, with the air of being a little more tired of things, but inwardly the same, unalterably loyal and certain. The prospect was curiously sustaining, the more in that she had no tangible cause of uneasiness, was an extremely happy woman—it was so that she would have most frequently described herself—only growing at times a little weary of the fashionable tread-mill, and the daily routine of not particularly noble interests which it involved. Catching his eyes sometimes, as he sat there, looking out idly, indifferently, upon it all—this success which was the breath of life to Dick—she found him somewhat admirable; disdainful, fastidious, reserved—beneath his surface good-humour, his constant kindness, he could scarcely be a happy man. In flashes of sudden gratitude, she would have been glad often to have done something for him, had there been anything in the world to do. And then she laughed at herself for such a vain imagination. Had it not been his proper charm all along that he was a man for whom one could do nothing? precisely, because he wanted nothing, was so genuinely indifferent to anything that life could offer? And now all that was at an end; by his own confession he had finished it, admitting himself, with a frankness almost brutal, a man like other men, only with passions more sordid, and a temper more unscrupulous, in that he had ruined this wretched woman, whose coming there had left a trail of vileness over her own life.

"Ah, yes, go!" she said, after a while, answering Rainham's exclamation. "For pity's sake, go!"

Rainham bowed his head, obeyed her; as the door closed behind them he could hear that she cried softly, and that Lightmark, his silence at last broken, consoled her with inaudible words.

CHAPTER XXIV

Rainham turned at random out of Grove Road, walking aimlessly, and very fast, without considering direction. He had passed the girl's arm through his own as they left the house; and in a sort of stupefied obedience she had submitted. To her, too, one way was the same as another, as dreary and as vain. With Rainham, indeed, after the tension of the last few minutes, into which he had crowded such a wealth of suffering and of illumination, a curious stupor had succeeded. For the moment he neither thought nor suffered: simply, it was good to be out there, in the darkness—the darkness of London—after that immense plunge, which was still too near him, that he should attempt to appreciate it in all its relations. By-and-by would be the season of reckoning, the just and delicate analysis, by nicely critical nature, of all that he had deliberately lost, when he might run desperately before the whips of his own thought; now he felt only the lethargy which succeeds strenuous action, that has been, in a measure, victorious; the physical well-being of walking rapidly, vaguely, through the comfortable shadows, allowing the cold rain to pelt refreshingly upon his face and aching temples. And it was not until they had gone so through several streets, whose names were a blank to him, that Rainham bethought him, with a touch of self-reproach, of his companion, and how ill her thin garments and slender figure were calculated to suffer the downpour, which he only found consoling. He drew her into

the shelter of a doorway, signalled to a passing cab; and just then, the light of an adjacent street lamp falling upon her face, he realized for the first time in its sunken outline the progress of her malady.

"I beg your pardon," he said gently; "I did not understand that you were ill. You must tell me where you are lodging, and I will take you back." Then, as though he anticipated her hesitation, a tribute to her old ambiguity, become so useless, he added dryly: "You can tell me your address; you have no reason to hide yourself now."

She glanced up at him furtively, shrinking back a little as though she feared his irony.

"I live in Charlotte Street, No. —. But pray let me go alone, sir!
It will not be your way."

"I have rooms in Bloomsbury," he answered. "It will be entirely on my way."

And the girl made no further protest, when he handed her into the cab, an inconvenient four-wheeler which had responded to his signal, and, after giving the driver the address which she had indicated, took his place silently beside her. Perhaps something of Rainham's own lethargy had infected her, after a scene so feverish; or perhaps she could not but feel dimly, and in a manner not to be analysed, how that, distant and apart as they two seemed, yet within the last hour, by Rainham's action, between her life and his a subtile, invisible chord had been stretched, so that the order of her going might well rest with him.

She cast furtive glances at him from time to time as he sat back, obscure in his corner, gazing out with eyes which saw nothing at the blurred gas-lamps, and the red flashes of the more rapid vehicles which outstripped them. And now that the first stupefying effect of his intervention was wearing away —it seemed like a mad scene in a theatre, or some monstrous dream, so surprising and unreal—her primitive consciousness awoke, and set her wondering, inquiring, with bewilderment that was akin to terror, into the motives and bearing of their joint conduct. It had seemed to her natural enough then, as do the most grotesque of our sleeping visions when they are passing; but now that she was awake, relieved from the coercion of his eyes, she was roundly amazed at her own complicity in so stupendous a fiction. What had he made her do? Why had he taken this sin of another's on his own shoulders? Eve's piteous cry of "Philip!" at his entry recurred to her—the intimate nature of her appeal. The scent was promising; but it opened out vistas of a loyalty too fantastic and generous to be true. Her mature cynicism of a girl of the people, disillusioned and abused, flouted the idea. Did she not know "gentlemen" and the nature of their love? The girl was hardened by ill-usage, bitter from long brooding over her shame. She was glad when he turned to her at last, breaking a silence which the sullen roar of London outside and beyond them, the dreary rattling of the cab, seemed only to heighten, with a sudden gesture of despair.

"If I had only known! If you had only told me two years ago!"

The suppressed passion in his voice, his air, terrified the girl.
She bent forward trembling.

"Ah! what have I done, what have I done?" she moaned. "How did I know that it would all come like this? I meant no harm, sir. He persuaded me to deceive you after I had found out who he really was, to put you off the scent, keeping his name a secret. He said he had a right to ask that. He told me he was married, though he wasn't then. And afterwards he made me move, when you were abroad: he wanted my address not to be known. That was the condition he made of his seeing after the child; he swore he would provide for her then, and bring her up like a lady. And he sent me the money for a bit pretty regular. Oh, it was only for her sake, I promise you that! I wouldn't have touched a brass farthing for myself. But, after all, she *was* his child. And then, somehow or other, the money didn't come. He went away—he was away all the summer—and he said he had so many calls on him, such expenses."

"Ah, the scoundrel!" cried Rainham, between his set teeth.

The girl took him up, hardly with an echo of his own resentment, rather with a sort of crushed directness, as one who acknowledged a bare fact, making no comment, merely admitting the obscure dreariness of things.

"Yes; he was a scoundrel. He was bad all along. I think he has no heart. And he has made me bad too. I was a good enough girl of old, before I knew him. Only something came over me to-night when I found *her* there, with that big house and the servants, and all that luxury, and thought how he couldn't spare a few pounds to bring his own child up decent. Oh, I was vile to-night. I frightened her. Perhaps it was best as it happened. It dazed her. She'll remember less. She'll only remember your part of it, sir."

She glanced across at him with timid eyes, which asked him to be so good as to explain: all that had

confused her so.

"I don't understand," she murmured helplessly—"I don't understand."

He ignored the interrogation in her eyes with a little gesture, half irritable and half entreating, which coerced her.

"How did you come there?" he asked. "What was the good——"

His question languished suddenly, and he let both hands fall slowly upon his knees. In effect, the uselessness of all argument, the futility of any recrimination in the face of what had been accomplished, was suddenly borne in upon him with irresistible force: and his momentary irritation against the malice of circumstance, the baseness of the man, was swallowed up in a rising lassitude which simply gave up.

The girl continued after a while, in a low, rapid voice, her eyes fixed intently upon the opal in an antique ring which shone faintly upon one of Rainham's quiet hands, as though its steady radiance helped her speech:

"It was all an accident—an accident. I was sick and tired of waiting and writing, and getting never a word in reply. My health went too, last winter, and ever since I have been getting weaker and worse. I knew what that meant: my mother died of a decline—yes, she is dead, thank God! this ten years—and it was then, when I knew I wouldn't get any better, and there was the child to think of, that I wanted to see him once more. There was a gentleman, too, who came——"

She broke off for a moment, clasping her thin hands together, which trembled as though the memory of some past, fantastic terror had recurred.

"It doesn't matter," she went on presently. "He frightened me, that was all. He had such a stern, smooth-spoken way with him; and he seemed to know so much. He said that he had heard of me and my story, and would befriend me if I would tell him the name of the man who ruined me. Yes, he would befriend me, help me to lead a respectable life."

Her sunken eyes flashed for a moment, and her lip was scornfully curled.

"God knows!" she cried, with a certain rude dignity, "I was always an honest woman but for Cyril—Dick she called him."

The intimate term, tossed so lightly from those lips, caused Rainham to quiver, as though she had rasped raw wounds. It was the concrete touch giving flesh and blood to his vision of her past. It made the girl's old relation with Eve's husband grow into a very present horror, startlingly real and distinct.

"Go on," he said at last, wearily.

"Ah, I didn't tell him, sir," she explained, misinterpreting his silence. "I wouldn't have done that. He sore angered me, though he may have meant well. He was set on seeing the child then, but I wouldn't let him. It came over me after he was gone that that, maybe, was what he came for—the child. Someone might have put him on to take her from me—some society. Oh, I was at my wits' end, sir! for, you see, she is all I have—all—all! Then I made up my mind to go and see him. Bad as he is, he wouldn't have let them do it. Oh, I would have begged and prayed to him on my knees for that."

She stopped for a moment, hectic and panting. She pressed both hands against her breast, as though she sought composure. Then she continued:

"It was all a mistake, you know, my being shown in there to-night! I would never have sought her out myself, being where she is. Oh, I have my pride! It was the servant's mistake: he took me for a fitter, no doubt, from one of the big dressmakers. Perhaps there was one expected, I don't know. But I didn't think of that when I came in and found her sitting there, so proud and soft. It all came over me—how badly he had used me, and little Meg there at home, and hard Death coming on me—and I told her. It seemed quite natural then, as though I had come for that, just for that and nothing else, though, Heaven knows, it was never in my mind before. I was sorry afterwards. Yes, before you came in with *him* I was sorry. It wasn't as if I owed her any grudge. How could she have known? She is an innocent young thing, after all—younger than I ever was—for all her fine dresses and her grand ladyish way. It was like striking a bit of a child.... God forgive him," she added half hysterically, "if he uses her as bad as me!"

Rainham's hand stole to his side, and for a moment he averted his head. When he turned to her again she was uncertain whether it was more than a pang of sharp physical pain, such as she well knew herself, which had so suddenly blanched his lips.

"For pity's sake, girl," he whispered, "be silent."

She considered him for a moment silently in the elusive light, that matched the mental twilight in which she viewed his mood. His expression puzzled, evaded her; and she could not have explained the pity which he aroused.

"I am sorry," she broke out again, moved by an impulse which she did not comprehend. "You did it for her."

"Oh, for her! What does it matter since it is done? Say that it was an accident—a folly—that I am sorry too."

"No," said the girl softly; "you are glad."

He shrugged his shoulders with increasing weariness, an immense desire to have the subject ended and put away with forgotten things.

"I am glad, then. Have it as you like."

But she resumed with a pertinacity which his irritated nerves found malignant.

"If it was that," she said ambiguously, "you had better have held your tongue. You had only to gain —— Ah, why did you do it? What was the good?"

He made another gesture of lassitude; then, rousing himself, he remarked:

"It was a calculation, then, a piece of simple arithmetic. If it gives her a little peace a little longer, why should three persons suffer—be sacrificed—when two might serve?"

"Oh, him!" cried the girl scornfully; "he can't suffer—he hasn't a heart!"

Rainham looked up at her at last. His fingers ceased playing with his ring.

"Oh, let me count for a little," he murmured, with a little, ghastly laugh.

The girl's eyes looked full into his, and in a moment they shone out of her face, which was suffused with a rosy flush that made her almost beautiful, with the illumination of some transcendent idea.

"Ah, you *are* a gentleman!" she cried.

In the tension of their nerves they were neither aware that the cab had come to a standstill, and before he could prevent her, she had stooped swiftly down and caught his hand passionately to her lips.

"Heaven forgive me! How unhappy you must be!" she said.

CHAPTER XXV

After all, things were not so complicated as they seemed. For Kitty was nearly at the end of her troubles; her trivial little life, with its commonplace tale of careless wrong and short-lived irony of suffering, telling with the more effect on a nature at once so light and so wanting in buoyancy, was soon to be hurried away and forgotten, amid the chaos of things broken and ruined.

"I don't want to die," she said, day after day, to the sternly cheerful nurse who had her in charge at the quiet, sunny hospital in the suburbs, where Rainham had gained admission for her as in-patient. "But I don't know that I want to live, either."

And so it had been from the beginning, poor soul, poor wavering fatalist! with a nature too innately weak to make an inception either of good or evil, the predestined prey of circumstance.

As she lay in the long, white room dedicated to those stricken, like herself, with the disease that feeds on youth, her strength ebbing away quite painlessly, she often entered upon the pathless little track of introspection, a pathetic, illogical summing up of the conduct of her life, which always led so quickly to the same broad end of reassurance, followed by unreasoned condemnation—the conventional judgement on her very inability to discover where she had so gravely sinned, how and when she had earned the extreme penalty of reprobation and of death. She was too wicked, she concluded hopelessly, vaguely struggling with the memories of the teaching of her Sunday-school, too wicked to find out wherein her exceeding wickedness lay.

One comfort she took to her sad heart, that Rainham had not condemned her; that he had only pitied her, while he reserved his damnation for the iron-bound, Sabbatarian world which had ruined and spurned another helpless victim. Rainham she believed implicitly, obeyed unquestioningly, with a sense of gratitude which had been largely mingled with self-reproach, until he had told her that, so far as he was concerned, she had nothing to reproach herself with. It never occurred to her for a moment now to question or to resent the part he had made her play on that tragical afternoon in Grove Road. Why should she? The imputation of a lie, what was that to her? Had he not taken it all, all her misery upon himself? Had he not fed, and clothed, and lodged her like the most penitent of prodigals, although she had no claim upon him until he chose to give it to her? Her benefactor could do no wrong, that was her creed; and it made things wonderfully smooth, the future on a sudden strangely simple. She had lied to him at the bidding of the other, and he had not resented it when he came to know the truth: she had brought shame on him, and he had not reproached her. A man like this was outside her experience; she regarded him with a kind of grateful amazement—a wondering veneration, which sometimes held her dumb in his presence.

If she had felt unhappy at first about the future of her child—and there had been moments when this thought had been more bitter than all the rest of her life together—this care was taken from her when Rainham promised to adopt the little girl, or, better still, to induce Mrs. Bullen to open her motherly heart to her. "They'll be only too glad to get her," he had said decisively, interrupting her awkward little speech of thanks. "That will be all right. Mrs. Bullen hasn't known what to do with herself since her son went to sea; she wants a child to care for. You needn't worry yourself about that."

It was after this that Kitty had owned to the nurse that she had no desire to live; and though the shifting of this burden enabled her to carry her life for a time less wearily, the end was not far; and the news of her death came to Rainham just after the first snowfall, in the middle of a dreary, cruel December.

The winter wore on, and still Rainham was to be seen almost nightly in his now familiar corner by the fireside at Brodonowski's, in the seat next that which had become Oswyn's by right of almost immemorial occupation. His negotiations with the company who were to buy him out of his ancestral dock were still incomplete, and now he felt a strange reluctance to hurry matters, to hasten the day on which he should be forced to leave the little room looking out upon the unprofitable river which he loved.

The two men would sit together, sometimes talking, but far more often not, until a very late hour; and when the doors were closed upon them they often wandered aimlessly in the empty streets, dismissing their cares in contemplation of great moonlit buildings, or the strong, silent river, sliding under the solemn bridges; united from day to day more closely by the rare sympathy which asks no questions and finds its chief expression in silence. One thing they both hated—to be alone; but loneliness for them was not what most mortals understand by the name. There was company for them in inanimate things—in books, in pictures, and even in objects less expressive; they were men who did not fear their thoughts, who looked to the past for their greatest pleasures. And now for Rainham the whole of life was a thing so essentially weary and flavourless that the *ennui* of little things seemed hardly worth consideration. He was dumbly content to let destiny lead him whither it would, without apprehension, without expectation. Oswyn had asked him, one evening, just before they parted on the doorstep of the club, with a certain abruptness which the other had long since learnt to understand, why he was in London instead of being at Bordighera. Rainham sighed, echoing the question as if the idea suggested was entirely novel.

"Why, because—— Well, for one thing, because you are in London and the Dollonds are at Bordighera. You don't know Mrs. Dollond?" he added, seeing that the other looked at him with a certain air of wistful distrust, a momentarily visible desire to see behind so obvious a veil.

"No, thank God!" said Oswyn devoutly, shrugging his bent shoulders, and turning away with a relapse into his unwonted impassiveness.

"But you have apparently heard of her," continued Rainham, with an effort toward humour. "And I am afraid people have been slandering her. She is a very excellent person, the soul of good-nature, and as amusing as—as an American comic paper! But in my present state of health I'm afraid she would be a little too much for me. I can stand her in homeopathic doses, but the Riviera isn't nearly big enough for the two of us as permanencies. No, I think I shall wait until next winter now."

Oswyn shot a quick glance at him, and then looked away as suddenly, and after a brief silence they parted.

Rainham was already beginning to consider himself secure from the inconvenient allusions to Lightmark and their altered relations, which he had at first nervously anticipated. Oswyn rarely

mentioned the other painter's name, and accepted, without surprise or the faintest appearance of a desire for explanation, the self-evident fact of the breach between the two quondam allies; regarding it as in the natural course of events, and as an additional link in the chain of their intimacy. Indeed, Lightmark had long ceased to be a component element of the atmosphere of Brodonowski's: he no longer brought the sunshine of his expansive, elaborate presence into the limits of the dingy little place; nor did its clever, shabby constituents, with their bright-eyed contempt for the popular slaves of a fatuous public, care to swell the successful throng who worshipped the rising genius in his new temple in Grove Road. The fact that in those days Rainham avoided Lightmark's name, once so often quoted; his demeanour, when the more ignorant or less tactical of their mutual acquaintances pressed him with inquiries as to the well-being and work of his former friend, had not failed to suggest to the intimate circle that there had been a rupture, a change, something far more significant than the general severance which had gradually been effected between them, the unreclaimed children of the desert, and Richard Lightmark, the brilliant society painter; something as to which it seemed that explanation would not be forthcoming, as to which questions were undesirable. The perception of this did not demand much subtlety, and, in accordance with the instincts of their craft, Rainham's reticence was respected.

"It was curious, when you come to think of it," Copal said reflectively one evening after his return from a late autumnal ramble in Finistère, and while the situation was still new to him, "very curious. Rainham and Lightmark were inseparable; so were Rainham and Oswyn. And all the time Lightmark and Oswyn were about as friendly as the toad and the harrow. Sounds like Euclid, doesn't it? Things equal to the same thing, and quite unequal to one another."

"Yes," assented McAllister, thoughtfully stroking his reddish beard. "And there was a time—not so very long ago, either—when Lightmark and Oswyn were on pretty good terms too!"

"Ah, well; most people quarrel with old Oswyn sooner or later. But it certainly does look a little as if—as if Lightmark had done something and the other two had found it out—Oswyn first. However, it's no business of ours. I suppose he's safe to be elected next week,—though he isn't a Scotchman, eh, Sandy old man?"

"Quite," said the other laconically.

And then their conversation was modulated into a less personal key as they resumed their discussion of the colony of American *pleinairistes* with whom Rathbone had foregathered at Pontaven, and of the "paintability" of fields of *sarrasin* and poplars.

Rainham found it rather difficult to satisfy his inner self as to his real, fundamental motive for wintering in England. Sir Egbert's orders? They had not, after all, amounted to much more than an expression of opinion, and it was somewhat late for him to begin to obey his doctors. The transfer of his business? That could have been carried out just as well in his absence by his solicitors.

For some time after Kitty's death—and her illness had certainly at first detained him—he was able to assure himself that he was waiting until little Margot (so he called the child) should have secured a firm foothold in the affections of his foreman's family; the fact that the Bullens were so soon to leave him seemed to render this all more necessary. But now, in the face of Bullen's somewhat deferential devotion and his wife's vociferous raptures, there hardly seemed to be room for doubt on this score. For the present, at least, the child ran no risk greater than that of being too much petted.

And at last he was obliged to own that his inability to follow his established precedent was due to some moral deficiency, a species of cowardice which he could only vaguely analyse, but which was closely connected with his reluctance to isolate himself among the loquacious herd of those who sought for health or pleasure. If Oswyn would have accompanied him to the Riviera he would have gone; but Oswyn was not to be induced to forsake his beloved city, and so he stayed, telling himself that each week was to be the last.

