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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STRONGER INFLUENCE ***

F.E. Mills Young

"The Stronger Influence"

Book One—Chapter One.

Among the passengers which the train disgorged on to the little platform at Coerney, the station from which visitors to the Zuurberg proceeded on their journey up the steep mountain road by cart, were an elderly woman and her husband; a middle-aged man, who was acquainted but not otherwise connected with them; and a young girl, who was neither connected nor acquainted with any of her fellow-travellers, and who, after the first cursory glance towards them, evinced no further curiosity in their movements, but walked alone across the sunlit space to where in the shade of the trees the cart waited until such time as it should please the driver to bring up his horses and inspan them in preparation for the long drive up the mountain.

The girl's three fellow-travellers had gone in quest of refreshment; the driver was invisible; an atmosphere of languorous repose brooded over the place, which, with the departure of the train, seemed utterly deserted, given over to the silences and the hot golden light of the afternoon sun.

The girl approached the cart with no thought of taking her seat therein: she preferred to walk and stretch her cramped limbs; and it was obvious that the cart would not start for some while. But the cart stood in the shade, and the day was hot: the girl sought the shadows instinctively and nibbled chocolate while she scrolled about under the trees, and awaited developments.

She had been ill, and was taking a holiday to hasten the period of convalescence so that she would be ready to resume her duties as a teacher of music when the vacation ended. The air of the Zuurberg was more bracing than that of the Bay. She was looking forward to the change with pleasurable anticipation; looking for adventures, as girls in the early twenties do look for the development of unusual and exciting events. Teaching was dull work; routine is always dull; the holiday adventure offers promise of immense distraction when one sets forth in the holiday mood.

Esmé Lester's mood, which at starting had been high with expectation, was a little damped. The journey in the train had tired her more than she had realised; and the appearance of her fellow-travellers—people whom she would meet daily, be under the same roof with—was not calculated to excite her curiosity. She wanted companionship. She wanted youth about her—not the immature youth with which her work brought her into daily contact, but contemporaries whose thoughts and tastes would assimilate with her own. The nice elderly couple who had repaired to the small hotel for refreshment, and the rather heavy middle-aged man who had followed them with the same purpose in view, did not answer her requirement in any sense. If this was all the companionship her holiday promised she would find it dull.

At the end of half an hour, during which time Esmé had tired of wandering and had seated herself on the pole of the cart, she saw her fellow-travellers emerge from the hotel and come towards her, and in the distance the driver appeared leading two of his horses, followed by a native with the second pair.

Esmé stood up and showed a renewed interest in the proceedings. The passengers looked on while the natives inspanned the lean reluctant team, the leader of which, despite a sorry appearance, showed signs of temper, which caused the elderly woman passenger considerable alarm. She took her seat in the back between her husband and Esmé; and when, after the start, the leader kicked over the traces, the business of persuading her to remain in her seat occupied all the husband's attention. Esmé considered his patience wonderful. The driver handed the reins to the middle-aged man and got down; and after much shouting and jerking and unbuckling and rebuckling matters were righted and the journey resumed. But the old lady was nervous and apprehensive that the team would bolt. The mountain road was sufficiently steep to have conveyed to any reasonable intelligence the improbability of this mischance; but fear lends wings to reason, and the old lady refused to be comforted.

Panting and sweating the horses laboured up the steep incline at a pace that was steady enough to reassure any one; but the further they proceeded along the winding track the deeper yawned the precipice at the side of the road:

it fell away sheer in places till it lost itself in the black-green depths of the gorge. The old lady was so positive that the horses would plunge over the precipice and hurl every one to certain death that she closed her eyes in preparation, and clung to her husband's arm in the determination not to be separated from him when the fatal moment arrived.

The old gentleman smiled whimsically at Esmé over his wife's drooping head. The girl, feeling that an understanding was established, returned the smile, and then gave her attention to the scenery, which was new to her and which, in its wild beauty, with the tangle of trees below and the green luxuriance of the mountain road revealing ever fresh and greater beauties the higher they climbed it, held her in silent wonder at the surprising incongruities of this great country which is Africa; a country of amazing contrasts, in parts a tangle of luxuriant vegetation, in other parts sterile and savage in the stark nakedness of the land. She had seen something of its sterility, not much; and, save for a brief view of the Cape Peninsular, she had not seen a great deal of its beauty either. The wild green splendour of this mountain journey she found restful and pleasantly stimulating. The air was cooler than in the plains. A soft wind blew furtively down from the heights and met them as they toiled upward in the hot sunshine behind the panting team. The horses' sides were dark and damp with sweat; foam flecked their chests and the greasy leather of the loosened reins. But they kept doggedly on. They were used to the journey, and the end of the journey promised rest. The beat of their hoofs upon the road, the rumbling of the cart, were the only sounds to disturb the stillness. No bird winged its flight across the quivering blue; there was no song of bird from the bush, no sign of any life, save for a number of grey monkeys which infested the trees lower down: these were left behind as the cart travelled upward. But down in the black-green depths of the undergrowth, moving noiselessly and unseen, countless insects and reptiles pursued their busy way; and the booms laang wound its heavy brown coils around the limbs of trees.

Esmé leaned back against the hot cushions of the cart and looked about her with quiet enjoyment. Despite fatigue and the weariness behind her eyes caused by the hard brightness of the day, she experienced a feeling of exhilaration. Every sense was on the alert to note and appreciate each fresh beauty along the rugged road. The scenery became tamer as the ascent was neared. Coarse grass and stunted bush took the place of the massed foliage of the trees. The land at the summit was flat and shadeless. But the air was light and wonderfully invigorating; and patches of green showed in places where the land dipped abruptly and lost itself in a kloof, amid a tangle of vegetation in the stony bed of a mountain stream.

The horses took a fresh spurt when the level road was reached and trotted briskly towards the hotel and drew up in style before the entrance. Esmé surveyed the low rambling building with interested eyes. It was a quaint old-fashioned place, this hotel on the veld, one-storied, with a stoep in front and a flight of low steps leading up to it. The garden gate stood open, and a man, who was possibly the proprietor Esmé decided, waited at the gate to receive the arrivals. A coloured boy came out to help with the luggage.

Esmé alighted and walked up the garden path, conscious of the curious gaze of a little knot of people gathered on the stoep to participate in the great excitement of the day,—the arrival of the cart with its load of passengers. The hotel was fairly full; there were men and women on the stoep and several children. The girl was too shy to note any of these people particularly; she took them in collectively at a glance and passed on and went inside. A woman stepped forward out of the gloom of the narrow passage, took her name and conducted her to her room.

Left alone in her room, Esmé crossed to the open window and stood looking out upon the wild bit of garden with its kei-apple hedge and the small vley quite close to the window. The glint of the water in the sunshine was pleasing to watch. That the water would breed mosquitoes, and other things likely to disturb one's repose at night, did not trouble her; she liked to see it. It stretched cool and clear as a mirror reflecting the blue of the unclouded sky.

The scene from the window was peaceful and pleasing. The whole place was peaceful: an atmosphere of drowsy detachment hung over everything. One felt out of the world here, and at the same time intensely alive. A sense of well-being and of contentment came to the girl while she knelt before the window with her arms on the low sill, looking out upon the unfamiliar scene. She had come to this isolated spot in search of health; and already she felt invigorated by the fresh pure air; her mind worked more clearly, threw off its morbid lethargy in newly kindled interest in everything about her. The clean homelike simplicity of her little bedroom pleased her; the view from the window pleased her; it was expansive, uncultivated—a vast stretch of veld, green and brown in the glow of the declining day, with the azure sky overhead remotely blue as a sapphire is blue, a jewel lit with the yellow flame of the sun.

Book One—Chapter Two.

The dining-room at the hotel was a low, narrow room, rather dark. Its French windows opened on to the stoep, which was creeper veiled and shaded with the shrubs in the garden. Down the centre of the room was a long table. A smaller room led off from the principal dining-room, where the guests with families took their meals.

Esmé, entering later than the rest, found a seat at the principal table reserved for her. On her right was seated the old gentleman who had been her fellow-traveller. He looked up when she took her seat and spoke to her. She turned from answering him and took quiet observation while she leisurely unfolded her napkin of the man who was seated on her left.

He was a man of about twenty-eight, tall and broadly built, with however an air of delicacy about him altogether inconsistent with his physique. He was round-shouldered, and his hands, long and remarkably white, suggested that their owner had never performed any hard work in his life. His face was altogether striking, strong and fine, with clear cut features, and keen dominating grey eyes. When Esmé sat down he was bending forward over his plate and did not once glance in her direction. He seemed wholly unaware of her entrance, unaware of, or indifferent to the presence of any one in the room. He confined his attention to his food, and did not talk, or evince any interest in the talk about him.

Esmé, while she looked at him, was keenly alive to the fact that he was conscious of her presence and of her scrutiny, though he chose to ignore both. A faint colour showed in his face and mounted to the crisp light brown hair, which, cut very short, had a tight kink in it as though it might curl were it allowed to grow. She liked the look of this man, and, oddly, she was attracted rather than repelled by his taciturn and unsociable manner. Why should a man staying at a sanatorium not remain aloof if he wished? The fact of being under the same roof with other people should not of itself enforce an obligation to be sociable when one inclines towards an opposite mood. Doubtless, like herself, he had come to the Zuurberg in quest of health. He looked as if he had been ill. His hand, she observed when he lifted his glass, was unsteady.

She watched his hands, fascinated and puzzled. It was obvious that he could not control their shaking, that he was aware of this shakiness and was embarrassed by it. She felt intensely sorry for him. She also felt surprise at his self-consciousness. She noticed that he ate very little. He rose before the sweets, and went out by the window and seated himself on the stoep.

Conversation brightened with his exit. The people near her seemed in Esmé's imagination to relax: the talk flowed more freely. Even the old gentleman on her right appeared to share in the general relief: he turned more directly towards her and entered into conversation. While the man outside sat alone, smoking his pipe, and looking into the shadows as the dusk drew closer to the earth.

With the finish of dinner Esmé walked out on to the stoep with the purpose of going for a stroll before bedtime. The long straight road beyond the gate looked inviting in the evening gloom. She would have welcomed a companion on her walk; but, save for her fellow-travellers, she knew no one; and her fellow-travellers showed no desire for further exercise.

When she appeared on the stoep she was aware that the man who interested her so tremendously looked up as she passed close to him. He followed her with his eyes as she went down the steps, down the short path to the gate, through the gate, out on to the open road. But he did not move. Esmé was conscious of his gaze though she could not see it; she was conscious of his interest. The certainty that she had caught his attention even as he had arrested hers pleased her. A restrained excitement gripped her. She laughed softly to herself as she stepped into the shadowed road. It was good to know that she left some one behind in whom she had provoked a faint curiosity in this place where she was a stranger and alone. He, too, was alone. She had thought when she passed him that he looked lonelier than any one she had ever seen or imagined, seated amid a crowd of people, saying nothing, doing nothing; sitting still and solitary, smoking and looking into the shadows.

What was wrong with this man, she wondered, that he should remain so aloof from his fellows. He was not a newcomer, as she was; he had indeed, though she did not know this, been many months at the hotel; yet he seldom spoke to any one. The coming and going of visitors was viewed by him with indifference. They were nothing to him, these people; he was less than nothing to them. Occasionally some man came to the hotel with whom he entered into conversation; but more often people came and went and held no intercourse with him at all. They summed him up very quickly for the most part; looked askance at him, and left him severely alone. He did not care. It pleased him to remain undisturbed, and the general disapproval troubled him very little. But that night a girl's clear eyes, a girl's sweet serious face, got between him and his egotism, got between his vision and the shadowy dusk, and mutely asked a question of him: "What was he making of life?"

What was he making of it? What was he giving in return for the gifts which he received? What was he doing, what had he ever done, to justify his existence? Nothing.

The light wind carried the answer on the dusky wings of night. It beat into his consciousness and stirred him out of his easy acquiescence in things. He was flotsam on the sea of life—waste matter drifting aimlessly, to be finally ejected and flung, spent and useless, on the shore. Dust which returns to the dust, for which God in His inscrutable reason finds some use which eludes man's understanding.

Esmé Lester walked along the quiet road and thought of the man she had left seated alone on the stoep, the man whom she believed to be ill. And the man sat on and waited for her return and wondered about her with an interest which equalled her interest in him. She was just a girl, a bright, sweet, wholesome young thing, who had happened along as the other guests at the sanatorium had happened along, and who would vanish again as they vanished, leaving him seated there still to watch further arrivals and departures as he had done for many weeks, as he would probably do for many months. He had never seen any one until this girl came who had held his attention even momentarily. She stood out from these others, some one apart and distinctive. It was not merely that she was pretty; many pretty women came there, but they did not interest him. There was something vivid and arresting about her, some elusive quality which caught his fancy, and which he could not define. He thought she looked sympathetic.

When Esmé returned an hour later he was still seated on the stoep. She saw his figure against the lighted doorway at his back: to all appearance he had not moved his position since she had passed him on setting forth. But the last of the daylight had departed, and the night was dark; there was no moon and the starlight was obscured by a mist of thin clouds which trailed across the sky. She could not see his face clearly. But as she stepped up to the stoep the light from the passage illumined her features and revealed her fully to the man's gaze. He watched her covertly from under his brows, saw the startled look in her eyes as they caught the artificial light, their curious bewildered blink as the warm glow fell on her face.

Her look of blank surprise amused him. It was like the look of a child which steps abruptly into the light out of darkness and finds perplexity in the sudden change.

She passed him and went inside; and it seemed to him that the light glowed more dimly, that the night grew darker when she disappeared. He rose and went into the bar and remained there, as was his nightly custom, until the bar closed, when he went to bed.

Book One—Chapter Three.

The daylight woke Esmé early. The sunbeams found their way through the open window and flashed upon her face and startled her from sleep. She had not drawn her blind overnight; and she lay still for a while and looked at the golden riot without, resting comfortably, with a feeling of lazy contentment and intense ease of mind and body. The sweet freshness of the air poured over her in health-giving breaths. The beauty of the day, the brilliance of the sunshine called her to go out into it and enjoy the morning in its early freshness.

She rose and dressed and opening her window wider, put her foot over the sill and dropped down on to the grass.

The heavy dew silvered the ground and sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. She felt exhilarated, surprisingly happy and glad to be alive. No one seemed to be abroad at that hour except herself. The hotel presented the appearance of a house in which the inmates are all asleep. She went through the garden, past the low hedge, and out into the road. The road, too, looked deserted. She had the world to herself. A sense of freedom gripped her. She was not conscious of feeling lonely; the sunshine was companionable, and the novelty of everything held her attention and kept her interest on the alert.

The daylight disclosed all which the night had hidden from her when she travelled the same road on the previous evening. It had appeared then a land of shadows, of velvety dark under a purple sky; the shadows had rolled back, and the scene revealed wide stretches of veld, with here and there a clump of trees or low bushes to break the sameness of the view. The veld glowed with an intensity of colour that strove with a sort of hard defiance against the golden light of the sun. The sense of space, of solitude, was bewildering in this vast picture of sun-drenched open country, where no sound disturbed the silence save the muffled tread of her own footsteps in the powdery dust of the road.

She broke into a little song as she walked briskly forward, but checked the song almost instantly because the sound of her own voice struck intrusively on the surrounding quiet: the note of a bird would have sounded intrusive even here, where the silence of forgetfulness seemed to have fallen upon the land.

A tiny breath of wind came sighing across the veld; the girl lifted her face to meet it, and her eyes smiled. This was the cradle of the wind; here it had its source upon the mountain. She loved the wind as she loved the sunlight; she loved the warmth and the crudely brilliant colour, the untempered heat of this land of eternal sunshine, of vast spaces, and fierce and splendid life. She loved, too, the dark-skinned people of the country; loved them for their happy dispositions and the childlike simplicity of their natures.

Further along the road a Kaffir woman passed her with a tiny black baby slung in a shawl, native fashion, on her back. Esmé stopped to admire the baby, and touched its soft dark skin with her finger. The native woman and the English girl spoke in tongues incomprehensible to one another; but the language of baby worship is universal; and the Kaffir mother smiled appreciatively, pleased at the notice taken of her babe. She went on her way with the light of the sun in her eyes, which met its fierceness as the eyes of the animals meet the sun, unblinking and without inconvenience. Esmé looked after her and admired her free graceful walk, the upright poise of her head. The people who live in the sun show a superb indifference to its power.

With the disappearance of the native woman a sudden feeling of loneliness came over her, stayed with her, despite the brightness of the day and the sense of returning health which came to her in the wonderful lightness and purity of the air. She walked a little further, to where a curve in the road brought her to a belt of trees which threw a pleasing shade across the path. She halted in the shade and looked about her with inquiring gaze.

It was very beautiful here, and restful, and the air was fragrant with the pungent scent of the mimosa blossoms. She gathered a branch of the flowers and thrust some of them in her belt. Looking upward at the road she had travelled she saw that the descent was greater than she had imagined; the return would necessitate a steady climb.

She rested for a while, leaning against one of the trees, idly watching the play of sunlight through the branches. The shadows of the trees lay along the road in grotesque shapes. The brooding stillness of the day, the brightness and the warmth, were soothing: but the feeling of loneliness deepened; there was something a little awe-inspiring in the general hush. And then, with an abruptness that startled her, a sound struck upon her ears, a sound that was not loud but which was curiously audible in the silence. It was the sound of footsteps crunching upon the road. The figure of a man appeared round the bend and came on quickly, his footstep beating in measured muffled rhythm in the dust. He was quite close to her before he saw her; when he caught sight of her he hesitated for a second; it looked as though he contemplated beating a retreat. Then, coming apparently to a decision, he walked on. When he was abreast of her he raised his hat.

Esmé regarded him curiously. It was the man whose seat was next hers at table, the man whose personality had arrested her attention, in whom she felt unaccountably interested. He carried a stick, which he used occasionally to walk with and more frequently to strike with at the grass which bordered the roadside. He carried it as a man carries something from which he derives a sense of companionship. It was all the companionship he ever had upon his walks.

“Good-morning,” the girl said in response to his mute salutation; and added, after a barely perceptible pause: “It is glorious, the air up here.”

“Yes,” he said, and halted irresolutely.

She believed that he resented, not only her speaking to him, but her presence there. He resented neither; but he felt averse from beginning an acquaintance which, once started, it would be impossible to draw back from, and which he

foresaw might develop into something of very deep significance. Instinctively he feared this acquaintance. But courtesy demanded some response from him; he made it reluctantly and in a manner which did not encourage her to persevere.

"You are an early riser," he said. "Usually at this hour I have the day to myself."

Again it seemed to her that he looked on her presence as an intrusion, that he preferred to take his rambles without the thought of encountering any one. An emotion that was a mixture of impatience and anger seized her at his selfishness.

"There is room for both of us," she said with a touch of scorn in her voice. "And we travel in opposite directions."

The man's features relaxed in a smile, the first she had seen cross his face, an involuntary, whimsical smile. A gleam of understanding lit his eye.

"Yes," he allowed briefly, and lifted his hat again, and walked on, leaving the girl with the feeling of having suffered a snub.

She looked after him, as he went on, still hitting aimlessly at the grass with his thick stick as he walked, until he rounded the bend and disappeared from her view. Then, dispirited and out of humour with the day, she left the shade of the trees and took her way upward and returned to the hotel.

At breakfast she saw the man again. He came in late, and dropped into his seat beside her with an air of weariness, as though he had walked far and was tired. She did not look at him; but she felt his gaze on her when he came behind her chair and drew his own chair back from the table. When he sat down he glanced at her deliberately. She went on with her breakfast and ignored his presence. Later, this struck her as unkind and somewhat childish. But it was not possible to make amends; the opportunity was past.

He sat, as he always sat at table, with his head bent over his plate in complete disregard of every one. But the presence of the girl beside him, her partly averted face, the nearness of a projecting elbow with its white, prettily rounded arm, forced themselves on his notice, made him intensely self-conscious. He put out a hand for the glass of milk and soda which stood beside his plate and lifted it unsteadily. The sight of his own shaking hand unnerved him, made him horribly and painfully alive to this ugly physical defect. Impatiently he jerked his arm upward; the glass tilted and the contents foamed over, ran down the cloth and on to the girl's skirt. He fumbled awkwardly, almost dropped the glass in his agitation, righted it clumsily and turned, napkin in hand, his face crimson, and began to sop up the liquid.

"I'm awfully sorry," he mumbled. "I can't think how I came to do that. I'm sorry."

Esmé turned quietly and watched him while with increasing embarrassment he timidly wiped her dress. In pity for him she put out a hand and took the napkin from him.

"Don't trouble," she said. "It's nothing really."

"I've spoilt your dress," he said.

"Oh! no. It's a frock on friendly terms with the wash-tub. That will be all right."

"It's kind of you to make light of it," he said. "But I'm ashamed of my clumsiness."

She felt intensely sorry for him as he turned again to his breakfast and resumed eating with a sort of uncomfortable shyness that was painful to witness. His hands, she noticed, shook more than usual. He did not attempt to lift his glass again, though it had been placed refilled before him; he was physically incapable of making the effort. Out of consideration for him she did not address him again, but finished her breakfast quickly and got up silently and left the room.

She went down the passage and into her own room and changed into a clean frock. It was her smartest dress which had been soiled. She took it off with a sorry little smile at the pang which it cost her vanity to have to lay it aside. But her earlier resentment against the man whose clumsiness had caused the mishap gave place to a deep compassion when she recalled the confused crimson of his face and the fierce yet diffident embarrassment in his eyes. She was sorry for him without understanding why she should feel pity for a man who made no appeal to her sympathy. His solitary condition was the result of his deliberate choice. When a man shuns the society of his fellows the fault lies within himself.

But the look in his eyes continued to distress her. She resolved that when next she encountered him she would make him talk to her.

Book One—Chapter Four.

During the morning Esmé played tennis with two girls and a man who were staying at the hotel. The tennis court was rough, and a rope stretched across it did service for a net. But the tennis players had brought balls and racquets with them, and, these being good, the defects of the ground were regarded good-naturedly as part of the fun.

The girls were about Esmé's own age; the man, a little older, paid marked attention to Miss Lester. She introduced an element of new life into the place, and the attractions of the Zuurberg were beginning to pall. There was nothing for a man to do, he explained as they strolled back together towards lunch time.

"But it is pleasant," the girl said, "to do nothing when one is having a holiday. It is very beautiful here."

He offered to show her some good walks in the neighbourhood, and put himself very much at her disposal for the remainder of his stay. It transpired that he was leaving at the end of the week.

"There are some beautiful spots to be enjoyed at the expense of a little climbing," he said. "I'll show you if you care about it. There's a kloof within walkable distance that well repays the effort. They found the spoor of a couple of tigers there about a month ago. It's the sort of place one can imagine wild beasts prowling about in—a tangle of undergrowth, with the moss hanging in long green ribbons from the dead branches of trees. The ferns growing in the water are a sight."

"It sounds exciting," Esmé said. "But I'm not keenly anxious to meet wild beasts."

"No great likelihood of that," he returned. "They are no, more keen than you are for an encounter. I wish you would let me take you there to-morrow. We could start after lunch. It's the coolest spot in which to spend a hot afternoon. But you mustn't play tennis beforehand: it's quite a good stretch. Will you come?"

Looking up to answer in the affirmative, she became aware as they approached the stoep of the presence in his customary seat near the entrance of the man who excited her curiosity and her sympathy in equal degrees.

"Who is that?" she asked her companion.

He glanced towards the object of her inquiry; and instantly on perceiving the expression in his eyes she regretted having asked the question.

"That! Oh! that's Hallam—an awful rotter. Drinks like a fish. I've not seen him drunk, but I believe he never goes to bed sober."

"I wish you hadn't told me that," she said in a voice that was blank with disappointment.

He stared at her in surprise and changed colour slightly as a man might do who is conscious of being rebuked.

"Perhaps I should have left you to discover it for yourself," he replied. "But it's common knowledge. He doesn't trouble to conceal the weakness. The odd part of it is I have never seen him drink anything stronger than milk and soda. But the thing is obvious enough. He soaks. I don't suppose there are two people in the hotel with whom he troubles to exchange a remark."

This speech let in a big ray of light upon her understanding. It became abruptly as clear as the daylight why this man shrunk from intercourse with every one, why he had seemed to shun her society, to almost resent her attempts to converse. She wondered whether her new acquaintance, whose name was Sinclair, had noticed the incident at the breakfast-table and deliberately offered this information with the purpose of putting her on her guard. If this were the case she determined to show him that she did not need advice.

She walked on in silence, and stepped on to the stoep alone, and paused beside the chair of the man whom they had been discussing and smiled down at him. He gazed back at her, surprise and uncertainty struggling in his look.

"I'm so hot," she said. "We've been playing tennis. You look cool sitting there."

He rose awkwardly to his feet, and stood with his hand resting on the back of the chair, and regarded her steadily.

"It is cool here," he said. "Take my seat. You have done more to earn the right to it than I have."

"Thank you, no. It's a shame to disturb you. I'm going inside to change."

"That's the second change this morning," he said, his eyes on her face.

She laughed brightly.

"It's something to do," she replied.

"Yes," he said.

The old reserve settled upon him once more. She noticed that he looked hesitatingly from her to the wicker chair beside which he stood, looked from it almost furtively towards the entrance. She believed that he purposed retreat, and forestalled him by turning away with a little friendly smile and going within herself.

He did not look after her. There were people present on the stoep: he knew very certainly, without glancing in their direction, the interest they were taking in the little scene. That they had observed the girl's action in stopping to speak to him, that, with her departure, they continued their observation of himself, he knew instinctively. Their curiosity was a matter of indifference to him.

But the girl's insistent friendliness troubled him. He sat down again heavily in his seat and reflected deeply, sitting with his elbow on the arm of the chair and his chin sunk on his hands. The gong sounded for luncheon, but he remained where he was and watched the rest go in, and listened to the talk and laughter which came to his ears through the open windows, until, after a while, the lunchers came out again, when he got up quietly and went inside.

Esmé, passing the open windows later on her way into the garden, saw the man seated alone at the table in the deserted room, eating in solitary discomfort, while the coloured servant cleared the table in a manner of sulky protest against this belated service. She quickened her steps and her face flushed warmly. She felt as though she had had

her ears boxed. Indignant and angry, she walked as far as the vley and seated herself in the shade of the trees with a book, which she did not read, open on her lap. She could not at the moment concentrate her attention on reading. Her cheeks burned. Twice this man had seemed to snub her, whether intentionally or not she could not determine; but she felt furious, less with the man than with herself for courting a repulse by her persistence. Why should she seek to thrust her society on him when very clearly he did not desire it? Her importunity embarrassed him. That thought rankled. In a desire to be kind to a man whose lonely condition excited her compassion she had been guilty of intruding unwarrantably upon his seclusion. What right had she to force her acquaintance upon him? She had had her lesson; she would profit by it and not repeat the blunder.

Idly she turned the pages of her book; but the printed matter upon which her eyes rested conveyed no meaning to her: between her vision and the open page a man's face obtruded itself, a face with fine, strongly marked features, and keen, unsmiling eyes. She could not switch her thoughts off this man, in whom, she realised with a sort of impatience, she was more than ordinarily interested. He piqued her curiosity.

Oddly, the ugly fact which she had learned concerning him had not repelled her so much as deepened her sympathy. She wondered about him; wondered what his life had been, what had made him, still a young man, derelict and at enmity with his fellows. He had possibly suffered a great sorrow, she decided; and, womanlike, longed to know the nature of the tragedy which had spoilt his life.

That his weakness awoke pity and not repugnance in her, filled her with a vague surprise. She knew that in another man she would have considered the weakness contemptible. Why should she except this man from censure in her thoughts when she would have held another unworthy for the same failing? A person who drank to excess had always seemed horrible to her. She would have shrunk in fear from a drunken man. But she felt no shrinking from this man: she felt an almost motherly tenderness for him. She would have liked to help him—with sympathy, with her friendship; and the only kindness she could do him was to humour his misanthropy and leave him to himself.

When she passed him again on her return at the tea hour she took no notice of him, but walked along the stoep with an air of not seeing him, and yet with a mind so intent on him that a consciousness of this penetrated his understanding, possibly because he in his turn was thinking about her with a curiosity equal to her own, with an interest which surpassed hers.

He followed her with his glance until she reached the open window of the dining-room and disappeared within. He did not move. Tea was a meal he never attended; he did not drink tea. When Esmé came out again on to the stoep his chair was empty.

Book One—Chapter Five.

The frankness of Esmé's nature was opposed to the rôle of dignified silence, which she assumed deliberately out of consideration for the man who had shown so plainly his objection to social amenities. She was resolved that unless he spoke to her she would not address him again.

The event of his venturing on a spontaneous remark was so improbable that it seemed unlikely that the silence between them would be broken. To sit daily at meals beside a person with whom the exchange of the ordinary commonplace is denied becomes embarrassing. His silent presence caused her to feel uncomfortable and unhappy. Had it been possible to do so without exciting remark she would have changed her seat.

Her old friend on her right helped her largely in this difficulty. He made himself particularly agreeable to his young companion. But his conversational efforts rendered the other man's silence more marked; and the awkwardness of sitting down to breakfast without offering a friendly good-morning appalled her in view of the many breakfasts which must follow with increasing strain each morning during her stay.

The point which troubled her most in regard to her new line of conduct was the certainty that the man who had furnished her with the gratuitous information concerning Hallam would conclude that the frozen alteration in her demeanour was the result of his unsought confidence. Absurdly, she wanted him to know that this breaking off of all intercourse was on Hallam's initiative and not hers. It was a little thing to trouble her; but it did trouble her exceedingly. She did not wish Sinclair to think that because of what he had told her she was treating with contempt a man for whom she felt no contempt in her heart—nothing but compassion.

In accordance with the arrangement that had been made the previous day she accompanied Sinclair down the kloof; but her pleasure in the excursion was not so keen as it had been in anticipation; she was prejudiced slightly against her companion. She suggested going in a party; but he refused to entertain the idea. He hated crowds, he said.

"I took a party down one day," he explained, "and they just fooled about and dug up ferns. Desecration, I call it. The ferns were thrown away, of course. That's what happens. People must pick things. I wonder why? Sheer destructiveness. I like to see things growing."

He was helpful and agreeable during the walk; and his appreciation of everything when they descended into the green twilight of the kloof pleased the girl: she shared in his enthusiasm. She stood silent amid the cool, green restfulness of this shadowed place, and viewed with amazed eyes the wonder of its vegetation which grew in a tangled luxuriance of varying shades of green; particularly she noticed the long trailing moss which hung festooned from the trees over the stream; the longer trails of clinging vine that wound itself about every plant and tree and linked the whole together in an ordered and pleasing confusion. Huge boulders, lichen covered, stood out of the water which purred round them, and, with the brown trunks of the trees, struck the only separate note of colour in a scene that was wholly green and lit with a soft green light. The sun did not penetrate here through the massed foliage of the locked boughs overhead. There was no view of the sky. The stream wound in and out among the loose

stones like a narrow footpath cut through the dense vegetation. Ferns grew rankly beside the water, in the water, in the crevices of the boulders, and in the rotting trunks of trees. Maidenhair ferns were everywhere with long succulent fronds, and the feathery leaves of the wild asparagus trailed gracefully above the banks.

Esmé gazed about her in silent wonder; and her companion stood beside her and watched her pleasure in the scene.

"Makes one feel good, doesn't it?" he said.

She turned to him reluctantly. His voice had broken the quiet spell of the place and caught her back from enchantment to everyday things.

"I want to sit on one of those boulders," was all she said. "I want just to rest and be still."

"Yes," he said. "But when you are rested we'll explore a bit. It's worth it. It goes on like this for ever so far, opening out and closing in again between green walls. It's difficult to break through in places; but I'll go first and make a clearing for you. Take my hand. These stones are treacherous."

"I'm glad you brought me here," she said, accepting his aid readily. "I'm glad I came. I've never seen anything quite like this before. It's wonderful. You are right: one can imagine wild beasts here. One can imagine anything here... snakes. I should be terribly frightened if I saw a snake."

She sat on a large boulder with her hands clasping her knees, and peered into the black-green shadows nervously. The man, standing upon the stones which just escaped the water, watched her with an expression of interest and of satisfaction in his eyes. The grace of her unstudied pose, the serious look on the bright, fair face, appealed pleasantly to him. In his preoccupation he scarcely heeded what she said, until she turned her face and looked up at him inquiringly.

"Are there snakes here?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've not seen one. I think we are more likely to discover them higher up. They like warmth. It is always wise to tread cautiously though."

"Ugh!" She drew her feet a little higher above the water and shivered apprehensively and looked about her. "It rather spoils one's enjoyment, thinking of these things."

"Don't think of them," he returned. "There are plenty of people in Africa and plenty of snakes, but it's very rarely that we hear of any one being bitten. I come here often; it's the only cool place on a hot day."

"Well, I shan't come here often—although I love it," she added. "Anything might happen here. It's difficult to believe that the sun is shining somewhere—blazing right over our heads. Here it is always twilight, which later will deepen into night. It's lovely, with a sort of eerie beauty. I don't want to talk. I want just to enjoy it and be quiet."

He understood her mood. The place had impressed him in much the same way when he first beheld it. Familiarity with it had made its wild beauty less assertively striking; but the girl's keen pleasure in everything recalled his own earlier impressions and added to them. He strolled off and left her in undisturbed contemplation while he explored along the bank of the stream and considered the best spots to show her when she wearied of inactivity and expressed the wish to go on.

But Esmé's mind at the moment was detached from her surroundings. She was thinking very earnestly of the man who held aloof from friendship, who seemed to regard with mistrust, almost with dislike, every one about him. She had never before met any one who was at enmity with mankind. The experience interested her immensely, troubled her. It occurred to her as altogether sad and incomprehensible that a man should shun his fellows and enclose himself in a stronghold of impenetrable reserve. She longed to pierce the hard crust of his egotism, to draw him out of himself. It was unthinkable that a man of intelligence should be misanthropic from choice and without cause. Possibly at some time he had suffered, been badly hurt by some one. Yet it was difficult to believe that a man could vent on the world at large his sense of injury for the fault of an individual.

She leaned down towards the water and looked into its still brown pools and frowned thoughtfully. It vexed her that this man should have laid such a grip on her imagination: his personality obtruded itself persistently on her thoughts. The thing was beginning to worry her.

She turned her head to look for her companion. He was not in sight. Abruptly a feeling of loneliness, a loneliness that was almost terrifying, seized her. That Sinclair was somewhere near at hand she knew, but the sense of being alone in that eerie spot frightened her; the silence of the place frightened her. Yet when the silence snapped suddenly, and her attention was caught by the sound of some one or something breaking through the undergrowth and coming towards her, her fear of these sounds was greater than her fear of the silence. She wanted to move, wanted to cry out; and she could not move, could not utter a word. She sat staring in the direction of the noise, staring, and waiting for she knew not what.

The sounds were not made by Sinclair; they came from the opposite direction to that which he had taken. Thoughts of wild beasts flashed into her mind. She wondered what she would do if out of the green tangle a tiger suddenly appeared. She believed that she would do nothing, that she would remain there staring, rooted to the spot. The crashing sounds grew louder, came nearer. She saw the boughs bend, their massed foliage shake and quiver as if a wind swept through it. A branch snapped loudly. Then out of the swaying greenery a man's arm protruded, and the next moment Hallam emerged and stood still, looking at her with a surprise greater than her own. Esmé gave a little gulp of relief and laughed weakly.

"Oh?" she said, and sat still clutching at the boulder with her hands.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked.

She nodded without speaking; and he advanced a little nearer to her, and stood still again, leaning on his stick.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea any one was here. You aren't alone?"

"No. Mr Sinclair is somewhere—over there. I thought—I thought you were a tiger."

Involuntarily he smiled.

