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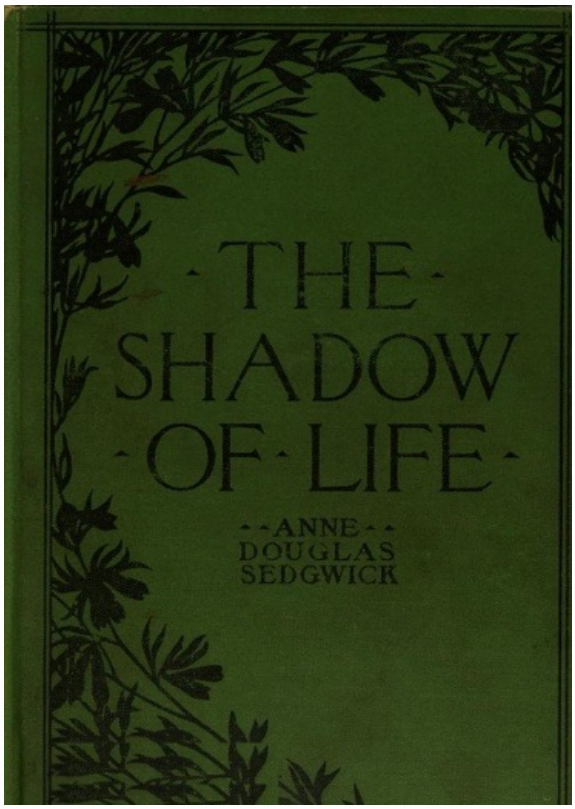

The Shadow of Life

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BY

Anne Douglas Sedgwick

AUTHOR OF "THE RESCUE," "THE CONFOUNDING OF

CAMELIA," "PATHS OF JUDGEMENT," ETC.

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PART I

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I

ELSPETH GIFFORD was five years old when she went to live at Kirklands. Her father, an army officer, died in her babyhood, and her mother a few years later. The uncle and aunts in Scotland, all three much her mother's seniors, were the child's nearest relatives.

To such a little girl death had meant no more than a bewildered loneliness, but the bewilderment was so sharp, the loneliness so aching, that she cried herself into an illness. She had seen her dead mother, the sweet, sightless, silent face, familiar yet amazing, and more than any fear or shrinking had been the suffocating mystery of feeling herself forgotten and left behind. Her uncle Nigel, sorrowful and grave, but so large and kind that his presence seemed to radiate a restoring warmth, came to London for her and a fond nurse went with her to the North, and after a few weeks the anxious affection of her aunts Rachel and Barbara built about her, again, a child's safe universe of love.

Kirklands was a large white house and stood on a slope facing south, backed by a rise of thickly wooded hill and overlooking a sea of heathery moorland. It was a solitary but not a melancholy house. Lichens yellowed the high-pitched slate roof and creepers clung to the roughly "harled" walls. On sunny days the long rows of windows were golden squares in the illumined white, and, under a desolate winter sky, glowed with an inner radiance.

In the tall limes to the west a vast colony of rooks made their nests; and to Eppie these high nests, so dark against the sky in the vaguely green boughs of spring or in the autumn's bare, swaying branches, had a weird, fairy-tale charm. They belonged neither to the earth nor to the sky, but seemed to float between, in a place of inaccessible romance, and the clamor, joyous yet irritable, at dawn and evening seemed full of quaint, strange secrets that only a wandering prince or princess would have understood.

Before the house a round of vivid green was encircled by the drive that led through high stone gates to the moorland road. A stone wall, running from gate to gate, divided the lawn from the road, and upon each pillar a curiously carved old griffin, its back and head spotted with yellow lichens, held stiffly up, for the inspection of passers-by, the family escutcheon. From the windows at the back of the house one looked up at the hilltop, bare but for a group of pine-trees, and down into a deep garden. Here, among utilitarian squares of vegetable beds, went overgrown borders of flowers—bands of larkspurs, lupins, stocks, and columbines. The golden-gray of the walls was thickly embroidered with climbing fruit-trees, and was entirely covered, at one end of the garden, by a small snow-white rose, old-fashioned, closely petaled; and here in a corner stood a thatched summer-house, where Eppie played with her dolls, and where, on warm summer days, the white roses filled the air with a fragrance heavy yet fresh in its wine-like sweetness. All Eppie's early memories of Kirklands centered about the summer-house and were mingled with the fragrance of the roses. Old James, the gardener, put up there a little locker where her toys were stored, and shelves where she ranged her dolls' dishes. There were rustic seats, too, and a table—a table always rather unsteady on the uneven wooden floor. The sun basked in that sheltered, windless corner, and, when it rained, the low,

projecting eaves ranged one safely about with a silvery fringe of drops through which one looked out over the wet garden and up at the white walls of the house, crossed by the boughs of a great, dark pine-tree.

Inside the house the chief room was the fine old library, where, from long windows, one looked south over the purples and blues of the moorland. Books filled the shelves from floor to ceiling—old-fashioned tomes in leather bindings, shut away, many of them, behind brass gratings and with all the delightful sense of peril connected with the lofty upper ranges, only to be reached by a courageous use of the library steps.

Here Uncle Nigel gave Eppie lessons in Greek and history every morning, aided in the minor matters of her education by a submissive nursery governess, an Englishwoman, High Church in doctrine and plaintive in a country of dissent.

A door among the book-shelves led from the library into the morning-room or boudoir, where Aunt Rachel and Aunt Barbara sewed, read, dispensed small charities and lengthy advice to the village poor—a cheerful little room in spite of its northern aspect and the shadowing trunk of the great pine-tree just outside its windows. It was all faded chintzes, gilt carvings, porcelain ornaments in corner cabinets; its paper was white with a fine gilt line upon it; and even though to Eppie it had sad associations with Bible lessons and Sunday morning collects, it retained always its aspect of incongruous and delightful gaiety—almost of frivolity. Sitting there in their delicate caps and neatly appointed dresses, with their mild eyes and smoothly banded hair, Aunt Rachel and Aunt Barbara gathered a picture-book charm—seemed to count less as personalities and more as ornaments. On the other side of the hall, rather bare and bleak in its antlered spaciousness, were the dining-and smoking-rooms, the first paneled in slightly carved wood, painted white, the last a thoroughly modern room, redolent of shabby comforts, with deep leather chairs, massive mid-century furniture, and an aggressively cheerful paper.

The drawing-room, above the library, was never used—a long, vacant room, into which Eppie would wander with a pleasant sense of trespassing and impertinence; a trivial room, for all the dignity of its shrouded shapes and huge, draped chandelier. Its silver-flecked gray paper and oval gilt picture-frames recalled an epoch nearer and uglier than that of the grave library and sprightly boudoir below, though even its ugliness had a charm. Eppie was fond of playing by herself there, and hid sundry secrets under the Chinese cabinet, a large, scowling piece of furniture, its black lacquered panels inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Once it was a quaintly cut cake, neatly sealed in a small jeweler’s box, that she thrust far away under it; and once a minute china doll, offspring of a Christmas cracker and too minute for personality, was swaddled mummy fashion in a ribbon and placed beside the box. Much excitement was to be had by not looking to see if the secrets were still there and in hastily removing them when a cleaning threatened.

The day-nursery, afterward the school-room, was over the dining-room, and the bedrooms were at the back of the house.

The Carmichaels were of an ancient and impoverished family, their estates, shrunken as they were, only kept together by careful economy, but there was no touch of dreariness in Eppie’s home. She was a happy child, filling her life with imaginative pastimes and finding on every side objects for her vigorous affections. Her aunts’ mild disciplines weighed lightly on her. Love and discipline were sundered principles in the grandmotherly administration, and Eppie soon learned that the formalities of the first were easily evaded and to weigh the force of her own naughtiness against it. Corporal punishment formed part of the Misses Carmichael’s conception of discipline, but though, on the rare occasions when it could not be escaped, Eppie bawled heart-rendingly during the very tremulous application, it was with little disturbance of spirit that she endured the reward of transgression.