On a bright day, when spring seemed to be within measurable distance in spite of the cold, he made an expedition with Margot to Kensington Gardens; and they passed, on their way through the Park, the seat on which he had rested after his interview with Lady Garnett on that far-away October evening—the memory struck him now as of another life. It was frosty to-day, and the seat raised itself forlornly from quite a mound of snow. And when they left the Gardens he hailed a cab, and, before they had reached the Circus on their homeward journey, bade the man turn and drive northward, up Orchard Street and into Grove Road.

It was dusk now, and there were bright touches of light in the windows of the low, white house, which he glanced at almost surreptitiously as they passed, and two carriages waited before the outer door.

"My dear child," he remarked suddenly to the little girl, who was growing almost frightened by his frowning silence, "you should always, always remember that when a man has made a fool of himself, the best thing he can do is to clear out, and not return to his folly like the proverbial dog!"

Margot looked solemnly puzzled for a moment, and then laughed, deciding boldly that this was a new and elaborate game—a joke, perhaps—which she was too little to understand, but which politeness and good-fellowship alike required her at least to appear to appreciate. They were great friends already, these two. Children always recognised an ally in the man who made so few friends among his peers, and for children—especially for pretty children of a prettiness which accorded with his own private views—Rainham had an undeniable weakness.

On slack days—and they were always slack now—loungers about the precincts of the dock often caught a glimpse of the child's fair hair above the low level of the dark bow-window which leaned outwards from Rainham's room; and the foreman had even gone so far as to suggest that his master was bringing her up to the business. "Pays us for looking after her," he confided to his wife, "and looks after her himself!"

Mrs. Bullen laughed and then sighed, being a soft-hearted woman, and inclined to grieve over their impending desertion of their unbusinesslike master.

"Mr. Philip couldn't do more for her if he was her own father," she acknowledged appreciatively.

Whereat Bullen had smiled with the superior air of one who knew—of one who had been down to the sea in ships, and was versed in the mysteries of the great world, of fathers and of children.

"Right you are, old woman," he chuckled, "no more he could. Blessed if he could! And there's no mistake about that. And when you and me go North in the spring, why, it strikes me that we shall have to leave missie behind. Yes, that we shall: though I'd take her, glad enough, without the money."

If at first his association with Margot reminded Rainham of another little girl whom he had loved, and whose place she could never even approximately fill, the memory was not a bitter one, and he was soon able to listen to her childish questioning without more than a gentle pang. In time, he even found a dreary transient pleasure in closing his eyes on the dank dun reality of Blackpool, while the child discoursed to her doll in the nook of the bow-window, and his fancy wandered in another sunnier, larger room, with open windows, and the hum of a softer language rising in frequent snatches from the steep street outside; with a faint perfume of wood fires in the balmy, shimmering air, a merry clatter and jingle of hoofs, and bells, and harness; and another daintier child voice ringing quaint, colloquial Italian in his ears. The awakening was certainly cruel, sometimes with almost the shock of a sudden savage blow, but the dream lasted and recurred: he had always been a dreamer, and every day found him more forgetful of the present, more familiar with the past.

Upon his return, rather late, to the dock, he recognised, with a thrill of pleasure tinged with something of self-reproach, among the little pile of business letters which Mrs. Bullen brought to him with his tea-tray, the delicate angular handwriting of Lady Garnett, and he made haste to possess himself of the secret of the narrow envelope, of a by-gone fashion, secured with a careful seal.

"MY DEAR" (so she wrote): "This is very absurd; yes, at the risk of offending you, I must tell you that it is not clever of you to take things so very much *au serieux*. I know more than you think, Philip. Mrs. Sylvester, who means well, doubtless—but, *mon Dieu*, what a woman!—Mrs. Sylvester has been here; she has spoken to me, and I am afraid I have scandalized her. 'You don't suppose he has married her,' I said, I confess not altogether disingenuously, and how mystified she looked! You will say that Mrs. Sylvester ought to mind her own affairs, and you will even find me a trifle impertinent, perhaps. But I claim my privilege. Am I not your godmother? Still, I am rather intrigued, I own. I don't want to ask what you have done, or why; whatever it is, I approve of it. What I find fault with is what you are doing, the part you are playing. You must not give me the chagrin of seeing Mrs. Sylvester and the admirable Charles triumphant at your expense, Philip. You must show yourself: you must come and see me; you must come to dinner forthwith, or I shall have to make you a visit at your dock. I must talk to you, mon cher! I am troubled about you, and so is Mary. Come to us, and Mary shall play to you and exorcise your demons. Besides, I am bored—horribly bored. Yes, even Mary bores me sometimes, and I her, doubtless; and we want you. We will own that we are selfish, after all, but you must come!"

Then there was a postscript: "Mary suggests that possibly you are not so incomprehensible as I think; perhaps you are at Bordighera? But you ought to let us know."

Rainham sat with the letter before him until Margot came to bid him good-night. And then he decided

to take advantage of the suggestion of the postscript: surely, if he did not answer the dear old lady's letter, she would conclude that he was indeed upon his travels.

CHAPTER XXVI

If Eve could have mended her idol discreetly and permanently, so that for the outward world it would still present the same uncompromising surface, so that no inquisitive or bungling touch could bring to light the grim, disfiguring fracture which it had sustained, it is probable that she would have chosen this part, and hidden the grief of her life from the eyes of all save those who were so inseparably connected with the tragedy of that autumnal afternoon. But it was so completely shattered, the pieces were so many; and, worst of all, some of them were lost. To forget! What a world of bitter irony was in the word! And she could not even bury her illusions quietly and unobserved of uncharitable eyes; there was the sordid necessity of explanation to be faced, the lame pretexts to be fashioned, and the half-truths to be uttered, which bore an interpretation so far more damning than the full measure which it seemed so hard to give.

Mrs. Sylvester, whose jealous maternal instincts continued to be on the alert hardly less keenly after her daughter's marriage than before, had soon detected something of oppression in the atmosphere; an explanation had been demanded, and the story, magnified somewhat in its least attractive features by Eve's natural reticence, had gone to swell the volume of similar experiences recorded in Mrs. Sylvester's brain. That she felt a genuine sorrow for Rainham is certain, for the grain of her nature was kindly enough beneath its veneer of worldly cleverness; but her grief was more than tempered by a sense of self-congratulation, of unlimited approval of the prudence which had enabled her to marry her daughter so irreproachably before the bubble burst. Indeed, the little glow of pride which mingled quite harmoniously with her nevertheless perfectly sincere regret, was an almost visible element in her moral atmosphere, as she emerged from the door of her daughter's house after this momentous interview, drawing her furs about her with a little shiver before she stepped into her well-appointed brougham. She had the air of saying to herself, "Dear me, dear, dear! it's very sad, it's very terrible; but I! how clever I have been, and how beautifully I behaved!" There was nothing particularly novel from her point of view in the story which she had just extracted from her reluctant daughter; the situation called for an edifying, comfortable sorrow, but by no means for surprise. It was what might have been expected—though this (which was somewhat hard) did not render the episode any the less reprehensible.

And it was this feeling which had predominated during the lady's homeward drive, and the half hour's *tête-à-tête*, before dinner, which she had utilized for an exchange of confidences with her son.

"I didn't know that there had been an—an exposure," he said, as he stood, a stiff, uncompromising figure, before the fire in the little drawing-room. "But I had an idea that it was inevitable from—from certain information which I have received. In fact, I have been rather puzzled. You must do me the justice to remember that I never liked the man—though he had his good points," he added a little awkwardly, as inconvenient memories of the many kindnesses which he had received at Rainham's hands thrust themselves upon him. "But I'm afraid he's hardly the sort of person one ought to be intimate with. Especially you, and Eve. Of course, for her it's out of the question."

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Sylvester decisively; "and they haven't seen him since, I need hardly say. In fact, they haven't even heard of him. They haven't told a soul except me, and of course I sha'n't tell anybody," the lady concluded with a sigh, as she remembered how difficult she had found it to drive straight home without breaking the vow of secrecy which her daughter had exacted from her.

Whatever Mrs. Sylvester may have thought, it is certain that the interview, from which she enjoyed the impression of having emerged so triumphantly, had brought anything but consolation to her daughter, whose first impulse was to blame herself quite angrily for having admitted to her secret places, after all so natural a confidante.

Nor had Eve repented of this feeling. As time went on she found her mother's somewhat too obviously complacent attitude more and more exasperating, and she compared her want of reserve very unfavourably with her husband's demeanour (it must be owned that he had his reasons for a certain reticence). Against Colonel Lightmark, also, she cherished something of resentment, for he, too, more especially in collaboration with her mother, was wont to indulge in elderly, moral reflections, which, although for the most part no names were mentioned, were evidently not directed generally and at hazard against the society of which the Colonel and Mrs. Sylvester formed ornaments so distinguished.

Upon one afternoon, when Christmas was already a thing of the past, and the days were growing

longer, it was with considerable relief that Eve heard the outer door close upon her mother, leaving her alone in the twilight of the smaller portion of the double drawing-room. She was alone, for Mrs. Sylvester had been the last to depart of a small crowd of afternoon callers, and Dick was interviewing somebody—a frame-maker, a model, or a dealer—in the studio. She sat with a book unopened in her hand, gazing intently into the fire, which cast responsive flickers over her face, giving a shadowed emphasis to the faint line which had begun to display itself, not unattractively, between her eyebrows and the irregular curve of her brown hair. She was growing very weary of it all, the distraction which she had sought, the forgetfulness of self which she had hoped to achieve, by living perpetually in a crowd. Indeed, to such a point had she carried her endeavours, that Mrs. Lightmark's beauty was already becoming a matter of almost public interest. She was a person to be recognised and recorded by sharp-eyed journalists at the play-houses on "first nights"; her carriage-horses performed extensive nightly pilgrimages in the regions of Kensington and Mayfair; and she had made a reputation for her dressmaker. And already she realized that her efforts to live outside herself were futile; moments like these must come, and the knowledge that, in spite of her countless friends and voluminous visiting list, she was alone.

Her mother? Dick? After all, they were only in the position of occupying somewhat exceptionally prominent places on the visiting-list.

As for her husband, after all these long months of married life, she could not say that she knew him. She regarded him with a kind of admiration of his personal, social attractions, in which she recognised him as fully her equal, with a kind of envy of the genius, which she could not entirely comprehend, but which seemed to make him so vastly her superior. And yet there was a shadow of doubt about it all: there had been sinister flashes, illumining, dimly enough, depths which the marital intimacy still left unfathomed, making her wonder whether her husband's candour might not mask something more terrible than forgotten follies, something that might prove a more real and irremovable barrier between them than even that indefinable want of a mutual horizon, of common ground upon which their traditions could unite themselves.

So long as Dick had remained cheerfully masterful, and picturesquely *flamboyant*, without even an occasional betrayal of the bitterness which makes the one attribute savour of insolence, and the other of oppression, his wife had regarded him as exactly fulfilling the part for which he had obviously been cast—of a good-humoured, ornamental, domestic tyrant, to be openly obeyed and covertly coerced. A husband who assisted her acquisition of social laurels; who gave her more money than she asked for; who designed for her the most elaborate and enviable dresses—yes, her mother certainly had reasons for declaring him a paragon! But still Eve was vaguely conscious of a defect, a shortcoming. It was all very well so far as it went, but the prospect was by no means unbounded. And, then, had he not also designed gowns for Mrs. Dollond, and succeeded (there was a sting in this) where success was somewhat more difficult of achievement?

Now, moreover, he had begun to carry an aggrieved air—an air which suggested that he pitied himself, that he considered that he had been unfairly dealt with, that he was entitled to assume the attitude of an innocent, injured victim of some blindly-dealt retribution. What did that mean? The only explanation which his wife could find for this symptomatic manifestation had its origin in the unhappy episode of which the memory was always on the threshold of her solitary thoughts, and, perhaps, of his. She began to feel, with a certain compunction, that Dick must resent the circumstances which obliged him practically to sever his acquaintance with a man who had indisputably figured for so many years as his nearest friend; and she asked herself sometimes whether the circumstances in question did not, in effect, centre in herself.

Although the world was as yet far from being an open book for her, it was conceivable that Philip Rainham (even if one judged by appearances) had done nothing which need necessarily cast him beyond the pale of the unregenerate society of bachelordom. It never occurred to her that, so far as she herself was concerned, a renewal of the old relation was among possible things: if she had met Philip in public she would have made it clear to him that he was no longer on the same plane with her; that, from her point of view, he had practically ceased to exist.

It was only when she was alone, and pleasant, bitter memories of the old days recurred, that she owned to herself how hard it was to think of this intimacy as severed by a rule of moral conduct no less inexorable, and even more cruel, than death. And yet there were moments—and this was one of them—when her husband's bearing seemed more portentous, when the explanation she had found possible seemed no longer probable, and uncomfortable doubts as to the real meaning of his uneasiness assailed her mind.

A fragment of burning coal fell with a clatter into the grate: she welcomed the interruption, and for the moment abandoned her thoughts, only, however, to enter upon them again by a different path.

"I wonder why I don't hate him?" she asked herself, almost wistfully. (She was not now thinking of her husband.) "I ought to hate him, I suppose, and to pity her. But I pity him, I think, and I hate—her."

The fire still crackled cheerfully, and she began to feel its heat oppressive; she let her hands fall with a gesture half of contempt, half of despair, and then rose abruptly, and walked into the darkness of the larger room, from the unshuttered windows of which she could see the dark bulk of her husband's studio looming against the gray, smoke-coloured sky.

While she stood, leaning with something of a forward tilt of her gracile figure, upon the ledge of the low, square window, the side door of the studio opened, letting a flood of light out upon the lawn, and with absent eyes she saw that her husband's visitor was taking his leave. Presently the door closed; the broad rays which had shone coldly from the skylight of the building died out, so abruptly that the change seemed almost audible; and simultaneously she heard her husband's careless step in the long glazed passage, half conservatory, half corridor, which led from her domain to his. He came in, softly humming an air from a comic opera, and then paused, peering into the darkness for an instant before he distinguished his wife's shape in dusky relief against the pale square of window.

"Don't light the room!" she said quickly, as she saw him stretch his hand towards the little button which controlled the electric light; "we can talk in the dark."

He stopped with his hand on the porcelain knob, breaking off his ditty in the middle of a bar.

"By all means, if you like," he said, "though I should prefer to see you, you know."

Then he dropped luxuriously into an easy-chair by the side of the fire, which continued to exhibit a comfortable, glowing redness.

But very soon Lightmark became aware of a certain weight of apprehension, which took from him the power to enjoy these material comforts; unattractive possibilities seemed to hover in the silent darkness, and his more subtile senses were roused, and brought to a state of quivering tension, which was almost insupportable. His wife moved, and he felt that she had directed her eyes towards him, though he could not see her; and he winced instinctively, seeking to be first to break the silence, but unable to find a timely word to say. The blow fell, and even while she spoke he felt a quick admiration for the instinct which had enabled him to anticipate her thought.

"Dick," she said quietly, without moving from her place by the window, "have you seen *him* since ——?"

There was no need of names; he did not even notice the omission.
Could she see his face, he wondered, in the firelight?

"No!" he sighed, "no!"

She came nearer to him, so near that he could hear her breathing, the touch of her fingers upon the back of a chair; and presently she spoke again:

"You think there was no excuse for him?"

"Ah—for excuse! She was pretty, you know!"

He got up, and stood facing her for a moment in the darkness, and then, while she appeared to consider, glanced at his watch, and made a suggestion of movement towards the door.

"Only a minute, Dick," she said, in the same set voice. "You will do me the justice to admit that I haven't alluded to this before. But I have been thinking—I can't help it—and I want to know——"

"To know?" he echoed impatiently.

"To know your position—our position; what you had to do with it all."

"What is the good? What difference can it make?"

"It's the doubt," she said—"the doubt. I thought you might like to explain."

"To explain? Good Lord! what have I to explain? Is it not all settled, all clear? My dear child, let us be reasonable, let us forget; it's the only way."

There was less of anger in his voice, but if Eve could have seen his eyes in the firelight, she might have noticed that they were very bright, and their pupils were contracted to hard, iridescent points.

"How can it be settled," she asked wearily, "while there is this shadow of doubt? And to forget—Heaven knows I have tried!"

Dick shrugged his shoulders tolerantly.

"What do you want me to say?—to explain?"

"Could you not have warned him, Dick? Did you not see it coming? She, that woman, was she not your model? Did he not meet her at your studio? Was not that the beginning of it all? Ah, can you say that you were not to blame?"

She spoke fast, following question with question, as if she anticipated the answer with mingled feelings of hope and fear, and there was more of entreaty than of denunciation in her last words.

"It's such an old story," he rejoined, with an air of feeble protest. "How could I foresee what would happen? And," he added, hardening himself, "they did not meet for the first time at my studio; on the contrary, it was he who brought her to me, and I suspected nothing. What more can I say? Surely it is all plain enough!"

Eve sighed. It seemed to her husband that she was on the whole disappointed, and he felt that, while he was about it, he might have given himself a freer hand, and made himself emerge, not only without a stain upon his character—the expression occurred to him with a kind of familiar mockery—but with beaten drums and flying colours.

He reflected that this was another example of the folly of attempting to economize. At the same time he was gently thrilled by what he owned to himself was a not ignoble emotion: that sigh seemed to speak so naturally and pathetically of disillusionment, it was such a simple little confession of a damaged ideal. It did not occur to him to suspect that the character of which his wife had formed too proudly high an estimate was his own.

"Don't you think you might trust me?" he said presently in a milder, almost paternal tone, magnanimously prepared for a charming display of penitence, which it would be his duty rather to encourage than to deprecate.

"To trust you?" replied Eve quickly. "Haven't I the appearance of trusting you? Don't I accept your explanations?"

It was Lightmark's turn to sigh. His wife moved away, with an air of dismissing the subject.

"It is quite dark; it must be time to dress for dinner. Please turn on the light." Then she added as she left the room, without waiting for an answer: "And you, do you find it so easy to forget?"

When Lightmark was alone, he stood for a few minutes before the fire in meditation; then he clenched his fist viciously.

"Confound the girl, and him, too! No, poor devil! he meant well. It was just the senseless, quixotic sort of thing one would have expected of him. But I don't know that it has done much good. It has made me feel a sneak, though I've only been lying to back him up. Why couldn't he let it alone? There would have been a storm, of course, but it would soon have blown over, and no one else need have known."

He stopped in front of a mirror—he had been pacing up and down the room—and found himself looking rather pale in the soft, brilliant glow of the incandescent lamps. Moreover, the clock pointed to an hour very near that for which the carriage had been ordered.

While he was dressing for dinner, it occurred to him—it was not for the first time—that, after all, it would take very little to render Rainham's bungling devotion, and his own meritorious aberrations from the path of truth, worse than nugatory. For what if Kitty should split?—so he elegantly expressed his fears—what if the girl, of whom he had heard nothing since the day of that deplorable scene, should break loose, and throw up the part which she had undertaken upon such very short notice?

Decidedly, he felt that he was abundantly justified in resenting the false position into which he had been thrust; the imposture was too glaring. Would it not even now be well to remodel the situation with a greater semblance of adherence to facts—to make a clean breast of it? The crudity of the idea offended him; the process would necessarily be wanting in art. But possibly it was not yet too late to substitute a story which, if it caused him temporary discomfort, would at least leave him more certain of the future, the master of an easier, a less violently outraged conscience.

At dinner the taciturnity, bordering on moroseness, of a talker usually so brilliant led his host to surmise that Lightmark had ruined a picture, his hostess to conclude that he had quarrelled with his

wife. He came home early, and occupied the small hours of the morning in forming an amended plan of campaign, of which the first move took the shape of a somewhat voluminous letter, addressed to Philip Rainham.

CHAPTER XXVII

Charles Sylvester was a man of a somewhat austere punctuality, and there were few of his habits in which he took a juster pride than in the immemorial regularity with which he distributed the first few hours of his day. To rise at half-past seven, whatever might be the state of the temperature or the condition of the air; to reach the breakfast-room on the stroke of eight, and to devote half an hour to the perusal of the *Times* and of his more intimate correspondence—of course, there were certain letters which he reserved until his arrival in chambers—while he discussed a moderate breakfast which seldom varied; to ride in the Row for another half-hour; and finally, having delivered his horse to a groom, who met him at the corner of Park Lane, to enter the precincts of the Temple, after a brisk walk through Piccadilly and the Strand, shortly after ten—these were infallible articles in his somewhat rigid creed.