"You've been listening to the chatter at the hotel," he said.

"It's stupid, I know." She tapped her foot on a stone with a movement of impatience and looked away from him. "It's easy to imagine anything in this jungle. There is something awesome even in its beauty."

"It's the dim light," he said, "and the suggestion of things hidden from sight. With your nerves you should remain in the sunlight."

Esmé laughed suddenly. She turned her face towards him again and scrutinised him with greater attentiveness.

"Yes," she said. "I like the sunlight. I like things which are revealed and comprehensive; the furtiveness of secrecy terrifies me. I prefer to move in the open."

"And miss the surprises which life conceals," he said.

"I hadn't thought of that. But I'm not particularly inquisitive," she replied.

Why it should vex her to see him smile at this, she did not know; but that he did smile, and that she resented his doing so, was certain. She flushed and looked round for her escort, whom she now saw coming towards them, leaping agilely across the boulders in the stream. He showed surprise on seeing Hallam; his manner was not cordial.

"If you are rested, we'll go on," he said, addressing himself to Esmé.

She stood up. Hallam raised his hat and turned back in the direction whence he had come. The girl felt sorry as she watched him go; she would have liked it had he joined their walk. But she believed that to propose such a thing would have been acceptable neither to him nor to Sinclair. In any case he would probably have declined. Already the ice, so unexpectedly broken, was forming again, a thin crust of resistance upon the surface of his temporary geniality.

Book One—Chapter Six.

That night Esmé lay wakeful in the darkness with a brain too active for sleep, courting slumber, which refused to come to her aid, physically tired, yet not overtired, and mentally very clear and wide awake.

Outside her window the crickets were chirruping noisily, and in the warm darkness, which pressed about her as she lay wide-eyed and very still in her narrow white bed, the mosquitoes hummed annoyingly close to her ears. The sounds of people moving in the rooms adjoining hers had ceased long since; the night was quiet, with the listening hush which settles upon a place when the activities of the day are ended and people sleep. It seemed to Esmé that she alone of all the household was awake.

She believed that it must be long past midnight. It had not as a matter of fact struck twelve o'clock; and some one besides herself was awake, had not yet gone to bed. She heard him go later; heard a stumbling step going clumsily and heavily along the stoep. Through the thin walls the noise of the footsteps was distinctly audible. She lay still on her pillow and listened to them, her heart beating quickly and the pulses in her temples throbbing like tiny hammers. A sick horror gripped her. She knew, without seeing the man, who it was who thus disturbed the silence, and, with the uncertain blundering step of a man under the influence of drink, lurched heavily along the stoep to his room. He made so much noise in getting there that she felt certain all the occupants of the rooms he passed would wake and hear him.

Her cheeks burned with shame for him, and her heart was filled with a great pity. What joy could he derive from this terrible misuse of life? What a waste of his manhood and of his intellect!

With the cessation of the sounds a deeper hush than before seemed to settle upon the night; even the crickets became less insistent: the world slept; every one slept, save herself. She alone of all the household kept wakeful vigil until the dawn broke, and brought with its hopeful promise of a new day rest and forgetfulness to her weary brain.

Esmé woke late, and had barely time to dress before the gong sounded for breakfast. With a curious reluctance to meet again the man whose noisy movements had disturbed her overnight, she went into the coffee-room and seated herself at table. Hallam's seat was empty. It was still empty when she rose at the finish of breakfast and went out on to the stoep into the sunshine.

She was relieved that she had been spared the ordeal of meeting him, of sitting beside him while the memory of last night was still so painfully vivid in her thoughts. Her whole being shrank from witnessing his degradation. He must feel, far more acutely than she felt for him, the embarrassment of appearing in public, of meeting the criticism in unsympathetic eyes.

She played tennis during the morning, and played badly; her heart was not in the game, and the careless gaiety of her companions jarred on her sober mood. They rallied her on her preoccupation, until she pleaded a headache; when Sinclair, leaving the others to play singles, led her away to a quiet corner in the garden where she could sit and rest.

He was glad to get her alone. He was leaving on the morrow, going back to his job in a stuffy office in a dull little town.

"Uitenhage is about the sleepest hole in South Africa," he grumbled.

"I think it is lovely," the girl returned. "I went there once when the roses were in bloom."

"Oh! it's pretty enough. And it's handy to the Bay. I shall look you up when you return—may I?"

"I shall be very pleased," she answered. "But you'll have to choose a holiday. I am going back to my job too. I teach music."

"Oh, really! That's fairly strenuous, I should think. What a bore for you."

She laughed.

"It's my bread and butter. There are less pleasant methods of making a livelihood. But of course one gets tired."

He nodded sympathetically.

"I want you to rest this afternoon and get rid of the headache. I'd like to take you for a walk after dinner if you care about going. It's my last night. Until you came there was no one to walk with—except Hallam. And he's such an unsociable beast. I wish you wouldn't talk to him. He is not a suitable companion for you."

"Don't say those things," she interposed quickly. "It's ungenerous."

She felt angry with Sinclair, felt an inexplicable necessity to defend the man he spoke of in such slighting terms. It was not merely because he was absent and unable to defend himself; there was something more than that to account for her indignation; she realised that much without understanding its nature. Never in all her life had she met any one who interested her so profoundly, who so deeply stirred her pity. She wanted to help this man—with her friendship. There was no other thought in her mind. And he would not let her. He demanded simply to be left alone. A girl could not thrust her friendship on a man who did not want it. But she could defend him in her thoughts and in her speech without fear of his resentment.

"I think Mr Hallam is a very remarkable man," she said. "I should hesitate to criticise him."

Sinclair looked at her in surprise.

"Do you know," he said, "that is the second time I have annoyed you in reference to the same subject."

"Not annoyed," she corrected,— "disappointed me, rather. I hate to hear a man speak disparagingly of another."

The young man was vexed, and showed it. Her ready championship of Hallam displeased him. It was a sort of feminine instinct, he supposed, to shed the light of a tender compassion on the derelict. Women were absurdly sentimental.

"You do jump on a fellow," he said, aggrieved. "I had no idea you would take my words amiss. Forget them, please."

"And you forget my irritable mood."

She smiled at him with kind brown eyes, eyes which expressed liking in fuller measure than their displeasure of a moment before. She regretted her outburst. What did it concern her what he thought, what any one thought of a man who was almost a stranger to her, whom a few days ago she did not know.

"I slept badly last night," she added, as if to account for her ill-humour.

"How was that?" he asked, more with a view to turning the talk than from curiosity.

His question recalled the ugly memories of the night very vividly to her. She heard again in imagination the stumbling footsteps going along the stoep. Her face clouded.

"What does keep one wakeful at times?" she inquired. "The mind works, I suppose. I think perhaps I was tired."

"I took you too far," he said contritely. "It was inconsiderate of me. But you seemed so interested."

"I was. I wouldn't have missed a bit of it. It was worth a sleepless night."

"I doubt whether I should consider anything worth the sacrifice of a night's sleep," he said, and laughed. "It would take a lot to spoil my rest. The air here acts like a narcotic with me."

"That's odd," she said. "It makes me alert. There's something in the atmosphere of this place—I don't know what it is—which influences me strangely. I go about in a state of expectant curiosity. I'm looking for things to happen. That's absurd, I know; but the feeling's there."

He scrutinised her intently. In this lonely spot what could happen out of the ordinary run of events? Nothing surely in the nature of change—unless the change were in one's self.

"The state of your mind is provocative," he said. "By invoking things to happen you may precipitate a crisis. It is always a dangerous practice to tempt the gods."

"I don't agree with that. I'm something of a fatalist," she said. "I believe, not that our lives are prearranged, but that the event which happens is inevitable, that we must accept things as they come to us. The manner of our acceptance alone is left to our choice."

"I should hesitate to adopt that theory," he said. "I like to feel that I have some say in the arrangement of my life. According to your idea a man might hold himself immune for any evil he contrived. It relieves the individual of all responsibility."

"No." She flushed slightly. "The qualities of good and evil are ours to develop at will. The individual is always responsible for his own nature."

"I don't like your theory any better as you enlarge it," he replied. "It's rough on any one to have to keep good with all the odds against him. And if he fail, what then?"

"I don't believe in complete human failure," she answered quietly. "Do you?"

"I don't know."

He was thinking of Hallam, considering him a fair example of failure; she also was thinking of Hallam, but with greater kindness. Derelict though the man appeared, the belief held with her that one day he would pull himself together and make good. She got up suddenly.

"We are growing too serious," she said; "and it's nearly lunch time. What a blessed break in the day one's meals make."

Hallam was in his accustomed seat when she returned, but he did not look up when she passed him on her way inside. He was reading a newspaper. His hands, holding the printed sheet, shook more than usual, she fancied; otherwise he looked much the same. She believed that he was aware of her presence, though he made no sign that he saw her. She passed him and entered the narrow passage and went direct to her room. An unaccountable shyness had come over her. She shrank from going into lunch, shrank from the thought of sitting beside him in the embarrassing silence which his taciturnity imposed. The thing was getting on her nerves. In the case of any other man, she believed that she would not have minded this blunt ungraciousness; but this man had the power to hurt her. The thing was incomprehensible and astonished her greatly. Why should his behaviour wound her when in another man it would merely have given offence?

The gong for luncheon sounded; but still she lingered in her room, reluctant to leave this quiet haven for the dining-room and the disquieting influence of her unresponsive neighbour. But the ordeal had to be faced. It was ridiculous to allow her nervousness to get the upper hand. With an action that was almost violent in the suddenness of her resolve, she opened the door, and stepping into the passage went swiftly along to the dining-room. At the door of the dining-room she and Hallam met face to face. He was going in, but he drew back to allow her to precede him. Thanking him briefly, she passed him and went on and took her seat. He followed leisurely. When he was seated and waiting to be served, he turned to her with unexpected suddenness and observed:

"You missed a great deal this morning through oversleeping. I have never seen a finer sunrise in my life than the one I witnessed on my walk."

"You were up at sunrise?"

Her surprised tone, the almost incredulous look in her eyes, drew a wondering glance from him. She saw it and felt furious with herself for her stupidity. She had imagined him sleeping late that morning, had supposed his non-appearance at breakfast was the result of his overnight excess; and she had been tactless enough to betray surprise on learning that he had been abroad so early. She flushed with confusion and averted her eyes.

"I am always up before the sun," he said. "I do most of my walking before breakfast. It's the best time of the day."

"Yes," she agreed; "I suppose it is. I slept late."

An inexplicable vindictiveness came over her. She turned to him again and added almost brusquely:

"I was extraordinarily wakeful last night. I did not get to sleep before the dawn broke."

"You should cultivate the habit of sleeping in a hurry," he advised. "I get all the rest I need in a few hours."

He began to eat. She watched him for a moment in silence and with a swift compunction for her recent ill-humour.

"I am sorry I missed the sunrise," she said, relenting, and wishful to make amends. "Tell me about it."

He smiled faintly.

"Can any one describe a sunrise?" he asked. "Are there any words in our language which will paint nature in her most wonderful aspects? If there are I am ignorant of them. You must go out and see these things for yourself."

This was not encouraging, but she persevered. A sort of inflexible determination to abolish finally the frigid distances he insistently maintained armed her with a temporary bravado which amazed herself. It probably amazed him equally, but he made no sign if so.

"I do not like seeing things by myself. Won't you let me accompany you some morning?"

"Most assuredly," he answered, after a barely perceptible hesitation. "But quite possibly you will miss your breakfast. I tramp far."

"I shall not complain," she said. "If you are equal to fasting I have no doubt I can stand it."

Hallam looked quietly amused. He surveyed her quite steadily for the fraction of a second, and then very deliberately turned his attention again to his plate.

"Do you really think," he asked presently, "that your endurance is equal to mine? You don't look to me very strong."

She was thinking the same about him, but she did not voice her thought. Possibly he read what she was thinking in her face when he glanced again momentarily towards her; whether this were so or not, he added after a pause:

"My constitution is made of cast iron. If it were not it would have broken down long ago. Notwithstanding that my hand has difficulty in raising this glass without spilling its contents, I could lift you with it as easily as I could lift a feather."

She looked at the hand stretched out towards the glass of milk and soda beside his plate, and noticed how it shook, and wondered that he should draw her attention to it. He had done so intentionally, mastering his usual self-consciousness in regard to this physical defect, for what reason she failed to understand. Oddly, she felt no embarrassment while she looked at his hand, and he betrayed none either. He lifted the glass unsteadily and drank from it and set it down again on the cloth.

"I have travelled for a week on a pocketful of dried mealies, and been none the worse for it," he said. "But I shouldn't recommend that diet for you."

"I think," she said unexpectedly and without annoyance, "that you don't wish to be bothered with my company."

"From the fear that I may have to carry you?" he suggested. "You are mistaken. If you like to be energetic to-morrow I will show you where best to view the sunrise. And I promise you that if we miss our breakfast here I will take you to a house where I can obtain a meal at any hour of the day."

"You breakfasted there this morning?" she said, turning a face flushed with pleasure to his.

"I breakfasted there this morning. They are accustomed to my irregular habits, and they don't mind."

"That will be nice," she said.

He laughed.

"I hope you won't be disappointed."

"Disappointed in what?—the sunrise, or the breakfast?"

"I pay you the compliment of supposing that such material pleasures as food do not interest you," he returned; "nevertheless, you will find the fare sufficient. The air in the early morning is chilly, so dress warmly."

With which advice he closed the conversation as resolutely as a man who, talking over a telephone, shuts off communication by replacing the receiver. He bent over his plate and went on eating as though he had forgotten entirely the girl's existence. He finished his breakfast before she did and got up and went out by the window.

Book One—Chapter Seven.

During the twenty-two unenlivening and, latterly, busy years of her life Esmé Lester had never been in love, had not known the excitement which many girls of her age enjoy of possessing a lover. She was not a sentimental young woman, and she had not had much time in which to indulge in these distractions. The woman who earns her livelihood has her mind occupied with graver matters generally. Love, if it succeed in penetrating her preoccupation, takes her usually unaware and remains sometimes unsuspected for quite an appreciable while.

It was possibly not love which in the early stages of their acquaintance aroused her interest in Hallam. Mainly her feeling for him was a mixture of womanly compassion and of repugnance so intense that at times it shouldered pity into the background, and left her chilled with disgust for his weakness and bitterly ashamed for him.

Her acquaintance with Hallam developed surprisingly. The occasion of their walk to view the sunrise advanced it to a stage of easy intimacy. The tentacles of friendship reached out and struck deep into the natures of both. The man accepted rather than welcomed the change in their relations. He deplored, despite its agreeableness, the growing intimacy as something dangerous to his peace, something which might not be pursued and developed beyond a certain point, which, because of its limitation, was disturbing and undesirable. No man cares to set a boundary line to his intercourse with a woman who attracts him; immediately with the appearance of the barrier the desire to surmount it is bred.

The state of Hallam's mind was that of paralysed initiative. He was incapable of making any sustained effort. He drifted into this friendship as he drifted into less desirable practices. Hereditary tendencies and inclination both led him to follow his present mode of life; nor had it seemed to him in any degree shameful until this girl stepped suddenly across his path and altered his view of things. But her influence was not yet sufficiently strong to cause him more than a passing regret for the waste he was making of life. His life was his own affair; it was no one's business how he elected to use it.

On the morning of their first walk together he came out on to the stoep, stick in hand, ready to start, and found Esmé waiting for him. He returned her greeting unsmilingly, and scrutinised her attentively with brows drawn together above the keen eyes.

"You had better fetch a coat," he said. "The morning air is chilly."

"It is fresh," she agreed; "but I thought perhaps walking—it may be very hot before we return."

"It probably will be," he replied. "But I would prefer that you wore a coat. When it gets hot I will carry it for you."

Smiling, she went inside to follow his instruction. When she came out again she wore a woollen sport's coat over her thin dress.

"That's better," he said. "It is unpleasant to feel cold."

He walked down the little path beside her and out on to the open road. A pale mist, like a thin white fog, shrouded the prospect and lent a bracing coldness to the air, which felt fresh and clean with the crisp purity of mountain air, washed by the overnight dews. The girl felt the benefit of the extra warmth of the coat; it was fresher than she had supposed out on the open road. A little wind that had more than a touch of sharpness in its breath blew in their faces as they walked.

"I had no idea the mornings were so good," she said. "I've not been out so early before."

"People miss more than they realise through lying between the sheets," he said. "In a country like this the bulk of the day's work should be accomplished before breakfast."

"Is that the principle you act on?" she asked.

He looked grimly ahead of him and was slow in replying.

"That is the principle I should act upon if I did any work," he said at length.

Esmé lifted wondering eyes to his face.

"It must be a great responsibility to be independent of work," she said.

Hallam laughed suddenly.

"Do you really think so? Most people would reverse that opinion. The weight of it does not press on me unduly."

He flicked at the dust of the road with his stick and at the grass which grew beside the road, and was silent for a space. When he spoke again it was on an entirely different subject.

They were swinging along down the road at a smart pace, and with every yard of ground they covered the aspect of the land changed, became more luxuriant in its growth, and altogether more rugged and assertive. The sky was flushed with a soft pink like the flush on the face of a child newly wakened from sleep. Before them as they walked the mist rolled back, a gradually thinning vapour dispersing before the warmth of the coming day, revealing with a startling unexpectedness in its reluctant retreat the wonder of contrasting colour, the beauty of the curving road with the shadows of the trees across it, and the great green silences stretching above and below; the silence of the heights, and the more secretive silence of the hidden places in the furtive darkness of the gorge.

The rose pink in the sky deepened, spread itself warmly over the blue expanse, reflected warmly upon the silent, neutral tinted world; changed the face of the land as it changed the face of the sky; brightening and intensifying the colour in the grass, in the leaves of the trees, painting the flowers wonderfully; transforming everything with the glow and warmth of life. The world threw off its lethargy of slumber and lifted its face wakefully to the flood of sunlight which broke through the rose and azure in a flash of gold.

Esmé stood transfixed, with eyes turned to the sunrise. She felt the warmth of the sun on her face, on her hands, on her body. It was like being gripped in a warm embrace, startling and a little disconcerting by its very suddenness. The gold of it poured over her like an amber flame. The man, standing beside her, watched the sun-bathed, radiant figure, and saw the wonder in her eyes, and remained silent, attentive, marking nothing of the glory in the changing heavens, seeing only the startled gladness in a girl's sweet face, and the glowing brightness of her figure against the sunlit dust of the road.

While he stood observing her the thought took shape in his mind and grew, as he watched her simple delight in what at another time would have delighted him equally, but which now he scarcely heeded, that it was an eternal shame he should of his own act, through his lack of endeavour, reduce himself to a level which divided him from her, and from women like her, as widely as the gorge was divided from the heights. But a steep uphill road connected gorge and heights. He looked down the road and up at the heights and frowned. Then deliberately he turned his attention away from the girl and started idly to trace patterns with his stick in the dust. She looked round at him with happy eyes, in which surprise gathered as she noted his preoccupation.

"But you are not watching the sunrise!" she exclaimed.

"It is disappointing," he replied. "Yesterday it was finer. It is one of nature's exhaustless perplexities that she never reveals herself in the same guise twice. Shall we go on?"

She started to walk again, a little chilled, she scarcely knew why, by his manner. She decided that possibly he enjoyed best seeing these things alone. Some people take their pleasures selfishly; he might be one of these. To her the sunrise had been wonderful; and she longed to express her admiration, to share it; but this grave and silent companion made her silent also. She felt disappointed. He stole a glance at her serious face, and his features relaxed; a smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"You had better take off your coat," he said. "The sun soon makes his power felt."

He helped her to remove the coat, and threw it over his shoulder and walked on, holding it with his disengaged hand.

"If the people at the hotel could see us they would be amazed," he said.

"Why?" she asked, a fine colour coming into her cheeks, which deepened as she met his eyes.

"Because no one there has ever seen me do a service for any one," he replied.

"Perhaps no one has demanded service of you," she said quietly.

"No one has," he answered, with a certain grimness that suggested such a demand might have met with small response. "In this instance I believe the idea originated with me."

She laughed brightly.

"You made me bring the coat," she said. "It is only fair you should carry it."

"I am not complaining. When you are tired, say so, and we will rest by the wayside. We have a long way to go yet; and I do not wish to carry you as well as your coat."

Again she laughed brightly and looked up into his face with merry eyes.

"You boasted that you could do that as easily as you could lift a feather. I should not mind carrying a feather," she said.

He looked down at her, quietly amused.

"Think of the amazement at the hotel if I were seen carrying you back!" he said, and smiled at the quick flush which overspread her face.

"I do not concern myself about the opinion of other people, as you appear to do," she retorted.

"Very well," he replied. "Then, when you are tired, say so, and I will support my boast in a practical manner."

"I will consider your sensitiveness in preference to my comfort," she said.

"You have not known me very long," he returned; "but in the time I should have thought that a person of ordinary discernment would have discovered that I possess no sensibilities to disturb."

"I have discovered one or two things about you," she answered gently, "but not that."

She felt relieved that he did not pursue the subject. He lifted his stick and pointed with it away to the right, where the white wall of a building showed among the trees.

"That is where we shall breakfast on our return," he said.

"On our return! Then you mean to go further?"

"We shall walk a good mile—two miles, if you are equal to it—beyond the house," he said. "The road gets more beautiful the further you travel. But we will stop when you wish. After you have breakfasted you shall rest as long as you like before making the journey back."

Book One—Chapter Eight.

It seemed to Esmé as they walked rapidly along in the clear light air that nature revealed herself in her fairest mood that morning. Surely never had sunlight shone more golden, never had the blue of the sky appeared more intense, nor the veld glowed with such splendour of colour. A blue haze, liquid in the golden light, quivered before her vision like a thing alive with iridescent wings outspread in the untempered sunlight that poured itself out upon the earth with a brilliance hurtful to the eyes. Everywhere her gaze turned some fresh wonder met the view. Green mingled with brown and orange, shot with vivid colours, where the hardy veld flowers blossomed in the grass and among the piles of hot-looking yellow stones by the side of the road. It was a scene of wide and glowing colour, of immense blue distances lit by the fierce flame of the sun.

How much of her enjoyment was due to the beauty of the day, and how much to the companionship of the man who shared these things with her, she did not at the time pause to consider. Her senses were steeped in the delight which

is born of the mysterious magic of beauty. Everywhere she looked she saw this magic pictured; in her heart she felt its influence; it permeated all her being, all her brain. And again the expectation of adventure gripped her. The belief that something was about to happen, something of tremendous personal importance, took hold of her imagination, stirred her deeply with a mingling of awe and joyous anticipation like nothing she had ever known before. Something was going to happen to her; something surely had happened to her already to work this change in her calm practical nature. For the first time in her quiet uneventful life her latent womanhood rose to the surface and found expression in a number of new emotions, emotions which she vaguely realised without understanding their significance.

She felt intensely alive. Her face was radiant with the joy of life. But she did not talk much. Hallam was not a talkative companion, and his silence affected her. Occasionally he paused to draw her attention to a particular spot; and once he called a halt and seated himself beside her in the shade of some bushes to rest. When he was seated he lit his pipe. He had brought apples with him, and he offered Esmé one, and a knife to peel it with. She returned the knife and set her teeth in the fruit and ate it with keen enjoyment.

"I get these from a farm in the neighbourhood," he explained. "You should walk there one day. They grow quite good fruit, and they are always glad to see visitors. It's not far from the hotel."

"You appear to know every one around here," she remarked.

"I have been here some months," he replied.

"And you seek your friends outside the hotel?" she said.

"I neither seek nor find friends," he answered bluntly. "I have some slight acquaintance with these people which they do not discourage because it is profitable to them. I do not understand disinterested friendship. I do not believe in it."

"Which is to say you have never felt a disinterested friendship for any one," she said. "You don't know what you miss."

"In that case, I miss nothing," he replied. "One has to be conscious of a need in order to appreciate its absence. Life is a huge business of bluff. A few persons only remain sincere because they will not take the trouble to pose. To be sincere is to become unpopular. But unpopularity is less irksome than maintaining a pose of sociability. I believe there are very few people who honestly love their kind."

"That is too cynical a belief to be worth discussing," she said, pausing with the half eaten fruit in her hand to look at him with puzzled eyes. He seemed amused rather than vexed at her answer, and smoked for a moment reflectively before resuming the talk.

"I doubt whether you are quite sincere in making that assertion," he contended. "It is an easy way of disposing of a subject which one feels unequal to combat in argument. Friendship is mere sentiment, so is love of one's fellows; let either interfere with self-interest, and what becomes of it? It is only with a few rare souls that altruism becomes a workable theory."

"So long as there are a few souls great enough for disinterested love," she said quietly, "there is a little light of hope in the world."

She got up and threw away the remains of the apple as though her pleasure in the fruit were spoiled. She hated this cynical bitter talk; at the moment she almost hated the speaker. Because of his own wasted life, his morbid views and perverted ideals, he was trying to poison her mind with the hopeless doctrine of his deliberate self-deception. There was something mean in her opinion in this wilful attempt to darken the world for others.

"Let us go on," she said. "Active exercise puts you in a better mood. I do not like your ideas. I'm sorry; but I don't wish to listen to them."

"No one likes my ideas," he answered, rising. "I don't like them myself. Truth is rarely agreeable; that is why so many people affect lies. I think we had better turn and see about breakfast. Your lack of patience suggests to me that you are hungry."

She broke into a laugh. At the sound of her mirth his face cleared immediately; he stood still in the road and looked at her curiously.

"I am glad that the sun still shines," he said, and started again to walk along the uphill path.

It was rather a silent walk back to the little house among the trees. Esmé felt shy at having been so outspoken. He had taken her rebuke in good part; she liked him for that. She liked, too, the quiet way in which he assumed command of herself and of everything when they reached the house and stepped up to the little stoep. He presented a new and more forceful side to his character.

The woman of the house fetched two chairs at his request, which she placed side by side in a corner of the stoep beyond the reach of the sun's rays that fell slantwise upon the white stone floor under the low roof. Hallam separated the chairs and pushed a little deal table between them and sat down opposite the girl.

"It is pleasanter to eat out of doors," he said. "I didn't consult your wishes, because I knew it was unnecessary to do so. And even if you preferred breakfasting inside it would not be good for you."

"I am satisfied with your choice," she answered, smiling, and took off her hat and dropped it on the floor. "I could eat anywhere; I am so hungry."

"Good!" he exclaimed, looking pleased, and surveying her across the narrow table, which the housewife had spread with a much-darned snow-white cloth.

It gave him an odd satisfaction to see her there, seated opposite to him, hatless and very much at her ease, a pleasing picture of fresh bright girlhood, with the glow of returning health showing in her cheeks.

The woman came out from the house and made further preparations towards their meal. Occasionally she addressed a remark to Hallam; but she was not loquacious. She stared a good deal at his companion: it doubtless caused her surprise to see him with any one. During all the months since he first came to her house he had never brought a friend with him before. She was obviously familiar with Hallam's requirements. Without consulting him she placed a glass of milk on the table beside him, and inquired whether the lady drank tea or coffee. Esmé looked at the glass of milk and made up her mind quickly.

"Neither. I will have milk also," she said.

The woman departed with the order, and the girl and the man sat gazing out on the sunny road and saying nothing. But the silence which hung between them was the silence of comradeship. There was an absence of all constraint in their manner; they were like old friends between whom speech is unnecessary.

With the arrival of breakfast the girl drew her chair nearer the table, and served the omelette and passed his plate across to Hallam; assisting him unobtrusively, because of the shaking of his hands and his pitiful consciousness of it. The sight of those nervous unsteady hands hurt her. She was always painfully aware of them and keenly anxious to conceal the fact. She observed that the man endeavoured to control their trembling, and that his inability to do so distressed him. He bent low over his plate. It was this habit of bending over his meals and of looking down when he walked which caused the stoop of the shoulders, giving him an appearance of ill health.

While she ate and attended to his needs and her own she wondered about him. What could be the secret of his downfall? Life had been generous to him in some respects; possibly in other, more important matters, it had treated him ill. She continued her study of him while she sat at the little table opposite to him and watched the sunlight slowly encroaching on the patch of shade in which they breakfasted. Before they had finished their meal it had reached Hallam, dividing them like a curtain of fire which wrapped him about in its radiant warmth and left her in the shadows.

"Hadn't you better move your seat?" she suggested. "The sun strikes on your head."

He got up, dragged his chair nearer to hers, and sat down again. Their chairs were side by side now. She leaned back in hers and smiled at him.

"This is infinitely pleasanter than breakfasting at a long table among a crowd. They will wonder at the hotel what has become of me."

"They will certainly never suppose that you are in my company," he said.

"Why not?"

A dry smile twisted his lips. He scrutinised her for a brief moment, and then answered abruptly:

"They wouldn't credit the possibility of my inviting you to come."

"You didn't," she answered, and laughed with amusement. The laugh was infectious; Hallam joined in it.

"I wish you hadn't such an awkward memory for blunt facts," he said. "I know I was abominably rude. I am always rude. As a rule that doesn't trouble me; but in your case I regret my lack of manners."

"I did not notice it," she replied. "I think perhaps I was preoccupied with the lack of manners betrayed on my part. You must think me rather pushing."

Again he smiled dryly, but in the keen eyes shone a kindly look.

"One day, if it will interest you to hear it," he said, "I will tell you what I think of you. But at the moment I do not feel equal to so much frankness. If you have finished breakfast, let me carry your chair into the shade of the trees. Since there is no one to whom your absence will cause anxiety we will suit our own convenience as to the time of our return."

Book One—Chapter Nine.

The two or three guests at the hotel who witnessed Esmé's return in the company of Hallam were filled with amazement at the unusual spectacle of the man who was never known to associate with any one, walking beside the girl and carrying her coat across his shoulder, with an air of being on perfectly friendly terms with his companion and with himself. The two were laughing when they neared the gate; but the man's expression settled into its habitual boredom as he followed the girl up the path and mounted the steps on to the stoep.

He removed the coat from his shoulder and handed it to her with a brief smile.

"I have enjoyed my walk," he said. "Thank you."

"Thank *you* for taking me," she answered, conscious of the curious eyes observing her. "I have enjoyed it also."

Then she went inside. Hallam waited for a minute or two before entering, the hotel, while the people on the stoep watched him, puzzled and immensely interested in these proceedings. He did not appear to notice them; and presently he went in, and the restraint which his presence always imposed on the rest relaxed perceptibly.

They started to discuss him, to deplore his friendship with the girl; they pondered the question whether it was the particular duty of any one to warn her against pursuing the acquaintance: every one thought that she ought to be warned; but no one volunteered to undertake this friendly office; they were all a little in awe of the man of whom they disapproved.

Esmé went to her room with the intention of remaining there and writing letters until lunch time. She was tired and wanted to rest. But while she sat at her window with her writing materials on her knee she saw Sinclair approaching from the direction of the garden beyond the kei-apple hedge. She remembered that he was leaving that morning. The early walk, and her pleasure in it, had caused her to forget.

He strolled as far as the vley, and stood by the edge, moodily kicking little stones into the water. He looked up and saw her at the window and looked away again, making pretence that he did not know she was there. She leaned out and spoke to him.

"Isn't it a perfectly wonderful day?" she called softly.

"Is it?" he said, and came towards her slowly, frowning, and with his hands in his pockets. "It's much like any other day, I think."

He leaned with his shoulder against the wall of the house, and regarded her with sulky reproach as she sat on the low sill, facing him, smiling into the hurt boyish eyes. She liked him, and he was going away. She decided to ignore his irritable mood.

"It's the finish of your holiday," she said, "and you are sorry. In a fortnight's time my holiday will have ended. I, too, shall regret leaving this place."

"It is not the place I mind leaving; it's dull enough," he said ungraciously. "There is nothing to do except moon around. Where did you have breakfast this morning?"

"At a little house along the road. I went to see the sun rise."

"It is possible to view that astronomical phenomenon from your bedroom window," he retorted disagreeably.

"I dare say it is. But I wanted the walk."

"You went with Hallam, I suppose?" he said. And, without waiting for her reply, added: "I think you might have remembered that it was my last morning. I would have taken you to see the sun rise if you had expressed the desire. I counted on a last walk."

"I walked with you last night," she said, surprised at the extravagance of his demands.

"I am not forgetting that," he said, with less aggression in his manner. "But my last morning... I think it was a little unkind. There will be plenty of opportunities for sun-gazing after I have gone. I am full up with things I want to say to you, and you seem such a long way off, perched up there."

She laughed, and twisted round on the sill preparatory to alighting.

"Look the other way for a minute. I'm coming out."

He swung round with a pleased smile, and before she realised what he was about he had seized her by the waist and lifted her down. She stood on the grass beside him and surveyed him with amazed eyes.

"Well!" she said.

"It was by far the easier way," he excused himself. "I have a couple of chairs fixed up under the trees. It's jolly and cool in the garden."

He led her to the spot he had selected and settled her in one of the two canvas chairs, which faced towards a little arbour covered with a pale, cool-looking creeper with long sprays of minute white blossoms thrusting out between the leaves. The chairs had been placed at the end of the roughly made path, and stood side by side with their backs towards the house. Esmé dropped into one, and looked about her with lazy satisfaction. It was restful out here under the trees, and strangely quiet. The hum of the bees sounded reposeful in the sunny stillness. She felt very tired, and was glad to sit still. She did not want to talk. But it was not possible to sit in silence with this man, as it was with Hallam. The necessity to make conversation was imperative. It surprised and puzzled her that this was so.

She glanced at Sinclair curiously, and discovered him, with his face turned towards her, observing her intently. He smiled when he met her eyes with their curious questioning look; his own expressed admiration, and something more, which he strove to suppress.

"You were quite right," he said. "It is a wonderful day. But I wish you had not discovered that before you came out here. I didn't. It seemed to me this morning a rotten sort of day altogether. I wasn't sure even that I should see you before I left. I have just half an hour. If it wasn't for the thought of seeing you again at the other end I should feel pretty sick at leaving. I've only known you a few days; but I seem to have known you for quite a long time. That's odd, isn't it? I've enjoyed the last of my holiday more than words can express."

He talked quickly, eagerly. His face was flushed, and a sort of boyish shyness showed in his eyes. She regarded him with an air of faint perplexity and said nothing. His abrupt confidences were disconcerting.

"You won't forget these few days altogether, will you?" he urged.

Her composed face, her air of increasing surprise, damped his ardour considerably. The light died out of his eyes.

"I shan't forget a single day of all the days I spend here," she replied, not knowing that she was unkind, not meaning to be.

She was not thinking of Sinclair. Her appreciation had nothing to do with him. She was reviewing her earlier impressions, feeling again the joy which the sense of beauty gives; the complete satisfaction of that walk towards the sunrise, and the magic splendour of the morning when the world stirred out of slumber, dew-drenched and asparkle in the golden radiance of the newly risen sun. She had realised, as she stepped confidently forward in its warmth, the wonder and the goodness of being alive. That sense of well-being remained with her, would remain with her when the boy, who looked to her for a response she was unable to make, was gone down the mountain road out of her dream. He was no part of the dream: he was merely a transitory figure flitting through the gold-blue mist.

"I don't know what it is about the place which grips me so, unless it is that it is unlike any place I've ever seen. I love the brooding silence and the warmth and the soft mountain air. There is health in every breath of it. Down at the Bay the winds rend one. It's all heat and noise and rush."

"Oh! the Bay's not half a bad place," he protested. "Most people at the beginning of a holiday feel as you do; but it wears off. You will be jolly well bored at the end of a fortnight. Travelling always along one old road grows monotonous. And whichever way you go it's the same old road. You may strike across the veld, but sooner or later you have to come back to the road."

"After all,"—she looked at him quickly,—“it isn't monotony that bores one really. We like doing the familiar thing."