At an early age she understood very clearly the simple characters around her. Aunt Rachel and Aunt Barbara were both placid, both pious, both full of unsophisticated good works, both serenely acquiescent in their lots. In Aunt Barbara, indeed, placidity was touched with wistfulness; she was the gentler, the more yielding of the two. Aunt Rachel could be inspired with the greater ruthlessness of conscientious conviction. It was she who insisted upon the letter of the law in regard to the Sunday collect, the Sunday church-going, who mingled reproof with her village charities, who could criticize with such decision the short-comings, doctrinal and domestic, of Mr. MacNab, minister of the little established church that stood near the village. Aunt Barbara was far less assured of the forms of things; she seemed to search and fumble a little for further, fuller outlets, and yet to have found a greater serenity. Aunt Rachel was fond of pointing out to her niece such facts of geology, botany, and natural history in general as the country life and her own somewhat rudimentary knowledge suggested to her as useful; Aunt Barbara, on the contrary, told pretty, allegorical tales about birds and flowers—tales with a heavy cargo of moral insinuation, to which, it must be confessed, Eppie listened with an inner sense of stubborn realism. It was Aunt Barbara who sought to impress upon her that the inclusive attribute of Deity was love, and who, when Eppie asked her where God was, answered, “In your heart, dear child.” Eppie was much puzzled by anatomical considerations in reflecting upon this information. Aunt Rachel, with clear-cut, objective facts from Genesis, was less mystifying to inquisitive, but pagan childhood. Eppie could not help thinking of God as somewhat like austere, gray-bearded old James, the gardener, whose vocation suggested that pictorial chapter in the Bible, and who, when he found her one day eating unripe fruit, warned her with such severity of painful retribution.

The aunts spent year after year at Kirklands, with an infrequent trip to Edinburgh. Neither had been South since the death of the beloved younger sister. Uncle Nigel, the general, older than either, was russet-faced, white-haired, robust. He embodied a sound, well-nurtured type and brought to it hardly an individual variation. He taught his niece, re-read a few old books, followed current thought in the “Quarterly” and the “Scotsman,” and wrote his memoirs, that moved with difficulty from boyhood, so detailed were his recollections and so painstaking his recording of inessential fact.

For their few neighbors, life went on as slowly as for the Carmichaels. The Carstons of Carlowrie House were in touch with a larger outside life: Sir Alec Carston was member for the county; but the inmates of Brechin House, Crail Hill, and Newton Lowry were fixtures. These dim personages hardly counted at all in young Eppie’s experience. She saw them gathered round the tea-table in the library when she was summoned to appear with tidy hair and fresh frock: stout, ruddy ladies in driving-gloves and boat-shaped hats; dry, thin young ladies in hard-looking muslins and with frizzed fringes; a solid laird or two. They were vague images in her world.

People who really counted were the village people, and on the basis of her aunts’ charitable relationship Eppie built up for herself with most of them a tyrannous friendship. The village was over two miles away; one reached it by the main road that ran along the moor, past the birch-woods, the tiny loch, and then down a steep bit of hill to the handful of huddled gray roofs. There was the post-office, the sweet-shop with its dim, small panes, behind which, to

Eppie's imagination, the bull's-eyes and toffee and Edinburgh rock looked, in their jars, like odd fish in an aquarium; there was the carpenter's shop, the floor all heaped with scented shavings, through which one's feet shuffled in delightful, dry rustlings; there the public-house, a lurid corner building, past which Miss Grimsby always hurried her over-interested young charge, and there the little inn where one ordered the dusty, lurching, capacious old fly that conveyed one to the station, five miles away. Eppie was far more in the village than her share of her aunts' charities at all justified, and was often brought in disgrace from sheer truancy. The village babies, her dolls, and Robbie, her Aberdeen terrier, were the realities at once serious and radiant of life. She could do for them, love them as she would. Her uncle and aunts and the fond old nurse were included in an unquestioning tenderness, but they could not be brought under its laws, and their independence made them more remote.

Remote, too, though by no means independent, and calling forth little tenderness, were her cousins, who spent part of their holidays each summer at Kirklands. They were English boys, coming from an English school, and Eppie was very stanchly Scotch. The Graingers, Jim and Clarence, were glad young animals. They brought from a home of small means and overflowing sisters uncouth though not bad manners and an assured tradition of facile bullying. The small Scotch cousin was at first seen only in the light of a convenience. She was to be ignored, save for her few and rudimentary uses. But Eppie, at eight years old, when the Graingers first came, had an opposed and firmly established tradition. In her own domain, she was absolute ruler, and not for a moment did her conception of her supremacy waver. Her assurance was so complete that it left no room for painful struggle or dispute. From helpless stupor to a submission as helpless, the cousins fell by degrees to a not unhappy dependence. Eppie ran, climbed, played, as good a boy as either; and it was she who organized games, she who invented wonderful new adventures, all illumined by thrilling recitatives while in progress, she who, though their ally, and a friendly one, was the brains of the alliance, and, as thinker, dominated. Brains, at their age, being rudimentary in the young male, Eppie had some ground for her consciousness of kindly disdain. She regarded Jim and Clarence as an animated form of toy, more amusing than other toys because of possibilities of unruliness, or as a mere audience, significant only as a means for adding to the zest of life. Clarence, the younger, even from the first dumb days of reconstruction, was the more malleable. He was formed for the part of dazzled subjection to a strong and splendid despotism. Eppie treated her subject races to plenty of pomp and glory. Clarence listened, tranced, to her heroic stories, followed her leadership with docile, eager fidelity, and finally, showing symptoms of extreme romanticism, declared himself forever in love with her. Eppie, like the ascendant race again, made prompt and shameless use of the avowed and very apparent weakness. She bartered rare and difficult favors for acts of service, and on one occasion—a patch of purple in young Clarence's maudlin days—submitted, with a stony grimace, to being kissed; for this treasure Clarence paid by stealing down to the forbidden public-house and there buying a bottle of beer which Eppie and Jim were to consume as robbers in a cave,—Clarence the seized and despoiled traveler. Eppie was made rather ill by her share of the beer, but, standing in a bed-gown at her window, she called to her cousins, in the garden below, such cheerful accounts of her malady, the slight chastisement that Aunt Rachel had inflicted, and her deft evasion of medicines, that her luster was heightened rather than dimmed by the disaster. Jim never owned, for a moment, to there being any luster. He was a square-faced boy, with abrupt nose, and lips funnily turning up at the corners, yet funnily grim,—most unsmiling of lips. He followed Eppie's lead with the half-surly look of a slave in bondage, and seemed dumbly to recognize that his own unfitness rather than Eppie's right gave her authority. He retaliated on Clarence for his sense of subjection and cruelly teased and scoffed at him. Clarence, when pushed too far, would appeal to Eppie for protection, and on these occasions, even while she sheltered him, a strange understanding seemed to pass between her and the tormentor as though, with him, she found Clarence ludicrous. Jim, before her stinging reproofs, would stand tongue-tied and furious, but, while she stung him, Eppie liked the sullen culprit better than the suppliant victim.

II

HEN Eppie was ten years old, she heard one day that a boy, a new boy, was coming to spend the spring and summer—a boy from India, Gavan Palairet. His mother and her own had been dear friends, and his father, as hers had been, was in the army; and these points of contact mitigated for Eppie the sense of exotic strangeness.

Eppie gathered that a cloud rested upon Mrs. Palairet, and the boy, though exotic, seemed to come from the far, brilliant country with his mother's cloud about him.

"Ah, poor Fanny!" the general sighed over the letter he read at the breakfast-table. "How did she come to marry that brute! It will be a heart-breaking thing for her to send the boy from her."

Eppie, listening with keen interest, gathered further, from the reminiscent talk that went on between the sisters and brother, that Mrs. Palairet, for some years of her boy's babyhood, lived in England; then it had been India and the effort to keep him near her in the hills, and now his delicacy and the definite necessity of schooling had braced her to the parting. The general said, glancing with fond pride at his niece, that Eppie would be a fine playmate for him and would be of great service in cheering him before his plunge into school. Fanny had begged for much gentleness and affection for him. Apparently the boy was as heartbroken as she.