Mrs. Sylvester, therefore, was struck with all the surprise which results from an unprecedented breach of custom when, descending to breakfast at her own laxer hour one dark morning in February, she found her son still presiding at the table, absorbed in his letters. He pushed aside these and a packet of telegram forms as she entered, and, rising to accept her discreet kiss, responded to her implicit inquiry as to whether anything was wrong—her eyes had strayed involuntarily to the clock—by pointing her attention to a paragraph in the morning paper. His manner was more solemn than usual; it betrayed an undercurrent of suppressed excitement.

"This is unusual," he remarked; "but, you see, I have an excuse."

She followed the direction of his finger: "Death of the Member for North Mallow." The cream of the news was contained for her in the heading, and so she did not read the rest of the notice, which was a short one.

Now, North Mallow was the respectable constituency in which a coalition of two parties had selected Mr. Sylvester to be their candidate at the next election, which this death had transferred into the immediate present.

"My dear boy!" said Mrs. Sylvester sympathetically.

Then she checked herself, recognising that a too open satisfaction in the event—opportune as it might be—would be hardly decent.

"Of course, it is very sad for him, poor man!" she remarked. "But I cannot help feeling glad that you should be in the House, and so much sooner than we expected."

He interrupted her with another discreet embrace.

"My dear boy!" she said again vaguely, contentedly, as she poured herself a cup of tea.

"He has been in bad health for some time," continued Charles. "He died two days ago at Cannes. It is astonishing that I did not hear the news before. I have wired to Hutchins, my election agent, and if I can manage it, I shall run down to Mallow. Of course one is sorry, but since it has been ordered so, after all, one has to think of the party."

"Ah yes, the party," murmured Mrs. Sylvester sympathetically; "of course that is the great thing. I am sure you will distinguish yourself. I suppose there is no danger of a defeat?"

"Oh, it is a safe seat! But one has always to canvass; there is always a certain risk. I sometimes wish ——" He stopped short, pulled nervously at his collar, finding it a little difficult to express his meaning. "I think," he went on at last with a visible effort, flushing somewhat, "that I must marry. An intelligent woman devoted to my interests would be of great service to me now."

Mrs. Sylvester allowed her eyes to remain in discreet observation of the tablecloth.

"I have often thought so," she said at last quietly.

"Indeed!" he remarked politely. "Yes; it is a matter, perhaps, which I should have discussed with you before. I am fully aware of the right you have—— I would not, I mean, have failed——"

"Oh, my son!" she protested, "I am sure you have always been most correct."

"I have tried to be," he said simply. "If I have said nothing to you, it has been because I wished to be cautious, not to commit myself, to be very sure——"

"Of the lady's affection, do you mean?"

"Ah, can one ever be sure of that? No; I mean rather of my own attitude, of my own situation. It has always seemed to me that marriage is a very great undertaking, a thing to be immensely considered, not to be embarked on rashly."

"You view everything so justly!" she exclaimed. "Have you—am I to understand that you have a particular person in view?"

He waved aside the compliment with a bland gesture, which asserted that only his magnanimity prevented him from acknowledging its truth.

"Surely, surely!" he said. "You are perhaps aware how immensely I admire Miss Masters; that I have paid her very great attention—marked attention, I may say?"

"I observed something of the kind at Lucerne. I did not know if it had continued; sometimes I thought so. Have you proposed to her?"

"No," he said slowly; "I have not yet proposed to her. Naturally, I wished to consult you first."

"I am sure, Charles," said his mother cheerfully, "that I shall be extremely pleased. She is a very nice girl. She is a great-niece of Lord Hazelbury, and connected with the Marshes, and I know she will have at least sixty thousand pounds."

He glanced across at her, frowning a little, with a certain irritation.

"I shall not marry her for her money," he said.

"My dear boy," she retaliated, "I did not suppose you would be mercenary; only, a little money is very desirable; and Lady Garnett has a great deal, and Mary will certainly get her share of it."

"Ah, I don't like her," put in Charles inconsequently; "she is a profane old woman."

"Neither do I; but one must accept her. And Mary, after all, is only her niece."

"She has a beautiful character," he continued slowly. (This time he was not speaking of Lady Garnett.) "I admire it more than I can say; it has very great depths."

His mother looked up at him quickly, struck by his strenuous accent, for which she was scarcely prepared. She had a high notion of his character, of his ability, and was pleased, more pleased than she cared to admit, at the suitability of the match. He had always been an excellent, even a sympathetic son; and it had been part of his excellence that whenever he should marry, she had been quite certain that he would marry like this, selecting with dignity a young woman whom one could emphatically approve—a testimony to his constancy in certain definite traditions in which he had been reared, traditions, it may be said, which he adhered to with a tenacity that even exceeded her own.

It had never entered into her calculations, however, to look upon him as an ardent lover, and yet it was as an ardent lover that he had just spoken. She recognised the tone.

And, strangely enough, for the moment it happened to touch her, to give her an increased interest in the affair, though afterwards she could reflect that in a man of Charles' character, so soberly practical and mature, it was perhaps a trifle incongruous, and, at the best, not precisely the tone by which women are most likely to be won.

She said placidly:

"I hope you will succeed. If you take my advice, you will speak at once."

"I had meant to take the first occasion," he said.

"Ah, my dear," she put in, "you had better make one yourself."

Charles simply smiled. Her approbation of his views, and the unwonted dissipation of a prolonged and indolent breakfast, together with the pleasant excitement of shortly taking the political field, had rendered him singularly mild.

He remembered that he was invited that night to a dance of some magnitude, at a house big enough for privacy to be easily secured, and where Mary would certainly be.

"Perhaps I will," he said, gathering up his voluminous papers as he prepared for departure, "this evening."

He was still in the same mood of cheerful resolution when, after an exceptionally busy day, which had also ministered in an exceptional degree to his self-esteem (it had included an interview with one of the whips of his party, as well as a satisfactory conversation with his agent on the temper of the constituency whose member was so seasonably deceased), he had dressed at his club, and dawdled at his accustomed table in the large bright room over a solitary dinner.

His head had been very full of his political ambitions, into which the image of Miss Masters had not inconveniently intruded. He had eminently that orderly faculty of detachment which allows a man to separate and disconnect the various interests of his life, admitting each only in its due order and place; but none the less had he been conscious all along that somewhere in the background of his mind her image subsisted, and now that he was at leisure again to give her that place of honour in his consideration which she had long been insensibly acquiring, he was more than ever determined to do all that lay in his power to make her his wife.

It amazed him almost that he had not put the important question long before, so vital and inevitable had it become; and he scarcely considered, in his curious egoism, his scant acquaintance with the subtilty of a woman's mind, how much Mary herself might have contributed to the delay by her careful avoidance of intimate topics, by the cloak of elaborate indifference in which she had wrapped herself whenever she had not been able to avoid being alone with him; so that, however much he had desired it, he could never, without doing her gross violence, have succeeded in striking the precisely right personal note.

To-night, however, there should be no more fencing; of that he was thoroughly resolved. He would be eloquent and sustained, impassioned, and, if necessary, humble—but, above all, perfectly direct; he would brook no faltering, feminine evasions; would insist on an answer, and on a right answer too, pointing out, with the close reasoning acquired in his profession, the superb propriety of the match. And he believed that she would be convinced. Was it not half of her attraction that she was a woman of intelligence, not a silly school-girl, who flirted and danced?

In spite of his self-esteem, however, he was not unwise enough to feel sure of the result. Were not all women, even the best of them, notoriously perverse? And there was always, conceivably, that inopportune third party, a preferred rival, to be counted with, who might have been first on the field.

Considering these things, he allowed himself a glass of chartreuse with his coffee, and the unwonted luxury of a cigar, over which he lingered, growing more nervous as its white ash lengthened and the occasion drew near. Yet he could remind himself at last that—at any rate, to his knowledge—there was no one else whose pretensions the lady preferred, since Rainham, the man whom he had marked as dangerous, was socially damned, and no longer to be feared.

It was very nearly eleven before he reached the house to which he had been invited, and where he found a very brilliant party already in progress. The house was chiefly a legal and political one, although there seemed to be a fair leaven of literary and artistic celebrities among the more solid reputations; and for some time he was engrossed by various of his Parliamentary acquaintances, who questioned and encouraged him. Two or three had newly arrived from the House, where an important division had just been declared; and Charles listened with some impatience to their account of it, gazing absently, over their heads, at the maze of pretty toilettes, which made an agreeable *frou-frou* over the polished floor, although the debate had been upon a question in which he was warmly interested.

He escaped from them at last with a murmured apology, an intimation that he wished to find somebody, and made his way slowly into the adjoining room, from which the strains of waltz music floated in, and where they danced. His friends found his demeanour noticeable, and were inclined to wonder with some amusement, knowing his habitual equanimity, that the vacancy at North Mallow should have undermined it. When he entered the ball-room he stopped for a moment, flushing a little. The first person he had seen, between the heads of the floating couples, was Lady Garnett, on a little raised seat at the further end of the large room, engaged in an animated conversation with an ambassador. He realized quickly that she would not have come alone.

He waited until the music ceased and the dispersal of the dancers made the passage of the floor practicable, then he set off in her direction, trusting that he might find her niece in the vicinity. Halfway down he stopped again; he had recognised his sister, who fanned herself languidly, seated on

one of two chairs partially concealed by a great mass of exotic shrubbery, in pots, which formed almost an alcove. She removed her long soft skirt, which she had thrown over the vacant seat, as he approached; and at this tacit invitation he accepted it.

"Only until the rightful owner comes," he explained. "But I see you so seldom now that I must not lose this chance. I suppose you are keeping it for someone?"

"It is for Miss Masters," said Mrs. Lightmark; "but she won't want it yet. She has just gone down to supper."

"Ah, so much the better. I want to see her."

"Do you?" she asked indifferently. "Well, you had better keep me company until she comes. It is a long time since I saw you."

He considered her for a moment with a heavy, fraternal appreciation.

"Yes," he said—"yes, it is a long time, Eve. But, of course, we have each our own occupations, our own duties now. And being the wife of a successful painter must involve almost as many as being—if I may say so—a fairly successful barrister. Gratified as we are, my dear—my mother and I—at the success of your marriage, which has proved more brilliant even than we hoped, I must say that we often regret having lost you. We are duller people, I fear, since you have left us. However, we can still think of the old days, as you, no doubt, do sometimes."

She gave a faint, little, elusive smile, behind her fan.

"Oh, I am afraid I have forgotten them," she said. Then she went on quickly, before he had time to reply: "Another thing, too, I had almost forgotten—to congratulate you—on Mr. Humphrey's death."

"My dear Eve!" He looked at her with some reproof, with an air of finding her a little crude. "You should not say such things, Eve! I deeply deplore——"

"Shouldn't I?" she asked flippantly. "Dick told me you were to succeed to his seat. Isn't it true?"

He ignored her question, busied himself with an obdurate button on his glove. She watched him over her fan, half smiling, with her brilliant eyes.

"You are cynical," he remarked at last. "I dare say I shall get in.
Is Lightmark here?"

"Yes, he is here. He has taken Mrs. Van der Gucht—the American Petroleum Queen they call her, don't they?—down to supper. She wants him to paint her portrait, at his own price. He will be here to fetch me at half-past eleven. I believe we have to move on then."

"Move on?" he asked, with an air of mystification.

"Show ourselves at another house," she replied. "It's a convenient practice, you know; one gets two advertisements in one night. Besides, one saves one's self a little that way; one sometimes gets an evening off."

"You talk as if you were an actress," he said, with offended irony.
"I don't understand your tone. Does Miss Masters accompany you?"

"I think not. Did you say you wanted to see her?"

"Particularly; it is chiefly for that I am here."

"She is a very nice girl," remarked his sister gently. "I hope——" She hesitated slightly; then held out her hand to him, which involuntarily he clasped. "I hope you will have a satisfactory conversation, Charles."

He glanced at her for a moment silently, feeling a secret pleasure in her discrimination.

"You look very well," he said at last, "only rather tired. That is a very pretty dress."

She smiled vaguely.

"I didn't know you ever noticed dresses. Yes, I am rather tired. Ah, there is Mary—and Dick."

The girl came towards them at this moment, looking pretty and distinguished in her square-cut, dark gown; and Lightmark followed, carrying her bouquet of great yellow roses, which he held

appreciatively under his nose.

He nodded to Charles Sylvester, who was shaking hands with Mary; then he turned to his wife.

"If you are ready, dear," he said lightly, "I expect the carriage is. Miss Masters, you know we have another dance to do. My brother-in-law will see after you and your bouquet, if you will allow me."

"Oh, give it me, please," cried the girl, with a nervous laugh. "I really did not know you were carrying it. Thanks so much."

She had succeeded almost mechanically to Mrs. Lightmark's vacated chair; and as she sat there, with her big nosegay on her lap, he was struck by her extreme pallor, the lassitude in her fine eyes. He ventured to remark on it, when the other two had left them, and she had not made, as he had feared and half anticipated, any motion to rise.

"Yes, the rooms are hot and dreadfully full. There are too many sweet-smelling flowers about; they make one faint. It's a relief to sit down in comparative quiet and calm for a little."

He was emboldened by her quiescence to resume his chair at her side.

"I won't ask you to dance, then," he said; "and allow me to hope that no one else has done so."

She glanced indifferently at her card.

"No. 10," he added anxiously; "a waltz, after the Lancers."

"I see some vague initials," she said; "but probably my partner will not be able to find me, thanks to these shrubs."

"I hope not, with all my heart," said Charles devoutly. "At any rate, I can sit with you until you are claimed."

"As you like," she replied wearily. "Are you not anxious to dance?"

"I am not a great dancer at any time," he protested; "and to-night my heart would be particularly out of it. I came for another purpose."

He spoke tensely, and there was a slight tremor in his voice, ordinarily so clear and dogmatic, which alarmed the girl so that she forgot her weariness and meditated a retreat.

"Oh, so did I," she replied with forced gaiety. "I came to look after my aunt, which reminds me that this is hardly the way to do it. Will you please take me to her?"

"I assure you she does not want you," cried Charles eagerly. "I saw her not ten minutes ago with M. de Loudéac. They seemed to be talking most intimately."

"He is an old friend," said Mary; "but, still, they may have finished by this time. One can say a great deal in ten minutes."

"Ah!" he put in quickly, "only give me them, Miss Masters."

"I really think it is unnecessary," she murmured with a rapid flush. She made another movement, as if she would rise, dropping her bouquet in her haste to prevent his speech. He picked it up quickly and replaced it in her hands.

"No, don't go, Miss Masters," he insisted. "I surely have a right to be heard. After all, I do not require ten minutes, nor five. Only I came to say——"

"Ah, don't say it, Mr. Sylvester," she pleaded. "What is the good?"

"I mean that I love you! I want you immensely to be my wife."

She bent her head over her flowers, so that her eyes were quite hidden, and he could not see that they were full of tears; and for a long time there was silence, in which Sylvester's foot kept time nervously with the music. The girl bitterly reproached her tiredness, which had dulled apprehension so far that she had not realized at once the danger of the situation, nor retreated while there was yet time. She had always dreaded this; and now that it was accomplished, an illimitable vista of the disagreeable consequences broadened out before her. The ice being once broken, however she might answer him now, a repetition, perhaps even several, could scarcely be avoided; she foresaw that his persistence would be immense, so that with whatsoever finality she might refuse him, it would all be to go over again. And with it all was joined her natural reluctance to give an honest gentleman pain, only

heightened by her sense that, for the first time in her knowledge of the man, the evident sincerity of his purpose had given simplicity to his speech. He for once had been neither formal nor absurd, and the uniqueness of the fact, taken in conjunction with her share in it, seemed to have given him a claim on her consideration. He had cast aside the armour of self-conceit at which she could have thrown a dart without remorse, and the man seeming so defenceless, she had a desire to deal gently with him.

"Mr. Sylvester," she said at last, looking up at him, "I am so sorry, but please do not speak of this any more. Believe me, it is quite impossible. I am sensible of the honour you do me, deeply sensible, only it is impossible. Let us forget this—this mistake, and be better friends than we have ever been before."

"Ah, Mary," he broke out, "you must not answer me like that, without consideration. Why should it be impossible?"

"Forgive me," she said gently; "only I am tired now. And consideration would not alter it. Let me go."

He put one hand out detaining her, and she sank back again wearily on her chair.

"If you are tired, so much the more reason that you should hear me. You will not be tired if you marry me. If you are tired, it is because your life has no great interests: it's frivolous; it is dribbled away on little things. You don't really care for it—you are too good for it—the sort of life you lead."

"The sort of life I lead?"

"The ideals of your set, of the people who surround your aunt, of your aunt herself. The whole thing is barren."

"Are we more frivolous than the rest?" she asked suddenly.

"You are better than the rest," he said promptly. "That is why I want you to marry me. You were made for great interests—for a large scene."

"What are they—your great interests, your ideals?" she asked presently. "How are they so much better than ours?—though I don't know what ours may be."

"If you marry me, you will find out," he said. "Oh, you shall have them, I promise you that! I want you immensely, Mary! I am just going into public life, I mean to go far—and if I have your support, your sympathy, if you become my wife, I shall go much farther. And I want to take you away from all this littleness, and put you where you can be felt, where your character—I can't say how I admire it—may have scope."

"I am sorry," she said again; "you are very good, and you do me great honour: but I can only answer as before—it is not possible."

"Ah, but you give no reason!" he cried. "There is no reason."

"Is it not a good enough one that I do not love you?" said the girl.

"Only marry me," he persisted, "and that will come. I don't want to hurry you, you know. I would rather you would take time and consider; give me your answer in a week or two's time."

They were silent for a little; Sylvester was now perfectly composed: his own agitation seemed to have communicated itself to the girl, whom he watched intently, with his bland, impartial gaze. She had closed her eyes, was resting her chin on her bouquet, and appeared to be deeply meditating his words. She looked up at last with a little shiver.

"I am very tired," she said. "If I promise to think over what you have said to-night and to give you my answer in a month's time, will you try and find Lady Garnett for me now?"

"Ah, Miss Masters—Mary!" he said, "that is all I want."

"And in the meantime," she pursued gently, "to allow the subject to drop?"

"You must make your own terms," he said; "but surely I may come and see you?"

"Very well," she consented, after a moment; "if it gives you any pleasure, you may come."

At which Charles simply took her cold, irresponsive hand in his own, with a silent pressure. Irresponsive as it was, however, he reminded himself, she had made no effective protest against the gesture.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At Lady Day, when the negotiations for the sale of his unprofitable riverside domain were finally concluded, Rainham scarcely regretted to find that an ample margin had been left before the new company took possession; and he had still several months, during which he might remain in occupation of his old habitation, and arrange leisurely for the subsequent disposition of his books and more intimate personal chattels. The dilapidated old house was to be pulled down by the new owners (the plans for an extensive warehouse, to be erected on the site of it, were already in the hands of the builders), and this also was a fact from which Rainham derived a certain satisfaction.

Insensibly, the spot had discovered a charm for him: the few rooms, which had been his for so long, although, actually, so small a proportion of his days had been spent in them, had gradually taken the impress of his personality—the faded carpets, the familiar grouping of pictures and books, the very shape of the apartment, and the discoloured paper on the walls, expressed him in a way that certainly no other abiding place, which might conceivably await him, could ever do. And he took a dreary pleasure in the consideration that, after he had gone, the rooms would know no other occupant; that from the glazed and barred windows of the dreary building, which was to take the place of the quaint old house, when it was levelled to the ground, no person would ever gaze out, exactly as he had done, at the white and melancholy river; in which, as he said to himself fantastically, he had cast, one by one, as the days lengthened, his interests, his passions, his desires.

Years before, by an accident of inheritance, he had come into the property with an immense antipathy:—a white elephant that would bring him neither profit nor honour, but which the modest competence that he had previously enjoyed did not allow him to refuse. It had altered the tenor of his existence, destroyed his youth and his ambitions, and represented for many years, more completely than anything else, the element of failure which had run through his life.