"Not necessarily," he returned. "When it is a case of returning to work, the familiar thing becomes a nuisance. I wish you were driving down the mountain with me. Don't come out to see the start. I don't wish you to make one of the crowd. I'm going to say good-bye to you here. I am leaving my racquet behind. I want you to use it, will you? I've another at my digs, so you needn't feel you are depriving me. I want you to have it."

"That's very kind of you," she said, touched by this act of generosity, and secretly embarrassed. She could not without ungraciousness refuse, but she wished that he had not placed her under this obligation.

"It will serve to pass an hour or two when you weary of the same old road," he said, smiling.

He was jealous because she had found a companion for the road; that this companion did not play games was a source of satisfaction to him.

"But you break up the set when you leave," she said.

"We played three before you arrived," he reminded her. "When you get back to the Bay I'm coming in sometimes to play with you at the Club courts. You're a member, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"Are you?"

"I am about to become one," he answered, with an amused look at her surprised face. "I've thought of joining often. You know the acquaintance isn't going to end here. I may see you again?"

He looked at her with great earnestness, and waited with such obvious anxiety for her reply that it seemed to her there was only one possible answer to his question. And indeed she was very willing to continue a friendship which had been on the whole agreeable.

"I should be sorry if I thought it would be otherwise," she said, with kind sincerity. "It would seem strange not to meet, seeing that we have been such good friends."

"Good friends!" he repeated. "Yes; we have been that... Well, that's the gist of what I wanted to say. When I travel down the mountain I shall remember your words and your sweetness. We are good friends, whose friendship started amid the heights."

He rose from his seat. She looked up at him with eyes that held a wondering interest in their look. The phrase took hold of her imagination. Until that moment he had always seemed just a boy to her; but in that moment she thought of him as a man, with a man's thoughts and a man's feelings. She stood up a little shyly and gave him her hand.

"I am sorry you are going away," was all she said.

Book One—Chapter Ten.

During the days which followed time sped on amber wings. It sped so swiftly that her fortnight's holiday seemed to Esmé the shortest fortnight her life had ever known. Oddly, she did not realise why the hours were so mysteriously curtailed. In reality her days were longer than usual; they started at sunrise.

This practice of early rising, which was new to her, developed into a daily habit. If by chance she overslept, as she did occasionally, her day was robbed of its chief pleasure—the early morning walk in Hallam’s company. He never waited for her. He never referred to her absence when she failed to put in an appearance on the stoep at the time he came out, stick in hand, ready for his walk. But he always looked for her; and when he saw her waiting for him he appeared pleased. They set forth together as a matter of course.

He grew to look forward to her companionship. His manner had lost its rough unsociability; he talked to her readily. Occasionally he left the seat, which had come by tacit recognition to be considered especially his, for a chair beside hers on the stoep. His behaviour excited considerable surprise and comment among the other guests; but to Esmé it appeared less remarkable than his former attitude of almost hostile aloofness. She derived a quiet happiness from his society.

As she came to know him better her amazement at his weakness grew enormously. That a man of such striking personality, possessed of considerable will-power, should yield himself to the influence of a sordid vice, be dominated by it, surprised her beyond words. It was the one thing about him which she hated. It was ugly and inconsistent and degrading. She never saw him drink; he took nothing but milk and soda with his meals. In the daytime he always appeared perfectly sober; but at night, after dinner, it was his invariable custom to disappear, where she did not know; but sometimes she heard his stumbling step going along the stoep after every one else was in bed. She would lie awake and listen for these sounds, but it was only occasionally she heard him go unsteadily to his room. Then her heart would beat faster, and the tears would come to her eyes, and always, she offered up a prayer for him in the quiet darkness of her little room. Her pity for him and her liking grew like a flower, unconscious of its expansion as it opens to the sun.

When first it occurred to Esmé to use her influence to wean Hallam from his nightly practice was uncertain; doubtless her desire had leaned that way from the beginning of their acquaintance; but it was not until she was well into the second week of her holiday that she summoned up sufficient courage one evening while they sat at dinner to propose that he should accompany her for a walk. It was too beautiful a night to spend indoors, she urged.

The man hesitated. She believed that he was going to refuse. It was easy to see that her suggestion was not acceptable to him. It took him aback, and for quite an appreciable while he did not reply to her. Then he said, somewhat brusquely:

“Have you not had walking enough for one day?”

“Come and sit with me on the stoep,” she said, “if you do not care to walk.”

Some quality in her voice, something, too, in the expression of her face, when he turned his face to look at her, arrested his attention. He scrutinised her more closely, and into his eyes, as he watched her, leapt a light of understanding.

“I never met any one quite so indefatigable as you,” he said. “If you really desire exercise, of course I’ll accompany you. There will be a moon to-night. She is young, but she will serve our purpose. Why do you want to walk?”

The question was jerked out abruptly. There was an inflection of curiosity in his tones. Esmé answered quietly, without looking at him.

“I suppose because I feel it is a sin to remain indoors on such a night.”

Had not her eyes been averted from his face she must have seen his lips compress themselves at her words. A sort of hardness came into his voice.

“Your language is somewhat exaggerated,” he returned. “The physical benefit is more obvious than the moral, I think. However, if it gives you a sense of righteousness, so much the better. I will lend myself readily to further that end. What do you usually do in the evenings?”

“Sit on the stoep generally. I don’t care about cards. When Mr Sinclair was here we used to walk.”

“Sinclair!—yes... The fellow who fancied he possessed all the virtues because he had not certain vices. You must miss him.”

“That isn’t a very kind description,” she said.

“I was not trying to be kind,” he answered. “I am not of a kindly disposition. You may observe that I do not lay claim to any of the virtues. It is safe to conclude that what you don’t claim will never be conceded to you. These facts once grasped simplify life enormously. But I waste time in attempting to teach you worldly wisdom. You live in a world of illusions.”

He spoke very little during the remainder of the time he sat at table. His manner was preoccupied, and his face looked grim. Esmé felt that he regretted having yielded to her request; he resented interference with his routine. When he rose from the table, which he did before any of the others, he turned to her and said in his curt way:

“Please be ready in half an hour from now.”

Then he pushed his chair back and walked quickly from the room.

The old gentleman on her right asked Esmé to make a fourth at bridge. He looked disappointed when she declined. She explained that she was going for a walk.

"It is good to be young. But don't overdo it," he counselled.

"The air is so wonderful; I am never tired up here," she replied.

"I have heard that said of the air in other places," he said, and smiled. "If I were twenty years younger I would go with you."

The old gentleman was not on the stoep to see Esmé start on her walk. He would have been astonished equally with the rest who viewed her departure to see Hallam come out of the house and join her and walk with her into the road. The people on the stoep who witnessed these things, wondered, and spoke of their wonder to one another. No one before had seen Hallam in the evenings after he left the dinner table. No one, except this girl, who seemed on terms of easy friendliness with him, ever spoke to him. It is not easy to talk to a man who deliberately ignores your existence. It was plain that he wanted to be left alone: yet he made an exception in favour of the girl. There was only one construction likely to be placed on this amazing preference. And so the people at the hotel looked after the disappearing figures, and criticised the growing intimacy between the man and girl long after they had vanished from sight amid the shadows of the early dusk.

When they were well away from the hotel Hallam took the pipe from his mouth and looked down at the girl's unconscious face and smiled dryly. He wondered whether she realised that they were objects of curiosity to the people they had left behind, whether, if she did realise it, it would trouble her at all? Her eyes, lifted to his in response to his steady scrutiny, showed darkly shadowed in the uncertain light; they smiled frankly up at him. He knew while he gazed down at her that he would miss her when she had gone, that life would seem emptier, more purposeless, than before. From the first he had realised the danger of the acquaintance; yet he had drifted into it with very little effort to evade the danger. He had not made the advances, but he had responded to them; and now he was regretting, with a sense of bitter futility, the folly of allowing her to become a significant influence in his life. He could not end the thing now; he did not want to; her companionship had become necessary to him.

But he could prevent her liking for him from developing, could, if he chose, crush it outright. To crush it outright was perhaps the wiser course.

"You know," he said quietly, "those people who watched us away are deploring your indiscretion in associating with me. I am not resenting it. They are perfectly right. I am not a desirable companion for any one. Why did you first speak to me? Why do you persist in the acquaintance? I often wonder. Don't you know what I am?"

"Perhaps I do," she answered in so low a voice that, but for the stillness of the night, he would scarce have heard the faltered words. "I think that is one reason why I spoke to you."

"You mean," he said, "that you were sorry? That's kind of you. But I am not conscious of needing sympathy. What other reason had you?"

"Isn't it only natural to talk to people one meets daily?" she asked. "I talk to every one in the hotel."

He smiled.

"I have observed that. But you don't walk with them. Why did you insist on my coming out to-night?"

"Oh!" she said, and felt her face aflame, and was grateful for the darkness which concealed her confusion. "I cannot give a reason for every impulse that moves me. I wanted to walk."

"Excuse me if I accuse you once more of insincerity," he said. "It was no impulse that prompted you to ask me. It was a deliberate and premeditated request which cost you some effort to make. Your concern for me is very flattering. But you waste your sympathy. What do you imagine you accomplish by this display of energy? You will overtire yourself, that is all. For me, it is merely a long time between drinks."

Tears came into her eyes. She hoped he did not see them, but she could not have kept them back. He hurt her even more than he intended to.

"I don't care," she said, a little unsteadily, "how hard you box my ears. I am glad I asked you to come. I'm glad you came." She raised her face suddenly and lifted defiant eyes to his.

"I am sorry I was insincere. You got me there. I didn't know you were so observant. In future I'll be absolutely frank with you. I'll be frank now, even if it angers you. I asked you to come out because I think it is a shame for you to spend your evenings as you do. I think it is a shame that you should waste your life. I'm not so much sorry for you as savage with you. It's hateful in you. It's the one thing which spoils you from being absolutely fine."

She broke off abruptly, startled at her own vehemence, immensely embarrassed, and horrified with herself. The man was staring at her, staring in amazement, incredulous and almost bewildered by the surprising rush of words. He had never in his life been so thunderstruck, nor had he ever before listened to such plain speaking. He was silent in face of this retort for which he had been in no sense prepared.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, aghast at her own daring. "What must you think of me? I never meant to attack you like this. It's—abominable."

"Whatever I think of you," he answered, "I can never again call you insincere. You have hurled truths at me to-night. You were quite right in everything you said; but—forgive me—you were quite wrong in saying them. However, largely that's my own fault for provoking you. It was inconsiderate to push my inquiries; it would be illogical if I complained because you answered them. We'll wipe the incident out. At least we understand one another. In future, when I see you making your social effort, I shall recognise that you are started on your morality campaign."

"Please don't," she said falteringly, with a catch so suggestive of repressed emotion in her tones that he repented the ill-nature of his words.

He glanced down at her as she walked beside him along the dim road, hatless, with the soft hair shading her partly averted face; then he straightened his stooping shoulders with a jerk, and looked about him at the darkening landscape, and up at the sky, where the young moon rode serenely in a star-strewn cloudless sky. It was a fine night, warm and still; the wan moonlight pierced the dusk palely, revealing the road cutting like a path of silver across the velvety darkness of the veld.

Some softening quality in the quiet beauty of the night, or it may have been in the sight of the partly turned face, with its look of hurt distress, penetrated the man's consciousness. His mood changed; a kinder note banished the harshness from his voice. He had wounded her deliberately, and he regretted it.

"I'm a brute," he said in altered tones. "Don't heed my roughness; it is not meant. I had no wish to offend."

"You did not offend," she answered. "But I am afraid that I did."

"No," he said, but without conviction, she thought. "I asked for truth, and I got it. Perhaps that is what surprised me. The last thing a man expects to hear is the truth about himself. I didn't credit you with the possession of so much courage."

"It has all evaporated," she said.

"The courage!" he laughed. "Oh! I think not. It has merely gone under for the time."

And then he turned the conversation, and closed the matter, as she felt, finally. She had no means of knowing whether his resentment of her plain speaking still rankled. A sort of constraint had fallen between them. She felt self-conscious, and rather like a child who has been rebuked. But she did not regret having spoken as she had done. The barriers of pretence were down; there existed a clear understanding between them. As she walked rather silently with him in the moonlight she resolved that on the morrow she would invite him to accompany her again.

Book One—Chapter Eleven.

That walk by the ineffectual light of a young moon brought about a significant change in the relations between the man and girl. The last reserves were swept away. The sweeping had been drastic; it left not so much as a shadow of doubt in the mind of each in regard to the other. They were profoundly interested in one another, with an interest which struck deeper than the repugnances which both were conscious existed. The girl liked the man and was horrified at his weakness; the man liked the girl and resented her interference: their mutual regard was stronger than their antagonism.

The people at the hotel watched the development of the friendship distrustfully. They did not approve of the man. All they knew of him was to his discredit. The general opinion was that it was well the girl was leaving so soon.

"You appear to be great friends with Mr Hallam," the old lady who was nervous of the mountain road observed one day to Esmé. "What a terrible thing it is to see a young man deliberately making wreck of his life. Don't you think so?"

"I do," Esmé answered gravely. "One day he will come to think so too; and then he will change."

The old lady shook her head.

"I should doubt it very strongly," she said. She considered it regrettable that the girl should cherish hopes of so improbable a reform.

"There is nothing that the human will cannot accomplish, when the will to accomplish a thing is strong enough," Esmé said with quiet conviction.

"You think that?"

"I am sure of it."

"Then, why does not Mr Hallam make some effort to overcome his failing?"

"I suppose because he has not felt a sufficiently strong incentive. It is difficult to understand these things. But I cannot help believing he will make good."

The old lady was manifestly unconvinced; but Esmé's faith remained unshaken. She believed in the eventual triumph of Hallam's better nature. The man was not insensible of her faith in him. Her influence over him was stronger than either of them realised. Each day he felt his interest in her deepening; but it was not until her visit came to the finish that he knew exactly what her friendship meant to him.

On the last morning when they sat at breakfast, and the talk turned naturally to the journey down the mountain, it came to him with unpleasant clearness that he was going to miss her very much. He saw the regret in her eyes at the thought of going away, and he knew that a similar regret was in his heart. They had come to the parting of the ways, and neither wished to part.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" he asked her. But she shook her head and answered no.

"I hate these comings and goings," he said gruffly; "they make life uncomfortable."

"I loved the coming," she replied softly; "but I hate going. I have been happy here."

"I expect you are happy anywhere," he said. And she laughed, but she did not answer him. "I shall miss our walks," he added.

"I shall miss them to," she replied. "I shall miss many things. One day I shall come up here again."

"Will you?" He looked surprised. "I shall not do that after I go away. To revisit a familiar spot is like walking among tombstones. Each point recalls a memory, and memory belongs to the past."

"But when one's memories are pleasant," she argued, "it is good to recall them."

"They come back to us with the dust on them," he insisted. "It is more comfortable to live in the present. You'll forget the Zuurberg when you are back in the town. You'll be engrossed with other matters. You'll forget."

"Not one hour," she breathed softly. "I'll forget nothing. Will you?"

He laughed bitterly.

"Life is not so full of pleasant things that I can afford to bury in oblivion the pleasantest that has happened to me," he said. "When you drive down the mountain to-day, I will go with you and see you on your way."

If anything could have given her pleasure at leaving it was this resolve on Hallam's part to drive with her down the mountain road. His accompanying her gave to the excursion an air of adventure and decreased the sense of parting. It was not, she found when she came to say goodbye to the little group of people assembled on the stoep to watch the departure of the cart, these general leave-takings which were distressing; nor did it concern her to turn her back on the hotel on the veld; the real parting was to follow, but for the moment that did not weigh with her. Her holiday was not yet at an end.

There were other passengers for the journey besides themselves. Hallam waited until these had taken their seats in the back; then he helped the girl up to the front seat next the driver, and, to the amazement of the beholders, got up after her and sat down by her side. They concluded that he was leaving also; it did not occur to any one to suppose that he was going to see the girl off by the train and would return that evening. An act of such supererogatory courtesy was not expected of him.

The horses started, and the cart swung along with its load of passengers and luggage, travelling at a good pace along the hard smooth road. Esmé leaned back in her seat and looked about her with happy appreciative eyes. On the upward journey she had longed for a companion to share her joy in the scenery. She recalled her first impressions, as she drove now with Hallam beside her. She had been very tired on that occasion, eye and brain both had been weary. To-day she felt surprisingly well and very alert. The air, the movement, the strong light, all added to her sense of enjoyment; and the presence of the man beside her, his nearness, his unobtrusive care of her, his interest in all which interested her, made the return journey infinitely more wonderful than the journey up the mountain had seemed. She felt extraordinarily happy. And yet she was going away. Soon she and her companion would be parted. It might be that she would never see him after that day. But she could not realise these things. She felt him beside her, heard his voice speaking to her against the mountain wind which blew across them, saw the kindness in the keen eyes when he turned his head to look at her and mark her appreciation of some beauty along the route; and she knew that he mattered to her tremendously; that her feeling for him was a real and profoundly significant emotion, something which had sprung to life suddenly, which would go on growing in her heart after they had separated and gone their different ways.

This was the thing which had happened to her. She had looked for something to happen, but she had not dreamed it would be anything like this.

She fell to wondering how she would feel when they came to say good-bye, whether she would realise the parting and feel lonely, whether her face would betray her regret? Whether he would see and understand...

The journey down occupied considerably less time than the journey up had done; everything seemed to lend itself to speed her departure. But at Coerney there was a wait before the train came in. Hallam took her to the hotel and ordered refreshments, and afterwards they went and sat in the shade of the trees and talked away their last minutes together. She felt that she would have liked to prolong that talk indefinitely; and the minutes slipped away so fast.

"It was nice of you to come," she said. "I should be feeling horribly lonely now if I had had this wait alone."

"The train's late," he said. "God bless the lack of unpunctuality. I've half a mind to go with you. I don't know why I don't go. I don't know why I stay on in a God-forsaken hole on the top of a mountain which leads nowhere. Do you?"

She laughed.

"I suppose you like it," she said. "And the air is fine."

"A man can't live on air."

"But you don't live there," she said. For the first time it occurred to her that she did not know where he lived; she knew surprisingly little about him.

"I don't live anywhere; I drift," he said.

He met her eyes and read the curiosity in them, their unspoken criticism, and smiled. But he did not give her any information. He started to talk again on impersonal matters, while she looked away into the green tangle of the trees and wondered about him.

On the way to the station he gave her a book, which he took from his pocket and handed to her with the remark that it would relieve the tedium of the train journey. She read the title, "David Harum," and flushed with pleasure as she thanked him.

"I hope you will like it," he said. "I have found him a good companion."

He discovered an empty compartment and settled her in it and stood by the door. She leaned from the window, with her arms on it, and looked down at him, earnestly, intently, with the light of unsaid things shining in her eyes.

"I hate going," she said.

"I know. Partings are beastly things."

But he said nothing to lead her to hope that this parting was not final; no intimation of it being otherwise entered his thoughts.

"To-morrow," he said, "I shall go alone to watch the sunrise."

A little wistful smile curved her lips.

"I shall think of you," she said.

"I shall probably have *you* in my thoughts," he replied, and smiled also. "We have spent some pleasant times together."

She leaned further out and held out a hand to him as the train was about to start. He took it and pressed it warmly.

"Thank you for your kindness to me," she said simply.

"Thank *you* for your bright companionship," he returned, and the regret he felt at parting crept into his voice.

He released her hand and stood back while the train moved slowly out of the station. The girl, leaning from the open window, saw the tall stooping figure on the platform, with face turned towards her, until she drew back suddenly and sat down in the corner seat, a feeling of great loneliness in her heart, and in her eyes the brightness of unshed tears. She took up the book he had given her, and opened it, and read on the fly-leaf his name, written in small, unsteady characters,—Paul Hallam.

She sat with the book open in her lap, gazing at his name.

Book Two—Chapter Twelve.

Esmé Lester lived with a married sister at Port Elizabeth in a little house in Havelock Street. Her brother-in-law was junior partner in a store which was not a particularly flourishing concern, and the family finances were generally at low ebb. There were two children, a boy and a girl, named respectively John and Mary. When the family were all at home the little house seemed full to overflowing.

Esmé had a tiny bedroom at the back, overlooking a cemented yard. There was one beauty in this yard, a huge oleander tree, the dark green leaves of which and the clusters of sweet-scented pink blossoms reared themselves against her window and shaded and perfumed her little room. If the oleander had been stricken by drought, or any other mischance had befallen it to cause it to die, the house would have been unbearable to the girl. As it was, the oleander made life possible, even when the children were troublesome, and when her sister and her husband quarrelled. They quarrelled frequently; over the children, over the housekeeping expenses, over the lack of money. Lack of money was the principal grievance.

Esmé boarded with them, because it seemed more natural to stay with her own people than with strangers, and because her sister liked to have her. But she was not fond of her brother-in-law; and the constant disagreements worried her.

It seemed to her, when she entered the house after her pleasant holiday, that she had left all the peace and romance behind and returned to the drab reality of the common daily round. Her sister welcomed her with restrained pleasure, but the children hung about her in unqualified delight, bubbling over in childish fashion with excitement at her return.

"You are looking well," her sister remarked. "I wish I could take a holiday. Single girls don't realise how lucky they are until after they are married. Jim and I spent our honeymoon at the Zuurberg. I thought it dull."

Esmé reflected, while she regarded her sister with a puzzled scrutiny, that it was scarcely surprising her marriage had proved on the whole a disappointing affair. To feel dull on one's honeymoon is not a promising beginning.

"I thought it wonderful," she said.

"You had a good time, I suppose. Were there many people there?"

"A fair number. But it's the place itself. It is lovely."

Mrs Bainbridge looked unconvinced.

"People, not places, make a holiday enjoyable," she said with a certain worldly wisdom which jarred on her hearer. "Were there any men there?"

"A few—yes."

Her sister laughed.

"You always get on with men," she said. "I wonder you don't marry."

"But, according to your view, that would be a mistake."

"Not if the man were well off. It is having to cheese-pare that makes the shoe pinch. Marriage has its compensations." Her gaze rested reflectively on the children. "One grumbles," she said; "but one wouldn't undo all of it."

"I'm never going to marry," John, aged eight, announced with sturdy determination. "I've seen too much of it."

His mother laughed, and Esmé caught him up and kissed him.

"That's for you, you stony-hearted little misogynist," she said, as he struggled to elude her embrace.

"John's a silly kid," Mary, his senior by two years, announced in the crushing tones of a person who resents a slight to her sex.

John freed himself from his aunt's detaining hold in order to vindicate his insulted manhood; and Esmé left them to their scuffling and went upstairs to unpack.

When she came down again her brother-in-law had come home. He sat by the window smoking his pipe, but he rose when she entered and came forward and kissed her. He was a heavily-built, good-looking man, with a boisterous geniality of manner which worried his sister-in-law. Oddly, he never realised her objection. He liked her and laboured under the delusion that she reciprocated his affection. He kissed her heartily.

"Glad to see you back, old girl," he said, and reseated himself in the only comfortable chair in the room and resumed his pipe. "You look very fit. I told Rose the Zuurberg would set you up; but she won't hear a good word for it. There isn't much to do up there, certainly, but loaf around. The drive up, though, is all right. Pretty— isn't it?"

She laughed, to his puzzled surprise. She often surprised him by the way in which she received his remarks. He had said nothing to cause her merriment. But he preferred smiling faces to glum looks, and so he did not resent it when she laughed at nothing.

"I suppose loafing around was what I needed," she said, steering clear of a discussion on the scenery. "Living in the open air with nothing to do is a fine tonic."

"Yes," he agreed. "I'd like a little of that myself. A man who spends all his days in an office ought to get away now and again; but when it comes to carting a wife and kids around with one it makes an expensive business of it. Rose ought to see that a man needs change from his work."

"We are most of us short-sighted where the needs of other people are concerned," she returned with an ambiguity which he did not suspect. "I suppose it would be rather nice if I remembered that Rose hasn't had a holiday and went out to help her with the preparations for your evening meal."

"Rot!" he ejaculated, unperceiving the drift of her reflections. "You finish out your holiday and sit down and talk to me."

But she elected to go in quest of her sister, who was busy in the kitchen, aided by an incompetent Kaffir girl of an amiable disposition, which revealed itself in the broad smile she gave the young missis when she appeared in the bright, hot little kitchen, which looked out, as her bed room looked out, on the white yard shaded by the big oleander tree beneath which the children played happily in their cramped but secure playground.

It was a homelike, pleasant enough picture; but the girl's thoughts strayed persistently to the green open spaces, and the pleasant ease of the life she had left behind her. She felt a new dissatisfaction with her present surroundings.

"Can I help?" she asked.

Her sister turned round from the stove with flushed preoccupied face to stare at her.

"In that dress! Goodness! no. Besides, it's all ready—or ought to be. But Maggie won't keep a good fire."

Maggie promptly came forward and fed the voracious little stove with a fresh supply of logs.

"This stove eat wood. Missis should see. I put plenty logs on."

"She's right, you know," Rose said, stepping back, and pushing the hair from her face. "Jim ought to buy a new stove. He'd save money on it in the long run. But he hasn't the cooking to do; he merely grumbles when he has to order the wood. Is the table laid, Maggie? Then you can begin to dish up."

She put a hand through her sister's arm and drew her out to the doorstep, where they stood watching the children,

both a little silent and thoughtful in mood.

“Aren’t you hating it, being back again?” Rose asked presently, and bent a keen look on her young sister’s face. Esmé looked up to smile.

“I suppose one always feels a little regretful at the finish of a holiday,” she said. “But of course I don’t hate being back.”

Rose did not press the point. Something in the girl’s manner, something even in the reticence she betrayed in speaking of her holiday, puzzled her. Esmé was usually more expansive. She did not seem to wish to talk of her experiences. Perhaps, after all, she had had a disappointing time. But the rest and the change had given her back her strength. Had it? Rose looked at her again more attentively. She appeared to be in excellent health; but she had lost her old gaiety; she seemed depressed.

“You are tired after the journey,” she said. “Come on in and have something to eat.”

She called the children away from their play; and they all went into the little dining-room and sat, crowded uncomfortably, round the small table.

Jim served the food, and was jocular and determinedly cheerful. He was pleased to have his sister-in-law home again. It was all rather noisy and uncomfortable. The girl’s thoughts strayed to the long shady room at the Zuurberg, and to the silent companionship of the man whose presence she was missing more than she would have thought possible. And it was only a few hours since they had parted. There would follow many hours, many days, many weeks. She wondered whether she would miss him less as the days went by, or if this intolerable loneliness would grow. It was distressing to think that she might never see him again. She wondered also whether he missed her. She hoped he did. And then she fell to picturing him reverting perhaps to the old evening practice of drinking steadily, until finally he stumbled along the stoep on his way to bed... Surely not that! If her friendship counted for anything at all in his life its influence would linger with him and have some deterrent effect.

“Sling along the Adam’s ale, old girl,” said Jim at this point in her reverie. It was one of his boasts that he didn’t pour his money down his throat.

Esmé passed him the water-bottle and roused herself with an effort and joined in the general talk. The meal seemed interminable. The children were excited and noisy; they dawdled over their food. Their mother urged them to be quicker, and their father defeated her authority by insisting that the slower they ate the better for their digestions. Husband and wife had a wordy argument on this point. The children ceased eating to listen, on perceiving which their father vented his annoyance on them and sent them away from the table.

“That’s your fault,” he said to his wife. “You are always nagging at the kids. We never get a meal in peace.”

Esmé listened and wondered. What was wrong with this household? These two were quite fond of each other, and fond of the children; yet they were seldom in agreement on any subject. She wondered whether all married people got on one another’s nerves. Marriage was a difficult problem. It occurred to Esmé that the solution of the difficulty might be reached by its generous use of tact. Without her volition her reflections found verbal expression.

“Tact!” she observed aloud to the astonishment of her hearers. “That’s the secret of happiness—immense tact. Jim, I think you are the most tactless person in the world.”

Book Two—Chapter Thirteen.

During the first few days after her return to her sister’s home time hung dismally for Esmé. It would have been better had she gone back to work immediately; but there was a full week to term time, and during that week she found nothing sufficiently interesting to distract her thoughts from the desolating fact that she missed something out of her life. Her world was like a world without sunshine, flat and colourless, a place of neutral tints and drab impressions. She hated the house, she hated going out; most of all, she hated the people who visited her sister and gossiped over tea of every trivial matter in the common daily round. Those afternoon gatherings gave her mental indigestion. Yet at one time these things had seemed pleasant and natural. The inference was that there was something wrong with herself.

Her sister laid a hand on her secret very soon after her return. She had gone into Esmé’s room and taken up a book, which lay on the little table beside her bed, and opened it casually.

“Who is Paul Hallam?” she asked, reading the name inside the cover.

Esmé swung round from the dressing-table, saw the book in her sister’s hand, and coloured warmly.

“A man who was staying at the Zuurberg.”

“And he gave you this book?”

“Yes—to read in the train.”

The two sisters looked at one another. Rose waited for further information, but it was not forthcoming. She laid the book down, and Esmé resumed brushing her hair. It was pretty hair, soft and wavy. The older woman watched operations for a moment or so, then she went forward, took the brush from the girl’s hand, and brushed it for her.

"Tell me about him," she urged.

"There is nothing to tell," Esmé replied. "He was nice to me while I was there; that is all."

The finality of the phrase struck on her own ears desolately. That was all. Her romance had begun and ended with her holiday.

Rose made no comment. The scrappy information had illumined things for her surprisingly. She felt suddenly very tender towards her sister. She put the hair back from her face and kissed her gently.

"You are just sweet. You look such a child with your hair like that," she said.

But she made no further mention of Paul Hallam. There were a dozen questions she would have liked to ask, but she forbore. It was not fair to attempt to force the girl's confidence; her very reluctance to speak of this acquaintance proved that there was more in it than she allowed, perhaps more than she yet realised.

There followed days of restlessness and alternating moods more fitful than any barometer. Sinclair called, and made himself so agreeable to Rose and the children, and was so markedly attentive to Esmé that Rose found herself wishing that this quite eligible and agreeable young man was the object of her sister's interest, as he unmistakably desired to be.

Esmé was pleased to see him again; but her manner towards him showed no particular partiality. It was certainly not George Sinclair, Rose decided, who was responsible for the change in the girl.

Sinclair called frequently after that first visit, and speedily became on very friendly terms with the family. He found a staunch ally in Rose, who, considering the other affair too remote to be serious, saw in Sinclair an eventual safety-valve for her sister's repressed emotions. Repressed emotion was undesirable; it hid like a morbid germ in the brain cells and worked with insidious effect upon the mind. In Esmé it betrayed itself in unexpected bursts of irritability, as her discontent with things grew. Mainly this was the result of reaction, and was but a phase in the cure of which Sinclair aided unconsciously. His visits made a break in the general monotony.

And then one day a letter came for Esmé. Rose took it in. It was directed in the same small untidy handwriting which she remembered vividly seeing on the front page of the book in Esmé's room. She had looked for that book often since but she had never seen it again. Now, with the letter in her hand, her thoughts went back to that little scene in the bedroom, and her brows knitted themselves in a frown. Paul Hallam had broken the silence and written to the girl. She carried the letter up to Esmé's room and laid it on the table beside her bed.

"Poor George!" she reflected. "This puts him out of the picture anyway."

Then she went downstairs and left it to the girl to make her own discovery on her return.

The first thing which Esmé's eyes rested on when she ran up to her room on getting back from the college where she gave music lessons was the letter lying on her table. She stood for a full minute looking down at it with pleased, amazed eyes and a deepening colour in her cheeks; then she reached forth shyly and took it up.

"I wonder how he learned my address?" was the thought in her mind.

She had not seen him copy it from the label on her suit-case. He had taken that precaution when the luggage was being placed in the cart.

She seated herself on the side of the bed and opened her letter and read it.

"Dear little Friend," it began characteristically,—

"I wonder whether it will surprise you that I should write to you? I write to ask you a favour. I want you out of the kindness of your heart to send me a line sometimes. You can in this matter help me considerably. I knew before you left that I should miss you, but I did not realise how great that miss would be until after you were gone. Never in all my life have I known what it was to feel intolerably lonely until now. It is not fair to me if, after giving me your friendship, you withdraw it again altogether.

"I am fighting the devil within me, and just at present I can't say who will win. But you can help me, if you will. Once you told me it was a shame to make waste of my life. You were right, and I knew it, though at the time I resented your candour. Since you left I have thought often of your words. I miss you. And I want to talk to you. I have never before ached to talk with any one. And yet I don't want to see you for the present. If ever we meet you will know I have won. I shan't attempt to see you otherwise.

"Please send me a line occasionally. You don't know what it will mean to me. I am wondering as I write what you are doing, and whether you continue the early morning habit? The sunrises are not marvellous any longer. Every morning I go in search of the old beauty, but it is not there. I wonder whether I shall ever find it again.

"Paul Hallam."

Esmé read this letter through with deepening interest and a growing softness in her eyes; there were tears in her eyes; they splashed on to the paper and blurred the signature, tears of relief, of deep thankfulness that at last the man had come to see the pity of wasting his days.

She felt no fear for him any longer. Not a doubt of him troubled her mind. That he would ultimately win through was

assured by the sincerity of his desire to win. It did not seem to her possible that he could fail in what he undertook to accomplish. His devil stood no chance when his better self took up arms against him. He would win. Assuredly he would win. And then...

The bell sounded for lunch. She folded the letter and put it inside her blouse. Then she bathed her eyes to hide the traces of emotion and went downstairs.

Her sister scrutinised her attentively, but could read nothing in her face to help her to any conclusion. She longed to ask questions, but restrained her curiosity in the hope that Esmé would confide in her when a propitious moment offered. She made opportunities somewhat too obviously, but Esmé did not take advantage of them. She did not speak of her letter.

The letters came regularly after that, once a week; and Rose's unsatisfied curiosity grew enormously. There was something unnatural in the girl's reticence. She began to entertain doubts of Paul Hallam. It entered her mind to seek information from Sinclair, but loyalty to her sister restrained her from doing that. Esmé, she supposed, answered these weekly epistles; but she never saw her write letters; whatever she wrote she posted herself.

"Who's Esmé's correspondent?" Jim asked on one occasion when the weekly letter attracted his notice. "These letters are always coming to the house."

"I don't know," his wife answered. "And you'd better not ask her."

"D'you mean she never tells you?" he asked, amazed.

"She doesn't tell me anything. But I believe they come from a man she met at the Zuurberg."

"That place seems to be a kind of matrimonial agency," Jim grinned. "I thought Sinclair was coming into the family. You see if you can't find out something about this fellow. Sinclair's all right, and he means business. Pity if this is going to queer his pitch."

"It's Esmé's affair," Rose replied, experiencing a distinct disinclination to follow his counsel. "When there is anything for me to know I expect she will tell me."

"I never knew before that you were so blooming discreet," he rejoined; and turned, red in the face but unabashed, to confront his sister-in-law, who entered by the open door and met them in the tiny hall. He gave her the letter.

"I was just asking Rose who your correspondent was," he said, with overdone ease of manner. "She pretends she doesn't know."

"She does not know," Esmé answered coolly, and took the letter from his hand and glanced at it casually.

"Well, but, see here," he returned, nettled but intent on information. "We are interested—naturally."

"How can you be interested in some one you have never met?" she said, and went on up the steep narrow stairs, carrying her letter with her.

"I'm blowed!" her brother-in-law ejaculated.

Rose laughed annoyingly.

"You made a hash of that," she said. "She won't say anything now."

"Then let her keep her mouth shut," he said rudely, and went into the sitting-room in a ruffled state of mind.

Book Two—Chapter Fourteen.