Eppie had very little diffidence about her own powers as either playmate or cheerer: she was well accustomed to both parts; but her eagerness to sustain and amuse the invalid was touched with a little shyness. The sad boy from India—her heart and mind rushed out in a hundred plans of welcome and consolation; but she suspected that a sad boy from India would require subtler methods than those sufficing for a Jim or a Clarence. From the first moment of hearing about him she had felt, as if instinctively, that he would not be at all like Jim and Clarence.

He came on a still, sunny spring day. The general went to meet him at the station, and while he was gone Eppie made excitement endurable by vigorous action. Again and again she visited the fresh little room overlooking the hills, the garden, the pine-tree boughs, standing in a thoughtful surveyal of its beauties and comforts or darting off to add to them. She herself chose the delightful piece of green soap from the store-cupboard and the books for the table; and she gathered the daffodils in the birch-woods, filling every vase with them, so that the little room with its white walls and hangings of white dimity seemed lighted by clusters of pale, bright flames.

When the old fly rumbled at last through the gates and around the drive, Miss Rachel and Miss Barbara were in

the doorway, and Eppie stood before them on the broad stone step, Robbie beside her.

Eppie was a lithe, sturdy, broad-shouldered child, with russet, sun-streaked hair, dark yet radiant, falling to her waist. She had a pale, freckled face and the woodland eyes of a gay, deep-hearted dog. To-day she wore a straight white frock, and her hair, her frock, dazzled with sunlight. No more invigorating figure could have greeted a jaded traveler.

That it was a very jaded traveler she saw at once, while the general bundled out of the fly and handed rugs, dressing-cases, and cages to the maid, making a passage for Gavan's descent. The boy followed him, casting anxious glances at the cages, and Eppie's eyes, following his, saw tropical birds in one and in the other a quaint, pathetic little beast—a lemur-like monkey swaddled in flannel and motionless with fear. Its quick, shining eyes met hers for a moment, and she looked away from them with a sense of pity and repulsion.

Gavan, as he ascended the steps, looked at once weary, frightened, and composed. He had a white, thin face and thick black hair—the sort of face and hair, Eppie thought, that the wandering prince of one of her own stories, the prince who understood the rooks' secrets, would have. He was dressed in a long gray traveling-cloak with capes. The eager welcome she had in readiness for him seemed out of place before his gentle air of self-possession, going as it did with the look of almost painful shrinking. She was a little at a loss and so were the aunts, as she saw. They took his hand in turn, they smiled, they murmured vague words of kindness; but they did not venture to kiss him. He did not seem as little a boy as they had expected. The same expression of restraint was on Uncle Nigel's hearty countenance. The sad boy was frozen and he chilled others.

He was among them now, in the hall, his cages and rugs and boxes about him, and, with all the cheery bustling to and fro, he must feel himself dreadfully alone. Eppie, too, was chilled and knew, indeed, the childish, panic impulse to run away, but her imagination of his loneliness was so strong as to nerve quite another impulse. Once she saw him as so desolate she could not hesitate. With resolute gravity she took his hand, saying, "I am so glad that you have come, Gavan," and, as resolutely and as gravely, she kissed him on the cheek. He flushed so deeply that for a moment all her panic came back with the fear that she had wounded his pride; but in a moment he said, glancing at her, "You are very kind. I am glad to be here, too."

His pride was not at all wounded. Eppie felt that at all events the worst of the ice was broken.

"May I feed your animals for you while you rest?" she asked him, as, with Aunt Barbara, they went up-stairs to his room. Gavan carried the lemur himself. Eppie had the birds in their cage.

"Thanks, so much. It only takes a moment; I can do it. My monkey would be afraid of any one else," he answered, adding, "The journey has been too much for him; he has been very strange all day."

"He will soon get well here," said Eppie, encouragingly—"this is such a healthy place. But Scotland will be a great change from India for him, won't it?"

"Very great. I am afraid he is going to be ill." And again Gavan's eye turned its look of weary anxiety upon the lemur.

But his anxiety did not make him forget his courtesy. "What a beautiful view," he said, when they reached his room, "and what beautiful flowers!"

"I have this view, too," said Eppie. "The school-room has the view of the moor; but I like this best, for early morning when one gets up. You will see how lovely it is to smell the pine-tree when it is all wet with dew."

Gavan agreed that it must be lovely, and looked out with her at the blue-green boughs; but even while he looked and admired, she felt more courtesy than interest.

They left him in his room to rest till tea-time, and in the library Aunt Rachel and Aunt Barbara exclaimed over his air of fragility.

"He is fearfully tired, poor little fellow," said the general; "a day or two of rest will set him up."

"He looks a very intelligent boy, Nigel," said Miss Rachel, "but not a cheerful disposition."

"How could one expect that from him now, poor, dear child!" Aunt Barbara expostulated. "He has a beautiful nature, I am sure—such a sensitive mouth and such fine eyes."

And the general said: "He is wonderfully like his mother. I am glad to see that he takes after Claude Palairet in nothing."

Eppie asked if Captain Palairet were very horrid and was told that he was, with the warning that no intimation of such knowledge on her part was to be given to her new playmate; a warning that Eppie received with some indignation. No one, she was sure, could feel for Gavan as she did, or know so well what to say and what not to say to him.

She was gratified to hear that he was not to go down to dinner but was to share the school-room high-tea with her and Miss Grimsby. But in the wide school-room, ruddy with the hues of sunset and hung with its maps and its childish decorations of Caldecott drawings and colored Christmas supplements from the "Graphic,"—little girls on stairs with dogs, and "Cherry Ripe,"—he was almost oppressively out of place. Not that he seemed to find himself so. He made, evidently, no claims to maturity. But Eppie felt a strange sense of shrunken importance as she listened to him politely answering Miss Grimsby's questions about his voyage and giving her all sorts of information about religious sects in India. She saw herself relegated to a humbler rôle than any she had conceived possible for herself. She would be lucky if she succeeded in cheering at all this remote person; it was doubtful if she could ever come near enough to console. She took this first blow to her self-assurance very wholesomely. Her interest in the sad boy was all the keener for it. She led him, next morning, about the garden, over a bit of the moor, and into the fairyland of the birch-woods—their young green all tremulous in the wind and sunlight. And she showed him, among the pines and heather, the winding path, its white, sandy soil laced with black tree-roots, that led to the hilltop. "When you are quite rested, we will go up there, if you like," she said. "The burn runs beside this path almost all the way—you can't think how pretty it is; and when you get to the top you can see for miles and miles all about, all over the moors, and the hills, away beyond there, and you can see two villages besides ours, and such a beautiful windmill."

Gavan, hardly noticing the kind little girl, except to know that she was kind, assented to all her projects, indifferent to them and to her.

A day or two after his arrival, he and Eppie were united in ministering to the dying lemur. The sad creature lay curled up in its basket, motionless, refusing food, only from time to time stretching out a languid little hand to its

master; and when Gavan took it, the delicate animal miniature lay inert in his. Its eyes, seeming to grow larger and brighter as life went, had a strange look of question and wonder.

Eppie wept loudly when it was dead; but Gavan had no tears. She suspected him of a suffering all the keener and that his self-control did not allow him the relief of emotion before her. She hoped, at least, to be near him in the formalities of grief, and proposed that they should bury the lemur together, suggesting a spot among birch-trees and heather where some rabbits of her own were interred. When she spoke of the ceremony, Gavan hesitated; to repulse her, or to have her with him in the task of burial, were perhaps equally painful to him. “If you don’t mind, I think I would rather do it by myself,” he said in his gentle, tentative way.

Eppie felt her lack of delicacy unconsciously rebuked. She recognized that, in spite of her most genuine grief, the burial of the lemur had held out to her some of the satisfactory possibilities of a solemn game. She had been gross in imagining that Gavan could share in such divided instincts. Her tears fell for her own just abasement, as well as for the lemur, while she watched Gavan walking away into the woods—evidently avoiding the proximity of the rabbits—with the small white box under his arm.