And, after all, now that deliverance was at hand, he was by no means jubilant. In escaping from this thraldom of so many years, he felt something of the chagrin with which a man witnesses the removal of some long-cherished and inveterate grievance; the more so, in that he could now remind himself impartially how small it had been, how little, after all, he had allowed it to weigh upon him. In effect, had he not always done very much as he liked, lived half his time abroad in his preferred places, chosen his own friends, and followed his own tastes without greatly considering his inherited occupation? He must look deeper than that, he reflected, within himself, or into the nature of things themselves, actually to seize and define that curious flaw which had made life seem to him at last (from what wearied psychologist, read long ago and half forgotten, did he cull the phrase?) "a long disease of the spirit."

For appreciations of this kind, he had, nowadays, ample leisure; and unprofitable as it appeared (he did not even pretend to himself that it would lead anywhere, since what faint illumination he might strike from it could only refer to the past), he was seldom tired of searching for them.

A hard March, cited generally as the coldest within the memory of a generation, following a winter of fog and rain, had made him an inveterate prisoner within the four walls of his apartment. He had, indeed, the run of others at this time, for the Bullens had left him (at the last there had been no question of little Margot's appropriation; Rainham had taken it so serenely for granted that she would remain with him), but this was a privilege of which he did not avail himself. And the place, stripped of all its commercial attributes, had fallen into an immense desuetude, to which the charm of silence, and of a deeper solitude than it had ever possessed before, was attached.

The dock gates were finally closed; a hard frost of many days' duration had almost hermetically sealed them, and the drip of Thames water through the sluices formed immediately into long, fantastic stalactites of clear ice. Rainham found it difficult to believe, at times, that the bustle of the wharves, the roar of maritime London, still went on at his elbows, the deserted yard cast such a panoply of silence round him. It was as though he had fallen suddenly from the midst of men into some wholly abandoned region, a land of perpetual snows. It symbolized well for him the fantastic separation which he had suffered from the rest of the world; so that, but for the painter Oswyn, who was a constant visitor, and had, indeed, since the departure of the Bullens, a room set apart for him in the house, he might have been already dead and buried, and his old life would not have seemed more remote. And if he found the atmosphere of Blackpool, more often than not, to be of soothing quality, or at least a harmonious setting to the long and aimless course of introspection on which he had embarked, there were also times when it had a certain terror for him.

It came upon him in the evening, as a rule, when Margot had been carried away to bed by the hard-featured old woman who had succeeded Mrs. Bullen in the superintendence of his household; for the child, with her sweet, shrill voice and her infantile chatter, had come to seem to him far more even than

Oswyn, about whom there would always lurk something shadowy and unreal, a last link with the living; when the tide was nearly out, so that the stillness was not even broken by the long, lugubrious syren of a passing steamer, his isolation was borne in upon him with something of the sting of sharp, physical pain.

The dark old room, with its mildewing wainscot, became full of ghosts; and he could fancy that the spirits of his ancestors were returned from the other side of Styx to finger the pages of bygone ledgers, and to mock from between the shadows of his incongruous bookshelves, at their degenerate descendant. And these did but give place, amid strange creaking and contortions of the decaying walls, to spectres more intimate, whose reprobation moved him more: the faces of many persons whom he had known forming themselves, with extraordinary vividness, out of the darkness, and in the red embers of the fire, and each adding its item of particular scorn to the round accusation of futility brought by the rest. They were part of his introspection, all those—he was not sick enough to hold them real—but nevertheless they gave him food for much vigilant thought, which came back always to the great interest of his life. Futility! Did she too, the beloved woman, point an accusing finger, casting back at him a sacrifice which, certainly, in his then disability seemed to him vain enough? For all his goodwill, had he gained any more for her than a short respite, the temporal reconstruction of a fading illusion?—and at what a price! The irony of things was just then so present to him that he could readily believe he had done no more than that—enough merely to embitter her knowledge when it should finally come. And an old saying of Lady Garnett's returned to him, which, at the time, he had disputed; but which struck him now with the sharp stab of an intimate truth. "You could have prevented it, had you wished." Yes, he might have prevented it, if only he had foreseen; the wise old woman had not made a mistake. And yet he had wished to prevent it, in a manner, only his colder second thoughts—he made no allowance now for their generous intention—had found propriety in the match, and his long habit of spectatorship had made the personal effort, which interference would have involved, impossible.

Harking back scrupulously to the remote days of Eve's girlhood, his morbid recollection collected a variety of scattered threads, of dispersed signs and tokens, which led him to ask at last, with a gathering dread, whether he had not made a mistake, must not plead guilty to a charge of malingering, or, at least, of intellectual cowardice in acquiescing so supinely in defeat?

Was it true, then, that a man found in life very much what he brought to the search?

Certainly, the world was full of persons who had been broken on the wheel for their proper audacity, because they had sought so much more than was to be found; but might it not be equally true that one could err on the other side, expect, desire too little, less even than was there, and so reap finally, as he had done, in an immense lassitude and disgust of all things, born neither of satiety nor of disappointment, the full measure of one's reward? Perhaps success in the difficult art of life depended, almost as much as in the plastic arts, upon conviction, upon the personal enthusiasm which one brought to bear upon its conduct, and was never really compatible with that attitude of half-disdainful toleration which he had so early acquired.

Yet that was a confession of failure he was loath to make, or admit that he had been too much afraid of high passions and great affairs, had been fastidious and reserved only to dissipate his life on whims and small interests—those seemed to him now too great refusals to be contemplated without regret. His depression had reached its lowest pitch when he had asked himself whether in love, as in life, his error might not have been the same; and his passion, like the rest, a thing without conviction, and thereby foredoomed to fail. And it was a sensible alleviation of his mood when he could answer this question finally with a firm negative.

Certainly, his vain desire for her personal presence, for the consolation of her voice and eyes, was with him always, like the ache of physical hunger or thirst—the one thing real in a world of shadows.

Reaching this point one night, and relapsing, as was his wont, into a vaguer mood of reminiscence, not wholly unpleasant, which the darkness of the quiet room, lit only by the fire of logs, turned at last into drowsiness, he looked up presently, with a sudden start, to find Oswyn standing over him.

"I am sorry," said the painter; "I am afraid I have awaked you. The room was so dark that I imagined you had gone to bed. I came to warm myself before turning in."

Rainham shifted his chair a little, and watched the other as he extended his thin, nervous hands to the glow.

"Don't apologize," he said; "I haven't so many visitors that I can afford to miss the best of them. Besides, I was only half asleep, or half awake, as you like to look at it."

"Oh, look at it!" cried Oswyn. "My dear fellow, I don't, and won't."

He pointed his words, which Rainham found meaningless enough, with an impatient dig of his rusty boot against the fragrant wood, and his friend considered him curiously in the light of the blaze which his gesture had provoked.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked. "More wrong than usual, I mean."

"As you like to look at it," echoed the other; "a mare's nest—a discovery of the blessed public—oh, but a discovery! Two or three clever young newspaper men, with a tip from Paris to help them, have made a discovery; they have unearthed a disreputable painting genius, one Oswyn, and found the inevitable Jew of culture—you know the type, all nose and shekels—to finance their boom. Oh, it's genuine! I have Mosenthal's letter in my pocket—it was handed me by McAllister—offering his gallery, the pick of Bond Street. Oswyn's Exhibition, with expurgations and reservations, of course, but an exhibition! Don't you congratulate me?"

Rainham glanced up at him, smiling; at last he said whimsically:

"If you don't want me to, of course I won't. But *après*, where's the harm?"

"Ah, they don't understand," cried the other quickly, acridly. "They don't understand."

He had drawn his chair beside Rainham, and sat with his large, uncouth head propped on one hand, and the latter could perceive that his mouth was twisted with vague irony and some subtile emotion which eluded him.

"You are the great paradox!" he sighed at last. "For Heaven's sake, be reasonable! It is a chance, whoever makes it, and you mustn't miss it, for the sake of a few—the just, the pure, the discreet, who do know good work—as well as for your own. After all, we are not all gross, and fatuous, and vulgar; there are some of us who know, who care, who make fine distinctions. Consider us!"

"Consider you?" cried the other quickly. "Ah, *mon gros*, don't
I—more than anything?"

Then he continued in a lighter key:

"However, I don't refuse; you take me too literally. It was the last bitter cry of my spleen. I have put myself in Mosenthal's hands; I've sold him two pictures."

"In that case, then, why am I not to be glad?"

"Oh, it's success!" said Oswyn. He glanced contemptuously at his frayed shirt-cuff, with the broad stains of paint upon it. "Be glad, if you like; I am glad in a way. God knows, I have arrears to make up with the flesh-pots of Egypt. And I have paid my price for it. Oh, I have damnably paid my price!"

Rainham shrugged his shoulders absently.

"Yes, one pays," he agreed—"one pays, some time or other, to the last penny."

His friend rose, pushed his chair back impatiently: he had the air of suppressing some fierce emotion, of anxiously seeking self-control. At last he moved over to the black square of window, and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking out at nothing, at the frosty fantasies which had collected on the glass.

"If it had come ten years ago," he said in a low, constrained voice, "ten years ago, in Paris.... Oh, man, man!" he went on bitterly, "if you could know, if you could dimly imagine the horrors, the mad, furious horrors, the things I have seen and suffered, since then."

He pulled himself up sharply, and concluded with a little mirthless laugh, as though he were ashamed of his outburst.

"You would consume a great deal of raw spirit, to take the taste out of your mouth. And my 'Medusa' is to hang for the future in Mr. Mosenthal's dining-room! Will he understand her, do you think?"

Rainham was silent, wondering at his friend's departure from his wonted reticence, which, however, scarcely surprised him. He had never sought to penetrate the dark background, against which the painter's solitary figure stood. He was content to accept him as he was, asking no questions, and hardly forming, even in his own mind, conjectures as to what his previous history and relations might have been. He was not ignorant, indeed, that he was a man who had been in dark places; it had always seemed possible to account for him on the theory that he lived on the memory of an inextinguishable sorrow.

And now this possibility had received corroboration from his own words, shedding a new light, in which both his character and his genius became more intelligible. He had only stood out of the shadows which obscured him for one instant; but that instant had been enough.

And Rainham did not find the occasion less valuable, nor the impression which he had received less pitiful, because he believed it to be ultimate and unique; his friend would make no vain, elaborate confidences; he would simply step back into his old obscurity, leaving Rainham with the memory of that instructive cry which had been wrung from him by the irony of tardy recognition, when he had seen him luridly standing over the wreck of his honour and of his life. And with his pity there came to him a fresh sense of the greatness of the painter's work. His genius, so full of suffering, and of the sense of an almost fiendish cruelty in things, was, simply, his life, his experience, his remorse.

With the hand of a master, with the finest technique, which made his work admirable even to persons who misinterpreted or were revolted by its conception, he rendered the things he had known, so that his art was nothing so much as an expression of his personal pain in life.

In the light of this vision into the bottom of Oswyn's soul, Rainham's own pain seemed suddenly shallow and remote; he had gazed for a moment upon a blacker desolation than any which he could know. He felt a new, a tolerant sympathy towards his friend, and it struck him, not for the first time, but with an increased force, as he reminded himself how his days were bounded, that they had many things which they had still to say, things which must certainly be said.

CHAPTER XXIX

In the same room one afternoon a fortnight later, Oswyn sat, absently correcting the draft catalogue of his exhibition, when he received an intimation, which for some days he had expected—his friend felt strong enough to see him. He put down his pen, glancing up inquiringly at the bearer of this message, a young woman in the neat, depressing garb of a professional nurse; but for answer she slightly shook her head with the disinterested complacency of the woman used to sickness, who would encourage no false notions.

"It is only temporary," she said with deliberation. "I fear there has been no real improvement; the patient is steadily losing strength. Only he insists on seeing you; and when they are like that, one must give them what they want. I must beg you to excite him as little as possible."

Oswyn bowed a dreary assent, and followed her up the obscure staircase, which creaked sullenly beneath his tread. And he stood for a few moments in silence, until his eyes were accustomed to the darkened room, when the nurse had gently closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with his friend.

He almost believed, at first, that Rainham must be sleeping, he lay back with such extreme quietness in the large old-fashioned bed. And seeing him there in that new helplessness, he realized, almost for the first time, how little there was to say or to hope.

He had never, indeed, been ignorant that his friend's hold on life was precarious; some such scene as this had often been in his mind before; only, insensibly, Rainham's own jesting attitude towards his disabilities had half imposed on him, and made that possibility appear intangible and remote. But now, in view of the change which the last fortnight had wrought in him, he could cherish no illusions; the worst that was possible was all now that one could expect. He was a charming, generous, clever fellow, and he was dying; that was a thing one could not get over.

He moved across to the bedside, and Rainham's eyes suddenly opened. They were immensely large, strangely brilliant; his face had fallen in, was so white and long and lean, that these tremendous eyes seemed almost all of the man that was still to be accounted.

Oswyn derived the impression from them that, while his friend's body had been failing, his mind had never been more vigorous; that, during these long nights and days, when he had lain so motionless, in so continued a silence, it had only been because he was thinking with redoubled intensity.

Presently, as Rainham's lips moved slightly, he drew nearer, and bent his head over him.

"Don't talk," he said nervously, as Rainham appeared to struggle with the difficulty of utterance; "don't tire yourself. I've only come to look at you. Wait until you are a little stronger."

Rainham raised his hand impatiently.

"It won't tire me, and tired or not there are things I must speak of. Is she in the room—the nurse?"

He spoke slowly, and with a visible effort; but his voice, although it scarcely rose above a whisper, and seemed shadowy and far away, was deliberate and distinct. Oswyn shook his head.

"She has given me half an hour; you must not abuse it. I have promised to keep you quiet. I really believe you are a little better."

"I am well enough for what I want—to talk to you. After that, I will be as quiet as you like, for as long as you like. Only I have been keeping myself for this all these last few days that I have lain here like a log, listening to the ticking of that merciless clock. They thought I was sleeping, unconscious, very likely. I have been collecting myself, thinking immensely, waiting for this."

"I have always been here," said the other simply, "in case you should send for me. I have been painting Margot. She is a dear little soul; she misses you sadly."

"It is of her partly that I must speak. I have left all I can to her. If you will sometimes give her a thought; she is absolutely without belongings. I don't wish to make it a charge on you, a burden, only sometimes it has struck me lately that you were interested in the child, that you liked her, and I have taken the liberty of making you a sort of guardian. She could live with the Bullens——"

"Oh, I like her—I like her!" cried Oswyn, with a short laugh. Then he went on more seriously, half-apologetically, as though the other might have found his mirth ill-timed: "My dear friend, it is a great honour, a great pleasure, you give me. I, too, have no belongings, no interests; this might be a great one. I never thought of it before, I must admit; but I will adopt her. She shall live with me, if it's necessary. Only, ah! let us hope still that this may not be necessary, that it is premature."

The other held up a thin hand deprecatingly.

"Ah, don't let us fence with the truth. I have always seen it coming, and why should I lie about it, now that it is come? When one is as tired as I am, there is only one other thing which happens—one dies. You don't suppose I should have sent for you like this if it hadn't been so?"

He lay very still for a moment or two with his eyes closed, as if the effort which speech cost him was considerable. At last he said abruptly:

"There are things you should know; she is Lightmark's child."

Oswyn had seated himself on a low chair by the bed; he kept his head averted, as does a priest who hears confessions; and he gazed with absent eyes at the fire which burned sulkily, at the row of medicine-bottles on the mantelpiece, at all the dreary paraphernalia of a sick-room.

"Yes, she is Lightmark's child," continued Rainham; "and the mother was that girl whom we found two years ago—do you remember?—the night of your first visit here outside the gates. She called herself Mrs. Crichton. It's a miserable story; I only discovered it quite recently."

Oswyn drew in a deep breath, which sounded like a sigh in the strangely still room.

It did not so much suggest surprise as the indefinable relief which a man feels when accident permits him to express cognizance of some fact of which he has long been inwardly assured.

"I knew that long ago," he said at last. "I suspected it when I first saw the girl; but I said nothing to you at the time; perhaps I was wrong. Afterwards, when we knew each other better, there seemed no occasion; I had almost forgotten the episode."

"Yes," went on the other faintly; "we have all made mistakes—I more than most folk, perhaps."

Then he asked suddenly:

"Had you any motive, any reason for your suspicion?"

"It was the name Crichton—the man's pseudonym on the *Outcry*. It flashed across me then that she was after Lightmark. He was just severing his connection with the paper. He had always kept it very close, and I dare say I was one of the few persons who were in the secret. That is why, at the bottom of his heart, he is afraid of me—afraid that I shall bring it up. It's the one thing he is ashamed of."

"I see, I see," cried Rainham wearily; "the wretched fellow!"

"Dear man, why should we think of him?" broke in Oswyn; "he isn't worth it. Now of all seasons can't we find a topic less unsavoury?"

"You don't understand," continued Rainham, after a slight pause in his thin, far-away voice. "I am not thinking of him, or only indirectly. I have found him out, and I should be content enough to forget him if it were possible. Only, unfortunately, he happens to be inextricably entangled with all that is most sacred, most important to me. It is of his wife—Mrs. Lightmark: do you know her?—that I think."

Oswyn shook his head.

"I know her only by sight, as we all do; she is very beautiful."

"I don't mind telling you that I have considered her a great deal—yes, immensely. I should not speak of it—of her—unless I were dying; but, after all, when one is dying, there are things one may say. I have held my peace so long. And since I have been lying here I have had time to ponder it, to have thought it all out. It seems to me that simply for her sake someone should know before—before the occasion passes—just the plain truth. Of course, Sylvester by rights ought to be the man, only I can't ask him to come to me—there are reasons; and, besides, he is an ass."

"Yes, he is an ass," admitted Oswyn simply; "that is reason enough."

And just then there flashed into his mind the one notable occasion on which the barrister had run across him, his intriguing letter and the ineffectual visit which had followed it—ineffectual as he had supposed, but which might nevertheless, he reflected now, have had its results, ironical and inopportune enough. It was a memory of no importance, and yet it seemed just then to be the last of a long train of small lights that led to a whole torch of illumination, in which the existence of little Margot and her quaint juxtaposition with his friend, which in his general easy attitude towards the fantastic he had not troubled to investigate, was amply and generously justified. He turned round suddenly, caught his friend's thin hand, which he held.

"Ah, don't trouble to explain, to make me understand," he murmured. "It's enough that I understand you have done something very fine, that you are the most generous of men."

Rainham was silent for a moment: he had no longer the physical capacity of smiling; but there was a gleam of the old humour in his eyes, as he replied:

"Only the most fortunate—in my friends; they are so clever, they see things so quickly. You make this very easy."

Oswyn did not shift for a while from his position: he was touched, moved more deeply than he showed; and there was a trace of emotion in his voice—of something which resembled envy.

"The happy woman! It is she who ought to know, to understand."

"It is for that I wished to tell you," went on Rainham faintly, "that she might know some day, that there might be just one person who could give her the truth in its season. Yes! I wanted her to be always in ignorance of what she had made of her life, of the kind of man she has married. She was such a child; it seemed too pitiful. It was for that I did it, damned myself in her eyes, to give her a little longer—a sort of respite. Very likely I made a mistake! Those things can't be concealed for ever, and the longer the illusion lasts, the more bitter the awakening. Only if it might serve her later, in her darkest hour, as a sort of after-thought, it won't have been quite vain. That is how I see it now: I want her to know immensely—to know that she has always been unspeakably dear to me. Ah, don't mistake me! It's not for myself, it's not yet; I shall have done with life, done with love, by that time. When one is as tired as I am, death seems very good; only it hasn't those things. Nothing can make any difference to me; I am thinking of her, that some day or other it will be for her benefit to understand, to remember ——"

"To remember?"

"Yes, to remember," repeated Rainham quietly, "that her unhappiness has its compensation; if she has been bitterly wronged, she has also been fervently loved."

The other said nothing for a long time, simply considered the situation which Rainham's words, and still more even than anything that he had said, the things that he had not said, had strikingly revealed to him, leaving him, at the last, in a state of mingled emotions over which, perhaps, awe predominated.

At last he remarked abruptly:

"It *is* you who are fortunate; you are so nearly done with it all; you've such a long rest before you." Then he added with a new solemnity: "You may trust me, Rainham. When it is seasonable, Mrs. Lightmark shall know the truth. Perhaps she will come to me for it— Heaven knows!—stranger things have happened. You have my hand upon it; I think you are right."