The receipt of those weekly letters and the pleasurable occupation of replying to them engrossed Esmé's thoughts, changed all her outlook, filled her life completely. She was falling very deeply in love. And she believed that Paul Hallam loved her. He did not tell her so in words, but every letter which came from him conveyed the idea that it was for her sake entirely he was attempting what no other influence would have led him to attempt, that when he was sure of himself he would come to her. She waited and hoped and hugged her secret to herself, determined to guard from others the knowledge of his weakness, which he was so earnestly endeavouring to conquer.

He had left the Zuurberg for the coast, and was staying at Camp's Bay, right on the beach, he explained, in writing her a description of his new quarters.

"You would love it here," he wrote. "The road between Camp's Bay and Seapoint surpasses everything for beauty. You've no idea how fine it is in the early morning."

In another letter he said: "The moonlight on the sea has set me thinking of you. If only we were watching it together! The surface of the sea is all splashed with silver, broken up and spread over it in a running liquid fire. One day I hope you will watch it with me. I see it from the window as I write."

She treasured these letters and tied them about and locked them away from sight. They brought him very near to her; and his detailed descriptions of his walks, his surroundings, helped her to visualise him. She longed to see him again; but she never allowed a breath of her longing to find expression in the cheery letters she wrote in answer to his.

In the meantime Sinclair pursued his courtship in blissful unconsciousness of the hopelessness of his cause. Esmé had come to accept Sinclair's friendship as a matter of course. Their relations were very fraternal. They called one another by their christian names. Sinclair was George to everyone in the Bainbridge household, down to the children, who viewed him with affectionate interest as a person who understood small people's tastes in the matter of sweets.

Every Saturday he came in for tennis, and returned with Esmé to the house in Havelock Street for supper. Usually on Sundays he took Esmé and the children to Red House, and they spent the day on the river. He brightened life for her considerably. She liked him. In a friendly, wholly unsentimental fashion she was fond of him. Had there been no one else in her life her affection would probably have developed into a warmer sentiment. But she never thought of George Sinclair in the light of a possible lover. He never made love to her. Not once in their pleasant intercourse had he said anything she could have construed into an attempt at love-making. His manner was affectionate and kind always. He was a good chum. That was how she thought of him, as a good chum. The awakening therefore was all the more startling when it came.

Sinclair seized his opportunity during the tennis tournament. With considerable difficulty he persuaded her to partner him in the mixed doubles. She was reluctant on account of being a weak player; but he overruled her objections, and she gave way.

"You'll lose—with me," she warned him. "I'm not good at games ever."

"I'll take my chance of that," he replied. "Anyway, I'd rather lose with you than win with any one else."

Esmé practised untiringly before the event. She had never attended the tournament before other than as a spectator, and the sight of the crowds which gathered each day to view the events shook her nerve. She played badly, and felt rather aggrieved that her partner managed to drag her victoriously through their first set. After their game she sat with him below the stand and reproached him for winning.

"It would be all over now if you hadn't cribbed half my balls," she complained.

"But you don't want to be out of it really?" he said, surprised.

"I do—and I don't. It makes me jumpy."

"That's all right. You'll get your tail up later. I'm going to win, you know. I'm going to pull this off."

"You've got your work cut out," she said, and laughed. "You'll get very little help from me."

"I only ask your co-operation," he returned confidently. "Take what you can, and leave the rest to me. I'm out to win. You see, we are coming through together."

She did see. And with each set they played and won her astonishment deepened. She had always known that he was a good player, but she had not realised the reserve force which he could bring into his game when he wanted it. It was something more than play, she decided, which carried him through; it was sheer determination not to be beaten. They came through the finals with a hard-won victory.

Jim and Rose were present to watch the finish. According to Jim, his sister-in-law played a footling game.

"At least she didn't hamper her partner," Rose said.

"Hamper him! No. She might as well have been off the court altogether."

"Her service is good," Rose insisted.

"Yes—for a girl." He chuckled. "She leaves him to make all the running."

"Well, they won anyhow."

"*He* won," he corrected. "Shouldn't be surprised if he didn't win all along the line. He has only a bundle of letters to compete against. My money is on the man on the spot all the time."

"Hush!" Rose said warningly. "Here they come."

She hailed the winners with smiling congratulations, and complimented Sinclair on his play.

"We pulled it off all right, Mrs Bainbridge," he said, laughing, looking hot and young and immeasurably contented with life. "Esmé funk'd right to the finish, but she played up like a good 'un. Whew! I'm hot. Come on, partner; let's go and have a lemon squash."

The girl, flushed and tired and less elated with success than he was, followed him to the back of the pavilion, and stood drinking lemonade, and talking to a little knot of competitors who were there for a similar purpose. Some of the players she knew, but a number of them were visitors down for the tournament. A dance that night at the Town Hall was to celebrate the finish of the festivities. A group of flannel-clad young men and white-frocked young women were discussing the ball and booking dances in advance. Some one came up to Esmé and asked her for a dance, which she promised willingly. In a very short while she had given a number of dances away. Sinclair touched her arm.

"I want some," he said. "I want quite a lot."

His tone was urgent, and when she turned to look at him she saw that his face was strained and very determined. The expression in his eyes puzzled her.

"Of course," she said, "I should feel a little hurt if you didn't."

"Look here!" he said in an undertone. "Come out of this. I don't want you to give away any more—not at present. I'm going to have the supper dance, and everything after that. Is it a promise?"

"Well," she said, and looked somewhat doubtful. "That means that you are booked for the entire half of my programme."

He nodded.

"That's it," he said.

"But,"—she was beginning, when he took hold of her arm and led her outside, with a muttered reference to the stifling heat.

"Come and sit under the trees," he said. "I want to watch the set on the far court."

It was one of the less interesting sets, and there were fewer spectators, which was probably why he decided for it. He conducted her to an unoccupied seat and sat down beside her.

"It's jolly here and cool and out of the crush. You don't want to watch the Johannesburg chap, do you?"

She would have preferred to watch the play on the centre court. It was clear that the Johannesburg man would carry off the championship in the men's singles; but she gave in to his wish and decided to remain where she was.

Sinclair's manner was nervous and preoccupied; but the girl did not appear to notice it; she did not want to talk. Her companion smoked cigarettes and stared with a sort of strained attention at the game and jerked out an occasional comment. Presently he remarked apropos of nothing:

"I had a rise yesterday. That was an altogether unexpected stroke of luck."

"Yes!" she exclaimed, turning an interested, unsuspecting face towards him. "I am pleased. Why didn't you tell me before?"

He laughed.

"Too absorbed in our game," he said, "to think of it. But I'm thinking of it now. It makes a difference."

"I suppose it does. You'll be bursting forth into extravagances. Why don't you keep a car?"

"Not yet," he said. "I want other things more urgently than that."

"What things?"

"I'll tell you to-night," he said, reddening.

"Yes," she said, her thoughts reverting to the discussion in the pavilion. "During half a programme you'll find time enough to tell me a good deal."

He glanced at her quickly.

"You didn't mind?" he said. "It's only the second half; and you'll be tired. You won't want to dance much."

"Oh, indeed! Then what do you propose we shall do? If we don't dance we might as well remain at home."

"We'll dance all you want to," he replied. "And we'll go for a stroll along the sea wall. The weather is too hot for being inside. You shall do what you like anyhow."

"You are always so amenable, George," she said, smiling. "And you always get your own way in the end."

He smiled back at her with gay confidence.

"My luck's in," he replied. "The gods smile on me. I told you, Esmé, that I meant to win."

"I did my utmost to prevent you," she said.

"You understand co-operation, partner," he returned coolly. "That's good enough for me."

She did not in the least understand the drift of his remarks, although he believed he was tactfully preparing her for the declaration he intended making that night. The last thing she anticipated was the proposal which hovered continually in the forefront of Sinclair's mind. He intended to put his luck to the test that evening, and felt fairly confident as to the result. He had not the remotest suspicion of possessing a rival. The road ahead, so far as he could see, was perfectly clear.

Book Two—Chapter Fifteen.

It seemed to Sinclair that all the conditions that night favoured his suit. It was a perfect evening, warm and still, with

a brilliant moon in a cloudless sky lighting the world with a luminous whiteness in which everything was revealed scarcely less clearly than in the daylight. It was a night for lovers, for the open air and solitude; it was not a night for dancing. Sinclair, after the first dance, which he had with Esmé, was content to remain on the outskirts of the crowd and look on at the rest. The floor was thronged with dancers. The lights, the music, the colour of the moving crowd, appealed pleasantly to the senses. He liked to watch; and every now and again he caught Esmé's eye and won a smile from her which cheered him. She appeared more than usually sweet and kind that night, he thought.

The supper dance gave him the right to claim her again. In the interim he had done a lot of thinking. He had his phrases turned and clear in his mind. He knew very definitely what he wanted to say; he had rehearsed it in his thoughts endless times. And he knew the right atmosphere for the deliverance of those neatly turned sentences. He wasn't going to fling the thing at her in a crowded room with numberless people present. They would slip away together in the moonlight, and stroll along the sea wall, against which the tiny waves broke softly, running in and curling round the rocks, slapping musically against the stonework which checked their further advance. He could tell her to the accompaniment of the sea what he could not tell her in a hot and crowded place. He wanted her to himself, away from these others.

It was not a difficult matter to persuade her to go with him. With the finish of supper they left the hall together, crossed the moonlit square, passed the Customs House, and so on to the sea wall, where the quiet of the night was undisturbed; the swish of lapping water and the low murmur of the sea were the only audible sounds in the surrounding stillness.

He sat down beside her on a seat cut into the wall, and remained very still, holding her hand and looking away to where the ships rode at anchor far out on the silver sea. All the things which he had meant to say to her, all his carefully planned sentences, eluded him; he felt intensely, horribly nervous as he sat there in the growing silence, holding her hand and looking out across the sea.

The girl sat and looked at the water also and forgot the man beside her. Her thoughts were away from her present surroundings. She was thinking of a sentence in one of Hallam's letters, while she sat silent in the moonlight and saw the surface of the sea, as he had seen it from his window while he wrote his letter to her, splashed with silver, broken up and spread over it, a running liquid fire. It was here just as he had described it—the same sea, the same moon,—with the waste of waters intervening, dividing them in everything but thought. Sinclair had made a mistake in taking her down to the sea.

"Esmé!" he said presently, breaking the dragging silence, and pressing her hand warmly in his strong grasp. "Esmé!"

She turned her face to his, wholly unaware of the emotional stress under which he laboured, but conscious of a quality in his voice which rendered it unfamiliar. She saw his face close to hers, strained and white in the moonlight, heard his breathing, hard and deep, like the breathing of a man after violent exercise, and felt a faint surprise. Dimly she began to realise that something unusual was happening; a look of apprehension grew in her eyes.

He groped about after the sentences he had so carefully prepared, but his mind was a blank. He could think of nothing effective to say; and all the while her eyes, puzzled and questioning, were on his face.

"I love you," he mumbled presently, and took heart of grace when the words were out and pulled her swiftly to him and kissed her. "Dear, I love you with all my soul. I want to marry you."

Very gently she freed herself from his hold, and drew back, and sat scrutinising him with ever growing distress. She liked him so well. She hated having to hurt him; but it had never occurred to her that he was in love with her. His affection had seemed so frankly friendly hitherto.

"George, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know. I don't feel towards you like that."

"Perhaps not now. But you will," he suggested. "I've been a little abrupt. I ought to have waited."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I'm very fond of you; but that's all," she added convincingly.

"Well, look here! I'm not taking 'No' right off like that. I'm going to wait—"

"No," she interrupted quickly. "You mustn't think that. I shan't change."

His face fell.

"You don't mean that there is some one else?" he asked.

For a moment or two she did not answer; then she nodded, without speaking, and put out a hand and touched his arm.

"My dear," she said, "don't ask me questions. It is quite possible that I shall never marry the man I love, but I cannot marry any one else. I'm sorry. I didn't think you cared for me like that. I wish you didn't. You must put me out of your thoughts."

He smiled faintly.

"That's not easily done," he replied. "Besides, I don't want to. Like you, I may never marry the girl I love, but at least

I cannot love any one else. You are the one and only girl for me. I know. I'm not a moonstruck boy. You'll let me keep your friendship, won't you? I won't take advantage of it."

Tears came into her eyes. She had never liked him so much as in that moment. The idea of giving up his friendship had not occurred to her until he begged the privilege of retaining it. She did not want to give it up. It was one of the pleasant things in her life.

"I want to continue being friends," she said. "I've grown to look on you as a chum. That's how I've always thought of you. I want to be friends—and to put this other thing out of my thoughts."

"Yes," he agreed. "We'll wipe that out. I made a mistake. You know, dear,"—he felt for her hand and found it and held it tightly,—"I think you are the sweetest girl in the world. I'll do anything for you. For the present I'm feeling a bit sore, and just for a little while will keep in the background. When I turn up again I'll be over the worst of it, and you needn't fear that I shall make a fool of myself. We'll take things up where we dropped them."

His defeat staggered Sinclair. He had been so sure that his luck was in, so confident of the girl's affection, and unsuspecting of a possible rival. He knew of no one with whom she was on terms of particular intimacy. It never entered his thoughts to associate Hallam with her in any way. He had not seen the development of that acquaintance. He would have disapproved if he had. His naturally healthy mind held only contempt for such weakness as Hallam's. He had summed up the man briefly as a waster, and so disposed of him. That the man he despised would one day have to be reckoned with, that he stood already in his life, a menace to his happiness, an adverse influence, he was wholly unaware. It was as well for his peace of mind that he remained in ignorance for long after she had refused him of his rival's identity. A rival who did not materialise left room for a tiny gleam of hope in his heart.

"We'd better get back," he said, and rose from the seat. The beauty of the night held no longer any attraction for him.

"I want to go home," she said, rising also. "I'm tired, and—I want to go home."

He took her back to the hall and waited while she fetched her cloak. She came out after a brief while, white faced and pensive, with a look in her eyes as though she had been crying and had dashed the tears hastily away.

He drew her hand through his arm and went with her out into the warm, still night, along the deserted streets, up White's Road, traversing the intervening byways to her own road almost in silence. At her door he said good-night, and was turning away when she stopped him. Her heart ached with pity for the sadness in his eyes.

"George, I'm sorry," she whispered, and tugged at his sleeve.

"That's all right," he answered, breaking away from her.

His voice sounded husky and a little gruff; he could not trust himself to say more. She drew back, feeling troubled and inadequate, and stood on the doorstep looking after him wistfully while he hurried down the road in the moonlight, turned a corner and went out of her sight. She had an impulse to run after him: she felt that she must say something, do something, anything, to drive the pain and disappointment from his look; it hurt her to let him go like that. But on reflection she knew that she could do nothing; she must let him go.

She opened the door and went dejectedly inside and shut it quickly and turned the key in the lock. Softly she crept upstairs to her room. The blind was not drawn and the moonlight streamed in through the open window and made any other illumination unnecessary.

She seated herself on the side of the bed and stared out at the black shadow of the tree with its clusters of blossoms showing palely in the white light. The household she supposed was asleep; everything was very still and quiet. In the distance a dog barked incessantly: there was no other sound to disturb the quiet of the night.

And then suddenly her door opened softly, and Rose came in in her nightdress, and stood looking in sleepy surprise at the motionless figure seated on the bed. She advanced to the bed and sat down beside the girl and started a whispered conversation.

"I heard you come in," she said. "Jim's asleep. Have you had a good time? Why don't you get to bed?"

"I forgot," Esmé said, and began to unfasten her dress. Rose became actively helpful.

"You are tired," she said. "What's the matter, dear?" She took the girl's face between her hands and scrutinised it closely. "Esmé, what has happened? I wish you'd confide in me more."

The gentle reproach in her sister's voice, acting on her overwrought nerves, caused the tears, so near the surface, to overflow. She dropped her face on to Rose's shoulder and wept softly.

"Did George say anything to you to-night?" Rose asked, feeling increasingly surprised. She had not wept when Jim proposed to her. She remembered quite vividly that she had felt elated and very excited. She had wanted to speak of it, to tell people. She could not fathom Esmé's mood.

"Is that the trouble, little goose?" she asked. "I knew—we all knew—he meant to propose."

Whereupon Esmé lifted her face and turned her tear-wet eyes on the speaker in wide amaze.

"You knew!" she said. "Well, I didn't. I wish I had known. I thought he was just a pal."

"A pal makes a good husband," Rose said thoughtfully, with the first glimmer of doubt in her mind as to what answer her sister had returned. "It's all right, isn't it?"

"It's all wrong," Esmé answered ruefully, and dabbed at her eyes,—“just as wrong as it can be. He's hurt; and I hate hurting him. I like him so well. But I don't love him, Rose.”

"You don't mean that you refused him?"

"Of course I mean that. I couldn't marry George.”

"Why not?" Rose inquired blankly. When no response came to her question, she caught her sister's arm and turned her towards her and looked her steadily in the eyes.

"Tell me," she said quietly, "what there is between you and Paul Hallam? You've changed since you knew him. You are more reserved, and you've lost your high spirits. Who is Paul Hallam? And why does he write to you? What is he to you?"

"He is just a friend," Esmé answered.

"You love him," Rose said. "Do you think I am so dense as not to have discovered that? You can trust me. I've not let Jim guess that I know who your correspondent is. I've kept your counsel all the time; it's your affair. But I think you might tell me.”

Esmé made a gesture that was at once a protest and an appeal. She sat straighter, with her hands locked together in her lap, and stared out at the moonlight unseeingly.

"I'd tell you if there was anything to tell," she said. "There isn't. There has never been any talk of love between us ever. We are just good friends.”

"But you love him?" Rose persisted.

"Yes, I love him with all my heart. If I never see him again I will go on loving him for the rest of my life.”

In face of this Rose found nothing to say. The situation had got beyond her. She felt increasingly curious. She wanted to know more about this man; but Esmé's manner baffled her. It was very evident that the subject was distressing to the girl. There was something behind all this of which she was in ignorance and which she felt she ought to be told. She put one or two leading questions, but all she elicited was the fact that Hallam was a man of independent means and no fixed abode. That struck Rose as significant. If no duties engrossed him it was odd that he should be satisfied to communicate with the girl only by post. If he were sufficiently interested in her to keep up a correspondence, why did he never come to see her?

"I would advise you to put Paul Hallam out of your thoughts," she said, as an outcome of these reflections.

Then she kissed the girl, and got off the bed, and stood hesitating between the bed and the door, sleepy, yet reluctant to leave her sister alone.

"I hoped when I came in you would have a different story to tell me," she added. "Don't waste your life, thinking of a man who doesn't care enough to want to come and see you. George is honest, and he loves you. It's a pity to throw away a really good chance of happiness.”

"To marry a man when you love another would not bring happiness," Esmé said, facing her sister in the moonlight, half undressed, and with her hair falling about her shoulders and shading her face. "And it wouldn't be fair to George.”

"I expect George, like most people, would prefer half a loaf to no bread," Rose answered. She opened the door. "Good-night, dear," she said softly. "You go to sleep, and don't bother your head about any of them. Men aren't worth half the tears women waste on them.”

She returned to her own room, and stood for a moment or so looking thoughtfully at the sleeping face of her husband, as he lay on his back with arms spread wide across the bed, and a faint smile touched her lips.

"It is all beauty and romance till we marry you," she mused. "Then we discover that our demi-gods are just mere men. I wonder whether I would have wept over you in the old days? ... I didn't anyway.”

With which she got into bed and fell asleep.

But Esmé did not sleep. She lay awake in the hot stuffy darkness of her little room, which the kitchen stove abetted the sun in keeping hot by day, while the warm slates of the too adjacent roof prevented any appreciable decrease in temperature during the night—lay awake with her mind filled with the thought of one man, and her imagination afire with the memory of splashes of moonlight on a heaving mass of water that stretched away endlessly and laved the moonlit, rock-strewn beach of a little bay along the coast. Then, with the dawn, she fell asleep and dreamed of the moonlight and of Paul Hallam.

Book Two—Chapter Sixteen.

From dreaming of Hallam at night and thinking of him in the daytime, Esmé arrived at a stage of almost incredible longing to see him again. Letters did not satisfy her. She wanted to hear his voice speaking to her, wanted to feel his

presence, wanted, above all, to discover whether the months had changed him, and if the lapse of time had decreased his kindly feeling for her in any way. His letters no longer referred to the possibility of meeting: they became more formal in tone as time went by.

Soon after her tennis victory he wrote congratulating her on the event. She had not written to him on the subject; his information had been gleaned from the papers.

"I see you have been distinguishing yourself on the tennis courts," he wrote. "Why do you leave me to discover the tale of your triumphs from the newspapers? I prefer to hear of these things first hand. The news furnished a further link with the old Zuurberg days. I recall how you practised with Sinclair then. So you keep hold on the thread of that acquaintance also?"

It occurred to Esmé that this circumstance had displeased him. She wished that she had written to him about the tournament and her part in it. It did seem a little odd, when she came to think of it, that she had suppressed this piece of news.

His letter was brief; and contained very little news of personal interest. It read as though it had been written with an effort, and not because he wanted to talk to her. A first fear that he might weary of the correspondence gripped her. If he ceased to write she would be desolate. His letters had come to mean so much to her: they caught her away from the dreary routine of her days; they coloured life for her warmly, kept her interest on the alert. Giving music lessons endlessly through the long, hot days, returning to the stuffy overcrowded little house where numberless small duties constantly demanded her attention, was not an existence calculated to add romance to life. She had grown weary of these things. The blood in her veins was astir like the sap in the trees in the springtime. Love budded in her heart; it only awaited a sign to burst into flower.

There were times when she fancied she read in Hallam's letters an intimation that he wanted her. He spoke often of his loneliness, and made reference to the happiness of their time together. But the months went by and he did not come, and into his letters crept a new note of reserve. Then followed a period of silence, after which he wrote from a totally new address and begged for news of her. She allowed herself twenty-four hours for reflection; then she replied to his letter in the old friendly vein.

It was nearing the vacation, and she spoke of needing a holiday, and told him that she could not decide where to go.

"I've thought of the Zuurberg," she wrote; "but your remark about walking among tombstones sticks in my memory unpleasantly. I am afraid it would be just that."

To which he replied from De Aar:

"There is a dignity about monuments which is soothing. My former remarks were ill-considered. You might do worse than walk among memories. Try the Zuurberg again, and tell me what you feel in respect to resuscitated emotions. I would suggest that you came up here, but it is a long journey and too hot for the time of the year."

Clearly he did not want her to join him. That thought wounded her. It had been in her mind when she told him of her indecision that he might propose meeting somewhere; that he made no such proposal seemed to prove that he did not desire to see her. She felt vexed with herself for having mentioned the subject to him. Once again the feeling of having been snubbed by this man tormented her. In the old days it had caused her indignation, but now it hurt.

The question of her holiday became a matter for debate in her mind. She no longer desired to go to the Zuurberg; but the fear that he might read in a change of plan her reason for deciding against it stiffened her resolve to do what she did not want to do. The Zuurberg had not lost its attraction for her; but it would be, she knew, haunted with memories, where the ghosts of old pleasures would meet her at every turn.

Fear of these ghosts prompted her to suggest taking the children with her, a proposal which led to a wordy discussion as to ways and means. Their father did not consider change necessary for them. Rose disputed this; she wished them to go.

"Other people's children go away," she insisted finally on a softer note. "If we can't afford a holiday for ourselves we ought to let them have one. I think we might manage it, Jim, don't you?"

This direct appeal from her, to which he was unaccustomed, took him aback. He was indeed surprised into acquiescing. In the end he spoke as if it had been his wish all along. Later, when he left the room, Rose looked across at her sister and smiled quietly.

"That was accomplished through the exercise of a little of the tact you advocate," she said.

"It's worth it, don't you think?" Esmé returned, and laughed. "All he needs is management."

"Most men, I suppose, need that. You can't drive them in the direction you wish, but if you can make them believe it's the way they want to go, they start off at the gallop. Funny animals, aren't they?"

"Some of them are rather nice," Esmé ventured.

"Some of them—perhaps. But you don't know; you aren't married. A girl never really knows a man—knows him, I mean, for what he is underneath the veneer of social pretences until she has lived with him. Then little things peep out, selfishnesses—like ugly excrescences upon the smooth surfaces you fancied were rather fine and noble. A man when he is a lover is all chivalrous gentleness. Well, the chivalry is mostly veneer. Jim always gives up his seat in a tram to a woman; when he is in his own home, you may have noticed, he takes the most comfortable chair. They have to relax sometimes, you see; it isn't possible to live up to that level always. I'd rather a man were a bear outside

the home and considerate in it. There are such men, I suppose, but I haven't met them."

"There are such men," Esmé repeated, and thought of Hallam's lack of social manner. She wondered whether the gentleness which she knew to be in him would manifest itself in the home. She could not imagine him behaving altogether selfishly towards any one for whom he cared.

"Husbands want training, like children," Rose went on. "I didn't train my man; I began by spoiling him. That's where most girls make a mistake. Then, when the babies come, the spoiling ceases generally. But the harm is done. I have often observed that the husbands of selfish women are a long way the nicest. Men like peace; they will sacrifice a great deal in order to get it."

"It is rather an agreeable thing," Esmé said, reflecting that a little more of it in her sister's household would make life pleasanter.

"I dare say it is; but it can't be had on an insufficient income. If you like peace so much, why do you take the children with you on your holiday? You won't get peace where they are."

"Oh! we'll get along. We shall be out all day, and there will be other children for them to play with. They won't worry me."

"It's nice of you to be bothered with them," Rose said. She scrutinised her sister closely, and, curiosity getting the upper hand, asked bluntly: "Where is Paul Hallam now?"

"On the Karroo," Esmé answered, surprised. "Why?"

"I didn't know. I thought perhaps you might meet at the Zuurberg."

"No. He left there long ago."

"Well, but he might have felt it worth his while to go back when you were there. I don't understand that affair, Esmé. I don't trust the man. My dear, I don't trust him. And you are wearing yourself out, thinking of him. You are losing your vitality. You aren't as pretty as you were. No." She surveyed the girl fixedly with adversely criticising eyes. "You are *not* so pretty."

This came as a shock to Esmé. She wanted to look in the glass over the mantelpiece; but her sense of dignity and the fitness of things kept her glued to her seat. What, after all, did it matter if her looks departed? There was no one to note these things nor feel distressed on their account.

"Why does he continue to write to you, and never come to see you?" Rose asked. "It's not fair to you. And there's George... If it wasn't for Paul Hallam you would marry George. He is a good fellow, and he's getting on. It would be a most suitable arrangement. You don't want to teach all your life. You want a home. Every woman does. Instead you fill your head with romantic nonsense, and make yourself miserable, and George miserable—for a man who doesn't care. You could forget him if you left off corresponding. Why do you let him play with you?"

"He doesn't play with me," Esmé answered, flushing. "He never asked me for anything more than friendship. I give him that because it is a help to him, and because he is lonely. Why cannot a man and a girl be friends?"

"I should have thought your own case furnished an answer to that," Rose said. "In a friendship between a man and a girl one of them invariably falls in love. You can't get away from nature. The eternal question of sex hides behind all these unequal friendships. That's what makes them interesting. But these interesting relationships can spoil one's life. I wish that you had never met this man. I feel uneasy about it."

Esmé sat in an attitude of disturbed attention, and kept her eyes studiously averted from her sister's. There was just sufficient reason in her discursive statements to cause the girl to wince mentally. She was beginning to believe that she was giving more than Paul Hallam wanted from her, more than he dreamed of when he proposed continuing the friendship. This thought was humiliating; but only temporarily so: even as she felt its sting another thought drew the venom from it. If she could help him, even a little, it was worth while.

Book Two—Chapter Seventeen.

"To revisit a familiar spot is like walking among tombstones. Every point recalls a memory, and memory belongs to the past."

Very vividly, like something heard long ago but never before realised, these words which Hallam had uttered on the morning she left the Zuurberg all those weary months before, echoed in Esmé's thoughts when she made her second journey up the mountain road. The truth of them struck her like a thing which hurts. Her memories came back to her, as he had said they would, with the dust on them. And there was no evading them; they obtruded at every point.

At Coerney there was the same wait under the trees before the cart was ready to start; the same languid stillness brooded over the place, the same enervating heat. Here was the first tombstone. She looked about her with reminiscent eyes, marked the spot where she had sat with Hallam while they waited for the train to come in, realised the crowd of new impressions which jostled the memories in her brain, and fell into thought.

The children were busy exploring. The sound of their gay, excited voices came to her distantly on the languid air. But she could not see them; their figures were hidden among the trees.

Everything was much the same as on her former visit. There were two other travellers beside her party: they had gone into the hotel for refreshments. Presently they came out. The horses appeared with the driver, and the business of inspanning began. The children wandered back and became actively interested in these proceedings. John wished to drive: a compromise was effected by his being allowed to sit beside the driver and hold the whip. Then began the toil upward.

With every mile of the journey memories came crowding back into Esmé's mind, a dismal procession of pale ghosts that came and went and left a feeling of greater loneliness when they passed. These memories of her first glowing impressions, when excitement and a sense of adventure had coloured her imagination, gave to the present occasion a sort of flatness: the wonder of romance was missing from the picture. She looked about her with intent, mystified eyes. Everywhere there were tombstones; they met her all along the route.

Yet the beauty of the place remained unchanged. The wild grandeur of the scenery, the magnificent solitude, the almost terrifying depths of the chasm which lost itself in the froth of green below, these things impressed her as they had impressed her before with a wondering admiration that held something of awe in it; but whereas before, though she had believed herself to be lonely, hope had travelled with her as a companion; on this occasion there was no joyful anticipation in her heart, only a sense of disappointment that the finish of the journey promised nothing more than the usual holiday offers—rest and change from the ordinary busy life.

She wished, with an urgency no less insistent because of its futility, that she had decided on some other place—any other place—in which to spend her holiday. The mountain road was haunted with the ghosts of dead pleasures; the gorge was haunted; its secret places were the repositories for the thoughts of yesterday, for the dreams which pass with the night.

She gazed down into the black-green silences and felt her despondency deepen. These familiar things linked up her life so completely with the one brief romance it had ever known. She could not disentangle her thoughts from the past. Everywhere her eyes turned, each fresh curve in the road, brought back recollections of Hallam, and of their drive down the mountain together. What was he doing now? Where was he, while she was being borne higher and higher up the steep ascent?

Every now and again the children turned in their seats to flash some question at her, or to point out some amazing novelty which caught their eager attention. The big tree across the road, which cut through its giant trunk, was a source of wonder and delight to them. John forgot his dignity and allowed himself to be impressed by its dimensions.

"Man! but they can grow trees up this way," he remarked to the driver.

Whereat the driver unbent so far as to permit him to drive under the tree. Whatever his aunt thought about it, John thoroughly enjoyed the experience of that journey up the mountain road. But when the hotel broke first upon his sight he was a little disappointed by its unpretentious appearance.

"It isn't very big. It's just like an ordinary house," he complained.

"I expect you'll find there is room enough for you inside," Esmé said.

"Gimme my suit-case. I'll go and find out," John replied.

The cart drew up before the entrance. John scrambled down and waited impatiently for his luggage. He had never owned a suit-case before. He insisted upon carrying it. This delayed the party. Esmé was obliged to wait while the cart was unloaded, until John's baggage came to light and was given into his care. Declining assistance, he struggled with his burden manfully up the short path, and, flushed and a little short of breath, deposited it on the stoep with an air of satisfaction. Some one came forward and offered to carry it inside for him; but John was distrustful of these overtures.

"I can manage," he said politely, to the amusement of a man who was seated on the stoep, "if you'll show me the way, please."

Before following his conductor he looked round for his aunt and sister; and the man who had shown amusement looked in the same direction, and then stood up. John was not interested in the stranger's movements; he was anxious to go inside and unpack; but the others were so slow in coming. Mary had halted in the path to fondle an amazingly fat white cat. John was not keen on cats; he preferred a dog. He wished they would hurry up.

"John," Mary's shrill voice called on a note of enthusiasm, "it's the darlinest thing, and it's called Snowflake."

"Oh, *come on!*" John returned.

Mary came on at a run, and Esmé followed leisurely. And then another delay occurred. John's patience was exhausted. Girls were all alike, he reflected scornfully; they made a fuss over everything they met. He did not understand why his aunt should stop to speak to the man who had been seated on the stoep, and who now stepped off the stoep and went to meet her. It seemed as though she had forgotten that he was waiting for her to go in with him.

She had stopped still in the path and was talking to the man. She had forgotten John and his suit-case altogether; she had forgotten everything. The weary months of waiting had slipped out of the picture; the present had rolled back into the past. She was back in the old spot with the man beside her whose presence made for her the magic of the place. The ghosts which had met and mocked her on the journey were finally laid to rest.

Hallam had come down the path quickly, and stood in front of her and blocked her way. She stood still, flushed and

wondering, and looked at him with eyes which told a tale.

"I began to think you hadn't come," he said.

"Oh!" she said, and held out a hand with a slightly nervous laugh. "I never expected to see you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was coming to the station to meet you," he said, "but the cart went away fairly loaded. I have been sitting here waiting for you for the past two days. What do you suppose I meant, you dense little thing, when I advised you to take your holiday here? Do you think I'd have left you to wander alone among the musty relics you dreaded? ... I am going to take you to-morrow morning to see the sun rise," he added in a lighter tone.

Esmé laughed happily.

"I haven't seen the sun rise since the last time we saw it together," she said, and scrutinised him for the first time with unwavering eyes.

She thought him looking extremely well and fit. He appeared younger and altogether more sure of himself. And the stoop of the shoulders was less noticeable; he carried himself better. He met her eyes and smiled.

"I rather suspected your early morning activity was a cultivation," he said. "It is possible, I have found, to discard habits as well as to cultivate them."

That was the only reference he made to the long months he had spent fighting his baser self. He did not know whether she caught the drift of his remark. It did not seem to him to matter much. There was manifestly very little need for explanations on either side. They took one another for granted. They took their love for one another for granted; it stood revealed, a thing which needed no words, which expressed itself mutely in their satisfaction in one another. They gazed into each other's eyes, and there was no shadow of doubt in their minds at all.

"You are looking well," she said.

"Yes," he said; "I feel well. I feel amazingly, extravagantly well. So do you. You're radiant. That's because we are feeling so extremely pleased, both of us, with life and with ourselves,—particularly with ourselves. We are going to have the best of times together. I have been looking forward to this for months. And now you're here... It is almost as if we had never parted. It's better, really; the break brings us nearer. It's just good."

The happiness which she felt shone in her face. She looked about her at the familiar little garden, at the homely comfortable hotel, and the small stoep in front of the house, where John and Mary waited, John seated on the steps with his precious suit-case beside him. Then she looked back into the man's face, and her eyes were grave and tender when they met his.

"I had forgotten the children," she said.

He glanced over his shoulder.

"The little chap with the suit-case," he said. "And the girl—yes. Who are they?"

She explained them.

"I brought them with me to keep away the ghosts," she said.

He laughed.

"Well, they are here. I wish they weren't; but we'll make the best of it. It doesn't very much matter. The sooner they get used to me and the situation, the better. If there is any one sufficiently good-natured to foster them we will shift our responsibilities. I am going to monopolise you. I've been lonely ever since I said good-bye to you at Coerney."

He turned and walked beside her up the short path to the stoep.

"I'm glad to have you back," he said.

John and Mary, staring with round-eyed curiosity at the pair as they advanced, wondered why their aunt looked so shy, and why she coloured suddenly from neck to brow and looked down and spoke softly.

"It's good to be back," she replied.

They came to a halt at the steps; and John, remembering his manners, stood up, but continued to stare, unabashed.

"This is John," Esmé said with greater confidence; and John held out a small, hot hand.

"How d'ye do?" he said, as one man to another.

Book Two—Chapter Eighteen.

The young Bainbridges were not slow in coming to a conclusion in regard to the condition of affairs between Hallam and their aunt. John pronounced Hallam as being "all right"; Mary thought him old. But then her aunt was rather old also; aunts are not girls. Mary viewed this mature romance with feminine curiosity. She thought it odd, but

immensely interesting. She dogged their footsteps.