The day after this was Sunday, a day of doom to Eppie. It meant that morning recitation of hymn and collect in the chintz and gilt boudoir and then the bleak and barren hours in church. Even Aunt Barbara’s mildness could, on this subject, become inflexible, and Aunt Rachel’s aspect reminded Eppie of the stern angel with the flaming sword driving frail, reluctant humanity into the stony wilderness. A flaming sword was needed. Every Sunday saw the renewal of her protest, and there were occasions on which her submission was only extorted after disgraceful scenes. Eppie herself, on looking back, had to own that she had indeed disgraced herself when she had taken refuge under her bed and lain there, her hat all bent, her fresh dress all crumpled, fiercely shrieking her refusal; and disgrace had been deeper on another day when she had actually struck out at her aunts while they mutely and in pale indignation haled her toward the door. It was dreadful to remember that Aunt Barbara had burst into tears. Eppie could not forgive herself for that. She had a stoic satisfaction in the memory of the smart whipping that she had borne without a whimper, and perhaps did not altogether repent the heavier slap she had dealt Aunt Rachel; but the thought of Aunt Barbara’s tears—they had continued so piteously to flow while Aunt Rachel whipped her—quelled physical revolt forever. She was older now, too, and protest only took the form of dejection and a hostile gloom.

On this Sunday the gloom was shot with a new and, it seemed, a most legitimate hope. Boys were usually irreligious; the Grainger cousins certainly were so: they had once run away on Sunday morning. She could not, to be sure, build much upon possible analogies of behavior between Gavan and the Graingers; yet the facts of his age and sex were there: normal, youthful manliness might be relied upon. If Gavan wished to remain it seemed perfectly probable that the elders might yield as a matter of course, and as if to a grown-up guest. Gavan was hardly treated as a child by any of them.

“You are fond of going to church, I hope, Gavan,” Aunt Rachel said at breakfast. The question had its reproof for Eppie, who, with large eyes, over her porridge, listened for the reply.

“Yes, very,” was the doom that fell.

Eppie flushed so deeply that Gavan noticed it. “I don’t mind a bit not going if Eppie doesn’t go and would like to have me stay at home with her,” he hastened, with an almost uncanny intuition of her disappointment, to add.

Aunt Rachel cast an eye of comprehension upon Eppie’s discomfited visage. “That would be a most inappropriate generosity, my dear Gavan. Eppie comes with us always.”

Gavan still looked at Eppie, who, with downcast eyes, ate swiftly.

“Now I’ll be bound that she has been wheedling you to get her off, Gavan,” said the general, with genial banter. “She is a little rebel to the bone. She knows that it’s no good to rebel, so she put you up to pleading for her”; and, as Gavan protested, “Indeed, indeed, sir, she didn’t,” he still continued, “Oh, Eppie, you baggage, you! Isn’t that it, eh? Didn’t you hope that you could stay with him if he stayed behind?”

“Yes, I did,” Eppie said, without contrition.

“She didn’t tell me so,” said Gavan, full of evident sympathy for Eppie’s wounds under this false accusation.

She repelled his defense with a curt, “I would have, if it would have done any good.”

“Ah, that’s my brave lassie,” laughed the general; but Aunt Rachel ended the unseemly exposure with a decisive, “Be still now, Eppie; we know too well what you feel about this subject. There is nothing brave in such naughtiness.”

Gavan said no more; from Eppie’s unmoved expression he guessed that such reproofs did not cut deep. He joined her after breakfast as she stood in the open doorway, looking out at the squandered glories of the day.

“Do you dislike going to church so much?” he asked her. The friendly bond of his sympathy at the table would have cheered her heart at another time; it could do no more for her now than make frankness easy and a relief.

“I hate it,” she answered.

“But why?”

“It’s so long—so stupid.”

Gavan loitered about before her on the door-step, his hands in his pockets. Evidently he could find no ready comment for her accusation.

“Every one looks so silly and so sleepy,” she went on. “Mr. MacNab is so ugly. Besides, he is an unkind man: he whips his children all the time; not whippings when they deserve it—like mine,”—Gavan looked at her, startled by this impersonally just remark,—“he whips them because he is cross himself. Why should he tell us about being good if he is as ill-tempered as possible? And he has a horrid voice,—not like the village people, who talk in a dear, funny way,—he has a horrid, pretend voice. And you stand up and sit down and have nothing to do for ages and ages. I don’t see how anybody *can* like church.”

Gavan kicked vaguely at the lichen spots.

“Do you really *like* it?”

“Yes,” he answered, with his shy abruptness.

“But why? It’s different, I know, for old people—I don’t suppose that they mind things any longer; but I don’t see how a boy, a young boy”—and Eppie allowed herself a reproachful emphasis—“can possibly like it.”

“I’m used to it, you see, and I don’t think of it in your way at all.” Gavan could not speak to this funny child of its sacred associations. In church he had always felt that he and his mother had escaped to a place of reality and peace. He entered, through his love for her, into the love of the sense of sanctuary from an ominous and hostile world. And he was a boy with a deep, sad sense of God.

“But you don’t *like* it,” said the insistent Eppie.

“I more than like it.”

She eyed him gravely. “I suppose it is because you are so grown up. Yet you are only four years older than I am. I wonder if I will ever get to like it. I hope not.”

“Well, it will be more comfortable for you if you do,—since you have to go,” said Gavan, with his faint, wintry smile.

She felt the kindness of his austere banter, and retorting, “I’d rather not be comfortable, then,” joined him in the sunlight on the broad, stone step, going on with quite a sense of companionship: “Only one thing I don’t so much mind—and that is the hymns. I am so glad when they come that I almost shout them. Sometimes—I’m telling you as quite a secret, you know—I shout as loud as I possibly can on purpose to disturb Aunt Rachel. I know it’s wrong, so don’t bother to tell me so; besides, it’s partly because I really like to shout. But I always do hope that some day they may leave me at home rather than have me making such a noise. People often turn round to look.”

Gavan laughed.

“You think that wicked no doubt?”

“No, I think it funny, and quite useless, I’m sure.”

After all, Gavan wasn’t a muff, as a boy fond of church might have been suspected of being.

Yet after the walk through the birch-woods and over a corner of moor to the bare little common where the church stood, and when they were all installed in the hard, familiar pew, a new and still more alienating impression came to her—alienating yet fascinating. A sense of awe crept over her and she watched Gavan in an absorbed, a dreamy wonder.

Eppie only associated prayers with a bedside; they were part of the toilet, so to speak—went in with the routine of hair-and tooth-brushing and having one’s bath. To pray in church, if one were a young person, seemed a mystifying, almost an abnormal oddity. She was accustomed to seeing in the sodden faces of the village children an echo to her own wholesome vacuity. But Gavan really prayed; that was evident. He buried his face in his arms. He thought of no one near him.

It was Eppie’s custom to vary the long monotony of Mr. MacNab’s dreary, nasal, burring voice by sundry surreptitious occupations, such as drawing imaginary pictures with her forefinger upon the lap of her frock, picking out in the Bible all the words of which her aunts said she could only know the meaning when she grew up, counting the number of times that Mr. MacNab stiffly raised his hand in speaking, seeing how often she could softly kick the pew in front of her before being told to stop; and then there was the favorite experiment suggested to her by the advertisement of a soap where, after fixing the eyes upon a red spot while one counted thirty, one found, on looking at a blank white space, that the spot appeared transformed, ghost-like and floating, to a vivid green. Eppie’s fertile imagination had seen in Mr. MacNab’s thin, red face a substitute for the spot, and most diverting results had followed when, after a fixed stare at his countenance, one transferred him, as it were, to the pages of one’s prayer-book. To see Mr. MacNab dimly hovering there, a green emanation, made him less intolerable in reality: found, at least, a use for him. This discovery had been confided to the Graingers, and they had been grateful for it. And when all else failed and even Mr. MacNab’s poor uses had palled, there was one bright moment to look forward to in the morning’s suffocating tedium. Just before the sermon, Uncle Nigel, settling himself in his corner, would feel, as if absently, in his waistcoat pocket and then slip a lime-drop into her hand. The sharply sweet flavor filled her with balmy content, and could, with discretion in the use of the tongue, be prolonged for ten minutes.