"Right? You mean that it wasn't a mistake, a *bêtise*?"

"*Felix culpa*! If it was a mistake it was a very fine one."

"Ah! I don't regret it," said Rainham, "only——"

"Only it was a mistake to suppose that life was to be arranged. That was all I meant. Yes; I don't believe in much, but I believe in necessity. You can't get over it yourself, and you can't—no, not for all your goodwill, your generosity—get over it for another. There are simply inevitable results of irrevocable causes, and no place for repentance or restitution. And yet you help her, not as you meant to, and not now; but ah, you help her!"

"So long as I do that——" murmured Rainham, with a deep inhalation, closing his eyes wearily, in a manner which revealed how severely the intimate strain of conversation had told upon him.

Oswyn waited a little longer, in half expectation of his further utterance; but Rainham made no sign, lay quite motionless and hushed, his hands clasped outside of the counterpane as if already in the imitation of death; then the other rose and made a quiet exit, imagining that his friend slept, or would soon sleep.

And yet actually, in spite of the extreme physical weariness which had gradually stolen over him, dulling his senses, so that he was hardly conscious of Oswyn's departure, or of the subdued entrance of the nurse, who had been discreetly waiting for it, Rainham's mind was still keenly vigilant; and it was in the relief of a certain new lucidity, an almost hieratic calm, that he reviewed that recent interview, in which he had so deliberately unburdened himself. It seemed as if, in his great weakness, the ache of his old desire, his fever of longing, bad suddenly left him, giving place (as though the literal wasting away of his body had really given freer access to that pure spirit, its prisoner), to a love now altogether purged of passion, and become strangely tolerable and sweet.

CHAPTER XXX

If Philip Rainham's name, during that long, hard winter and ungracious spring—near the close of which he turned his face, with the least little sigh of regret, to the wall—was not often mentioned in the house in Parton Street, at whose door he had formerly knocked so often, it must not be supposed that by its occupants it had been in any way forgotten. He had not committed the discourtesy of leaving Lady Garnett's note unanswered; on the contrary, he had answered it both promptly and—as it seemed to him—well, in a letter which was certainly diplomatic, suggesting as it did—at least, to Mary Masters, to whom it had been shown—that he was on the point of an immediate flight South.

Whether the elder lady was equally deceived by his ambiguous phrases, it was not so easy to declare. She had, at this time less than ever, the mode of persons who wear their hearts upon their sleeves; her mask of half-cynical good-humour was constantly up; and she met the girl's hinted interrogations—for directly the nature of their uneasiness, by a sort of tacit agreement, was not alluded to—with the same smiling indifference, the same air of bland reassurance which she brought to the discussion of a sauce or an *entremet* at one of those select little dinner-parties on which she piqued herself, and which latterly had been more incessant and more select than ever.

Only on Mary's sensitive ear something in the elaborately cheerful tone in which she mentioned their vanished friend would occasionally jar. It was too perfectly well done not to appear a little exaggerated; and though she could force a smile at Lady Garnett's persistent picture of the recalcitrant godson basking, with his pretext of ill-health, on the sunny terraces of Monte Carlo, she none the less cherished a suspicion that the picture was as little convincing to its author as to herself, that her aunt also had silent moments in which she credited the more depressing theory.

And the long silence simply deepened her conviction that, all the time they were imposing upon themselves with such vain conjectures, he was actually within their reach, sick and sorry and alone, in that terrible Blackpool, which she peopled, in her imagination of a young lady whose eastward wanderings had never extended beyond a flower show in the Temple Gardens, with a host of vague, inconceivable horrors.

From Bordighera, from Monaco, she argued, he would certainly have written, if it were only a line of reassurance, for there his isolation was impregnable. Only the fact that he had stayed on in London could account for the need of this second arm of silence, as well as of solitude, to enforce his complete withdrawal from the torment of tongues.

Certainly, wherever he might actually be, the girl had never realized more fully than just then what an irreparable gap estrangement from him made in her life.

There was, indeed, no pause in the stream of clever, cultivated, charming persons who rang daily at their discriminating door, who drank tea in their drawing-room, and talked felicitously for their entertainment.

It was a miscellaneous company, although the portal was difficult in a manner, and opened only on conditions of its own—conditions, it may be said, which, to the uninitiated, to the excluded, seemed fantastic enough.

One might be anything, Lady Garnett's constant practice seemed to enunciate, provided one was not a bore; one could represent anything—birth or wealth, or the conspicuous absence of these qualities—so long as one also effectively represented one's self. This was the somewhat democratic form which the old lady's aristocratic tradition assumed.

It was not, then, without a certain pang of self-reproach that Mary wondered one evening—it was at the conclusion of one of their most successful entertainments—that a company so brilliant, so distinguished, should have left her only with a nervous headache and a distinct sense of satisfaction that the last guest had gone.

Was she, then, after all an unworthy partaker of the feast which her aunt had so long and liberally spread for her delectation?

As she sat in her own room, still in her dress of the evening, before the comfortable fire, which cast vague half-lights into the dark, spacious corners—she had extinguished the illumination of candles which her maid had left her, a sort of unconscious tribute to the economical traditions of her youth—she found herself considering this question and the side issues it involved very carefully.

Was it for some flaw in her nature, some lack of subtilty, or inbred stupidity, that she found the inmates of Parton Street so uninspiring, had been so little amused?

The dozen who had dined with them to-night—how typical they might be of the rest!—original and unlike each other as they were, each having his special distinction, his particular note, were hardly separable in her mind. They were very cultivated, very subtile, very cynical. Their talk, which flashed quickest around Lady Garnett, who was the readiest of them all, could not possibly have been better; it was like the rapid passes of exquisite fencers with foils. And they all seemed to have been everywhere, to have read everything, and at the last to believe in nothing—in themselves and their own paradoxes least of all. There was nothing in the world which existed except that one might make of it an elegant joke. And yet of old, the girl reflected, she had found them stimulating enough; their limitations, at least, had not seemed to her to weigh seriously against their qualities, negative though these last might be.

Had it been, then, simply the presence of Mr. Rainham which had leavened the company, and the personal fascination of his friendship—indefinable and unobtrusive as that had been—which had enabled her to adopt for the moment their urbane, impartial point of view?

Perhaps there had been a particle of truth in the charge so solemnly levelled at her by Mr. Sylvester: it was a false position that she maintained.

The attitude of Lady Garnett and her intimates, of persons (the phrase of Steele's recurred to her as meeting it appropriately) "who had seen the world enough to undervalue it with good breeding," must seem to her at last a little sterile when she was conscious—never more than now—of how clearly and swiftly the healthy young blood coursed through her veins, dissipating any morbid imaginations that she might feel inclined to cherish. She looked out at life, in her conviction that so little of it had yet been lived, that for her it might easily be a long affair, with eyes which were still full of interest and, to a certain degree, of hope; and this did not detract from at least one "impossible loyalty," from which it seemed to her she would never waver. And Charles Sylvester's infelicitous proposal recurred to her, and she was forced to ask herself whether, after all, it was quite so infelicitous as it seemed. Might not some sort of solution to the difficulties which oppressed her be offered by that alliance? Conscientiously she considered the question, and for a long time; but with the closest consideration the prospect refused to cheer her, remained singularly uninviting. And yet, arid as the notion appeared of a procession hand-in-hand through life with a husband so soberly precise, to the tune of political music, she was still hardly decided upon her answer when she at length reluctantly left her comfortable fire and composed herself to sleep.

It was not until a day or two later that a prolonged visit from the subject of these hesitations reminded her—perhaps more forcibly than before—that, however in his absence she might oscillate, in

his actual presence a firm negative was, after all, the only answer which could ever suffice.

At the close of what seemed a singularly long afternoon, during which her aunt, who was confined to her room with a bad headache, had left to her the burden of entertaining, Mary came to this conclusion.

Mr. Sylvester had come with the first of her callers, and had made no sign of moving when the last had gone. And in the silence, a little portentous, which had ensued when they were left together, the girl had read easily the reason of his protracted stay. She glanced furtively, with a suggestion of weariness in her eyes, at the little jewelled watch on her wrist, wondering if in the arrival of a belated visitor there might not still be some respite.

"You are not going out?" he asked tentatively, detecting her. "I expect my sister will be here soon."

"No, I am not going out," admitted the girl reluctantly. "I am on duty, you know. Somebody may arrive at any minute," she added, not quite ingenuously. "Let us hope it will be your sister."

"I hope not—not just yet," he protested. "It is so long, Miss Masters, since I have seen you alone. That is my excuse for having remained such an unconscionable time. I have to seize an opportunity."

She made no remark, sitting back in the chair, her fine head bent a little, thoughtfully, her hands folded quietly in her lap, in an attitude of resignation to the inevitable.

"You can't mistake me," he went on at last eagerly. "I have kept to the stipulation; I have been silent for a long time. I have been to see you, certainly, but not so often as I should have liked, and I have said nothing to you of the only thing that was in my head. Now"—he hesitated for an instant, then completed his phrase with an intonation almost passionate—"now I want my reward! Can't you—can't you give it me, Mary?"

The girl said nothing for a moment, looking away from him into the corners of the empty room, her delicate eyebrows knitted a little, as though she sought inspiration from some of Lady Garnett's choicer *bibelôts*, from the little rose and amber shepherdess of Watteau, who glanced out at her daintily, imperturbably from the midst of her *fête galante*. At last she said quietly:

"I am sorry, Mr. Sylvester, I can only say, as I said before, it is a great honour you do me, but it's impossible."

"Perhaps I should have waited longer," suggested Charles, after a moment's silence, in which he appeared to be deeply pondering her sentence. "I have taken you by surprise; you have not sufficiently considered——"

"Oh, I have considered," cried the girl quickly, with a sudden flush. "I have considered it more seriously than you may believe, more, perhaps, than I ought."

"Than you ought?" he interrupted blankly.

"Yes," she said simply. "I mean that if it could ever have been right to answer you as you wished, it would have been right all at once; thinking would not alter it. I am sorry, chiefly, that I allowed this—this procrastination; that I did not make you take my decision that night, at Lady Mallory's. Yes, for that I was to blame. Only, some day I think you will see that I was right, that it would never have done."

"Never have done!" he repeated, with an accent full of grieved resentment. "I think it would have done so admirably. I hardly understand——"

"I mean," said poor Mary helplessly, "that you estimated me wrongly.
I *am* frivolous—your interests would not have been safe in my hands.
You would have married me on a misunderstanding."

"No," said Charles morosely, "I can't believe that! You are not plain with me, you are not sincere. You don't really believe that you are frivolous, that we should not suit. In what way am I so impossible? Is it my politics that you object to? I shall be happy to discuss them with you. I am not intolerant; I should not expect you to agree with me in everything. You give me no reasons for this—this absurd prejudice; you are not direct; you indulge in generalizations."

He spoke in a constrained monotone, which seemed to Mary, in spite of her genuine regret for the pain she gave him, unreasonably full of reproach.

"Ah!" she cried sharply, "since I don't love you, is not that a reason? Oh, believe me," she went on rather wearily, "I have no prejudice, not a grain. I would sooner marry you than not. Only I cannot

bring myself to feel towards you as a woman ought to the man she marries. Very likely I shall never marry."

He considered her, half angrily, in silence, with his unanimated eyes; his dignity suffered in discomposure, and lacking this, pretentious as it was, he seemed to lack everything, becoming unimportant and absurd.

"Oh, you will marry!" he said at last sullenly, an assertion which
Mary did not trouble to refute.

He returned the next minute, with a persistency which the girl began to find irritating, to his charge.

"I don't understand it. They seem to me wilful, unworthy of you, your reasons; it's perverse—yes, that is what it is, perverse! You are not really happy here; the life doesn't suit you."

"What a discovery!" cried the girl half mockingly. "I am not really happy! Well, if I admit it?"

"I could make you so by taking you out of it. You are too good for it all, too good to sit and pour out tea for—for the sort of people who come here."

"Do you mean," she asked, with a touch of scorn in her voice, "that we are not respectable?"

"That is not you who speak," he persisted; "it is your aunt who speaks through you. I know it is the fashion now to cry out against one, even in good society, to call one straitlaced, if one respects certain conventions. There are some I respect profoundly; and not the least that one which forbids right-minded gentlewomen to receive men of notoriously disgraceful lives. One should draw the line; one should draw it at that Hungarian pianist who was here this afternoon. Your aunt, of course, is a Frenchwoman; she has different ideas. But you, I can't believe that you care for this society, for people like Kronopolski and—and Rainham. Oh, it hurts me, and I imagine how distasteful it must be to you, that you must suffer these people. I want to take you away from it all."

The girl had risen, flushing a little. She replied haughtily, with a vibration of passion in her voice:

"You are not generous, Mr. Sylvester. You are not even just. What right have I ever given you to dictate to me whom I shall know or refuse to know? I, too, have my convictions; and I think your view is narrow, and uncharitable, and false. You see, we don't agree enough…. Ah, let it end, Mr. Sylvester!" She went on more gently, but very tiredly, her pale face revealing how the interview had strained her: "I wish you all the good in the world, but I can't marry you. Let us shake hands on that, and say good-bye."

Sylvester had also risen to his feet, and he stood facing her for a moment indecisively, as though he hardly credited the finality of his rejection.

They were still in this attitude, and the fact gave a certain tinge of embarrassment to their greetings, when the door opened, and Mrs. Lightmark was announced.

"I was on the point of going," explained Charles nervously. "I thought you were not coming, you know."

Eve made no effort to detain him, half suspecting that she had appeared at a strenuous moment. When the barrister had departed (Mary had just extended to him the tips of her frigid fingers), and Eve's polite inquiries after Lady Garnett's health had been satisfied, she remarked:

"I really only came in for a cup of tea. I walked across from Dorset Square. I have sent the carriage to pick up my husband at his club: it's coming back for me. You look tired, Mary. I think I oughtn't to stay. You look as if you had been having a political afternoon. Poor Charles, since he has been in the House, can think of nothing but blue-books."

"Tired?" queried the girl listlessly; "no, not particularly.
Besides, I am always glad to see you, it happens so seldom."

"Yes; except in a crowd. One has never any time. Have you heard, by the way, that my husband is one of the new Associates?"

She went on quickly, preventing Mary's murmured congratulations:

"Yes, they have elected him. I suppose it is a very good thing. He has his hands full of portraits now."

Then she remarked inconsequently—the rapidity with which she passed from topic to topic half surprised Mary, who did not remember the trait of old:

"We are going to the theatre to-night—that is to say, if my husband has been able to get seats. It's the first night of a new comedy. I meant to ask you to come with us, only it was an uncertainty. If the box is not forthcoming, you must come when we do go. Only, of course, it will not be the *première*."

"I should like to," said Mary vaguely. "I don't care so much about first nights. I like the theatre; but I go so seldom. Aunt Marcelle does not care for English plays; she says they are like stale bread-and-butter. I tell her that is not so bad."

"The *mot*, you mean?"

"Partly; but also the thing. Bread-and-butter is a change after a great many *petits fours*."

Mrs. Lightmark smiled a little absently as she sat smoothing the creases out of her pretty, fawn-coloured gloves.

"Oh, the *petits fours*," she said, "for choice. One can take more of them, and amuse one's self longer."

They heard a carriage draw up suddenly in the street below, and Eve, who had been glancing from time to time expectantly at the window, went over and looked out. She recognised her liveries and the two handsome bays.

"Perhaps I had better not let him come up," she said; "it is late already, and you will be wanting to dress."

Lightmark had just alighted from the carriage when his wife joined him in the street. He held the door for her silently, and stopped for a moment to give the direction, "Home," to the coachman before he took the place at her side.

She turned to him after a while inquiringly, finding something of unwonted gravity in his manner.

"Did you get the box?" she asked.

"The box?" he repeated blankly. Then, pulling himself up, "No," he said quickly, "I forgot all about it. The fact is, I heard something this afternoon which put it out of my head. I am afraid," he went on, with a growing hesitation, "you will be rather shocked."

"Ah," she cried quickly, catching at her breath, "something has happened. Tell me. Don't preface it; I can bear anything if you will only tell me straight out."

"It's Rainham," he murmured. "He died last night at Blackpool. I heard it from McAllister, at the club."

He looked away from her vaguely out of his window at the pale streets, where a few lamps were beginning to appear, waiting in a fever of apprehension, which he vainly sought to justify, for some word or comment on the part of his wife.

As none came, and the silence grew intolerable, he ventured at last to glance furtively across at her. Her face seemed to him a shade paler than before, but that might be exaggerated by the relief of her rich and sombre furs. Her eyes were quite expressionless and blank, although she had the air of being immensely thoughtful; her mouth was inscrutable and unmoved. And he experienced a sudden pang of horror at the anticipation of a dinner alone with her, with the ghostly presence of this news dividing them, before he reminded himself that Colonel Lightmark was to be of the party.

For, perhaps, the first time in his life the prospect of his uncle's company afforded him a sensation of relief.

CHAPTER XXXI

When Oswyn emerged from the narrow doorway of the gallery in Bond Street, which on the morrow was to be filled with the heterogeneous presence of those who, for different reasons, are honoured with cards of invitation to private views, it was still daylight, although the lamps had been lighted; and the east wind, which during the earlier hours of the day had made the young summer seem such a mockery of flowery illusions, had taken a more genial air from the south into alliance; and there was something at once caressing and exhilarating in their united touch as they wandered in gentle eddies up the crooked thoroughfare.

Oswyn paused upon the pavement, outside the showroom which Mosenthal called a gallery, gazing up

the road towards Oxford Street, with a momentary appreciation of the subtile early evening charm, which lent so real a beauty even to a vista of commonplace shop-fronts and chimney-pots, straightening his bent figure, and wondering whither to betake himself.

He had not allowed his friend's death to be an excuse for abandoning the projected exhibition; indeed, when this event occurred, he was already too far compromised; and he even found the labour involved in the preparations for the new departure a very welcome distraction—the one thing which made it possible for the desolate man to stay on in London, which, he assured himself dogmatically, was the only place on earth where he could face life with an indifference which was at least a tolerable imitation of equanimity.

To get together the materials for even a modest exhibition of the kind which he contemplated, it became necessary for him to ransack old portfolios, and to borrow from dealers, and from his few discriminating private patrons, works which had but recently left his studio and could still be traced; to utilize all the hours of daylight accorded to him by a grudging season for finishing, mounting, and retouching.

The man who made frames for Oswyn knew him of old as an exacting customer and hard to please, who insisted on a rigid adherence to his own designs, and was quick to detect inferior workmanship or material; but during the last few days he had been driven almost to rebellion by the painter's exigencies; never had such calls been made upon him for flawless glass, and delicately varied shades of gold and silver; never had artist's eye been so ruthless in the condemnation of imperfect mitres and superfluous plaster.

But now the work of preparation was at an end: the catalogues had been printed, and his *impresario* had judiciously circulated invitations to press and public: the work was done, and the workman felt only weary and indifferent. If the public howled, what did it matter? Their hostility would be for him a corroboration, for his Jew an invaluable advertisement. If they fawned, so much the better: it would not hurt him, and Mosenthal would still have his advertisement. If they were indifferent, well, so was he.

The question of pecuniary profit troubled him not at all (though here his Jew joined issue): what in the world could he do with money, now? He could paint a picture in a month which would keep him for six, and the dealer who bought it probably for a year.

Margot was already provided for, even handsomely: in that respect, at least, her first adopted father had left no void for his successor to fill.

So again he shrugged his shoulders. And upon that evening, for the first time since Rainham's death, he dined, more solitary and more silent than ever, at his familiar table at Brodonowski's. He found that, after all, his nervous anticipation of inconvenient protestations of sympathy was not fulfilled; there were not many men who knew him more than by sight at Brodonowski's, and the few of his old associates who were there had the good sense to exhibit nothing extraordinary in their demeanour towards him. Only they were a little less wildly humorous than of old, and more forbearing in their sallies; the conversation died out for an instant as he made his way quickly, with the faintest sign of recognition, through their midst—and that was all.

Rainham's death had affected some of them for a few days perhaps, but it had not the shock of the unexpected; they chiefly wondered that he had dragged his life through so cruel a winter. And his close alliance with Oswyn had, as a natural consequence, debarred him from a real intimacy with any of the other men, who, for the most part younger, cultivated different friendships and different pursuits.