"I believe Mr Hallam is in love with Auntie," she confided to John, who probably unaided would not have discovered this surprising fact.

"I wonder!" John said, and pondered the announcement. "I think I'll ask him," he added.

He took an early opportunity of doing so. He waylaid the pair, returning from their morning walk, and planted himself in front of Hallam, looking squarely up at him, with his hands in his pockets, in an attitude so reminiscent of his father as to move Esmé to merriment. Her laugh ended in a strangled gurgle when John spoke.

"Are you going to marry Auntie, Mr Hallam?" John asked with a directness that would have disconcerted most people, but at which Hallam only smiled.

"I am," he answered. "I hope you don't object?"

"No; that's all right," John said amiably. "I only wanted to know."

And then he wandered off to join Mary and impart the result of his inquiries to her. Hallam looked at Esmé, and turned about abruptly, and proceeded to walk with her away from the hotel.

"I think," she said hesitatingly, "that I ought to go in."

"Not yet," he said. "I want to talk to you. You may think that that was an odd sort of proposal; but the little chap forced my hand. It is amazing how sharp children are. Did you mind?"

"No," she replied, confused but extraordinarily happy. "I was a little unprepared though."

They had both taken things so much for granted that she had not noticed that he had never definitely asked her to marry him. That part of it did not seem to matter.

"You knew," he said, "how things were? I think we both assumed it from the moment you arrived. But John has put matters on a businesslike footing. I said I meant to marry you. I do—if you'll take me. You know what I am. I think you know more about me than any one. Any good that is in me is of your making—"

"No," she interrupted quickly. But he took no heed of that, and went on as if she had not spoken.

"When I met you I was drifting. No other influence, I believe, could have pulled me up. It was not merely that you made me realise the folly of wasting my life; you opened my mind to more than that. I have come to see that man has a duty towards his fellow-men; that he has got to serve the community: if he serve it ill, he plays a mean part; if his service be good he doesn't merit praise, he is simply doing his job. You have pulled me out of the mire; now that I have cleaned some of the mud off I want you to take me by the hand and continue the journey with me. There isn't any need for me to say in words that I love you. I think you guessed that long ago."

He looked down and saw her face all flushed and confused, with eyes, too shy to meet his own, lowered till the lashes touched her cheeks. He longed to take her in his arms and kiss her; but the open road was ill suited to his purpose, and he decided to wait.

"Dear, will you marry me?" he asked.

For one fleeting moment she lifted her eyes to his face, and her look was so sweet and so gravely tender when it met his that his longing increased. Then she looked away again and answered softly:

"Yes."

Bald little monosyllable, which was all her lips could utter though her heart was filled with love for him; but it sufficed for Hallam. He pressed closer to her and bent down over her and touched her hand.

"I want to kiss you," he muttered. "I'm longing to kiss your lips."

She looked up, startled, and moved a little away from him. The passionate urgency in his voice was so altogether unexpected and unfamiliar that she felt disquieted. She was afraid of being seen from the hotel.

"Not now," she faltered. "Wait, I haven't got used to the idea yet. Not now."

He laughed quietly.

"Little duffer!" he said. "Do you suppose I am going to make love to you in front of the windows of the hotel? I'll wait—until we are alone. Then..."

Voice and eyes were eloquent. There was an air of confident mastery about him. She felt increasingly shy of him. He seemed suddenly to loom bigger, to express qualities of a virile and dominating nature which she had not suspected were in him. It was as though he put out a hand and took her heart in it and held it in a firm grasp. It frightened her just a little. Her breath came quicker and her pulses beat fast. They turned about and started to walk back.

"I think we had better go and have some breakfast," he said, with an amused look at her confused face. "If we delay any longer we shall be faced with more awkward questions from young John. After breakfast we will go in search of solitude and have our talk. There are endless things I want to say to you."

They entered the hotel, separating at the door to meet again at the breakfast-table. It was a silent meal so far as they were concerned, as silent as those meals through which they had sat in the early days of their acquaintance, when the man had maintained a moody aloofness painfully embarrassing to his companion. She felt no embarrassment any longer when he did not talk at table, and the chatter of the children made conversation difficult.

She was glad on that particular occasion that she had the children to distract her attention. She felt so extraordinarily shy of the man beside her, shy of the accepted position of their new relations. She felt that she must drag out the meal indefinitely: she wanted to postpone that walk. But Hallam held altogether different views; and presently he got up and prepared to leave the table.

"Hurry up!" he said. "You'll find me waiting for you on the stoep."

Then he went out, and she found herself confronted with the problem of disposing of John and Mary for the morning. They were desirous of accompanying her. The situation held an absorbing interest for them.

"I am going to be your bridesmaid, Auntie," Mary said, fascinated with the prospect of a wedding looming in the near future. "And wear a blue dress," she added.

John's face became grimly resolute.

"Mr Hallam needn't count on me for best man," he announced. "I'm off that."

Esmé left them to the discussion of these weighty matters under the sympathetic guardianship of a visitor at the hotel, who had children of her own and did not mind an addition to the party, and joined Hallam. They set out together on their first walk since their engagement.

For a time they walked in silence, both of them a little impressed with the strangeness of the new situation. Hallam's face was grave and thoughtful, and every now and again he turned to the girl with a curious eagerness in his eyes, and an added tenderness in the look he gave her.

It was altogether a memorable and wonderful occasion. He liked the shyness of her mood. It surprised and amused him to see her eyes droop before his gaze, and the colour come and go in her cheeks. He had known her before only as a very self-possessed young woman; but she revealed to him that morning, as he revealed to her, new and unexpected qualities that were profoundly interesting. Again there came over him the longing to take her in his arms and hold her close against his heart.

He took her hand when they were well away from the hotel, and they walked along together thus and talked disjointedly and a trifle self-consciously of trivial things. Presently Hallam said:

"I am going back with you when you leave. I have to make the acquaintance of your people. That is a necessary preliminary. Afterwards we will speed matters, and get married without undue delay. There isn't any object in waiting, is there? I don't feel that I can wait. I want you so."

"I'll have to resign my position as music teacher," she said. "There is nothing else to consider. You know, I can't quite realise it yet. It all seems so strange and wonderful."

"It is wonderful," he answered gravely. "It's wonderful to me that you should love me. It seems more wonderful still that you trust me. Your belief in me has been more helpful than any sermon. It is a sermon. It's a sort of religion. I've leaned on you... you little thing, whom I could pick up and toss over my shoulder! Dear, you'll never know how much I love you. I can't put it into words."

She squeezed his hand understandingly. It was the same with her. She could never have told him all that was in her heart.

"There isn't any need for words," she said softly.

"No." He looked at her quickly. "You do understand," he said. "You've always understood. From the first we seemed to strike the same thoughts instinctively. We get at one another somehow. I feel as if I had known you all my life."

"And I," she answered with a shy little laugh, "feel that I am only beginning to know you. Each time I am with you something fresh and unexpected leaps to the surface, and I've got to start again from the beginning and reconstruct all my ideas of you. I wonder if it will always be like that?"

"You will find me consistent in one respect anyhow," he answered.

He drew her into the shadow of some trees towards which their steps had been directed, and came to a halt facing her, and dropped her hand and put his arms around her.

"Now..." he said.

He held her closely and for the first time kissed her lips.

Book Two—Chapter Nineteen.

Esmé was married from her sister's house very quietly, and with what Rose considered quite unnecessary haste. The whole affair was so sudden and so altogether unexpected that she scarcely knew whether to be the more pleased or the more dismayed by her sister's change of fortune. She never felt quite at ease with her future brother-in-law, and

in her heart she regretted that it was not George Sinclair upon whom Esmé's choice had fallen. Marriage with Hallam meant a more complete separation from the old life: it would remove the girl altogether from her former associations. While she recognised the worldly advantages of the match she resented this: had Esmé married Sinclair they would have continued in touch with one another. But Hallam intended making his home in Cape Town, in one of the suburbs, after a prolonged honeymoon spent in Europe. The honeymoon, she gathered, would extend over a year.

It was all very amazing and rather wonderful. And Esmé appeared to be supremely happy; that, after all, was the chief thing.

Rose, while she watched from her seat in church, the girl standing before the altar beside the man whose name she was taking, experienced a curious misgiving which, though she felt it to be unreasonable, she could not shake off. Largely, she believed, she was influenced by something Sinclair had said when she informed him of Esmé's engagement. He had been taken by surprise and was greatly upset by the news. She had very vividly in her memory the sight of his face as he sat and stared at her with stunned, blue eyes, and muttered hoarsely:

"My God! ... Hallam! ... I could have stood it had it been any one else."

She had asked him what he meant, what he knew of Hallam? And he had answered shortly, "Nothing," and gone away hurriedly. She had not seen him since.

That this scene should come back to her now, obtruding itself in the middle of the marriage service, struck her as portentous. What had he meant? Some other emotion deeper than jealousy had moved him surely to speak as he had done. Her eyes rested contemplatively on Hallam's face. It was a fine face, a strong face, and the keen eyes were reassuring. The slight stoop of the shoulders and the reserved inward manner of the man suggested the scholar and thinker. Rose believed that he was clever; Jim said so. Neither she nor her husband understood him or felt at ease in his society. He displayed no interest in any of the family, save young John, whose conversation seemed to amuse him. John and he remained on terms of frank friendliness, marked by an air of patronage on John's side and an entire absence of sentiment on the part of both. But in relation to the rest he was the same silent unsociable man who had stayed for months at the Zuurberg without exchanging remarks with any one.

It puzzled Rose to understand what formed his great attraction in her sister's eyes. That Esmé was very deeply in love was evident; she was like a girl suddenly transformed; her face was alight with a glow of happiness which made it beautiful even to Rose's accustomed eyes.

Rose sat and watched her, perplexed and thoughtful, with the strange uneasiness disturbing her mind and distracting her thoughts from the service. Why she should feel anxious she did not know; unless it was the result of Sinclair's speech. But throughout the service the sense of disaster held with her, and later in the vestry, when the bride was signing the register, she experienced an overwhelming desire to cry, and shed a few surreptitious tears with the vexed knowledge that Hallam was observant of her emotion. Her eyes met his critical gaze a little defiantly with a faint hostility in them; and she fancied while she looked back at him that a shadow like a passing regret momentarily crossed his face. Then abruptly he turned to his wife and bent down and spoke to her and smiled. The shadow, if it had been there, had left his face unclouded as before.

The wedding party drove to the hotel for lunch, an arrangement which, while it pleased Jim exceedingly and met with the delighted approval of the children, occurred to Rose as altogether irregular. It was not the bridegroom's duty to provide the wedding-breakfast, she had protested. But her husband talked her objections down and overruled them.

"Hallam can afford to do it," he insisted. "Why shouldn't he? We can't give them a champagne breakfast anyhow."

Besides the Bainbridges there was only one other guest, in the person of the best man, who was called Watkin, and whose acquaintance with the bridegroom seemed of the slightest. The absence of any relation or intimate friend of Hallam was a further aggravation to Rose. She looked at everything through dark-coloured glasses that day: no one else did: even John, whose respect for Hallam had decreased with the latter's deliberate committal of matrimony, allowed that there was considerable enjoyment to be got out of other people's weddings; the lunch at the "Grand" in particular appealed to him.

Hallam bore himself well through the ordeal. Whatever his feelings were in regard to his wife's relations he managed on the whole to conceal them fairly well. Although he did not like Jim Bainbridge, and did not understand Rose in the remotest degree—he thought her disagreeable and commonplace and as unlike her sister as it was possible for a person intimately related to another to be—it pleased him to entertain them, and to note that they did full justice to his hospitality.

Jim drank champagne, to which he was unaccustomed, and became surprisingly talkative and rather noisy; and Rose, responding to the same genial influence, relaxed, and forgot for a time her apprehensions.

They made quite a merry party at their flower-decked table by the window, which opened on to the stoep and looked out upon the well-kept garden beyond. It was so near the finish of that part of Esmé's life that Hallam was content to see her happily surrounded with her people, and to do his share in making himself agreeable; but he longed to be through with it and started on the journey to Cape Town, where he proposed staying for a week before embarking for England. When the talk was at its noisiest he felt Esmé's hand reaching out under the table and touching his knee; his own hand went down and closed over it warmly while their eyes met in an understanding smile. She felt grateful to him for the effort she knew he was making for her sake to play his part well.

"Weddings," Jim remarked in a reminiscent vein, "always recall to my mind the day I took the plunge. Odd sensation, getting married—uncertain business—rather like backing an outsider in a race. You hope you've drawn a prize; but it's all a chance whether you have or not. It's tying a knot with your lips which you can't untie with your teeth. A man gets let in for this sort of thing. He can't help himself. He gets a sort of brain fever, and there it is—done."

His wife directed a meaning glance towards his glass and smiled dryly. Hallam took up the challenge.

"I think it is sometimes the woman who backs an outsider," he said. "But a light hand on the rein brings many a doubtful mount past the winning post."

"You've got the fever all right," Jim returned. "I know all about that. I had it in its most acute form."

"Never mind that old complaint," Rose said soothingly. "You are quite cured now."

"That's all you know about it," he replied almost aggressively. "That fever is recurrent. Every married man who has ever experienced it knows that the germ once there lies latent for all time. You hear of married people drifting apart... Well, they do, you know—often; but generally they drift back again—or want to. It's usage. You get fed up—like you get fed up with saying your prayers every night."—Young John pricked up his ears and became interested in the talk.—"You leave 'em off. Well, some time or other you come back to them. You want to come back to them. Prayer and love—they're pretty much about on a par."

John's interest waned. He helped himself to fruit and disregarded the company.

"You are getting somewhat beyond my depths," the best man remarked. "These things haven't come my way."

"They will," Jim ventured to predict.

The best man looked at the bride and laughed.

"I hope so," he answered gallantly; and introduced, with the ease of the man of the world, a lighter note into the talk.

The entire party drove down to the jetty to see Hallam and his bride embark. When she stood on the steps and watched her sister seated beside Hallam in the bobbing launch, smiling and radiantly happy, Rose's former misgivings reasserted themselves and remained with her while she looked after the crowded launch steering its course towards the mail boat, which lay far out amid the ships on the sunlit blue of the sea.

Hallam turned to the girl, when they were well away from the shore, with a look of glad relief, and saw her eyes, happy and loving and trustful, lifted to his in sympathetic understanding. He smiled down at her.

"It's good to get off, to be alone together," he said. "The thought of this moment has kept me going. I believed we should never be through with it all."

"I know," she said with a little laugh. "But it's over. We are together, Paul... for all our lives."

"For all our lives," he repeated; and, oblivious of the crowd about them, pressed closer against her on the narrow seat.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty.

The fulness of life made perfect by a perfect human love lifted Esmé so completely out of the past that all her life which had gone before seemed as a dream, a thing indistinct and distant, with the haunting sense of unreality which clings to dreams in defiance of the vivid impression sometimes left on the mind. To look back on the days of her girlhood was like looking back on the life of some one else. The little hot bedroom, shaded by the pink oleander tree, the life of continuous discords in her sister's home, the daily drudgery of instructing unmusical pupils in an art they would never acquire, these things were as remote as if they had never been. She looked back on those days wonderingly, comparing them with the present; and the present seemed the more beautiful by comparison with those earlier years.

After their year of wandering Hallam and his wife returned to the Cape. No country they had seen appealed to either with the same magnetic attraction which the Peninsular held for both. The house which Hallam took was not large; but it was luxurious in its appointments, and was beautifully situated, high, and surrounded with fine old trees which afforded shade and coolness on the hottest day. From the windows of her new home, as from the garden, Esmé had a view of the wide blue Atlantic stretching away endlessly to the far horizon; while, like a giant wall, rugged and grey, and towering in its immensity above the house, as it towered above the city, was the great square mountain, blue-grey in the sunlight, patterned gorgeously with the flowers which carpeted its slopes. And at night there was the sea still, darkly swelling, mysterious, remote, restless, a black expanse moving ceaselessly under the motionless star-lit darkness above; beating with passionate energy upon the shore and tossing its foam-flecked waters against the rocks: there, too, was the mountain, stark and dominating, black and sharply defined against the sky.

Always these wonders were there, and always they assumed fresh guises, revealed themselves in new and surprising aspects with the varying seasons and the shifting light. It was good to sit out on the stoep in the warm still dusk and enjoy these things together in an intimate and undisturbed solitude. They needed nothing else for the present, desired no companionship but each other's. Hallam was no less misanthropic than before his marriage; but his life was happier and full of interest. He was passionately in love; and his passion poured itself out in daily worship of this woman who gave him a full return, whose passion answered to his, equalled his in everything save its absorbed concentration on the individual to the exclusion of every other interest in life. To shut out the world from her thoughts entirely, as Hallam did, was not possible to Esmé. She loved life and her fellow-beings. Because she loved Paul better than all the world, with a love which was an emotion apart and different in quality from anything she had ever known before, she could not close her heart to every outside interest. She was glad always to be with him, glad during the first months in their own home to have him to herself with no interruptions from the world beyond their walls. But she did not desire to lead that shut in life always. She wanted to go about among people, and to have him go with her;

and she made this clear to him after a while to his no inconsiderable dismay.

People called on her, and she returned their calls—alone; Hallam refused definitely to have any share in that. She waived the point. So many men evaded this social duty that it did not seem to her of great importance. But when dinner and other invitations began to arrive, and he as flatly declined to accept them, she felt disappointed and showed it. She wanted to take part in these things, and his objection made her participation impossible.

“Why should you want to go?” he asked, with passionate resentment in his tones, on an occasion when she pressed him to accept an invitation to a private dance. “I don’t want to go to these things. I don’t care about them. I want only you. Why can’t you be content with your home and me? Why are you not satisfied?”

“Oh, Paul!” she said, and entwined his arm with both her arms and leaned against him confidently. “You know I’m satisfied. But we are living in the world, dear; we can’t shut ourselves off from it entirely. We can’t live just for ourselves.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“But,”—she protested, and looked up at him with puzzled eyes. “How can we?” she asked. “We must take our part, like other people. It isn’t good to live shut off: it’s cramping. I love you, I love my home; but I want other things. I want to see and talk with people. I want to meet other women. I want to—gossip—about the things women love discussing. I want to show off my clothes.”

“You show them off to me,” he said.

She laughed softly.

“To you!—you unappreciative male! I’ve everything in life to make a woman proud and glad and happy; and I want the world to know it. I long to parade my happiness, as a manikin parades the fashions, to the admiration and the envy of all beholders. Why shouldn’t I? Why shouldn’t I dance, boy? I love dancing. I’d love to dance with you.”

“I can’t dance,” he answered. “I don’t do any of these things.”

“I’ll teach you,” she volunteered. “It’s altogether simple. You’ve no idea how simple it is, nor how lovely, till you try.”

He smiled involuntarily.

“At my time of life! Imagine it! I wonder what you’ll ask me to do next?”

“Well, you need not dance,” she urged. “You can go to the card room.”

“I don’t care about cards,” he answered obstinately and with a note of hard decision in his voice. “And I don’t like the idea of your dancing with other men. Can’t you give up these things—for me?”

His objection surprised and vexed her. It was to her absurd that he should feel jealous, even slightly jealous, at the thought of her dancing with any one else. She felt hurt. Surely he had sufficient evidence of her love to trust her? She would have trusted him in any circumstances in her confident assurance of his love for her. She did not understand the temper of his love. It was not mistrust of her that moved him to object: it was dislike of the thought of any other man touching her, holding her in his arms even in the legitimate exercise of dancing. His passion had more than a touch of the primitive male in its quality. He wanted her to himself, shut away from the world, content to be alone with him always. And that was not in the least Esmé’s view of things: her outlook was entirely modern and wholly free from self-consciousness. She saw no reason why she should not enjoy herself in the same way in which other women enjoyed life. She wanted to cure Paul of his misanthropy, not to cultivate it herself. It was not an engaging quality; it was even a little ridiculous.

“I would give up anything for you, Paul, if there was a good reason for the sacrifice,” she said. “But I think you are merely prejudiced. You’ve spent so much time alone that you’ve grown used to solitude; but it isn’t good for you. It isn’t good for any one. We can’t live like that—shunning people as if we had something to hide. I want to go out, and I want to invite people here—not very often, but occasionally. Dear, be sensible. You gave up your solitude when you married me. I can’t let you slip back again.”

He moved restlessly and disengaged his arm from hers and stood looking across the garden into space and frowning heavily. She watched him with anxious eyes. After more than a year of married life this was the first cloud to gather in their radiant sky.

“You can go where you please,” he said ungraciously. “I never supposed you cared so much for these things.”

“I can’t go without you,” she insisted.

The frown on his brow deepened.

“You know how I hate that sort of show,” he answered. “I’ve always avoided social functions. They don’t interest me.”

“Very well,” she said. “Then I must decline the invitation.”

He swung round on her quickly and caught her up in his arms and held her tightly, muttering against her lips, and punctuating the words with kisses.

“Decline it... yes... I can’t let the world—any one—come between you and me. Why should you want interests apart

from your home? Your home is here, little one, in the depths of my heart.”

She felt his heart thumping against his chest, beating hard and fast as the heart of some one labouring under great excitement; she heard his breath escaping in quick deep gasps, and saw the passionate ardour which burned in his eyes; and she gave way, yielding her will to his stronger will, reluctantly, but with a growing sense of the futility of striving against him any longer. He silenced her protests with kisses, holding her head against his shoulder and keeping his lips on hers.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty One.

For a time Hallam kept the social world at arm’s length, and continued to monopolise his wife, and to persuade himself that she needed nothing beyond his love to make life perfect for her, as it was for him.

But Esmé’s more active temperament was not satisfied with the exclusion of every outside influence; and she chafed frequently at the monotony of her life, its gradually narrowing limits. Hallam was a bookworm: he spent much of his time in reading. When he was among his books she longed to go out and amuse herself in the ordinary way as she had done before her marriage; but if she went without consulting him he worried at her absence; when she mentioned that she was going he always laid aside his reading and accompanied her. There were times when this amused her; there were other times when she felt merely exasperated.

It became very clear to her that she would be obliged to make some stand or she would cease to have any life of her own at all. She decided to take up tennis again; and joined the public courts on the advice of a woman with whom she was becoming intimately friendly, and who, despite Hallam’s lack of response, continued to call and to bring her husband with her on occasions.

The Garfields considered Hallam eccentric, and pitied his wife. Sophy Garfield held out the hand of friendship, and Esmé grasped it readily, and found in her a useful and agreeable acquaintance. When Mrs Garfield proposed that she should join the tennis club, Esmé caught at the suggestion eagerly. She did not consult Hallam: she paid her subscription fee and told him later what she had done. Although he did not receive the information graciously he raised no objection. It was the least unpleasant diversion she had sought to impose so far. He joined the club also with a view to accompanying her sometimes. But he did not attend often; and after a while he gave up going and allowed her to develop some slight independence of him. She made friends easily; he neither made nor desired friends. In this respect they differed materially. She wished that he would become more sociable. He talked well when he chose: it would have afforded her immense pleasure to see him in the company of other men more often.

But he kept to his home and his long tramps with her. He bought her a horse and taught her to ride. He was a keen horseman; and when she was sufficiently at home in the saddle they spent long days together, riding, in pursuit of a pleasure that never palled on either: the discovery of fresh and beautiful scenery. In their love of nature they were entirely in accord.

“I wish,” Hallam said once, when they sat together on a lonely stretch of beach, with their horses knee-haltered and straying among the coarse grass higher up, “that I had taken you away into the wild somewhere—Central Africa—anywhere where white faces are rare, instead of making a home in the centre of civilisation. These lonely places grip me. I like to feel you beside me and know that the rest of the world is far off, too remote to trouble us. Would you be happy in the wilds with me?”

“I suppose I should be happy with you anywhere,” she answered, and touched his hand caressingly as it lay on the sand close to hers. “But I am not hungering for loneliness, Paul. My instincts are civilised. I’m nervous in lonely places.”

“With me?” he asked.

She met his eyes and smiled faintly.

“Even with you I think I might feel fear at times in such solitude as you describe. I remember how terrified I was at the Zuurberg that day, down the kloof, when you crashed through the bushes. I thought of tigers—oh! of all sorts of horrors. I wasn’t shaped on heroic lines, man o’ mine. Leave me to the life of the city, with its comfortable laws and protections, its nice, safe orderliness, and the sense of security one gets in the midst of life. What can the solitudes offer more than we already have?”

“The difference between us is that you like crowds and I don’t,” he answered. “Sometimes I feel that the crowd will get between us.”

“Paul!” she remonstrated. She observed him closely as he leaned on his elbow beside her, playing idly with the sand, making patterns on it and effacing these again with his hand. He turned his face towards hers, and his restless hands became still. His keen eyes searched her face.

“That strikes you as exaggerated,” he said; “but it’s not so. I’ve watched you, and I see it coming. You have quite a number of friends who are not my friends—”

“They would be your friends if you would let them,” she interposed.

“Yes; I know it’s my fault; but there it is. You want friends. That’s perfectly natural. You ought to have them. You want amusement. I hoped you wouldn’t need any of these things, that you’d be satisfied, as I am, just to be together. That was expecting too much—”

"Oh! my dear," she said quickly, with a note of pain in her tones. "I don't love you less because I love my kind; I love you better in relation to these others. Paul, why do you say these things? They hurt."

"It wasn't my intention to hurt you," he said. "I was merely trying to get the thing square in my mind. I've got to get used to these things, you see. I've been selfish. When a man loves as I do, he is inclined to grow selfish and exacting. Well, I've got to make a fight against that. I don't like the idea of sharing you with the world at large; but I am forced to consider that as a necessary part of our compact."

"Compact!" she echoed in a puzzled voice.

"We compacted to love one another," he answered quietly. "Love stands for sacrifice. If we cannot give way in little things, the big things become more difficult to relinquish. Your brother-in-law made one observation that was profoundly true, though he did not phrase it happily: love and prayer are synonymous terms. My love for you is as a prayer in my heart. I do not wish to lower it to a mere selfish human passion."

"Oh, Paul!" she said. And suddenly she dropped her face to his hand and her lips caressed it where it lay open, palm upward, on the sand.

His talk of sacrifice made her desire to give up things also, to give up her will to him; but the persuasion that it was good for him to throw off his absorption, to adapt his life to the common rule and live more like other men, held her mute. She would accept his sacrifices, all that he offered, and would prove to him in numberless tender ways how great was her appreciation of the unselfish love he gave her; how intense was her pride in it. She had never loved him so much as in that moment when he gave her an insight into what his conception of love was. He so seldom spoke on the subject, and never before had spoken without reserve; it seemed to her that his talk that day threw a bright ray of light upon his feelings, and revealed to her very clearly the beauty of his ideal of love, hitherto so jealously locked in his inmost thoughts.

A feeling of happiness that was as a song of gratitude warmed her heart. She pillowed her face on his hand and lay still on the burning sand beside him, undisturbed by the hot sun which beat upon her body, upon her face; loving its warmth which was as the warmth in her heart, a flame that glowed and burned and did not consume.

Hallam rolled over on his elbow and lay watching her in contemplative silence for a space. The feel of her cheek against his hand pleased him. Her face was flushed and happy, and the look in the soft eyes when they met his moved him to lean over her and kiss their long lashes. Laughing, she opened them wide and looked up at him.

"Paul, heart of my heart!" she cried. "How you make me love you!"

"Yes!" he said, and kissed her again. "I wonder whose love is the stronger—yours or mine?"

"We cannot prove that," she said.

"Time may," he replied. "The strength of love is tested by its endurance. A great love endures through everything for all time."

"A great love!" she repeated, and brushed his hand caressingly with her cheek. "I never knew, until you taught me, how great love was."

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Two.

Marriage, like every other relationship in life, becomes with time a matter of usage. One by one the demands which the ardour of passion exacts relax imperceptibly, and love finds its level on a practical basis of mutual interests in the common daily round.

Hallam's marriage was a reversal of the usual order, in which generally it falls to the woman to adapt herself more or less to the altered conditions. In their case the change affected him more materially than it affected Esmé: his life had become, as it were, uprooted, and the roots did not strike freely in new soil. The change was not agreeable to him; but his love for his wife was of a quality which helped him to endure with a certain dogged patience many things that formerly he would not have entertained for a moment. He suppressed his own inclinations: to a large extent he suppressed his feelings: mentally his life with her was a series of small deceptions, of pretences practised deliberately for the purpose of misleading her. He feared to disappoint her. His mind became a storehouse of reserved thoughts and inhibitions upon which he turned the key, locking its surprises against her.

In certain respects, though she was unaware of this, he was a stranger to her: one side of his nature remained hidden from her, the weaker side, which most urgently needed her loving sympathy, and which shrank from exposure and misunderstanding with a sensitiveness of which he was conscious and secretly ashamed. He was not the type of man to make an appeal even to the woman he loved. He gave more than he exacted. He gave more than she realised in her ignorance of the sacrifices he made in his attempts to bridge the abysmal gap in temperaments. For her sake he endured many things which were to him boring and annoying in the extreme. He made stupendous efforts to subdue his prejudices and adjust his life to meet the new demands. But the nature of the man remained unchanged and suffered as a result of the artificial conditions of his self-imposed obligations.

Three brief years of married happiness passed; and then Hallam began at first moderately, and always secretly to drink again.

For a time Esmé was unaware of this relapse on his part; for a further period she suspected it but could not be sure. Then the old symptoms reappeared with terrible convincingness: she saw his hands grow shaky, his whole

appearance degenerate, till he looked as she had seen him first on the stoep of the hotel at the Zuurberg, older, ill, nervous and morose, with a disregard for public opinion and a growing indifference as to whether she knew or not.

Esmé's eyes opened to the condition of things after a short visit paid to her sister, which Hallam readily agreed to her accepting but refused to accept for himself. He had no wish to see his wife's relations; he preferred to remain at home.

She parted from him reluctantly. A feeling of anxiety gripped her at the thought of leaving him alone. It was their first separation since their marriage. But she wanted to see her sister again. Rose's letter was reproachful; it conveyed the suggestion that the writer was hurt by her neglect. The neglect on Esmé's side was not wilful: she had wished to have her sister to stay with her; but Hallam had always seemed so disinclined to entertain any member of her family that she had been obliged to give up the idea. But when Rose's letter came urging her to take a trip round to the Bay, she decided that she ought to go, unless she wished for a complete estrangement between them. Hallam was quite agreeable. He booked her a passage and saw her off by the boat; but at the last moment he showed a strong disinclination to part from her, and almost persuaded her to give up the idea and return with him.

"It's too absurd," she said: "we are like a pair of children. Why don't you come with me?"

"No," he said. "I'll wait at home for you. Don't stay longer than you need."

She watched him descend to the quay, and, leaning on the rail, looking down at him, the first intimation that things were not quite as they should be dawned on her, and filled her with a sense of uneasiness which grew with every hour of her separation from him.

In the end she curtailed her visit and returned unexpectedly by train.

She had sent a telegram informing Hallam when to expect her; and she found him on the platform waiting for her, and was struck immediately by the change in him. Her heart sank within her, but she forced a smile to her lips and accompanied him out of the station and got into the waiting taxi. He opened the door for her, fumbling with the catch with unsteady fingers, and got in after her and sat down heavily.

"It didn't take you long to discover that home's the best place," he remarked, with a sideways furtive look at her. "How did you find them all? Jim still grouching, I suppose? And the small boy a perennial note of interrogation?"

"Everything was much the same," she answered in a dispirited voice. "They were all a little older in appearance, and the children have grown tremendously. I wish you had been with me. Rose was hurt, I think, because you did not go."

"Oh, really! I should have thought she would have felt relieved."

"Why?"

He disregarded the question. Abruptly he put out an unsteady hand and laid it upon hers.

"Tired?" he asked.

"A little." She twisted her hand round in her lap and her fingers closed upon his. "What have you been doing during my absence?"

"Mainly missing you," he answered. "A reversion to one's bachelor days is a dull sort of holiday."

"I know. But what was I to do? I don't want to lose touch altogether with my ain folk."

"I have no folk," he said, "so I can't understand these family ties. I think them a bore. But if you had a good time that's the chief thing. You've a lot of friends at the Bay, and you find pleasure in them. My friends are silent companions and are better suited to my taste. How did your people think you were looking? None the worse for being tied to this dull person, I hope?"

She laughed and squeezed his hand.

"They were impressed with my staid appearance, and the fact that I am putting on weight," she said. "I didn't realise it myself until Jim told me I was getting fat."

"That is a Jim-like touch," he returned, and glanced at her cursorily. "The grossness is not apparent to me. Did you meet Sinclair during your stay?"

"Yes," she said, and looked surprised that he should ask the question. That he had once been jealous of Sinclair was unknown to her.

"And does he still wear the willow for your sake?"

"He isn't married," she answered. "But I don't think that has anything to do with me."

She regretted that he had opened this subject. The memory of Sinclair was a distress to her. The change in him had struck her more forcibly than the change in any member of her own family. The difference in him was not due alone to the passing years. He was altered in manner as much as in appearance; all the boyish gaiety had departed: he was older, more thoughtful; the irresponsible gladness of youth, formerly so noticeable a characteristic of his, was missing. She could have wept at the change in him. He was still her devoted slave. During her visit he had haunted her sister's house. He had claimed the privilege of friendship and put himself at her disposal. He was always at hand

when she needed him. And never once by word or gesture had he attempted to overstep the boundary of friendship. She felt grateful to him for his consistent and considerate kindness. She did not want to discuss him, even with Paul.

Hallam did not pursue the subject. He fell into silence and left her to do the talking. During the remainder of the drive she chatted fragmentally and brightly of her doings while she had been away. Principally she talked about the children. The sight of John and Mary, the sound of their gay young voices, their insistent claim upon the general attention, had brought home to her the absence of the one great interest in her own home. She wanted children intensely; and it did not seem that her desire would ever be satisfied. A child would have completed her married happiness.

Something of what was in her thoughts she managed to convey to Hallam when they reached the house and entered together, her arm within his. Alone in the drawing-room, when he held her in his embrace and kissed the bright upturned face, she slipped her hands behind his neck and looked back at him with tender loving eyes.

"Paul," she whispered, "I wish we had a child of our very own—a wee scrap of soft pink flesh, with tiny clinging hands. My dear, my dearest, I do so want a child!"

He gazed down at her, troubled and immeasurably surprised, and gently kissed the tremulous lips. He had never given any thought to the matter until now, when he realised the aching mother-hunger expressed in her desire: she had concealed it so successfully hitherto. He did not himself wish for children; the thought of them even was an embarrassment. With clumsy tenderness he stroked her hair.

"It seems as though it is not to be," he said. "I didn't know you cared so much, sweetheart."

"Don't you care?" she asked. "I!" He seemed surprised. "I've got you," he said, and drew her close in his embrace.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Three.

The first real sorrow in Esmé's life came to her with the realisation of the fact that her influence with her husband no longer sufficed to keep him steady. Gradually, so gradually that she did not suspect it until the thing was plainly manifest, he fell back upon his former habit of intemperance and became once more the drunkard whom she had first met at the Zuurberg, and pitied and despised for the weakness of his character.

Hallam did not give in to his vice without a struggle; but with each lapse his will weakened, till eventually he ceased to fight his enemy, ceased even to consider the pain which he was aware he caused his wife.

Esmé's grief was deep, and the humiliation of realising that the thing was becoming publicly known added to her distress. Reluctantly she withdrew from social intercourse and devoted her time entirely to him, trusting that the power of love would yet prove the stronger influence. Her love for him strengthened with her recognition of his need of her: he was her child, weak and foolish and dependent,—her man and her child, whom she had to protect from himself.