But to-day her eyes and thoughts were fixed on Gavan; and when the lime-drop was in her mouth she crunched it mechanically and heedlessly: how he held his prayer-book, his pallid, melancholy profile bent above it, how he sat gravely listening to Mr. MacNab, how he prayed and sang. Only toward the end of the sermon was the tension of her spirit relieved by seeing humanizing symptoms of weariness. She was sure that he was hearing as little as she was—his thoughts were far away; and when he put up a hand to hide a yawn her jaws stretched themselves in quick sympathy. Gavan’s eyes at this turned on her and he smiled openly and delightfully at her. Delightfully; yet the very fact of his daring to smile made him more grown up than ever. Such maturity, such strange spiritual assurance, could afford lightnesses. He brought with him, into the fresh, living world outside, his aura of mystery.

Eppie walked beside her uncle and still observed Gavan as he went before them with the aunts.

“How do you like your playmate, Eppie?” the general asked.

“He isn’t a playmate,” Eppie gravely corrected him.

“Not very lively? But a nice boy, eh?”

“I think he is very nice; but he is too big to care about me.”

“Nonsense; he’s but three years older.”

“Four, Uncle Nigel. That makes a great deal of difference at our ages,” said Eppie, wisely.

“Nonsense,” the general repeated. “He is only a bit down on his luck; he’s not had time to find you out yet. To-morrow he joins you in your Greek and history, and I fancy he’ll see that four years’ difference isn’t such a difference when it comes to some things. Not many chits of your age are such excellent scholars.”

“But I think that we will always be very different,” said Eppie, though at her uncle’s commendation her spirits had risen.

III

GREEK and history proved, indeed, a bond. The two children, during the hours in the library, met on a more equal footing, for Gavan was backward with his studies. But the question of inequality had not come up in Gavan's consciousness. "I'm only afraid that I shall bore her," he hastened, in all sincerity, to say when the general appealed to a possible vanity in him by hoping that he didn't mind being kind to a little girl and going about with her. "She's the only companion we have for you, you see. And we all find her very good company, in spite of her ten years."

And at this Gavan said, with a smile that protested against any idea that he should not find her so: "I'm only afraid that I'm not good company for any one. She is a dear little girl."

It was in the wanderings over the moors and in the birch-woods and up the hillside, where Eppie took him to see her views, that the bond really drew to closeness. Here nature and little Eppie seemed together to thaw him, to heal him, to make him unconsciously happy. A fugitive color dawned in his wasted cheeks; a fragile gaiety came to his manner. He began to find it easy to talk, easy to be quite a little boy. And once he did talk, Gavan talked a great deal, quickly, with a sort of nervous eagerness. There grew, in Eppie's mind, a vast mirage-like picture of the strange land he came from: the great mountains about their high summer home; the blue-shadowed verandas; the flowers he and his mother grew in the garden; the rides at dawn; the long, hot days; the gentle, softly moving servants, some of whom he loved and told her a great deal about. Then the crowds, the swarming colors of the bazaars in the great cities.

"No, no; don't wish to go there," he said, taking his swift, light strides through the heather, his head bent, his eyes looking before him—he seldom looked at one, glanced only; "I hate it,—more than you do church!" and though his simile was humorous he didn't laugh with it. "I hate the thought of any one I care about being there." He had still, for Eppie, his mystery, and she dimly felt, too, that his greater ease with her made more apparent his underlying sadness; but the sense of being an outsider was gone, and she glowed now at the implication that she was one he cared about.

"It's vast and meaningless," said Gavan, who often used terms curiously unboyish. "I can't describe it to you. It's like a dream; you expect all the time to wake up and find nothing."

"I know that I should never love anything so much as Scotland—as heather and pines and sky with clouds. Still, I should like to see India. I should like to see everything that there is to be seen—if I could be sure of always coming back here."

"Ah, yes, if one could be sure of that."

"I shall always live here, Gavan," said Eppie, feeling the skepticism of his "if."

"Well, that may be so," he returned, with the manner that made her realize so keenly the difference that was more than a matter of four years.

She insisted now: "I shall live here until I am grown up. Then I shall travel everywhere, all over the world—India, Japan, America; then I shall marry and come back here to live and have twelve children. I don't believe you care for children as I do, Gavan. How they would enjoy themselves here, twelve of them all together—six boys and six girls."

Gavan laughed. "Well, I hope all that will come true," he assented. "Why twelve?"

"I don't know; but I've always thought of there being twelve. I would like as many as possible, and one could hardly remember the names of more. I don't believe that there are more than twelve names that I care for. But with twelve we should have a birthday-party once a month, one for each month. Did you have birthday-cakes in India, Gavan, with candles for your age?"

"Yes; my mother always had a cake for my birthday." His voice, in speaking of his mother, seemed always to steel itself, as though to speak of her hurt him. Eppie had felt this directly, and now, regretting her allusion, said, "When is your birthday, Gavan?" thinking of a cake with fifteen candles—how splendid!—to hear disappointingly that the day was not till January, when he would have been gone—long since.

On another time, as they walked up the hillside, beside the burn, she said: "I thought you were not going to like us at all, when you first came."

"I was horribly afraid of you all," said Gavan. "Everything was so strange to me."

"No, you weren't afraid," Eppie objected—"not really afraid. I don't believe you are ever really afraid of people."

"Yes, I am—afraid of displeasing them, trying them in some way. And I was miserable on that day, too, with anxiety about my poor monkey. I'm sorry I seemed horrid."

"Not a bit horrid, only very cold and polite."

"I didn't realize things much. You see—" Gavan paused.

"Yes, of course; you weren't thinking of us. You were thinking of—what you had left."

"Yes," he assented, not looking at her.

He went on presently, turning his eyes on her and smiling over a sort of alarm at his own advance to personalities: "*You* weren't horrid. I remember that I thought you the nicest little girl I had ever seen. You were all that I did see—standing there in the sun, with a white dress like Alice in Wonderland and with your hair all shining. I never saw hair like it."

"Do you think it pretty?" Eppie asked eagerly.

"Very—all those rivers of gold in the dark."

"I *am* glad. I think it pretty, too, and nurse is afraid that I am vain, I think, for she always takes great pains to tell me that it is striped hair and that she hopes it may grow to be the same color when I'm older."

"*I* hope not," said Gavan, gallantly.

Many long afternoons were spent in the garden, where Eppie initiated him into the sanctities of the summer-house. Gavan's sense of other people's sanctities was wonderful. She would never have dreamed of showing her dolls to her cousins; but she brought them out and displayed them to Gavan, and he looked at them and their appurtenances carefully, gravely assenting to all the characteristics that she pointed out. So kind, indeed, so comprehending was he, that Eppie, a delightful project dawning in her mind, asked: "Have you ever played with

dolls? I mean when you were very little?"

"No, never."

"I've always had to play by myself," said Eppie, "and it's rather dull sometimes, having to carry on all the conversations alone." And with a rush she brought out, rather aghast at her own hardihood, "I suppose you couldn't think of playing with me?"

Gavan, at this, showed something of the bashful air of a young bachelor asked to hold a baby, but in a moment he said, "I shouldn't mind at all, though I'm afraid I shall be stupid at it."

Eppie flushed, incredulous of such good fortune, and almost reluctant to accept it. "You *really* don't mind, Gavan? Boys hate dolls, as a rule, you know."

"I don't mind in the least," he laughed. "I am sure I shall enjoy it. How do we begin? You must teach me."

"I'll teach you everything. You are the very kindest person I ever knew, Gavan. Really, I wouldn't ask you to if I didn't believe you would like it when once you had tried it. It is such fun. And now we can make them do all sorts of things, have all sorts of adventures, that they never could have before." She suspected purest generosity, but so trusted in the enchantments he was to discover that she felt herself justified in profiting by it. She placed in his hand Agnes, the fairest of all the dolls, golden-haired, blue-eyed. Agnes was good, and her own daughter, Elspeth, named after herself, was bad. "As bad as possible," said Eppie. "I have to whip her a great deal."

Gavan, holding his charge rather helplessly and looking at Elspeth, a doll of sturdier build, with short hair, dark eyes, and, for a doll, a mutinous face, remarked, with his touch of humor, "I thought you didn't approve of whipping."

"I don't,—not real children, or dolls either, except when they are really bad. Mr. MacNab whips his all the time, and they are not a bit bad, really, as Elspeth is." And Elspeth proceeded to demonstrate how really bad she was by falling upon Agnes with such malicious kicks and blows that Gavan, in defense of his own doll, dealt her a vigorous slap.