They had missed Oswyn during his seclusion of the last few weeks; he was so essentially the presiding, silent genius of the place—a man to be pointed out to new-comers, half ironically, as the greatest, most deeply injured, of them all; the possessor of a talent unapproached and unappreciated. They felt that his presence lent a distinction to the dingy resort which it otherwise frequently lacked: and he had come to be so far regarded as a permanent institution, of an almost official nature, that even on the coldest nights his chair by the fireside had remained untenanted.

When the next morning came, Oswyn felt desperately inclined to break the promise which Mosenthal had, with some difficulty, exacted from him, and to keep far from Bond Street and the crowd who even then were assembling to cast their careless glances and light words at the work of his life; it was only the fear of the taint of cowardice, and a certain perversity, which induced him eventually to present himself within the gallery rather late in the afternoon.

As he entered the room, looking about him with a kind of challenge, many eyes were turned upon him (for people go to private views not to see pictures—that is generally impossible—but to see and be seen of men), but few had any suspicion that this strange man, with the shabby, old-fashioned apparel, and

expression half nervous, half defiant, was the painter whose pictures they were pretending to criticise.

Very few of those present—hardly half a dozen perhaps—knew him even by sight; and while his evident disregard for social convention marked him, for the discerning observer, as a person of probably artistic distinction, the general conjecture set him down, not as a painter—he did not seem to be of that type—but as a man of letters—probably a maker of obscure verse.

When he had mastered the first wild impulse which prompted him to tear his pictures down, to turn their faces to the wall—anything to hide them from this smiling, languid, well-dressed crowd—and resigned himself to observation, he saw that Mosenthal was beaming at him complacently, through the massive gold spectacles which adorned and modified the bridge of his compromising nose, from his seat behind the table, where information as to the prices of the exhibits could be obtained.

There were exactly forty drawings and paintings to be seen upon the sparsely-covered walls, which had been draped for the occasion with coarsely-woven linen of a dull olive-green, and about half of these were drawings and studies, small in point of size, executed in chalk and pastels.

The greater part of these represented ordinary scenes of London outdoor life—a deserted corner of Kensington Gardens, with tall soot-blackened trees lifting their stately tracery of dark branches into the sky; a reach of the wide, muddy river, with a gaunt bridge looming through the fog; a gin-palace at night time, with garish lamps shining out upon the wet streets and crouching beggars.

Of the remainder, which included a few portraits and some imaginative subjects, the greater number were painted in oils, and the largest canvas would not have seemed out of place on the walls of an ordinary room.

Oswyn smiled grimly as he noticed that the portrait of Margot, which he had begun for Rainham and finished for himself, was a considerable centre of attraction; there was quite a dense crowd in the vicinity of this canvas (it is true, it was near the tea-table), and it included two bishops, a duke, and an actress, of whom the last-named was certainly more stared at than the picture.

It irritated him, in spite of his contempt for the throng, to see people standing, chatting, with their backs turned towards his creations; and when Mosenthal informed him in a triumphant stage-whisper, leaning across the table littered with catalogues, that nine of the pictures had already found purchasers, he was almost inclined to rebel, to refuse to ratify the sales.

The only friendly face which he encountered during the afternoon was that of McAllister, who presently brought his congratulations and conspicuous presence to the corner to which Oswyn had betaken himself; and for a time he found himself listening, while the Scotchman enlightened him, somewhat against his will, as to the names and celebrity of the distinguished visitors whom he was supposed to be receiving.

He was assured that the press notices could not fail to be favourable (he mentally promised himself that nothing should induce him to read a newspaper for at least a fortnight), and the flattering comments of Mr. This and Lady That were half-apologetically retailed for his presumed delectation.

As his eyes wandered, with his attention, furtively round the room, they presently encountered, in their passage from group to group, a face which seemed vaguely familiar—the face of a woman, whom he certainly had never known, but whose beauty, he thought, was not appealing to his admiration for the first time.

She was standing with her profile turned towards him, gazing gravely at his study of a pale figure, with beautiful eyes and an armful of wonderfully coloured poppies, which he called "Thanatos, the Peace-bearer."

When she moved, presently, her gaze rested on him for a moment, with the faintest note of inquiry interrupting the smile with which she was listening to the sallies of her escort for the time being; the smile and glance revealed her more perfectly to Oswyn, and he was prepared to hear McAllister greet her as Mrs. Lightmark when, a few minutes later, she passed them on her way round the room.

Eve had spent the week which followed the afternoon upon which her husband had stunned her with the news of Philip Rainham's death almost in solitude.

Lightmark had been obliged to pay a hasty visit to Berlin, on business connected with an International Art Congress, and his wife at the last moment decided, somewhat to his relief, that she would not accompany him. A man of naturally quick perception, and with a certain vein of nervous alertness underlying his outer clothing of careless candour, he could not help feeling that when he was alone with his wife he was being watched, that traps were set for him—in short, that he was suspected.

And not only when they were alone had he cause for alarm: in crowded rooms, at mammoth dinner-parties, and colossal assemblies he frequently became aware, by a sense even quicker than vision, that his wife's eyes were directed upon him from the farther side of the room, the opposite end of the dinner-table, with that wistful, childish expression in their depths, which, growing sterner and more critical of late, had ended by boring him.

Before Rainham's death, Eve, in her private discussions of the situation, had generally concluded by dismissing the subject petulantly, with a summing-up only partially convincing, that everything would come right in the end; that in time that miserable scene would be forgotten or explained away; and that the old intimacy, of which it was at once so bitter and so pleasant to dream, would be restored.

Her training—of which her mother was justly proud—had endowed her with a respect for social convention too great to allow her to think of rebelling against the existing order of things. She consoled herself by the reflection that at least she had committed no fault, and that no active discipline of penitence could justly be expected of her.

Concerning the truth of Rainham's story she could not fail to harbour doubts; that her husband was concealing something was daily more plainly revealed to her.

It was hard that she should suffer, but what could she do? At the bottom of her heart, in spite of the feeling of resentment which assailed her when—as it often did—the idea occurred to her that he had not exhibited towards her the perfect frankness which their old friendship demanded, she pitied Rainham. There were even times—such was her state of doubt—when she pitied her husband, and blamed herself for suspecting him of—she hardly owned what.

But, most of all, she pitied herself. She felt that in any case she had been wronged, whether Philip's ill-told tale was true or false.

But her pride enabled her to keep her doubts locked within her own heart, to present a smiling, if occasionally pale, face to the world, in whose doings she took so large a part, and even to deceive Mrs. Sylvester.

And now Philip was dead! The severance, which she had persuaded herself was only temporary, was on a sudden rendered inexorably complete and eternal.

The blow was a cruel one, and for a time it seemed to be succeeded by a kind of rebellious insensibility. Eve felt demoralized, and careless of the future; her frame of mind was precisely that of the man who is making his first hasty steps along the headlong road which is popularly spoken of as leading to the devil.

Later she began to reproach herself. She reflected, with a kind of scornful wonder at her weakness, that she had allowed all chance of explanation to escape; the one man whom she could trust, who would surely give her a straightforward answer if she appealed to him by the memory of the old days, was beyond the reach of her questions, silent to eternity. Her former sorrow seemed trivial by comparison with this.

On his return, Lightmark found his wife looking so pale and tired that he broke off in the middle of the story of his flattering reception at the German Court to express a suggestion for her benefit, that she had better go to Brighton or somewhere to recruit. She would never get through the season at this rate. Yes, she must certainly take a holiday, directly after the Academy Private View.

Eve caught at the idea, only she did not wait for the Academy to open. She went for a fortnight, accompanied by an old servant of the family, who regarded her mistress's birth as quite a recent event, to Mrs. Sylvester's cottage in Norfolk.

When Mrs. Lightmark came back to town her face was still pale, but her brow wore a serener air, and her eyes had lost their look of apprehension. The woman had arisen triumphant out of the ashes of her childhood, with a heart determined to know the truth, and to face it, however bitter it might prove to be. Meanwhile, she would not judge hastily.

As she drove up Bond Street one day soon after her return to town, the advertisement of Oswyn's exhibition caught her eye. She would probably have remembered a name so uncommon if she had only heard it once, and, as it was, she had heard it several times, and associated with it, moreover, a certain reticence which could not fail to arouse a woman's curiosity.

Later, when Mosenthal's card of invitation for the Private View arrived, she noted the day upon her list of engagements.

On the morning of Oswyn's ordeal, Eve sent a message to her husband, who was engaged with a model in the studio, to notify to him her intention of taking the carriage into town later in the afternoon; to which he had returned a gallant reply, expressing a hope that, if it would not bore her too much, she would pick him up somewhere and drive him home. Where and when could he meet her? The reply, "At Mosenthal's at five o'clock," did not surprise him. He did not happen to have the vaguest idea as to what was the attraction of the day at that particular gallery. It might be Burmese landscapes, or portraits of parrots; it was all one to him. It was extremely decorous in his wife to affect picture-galleries, and Mosenthal's place was conveniently near to his favourite club.

A few minutes before the appointed hour he made his way, from the new and alarmingly revolutionary club-house, where he had been indulging in afternoon tea in company with Felicia Dollond, to the gallery, outside which his horses were already waiting, and, perceiving Oswyn's name on the placards disposed on either side of the entrance, he felt only a momentary hesitation.

Oswyn would probably not be there; and, after all, why should he not inspect the man's pictures?

Before reasons had time to present themselves he had passed into the room, and had been deferentially welcomed and presented with a catalogue by the proprietor in person.

The room was still crowded, and it was oppressively warm, with an atmosphere redolent of woollen and silken fabrics, like a milliner's shop on the day of a sale.

At first he made no effort to join his wife, whom he discerned from afar talking to a pillar of the Church in gaiters and a broad-brimmed hat.

He looked at the pictures whenever there was a break in the sequence of bows and greetings which had to be exchanged with two-thirds of the people in the room; and as he looked he was smitten with a quick thrill of admiration: he was still young enough to recognise the hand of the master. And in his admiration there was a trace of a frank envy, a certain unresentful humiliation—the feeling which he could remember to have experienced many times in the old days, when he put aside the sonnet he had just finished for some fashionable magazine, and took down from his limited bookshelf the little time-worn volume which contained the almost forgotten work of a poet whose name would have fallen strangely on the editorial ear.

Before long there was a general departure, and Lightmark, flushed with the triumphs of a conversation in which, in the very centre of an admiring group of his antagonist's worshippers, he had successfully measured swords with a notorious wit, turned to look for his wife; and, for the first time, meeting Oswyn's eye, half-involuntarily advanced to greet him.

"This is an unexpected honour," said Oswyn coldly, disregarding the proffered hand; "unexpected and unwelcome!"

Then he would have turned away, leaving his contempt and hatred unspoken, but his passion was too strong.

"Have you come to seek ideas for your next Academy picture," he continued quickly, with a sneer trembling on his lips, "or for the *Outcry*?"

Lightmark grew a little pale, biting his lip, and frowning for a moment, before he assumed a desperate mask of good-humour.

"Hang it, man!" he answered quickly, "be reasonable! Haven't you forgiven me yet? Though what you have to forgive—— I only want to congratulate you, to tell you that I admire your work—immensely."

"I don't want your congratulations," interrupted the other hoarsely. "I might forget the wrong which, as you well know, you have done me; that is nothing! But have you forgotten your—your friend, Rainham? You had better go," he added, with a savage gesture. "Go! before I denounce you, proclaim you, you pitiful scoundrel!"

The man's forced calm had given way to a quivering passion; his lips trembled under the stress of the words which thronged to them; and as he turned on his heel, with a glance eloquent of loathing, he did not notice that Eve was standing close behind her husband, with parted lips, and intent eyes gleaming out of a face as pale as his own.

Lightmark recovered himself quickly, shrugging his shoulders as soon as the other was out of earshot. He glanced at his wife, who was following Oswyn with her eyes; he did not dare to ask, or even to think, what she might have heard.

"The man's mad," he said lightly, "madder than ever!"

CHAPTER XXXII

It was Margot who gave him the letter: Oswyn remembered that afterwards with a kind of superstition. She came to meet him, wearing an air of immense importance, when his quick step fell upon the bare wooden stairway which led to his rooms.

"There's a letter for you," she said, nodding impressively, "a big letter, with a seal on it; and Mrs. Thomas had to write something on a piece of green paper before the postman would give it to her."

Then she followed him into the twilight of the attic which was his studio, and watched him gravely while he lighted the gas and, in deference to her curiosity, broke the seal.

The envelope contained a letter, and a considerable bundle of papers, folded small, and neatly tied together with red tape.

When he had read the letter, he turned the package over with a sigh, reflectively eying it for some minutes, and then put it aside.

Later, when Mrs. Thomas, his landlady, had carried the child away to bed, he took, the papers up again, and, after some hesitation, slowly untied the tape which encircled them.

The letter was from Messrs. Furnival and Co., the firm of solicitors who had acted for Rainham, and were now representing Oswyn as his friend's sole executor.

It contained a brief intimation that the grant of probate of the late Mr. Rainham's will had been duly extracted, and ended with a request that the executor would consider the inclosed bundle of documents, which appeared to be of a private nature, and decide whether they should be preserved or destroyed.

When he had removed the tape, Oswyn noticed that a great many of the letters had the appearance of being in the same handwriting; these were tied up separately with a piece of narrow faded silk riband, and it was evident that they were arranged more or less in order of date; the writing in the case of the earliest letter being that of a child, while the most recent, dated less than a year ago, was a short note, an invitation, with the signature "Eve Lightmark."

Oswyn contemplated the little bundle with an air of indecision, falling at last into a long reverie, his thoughts wandering from the letters to the child, the woman who had written them, the woman whose name his friend so rarely breathed, whose face he had seen for the first time, proud, and cold, and beautiful, that very afternoon. Did she, too, care? Would she guard her secret as jealously?

Suddenly he frowned; the thought of Lightmark's effrontery recurred, breaking his contemplative calm and disturbing his speculations. He laid the papers aside without further investigation, and, after gazing for a few minutes vacantly out of the uncurtained window, rolled a fresh cigarette and went out into the night.

Next morning he made an expedition to Lincoln's Inn Fields to see Messrs. Furnival and Co., taking the packet with him. The partner who had the matter in hand was engaged, and he was kept waiting for nearly half an hour, in a dusty room with an elaborately moulded ceiling, and a carved wooden chimney-piece and scrolled panelling of some beauty, both disfigured with thick layers of dingy brown paint. A fire had just been lighted, in deference to the unseasonable coldness of the June day, and the room was full of pungent smoke.

As he waited his irritation increased. Lightmark's impertinent intrusion (such it appeared to him) and the scene which had ensued, had entirely aroused him from the state of indifference into which, when the incident occurred, he was beginning to relapse. The man was dangerous; a malign passion, a craving for vengeance, slept in him, born of his southern blood, and glancing out now and again at his eyes, like the fire which darts from the windows of a burning building.

He wondered now, as he thought of the wrongs he had borne, as it seemed to him, so patiently; in Rainham's lifetime there had doubtless been reasons, but was he never to retaliate? Had not he considered other people enough? His forbearance struck him now as a kind of weakness, as something almost contemptible, to be thought of with a feeling akin to shame.

Finally he was ushered up into Mr. Furnival's room, a pleasant apartment on the first floor, with windows looking out upon a charming oasis of grass and trees. The lawyer apologized for keeping him waiting, intimated delicately that he had a pressing appointment in five minutes' time, and expressed his sympathy with Oswyn's difficulty as to the letters.

"It's quite a matter for you to decide," he said. "If you like to take the responsibility you may burn them forthwith, unread; or you may give them to me, to file with the other papers. But I should advise you to glance through the later letters, at all events. May I look at them? Thanks."

Oswyn had given him the packet of letters, and he spread them out on the table at which he was sitting, methodically, in little heaps, clearing a space among the piles of drafts and abstracts which lay before him.

"I think we may destroy these," said Oswyn, pointing to the little bundle tied up with riband. "I think I know what they are."

"As you like," said Mr. Furnival; "they appear to be from a lady.
Yes, I don't think you need read them."

"And these," continued Oswyn. "They are all from Lady Garnett, and it is extremely unlikely that they can have any business reference."

"That disposes of nearly all," said the lawyer cheerfully. "I may put them on the fire, then?"

Oswyn bowed a grave assent, and Mr. Furnival dropped the little packets quickly into the hottest part of the fire.

"Now, here is a letter with a very recent postmark," he continued. "A man's writing, too, I should say. Will you read this, while I go through the others? It looks like rather a long epistle."

The handwriting seemed familiar to Oswyn, and his hand trembled slightly as he turned to the signature for corroboration. As he guessed, it was from Lightmark.

"I think I had better read this," he said grimly, half to himself.

He glanced quickly through the letter, and then read it a second time slowly, and while he was reading it his expression was such as to confirm the solicitor's previous opinion, that the man was a little bit mad.

When he had finished his perusal (he thought at the time that he should never forget a single word of that disgraceful letter), Oswyn sat in silence for some minutes, intently watching Mr. Furnival's struggles with a large bundle of papers and a small black bag.

The letter had, if such a thing were possible, increased his contempt for the writer; that the man was insincere (Oswyn would have used a far stronger term) he had been aware from the beginning; now he knew that he was a coward, a creature almost unworthy of his hatred.

A quick thought struck him, and he smiled.

"We won't burn this—at present, at any rate," he said quietly. "Is there anything else for me to read?"

The lawyer shuffled the remaining papers together quickly.

"I think not: these are chiefly bills which have since been paid. Will you keep that letter, or do you wish us to do anything about it?"

Oswyn deliberated for a moment, with a curious expression flitting over his face, biting his lip and frowning slightly, as he gazed at the fireplace, where Rainham's long-cherished letters from Eve and Lady Garnett's delicate, witty compositions were represented by a little heap of wavering black ashes.

The lawyer looked at his watch uneasily.

"I beg your pardon," said Oswyn quickly; "I needn't keep you any longer. Will you let me have an envelope? I dare say they can give me Mr. Sylvester's address downstairs—Mr. Charles Sylvester, the barrister?"

"The new member, you mean, of course?" said the lawyer. "He has chambers in Paper Buildings, No. 11. Do you know him?"

"I am going to send him this letter," said Oswyn briefly, folding it up and bestowing it in the envelope which Mr. Furnival had given him. "Thanks, no, I needn't trouble you to have it posted: I prefer to leave it at Mr. Sylvester's chambers myself."

"He was a great friend of the late Mr. Rainham, as, of course, you know," said the lawyer, as they parted at the door. "Mr. Rainham introduced him to us when he was quite a young man—soon after he

was called, in fact, and we gave him his first brief—the first of a good many! He's been one of our standing counsel for years. Good-day!"

As he made his way towards the Temple, Oswyn smiled to himself rather savagely, tasting in anticipation the sweets of long-deferred revenge. The flame of his ancient discontent with the academical art of the day, which had been fed by his personal hatred of one particularly successful exponent of it, was fanned into fury. And, at the same time, as he proceeded, with short, hasty steps, amply armed for the vindication of his friend, in his grim fatalism he seemed to himself immensely the instrument of destiny, which had so given his enemy into his hands.

He paused when he reached Fleet Street; entering the first public-house, at haphazard, to order six pennyworth of brandy, which he drank neat across the counter, with slow, appreciative sips, as he reminded himself that, the excellence of his ammunition notwithstanding, he was still without any definite plan of campaign.

Would his luck desert him again? Would Sylvester be away, or refuse to see him? or, while receiving him, contrive by some sinuous legal device, adroitly to divert his attack? The mere contemplation of any such frustration dulled him strangely.

He called for his glass to be replenished, and emptied it sharply: and immediately the generous spirit moved his pulse, rebuked him for his depression, sent him briskly on on his way.

As he lifted the ponderous knocker upon Sylvester's door, he remembered vividly the only other occasion upon which he had visited those chambers. With the member for Mallow, too, indiscreet busybody that he was, had he not a reckoning to settle? The choice of him as an instrument of his punishment, which, if it was primarily directed against another, should not leave him wholly unscathed, gave a zest to his malice, and increased firmness to his manner, as he curtly ordered the clerk to take in his card.

"Is it an appointment?" this youth had asked dubiously, "because if it isn't——"

"Mr. Sylvester will see me," said Oswyn with irritation, "if you will have the goodness to do as you are told, and give him my name."