Matters grew worse. An inkling of the trouble reached Rose through an acquaintance of her husband who had been in Cape Town and had heard rumours of the state of affairs. Rose's first impulse was to write to her sister and ask for information direct; but on reflection she decided against this course. There flashed into her mind, as once before at the time of Esmé's marriage the same memory had disturbed her peace, the picture of George Sinclair's face when he heard of Esmé's engagement and the recollection of his incomprehensible agitation. Was it possible that he had known?

She determined to ask him; and on the first opportunity did so, observing him attentively while she put a direct question to him. The quick distress and the absence of surprise in his look confirmed her suspicion. He had been aware of this thing all along.

"You knew!" she said resentfully. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Good lord!" he exclaimed almost passionately. "It wasn't for me to say anything. She knew what she was taking on. It wouldn't have made a fraction of difference if you had done everything in your power to dissuade her. She went into it with her eyes open."

"You mean that she realised she was marrying a drunkard?"

"Of course she realised it. I suppose she believed she could reclaim him. For a time no doubt she did. Mrs Bainbridge, I could cheerfully kill him, if that would help matters."

"It wouldn't," Rose answered practically. "Don't talk like a fool, George."

"I love her," he said simply, the tears welling in his eyes. "I hate to think of her life with him. It cuts me."

"Dear old boy," she said, with greater gentleness of manner than she often displayed, "I know. I wish from my soul that she had married you. I always mistrusted Paul. But she was fascinated with him; there was no one else in the picture for her. He may break her heart and spoil her life, but she'll go on loving him. You could see for yourself when she was round here; she was restless without him and wanting to go home."

"That's not surprising in the circumstances," he returned with bitterness. "I don't suppose that she trusts him out of her sight for long."

"That wasn't it," Rose said quietly; and added after a brief pause: "She just wanted him."

It was better, she decided, that he should face matters and give over cherishing a hopeless attachment. She liked George Sinclair sufficiently to wish to see him happily married and settled down. He was a man who would make an admirable husband.

But Sinclair showed no inclination towards marriage. He had met the girl he wanted, and lost her; no other girl could blot out the memory of his first real love, nor take her place in his heart. It had been a big blow when she married; and the bitterness of his disappointment increased enormously with the knowledge of the disaster which threatened her happiness. In a measure he had expected it; it did not come as a surprise, only as an ugly confirmation of his fears. He believed that he could have borne his own disappointment philosophically had life gone well for her: but the conviction that she had made a mistake held with him and inflamed his resentment against Hallam.

"Well, there's one thing," he said, as he got up from his seat and confronted Rose with grim set face, "if he goes on at the rate he did when he was at the Zuurberg she will be a widow before many years. A man can't fool with his constitution like that—not in this country anyhow."

"Don't count on that, George," she advised. "It's a slow poison."

He laughed shortly.

"I've a feeling that my turn will come," he said, and turned about abruptly and left the room, left the house, with a sore heart, and his sense of exasperation deepening as he thought of the girl he loved tied to a drunkard who was not man enough to conquer his particular vice.

And the girl he pitied was blaming herself for not having gone with her man into the wilds, for not having allowed him to follow the life he preferred, hunting and exploring along the unbeaten track. Had life offered him a sufficient interest this relapse might have been averted. She had relied overmuch on the strength of character which she believed was his: she had overestimated his strength, had left him to fight his battle unaided. He had wearied of the struggle and given in. From the point where he wearied she took it up, took it up with a tireless determination to win, that armed itself against all disappointments and rebuffs; and the rebuffs were many. Hallam resented her attempts at coercion.

Oddly, he did not mind her knowing of his weakness, but he objected when she allowed her knowledge to become obvious. He felt that she ought to have ignored this thing; to embarrass him by thrusting it under his notice was tactless and annoying.

He shut himself away from her more than formerly, and sat up late into the night reading in his study. Occasionally he fell asleep in his chair and remained there until the morning, to wake cramped and unrefreshed and creep upstairs in the dawn.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Four.

These late hours, and the fact that he had taken to sleeping in the dressing-room from a desire not to disturb her, excited Esmé's worst apprehensions. She fell into the habit of lying awake and listening for him: she could not rest while she knew that he was downstairs. The old sickening sensation of terror, which had seized her at the Zuurberg when she listened to him stumbling along the stoep on his way to his room, gripped her anew each time that she heard him mount the stairs and go unsteadily to the dressing-room in his stockinged feet.

The horror of it was as a nightmare which tormented her unceasingly. She was afraid of him when he had been drinking heavily; not afraid that he would do her any physical injury; but the look in his eyes terrified her; it seemed to alter him, to make him a stranger almost. There were times when he passed her on the stairs or landing with wide-opened eyes which appeared not to notice her presence: the sight of him thus made her knees shake under her and blanched her face. It was like meeting a sleep-walker, only more horrible.

She went to him one night in his study and knelt on the carpet beside him and pleaded with him.

"Paul," she said, and lifted sweet, distressed eyes to his, with no reproach in their look, only a great sadness. "Aren't you neglecting me a little? Why do you shut yourself away every night? I'm lonely all by myself."

"I thought you were in bed," he said, and moved restlessly and avoided her gaze. "You usually go to bed at ten o'clock."

"Not lately," she answered. "I sit up and wait for you. I think to myself, he may need me. I am always hoping against hope. My dear, why do you shut yourself away from me? It's unkind. Paul, don't you love me any longer?"

He brought his eyes back to her face, and looked at her long and earnestly. Then he put his hands on her shoulders and held her a little way off, still scrutinising her attentively.

"Do you think it necessary to ask that?" he said.

"Yes," she answered almost passionately. She put her hands over his and clung to him desperately, exerting all her control to keep back the rising tears. "Once our love sufficed, dearest heart; you wanted only to be with me; and now —"

"Aren't you being a little foolish?" he asked. "People who live together develop a sort of independence of each other

after a while. Because I like to be quiet for an hour or two during the evening, need that be construed into a sign of indifference?"

"No," she said; "not that in itself. But my love is not strong enough any longer to hold you. You've slipped back into the old ways, dear. It's breaking my heart, Paul; I can't bear it."

She dropped her face on to his knees and wept bitterly, with her eyes hidden in her hands. His own hand, shaky and uncertain, came to rest on her hair, stroked her hair gently.

"I'm a brute," he said, "an inconsiderate brute." He gathered her in his arms and drew her up and held her, weeping still, upon his knee. "Don't cry. Tell me what you want. I'll try, Esmé. I didn't think it was so bad as this. I'll pull myself together. Don't cry, sweetheart. It distresses me to see you cry. The brute I've been!"

He drew her wet cheek to his and kissed her, and she wound her arms about his neck and clung to him, sobbing softly, with her head resting like a tired child's on his shoulder.

When the sounds of her sobs ceased he got up and left the room with her and went with her upstairs. For that night she had won a victory. But she did not feel sure any longer that her influence would hold. He had made her promises before and broken them again. It seemed to her that his will had weakened considerably: she no longer felt any real confidence in him.

Perhaps she allowed him to see this, and so lost much of her hold on him. He was conscious always that she watched him; and his manner became furtive and suspicious as a result of this supervision. His moods of repentance did not endure for long; but while they lasted his hatred of himself for the distress he caused the wife whom he still tenderly loved was genuine and deep. It was as though his life were accursed and the curse of his misfortune overshadowed her.

It amazed Hallam and disconcerted him enormously when he began to realise that he had lost his grip on himself. He had imagined that he had conquered his vice, that he could keep it under without particular effort. He had believed in himself with an even greater confidence than Esmé had once believed in him: he had relied, with an almost arrogant faith in the power of the human will, on his unaided effort to control his desires. At the time of his marriage he had felt quite sure of himself; otherwise he would never have injured the girl he loved by linking her lot with his. He felt as though he had been guilty of a breach of faith with her; and this thought worried him unceasingly, till he drugged his mind into temporary oblivion and laid up thereby further torment for his sober hours.

The state of things became unendurable, and finally worked to a climax.

A few weeks of restraint on Hallam's part, of determined and difficult self-discipline, and then his devil got the upper hand once more, and his resolves faded into nothingness before the craving which he could no longer resist.

He fought the demon of desire for a few days with a fierce despair in the knowledge that the thing was too strong for him. With each battle his strength weakened. Realising this he sought diversion, taking Esmé out in the evenings to any entertainment that offered. He feared to be alone. When he was alone his craving for drink was insistent.

And then one fateful night he gave way to his desire, deliberately and without further struggle: he flung his scruples aside and relaxed all effort, as an exhausted swimmer might relax and give up with the shore and safety in sight.

He had been with Esmé to the theatre. The performance had been poor, both in regard to acting and to plot: he had felt extremely bored. And Esmé was tired, and complained of headache. It had been a boisterous day, with a black south-easter raging. The wind gathered force towards evening and blew to a gale, driving the dust before it in swirling clouds of sticky grit. Small stones rattled against the closed windows of the taxi in which they drove; the cushions felt damp and sticky, and the dust penetrated through the cracks.

"What a night to be abroad in!" Hallam said, and observed his wife's pale face with some concern. "You ought not to have come. It was a silly sort of show, and it's made your head worse. You should have stayed at home and rested."

"I'm all right," she answered brightly; and made an effort to be entertaining during the long drive home. She did not like him to feel bored when he took her out.

But her head ached badly; and she was relieved when the taxi stopped before the house, and Hallam got out and opened the door for her and followed her into the lighted hall. It was good to get inside and shut out the inclement night. The rush of the wind sweeping round the side of the house was terrific. She stood for a moment at the foot of the stairs and listened to it, with her temples throbbing painfully and her nerves jarred with the noise of the warring elements. Hallam shut the front door and bolted it. When he turned round he saw her eyes, dark-ringed in her white face, looking at him gravely with a question in them.

"You get off to bed," he said. "I'll lock up and follow you in a few minutes. You look done."

"It's this stupid headache," she said apologetically. "Paul, you won't be late? The wind makes me nervous."

"Brave person!" he returned, smiling at her indulgently. He removed the wrap from her shoulders and threw it over his arm. "I will be up before you are asleep."

He watched her mount the stairs. When she reached the landing she paused to smile down at him before entering her room. He turned away and went into his study, switching on the light as he entered. He became aware that he was still carrying his wife's wrap, and placed the flimsy thing over the back of a chair, and stood hesitating, looking towards his easy chair, with the table beside it littered with books and the reading-lamp in the centre. He touched the switch of the lamp and turned off the brighter light and remained, still in indecision, looking no longer at the chair but

beyond it towards a cupboard, the key of which he carried always upon him. He felt in his pocket for the key, and remained staring at it in his hand and reflecting deeply. His devil tempted him sorely. Against his volition his gaze travelled to the flimsy thing of gauze and fur which lay as a mute reminder of his wife where he had dropped it on entering, and in imagination he heard again the plaintive note of her question: "Paul, you won't be late?" as she had turned and looked back at him from the stairs. He had promised to follow her shortly.

Frowning, he turned the key in his hand. For a while he remained still irresolute while his will slowly weakened and his craving increased; then with an abrupt movement he advanced swiftly and, stooping, inserted the key in the cupboard door.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Five.

Midnight struck and still the wind raged without, while inside the house complete silence reigned. One o'clock struck. The gale was at its height; the noise of the wind was terrific: it swept past the lighted window of Hallam's study and shook the glass as though something alive were out in the storm and seeking refuge from the fury of the wind. But the occupant of the room neither stirred nor looked round: he sat with a book open on the table before him, and a glass at his elbow towards which his shaking hand reached forth at regular and frequent intervals. He had forgotten his promise to his wife, had forgotten the hour; he sat in a semi-stupor, and took no heed of time or place. Whether he read, and, if he did read, whether his drugged brain took hold of the sense of the printed matter on which his eyes rested, was uncertain; but every now and again he turned a page of the book without raising his glance even when his hand reached out for the glass from which he drank: he only looked up to refill the glass from a decanter on the table.

The minutes ticked on relentlessly, and the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half-hour after one. A light footfall descending the stairs, so light that it could not be heard above the noise of the wind, did not disturb the reader; nor did he appear to see when the door of the room was pushed wider and Esmé with a dressing-gown worn over her nightdress and her hair in a heavy plait over her shoulder, stood framed in the doorway, a shrinking slender figure, looking towards him with wide, anguished eyes. She advanced swiftly and stood beside him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Paul!" she said.

He looked up at her slowly, stupidly, his dull eyes scrutinising her, a frown contracting his brows: then his gaze travelled to the hand on his shoulder and stayed there. He moved his shoulder impatiently.

"What's the matter?" he said in thickened tones. "I thought you were asleep."

"You promised that you would not be long," she said. "I waited for you. Come to bed, Paul; it's late."

"I shan't be long," he muttered. "You'll take cold." He stared at her deshabelle. "Don't be silly, Esmé; go back to bed."

"Dear." She put her hand under his arm and attempted to raise him. "Come with me. I am afraid."

She looked frightened; her face was blanched and tense; her whole body trembled. He stared at her, amazed. Then clumsily he got on to his feet and stood unsteadily before her, assisted by her supporting hand. Slowly she led him towards the door. He appeared reluctant to go with her; and at the door he halted irresolutely and attempted, without success, to free himself from her hold. Her grasp on his arm tightened.

"Come with me," she urged.

"I've never known you to be so foolish before," he said. "Why should a little wind make you nervous? It blows hard often enough to have accustomed you to it."

"I don't feel well, Paul," she pleaded. "I want you with me."

She drew him on towards the stairs. He took hold of the banister and mounted, stumbling, and kicking against each stair in his progress. She got him as far as the landing; but when she strove to draw him on towards the bedroom he resisted.

"You go on," he said. "I must go down and switch off the lights?"

"Never mind the lights," she urged. "Come with me, dear."

"I must go down," he repeated with irritable obstinacy. "I won't be a minute. Go on, and get into bed. I'll be up in a minute."

"No," she persisted, and got between him and the stairs, and put out a hand to hinder his descent. "Stay with me, Paul, I don't want you to go down again."

With darkening looks, and anger kindling in his resentful eyes, he endeavoured to push past her. He shook off her hold roughly, and made a clumsy movement forward, lurching against her heavily, with a force and suddenness which caused her to overbalance. She threw out a hand wildly to catch at the rail, missed it, and fell headlong down the stairs, landing with a crash upon the floor of the hall, where she lay, an inert and crumpled figure, with white upturned face showing deathlike in the artificial light.

Hallam swayed forward dizzily and clutched at the rail and leaned against it heavily.

"My God!" he muttered, and hid his eyes from the sight of the still white face.

There came the sound of doors opening behind him. He pulled himself together quickly, and stumbled down the stairs, and knelt on the floor beside his wife. The frightened faces of the servants peered at him from the landing. He did not look up: he was stroking his wife's hand and speaking to her softly and weeping. His tears splashed upon her hand and upon his own hand; they fell warm and wet: something else warm and wet touched his hand. Abruptly he became aware of a dark stain under Esmé's head; it oozed slowly, and spread darkly over the polished floor. She was bleeding. That had to be stopped anyway.

The shock of the accident had sobered him; the cloud cleared away from his brain and he was able to think. Quickly he went to the telephone, hunted up a number and rang up the doctor. When he was satisfied that help would arrive speedily he returned to his post beside the unconscious figure of his wife, and slipped a pillow, which one of the servants fetched at his bidding, under her head. He moved her with infinite care. He would have lifted her and carried her upstairs, but he dared not trust himself with this task which in his sober moments he could have accomplished with the utmost ease. He sat beside her, holding her hand and crying uncontrollably, until the doctor arrived and took over the direction of affairs.

Hallam, stricken with remorse, shaken, and dazed with grief, wandered aimlessly between his study and the landing, and stood outside the bedroom door, which he dared not open, waiting in a terrible suspense for information of his wife's condition.

A nurse appeared upon the scene. He did not know how she came there; he did not know who admitted her. He heard the subdued noise of her arrival, and later met her on the stairs, a quiet-eyed, resourceful-looking woman, who watched him with interested curiosity as he passed her and went down and shut himself in his study once more. In the cold light of the dawn the house seemed alive with movement, the stealthy rustling of people coming and going on tiptoe, and the occasional murmur of voices speaking in undertones.

After what appeared to Hallam an interminable time the doctor came downstairs. He accompanied Hallam into the study and sat down opposite to him and looked with keen, understanding eyes into the haggard face of the man whose agony of mind was written indelibly on every line of the strongly marked features. Hallam's only question was: "Win she live?"

"Oh, yes."

The relief of this assurance was so tremendous that he scarcely took in anything else that was said. The doctor outlined the injuries. A fractured base was the most serious of these. He asked permission to remove the patient to a nursing-home. The case required skilled nursing; it was a matter of time and care; absolute quiet and freedom from worry were essential. The removal could be accomplished that morning, if he were agreeable. Hallam nodded.

"I leave everything in your hands," he said. "You know best."

He felt suddenly very tired. The strain of anxiety and his long night vigil began to tell. The doctor eyed him keenly, advised food and rest, and then rose and went out to his car. Hallam closed the front door after him, and turned towards the stairs which he climbed wearily.

Outside the door of Esmé's room he halted to listen. There was no sound from within. The nurse was in charge he knew. He had no thought of entering; he did not desire to enter. He shrank from the idea of looking upon his wife's face: the memory of her face, still and white, with the dark fringes of her closed eyes resting on the deathlike pallor of her cheeks, haunted him; it would haunt him, he believed, all his life.

While he stood there outside her door, in the faint light that was creeping in wanly as the dawn advanced, he resolved that her life should no longer be darkened with his presence: he would go away somewhere—anywhere,—he would become lost to the world until such time as he could feel certain that the curse which was ruining their married happiness was conquered finally and for ever. Never again should the horror of it cloud her peace.

With head sunk on his breast he turned away from the door and went into his dressing-room and threw himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Six.

Following the departure of his wife in an ambulance, Hallam made his own preparations for leaving home for an indefinite time. He purposed going into the interior. He wanted to be alone, away from the influences of civilisation and the sight of European faces, away from the memory of the past and the nightmare of recent events.

Great mental anguish, particularly anguish which is accompanied by remorse, tends to a morbid condition of mind which renders the individual liable to act in a manner altogether unusual. Hallam made his preparations as a man might do who leaves his home with no thought of ever returning. He left quite definite and detailed instructions with his solicitor, and a letter for his wife, which was only to be given to her when she was strong enough to receive communications of a startling nature. In his letter he informed her that he had left her until such time as he could with confidence feel that he would never again cause her such distress as he had done in the past. He wrote with restraint but with very deep feeling of his undying love for her and of his remorse for what had happened, and ended by bidding her keep a brave heart and carry on until his return.

He posted this letter, with instructions as to its delivery, under cover to his lawyer, and completed his personal arrangements, and left by the train going north.

He had no clear idea as to his destination at the time of entraining; his one thought was to get as far away from civilisation as possible: he intended to make for the Congo. Besides a light kit, he was provided with sufficient money and his gun, which he carried in its case. The undertaking was adventurous; but it was in no spirit of adventure that he started; his heart was heavy and his mind clouded and depressed, preoccupied with thoughts of Esmé lying ill and alone in a nursing-home—too ill to concern herself about him for the present; but later he knew she would ask for him and wonder why he did not come. That could not be avoided: she would grow reconciled to his absence, and she would get well quicker without him to worry about.

Hallam had secured a compartment to himself, a fact which gave him immense satisfaction. He leaned with his arms on the window and surveyed the lively scene on the platform in gloomy abstraction in the interval before the train started. Other passengers leaned from the windows also for a few last words with friends who were seeing them off. But Hallam spoke to no one, and no one paid any attention to the solitary man looking from his compartment on the animated scene below. Doors slammed noisily, and the guard raised his flag, and instantly lowered it again as, amid a confusion of bustle and excitement, two belated travellers arrived and were bundled unceremoniously into the carriage next to Hallam's. Their baggage was flung in through the windows after them. Then the whistle sounded and the train moved slowly out of the station.

Disturbed and singularly annoyed, Hallam drew back and sat down in the corner seat. The people whose tardy arrival had delayed the start by a couple of minutes were the Garfields. He had recognised them instantly; he believed that they had seen and recognised him. He felt oddly irritated. Had his flight been a criminal proceeding and the secrecy of his movements imperative, he could not have been more discomposed by the knowledge that these people, who were friends of his wife and with whom he was acquainted, were in the next compartment to his. He would probably encounter them later, almost certainly they would meet in the restaurant-car. They would regard it in the light of a social obligation to inquire for his wife. Mrs Garfield had already called both at the house and at the nursing-home for news of Esmé. He had not seen her; he shrank from the thought of seeing her; but he knew that he would be compelled to face her sooner or later. She was one of the few people whose persistent friendship for his wife refused to be dismayed by an absence of response. She understood Esmé's difficulties, and sympathised with and admired her tremendously.

The news of the accident, which no one associated with Hallam, had genuinely distressed her. If by her presence she could have been of service during Esmé's illness she would have put off her journey to the Falls; but her visit to the nursing-home had convinced her that Esmé was not in a condition to need any one; she might be of some use later during the period of convalescence.

Her surprise at seeing Hallam on the train was great. That he should be leaving Cape Town then occurred to her as little short of amazing. While her husband was engaged in stowing their baggage away on the racks she asked him if he had noticed who was in the next compartment to theirs. Apparently he had. He looked down at her and nodded.

"Odd chap?" he said. "Most men would prefer to remain on the spot, even if their presence wasn't actually needed."

"The journey may be a matter of necessity," she said.

"It may be, of course." He lifted the last bag up to the rack and sat down opposite to her and unrolled a bundle of papers. "We ran it rather fine, old girl. The next time I take you on a holiday I hope you'll get forrader with your preparations."

"You old Adam, you!" she said, smiling, and leaned forward to pat his knee.

And the man in the next compartment sat and smoked and meditated gloomily, while the train ran on through fertile grass-veld towards the mountains and the sterile plain which lay beyond them.

In the vexation of seeing people he knew on the train, Hallam's first thought had been to leave it at a convenient stopping place and wait for the next train and so resume his journey; but on reflection this idea seemed a little absurd. Of what interest could his movements possibly be to the Garfields? They would leave the train in all probability long before he did, and the greatest inconvenience their presence would cause him would be an occasional and brief encounter.

The first encounter occurred very speedily: Mr Garfield came to his compartment and stood in the corridor and inquired after his wife. He expressed much sympathy with Hallam.

"We were shocked," he said, "when we heard. My wife called at the nursing-home, but she wasn't allowed to see Mrs Hallam. I trust she is doing well?"

"The doctor tells me so," Hallam answered, with what the other man considered a curious lack of feeling. "She is too ill at present to see any one."

The talk hung for a while. Mr Garfield, who never felt at his ease with Hallam, was none the less profoundly sorry for the man. He believed that the callous manner was assumed to cloak his real feelings. The haggard face and sombre eyes betokened considerable mental anguish.

"It is rather an awkward time for you to have to get away," he ventured.

"It is." Hallam's tone became more constrained. He moved restlessly, and looked beyond the speaker out at the changing scenery. "But at least I can't help by remaining," he added. Abruptly he brought his gaze back again and looked steadily into the other's eyes with an expression that was faintly apologetic. "I haven't recovered from the shock yet," he said. "I'm worried."

Garfield nodded sympathetically.

"My dear fellow, of course. It's not surprising that you should be. If we can do anything, let us know. And if you want a chat come along to our compartment; we're only next door. I'm taking the wife to the Falls. It's her first visit. I expect we'll put in about a couple of weeks there. Do you go as far?"

"I'm going farther," Hallam answered briefly. But, although Garfield looked inquiry, he did not give him any more definite information in regard to his destination.

Hallam had started on his journey with no thought of deserting his wife and leaving his home for ever: he had come away simply because he felt the imperative necessity for change and solitude. The man's mind was dark with despair. This feeling of despair deepened with every passing hour. Fear held him in its grip. He mistrusted himself. The horror of what had happened haunted him night and day; he could not sleep for thinking of it. Always before his mind's eye was the picture of his wife—falling—falling headlong—striking the ground with a thud—lying still and white at the foot of the stairs, with the dark stain under her head slowly spreading on the darker wood of the floor...

How had this thing happened? How had he come to lose control of himself completely? He ought not to have married her. He had done her an irreparable injury by tying her life to his...

Throughout the long hot days he sat in his compartment and brooded, and when the gold merged with the evening purple, and the purple deepened to night, he stretched himself on his bunk, and lay looking out at the star-strewn sky through the unshuttered windows, and brooded still with a mind too distraught to rest.

He believed that some brain sickness was coming upon him; he felt wretchedly ill; and from the way in which people stared at him when he entered the dining-car he judged that his appearance evidenced his physical and mental debility. Although he forced himself to go to meals he ate little; he had no appetite for food; the smell and the sight of it nauseated him.

He began to think that he would be compelled to leave the train: the confined space and the heat were making him ill. He found himself falling into the habit of talking to himself. This development horrified him no more than it horrified Mrs Garfield, who overheard him, and communicated her fear to her husband that Hallam was mad. His proximity made her nervous. She lay awake the greater part of one night listening to his mutterings, and fell asleep with the dawn and slept heavily until breakfast time. It came as a great relief to her to discover later that Hallam had left the train in the early morning.

He had alighted at a wayside halt, moved by an inexplicable impulse too strong to resist. Dread of another long day, of another sleepless night on the train, had been the ruling motive. He felt that if he did not get out and walk he would be ill. He was on the verge of a collapse, and in no condition of mind to realise the foolishness of alighting in this barren waste, with no prospect of shelter or refreshment within view. There must be farms somewhere in the neighbourhood, he judged, or at least a native hut where he could procure all he needed. For the moment he required only to walk in the pure air, to exert his muscles, and rid himself of the intolerable strain on his overcharged nerves. Something had seemed to snap in his brain during the night. He found it increasingly difficult to concentrate his attention on anything for long. But the idea that he must walk obsessed him; and, with his gun-case in hand and his kit across his shoulders, he struck across the veld, turning his back on the permanent way.

It did not greatly matter which direction he took; he had no particular objective in view: he wanted chiefly to shake off this annoying sense of unfitness. He had never been ill in his life before: he did not understand it. It had seemed to him that if he could walk he would be all right, and instead he felt worse. He was giddy, and he could not make any pace. He took a bush for a landmark and noted how long he was in reaching it. It amazed him. He became angrily impatient with his own laggard steps: he wasn't walking, he was crawling—crawling like a sick animal, with a sick animal's instinct to find some hole to creep into.

He looked about him vaguely, with tired eyes. That was what he wanted, all he wanted,—some quiet shelter into which to crawl and rest.

He stumbled on, tripping over the dry scrub, lurching heavily like a drunken man, and clinging tightly to his gun-case, as to something from which he would not be separated, though the weight of it was too great for his failing strength. Twice he came to his knees; but each time he rose again and stumbled blindly on as before.

The sun rose higher in the heavens. It poured its warmth like some molten stream upon the gaping ground. For miles around the veld stretched in unbroken sameness, blackened from the long drought, sparse and scrubby, with never a sign of any living thing, save the solitary man's figure, moving slowly, with heavy uncertain gait, in quest of some temporary shelter from the sun's burning rays.

It seemed to Hallam that he walked many miles and for many hours before, a long way off like some wonderful oasis amid the arid waste, he descried signs of water, and the wooded banks of a river which meandered like a green irregular wall across the stark nakedness of the land. The sight of this unexpected fertility gave him fresh heart and stimulated his failing energies to further effort. By sheer force of will he dragged his lagging feet over the uneven ground. He desired only to reach the river and lie down beside it and rest. He longed simply to get to the water, to feel it, to lave his burning brow in its coolness, to moisten his parched lips.

Again he fell, and again he rose and staggered on, covering the intervening space painfully and slowly. When he was quite close to the bank he fell once more, and this time he failed to rise, despite his persistent efforts. For the first time his hold on his gun-case relaxed. He stared at it regretfully; but he knew that he was powerless to drag it further. He left it lying where it was, and crawled on his hands and knees painfully towards the bushes, crawled between them, and reached the shallow river which had been his goal.

Book Three—Chapter Twenty Seven.

Esmé's accident, and the contemporaneous and mysterious disappearance of Hallam, brought Rose in haste and at great personal inconvenience round to Cape Town. She was terribly worried about her sister, and enormously concerned at Hallam's departure at a time when it seemed to her his presence was urgently needed.

Her concern deepened as the days passed, the weeks passed, and still there was no word from him, no news of his whereabouts. The information which the Garfields furnished on their return gave a sinister aspect to the look of things. And Esmé as she got better was continually asking for her husband. She fretted at his absence; and when ultimately she was allowed to have the letter he had left for her, though she ceased to ask for him, she fretted more than before.

The contents of the letter, which she refused to allow any one else to read, upset her greatly. It elucidated nothing of the mystery of his complete disappearance, but merely informed her that he had gone away for an indefinite time. She felt assured from her knowledge of him that he would never return until he was master of himself.

Her heart was nigh to breaking with her longing for him, and with pity, pity for the suffering which she knew he was enduring: his agony of mind must be terrible. She wanted to see him, to put her arms about him and bid him think no more of what was past. It was grievous to her to think of him alone with heart and mind heavy with sorrow and remorse. If only she could be with him she would help him to forget. The injury to herself seemed to her so small a part of the trouble; it was so entirely accidental: largely her own carelessness was responsible for her fall; if she had been on her guard it need not have happened. She believed that if she could talk to him she could make him see this. She wanted to help him, to comfort him. And she wanted him beside her, wanted his love, his presence, with a feverish urgency that burned like a fever in her veins, and left her sick with unsatisfied longing as the days dragged by without bringing him, without bringing news of him even. If he had died he could not have vanished more completely out of her life.

Her sister urged her to return with her to the Bay until she was stronger and more fitted to be alone; but Esmé preferred to remain in her own home.

"Any day he may return," she said. "I would not like him to come back and find me gone."

"He would understand," Rose said sensibly. "At least he would know where to look for you."

She did not herself believe that her brother-in-law would return. The whole affair was to her mysterious and inexplicable.

"Did you quarrel with Paul?" she asked bluntly.

Esmé lifted astonished eyes to the questioner's face.

"Quarrel!" she repeated, aghast at the mere suggestion, and too genuinely surprised to leave any doubt as to the amicable conditions of her relations with her husband in Rose's mind. "Paul and I never quarrelled over anything."

"Then it's a pity you didn't," Rose replied practically. "It lets off steam. You know, my dear," she added, and passed a caressing arm round Esmé's shoulders, "your husband possesses a very complex nature. Judged from the ordinary standpoint, it's an outrageous thing for him to go away like this; in the circumstances it is even cruel. Don't you think it would be good for him when he returned to find that you had gone back to your own people?—that you were not content to sit at home and wait for him? I'd show more spirit, Esmé. A man like Paul is apt to become neglectful without intending it. He should be made to think. You ought not to be alone until you are strong again."

"I should like him to find his home open," Esmé answered, "and a welcome waiting for him when he comes back."

There was no doubt in her own mind that one day he would come back. She believed that he would walk in unexpectedly, quite suddenly as he had gone; and she would feel his strong arms round her, and in their shelter forget all the sorrow and perplexity of their separation. That belief buoyed her up and gave her courage to wait. She would not desert her post while he was absent working out his salvation in his own way.

Rose left her and went back to her home, and so imbued Jim with her doubts that he sought advice on the matter, and eventually instigated a search for Hallam, who was not, in his opinion, responsible for his actions.

Hallam's disappearance seemed as complete as if he had vanished off the face of the earth. For months his whereabouts baffled all inquiries. People referred to him in the past tense as they might refer to a man who is dead. Generally it was believed that he was dead. From the point where he left the train nothing was known of his movements: no one appeared to have seen him after that; no one in the district, which consisted of a few scattered farms, had heard of or seen any stranger; if he had passed through their land he had not made his presence known. It was thought to be unlikely that he had remained in the district. Possibly he had changed his mind and taken again to the train.

This theory gained credence when later the body of a man, answering to Hallam's description, was discovered in a lonely spot a day's journey from the halt where he had left the train. There was nothing to show how the man had met his death, and, owing to the state of the body, recognition of the features was impossible; but the clothes were the clothes which Hallam had been wearing, and in the pockets were letters addressed to Hallam, and the watch which had been a present to him from his wife. The facts seemed to point conclusively to this being the missing man; otherwise how came he to be wearing Hallam's clothes, and where was the owner? Had Hallam been alive he would assuredly have come forward to refute the finding at the inquest on the dead man, whose identity could only be established by his garments and the papers discovered on him.

There was no doubt in Jim Bainbridge's mind, when he viewed the body, that it was that of Paul Hallam; and, although for a long while Esmé refused to believe that her husband was dead, the hope which she cherished of his being alive was a forlorn hope, which faded with the passing of time into a reluctant acceptance of the general belief.

It was during the period of uncertainty, when her mind still obstinately rejected the evidence of her husband's death, that Esmé decided to give up her house in Cape Town and move to Port Elizabeth in order to be near her sister. She felt too nervous and unstrung to remain alone in a place where her only intimate friends were the Garfields; she wanted to be nearer her own people. To the infinite satisfaction of John and Mary, she took a house, with a good garden attached, in Park Drive, and brought her furniture round with the definite intention of making her home there.

Promptly with her arrival John packed his suit-case and invited himself to stay with her. He could, he informed her, be of considerable use to her in the business of settling in. John at the age of twelve was quite a man of the world. In her loneliness she was glad of his company. This young kinsman of hers was the most tactful member of her family. He never distressed her with references to his uncle; he took his disappearance as a matter of course, very much as he had taken his marriage with his aunt. These things were incidental, and a little surprising: they were episodes in the pleasant business of life. Since the loss of his uncle had brought his aunt back he was less concerned about it than he otherwise would have been.

He found it interesting to assist in moving in, to take over the direction and arrangement of everything. It needed a man to do that.

"Dad's getting old," he informed Esmé, when he took up his residence with her. "But you can always count on me when you want a man about."

"That's very nice of you, John," she said. "You are a great help to me."

He came to her one day in the garden, carrying a leggy retriever pup, which he thrust into her arms with an air of magnificent generosity.

"I got a dog for you," he explained. "You must have a watch-dog, you know. George gave me the pick of his litter. When I told him I wanted it for you, he let me have his best pup."

"Oh!" she cried quickly, and put the little beast down and stooped to pat it. "It's sweet; but you must keep it. I won't take your pup."

"We'll share it," John returned magnanimously. "It will stay here. I expect I'll run up most days to see it." He fondled the puppy lovingly. "Isn't he a beauty? He's called Regret."

"Regret!" she repeated slowly. "I don't think I like that name for a dog. Let us change it, shall we?"

"I thought it a silly sort of name myself," John replied. "But George named it. Perhaps he wouldn't like it changed. We can cut it down to Gret."

She bent down suddenly and kissed him, to his no small surprise. It pleased her that he showed consideration for others in his direct boyish way: she wondered whence he inherited that kindly characteristic.

John suffered the caress, but he looked embarrassed.

"I say," he said; "that's all right when we are alone; but don't do it in front of the others."

And then, in case he had hurt her feelings, he slipped an arm round her waist, and walked with her, carrying the puppy, down the garden path in the brief twilight before the darkness fell.

Book Four—Chapter Twenty Eight.

Four years passed away. They were the years of the Great War, which flung the world into mourning and left a pall of depression like a blighting legacy on its passing.

Among the men who left South Africa for Europe to fight for the old country was George Sinclair. He had been one of the first to go; and after three years, the greater part of which was spent in France, he was shot through the lung, and invalided out and sent for treatment to England.

During the years he was away he wrote to Esmé regularly. He had begged permission to write to her before he left. He did not ask her to write in reply; and for a long while she received his letters without any thought of answering them. But, as the war progressed and the horrors of war deepened, her sympathy with the man and her admiration for his cheerful courage, moved her to open a correspondence with him.