"Well done, Mr. Palairet; she richly deserves it! Come here directly, you naughty child," and after a scuffling flight around the summer-house, Elspeth was secured, and so soundly beaten that Gavan at last interceded for her with the ruthless mother.

"Not until she says that she is sorry."

"Oh, Elspeth, say that you are sorry," Gavan supplicated, while he laughed. "Really, Eppie, you are savage. I feel as if you were really hurting some one. Please forgive her now; Agnes has, I am sure."

"I hurt her because I love her and want her to be a good child. She will come to no good end when she grows up if she cannot learn to control her temper. What is it I hear you say, Elspeth?"

Elspeth, in a low, sullen voice that did not augur well for permanent amendment, whispered that she was sorry, and was led up, crestfallen, to beg Agnes's pardon and to receive a reconciling kiss.

The table was then brought out and laid. Eppie had her small store of biscuits and raisins, and Elspeth and Agnes were sent into the garden to pick currants and flowers. To Agnes was given the task of making a nosegay for the place of each guest. There were four of these guests, bidden to the feast with great ceremony: three, pink and curly, of little individuality, and the fourth a dingy, armless old rag-doll, reverently wrapped in a fine shawl, and with a pathetic, half-obliterated face.

"Very old and almost deaf," Eppie whispered to Gavan. "Everybody loves her. She lost her arms in a great fire, saving a baby's life."

Gavan was entering into all the phases of the game with such spirit, keeping up Agnes's character for an irritating perfection so aptly that Eppie forgot to wonder if his enjoyment were as real as her own. But suddenly the doorway was darkened, and glancing up, she saw her uncle's face, long-drawn with jocular incredulity, looking in upon them. Then, and only then, under the eyes of an uncomprehending sex, did the true caliber of Gavan's self-immolation flash upon her. A boy, a big boy, he was playing dolls with a girl; it was monstrous; as monstrous as the general's eyes showed that he found it. Stooping in his tall slightness, as he assisted Agnes's steps across the floor, he seemed, suddenly, a fairy prince decoyed and flouted. What would Uncle Nigel think of him? She could almost have flung herself before him protectingly.

The general had burst into laughter. "Now, upon my word, this is too bad of you, Eppie!" he cried, while Gavan, not abandoning his hold on Agnes's arm, turned his eyes upon the intruder with perfect serenity. "You are the most unconscionable little tyrant. You kept the Grainger boys under your thumb; but I didn't think you could carry wheedling or bullying as far as this. Gavan, my dear boy, you are too patient with her."

Eppie stood at the table, scarlet with anger and compunction. Gavan had raised himself, and, still holding Agnes, looked from one to the other.

"But she hasn't bullied me; she hasn't wheedled me," he said. "I like it."

"At your age, my dear boy! Like doll-babies!"

"Indeed I do."

"This is the finest bit of chivalry I've come across for a long time. The gentleman who jumped into the lions' den for his mistress's glove was hardly pluckier. Drop that ridiculous thing and come away. I'll rescue you."

"But I don't want to be rescued. I really am enjoying myself. It's not a case of courage at all," Gavan protested.

This was too much. He should not tarnish himself to shield her, and Eppie burst out: "Nonsense, Gavan. I asked you to. You are only doing it because you are so kind, and to please me. It was very wrong of me. Put her down as Uncle Nigel says."

"There, our little tyrant is honest, at all events. Drop it, Gavan. You should see the figure you cut with that popinjay in your arms. Come, you've won your spurs. Come away with me."

But Gavan, smiling, shook his head. "No, I don't want to, thanks. I did it to please her, if you like; but now I do it to please myself. Playing with dolls is a most amusing game,—and you are interrupting us at a most interesting point," he added. He seemed, funnily, doll and all, older than the general as he said it. Incredulous but mystified, Uncle Nigel was forced to beat a retreat, and Gavan was left confronting his playmate.

"Why did you tell him that you enjoyed it?" she cried. "He'll think you unmanly."

"My dear Eppie, he won't think me unmanly at all. Besides, I don't care if he does."

"*I* care."

"But, Eppie, you take it too hard. Why should you care? It's only funny. Why shouldn't we amuse ourselves as we like? We are only children."

"You are much more than a child. Uncle Nigel thinks so, too, I am sure."

"All the more reason, then, for my having a right to amuse myself as I please. And I am a child, for I do amuse myself."

Eppie stood staring out rigidly at the blighted prospect, and he took her unyielding hand. "Poor Elspeth is lying on her face. Do let us go on. I want you to hear what Agnes has to say next."

She turned to him now. "I don't believe a word you say. You only did it for me. You are only doing it for me now."

"Well, what if I did? What if I do? Can't I enjoy doing things for you? And really, really, Eppie, I do think it fun. I assure you I do."

"I think you are a hero," Eppie said solemnly, and at this absurdity he burst into his high, shrill laugh, and renewed his supplications; but supplications were in vain. She refused to let him play with her again. He might do things for the dolls,—yes, she reluctantly consented to that at last,—he might take the part of robber or of dangerous wild beast in the woods, but into domestic relations, as it were, he should not enter with them; and from this determination Gavan could not move her.

As far as his dignity in the eyes of others went, he might have gone on playing dolls with her all summer; Eppie realized, with surprise and relief, that Gavan's assurance had been well founded. Uncle Nigel, evidently, did not think him unmanly, and there was no chaffing. It really was as he had said, he was so little a child that he could do as he chose. His dignity needed no defense.

But though the doll episode was not to be repeated, other and more equal ties knit her friendship with Gavan. Wide vistas of talk opened from their lessons, from their readings together. As they rambled through the heather they would talk of the Odyssey, of Plutarch's Lives, of nearer great people and events in history. Gavan listened with smiling interest while Eppie expressed her hatreds and her loves, correcting her vehemence, now and then, by a reference to mitigatory circumstance. Penelope was one of the people she hated. "See, Gavan, how she neglected her husband's dog while he was away—let him starve to death on a dunghill."

Gavan surmised that the Homeric Greeks had little sense of responsibility about dogs.

"They were horrid, then," said Eppie. "Dear Argos! Think of him trying to wag his tail when he was dying and saw Ulysses; *he* was horrid, too, for he surely might have just stopped for a moment and patted his head. I'm glad that Robbie didn't live in those times. You wouldn't let Robbie die on a dunghill if *I* were to go away!"

"No, indeed, Eppie!" Gavan smiled.

"I think you really love Robbie as much as I do, Gavan. You love him more than Uncle Nigel does. One can always see in people's eyes how much they love a dog. That fat, red Miss Erskine simply feels nothing for them, though she always says 'Come, come,' to Robbie. But her eyes are like stones when she looks at him. She is really thinking about her tea, and watching to see that Aunt Rachel puts in plenty of cream. I suppose that Penelope looked like her, when she used to see Argos on the dunghill."

Robbie was plunging through the heather before them and paused to look round at them, his delicate tongue lapping in little pants over his teeth.

"Darling Robbie," said Gavan. "Our eyes aren't like stones when we look at you! See him smile, Eppie, when I speak to him. Wouldn't it be funny if we smiled with our ears instead of with our mouths."

Gavan, after a moment, sighed involuntarily and deeply.

"What is the matter?" Eppie asked quickly, for she had grown near enough to ask it. And how near they were was shown after a little silence, by Gavan saying: "I was only wishing that everything could be happy at once, Eppie. I was thinking about my mother and wishing that she might be here with you and me and Robbie." His voice was steadied to its cold quiet as he said it, though he knew how safe from any hurt he was with her. And she said nothing, and did not look at him, only, in silence, putting a hand of comradeship on his shoulder while they walked.

IV

ONCE a week, on the days of the Indian mail, Eppie's understanding hovered helplessly about Gavan, seeing pain for him and powerless to shield him from it. Prayers took place in the dining-room ten minutes before breakfast, and with the breakfast the mail was brought in, so that Gavan's promptest descent could not secure him a solitary reading of the letter that, Eppie felt, he awaited with trembling eagerness.