At which the youth had smiled loftily and retired, only to return five minutes later with an air of greater humility and information that the legislator was disengaged.

Charles looked up at him from the table at which he was sitting, with an open volume of Hansard before him, coldly waving him to a chair—an offer which Oswyn, mentally damning his superciliousness, ignored.

"My business is very brief," he said quickly; "I can explain it standing."

"I understand that it is urgent, Mr.—Mr. Oswyn. Otherwise, you know, I am a busy man."

"You mean that my call is inconvenient? I can quite imagine it. I should hardly have troubled you if you had not once taken the trouble to send for me—you, perhaps, have forgotten the occurrence; that seemed to give me a sort of right, a claim on your attention."

"I recognised it," said Charles gravely, in a tone which implied that, had he not given this nicety the benefit of his liberal consideration, the intruder would never have penetrated so far. "Since that is agreed, may I ask you to explain your business as expeditiously as possible?"

Oswyn smiled with some irony; and Sylvester suppressed a little shudder, reflecting that the man's uncouthness almost transgressed the bounds of decency.

"I can quote your own words on a previous occasion: it concerns the honour of a friend—the honour of your family, if you like it better."

Sylvester shut his volume sharply, glanced up at the other with suppressed irritation.

"That is not a matter I can discuss with you," he said at last.

"I simply intend you to read," went on Oswyn calmly, "a letter which your brother-in-law wrote to my friend, Philip Rainham, a few weeks before his death."

Charles rose from his chair quickly, avoiding the other's face.

"I regret that I can't assist you," he said haughtily; "I have no interest whatever in the affairs of the late Mr. Rainham, and I must decline to read your letter."

He glanced significantly at the door, not suppressing a slight yawn; it was incredible how this repulsive little artist, with his indelicate propositions, bored him.

But Oswyn ignored his gesture; simply laid the missive in question on the table; then he glanced casually at his watch.

"I can't compel you to read this letter," he said in the same studiously calm voice. "I warn you that your honour is gravely interested in its contents, and I will give you five minutes in which to decide. If you still persist in your determination, I have no course left but to send copies of it to some of Rainham's most intimate friends, and to your sister, Mrs. Lightmark."

He had his watch in one hand, but his gaze, curiously ironical, followed the direction of Charles's irresolute eyes, and the five minutes had not elapsed before he realized—and a touch of triumph mingled with his immense contempt of the man and his pompous unreality—that Charles's resolution had succumbed.

He stretched out his hand for the letter, unfolded it deliberately, and read it once, twice, three times, with a judicial slowness, which the other, who was now curiously moved, found exasperating.

When at last he looked up at Oswyn he shaded his eyes with one hand, but his face remained for the rest imperturbable and expressionless. The painter saw that his discretion was larger than he had imagined.

If the reading had been disagreeably illuminative—and Oswyn believed that under his surface composure he concealed, at least, a terrible wound to his pride—he was not going to allow this impression to appear.

"I might suggest that this document is a forgery," he said after a moment.

Oswyn indulged in a little, harsh laugh, shrugging his shoulders.

"That would be too fatuous, Mr. Sylvester."

"I might suggest it," went on Charles slowly. "Perhaps, then, you will be surprised when I tell you that I believe it to be genuine. May I ask, Mr. Oswyn, why you move in this matter?"

"As Rainham's friend," said Oswyn quickly, "I intend to expose the miserable calumny which clouded his last days."

"A public scandal would be greatly to be deplored," Charles hazarded inconsequently, in the tone of a man who argued with himself.

Oswyn made as if he would have taken up the letter with a gesture of sudden impatience; but Charles intercepted him quickly, and his voice had a grave simplicity in it which arrested the other's attention.

"Don't mistake me, Mr. Oswyn; I have not the least desire or intention to suppress this document. I must expect you to judge me harshly; but you will surely see that my honour is as deeply concerned in the redressing of Mr. Rainham's reputation as anyone's can be, only I am naturally desirous of sparing my—of sparing the innocent persons who are unfortunately mixed up in the affair unnecessary pain, the scandal of publicity."

"There are certain persons who must absolutely know the truth," said
Oswyn bluntly.

"If I pledge you my word that the persons whom you mean shall be immediately enlightened, will you leave me to act alone?"

The other was silent for a moment revolving the proposition, half surprised at the unwonted humility of the barrister's eagerness. At last he said, with a short, ambiguous laugh:

"I will leave it in your hands, Mr. Sylvester."

He underwent a momentary repentance of his own readiness when he was in the street, and had turned his face to Soho again; it seemed almost childishly trusting. But presently, remembering he knew not what shade of curious sternness in Sylvester's manner, he decided that he had done wisely—it was on some such result as this that he had counted in his coming—and that the score, stupendous as it was, would be accurately settled.

For a long while, after his unwelcome visitor had departed, Charles sat silent and buried in deep thought.

From time to time he glanced vaguely at the letter which Oswyn had abandoned, and he wondered—but quite inconsequently, and with no heart to make the experiment—whether any further perusal of those disgraceful lines could explain or palliate the blunt obloquy of the writer's conduct. His concise, legal habit of mind forbade him to cherish any false illusions.

Lightmark, writing in an hour of intimate excitement, when the burden of his friend's sacrifice seemed for a fleeting moment more intolerable than the wrench of explanation with his wife, had too effectually compromised himself. He had cringed, procrastinated, promised; had been abject, hypocritical, explicit.

It seemed to Sylvester, in the first flush of his honourable disgust, that there was no generous restitution which the man had not promised, no craven meanness to which he had not amply confessed.

He dropped his correct head upon his hands with something like a moan, as he contrasted the ironical silence which had been Rainham's only answer to this effusion—a silence which had since been irrevocably sealed. He had never before been so disheartened, had never seemed so intimately associated with disgrace.

Even the abortive ending of his passion—he knew that this was deep-seated and genuine, although its outward expression had been formal and cold—seemed a tolerable experience in comparison.

But this was dishonour absolute, and dishonour which could never be perfectly atoned.

Had not he in his personal antipathy to Philip Rainham—the tide of that ancient hostility surged over him again even while he vowed sternly to make the fullest amends—had he not seized with indecent eagerness upon any pretext or occasion to justify his dislike?

He had, at least, assisted unjustly to destroy Rainham's reputation, giving his adherence to the vainest of vain lies; and however zealous he might be in destroying this elaborate structure which he had helped to build, however successful the disagreeable task of enlightening his sister and the maligned man's most interested friends might prove, the reproach upon his own foresight would remain.

It was notable that, in the somewhat hard integrity of his character, he did not for a moment seek to persuade himself, as a man of greater sympathy might have done, that Eve was a person to whom the truth could legitimately be spared.

How she would suffer it, and whither her indignation might lead her, he did not care to inquire; these were matters with which henceforth he should decline to meddle. His part would be done when he had given her the simple information that was her due—that they had made a great mistake; that her husband was not to be trusted.

He tried to prepare the few set phrases in which the intelligence would be couched, but found none that were satisfactory. The effort appeared more and more stupendous as the afternoon advanced, until at last, with astonishment at his weakness which refused to be analysed, he recognised that, after all, it was not possible. It was news which he could not give to his sister with his own lips.

Mary Masters as a possible mediator suddenly occurred to him. He recognised by some occult instinct that she was one of the persons for whom Oswyn had stipulated, to whom restitution was due, and at once he resolved to appeal to her.

He reminded himself that the Lightmarks were entertaining that evening on a scale of quite exceptional grandeur, that he had a card for their fancy-dress ball, from which Lady Garnett and her niece would hardly be absentees. If he could see the girl beforehand, she would doubtless find the time and occasion to say what was necessary.

He had recovered his composure when, at no considerable interval after the formation of this resolve, he was ushered into Lady Garnett's drawing-room. It was his first appearance there since the rejection of his suit (he had not had the courage to renew it, although he was by no means prepared to admit that it was hopeless), and in the slight embarrassment which this recollection caused him he hardly regretted the presence of a second visitor, although his identification as a certain Lord Overstock, whom he believed to be opposed to him in more ways than in his political views (he was a notorious Tory), was not made without a jealous pang. He greeted Mary, however, without undue formality, and went over to Lady Garnett.

The old lady glanced up at him rather listlessly. She was growing deaf, or feigned deafness. He said to himself that perhaps she was much older than they knew—was growing tired. Her *persiflage*, which Charles had never much appreciated, was less frequent than of old, and she no longer poured out her

witticisms with the placid sweetness of a person offering you *bonbons*. There were sentences in her talk —it was when she spoke of the couple opposite them, who were conveniently out of ear-shot—which the barrister found deliberately malignant.

"You mean that it is settled?" she asked, affecting to misunderstand some trivial remark. "Ah, no, but it will arrange itself—it is coming. You think she will make an admirable duchess? She has sometimes quite the grand air. Have you not found that out? You know his father is very old; he cannot in reason live much longer. And such estates! Personally, too, the nicest of boys, and as proper as if he had something to gain by it. And yet, in England, a Duke can do almost anything and be respected. Ah, Mr. Sylvester, you did not use your opportunity!"

"I want one now," he said rather coldly, "of saying two words to Miss Masters."

She just raised her delicate eyebrows.

"Will it be very useful?"

Charles flushed slightly, then he frowned.

"It has nothing to do with myself. I have some news she should hear. Perhaps you yourself——"

She interrupted him with a little mirthless laugh.

"I will not hear anything serious, and you look to me very serious. I am old enough to have promised never again to be serious in my life."

She submitted, however, to listen to him, seeing that his weighty confidences would not be brooked; and when he had finished—he said what he had to say in very few words—she glanced up at him with the same air of impenetrable indifference.

"Come!" she said, "what does it matter to me that you acted in exceedingly bad taste, and repent it? It made no difference to me—I am not the *police des moeurs*. If I were you, I would hold my tongue."

Then she added, as he glanced at her with evident mystification, shrugging her shoulders:

"When one is dead, Mr. Sylvester, what does it matter?"

He turned away rather impatiently, his eyes following the fine lines of Mary's face, which he saw in profile.

He noticed that she talked with animation, and that Lord Overstock's expression was frankly admiring. At last the old lady said:

"But, yes; you must tell Mary—by all means. To her it will mean much. See, the Marquis is going; if you wish I will leave you alone together."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"Now, isn't it a pretty dance?" murmured Mrs. Dollond rapturously, as she sank into a low chair in a corner secure from the traffic of the kaleidoscopic crowd which had invaded Mrs. Lightmark's drawing-room, and opened her painted fan with a little sigh intended to express her beatitude.

Colonel Lightmark, to whom Mrs. Dollond addressed this complimentary query (which, after all, was more of an assertion or challenge, in that it took its answer for granted), was arrayed in the brilliant scarlet and silver of the regiment which had once the honour of calling him Colonel; his tunic was so tight that sitting down was almost an impossibility for him, and Mrs. Dollond, who looked charming in her powder and brocade, could not help wondering whether any mortal buttons could stand the strain; and, on the other hand, the dimensions of his patent leather boots were such that standing, for a man of his weight, involved a torture which it was hard to conceal. And yet the veteran was happy—he was positively radiant. He felt that his nephew's success in the world of Art and of Society considerably enhanced his own importance; he was not ashamed to owe a portion of his brilliance to borrowed light —and tonight one could not count the celebrities on the fingers of both hands.

The old hero-worshipper gazed complacently at the little ever-shifting crowd which surrounded his nephew and his niece (so he called her) at their post near the doorway, and he listened to Mrs.

Dollond's sparkling sallies with a blissful ignorance of her secret ambition in the direction of a partner who would make her dance, and for whose edification she would be able to liken the Colonel's warlike figure to a newly-boiled lobster, or a ripe tomato.

"Regular flower-show, isn't it?" he suggested, naïvely reinforcing his simile. "I don't know what the dickens they're all meant for, but a good many of them seem to have escaped from the Lyceum—Juliets, and Portias, and Shylocks, and so forth."

"Yes," said Mrs. Dollond. "I think the Shylocks must be picture-dealers, you know. But their conversation isn't very Shakespearian, is it? I heard Hamlet say, just now, that the floor was too perfect for anything, and Ophelia—she was dancing with a Pierrot *incroyable*—told her partner that she adored waltzing to a string band!"

They both laughed, the Colonel shortly and boisterously, Mrs. Dollond in a manner which suggested careful study before a looking-glass, with an effect of dimples and of flashing teeth.

"What wicked things you say, Colonel Lightmark," she added demurely. "Who is that stately person in the dark figured silk, with a cinque-cento ruff? Isn't it Lady Garnett's niece?"

"Yes, that's Miss Masters," said the Colonel, "and I suppose that's Lady Garnett with her. I don't think I've ever met Lady Garnett, though I've often heard of her. What is her dress—whom is she intended to represent? I don't see how the dickens one's expected to know, but you're so clever."

"Oh, she's dressed as—as Lady Garnett! What a lot of people—*real* people, you know—there are here to-night! Dear me, there's the music again already. I believe I've got to dance this time. I do hope my partner's dress won't clash with mine too awfully. That's the worst of fancy dress balls; they really ought to be stage-managed by a painter, and the period ought to be limited. One's never safe. Our dance, Mr. Copal? Number six? Yes, I think it must be! A polka? Then we'll waltz!"

And the Colonel, who was not a dancing man, was left in not unwelcome solitude to reflect somewhat ponderously on the advantages of possessing a nephew and niece young enough, brilliant enough, and rich enough—though that was partly *his* affair—to cultivate the very pink and perfection of smart society. He regarded Dick in the light of a profitable investment.

When the young people, so to speak, came to the rescue of the avuncular hulk, it was already beginning to drift into the corner of the harbour devoted to derelicts.

The friends who had developed about his path in such flattering numbers when he came home from India, and retired, with a newly-acquired fortune and a vague halo of military distinction about his person, into the ranks of the half-paid, were beginning to find him rather old and, frankly, a considerable bore; but the timely benevolence which he had extended to his nephew was, it appeared, to have its reward in this world in the shape of a kind of reflected rejuvenescence, a temporary respite from the limbo of (how he hated the word!) fogeydom.

When Dick married, his uncle was already settling down in a narrow groove among the people of yesterday; now he felt that he had once more established his foothold among the people of to-day.

Presently he noticed that Lady Dulminster had arrived, and he made his way across the room to meet her with a quite youthful bashfulness, cannoning apologetically against Romeos and Marguerites, hoping that she would like his uniform.

There was one person, at least, in the room who made no attempt to assure herself that she was enjoying the vivid gaiety of these parti-coloured revels.

Mary Masters, when she had time for solitary thought, found that the atmosphere of the charming room was full of mockery. For her, the passionate vibrations of the strained, incessant strings seemed to breathe the wild complaint of lost souls; the multitudinous tread of gliding feet, the lingering sweep of silken skirts, the faint, sweet perfume of exotic flowers, all had a new and strange significance; the effect of an orchestral fugue wearily repeating the expression of a frenzied heartlessness, a great unrest.

The girl was completely unstrung. Since Charles had brought her news, which, after all, had been merely a corroboration, her nerves had played her false; the balance of her mind was thrown out of poise; and the fact that she was there at all seemed only a part of her failing, an additional proof of her moral collapse.

Seated on a low ottoman, in a little recess among the tall palms and tree-ferns, which lined the passage leading from the ball-room to the studio, she was startled presently from her reverie by Mrs.

Lightmark, who confronted her, a dainty figure in the pale rose colour and apple-green of one of Watteau's most unpractical shepherdesses.

"Not dancing, Mary!" she protested, smiling a little languidly. "What does it mean? Why are you sitting in stately solitude with such an evident contempt for our frivolity?"

"Frivolity!" echoed Miss Masters. "I *have* been dancing, this last waltz, with Lord Overstock. I have sent him to find my fan. I told him exactly where to look, but I suppose he can't discover it. He's not very clever, you know!"

"Poor Lord Overstock! I hope he won't find it just yet and come to turn me out of his seat. I'm *so* tired of standing, of introducing men whose names I never knew to girls whose names I have forgotten, and of trying to avoid introducing the same people twice over. It's so difficult to recognize people in their powder and patches!"

"Yes," said Mary slowly, with a kind of inward resentment which she could not subdue, although she felt that it was unreasonable, "I almost wonder that you recognised me."

Eve glanced at her, struck by her tone, trying to read her expression in the dim light, a shadow of bewilderment passing over her own face and for a moment lowering the brilliancy of her eyes. Then she smiled again, dismissing her thought with a little laugh which broke off abruptly.

"One so soon forgets!" the other added, with an intention in her voice, an involuntary betrayal which she almost immediately regretted.

"Forgets!"

Eve caught up the word eagerly, almost passionately, her voice falling into a lower key.

"Forget! Forgive and forget!" repeated Mary quickly and recklessly, letting her eyes wander from her own clasped hands to Eve's bouquet of delicate, scentless fritillaries, which lay neglected where it had fallen on the floor between their feet. "How easy it sounds!—is perhaps—and yet—I have not so much to forget—or to be forgiven!"

The last words were almost whispered, but for Eve's imagination, poised on tiptoe like a hunted creature blindly listening for the approach of the Pursuer, they were full of suggestion, of denunciation.

She remembered now, with a swiftly banished pang of jealousy, that this girl had loved him.

Her thought sped back to a summer evening nearly a year ago, when it had seemed to her that she had surprised her friend's secret.

"What do you mean, Mary?" she demanded courageously. "What have I to be forgiven? Don't despise me; don't, for Heaven's sake, don't play with me! I am all in the dark! Are you accusing me? Do you think because I say nothing that I have forgotten—that I can forget? Is it something about—him?"

Mary cast a rapid glance at her.

"Are you afraid of his name, then?"

Eve dropped her hands despairingly.

"Ah, you do! You *are* playing with me! About Philip Rainham, then! For Heaven's sake speak! Do you know what I only guess—that he was innocent? For God's sake say it!"

It was Mary's turn to look bewildered, to feel penitent. She began to recognise that there were greater depths in Eve's nature than she had suspected, that her indifference might, after all, prove to have been merely a mask.

"You guess—innocent—don't you know, then?"

"Nothing, nothing! I only suspect—believe! I have been groping alone in the darkness—and yet I *do* know! He was innocent—he played a part?"

"Yes," said Mary gently; "he sacrificed himself, for another!"

"He sacrificed himself—for me. Ah, say it! say it!"

Mary was greatly puzzled and at the same time moved—filled with a supreme compassion for this woman who was yet such a child, so dainty and frail a thing to confront the deadly knowledge that she had made a shipwreck of a life, of lives.

And yet, was there not also a ring of exultation, a challenge in her last words?

At least, her sorrow was ennobled. She was invested with a sombre glory, as one who had inspired a rare and perfect devotion.

And, after all, had she not already been considered enough?

A silence ensued, during which Eve seemed to be wrapped in steadfast thought.

She grew calmer, picking up her bouquet, and sedulously arranging its disordered foliage; while Lord Overstock, who had arrived with Mary's fan, poured forth elaborate apologies, protesting that she must give him another dance—the second extra—to make up for the time he had lost.

Already the music was beginning for the next dance, and people passed in couples, laughing and talking gaily, a motley procession, on their way into the ball-room.

"I thought your brother would have told you," said Mary softly, bending over her programme and gathering her skirts together with a suggestion of departure.

"Charles? He was always prejudiced against him—always his enemy!"

"That is why; he is very just, very conscientious. He told me this afternoon."

Mary's voice sank a little lower. She was standing now. She could see her prospective partner looking for her. She wondered vaguely whether Eve accepted the alternative, whether she realized that, to prove Philip innocent, was to establish her husband's guilt, his original wrong-doing, and subsequent cowardice.

"But—Charles! How did he know? Does he believe it? Who told him?"

Mary had gently disengaged her arm from Eve's restraining hand. She stepped back for an instant, excusing herself to her expectant cavalier.

"One of Philip's friends told him to-day—proved it to him, he says.
It was a Mr. Oswyn."

A minute later Mary found herself in the ball-room, making heroic efforts to divide her entire attention impartially between the strains of the band and the remarks of her partner.

She was afraid to pass in review the conduct of those few minutes which had seemed so long. Had it really all occurred in the interval between two waltzes?