She kept this letter writing up after he was in hospital, until she learnt from him that he was well and shortly sailing for home. Then, though he still wrote every week, her letters ceased abruptly. She dreaded his coming out. She knew that he still loved her, that he meant to ask her to marry him. He had given her to understand that before he left. She liked him. In a friendly way she was fond of him; but all her love had been given to Paul Hallam; and, although she now accepted the evidence of his death, her heart still cherished his memory, and turned in unforgettable longing towards the past. Her happiness had ended in tragedy: but that was the common lot in those tragic times.

The war with its harvest of death and suffering had put her own trouble further into the background than time itself could have succeeded in doing. So much had happened within the past four years that was sad and stirring and

broad in its appeal to the sympathies of even those outside the reach of these terrific happenings that the egotism of personal grief was merged with the wider sorrow in which the world shared. It was no time for brooding: a common tragedy called for the utmost effort of endurance from all.

In a sense the war proved helpful to Esmé; the horror of the calamity took her out of herself, and prevented her from growing morbid through the overwhelming shock of her own great loss. It had taken her a long time to reconcile herself to the belief that Paul was dead. Conviction came to her slowly with the passing of time, and the absence of any word from him. If he had been alive he would have contrived to let her know. It was unthinkable that he should have left her deliberately in a terrible suspense. Hope died hard within her, but it died surely. She mourned him as dead in her thoughts. But she could never bring herself to visit the grave where he was laid to rest, above which had been erected a simple granite cross, inscribed with his name and the date of the year in which he died. Jim had seen to these matters for her; she had been satisfied to leave them to him, and to ask no questions. In his way her brother-in-law had been kind and helpful. And John, who spent all his leisure time at her house, which had become a second home for him, proved a great comfort and companion.

John was now sixteen, and his only regret was that he was not old enough to join up. He admired and envied George Sinclair profoundly. To return after three years' fighting with a pierced lung and covered with glory was a splendid record in young John's estimation. He awaited Sinclair's return impatiently, eager for first-hand information of the wonderful doings in which he had longed to take part; while Esmé awaited his coming with misgivings, and wondered what she would find to say to him when they met. She recalled very vividly his coming to say goodbye to her on the evening before he sailed.

"I am going to write to you," he had said, with his blue eyes on her face. "Please don't forbid me that pleasure; it will be a tremendous help to me to be able to talk to you on paper. I may never come back, you know; but if I do I shall come straight to you."

He had gone away wearing a photograph of her which Rose had given him; that, and her friendly occasional letters, had proved the greatest happiness during those days of war and horror and discomfort. And now he was returning, with her photograph worn in a locket, and with her letters, so frequently read that they tore where they were folded, tied together with a piece of ribbon that once had adorned a box of chocolates, and was faded and discoloured even as the package which it secured.

He came to her, as he had said he would do, as soon as he arrived in the Bay. He was shy, and a little uncertain of the welcome likely to be accorded to him. The sudden cessation of her letters had damped his hopes considerably.

She was walking in the garden when his taxi stopped at the gate. He caught a glimpse of her through the mimosa trees, pacing the path slowly with the dog, Regret, walking beside her, close to her, his nose touching the hand which hung loosely at her side.

Sinclair dismissed his driver and opened the gate and advanced swiftly along the path towards her. She saw him and stood still, flushed and obviously nervous, waiting for him, while the dog bounded forward and sniffed the newcomer inquisitively, and finally leapt upon him in boisterous greeting. He patted the dog's head, pushed it aside, and approached the woman, who remained still, watching him with eyes which smiled their welcome. He took her outstretched hand and held it while he looked long and steadily into the face which had lived in his memory from the time when years ago he had met and loved her at the Zuurberg. Outwardly she had changed little: life had scored far deeper impressions on his face than on hers.

"So glad to see you back, George," she said, with a faint show of embarrassment in her manner under his continued scrutiny. "So very glad to see you safe and sound."

He approached his face a little nearer to hers, still retaining her hand, which he held in a firm grip.

"May I kiss you?" he asked.

Instinctively she drew back, and then, as though regretting the impulse which had moved her to refuse his request, lifted her face and allowed him to kiss her lips. He dropped her hand then, and turned and walked beside her towards the house.

"You can't think what it means to me," he said, "to be home again—and with you. I've had you in my thoughts, dear, every day. Why did you suddenly cease writing, Esmé?"

"I don't know," she answered shyly, and ran up the steps on to the stoep and entered the house through the drawing-room window.

He followed more slowly. His gaze, travelling round the pretty room, fell on his own photograph in uniform on the mantelpiece. He had sent her the photograph from England, and it pleased him to see it there. From the photograph his eyes went to her face and rested there, smiling and confident. She stood facing the light, looking shy and a little overcome at seeing him. Although she had been expecting him she felt oddly unprepared. Everything seemed to have changed with his appearance. He loomed large and substantial in the forefront of her thoughts, a person to be reckoned with, no longer the vague figure which had hovered indistinctly amid the confusion of her mind. Deliberately she moved to the sofa and sat down, and the dog came and lay at her feet. Sinclair seated himself beside her and played with the dog's ears.

"I've a feeling," he said, without looking at her, "that all this is unreal. It's been a sort of make-believe with me that I was with you over there. I've talked with you, told you things in dumb show, often. I've pretended that you were present and could hear and respond. Now I'm half afraid to look at you for fear you'll vanish. Absurd, isn't it?"

"Poor dear!" she said, and touched his hand gently. He looked up then and smiled at her.

"You know you haven't altered a bit since the days when we began our friendship amid the heights."

"Ah!" she said, and the light in her eyes faded. "I feel as though I had no connection with that girl at all. It's not only the years which alter us, George. You've been through experiences; they've changed you. Both of us look on life more seriously now. We were boy and girl in those old days of which you speak. I don't care to look back."

"I don't wish you to look back," he said; "I want you to look forward—with me. Esmé, you know what my hope is? I've besieged you for years. Can't you give me a different answer, dear? I've waited so long. It seems to me we are both of us rather lonely people. Why won't you end all that, and make me happy?"

Again she put out a hand, and this time she slipped it into his. He sat holding it, waiting in an attitude of strained alertness for her answer.

"It is because I like you so well," she said, "that I am reluctant to marry you. I can't give you a fair return. My dear, I've loved... There never could be any one else in my life—not in the same way."

For a moment he remained silent. He still held her hand; but he was not looking at her; he stared thoughtfully down at the carpet reflecting on what she had said. Then abruptly he released her hand and sat up.

"I'll take what you'll give," he said resolutely.

She made no answer. She could not speak just then for the emotion which gripped her. There were tears in her eyes. He leaned over her and very tenderly kissed the tears away.

Book Four—Chapter Twenty Nine.

It surprised no one, and gave considerable satisfaction to her relations, when Esmé, quite soon after Sinclair's return to South Africa, was married to the man who had been her faithful lover for over eight years.

On the evening before her marriage she discussed the matter and her feelings quite frankly with Rose.

"I'm not in love with George," she said, regarding her sister earnestly; "and I'm not marrying him out of pity. I think chiefly it was a phrase he used which got me: 'We are both of us rather lonely people.' ... That was how he put it. And suddenly while he spoke a picture of the lonely years ahead for us flashed across my imagination. It's true, you know; we are lonely; and we are both still young."

"Yes," Rose agreed. "I'm glad you see it like that. I've hated to think of you alone always."

"It's a little selfish, and altogether futile, to live wholly in the past," Esmé resumed after a pause. "My love for Paul is a sacred memory; but it should not prevent me from making George happy. He is satisfied to take the risk."

"George is a wise man," Rose responded; "he doesn't underrate his power to win your love. You'll grow very fond of him, Esmé; he is a lovable fellow."

"I am fond of him," Esmé answered. "Do you suppose I would marry him otherwise? I am bidding good-bye to the old life to-night, my dear; I am not dragging it with me into the life which begins to-morrow. I feel as though I were beginning all over again. It's a big break, you know."

"I know."

Rose's gaze travelled round the comfortable, homelike room, which from to-morrow would be deserted, and would ultimately pass to strangers. Henceforward Esmé would live in Uitenhage, where George's work was. He had furnished a house for her, and bought a car. The sight of the car, which he purposed learning to drive, had reconciled John to his aunt's second marriage. John's mother, while she gazed about her, was thinking of many things, other than motors, which might change and brighten her sister's life. There was the possibility of children. Esmé had always desired children. A baby's tiny hands would speedily heal old wounds; the feel of baby lips would stifle all regrets. In Rose's opinion this marriage was altogether desirable; it closed the past completely. In a sense it seemed to her that her sister's life was only now beginning. The curtain had rung down on the prologue, and was about to rise for the first act of the actual drama.

The Sinclairs spent two weeks in Natal after the wedding. It was Esmé's idea to go to Durban for the brief holiday, which was all the leave George could obtain. Sinclair himself had no preference; any place, so long as he had Esmé with him, would have seemed Eden to him. He was extravagantly happy. The wish of his heart was realised. The intervening years of bitterness and regret and jealousy were forgotten in the supreme satisfaction of possession. The woman whom he had married was his girl sweetheart, to whom he had remained faithful through long years of disappointment and hopeless longing. There had never been, never could have been, any one else for him. Now that she was his wife, he set himself to the task of teaching her to forget the man whose influence, dead even as when he had been alive, interposed between them. He was determined to win her love, all her love; the strength of his steadfast devotion insisted on a like response. She was very sweet to him, very gracious and kind in manner: time, he believed, would give him his desire. He must have patience, be content to wait. He had waited so long to win her that this further waiting appeared a small matter compared with what he had endured. With her beside him everything seemed possible, and life was a succession of glad and perfect days.

They spent an ideal fortnight together. Neither referred to it as a honeymoon: it was just a holiday, a pleasant period

of sight-seeing and excursions, of bathing and dancing and strolling together in the moonlight. Unconsciously they recovered something of the youth they had been allowing to slip past them unheeded, and realised with a sort of surprise the leaven of frivolity hidden beneath their more serious qualities.

If Esmé did not find the same deep happiness which she had known in her life with Paul Hallam, she was at least care free. George was a normal healthy-minded man, popular with his fellows, and possessed of keen powers of appreciation and enjoyment; and he succeeded, in rousing her to a new interest in things. His devotion touched her deeply. She began to realise that without being passionately in love, it was possible to love tenderly. Her life with George promised to be a satisfying and peaceful one. She resolved that as far as it lay in her power she would make him happy.

Life is all a matter of adaptability. Given the qualities of kindness and a tolerant disposition, it is not difficult to be happy and to give happiness. In the case of large-hearted people love develops naturally; and Esmé and George had known one another a long time and intimately; they were good comrades when they married; no feeling of strangeness or shyness marred the ease of their intercourse. Even when they returned and took up their residence in their new home it was all pleasantly familiar. They had chosen the house together, furnished it according to their mutual tastes: there was not a corner of the place, or a thing in it, they had not inspected together, discussed, disputed over, and finally come to agreement about.

And Regret was there to welcome them, the faithful watch-dog which had been Esmé's constant companion since the day when, as a puppy, John had placed it in her arms. She stooped down to pat the dog, which bounded out of the house and down the steps to meet her, jumping up and licking her hand.

"He's a bit overwhelming in his attentions," George remarked.

He despatched the coloured boy, who stood grinning on the stoep, to assist with the baggage, and put a hand in Esmé's arm and drew her into the house. Everywhere there were flowers; masses of roses in bowls, and long sprays in taller vases of the crimson passion-flower. Esmé stood still and looked about her with pleased eyes.

"Rose has been busy here," she said. "It looks lovely, doesn't it? George, it's a dear little house; and the garden is wonderful."

She stood by the window, looking out on the cool green of grass, on the blaze of colour from the flower borders, on neatly gravelled paths. Here, too, there were roses; the green of the lawn was patterned gaily with their petals which the soft, warm wind had scattered wide and blown into little heaps and again distributed these in a pleasing blending of colour; the path was covered with them, sweet-scented, and newly scattered by the breeze.

"It looks festive," she remarked.

"It looks as if the boy had better get to work with a broom," George replied.

"Prosaic person?" she said, laughing. And added: "Let them stay. It's a sweet disorder, anyhow."

He stooped to kiss her.

"You are a sweet woman," he said, and put his arm about her, and stood looking with her out upon the small but pretty garden of their home.

Pride of ownership filled the man's brain, flooded his heart with genial warmth, even as the sunlight which flooded the garden and shone hotly on the gaily coloured flowers in the borders. He felt that life had nothing more to offer him; his cup of happiness was full to the brim.

But to the woman, looking out on the sunlight with him, such complete satisfaction was not possible. She was content. But the sun of her happiness had passed its zenith and was on the decline.

Together they went through the house on a tour of inspection, while lunch was preparing. Each room called for comment and fresh expressions of delight. They came to their bedroom last. George sat on the side of the bed while Esmé removed her hat and gave little touches and pats to her hair, standing before the mirror and surveying her appearance critically. She discovered a tiny powder puff and dabbed her face with it. These mysteries of the toilet interested George profoundly. He disapproved of the puff.

"I can't understand why you do that," he said. "Your skin's all right."

"We do a lot of incomprehensible things," she returned, laughing at him. "Men shave, for instance, though nature intended them to wear hair on the face."

"That's one up to you, old dear," he said, and got up and seized her by the shoulders and kissed her. "It's rather jolly to be in our own home. It was nice being away together; but this... Esmé, I feel extraordinarily happy. It seems too good to be true, too good to last. It's great."

"Silly old duffer!" she said, smiling back into his eager eyes. "Why should the good things be less enduring than the evil?"

"Put like that, I don't see why they should be," he responded. "Wise little woman! we will make our good time last for all our lives."

Time passed, and the Sinclair menage increased its numbers by one. A baby girl was born to Esmé, and was christened, despite its father's protests, Georgina.

The baby ruled the household, and tyrannised over its parents, and made slaves of its godparents, who were amazingly interested in this small cousin of theirs. Mary, a pretty girl of nineteen, with all her sex's partiality for babies, worshipped at the shrine of the new arrival; John, with masculine mistrust of humanity in miniature, regarded the infant doubtfully, until, with its further development, it captivated him with its smile. From the moment when the baby first smiled at him, John lost his awe of it. He found it infinitely more amusing than any puppy. He carried it about the garden, bundled under one arm like a parcel, to its intense gratification. It was a good-tempered mite, and seldom cried.

The coming of her baby brought complete happiness to Esmé. It entirely changed the current of her thoughts, and drew her closer in love and sympathy to George, cementing their union with the strongest bond which married life can forge. Her love for George, as the father of her child, became a fine and tender emotion. She loved him in relation to the child. The great desire of her life was granted. She had her baby: life could give her no greater happiness.

Sinclair took very kindly to the parental rôle. Young things appealed to him; and he was immensely proud of his daughter, whose coming had completed the home circle, had indeed filled the home and banished for ever the quiet of former days. He never tired of watching Esmé with the child. She suggested the incarnate picture of motherhood, with the brooding look of love and contentment in her eyes.

The gap was filled; and the old life with Paul slipped further into the background of her thoughts.

And in England a man, newly released from a German prison camp, ill, half-starved, with nerves racked and shaken, a physical wreck, was thinking of his wife in Africa, and wondering how life had gone with her in the years since he had left her because he had felt himself to be unfit to breathe the same air with her.

Had she grieved for him, he wondered? Or had she felt contempt for his weakness, blamed him for a coward, for leaving her secretly like a criminal? The years since he had left his home were so many that it was more than possible she believed him to be dead. Several times since he was made a prisoner, during the early days of war, he had written to her; but, receiving no replies to his communications, he concluded that these, for some obscure reason of his captors, were never sent. Many men, like himself, had been similarly cut off from all communication with their friends. He had considered the question of writing after his release; but decided against it; he would wait until he saw her. His return would prove a shock in any case. He preferred to reserve explanations until he could offer them in person and comfort her for the sorrow of their years of separation.

Not once did it ever enter Paul Hallam's thoughts that his wife, even though she might believe him to be dead—which he considered likely—would have married again. It simply did not occur to him.

For some months he remained in a convalescent home in England, recovering slowly from the privations of prison life in Germany: for a further period he waited for the purpose of proving for his own satisfaction that, with every facility to indulge his former vice, the desire no longer tormented him. Then, in a mood of deep thankfulness, with a heart surcharged with love, and with an intense longing for Esmé exciting his imagination, he sailed for Cape Town in the first available ship.

Strangely, at the time of Hallam's sailing and during the weeks the voyage occupied, Esmé was troubled with dreams of him. Night after night she woke trembling in the darkness, with the vision, which sleep had brought to her lingering in her imagination, of Paul standing before her and gazing at her and turning away from her. Always the dream was the same. Suddenly the vision would appear; his eyes would gaze into her eyes, then abruptly he would turn about; and she would wake to darkness, to the stillness of the night, and to her own nervous fears. Why should the dream haunt her now, when she was learning to forget?

And Hallam, on board the ship which steered its difficult course slowly to avoid the danger of floating mines, looked across the blue waste of waters with the image of his wife's face ever before him, and the thought of her in his mind during every wakeful hour. He, too, awoke in the night, thinking of her, and lay awake in the darkness to the sound of the swish of the waves, picturing his return and the wonderful gladness he anticipated as shining in her eyes at sight of him. All the distress and horror of the past would be wiped out and forgotten in the happiness of their reunion. He would never again give her cause for a moment's anxiety. He would fill her life with love; there should be nothing to give her sorrow any more.

Slowly the blue distance which separated them narrowed, narrowed until the land came within sight, mistily, like a cloud against the deep azure of the sky, a cloud which resolved itself into a square mass of rock, blue-grey in the sunlight which shone upon the city at the base of the mountain, shone upon the sea, lit everything with a blaze of golden light. The ship glided past the breakwater into dock.

Hallam was among the first to go ashore. Before sailing he had cabled to his solicitor to inform him that he was coming out. He drove now direct to the lawyer's office. He wanted news of his wife before seeing her, wanted to glean some idea as to what his long absence and unaccountable silence was attributed to; whether Esmé and others supposed him to be dead; in which event it might be inadvisable to appear before her suddenly and without any preparation.

The reception which he received from his man of business and one-time friend surprised him. Mr Huntley, of the firm of Huntley and Thorne, was manifestly embarrassed by the sight of his former client, whom he interviewed in his private office, after issuing the strictest orders against interruption. His obvious nervousness, and the absence of any sign of welcome in his manner, impressed Hallam oddly. Had the man been guilty of embezzling trust money, which Hallam knew him to be incapable of, he could not have betrayed greater dismay at the meeting.

"This is immensely surprising, Hallam," he said. "I have not yet recovered from the amazement which the receipt of your cablegram caused me. You see, I—we all concluded you were dead. The mistake was perfectly natural."

"I grant that," Hallam answered, considerably mystified and a little annoyed by the other's manner. "At the same time I don't see why it should be regarded in the light of a misfortune that I am not dead."

"My dear fellow! Certainly not. But you must allow for a certain—astonishment. I might even put it more strongly. Your return after so long a period calls for such an abrupt readjustment. There have been changes. I don't see how you can expect otherwise. I've sat in this chair day after day since receiving your cable trying to resolve some way out of the muddle. I haven't communicated with—with your wife. You didn't instruct us, so I've done nothing."

"Quite right," Hallam said.

"I prefer to see her myself."

"You haven't written?"

"No. I am going home when I leave here."

"But Mrs Hallam has left Cape Town. She gave up the house and went round to Port Elizabeth and took a house there. Since then she—she has given up that house also, I believe. In fact I know she has. We manage her affairs for her."

Hallam nodded.

"I see nothing very extraordinary in these changes," he said. "It was not to be expected that she should remain in Cape Town alone. She has relations at the Bay."

Mr Huntley was silent. He took up from the desk before him, and put down again, a little sheaf of papers, and fidgeted with a pen lying beside the blotting-pad. He looked as he felt, immensely embarrassed.

"My dear Hallam," he burst forth at length, "I don't wish to appear to criticise your actions, but your absence—your complete disappearance, in fact, seems to me inexplicable. That is how it would strike any unbiassed person. Whatever your private reasons were for leaving your home, you might at least have kept us informed as to your whereabouts. It would have prevented a great deal of subsequent distress."

Hallam looked at the speaker in surprise. The last thing he had anticipated was this tone of rebuke from his old friend. That Huntley should suppose he had deliberately suppressed all information relating to himself struck him as an unjust view to take; he resented it.

"I have been a prisoner in Germany since the beginning of the war," he said quietly. "I wrote home many letters in the early days of my captivity. I wrote to you. Oh! there's no need to tell me you never received it. I got no replies to anything I sent out; so I left off writing after a time. My case was not exceptional."

Huntley leaned with his arm along the desk and looked earnestly into Hallam's eyes: his own eyes expressed an immense sympathy.

"Good God, Hallam!" he said.

Suddenly he grasped Hallam's hand and wrung it hard.

"I don't know how to tell you," he added. "But the thing has got to be faced. Your body was found, and identified by your brother-in-law. You've been dead these many years. And your wife—"

"Yes?" Hallam said, in a tone of deadly quiet.

"Your wife married again, and is living in Uitenhage."

Book Four—Chapter Thirty One.

Hallam recoiled from the news of Esmé's marriage as a man might recoil from the effects of a blow. The thing staggered him. His first thought was to disappear again, to walk away from Huntley's office, and turn his back for ever on the country which was home to him no longer and held no place for him. He felt dazed with grief and anger. The thought of Esmé as the wife of another man was intolerable. He could not reconcile it with his knowledge of her that she should seek consolation elsewhere. It was like some hideous nightmare, some terrible hoax, that was being practised on him for the purpose of torturing him.

He could not determine how to act in the circumstances; he could not think; his mind was blank with despair. And then jealousy awoke; his thoughts gained stimulus, and worked in a new direction along lines that were fiercely personal and possessive in outlook. After all, she was his wife. This man had no claim on her; she belonged to him. He was not going to allow any one to hold what was lawfully his.

This sense of urgency to resume possession spurred him to a fever of aggressive activity, in which mood, and with the settled purpose of interviewing his brother-in-law, he went round to Port Elizabeth, and called on Jim Bainbridge at the latter's place of business as soon as he arrived.

To say that Jim Bainbridge was amazed at the sight of him, were to express his emotions as inadequately as it would be to describe a violent explosion as disquieting to the unfortunate persons within the affected area: the effect on

him was rather similar to the effects of an explosion; he was literally bowled over on beholding a dead man returned to the world of the living. Had he been given to the cult of the supernatural he would have imagined that he saw Paul Hallam's ghost, when Hallam walked into his office. But he did not believe in ghosts; and there was something uncomfortably lifelike in the hostile gleam of Hallam's eyes, as he turned from shutting the door and regarded the man seated in his swivel-chair, with jaw dropped, and with protruding eyes which stared back at him stupidly.

"Oh hell!" muttered Jim Bainbridge, and collapsed in his seat in a crumpled heap.

Hallam advanced deliberately, and seated himself opposite his dumbfounded brother-in-law.

"I knew I was bound to give you an unpleasant surprise," he said, "so I didn't make an appointment. I've come for news of my wife."

Bainbridge's jaw dropped lower in his increasing consternation. The man's florid countenance had turned the colour of putty.

"Your—Oh lord!"

The words gurgled in his throat. He gripped the arms of his chair and attempted to sit up straighter and to get control of himself. Compared with his nervous collapse the calm of Hallam's demeanour was remarkable.

"Look here," he muttered, fumbling for words, his bewildered gaze fixed upon the other's face. "Don't you try to rush things. I've got to get used to this idea. I'm all abroad. When a man has been missing for years one doesn't expect to see him walk in as if he had been away on a holiday. What in hell do you mean by turning up here after all this time? Where've you been? Man, you were found—dead—and buried. There's a stone erected to your memory out on the veld beyond Bulawayo. You've no right to disappear and turn up again after six years. It's indecent."

"It's awkward, I admit," Hallam returned grimly, and regarded the other sternly with the angry light of accusation in his keen eyes. "I want an explanation of your reasons for swearing falsely to my identity. You buried another man under my name—why?"

"Paul, I swear I thought it was you—believe me, or not, as you will." Suddenly Bainbridge turned with quick suspicion in his look, and smote the arm of his chair fiercely. "You put that trick on us—to deceive us. Why was that man dressed in your clothes, and carrying your papers? Poor devil! there wasn't anything else left of him that one could swear to."

"I see. No," Hallam shook his head; "you are on the wrong track. I owe my life to the man you buried—I don't know his name. I don't know how he came by his death. I know nothing about him; save that he came to my aid when I was past aiding myself. Then he left me to the care of natives, and robbed me; left me with his old clothes, and nothing of my own but my boots, which, presumably, didn't fit him. Oddly, he didn't discover that the boots had double soles and were lined with notes. He stole all the money I had on me, which was considerable, and which possibly cost him his life. He did me good service; though through his death he injured me more than he could have done had he murdered me. It's a grim mistake; and it's going to lead to grim consequences."

Bainbridge stared hard at the speaker.

"The muddle is of your own making," he said sullenly. "Why did you never send a line? Esmé fretted her heart out for news of you."

"She soon recovered from her distress," Hallam replied.

"You've heard?"—Bainbridge broke off in his question abruptly.

"That she married Sinclair—yes. That is what I have come to talk over with you."

"Well, look here!" Jim Bainbridge leaned his head on his hand and thought hard. "Why didn't you send a line?" he repeated in tones of exasperation. "Man, don't you see how a word from you would have saved the situation? It's your own fault, Paul. You've brought this on yourself."

"I acknowledge the justice of that. I might have written—in the early days. But, for reasons which Esmé alone could appreciate, I refrained from writing then. Later communication became impossible. I went to England and joined up. I didn't mean to join up. But if you'd been on the spot you'd understand the pressing urgency that impelled a man to go. I was among the first batch of prisoners taken by the Germans. It's a long story anyhow. I'll tell it to her. She will understand."

But that was exactly what Jim Bainbridge intended to dissuade him from doing. The moral rights of the case were too subtle for him to grasp; but he appreciated fully the insuperable difficulties of a readjustment under existing conditions. The lives of three people would be upset and the happiness of none secured. The only way to avoid further muddle was to allow the present muddle to go on. That was how he saw it; and he hoped to persuade Hallam into taking his view.

"Do many people know of your return?" he asked.

Hallam looked surprised.

"Only Huntley and yourself."

"In your place, I should clear out," Bainbridge advised. "Why not leave the country altogether, Paul? I'll keep my

mouth shut.”

As the drift of his meaning dawned on him, Hallam’s face hardened; the grey eyes shone steel-like. Jim Bainbridge, observing him closely, realised that the task he had set himself would prove no easy matter; but he braced himself to fight for the peace of mind of the woman whose happiness hung in the balance.

“You know,” he added, after a brief moment for reflection, “your long absence, your silence, amount pretty near to desertion. I don’t know much about the blooming divorce laws in this country; but I fancy if we stretched our imaginations a bit we could make out a good case. Clear out, Paul. Make it a case of desertion proper. It’s the only decent course to take. You don’t want to injure Esmé further. Leave her alone.”

“And condone a bigamy—in which my own wife is concerned! She *is* my wife. I will agree to a divorce only if she wishes it.”

“Man, can’t you see the unnecessary cruelty of letting her know you’re alive? She’s got used to thinking of you as dead. She’s happy.” Bainbridge leaned nearer to him and threw out a protesting hand. “It’s hard on you. I admit it’s hard on you—damned hard. But—hang it all!—you created the muddle. If it were only a matter of your claim against George’s, I wouldn’t offer advice; but it isn’t. It’s a case which would baffle Solomon himself. There’s a kid—a baby girl. If I’m not mistaken, the baby’s got a stronger claim than either of you two men. Some women are like that. Esmé lives for the child.”

He broke off, heated by his unusual eloquence, and uncomfortably aware of the expression of black hate on his listener’s face. Hallam sat silent, staring straight before him. The news of the child was the last dreg of bitterness in the cup which he was forced to drain. The thought of the child infuriated him, filled him with intolerable jealousy. Esmé, his wife,—with a child—which was not his! The thing would not bear thinking about. And yet it stuck in his thoughts, tormented his thoughts, would not be dismissed however much he strove to thrust it aside. In the moment when Jim Bainbridge let fall this bomb Hallam’s feeling for his wife underwent a sudden revulsion. It seemed to him that his love died as surely as if it had never been. It seemed to him, too, though he knew the thought to be an injustice, that the wife he had loved was unworthy, was no better than a light woman. She had consoled herself very speedily. His years of self-discipline had been spent in vain. He had gained a victory over himself at a terrible price—the price of his wife. He had lost the fruits of his labour; even as a man who will sometimes strive, putting all his endeavour into one harvest, to be ruthlessly cheated of the profit of his toil by some unforeseen calamity, such as drought or other disaster. These things happen: it is the throw of the dice of chance.

“You had to know,” remarked Jim Bainbridge abruptly, feeling the urgency to say something to end the strained silence which had followed upon his disclosure, and busying himself with his pipe in order to avoid seeing the play of bitter emotion which disfigured the other man’s features. “Some one had to tell you. It complicates matters.”

“Yes.” Hallam stood up. “I wasn’t prepared for this,” he said. “I’ve got to think about it. I’ll see you again some other time. If you want me, I’m staying at the ‘Grand.’”

“Man, I’m sorry about this,” Bainbridge said, and held out his hand.

Hallam did not even see it. Like a man in a trance he turned and walked out of the place.

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Two.

Jim Bainbridge whistled. He filled his pipe and lighted it, and let it go out again. He repeated this performance until he had exhausted all the matches in his box; then he put the pipe down and sat back in his seat, with his thumbs in his braces, and cogitated.

It was a hell of a mess. No other phrase described the situation so aptly. It *was* a hell of a mess. He could not see how it was to be cleaned up exactly. Why the devil, instead of being taken prisoner, could not the fellow have stopped a bullet? That would have been a creditable finish. Well, he hadn’t. He was back again; and it looked as though there was going to be the hell of a fuss.

For several minutes Jim Bainbridge ceased from his meditations and coloured the air luridly with the variety and force of his expressions; then he cooled down again, and fell once more into thought. This thing had to be kept from his wife. The fewer the people in possession of the uncomfortable facts the better for the present. There was no need to confess to a cat in the bag until the brute mewed.

It wasn’t his affair anyway.

Suddenly he remembered, with a distinct disinclination to face Esmé in the circumstances, that they were dining at the Sinclairs’ that night. It was a memorable occasion—the baby’s first birthday. A nice sort of birthday surprise he had up his sleeve!

“Blast the baby!” he muttered; and immediately felt ashamed of himself. It was most assuredly none of the baby’s fault.

The case, looked at from any point, looked at all the way round, presented no possible solution to his mind. He had not liked the look in Hallam’s eyes when the latter walked out. He did not feel sure of the man, of how he would act, what his purpose was. There was trouble in the air; the atmosphere was heavy with it. He stared out of the window. It was a bright sunny day, hot and clear; it ought to have been thunder weather; and it was not: the thunder was all within—in the minds of men, in Hallam’s mind in particular. What was he going to do?

Bainbridge kicked the desk in front of him savagely, and got up and put his coat on. If he sat there any longer he would be moved to do something ridiculous. He would go out, walk along the Main Street, and talk with any one he chanced to meet. He must get a grip on himself before he faced Rose, or she would draw the whole thing out of him. And Lord knew what would happen then! For her own sake he wanted to keep his wife in ignorance of this wretched business until secrecy was no longer possible.

"There's no sense in unfurling an umbrella before the rain falls," he soliloquised. "There is always a chance that the cloud won't burst."

The abstraction of his manner at lunch that day excited general comment. Rose jumped to the conclusion that business was worrying him, and showed immediate concern for the family finances; and so exasperated him that he left the house in a rage and went back to his office in an irritable frame of mind.

"The old man's temper is getting a bit frayed at the edges," John observed, with filial candour.

"Oh! daddy's all right," said Mary, "if you don't take his little moods seriously. He is always excitable when he is going to a party."

The irritability had worn off, but the abstraction deepened when Jim Bainbridge escorted his family to the Sinclairs' house that evening. It was entirely a family gathering. Sinclair's sister and her husband were present, beside his wife's relations; there were no other guests. Jim Bainbridge, when he kissed his sister-in-law, had an odd feeling that there was another uninvited guest there, a hovering presence of which he alone was aware. This sinister, lurking shadow stood between Esmé and the man who, all unconscious of the danger which threatened his happiness, welcomed his wife's relations with frank cordiality. Bainbridge wrung his hand hard on an impulse of genuine sympathy. He liked George. It distressed him to think of the blow which might fall at any moment. The calm happiness of Esmé's face, George's genial smile, arrested his attention, played on his imagination to an unusual degree. It was not his wont to notice such things; but to-night he was stirred out of his phlegmatic indifference to a very vivid and human interest in the concerns of these people, whose lives were overshadowed by a tremendous crisis.

The references to the baby, the laughing congratulations of the guests, jarred on his nerves. He refrained from any mention of the child. And at dinner, when Georgina's health was drunk in champagne, he alone ignored the toast. For the life of him, he could not have joined in the farce of the general rejoicing. Later, in the drawing-room, Esmé sat down beside him and rallied him on his preoccupation.

"You are bored, Jim," she said. "I believe you are longing to be home and in bed."

"No. But I've got the toothache," he lied.

"Poor old dear! I'm sorry. Come upstairs and have a peep at the babe asleep. She looks such a duck in her cot."

He followed her from the room and upstairs to the nursery. There was a nurse in charge, but she withdrew when they entered, to Jim Bainbridge's infinite relief. Esmé pulled aside the mosquito net and bent over the cot. Her eyes, the man observed, were soft with mother-love as she leaned down towards the sleeping child. He did not look at the child; he was intent upon her.

"Isn't she sweet?" she said, and glanced up at him, smiling.

His own face was grave, even stern in expression. He was watching her attentively, wondering about her, wondering how the news of Paul's return would affect her when she knew.

"I believe you care more for that kid than you do for—any one," he said gruffly. "If you could go back... If it were possible, say, to begin again—with Paul... Would you be willing to give up the kid—for him?"

Abruptly she straightened herself and stood beside the cot, holding the mosquito net in her hand, and looking at him fixedly with an air of troubled surprise.

"Jim," she said, and her face saddened, "what put it into your mind to ask me that question? One can never go back. I wish you hadn't said that—to-night. What brought that idea into your mind?"

"I don't know."

He fidgeted nervously with his collar and avoided her gaze. She was looking at him with a puzzled, questioning expression in her eyes, with no suspicion of his purpose in mentioning Paul's name, but struck by the coincidence that Paul should be in his thoughts, even as he was in hers.

"It's strange you should have said that," she continued. "Lately I have been dreaming of Paul. I dream of him nearly every night."

"Dream of him!" he echoed blankly. "Do you mean that you dream that he's alive?"

"I dream that I see him looking at me," she answered. "He looks into my eyes and turns away; and then I wake and lie in the darkness, trembling. The dream is always the same."

"I say! that's queer," he said, staring at her, as earlier in the day he had stared at Hallam, as if he saw a ghost. These things were making him superstitious. "What should make you do that, I wonder?"

"Who can say? It's a matter of nerves, I suppose." She dropped the net she was holding and put a hand on his arm

and drew him towards the door. "Come along down, old thing," she said. "We are not good company for one another to-night. For your toothache, and my heartache, we must seek an anodyne in the society of the others."

But for Bainbridge's imaginary toothache there was no effective anodyne: the complexities of the situation were altogether beyond his efforts at elucidation. There was nothing for it but to stand by and wait for the blow to fall.

He sat on the stoep and talked with Lake, George's brother-in-law, about the native labour unrest, and the advisability of adopting strong measures in quelling the agitation.

"This native question is going to be a big problem in the near future," Lake opined. "We give the coloured man too much power."