"A letter from India, Gavan dear," Miss Rachel, the distributer of the mail would say. "Tell us your news." And before them all, in the midst of the general's comments on politics, crops, and weather, the rustling of newspapers, the pouring of tea, he was forced to open and read his letter and to answer, even during the reading, the kindly triviality of the questions showered upon him. "Yes, thank you, very well indeed. Yes, in Calcutta. Yes, enjoying herself, I think, thanks." His pallor on these occasions, his look of hardened endurance, told Eppie all that it did not tell the others. And that his eagerness was too great for him to wait until after breakfast, she saw, too. A bright thought of rescue came to her at last. On the mornings when the Indian mail was due, she was up a good hour before her usual time. Long before the quaint, musical gong sounded its vague, blurred melody for prayers, she was out of the house and running through the birch-woods to the village road, where, just above the church, she met the postman. He was an old friend, glad to please the young lady's love of importance, and the mail was trusted to her care. Eppie saved all her speed for the return. Every moment counted for Gavan's sheltered reading. She felt as if, her back to its door, she stood before the sheltered chamber of their meeting, guarding their clasp and kiss, sweet and sorrowful, from alien eyes. Flushed, panting, she darted up to his room, handing his letter in to him, while she said in an easy, matter-of-fact tone, "Your mail, Gavan."

Gavan, like the postman, attributed his good luck to Eppie's love of importance, and only on the third morning discovered her manœuver.

He came down early himself to get his own letter, found that the mail had not arrived, and, strolling disappointedly down the drive, was almost knocked down by Eppie rushing in at the gate. She fell back, dismayed at the revelation that must force the fullness of her sympathy upon him—almost as if she herself glanced in at the place of meeting.

"I've got the letters," she said, leaning on the stone pillar and recovering her breath. "There's one for you." And she held it out.

But for once Gavan's concentration seemed to be for her rather than for the letter. "My mother's letter?" he said.

She nodded.

"It was you, then. I wondered why they came so much earlier."

"I met the postman; he likes to be saved that much of his walk."

"You must have to go a long way to get them so early. You went on purpose for me, I think."

Looking aside, she now had to own: "I saw that you hated reading them before us all. I would hate it, too."

"Eppie, my dearest Eppie," said Gavan. Glancing at him, she saw tears in his eyes, and joy and pride flamed up in her. He opened the letter and read it, walking beside her, his hand on her shoulder, showing her that he did not count her among "us all."

After that they went together to meet the postman, and, unasked, Gavan would read to her long pieces from what his mother said.

It was a few weeks later, on one of these days, that she knew, from his face while he read, and from his silence, that bad news had come. He left her at the house, making no confidence, and at breakfast, when he came down to it later, she could see that he had been struggling for self-mastery. This pale, controlled face, at which she glanced furtively while they did their lessons in the library, made her think of the Spartan boy, calm over an agony. Even the general noticed the mechanical voice and the pallor and asked him if he were feeling tired this morning. Gavan owned to a headache.

"Off to the moors directly, then," said the general; "and you, too, Eppie. Have a morning together."

Eppie sat over her book and said that perhaps Gavan would rather go without her; but Gavan, who had risen, said quickly that he wanted her to come. "Let us go to the hilltop," he said, when they were outside in the warm, scented sunlight.

They went through the woods, where the burn ran, rippling loudly, and the shadows were blue on the little, sandy path that wound among pines and birches. Neither spoke while they climbed the gradual ascent. They came out upon the height that ran in a long undulation to the far lift of mountain ranges. Under a solitary group of pines they sat down.

The woods of Kirklands were below them, and then the vast sea of purple, heaving in broad, long waves to the azure, intense and clear, of the horizon. The wind sighed, soft and shrill, through the pines above them, and far away they heard a sheep-bell tinkle. Beyond the delicate miniature of the village a wind-mill turned slow, gray sails. The whole world, seemed a sunlit island floating in the circling blue. Robbie sat at their feet, alert, upright, silhouetted against the sky.

"Robbie, Robbie," said Gavan, gently, as he leaned forward and stroked the dog's back. Eppie, too, stroked with him. The silence of his unknown grief weighed heavily on her heart and she guessed that though for him the pain of silence was great, the pain of speech seemed greater.

He presently raised himself again, clasping both hands about his knees and looking away into the vast distance. His head, with its thick hair, its fine, aquiline nose and delicately jutting chin, made Eppie think, vaguely, of a picture she had seen of a young Saint Sebastian, mutely enduring arrows, on a background of serene sky. With the thought, the silence became unendurable; she strung herself to speak. "Tell me, Gavan," she said, "have you had bad news?"

He cast her a frightened glance, and, looking down, began to pull at the heather. "No, not bad news, exactly."

Eppie drew a breath of dubious relief. "But you are so unhappy about something."

Gavan nodded.

"But why, if it's not bad news?"

After a pause he said, and she knew, with all the pain of it, what the relief of speaking must be: "I guess at things. I always feel if she is hiding things."

"Perhaps you are only imagining."

"I wish I could think it; but I know not. I know what is happening to her."

He was still wrenching away at the heather, tossing aside the purple sprays with their finely tangled sandy roots. Suddenly he put his head on his knees, hiding his face.

"Oh, Gavan! Oh, don't be so unhappy," Eppie whispered, drawing near him, helpless and awe-struck.

"How can I be anything but unhappy when the person I care most for is miserable—miserable, and I am so far from her?" His shoulders heaved; she saw that he was weeping.

Eppie, at first, gazed, motionless, silent, frozen with a child's quick fear of demonstrated grief. A child's quick response followed. Throwing her arms around him, she too burst into tears.

It was strange to see how the boy's reserves melted in the onslaught of this hot, simple sympathy. He turned to her, hiding his face on her shoulder, and they cried together.

"I didn't want to make you unhappy, too," Gavan said at last in a weakened voice. His tears were over first and he faintly smiled as he met Robbie's alarmed, beseeching eyes. Robbie had been scrambling over them, scratching, whining, licking their hands and cheeks in an exasperation of shut-out pity.

"I'm not nearly so unhappy as when you don't say anything and I know that you are keeping things back," Eppie choked, pushing Robbie away blindly. "I'd much rather *be* unhappy if you are."

It was Gavan, one arm around the rejected Robbie, who had to dry her tears, trying to console her with: "Perhaps I did imagine more than there actually is. One can't help imagining—at this distance." He smiled at her, as he had smiled at Robbie, and holding her hand, he went on: "She is so gentle, and so lonely, and so unhappy. I could

help her out there. Here, I am so helpless."

"Make her come here!" Eppie cried. "Write at once and make her come. Send a wire, Gavan. Couldn't she be here very soon, if you wired that she must—*must* come? I wouldn't bear it if I were you."

"She can't come. She must stay with my father."

All the barriers were down now, so that Eppie could insist: "She would rather be with you. You want her most."

"Yes, I want her most. But he needs her most," said Gavan. "He is extravagant and weak and bad. He drinks and he gambles, and if she left him he would probably soon ruin himself—and us; for my mother has no money. She could not leave him if she would. And though he is often very cruel to her, he wants her with him." Gavan spoke with all his quiet, but he had flushed as if from a still anger. "Money is an odious thing, Eppie. That's what I want to do, as soon as I can: make money for her." He added presently: "I pray for strength to help her."

There was a long silence after this. Gavan lay back on the heather, his hat tilted over his tired eyes. Eppie sat above him, staring out at the empty blue. Her longing, her pity, her revolt from this suffering,—for herself and for him,—her vague but vehement desires, flew out—out; she almost seemed to see them, like strong, bright birds flying so far at last that the blue engulfed them. The idea hurt her. She turned away from the dissolving vastness before which it was impossible to think or feel, turned her head to look down at the long, white form beside her, exhausted and inert. Darling Gavan. How he suffered. His poor mother, too. She saw Gavan's mother in a sort of padlocked palanquin under a burning sky, surrounded by dazzling deserts, a Blue-beard, bristling with swords, reeling in a drunken sentinelship round her prison. Considering Gavan, with his hidden face, the thought of his last words came more distinctly to her. A long time had passed, and his breast was rising quietly, almost as if he slept. Conjecture grew as to the odd form of action in which he evidently trusted. "Do you pray a great deal, Gavan?" she asked.