For the present she drew a mental curtain over the scene. She lacked the courage to gaze upon her handiwork, although she was not without a hopeful instinct that, when she criticised it in sober daylight, she would even approve of what she had done. Her determination did not, however, carry her further than the middle of the dance.

The room was now crowded to repletion, and she readily fell in with her partner's suggestion that they should take a turn in the cooler atmosphere of the garden; and as she passed the threshold, a rapid, retrospective glance informed her that Eve was once more playing her arduous part of hostess.

Never had actress more anxiously awaited the fall of the curtain upon her scene. Her husband, in the gallant russet of a falconer, was dancing now with Mrs. Dollond: she could hear his frequent laughter, and, though she turned her eyes away, see him bending over his partner to catch the words, trivial enough no doubt, which she seemed to whisper with such an air of confidence. But, though she had heard him address Mrs. Dollond by her Christian name, she did not pay him the compliment of being jealous: the time for that had passed. The account which she had to demand of him related to a matter far more serious than the most flagrant of flirtations—she only longed to confront him, to tear from him a confession, not so much with a view to humiliate him as to enlighten herself, and to force him to make the only reparation in his power.

When the music had ceased, and the measured tread of feet lapsed into the confusion of independent wanderings, Eve turned to find her husband close behind her, and Mrs. Dollond firing off a neat little speech of congratulation, panting a little, and making play with her elaborate fan.

She was quick to seize the opportunity for which she had waited so eagerly; with a few words of smiling apology to Mrs. Dollond and the others who were gathered round her, she intimated to her husband that she wished him to come with her, to attend to something: she assumed a playful air of mystery.

"Oh, you must go!" said Mrs. Dollond, "your wife is planning some delightful surprise for us: I can see it in her eyes! Though, what one could want more——"

The music began again, and the couples took their places for the Lancers: there was to be a Shakespearian set, and another of Waverley notabilities.

Under cover of the discussion and confusion which this scheme involved, Eve withdrew, leading the way into the room which they called the library, and which was full of superfluous furniture, removed from the drawing-room to make space for the dancers. Her husband followed, lifting his eyebrows, with a chivalrous but not wholly successful attempt to disguise his impatience.

When he had closed the door, Eve turned suddenly and confronted him, interrupting the question which was on his lips. He noticed, with a quick apprehension, that she was very pale, that the smile which she had worn for her guests had given place to an expression even more ominous than her pallor and the trembling of her lips.

"Why have I brought you here?" she echoed. "I don't know, I might have asked you before them all—perhaps you would have preferred that! But I won't keep you long. The truth! That is all I want!"

He frowned, with a vicious movement of his lips: then meeting her gaze, made an awkward effort to seem at ease.

"My dear child!" he said, stepping back and leaning his back against the door, "what melodrama! The truth! what truth?"

"How often you must have withheld it from me, to ask like that! The truth about Philip Rainham, and that woman: that is what I ask!"

Lightmark exclaimed petulantly at this:

"Haven't we discussed it all before? Haven't you questioned me beyond all limits? Haven't you said that you believed me? And what a time——"

"Yes, I have asked you before. Is it my fault that you have lied? Is it my fault that you have made it possible for—for someone else to prove to me, to-night, that you have deceived me? The time is not of my making. But now, I must have the truth; it is the only reparation, the last thing I shall ask of you!"

"You must be mad!" he stammered, his self-possession deserting him; "you don't know—you have no right to speak to me like this. You don't understand these things; you must let me judge for you——"

"The only thing I understand clearly is that you have blackened another man's—your friend's—memory. Isn't that enough? Can you deny that you have allowed him to bear your shame? I know now that he was innocent; I insist that you shall tell me the rest!"

"The rest!" he repeated impatiently, shifting his attitude. "I won't submit to this cross-examination! I have explained it all before; I decline to say any more!"

"Then you cling to your lie?"

"Lie? Pray, don't be so sensational; you talk like the heroine of a fifth-rate drama! Who has put such a mad idea into your head? Let me warn you that there are limits to my patience!"

"I will tell you, if you will come with me and deny it to his face—if you will refute his proofs."

"Proofs! You have no right to ask such a thing! I tell you, I have acted for the best. Why should you believe the first comer rather than me?"

"Why? You can ask why!" she interposed.

"Let me beg of you to come back with me to our guests; we shall be missed—people will talk!"

Eve shrugged her shoulders defiantly, ironically.

"You prevaricate; you won't, you can't be candid! There is only one other man who can tell me the truth—you make it necessary, I must go to him."

Lightmark clenched his hand viciously upon the handle of the door.

"I decline to discuss this damnable folly any longer; if you won't come with me I shall go alone; I shall say that you are ill—really, I think you must be!"

"Go by all means!" she replied indifferently, "but tell me first, where can I find Mr. Oswyn?"

He paused, gazing at her blankly.

"Oswyn?"

"Yes. The man who is not afraid to denounce you. If you won't enlighten me, if you won't clear your—your friend's memory—it may be at the expense of your own—perhaps he will."

"Oswyn!" he stammered, "Oswyn!"

"His address!" she demanded quickly. "Please understand that for the future I am independent; I will go to him at once! If you won't give me his address, if—— Would you prefer that I should ask my brother for it? That is my alternative!"

Lightmark found something very disconcerting in his wife's steadfast gaze, in the uncompromising calm, the quiet passion of her demeanour; his one desire was to put an end to this scene, which oppressed him as a nightmare, before he should entirely lose all power of self-control.

He felt himself almost incapable of thought, unable to weigh the meaning of her words, her threats; the readiness of resource which served him so deftly in little things had deserted him now, as it invariably did in the face of a real emergency.

If he could temporize, he might be able to arrive at something more like a plan of action, to concentrate his efforts in one direction.

He realized that if his wife fulfilled her threat, which was the more alarming in that it was not an angry one, but had every appearance of being backed by deliberate intention—if she appealed to her brother, whose moral principles he estimated more highly than his tact or worldly wisdom—there appeared to be every prospect of an aggravated scandal. For if Charles Sylvester (who was unfortunately among the revellers) declined to furnish his sister with Oswyn's address, was it not certain that she would apply elsewhere? And, after all, might not Oswyn adhere to the silence which he had so long maintained?

He reasoned quickly and indeterminately, vaguely skimming the surface of many ominous probabilities and finding no hopeful resting-place for conjecture, finally allowing a little desperate gesture to escape him.

The music had stopped amid the desultory clapping of hands, and he could hear people passing outside on their way into the garden. He turned the handle slowly without opening the door.

"Be reasonable!" he appealed. "There is still time; let us go into the ballroom; let us forget this folly!"

"You may go," she replied contemptuously; "I have no wish to detain you—far from it. But if you leave me without giving me Mr. Oswyn's address I shall ask Charles for it, and if Charles——"

Her husband interrupted her savagely.

"Oh, if you are bent on making a fool of yourself, I suppose I can't prevent you. The man lives at 61, Frith Street. Now you have it. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

He opened the door, and she passed out gravely before him, holding her bouquet to her down-turned face; and then they parted tacitly, the husband turning towards the door which led into the garden, the wife making her way into the ball-room, and thence towards the studio.

CHAPTER XXXIV

In the empty studio, from which, for one night, most of her husband's impedimenta had been removed to allow place for the long supper-table, which glistened faintly in the pale electric light, she paused only long enough to wrap her fantastic person in the dark cloak which she had caught up on her way.

Then she let herself out quietly by the private door into the road. And she stood still a moment, blotted against the shadows, hesitating, vaguely considering her next step.

The honey-coloured moon, casting its strange, silken glamour over the white house, over the black outline of the trees in the garden, spangled here and there with Japanese lanterns, gave an air of immense unreality to the scene; and the tremulous notes of the violins, which floated faintly down to

her from the half-opened windows of the ball-room, only heightened this effect, seeming just then to be no more than the music of moonbeams to which the fairies dance.

For a moment a sudden weakness and timidity overcame her. In a world so transcendently unreal—had not she just seen her happiness become the very dream of a shadow?—was it not the merest futility to take a step so definite, to be passionate or intense? Better rather to rest for a little in this vague world of half-lights into which she had stepped, under the cooling stars, and then to return and take up one's old place in the masque.

But her fantasy passed. In the distance two glowing orbs of a hansom came slowly towards her, and her purpose grew suddenly very strong.

The man reined in his horse with an inquiring glance at the hooded figure on the pavement, seeking a fare. And it was without hesitation that she engaged him, giving him the number of Oswyn's house in Frith Street, Soho, in her calm, well-bred voice, and bidding him be quick.

But the horse was incapable—tired, perhaps (she recalled the fact long afterwards, and the very shape and colour of the bony, ill-groomed animal, as one remembers trivial details upon occasions of great import); and after a while she resigned herself to a tedious drive.

As they rattled along confusedly through the crowded streets she caught from time to time the reflection of her own face in the two little mirrors at each side, and wondered to find herself the same. For she did not deceive herself, nor undervalue the crushing force of the blow which she had received.

To her husband, when she turned scornfully from his clumsy evasions—for a moment, perhaps, to herself—she had justified the singular course she was taking by an overwhelming necessity of immediately facing the truth, in which, perhaps, there still lurked the dim possibility of explanation whereby her husband's vileness might find the shadow of an excuse.

But with further reflection—and she was reflecting with passionate intensity—this little glow-worm of hope expired. The truth! She knew it already—had known before, almost instinctively—that Philip Rainham's justification could only be the warrant of her husband's guilt; no corroboration of Oswyn's could make that dreary fact any plainer than it was already.

No, it was hardly the truth which she desired so much as an act of tardy expiation which she would make. For with the bitterness of her conviction that, for all her wealth, and her beauty, and her youth, she had, none the less, irretrievably thrown away her life, there mingled an immense contrition at having been so blind and hard, so culpably unjust to the most generous of men, who had deliberately effaced himself for her good.

And the exceeding bitterness of her self-reproach, which alone saved her composure, forbidding the mockery of tears, was only exaggerated when she remembered how vain her remorse must remain. It mattered no jot that she was sorry, since death had sealed their estrangement ironically for all time.

In her passionate recognition of his constant justice and kindness, which of old, vainly striving to perpetuate the fading illusion of her husband's honour (her generosity did not pause to remember how vain these efforts had been), she had discounted for hypocrisy, she felt that no price of personal suffering would have been too heavy if only for one hour, one moment, she could have recalled him from the world of shadows to her side.

She could figure to herself, refining on her misery, his attitude in such a case: the half sad, half jesting reassurance of his gravely pardoning eyes.

They haunted her just then, those eyes of Philip Rainham, which had been to the last so ambiguous and so sad, and were now perpetually closed.

And for the first time a suspicion flashed across her mind, which, while it made her heart flutter like a frightened bird, seemed to her the one drop hitherto lacking in the cup of her unhappiness. Had, then, after all, that gentle indifference of her friend masked an immense hunger, a deeply-felt need of personal tenderness, which she might have supplied—ah, how gladly!—if she had known? Could he have cared more deeply than people knew?

She reminded herself the next moment, as they came to a sudden standstill before a dark-green door, how idle all such questions were—vain beating of the hands against the shut door of death!

She alighted and dismissed her cab, and in the interval which elapsed before her ring was answered by a slovenly little servant, who gaped visibly at the lady's hurried request that her name should be taken up to Mr. Oswyn, she had leisure for the first time to realize the strangeness of her course.

Her mother, Charles, her guests—Felicia Dollond and the rest—how would they consider the adventure if ever they should know? It was easy to imagine their attitude of shocked disapproval, and her brother's disgusted repudiation of the whole business as a thing, most emphatically, which one did not do. Ah, no! it was not a departure such as this that a well-bred society Spartan could even decently contemplate! And it was almost with a laugh, devoid, indeed, of merriment, that Eve tossed consideration of these scruples contemptuously away.

At last she was in revolt against their world and the pedantry of its little inflexible laws; and all her old traditions had become odious to her, seeming, for the moment, deeply tainted with dishonour, and partly the cause of her disastrous plight. A great, ruining wave had broken over her life, and in her passionate helplessness she cried only for some firm and absolute shore, else the silence of the engulfing waters, not for the vain ropes of social convention with which they would drag her back into the perilous security from which she had been swept; and she had forgotten everything but her imperative need, which had brought her there, when the lodging-house drudge returned and ushered her clumsily into Oswyn's presence.

It was a sitting-room on the second floor which the artist occupied, by no means an uncomfortable apartment, though Eve's first impression of it was immeasurably sordid, and she realized, with a touch of pity, that the painter's difficult genius had no tact of application to his surroundings.

Had, then, the painter of "Thanatos the Peacebearer"—that incomparable work!—no personal taste, to be violated by the crude wall-paper and the vulgar vases, containing impossible flowers, which jostled against broken tobacco-pipes and a half empty bottle of milk on the mantelpiece?

There was an immense untidiness everywhere; a disorder of children's toys and torn picture-books would have prepared Eve for the discovery of a sleeping child with brilliant hair coiled up in a rug on the sofa, if her eyes had not been arrested by an unframed canvas on an easel, the only picture, save some worthless prints in common gilt frames, which was visible. It was the head of Philip Rainham, immortalized by the brush of his friend, which awaited her—the eyes already closed, the pale lips still smiling with that superbly ironical smile of the dead.

She had not greeted Oswyn on her entrance, and now she had ceased to remember that he was there, as she stood contemplating the portrait with her rapt and sorrowful gaze, while Oswyn, leaning across the table, implicitly accepting the situation, which had to him all the naturalness of the unexpected, considered her in his turn.

He had never before seen her to such advantage, and, remembering that early presentment of her which Lightmark had exhibited in the Grosvenor, he realized how much she had developed. The singular nobility and purity of her beauty amazed him; it shone out like the starry night; and, standing there remote and silent (in her abstraction she had let her cloak slide to the ground, revealing her white arms, her fanciful, incongruous attire), she seemed, indeed, a creature of another world.

When she turned to him at last there was an immense and solemn entreaty in her eyes for candour and directness, an appeal to be spared no bitter knowledge that he might possess—for the whole truth.

"Tell me," she began slowly, calmly, though he was not ignorant that her composure was the result of an immense inward effort. "I can't explain why I have come to you—perhaps you yourself can explain that better than I. I don't know what you may think of me—I am too unhappy to care. I have no claim upon you. I only entreat you to answer me a question which perhaps no one now living can answer but you. Ah!"—she broke off with a gesture of sudden passion—"I have been so cruelly kept in the dark."

Oswyn lowered his eyes for a moment, considering. A curious wave of reminiscence swept over him, giving to this strange juxtaposition the last touch of completion.

He remembered Rainham's long reticence, and his unburdening himself at the last, in a conviction that there would be a season when the truth would be best. And he said to himself that this time had come.

"Mrs. Lightmark," he said at last, in a low, constrained voice, "I promise to answer any question that is within my knowledge."

"It is about my—my husband and Philip Rainham. What passed between them in the autumn of last year? Who was that woman?"

He did not reply for a moment; but unconsciously his eyes met hers full, and in their brief encounter it was possible that many truths were silently told. Presently she continued:

"You need not tell me, Mr. Oswyn. I can see your answer as plainly as if you had spoken. It is my

husband——"

She broke off sharply, let her beautiful head droop with a movement of deep prostration upon her hands.

"What have I done, what have I done," she moaned, "that this dishonour should come to me?"

It was a long time before she looked up at him.

"Why did he do it?" she whispered.

"Have you never guessed?" he asked in his turn. "I will tell you, Mrs. Lightmark. I was with him when he was dying. He wished you to know; he had some such time as this in his mind. It was a sort of message."

"He wished me to know—a sort of message," she repeated blankly. "He spoke of me, then—he forgave me for my hard judgement, for knowing him so ill?"

"It was himself that he did not forgive for not having guarded you better, for having been deceived by your husband. He spoke of you to me very fully at the last when we both saw that his death was merely a question of days. I saw then what I had sometimes suspected before, that you had absorbed his whole life, that his devotion to you was a kind of religion."

"He loved me?" she asked at last, in a hushed, strange voice, white to the lips.

Oswyn bowed his head.

"Ever since you were a child. It was very beautiful, and it was with him at the last as a light. Don't reproach yourself; it was to prevent that that he wished you to be told."

"To prevent it!" she cried, with tragical scorn. "Am I not to reproach myself that I was hard and callous and cold; that I never understood nor cared; that I was not with him? Not reproach myself? Oh, Philip, Philip!" she called, breaking down utterly, laying her face in her hands.

Oswyn averted his eyes, giving her passion time to appease itself. When he glanced at her again, she had gathered her cloak round her, was standing by the picture from which she seemed loath to remove her eyes.

"You gave him great happiness," he suggested gently, "in the only manner in which it was possible. Remember only that. He must in any case have died."

He imagined that she hardly heard him, absorbed in the desolation of her own thought; and when she turned to him again, quite ready for departure now, he saw by the hard light in her eyes that she had recurred to her husband, to the irreparable gulf which must henceforth divide them.

"I can't go back to him," she whispered, as if she communed with herself. "I hate him; yes, I hate him, with my whole soul. He has lied to me too much; he has made me do such a cruel wrong. There are things which one can't forgive. Ah, no! it's not possible."

Oswyn viewed her compassionately, while a somewhat bitter smile played about his mouth.

"No, you will go back, Mrs. Lightmark! Forgive me," he added, raising his hand, interrupting her, as she seemed on the point of speech. "I don't want to intrude on you—on your thoughts, with advice or consolation. They are articles I don't deal in. Only I will tell you—I who know—that in revolt also there is vanity. You are bruised and broken and disillusioned, and you want to hide away from the world and escape into yourself, or from yourself; it's all the same. Ah, Mrs. Lightmark, believe me, in life that is not possible, or where it is most possible is in a crowd. Go back to your guests; I know, you see, whence you come; take up your part in the play, the masque; be ready with your cues. It's all masks and dominoes; what does the form or colour of it matter? Underneath it all you are yourself, with your beautiful sorrow, your memories, your transcendent happiness—nothing can touch that; what does it matter?"

"Happiness!" she ejaculated, rather in wonder than in scorn, for in spite of her great weariness she had been struck by the genuine accent struggling through his half ironical speech.

"Most happy," he said, with a deep inhalation. "Haven't you an ideal which life, with its cruelties, its grossness, can never touch?"

Then he added quickly, in words of Philip Rainham, which had flashed with sudden appositeness across his mind.

"Your misery has its compensation; you have been wronged, but you have also been loved."

"Ah, my friend!" she cried, turning toward the picture with a new and more beautiful illumination in her eyes, "was it for this that you did it?"

Oswyn said nothing, and Eve moved towards the door, discovering for the first time, on her way, the sleeping child. She stopped for a moment, and the other watched her with breathless curiosity, uncertain how far her knowledge might extend.

And as she stood there, wondering, a great wave of colour suffused her white face; the next moment she was gone, but in the light of that pure blush Oswyn seemed to have discovered that her tragical enlightenment was complete.

When she turned once more into the street, she had already set herself gravely, with a strange and factitious composure, to face her life. It stretched itself out before her like a great, gray plain, the arid desolation of the road being rendered only more terrible by the flowers with which it would be strewn. For suddenly, while Oswyn had been speaking, she had recognised that after all she would go back; the other course had been merely the first bitter cry, half hysterical, of her grief.

By her husband's side, with the semblance of amity between them still, utterly apart and estranged as they must in reality henceforth perpetually be, it seemed to her that she could none the less religiously cherish the memory of her friend because she would turn a smiling mask to the world's indifference, wearing mourning in her heart. And deeply as she had suffered, in the midst of her remorse she could still remind herself that in the last half hour she had gained more than she had lost; that life, however tedious it might be, was in a manner consecrated by this great devotion, which death had embalmed, to be a light to her in lonely places and dark hours, a perpetual after-thought against the cynicism or despair to which her imitation of happiness might conduce.

The mask of a smile, and mourning in her heart! Yes, it was in some such phrase as that that the life which began then for her must be expressed—for her, and perhaps, she reflected sadly, for others, for many, the justest and the best.

And in the meantime she would go back to her dancers, resume once more her well-worn *rôle* of the brilliant and efficient hostess. She wondered if it would be difficult to account for herself, to explain an absence so unprecedented, if, as was doubtless the case, her figure had been missed. But the next moment she smiled a trifle bitterly, for she had reminded herself of her husband's proved facility of prevarication, which she felt certain would already have been usefully employed.

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