"What other course is possible with a civilised system of government?" Bainbridge contended.

"But the coloured man isn't properly civilised," Lake insisted; "that's the point. He hasn't grasped the rudiments of citizenship yet."

"Well, we've got to teach him. He's learning."

Bainbridge's mood forced him into a reluctant opposition. He was not in sympathy with the coloured man, but he took up his defence warmly. He and Lake plunged into argument; while in the room behind them Mary sang in a fresh, sweet soprano voice to Esmé's accompaniment, and the rest sat about and listened and joined in the popular choruses.

And, a few miles away, walking along the shore in the darkness, a man, alone and with a mind black with despair, thought of the wife he had come back to claim, and of a child which was not his...

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Three.

Throughout that night Hallam tramped along the shore, struck inland, came back to the sea, retraced his steps over the same ground; walking with tireless energy while he considered the position, so hopelessly complicated by the birth of the child.

His feeling for Esmé oscillated between love and hate. He thought of her as his dear wife, and wanted her urgently; again he thought of her as the mother of Sinclair's child, and his heart turned from her, grew hard with bitter jealousy and revulsion. The thought of the child infuriated him—the child who stood between him and the woman whom he loved and who belonged to him. She was his wife; he could claim her. But would she give up the baby for him? Would she forsake all the new love which had come into her life for the sake of the old love, so unexpectedly come back to her, almost like a gift from the grave? He could not tell. Intimately as he knew her nature, confident in his assurance that the best of her love had been given to him, there was yet a side of her character with which he was wholly unfamiliar, the maternal side. He had no means of judging how far her motherhood would influence her. That the maternal instinct was deep-rooted with her he knew; that much she had revealed to him during their married life. She had hungered for a child...

He stood still on the sands, looking seaward, with hands clasped behind him, his shoulders bent. He became suddenly conscious of great physical fatigue. He had walked far and for many hours—walked, as he had been thinking, in a circle which brought him back to the starting point, no whit further advanced towards the solving of the problem which harassed his mind, and which, on setting forth, he had determined to solve before another dawn broke. And already the first sign of dawn showed in the pallid skyline where it touched the sea. The feel of the air was fresh and pure; it followed upon the hot darkness of the passing night like a revivifying breath. Hallam felt its coolness on his forehead and lifted his face to meet it, and beheld the stars glowing fainter, and the darkness yielding reluctantly to the grey of the creeping dawn.

Another day was advancing upon him, another day of perplexity and doubt and bitter torment; creeping upon him like a cold shadow out of the darker shadows, bringing with it no hope, only a deeper sense of despair.

What ought he to do?

Was it clearly his duty, as Bainbridge had sought to indicate, to leave Esmé in the undisturbed belief in his death and in her false position as George Sinclair's wife? That course raised so many points, legal and ethical, which made its adoption difficult, if not impossible. There was the question of income. Why should his income, as well as his wife, be enjoyed by the man who, even though unwittingly, had nevertheless robbed him of everything? There was the other resource of collusive divorce. But that was only practicable by agreement, which would involve the disturbing of Esmé's peace of mind, and invest her with the responsibility of decision. There was the third course of claiming her as his wife. Here again the difficulty of the child obtruded itself, an insuperable barrier to the happiness of all concerned. He wanted his wife, but he did not want the child; on that point he was firmly resolved. It was the one point in the series of complications upon which he entertained no doubt. The child was not his; he had no thought of adopting it as his: he was jealous of it, more jealous of it than he was of Sinclair. Its very helplessness made it a tremendous factor in the case.

He wondered dully how Esmé, when she learned of it, would receive the news of his return? Judged by ordinary standpoints, his manner of leaving her, of allowing her to remain uninformed as to his whereabouts, was unpardonable. Practically it amounted to desertion, as Bainbridge said. But his mental condition at the time he left his home was responsible for his amazing conduct. The voyage to England had been undertaken for the purpose of regaining strength, of regaining control of his nerves; the rest had been due to the unfortunate accident of circumstances: it might have happened to any one; it had happened to other men. Plenty of fellows reported missing

had turned up again. He wondered whether any man, beside himself, had returned to his home to find his wife married again? And, if so, how he had acted? No precedent could have aided him in his dilemma; each case called for individual action which must be governed largely by circumstances. The big stumbling block in his own case was the child. Everything worked round to that one point and stuck there; it formed a cul-de-sac to every line of thought.

Wearily Hallam returned to his hotel and went to bed and fell into the heavy, unrefreshing sleep of physical and mental exhaustion.

Later in the day he went again to Jim Bainbridge's office. Bainbridge was not in; his return was expected any minute. Hallam decided to wait for him. He waited a long time. No one came to disturb him. His presence was, as a matter of fact, forgotten in the excitement of the unusual doings outside the Court House. The Square and the streets leading to it were choked with natives, agitators, angrily demanding the release of their leader, whom the authorities had arrested as a disturber of, and a menace to, the peace of the community.

Hallam knew of these matters only through the talk overheard at the hotel. He had noticed an unusually large crowd of natives when he descended the hill on his way to see Bainbridge. The crowd had swelled its numbers since then, though it had not yet attained to the dangerous proportions which it did later, when the serious rioting took place, and the massed ranks of dark forms surged in ugly rushes upon the building which was held by a brave handful of Europeans.

The angry murmur of the mob rose and died down, and rose again, louder and more continuous. The sounds penetrated to the quiet room where Hallam sat, so engrossed with the turmoil of his own thoughts that these signs of men's passions aroused beyond control excited in him merely a faint curiosity. He rose and went out into the street to ascertain what the disturbance was about.

The sight of the vast concourse of natives amazed him. From every direction dark running figures appeared, many of them armed with sticks, and all making for the same point, wedging themselves into the crowd like stray pieces in one gigantic whole. There was no possibility of getting past them; it would be dangerous, he realised, to go among them. Their attitude was threatening. He had had experience of the native when he was out of control. Lacking in discipline and all sense of responsibility, and with an utter disregard for consequences, he was a difficult proposition to tackle.

Hallam turned down a side street, which was silent and deserted, passed a number of warehouses, and came out upon the fringe of the crowd. So far nothing had happened to fan the smouldering hate into a conflagration. It needed only, the white man realised, the throwing of a missile or the random discharge of a firearm, to rouse the mob to a frenzy of murderous activity. But so far the situation was in hand; the rioting came later.

It was difficult to say who started it, from which direction came that first shot that turned the sea of black swaying figures into a frenzied rabble of monomaniacs with a common enemy, the white man, the ruler, who, terribly outclassed in numbers, yet held the coloured man at bay. They were there, behind the walls, a handful of white men, police and ex-soldiers, armed, determined, cool-headed, maintaining law and authority against the vast rabble of native insurgents.

Hallam heard several shots fired; heard the yells of the mob; watched the ugly rush as it surged forward in one mighty wave of humanity. Sticks were wielded freely, stones and other missiles came into use; the noise swelled to pandemonium. To remain in the streets was unsafe. A white man would receive no quarter if the mob got hold of him. Aware of his danger, Hallam turned to retreat; and, as he made for the side street down which he had come, the sound of a woman's scream arrested his attention. He halted and looked round. A white woman was struggling with a native a few yards from where he stood. It was the work of a minute to reach her; the next, he had the native by the throat and was choking the life out of him. The woman had fallen to the ground. She might be hurt, or she might have fainted: Hallam did not pause to find out. A couple of natives had seen them and were running towards them; if they came up with them, though he might succeed in shooting them, for he carried a revolver, it would bring the crowd upon them; and he and the woman he had rescued would inevitably perish. Stooping, he picked her up in his arms, and ran with her up the street, darting through the open door of a wool-shed, where he dropped her unceremoniously on a bale of hides and ran back to the door and secured it.

But there was no sign without of their pursuers. The chase of fugitive whites was less exciting than the bigger business in hand. The street was quiet, and wore an air of desertion, as if every man had left his post for the scene of greater activity.

Hallam turned from securing the door, and leaned with his shoulders against it, breathing hard, in quick short breaths. With the abrupt shutting out of the sunlight the interior of the building appeared dark; the insufficient light, which penetrated through the dirty windows, revealed everything dimly, like objects seen in the dusk. Neither Hallam nor the woman had spoken. They did not speak now. She was sitting up, looking about her with dazed eyes. She put a hand over her eyes, as if to shut out the sight of the tall figure confronting her, uncovered them again, and looked straight into the eyes of the man, who stood with his shoulders against the door, watching her.

He had recognised her when he stooped over her in the street to lift her; she had recognised him sooner. But to her it had seemed that fear had deranged her reason; she believed that her imagination had given to her rescuer the features of some one whom she knew to be dead. Now, while she watched him, listened to his deep breathing, conviction came to her that this was Paul himself, no creation of her fancy; and suddenly, while she looked at him, the room grew dark about her, his face faded in a mist, disappeared: she dropped back on the hides and lay still.

As Hallam looked down on the white face, with the eyes closed, and the dark lashes resting on the colourless cheeks, there came back very vividly to his memory a picture of his wife lying senseless at the foot of the stairs, and the horror which had gripped his heart at the sight of her lying thus, the remorse and the self-accusation which had all but unhinged his reason. In recalling these painful memories he felt his heart softening towards her; the jealousy which had embittered his thoughts of her yielded to the more generous instincts of love and a pitiful tenderness, which desired only to shield her from the distress and embarrassment of her position.

Fate had resolved the point as to whether she should know of his return; the responsibility of decision had been lifted from his shoulders. At least his presence had been the means of saving her from a dreadful and violent death. It was horrible to contemplate what might have happened had he not been on the spot.

Deliberately he moved away from the door and approached the unconscious figure lying on the pile of evil-smelling hides. For a while he remained standing, looking down on the quiet form; then he took a seat on the hides and sat still and watched for a sign of returning consciousness. As soon as she was equal to walking he meant to take her to Jim Bainbridge's office. He was not satisfied of their safety while they remained where they were.

Esmé recovered from her faint to find him seated beside her, watching her with those keen eyes which seemed to search her soul. She lay still for a while, staring back at him, too bewildered to realise at once where she was and what had happened. Then abruptly memory came sweeping back in a confusing rush, and the events immediately preceding her swoon crowded into her mind. She sat up; and the man and the woman looked steadily at one another.

"Paul!" she whispered.

"Esmé!"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, my dear! Oh, my dear!" she wailed.

She broke down and cried uncontrollably. He made no move to comfort her, or to attempt explanations; he let her cry; tears were more often a relief than otherwise. And there was nothing he could find to say. There was nothing, it seemed to him, to be said. Matters had reached a deadlock. Here they were, husband and wife, together after long years of separation; and, dividing them more effectually than the years, was the fact of Esmé's second marriage and the existence of her child.

Presently she looked up at him through her tears with eyes that were infinitely sad, that held, too, in their look an expression of yearning tenderness for this man, whom she had loved in the past, whom she still loved better than any one in the world. The sight of him brought back so many memories of the happiness which their great love for one another had put into their lives. Why had she forgotten? The memory of the beauty of their love should have satisfied her. What had she done by forgetting so soon?

"They told me you were dead," she said.

"I know."

"At first I wouldn't believe it. But you sent no word, and the years passed... Oh, my dear! Oh, my dear! Why did you leave me like that?—without a word or a sign from you all these years?"

"I will explain later," he answered, speaking as calmly as his emotion permitted. "For the present you must just believe that it wasn't altogether my fault. I was ill for a long time after I left home. It was touch and go. If there is a purpose which governs our destinies, I suppose there was some reason why I should live. Anyhow I pulled through with all the odds against me. And again, when men were dying all about me, my life was preserved—I know not why, nor for what. I have no place in the world. I am just so much dust encumbering the earth. My return is only a distress to you. I come back to find you gone from me."

She hid her face in her hands and wept afresh. Gone from him! That was how he saw it. She had not been faithful to his memory even.

"Tell me about yourself," she pleaded. "I want you to fill in the blank. I want to know where you've been—all about everything. I don't understand. Tell me."

"Not now—nor here," he said, rising. "It's a long story; and we should be moving out of this. Can you walk as far as Jim's office? I think we should be safer there."

As though reminded by his caution of the disturbance in the streets, which the sight of him had driven temporarily from her thoughts, she stood up and remained in an attentive attitude, listening to the din, which penetrated to their quiet shelter with horrible distinctness. Men were out there a few yards away, fighting and being injured, killed perhaps, as she might have been but for Paul. She lifted frightened eyes to his face.

"What is it?" she asked. "What is happening?"

"It's a riot," he answered. "The gaol will be overfull as a result of this noisy disturbance. I hope some of the brutes will get shot."

"You saved my life, Paul," she said, looking at him gravely.

He made no answer to that. He went to the door and unfastened it and looked out into the street. With the opening of the door the tumult seemed to swell in volume, but the street itself was quiet; there was no one within sight. He

turned to her swiftly and took hold of her arm and led her outside.

"There is nothing to be nervous about," he said. "We shan't meet a soul. I came this way just before I saw you."

None the less, he carried his revolver in his hand, and hurried her up the street, keeping a sharp look-out against surprise, until he got her safely to Bainbridge's office. The room when they entered it was empty as when he had left it, and showed no sign of its owner having been there.

Esmé sat down, white and shaken, and leaned back in her chair without speaking. A clerk came to the door and inquired whether he could do anything. Her appearance, hatless and dishevelled and white, had struck him when she entered. She asked for water; and he went away to fetch it. Hallam took the glass from him when he returned with it and carried it to her himself.

"Mrs Sinclair isn't hurt, I hope?" the clerk asked.

"No," Hallam answered curtly; and the clerk withdrew.

At the sound of her name, Esmé's eyes sought Hallam's face. She saw it harden, saw the lips compress themselves, as he turned with the glass in his hand and approached her chair. She took the glass from him with a word of thanks, and drank the contents slowly, while he paced the carpet with long, uneasy strides, backwards and forwards, before the open window.

"Paul," she asked suddenly, "have you seen Jim?"

"I saw him yesterday," he answered, without pausing in his walk.

"Yesterday!" she echoed, her thoughts reverting to the dinner party, and to the curious preoccupation of her brother-in-law's manner. Jim had known yesterday that Paul was alive; and he had said nothing.

"He told you—about me?" she said.

"Yes—everything that matters."

She put the glass down on the desk and stood up and confronted him.

"What am I to do?" she wailed. "Oh! what am I to do?"

"That," he answered with surprising quietness, "is a question which no one can resolve but yourself. It is for you to decide."

"But I don't know what to do," she returned distressfully. "I—Oh, dear heaven! what a terrible position to be placed in!"

She wrung her hands and turned away from him and stood leaning against the frame of the window, where the warm fresh air poured in on her, and the distant sounds of the din in the streets came to her ears like something far off, something altogether outside her own concerns. The horror of her encounter with the Kaffir was submerged, almost forgotten, in the bewilderment of Paul's return. Paul knew of her second marriage—which was no marriage. He must know, since he had spoken with Jim, of her child. The child's future welfare was her chief concern. She resented the injury done to it as a deliberate wrong wrought through the agency of this man by his long absence, his inexplicable silence. She felt bitter when she thought of it.

"Why did you leave me in ignorance of your whereabouts?" she asked. "Was it fair to treat me like that? You had all my love, all my confidence. Surely you might have trusted me! Whatever you were doing, wherever you were, I should have understood. I would have waited patiently. I was prepared to wait after reading your letter. I judged from it that you would not return to me until you were sure of yourself, even though it meant separation for all our lives. But you could have let me know you were alive. It was cruel to keep silent all these years."

"Yes," he allowed; "had it been intentional it would have been."

He joined her at the window, and stood opposite to her, observing her with a steady gaze which drew her eyes to his, held them: she remained looking back at him, listening to him, while he strove to make her understand the struggle and the despair of those silent years.

He told her of his flight; of the unhinged state of his mind when he left home; of his physical condition which brought him to the verge of death; of how he would have died but for the care of a stranger—a poor white, who later robbed him, and was subsequently buried in his name. He told her of his slow recovery in a native hut; of the fierce craving for alcohol which assailed him as soon as he was able once more to get about.

"I could not write to you then," he said. "I felt unfit to breathe your name."

He went on to speak of the journey to England, still with his vice in the ascendant. He had given way to it in England. His illness had sapped his will-power and he was at the mercy of his desires once more. Then came the war. He joined up with the intention of making good. Until he had made good he was resolved that he would not write.

The rest of the story, of his early capture and his ineffectual efforts to communicate with her, he described briefly. He gave a detailed account of the period following his release; of his tedious convalescence; of his longing for her; of his time of probation, during which he tested his endurance until satisfied that he had won a final victory over himself. He told of his voyage out; of his wish to break the news of his return to her himself.

"It was unlikely that you believed me to be still alive," he said. "And I did not want to give you a shock by writing when, by the exercise of a little patience, I could tell you all this, and—"

He broke off abruptly. In his imagination he had anticipated her gladness, had pictured their mutual joy in the reunion, when, with his arms about her, he would tell her the story of his absence, and with his kisses comfort her for the sorrow that was past. This home-coming was so different from anything he had conceived.

"I knew nothing of the finding of the body of a man supposed to be me," he said. "That was one of the unforeseen accidents of circumstance which create an aftermath of deplorable consequences. We are the victims of circumstance. It is useless to impute blame to any one. The facts remain. But for Jim's positive testimony you would not have re-married. Without some proof of my death, you would have gone on hoping, I believe."

"Paul!—Oh, Paul!" she sobbed, and held out her two hands towards him in a gesture of pathetic helplessness.

He took them in his. And abruptly with the feel of her hands in his, his reserve broke down; the hardness went out of his eyes. He gathered her to him and kissed her and held her close in his embrace.

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Five.

What were they to do?

That was the question they asked each other as soon as they were able to collect their ideas and talk calmly.

Hallam had put her into Jim Bainbridge's swivel-chair; and he sat on a corner of the writing-table, facing her, holding one of her hands in his. It was become to him now a matter simply of doing what was best for her happiness. Whatever she decided he resolved to abide by. She was the more injured; the settlement of their future must lie in her hands. His rights, his claim on her, which until now had held a paramount place in his thoughts, assumed an insignificance which rendered them negligible beside her supreme right to the direction of her own life.

"I'll go, Esmé,—I'll go now, if you wish it," he said,—"if it would make things easier for you."

He felt her fingers close round his, and said no more about going.

They sat hand in hand for a long while without speaking. Presently she moved slightly and lifted her face to his, white and wrung with emotion, with the stain of much weeping disfiguring it; but the sweetness of her look, the pathos in the eyes which met his, made her face seem more beautiful to him than ever before. He leaned over her and pressed his cheek to hers.

"Paul," she whispered, "if it wasn't for—It breaks my heart when I think of George."

Sharply, as though her words stung him, he drew back.

"It's going to hurt him badly," she said. "And my baby... My poor little innocent baby!"

Hallam had nothing to say to that. The culminating disaster, the biggest and most appalling of the difficulties with which they were faced, was wrought by the existence of the child. He sat, gripping her hand hard, speechless and immeasurably disconcerted. What was there to say in face of her distress?

"I can't think," she said. "I'm all confused. This changes everything. I don't know what to do. I don't feel that I can go home. I haven't got a home..."

She reflected awhile.

"George will have to be told. That is the part which is going to hurt. I can't bear to think of it."

"I'll tell him," Hallam said.

"No; not you."

She spoke with a sort of repressed vehemence, and drew her hand from his, and sat with it clenched on the desk in front of her, her face working painfully.

"Oh! whatever made me do it?" she cried. "Why was I not satisfied to live with my memories? All this distress is of my making. Why did I do it?"

"God knows!" he returned with sudden bitterness. "If you had died, your memory would have been sacred to me."

He regretted having said that as soon as the words were spoken. What right had he to reproach her for inconstancy? It was easy for him to remain faithful in thought to the wife who had never given him a moment's pain. She had suffered—he knew that she must have suffered a great deal—on his account; but her love had remained unchanged through all the disappointment and the weary years of waiting. He held the foremost place in her heart. He was still her husband, to whom she had given the best of her love. She did not withdraw her heart from him. She wanted him, even as he wanted her: that assurance removed all doubt from his mind as to what they ought to do. He meant to have her.

He fell to talking quietly and reasonably about the situation. It was useless to indulge in recrimination and self-reproach: they must take a common-sense view of their case and make the best of the difficulties. These were not

insoluble after all.

He was still talking, while Esmé listened to him with an air of anxious attention, when Jim Bainbridge walked in. From the clerk he had learned of the presence of his sister-in-law and of the stranger who had visited him on the previous day. The cat was out of the bag now for good or ill: the business of keeping Paul Hallam's return secret had ceased to be any affair of his. He had wanted to biff the fellow out of it; had trusted that Hallam would see the inexpediency of his resuscitation stunt and clear off before the news of his return got about. And here they were, together—in his office! He was jolly well in the soup this time.

He came in looking harassed and startled, and stood inside the door, surveying them in a sort of worried amazement. The appearance of his sister-in-law shocked him. She looked as if she had been mixed up in the brawling in the streets; as if she had been rolled in the dust and badly hurt. His eyes met hers, and read reproach in them as she got up from his chair and came towards him.

"Jim, why didn't you tell me this last night?" she said.

"I wouldn't have told you, ever, if I'd had my way," he answered, with the sulky manner of a man receiving an unmerited rebuke. "How did you come to find one another? If those blasted niggers hadn't started raising Cain over the arrest of their blackguardly leader, I'd have been in my place here. Something always happens when I'm not on the spot. Well, you've settled what you're going to do, I suppose? It's your show anyhow."

The telephone bell rang at that moment and interrupted the train of his ideas. He seated himself before his desk and took up the receiver. His face was a study in expressions while he listened.

"Hullo! ... Yes. She's here all right..."

"It's George speaking," he looked up to remark for the general information.

"Eh? ... Oh! yes; there's been a devil of a shindy. It's quieting down now. I think we've seen the worst of it. I hope it will serve to illustrate how absurdly inadequate our police force is. They've done wonders. There will be a few funerals over this. One or two Europeans killed, worse luck! ... You will? ... Right! We'll keep her with us until you turn up. Good-bye."

He rang off, and looked up at Esmé with a wry face.

"They've heard of the row; and George got the wind up about you. He's motoring in later to fetch you. How did you get through? Were you roughly handled at all?"

He surveyed the disorder of her hair, her torn and crumpled dress. She looked as though she had been in the thick of the mêlée. She nodded.

"If Paul hadn't been near I should have been killed," she answered. "That was how we met. I was on my way here when a Kaffir got hold of me. Paul killed him."

"Well!" he said, and sat back and stared from one to the other in astonished curiosity. "I take it, that about settles it. It establishes his claim anyway. It seems like an act of Providence that he should be in the right spot at the right moment. I'm not going against that."

Hallam put out a hand and drew Esmé to his side.

"I'm not for allowing any man to interfere between us," he said in quiet authoritative tones. "She's mine all right. We're both agreed as to that."

Jim Bainbridge smiled dryly.

"So it seems. Well, it's the right course, I've no doubt."

He made a mental resolve that he would not be anywhere handy when the explanation with George took place. Thank Heaven, a man had his club to retire to in these domestic crises!

"You'd better not show up at the house," he observed to Hallam, "until we've broken the news to Rose. Shocks aren't good for her. I've had as much excitement as I care about for one day."

Esmé crossed to his chair and stood beside it, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"There's one thing more, dear," she said, with brightly flushed cheeks, and eyes carefully averted from Hallam's. "I want you to ring up George and ask him to bring baby and nurse in the car. I am staying with you to-night."

"The kid, eh!"

Swiftly he glanced at Hallam. Hallam remained rigid and said nothing.

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Six.

The whole world changed for Esmé with the return of the husband she had mourned as dead. But for her sorrow on George Sinclair's account, she could have found in her heart only room for rejoicing in the knowledge that Paul was alive and well instead, as she had been led to believe, of having died mysteriously and alone and been buried in a

lonely grave. But the thought of George, of how this must hit him, haunted her distressfully. It grieved her to have to hurt him; he was so altogether fine and good. She felt like a cheat in relation to him. It seemed to her that she had stolen his love, stolen everything he had to give; and now she was about to steal his child from him and leave him sad and alone.

If only she had remained steadfast, and had refused to marry him!

The thought of the child tormented her anew, the child who would never know a father's love. Fortunately the baby was so young that these matters could be kept from her knowledge until it seemed expedient to reveal them to her. Paul, however kind he might be, could never take a father's place. Instinctively she realised that, though he accepted the position, he resented it keenly. The knowledge that the child was Esmé's and not his galled him sorely. But from the moment when he was resolved to have his wife at all costs Hallam had made up his mind that the child would form a part of the new life. Deep down in his soul he had a sort of perception that in this mental scourging lay his punishment and possibly his ultimate salvation. He would be good to the child for the sake of the woman he loved, and who loved them both.

He drove with Bainbridge and Esmé to the top of the hill, where he left them and walked the few yards to his hotel. The disturbance was over, and the rioters were in rapid retreat. They swarmed over the Donkin Reserve on their way to the locations. Many of them were injured, and, with the blood streaming from their wounds, presented a sufficiently unpleasant sight. The taxi turned into Havelock Street and stopped before the house, the door of which was opened promptly, and Rose, looking concerned and curious, came out upon the step. Her alarm increased when her eyes discovered Esmé's dishevelled appearance.

"Whatever's happened?" she asked, and put out a hand and caught her sister's arm.

Bainbridge turned from paying the driver and followed them into the house.

"Don't make a fuss," he said. "She's upset."

There were tears in Esmé's eyes; she looked white and altogether unstrung.

"There's been an accident?" Rose said.

"It came pretty near to being a fatal accident," Jim threw in helpfully. "One of those black devils got hold of her. If it hadn't been for Paul she'd be as dead as mutton by now."

"*What?*" Rose ejaculated.

"Paul's turned up," came the laconic information. "Turned up in the nick of time too. It seems he's been a prisoner of war. Don't say anything now. We are all feeling jumpy. He's coming over in the morning."

Rose gasped in her astonishment. Her husband's jerked out sentences, his perturbed and bothered look, as much as her sister's evident agitation, kept her from putting the elucidatory questions which she longed to ask. She could scarcely believe this startling news, so abruptly given; it seemed to her incredible that Paul Hallam should be alive, and coming there. Gently she passed an arm about her sister's shoulders and spoke to her soothingly.

"You poor dear!" was all she said. "You poor dear!"

Mary came running down the stairs, agog with excitement, and manifestly curious. But at the foot of the stairs she halted abruptly, and surveyed the group in the hall in wide-eyed amaze. Tactfully she disregarded Esmé's tearful condition and confined her attention to the dilapidations of her attire.

"You've been in the wars," she said. "Come on up to my room; I'll rig you out."

Jim Bainbridge, approving of his daughter's handling of an embarrassing situation, looked after the pair as they went arm in arm up the stairs; then, in answer to the question in his wife's eyes, he followed her into the sitting-room and entered into explanations.

Rose took things more calmly than he had expected. The shock of the news left her bewildered and curiously at a loss for words. She found some difficulty in collecting her ideas.

"I always said," she remarked once, "that it was ridiculous to swear so positively to a man's identity by the clothes he happened to be wearing."

And after reflection she added simply:

"Poor George!"

Bainbridge's sympathies set strongly in the same direction.

"That's how I felt about it when Paul walked into my office yesterday," he observed.

"Yesterday!" she repeated. "You knew this yesterday? Why didn't you tell me?"

"For obvious reasons," he answered. "I hoped when Paul heard of the second marriage he'd see the wisdom of clearing out. But he didn't. I wonder how I would have acted had it been my case? Whether, if I had disappeared and returned to find you married again, I would have slipped away and left the other fellow in possession? Largely, of course," he added reflectively, "it would depend on whether I wanted you. *If* I had wanted you all right, the other

fellow would have had to quit. That's as plain as print anyway. No doubt I gave Paul fairly rotten advice. However he didn't take it; so there it is."

"You are positively immoral," Rose exclaimed indignantly. "There is no question about the matter at all. They are man and wife."

"I wasn't dealing in morality in offering my advice," he answered, grinning. "I was thinking of the simplest way out of the difficulty."

"The path of least resistance—yes," she said. "And it didn't strike you that in shirking difficulties one makes others? A fine crop of criminal complications you would have started. Besides, Paul isn't a man to take advice."

"No; he is not to be moved from his purpose once his mind is made up. Incidentally, he's rather a fine chap."

"He drinks," she said.

"I imagine he has learned control," he returned quickly. "You are a little unfair in your judgment, aren't you?"

"Perhaps I am," she allowed. "I never liked him. I resent his coming back and upsetting everything. What a talk there'll be!"

"Don't overlook the fact that he saved us a funeral in the family," he reminded her. "You can't have it both ways. I consider it was providential his being on the spot. George stood to lose in either case."

"I hope he will take your philosophic view of the matter," was all she returned. Then she left him to his reflections and went away to see about a meal.

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Seven.

It had been a day of varied experiences of big moments, fraught with terror and relief, joy and sorrow, inextricably interwoven. The eventful day was followed by a night of correspondingly deep emotions, a night of painful revelation and much anguish of mind for Esmé, as well as for the man who was to learn from the lips of the woman he loved, and whom he believed was his wife, that she had never been legally married to him, that her husband was alive, that she and the child, which was his, were leaving him finally.

They talked late into the night, sitting opposite to one another, with a small table between them on which Rose had placed two cups of coffee, before she left them alone together, and went softly upstairs to take a look at the baby, asleep in its improvised cot.

The little house was overcrowded that night, so that John was forced to sling a hammock on the balcony and sleep out in the open air. It was also a very quiet house; a house in which every one walked softly and spoke in whispers and went about with concerned and anxious faces. The master of the house stayed late at his club, and slipped in quietly on his return and crept past the sitting-room door and went softly upstairs to bed.

And the man and the woman within the room talked on fragmentally, heedless of everything beyond the confines of those four walls which gave privacy to their interview, to the man's grief, and the woman's unutterable sympathy with his sorrow.

George Sinclair sat forward in his seat, with his hands dropped between his knees, staring before him with blurred unseeing eyes. Occasionally he beat the knuckles of one clenched hand softly with the palm of the other, with an action pitiful to watch, suggesting, as it did, intense emotion hardly repressed. He did not say much. The situation had gone beyond words. He sat there, tense and quiet, trying to grasp the fact that she was not his wife, never had been his wife, that their married life had been a sham. And now he had to give way. There was no course left to him but to pass out of her life altogether. And he loved her, worshipped her. Life without her would be entirely blank. He could not realise living without her. To know that she was in the world somewhere and that he must not see her, speak to her, touch her ever again after to-day...

The thought was torture. It was also fantastically unreal. He felt like a man in a dream, faced by an absurdly impossible situation, which was nevertheless distressing and horrible, which he believed would fade if he could only wake. But he could not wake; and the dream became more real, more terribly convincing with every passing moment.

Why, in the name of reason, had he not been shot in France and thus saved this refinement of torture? It would have spared Esmé unnecessary suffering also. It seemed monstrous that through his love for her he should hurt her, that by their marriage they should have all unconsciously injured one another grievously. Wherever she might be, however happy she was in her love for Paul and for her child, always there must linger in her mind a regret when she thought of him alone with his memories of his brief happiness and his enduring sorrow.

"Don't reproach yourself," he said, once, looking up in response to something she said in self-condemnation, and meeting her saddened eyes fully. "The trouble is none of your making. I don't see that you are to blame anyway. I worried you into it. You know,"—he leaned towards her and took hold of her hands where they lay along the table,—“I can't regret our marriage, Esmé. It's been a wonderful time. It's something to remember when—when I've nothing else left of you. If it wasn't that I know you love Paul better than ever you loved me, I'd not give you up. But the law and your happiness are both on one side. I'm out of the picture altogether."

She made no reply. She felt that it would not be kindness to urge on him then how much she cared for him. She loved

him, not as she loved Paul, but with a strong and tender affection that would keep his memory warm and vivid in her thoughts always.

"I shall never forget you—the sweetness and the dearness of you," he added. "It's a big blow, Esmé, to be forced apart now. Dear, I don't know how I'll stand it... No matter; we won't think of that part of it. One gets used to most things, I imagine."

He was silent again for a while. He had released her hands and returned to his former attitude, and to his action of beating one hand upon the other. Esmé watched him, biting her lip to stop its trembling, and with difficulty holding back her tears. What could she do, what could she say, in face of this misery which she was powerless to avert?

Presently she rose from her seat, and went to him, and kneeled on the carpet beside him, and put her hands over his hands to quiet their painful movement.

"George," she said softly, "it stabs me to the heart to see you grieve so. What can I say? You've been so good to me. I love you for your goodness. I'll remember you with gratitude every day—every hour of every day, so long as I live. My dear boy! my dear boy! I can't bear it when you look so sad."

She was sobbing now, sobbing and choking with emotion. He took her face between his hands and smiled at her, with a smile that was infinitely sadder than tears, and bent forward and kissed her gently.

"Poor, weary little woman!" he said. "That white face, with its tired eyes, ought to be on the pillow. Come upstairs, and let me take a look at the baby before I go."

He helped her on to her feet; and, hand in hand, softly and in silence, they went upstairs and stood side by side looking down on the unconscious beauty of their sleeping child.

"She forms a link," he said. "When her blue eyes look into your eyes, you'll remember."

He bent down and laid his hand over the baby hands and kissed the soft cheek.

"I'll miss her," he said; and straightened himself and turned away from the cot abruptly.

Esmé followed him to the door.

"No; don't come down. We'll part here. I can let myself out."

He took her by the shoulders and held her a little way off, looking at her long and earnestly as though he wished to impress her features on his memory for ever.

"Some time in the far off future we may meet again," he said. "God knows. Anyhow, you will live always in my heart. Good-bye, and God bless you."

His hands slipped to the back of her shoulders, drew her to him, held her. She lifted her face to his; and in the dimly lit room where the baby slept, and where the man was to part from both wife and child, they clung together and kissed for the last time, not as lovers, but solemnly and tenderly, as dear friends embrace, knowing they may never meet again. Then the man went swiftly down the stairs and let himself quietly out of the house.

Book Four—Chapter Thirty Eight.

Sleep was long in coming to Esmé that night.

She lay in the little bed in the room where, as a girl, she had slept soundly in the untroubled days before love had entered into her life, lay wide-eyed in the hot stillness, with the heavy scent of the oleander stealing into the room, perfuming the night, filling the little garden and the surrounding air with its sweetness, bringing back with its familiar fragrance a rush of memories, shy sweet memories of the days when Paul was her lover and she slept with his letters beneath her pillow and sometimes dreamed of him.

So much had happened since those care-free days to change her, to alter all her views of life, that the girl who had slept there before seemed almost a stranger to her. One quality they shared in common; there was one flaming harmony across their sky amid the wind-swept clouds of discontent and passing griefs and early intolerances, love. The girl had lain there and dreamed of love, and felt love aglow in her heart; the woman lay there with heart and brain filled with love—compassionate love, deep and tender and protective in quality—for her husband, for the man who loved her as a husband, and for the small life which God had given her to complete her world.

These three lives, so intimately and closely associated with her own, asserted each its separate claim. Never could she forget, or cease to think kindly and with grateful heart, of the man who was the father of her child. She would love the child more tenderly through her undying affection for George Sinclair. The child forged a link, as he had said, between them for all time.

But above and beyond everything, like a sun set in the sky amid the lesser luminaries, shone her love for Paul Hallam; a great white flame of love that made the crown and glory of her life.

As she thought of Paul, of his struggle and his suffering, her tears fell freely. His claim was stronger than the other claims, his need of her the greater.

With the dawn her mind became more tranquil, less feverishly alert; the curtain of formless thoughts, of futile striving

to understand, hung away from her weary brain; and sleep came to her, calm and peaceful sleep, blotting out the sorrows and the joys which go to the making of every life.

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