He nodded under the hat.

"Do you feel as if there was a God—quite near you—who listened?"

"I wouldn't want to live unless I could feel that."

Eppie paused at this, perplexed, and asked presently, with a slight embarrassment, "Why not?"

"Nothing would have any meaning," said Gavan.

"No meaning, Gavan? You would still care for your mother and want to help her, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but without God there would be no hope of helping her, no hope of strength. Why, Eppie," came the voice from behind the hat, "without God life would be death."

Eppie retired to another discomfited silence. "I am afraid I don't think much about God," she confessed at last. "I always feel as if I had strength already—I suppose, heaps and heaps of strength. Only—to-day—I do know more what you mean. If only God would do something for you and your mother. You want something so big to help you if you are very, very unhappy."

"Yes, and some one to turn to when you are lonely."

Again Eppie hesitated. "Well, but, Gavan, while you're here you have me, you know."

At this Gavan pushed aside his hat almost to laugh at her. "What a funny little girl you are, Eppie! What a dear little girl! Yes, of course, I have you. But when I go away? And even while I'm here,—what if we were both lonely together? Can't you imagine that? The feeling of being lost in a great forest at night. You have such quaint ideas about God."

"I've never had any ideas at all. I've only thought of Some One who was there,—Some One I didn't need yet. I've always thought of God as being more for grown-up people. Lost in a forest together? I don't think I would mind that so much, Gavan. I don't think I would be frightened, if we were together."

"I didn't exactly mean it literally,—not a real forest, perhaps." He had looked away from her, and, his thin, white face sunken among the heather, his eyes were on the blue immensities where her thoughts had lost themselves. "I am so often frightened. I get so lost sometimes that I can hardly believe that that Some One is near me. And then the fear becomes a sort of numbness, so that I hardly seem there myself; it's only loneliness, while I melt and melt away into nothing. Even now, when I look at that sky, the feeling creeps and creeps, that dreadful loneliness, where there isn't any I left to know that it's lonely—only a feeling." He shut his eyes resolutely. "My mother always says that it is when one has such fancies that one must pray and have faith."

Eppie hardly felt that he spoke to her, and she groped among his strange thoughts, seizing the most concrete of them, imitating his shutting out of the emptiness by closing her own eyes. "Yes," she said, reflecting in the odd, glowing dimness, "I am quite sure that you have much more feeling about God when you think hard, inside yourself, than when you look at the sky."

"Only then, there are chasms inside, too." Gavan's hand beside him was once more restlessly pulling at the heather. "Even inside, one can fall, and fall, and fall."

The strange tone of his voice—it was indeed like the far note of a falling bell, dying in an abyss—roused Eppie from her experiments. She shook his shoulder. "Open your eyes, Gavan; please, at once. You make me feel horridly. I would rather have you look at the sky than fall inside like that."

He raised himself on an arm now, with a gaze, for a moment, vague, deadened, blank, then sprang to his feet. "Don't let's look. Don't let's fall. We must pray and have faith. Eppie, I have made you so pale. Dear Eppie, to care so much. Please forgive me for going to pieces like that."

Eppie was on her feet, too. "But I want you to. You know what I mean: never hide things. Oh, Gavan, if I could only help you."

"You do. It is because you care, just in the way you do, that I *could* go to pieces,—and it has helped me to be so selfish."

"Please be selfish, often, often, then. I always am caring. And just wait till I am grown up. I shall do something for you then. *I'll* make money, too, Gavan."

"Eppie, you are the dearest little girl," he repeated, in a shaken voice; and at that she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. The boy's eyes filled with tears. They stood under the sighing pines, high in the blue, and the scent of the heather was strong, sweet, in the sunny air. Gavan did not return the kiss, but holding her face between his hands, stammering, he said, "Eppie, how can I bear ever to leave you?"

V

IN looking back, after long years, at their summer, Eppie could see, more clearly than when she lived in it, that sadness and Gavan had always gone together. He had, as it were, initiated her into suffering. Sadness was the undertone of their sweet comradeship. Their happy stories came to tragic endings. Death and disaster, though in trivial forms, followed him.

With his returning strength, and perhaps with a sense of atonement to her for what he had called his selfishness, Gavan plunged eagerly into any outer interest that would please her. He spent hours in building for her a little hut on the banks of the brae among the birches: the dolls' Petit Trianon he called it, as the summer-house was their Versailles. They had been reading about the French Revolution. Eppie objected to the analogy. "I should always imagine that Elspeth's head were going to be cut off if I called it that."

Gavan said that Elspeth need not be the queen, but a less exalted, more fortunate court lady. "We'll imagine that she escaped early from France with all her family, saw none of the horrors, was a happy *émigrée* in England and married there," he said; and he went on, while he hammered at the pine boughs, with a desultory and reassuring account of Elspeth's English adventures. But poor Elspeth came to as sad an end as any victim of the guillotine. Eppie was carrying her one day when she and Gavan had followed Aunt Barbara on some housewifely errand up to the highest attic rooms. Outside the low sills of the dormer-windows ran a narrow stone gallery looking down over the pine-tree and the garden. The children squeezed out through the window to hang in delighted contemplation over the birds'-eye view, and then Eppie crawled to a farther corner where one could see round to the moorland and find oneself on a level, almost, with the rooks' nests in the lime-trees. She handed Elspeth to Gavan to hold for her while she went on this adventure.

He had just risen to his feet, looking down from where he stood over the low parapet, when a sudden cry from Eppie—a great bird sailing by that she called to him to look at—made him start, almost losing his balance on the narrow ledge. Elspeth fell from his arms.

She was picked up on the garden path, far, far beneath, with a shattered head. Gavan, perhaps, suffered more from the disaster than Eppie herself. He was sick with dismay and self-reproach. She was forced to make light of her grief to soothe his. But she did not feel that her soothing hoodwinked or comforted him. Indeed, after that hour on the hilltop, when he showed her his sorrow and his fear, Eppie felt that though near, very near him, she was also held away. It was as if he felt a discomfort in the nearness, or a dread that through it he might hurt again or be hurt. He was at once more loving and more reticent. His resolute cheerfulness, when they could be cheerful, was a wall between them.

Once more, and only once, before their childhood together ended, was she to see all, feel all, suffer all with him. Toward the end of the summer Robbie sickened and died. For three nights the children sat up with him, taking turns at sleep, refusing alien help. By candle-light, in Eppie's room, they bent over Robbie's basket, listening to his laboring breath. The general, protesting against the folly of the sleepless nights, yet tiptoed in and out, gruffly kind, moved by the pathos of the young figures. He gave medical advice and superintended the administering of teaspoonfuls of milk and brandy. That he thought Robbie's case a hopeless one the children knew, for all his air of reassuring good cheer.

Robbie died early on the morning of the fourth day. A little while before, he faintly wagged his tail when they spoke to him, raising eyes unendurably sad.

Eppie, during the illness, had been constantly in tears; Gavan had shown a stoic fortitude. But when all was over and Eppie was covering Robbie with the white towel that was to be his shroud, Gavan suddenly broke down. Casting his arms around her, hiding his face against her, he burst into sobs, saying in a shuddering voice, while he clung to her, shaken all through with the violence of his weeping: "Oh, I can't bear it, Eppie! I can't bear it!"

Before this absolute shattering Eppie found her own self-control. Holding him to her,—and she almost thought that he would have fallen if she had not so held him,—she murmured, "Gavan, darling Gavan, I know, I know."

"Oh, Eppie," he gasped, "we will never see him again."

She had drawn him down to the window-seat, where they leaned together, and she was silent for a moment at his last words. But suddenly her arms tightened around him with an almost vindictive tenderness. "We *will*," she said.

"Never! Never!" Gavan gasped. "His eyes, Eppie,—his eyes seemed to know it; they were saying good-by forever. And, oh, Eppie, they were so astonished—so astonished," he repeated, while the sobs shook him.

"We will," Eppie said again, pressing the boy's head to hers, while she shut her eyes over the poignant memory. "Why, Gavan, I don't know much about God, but I do know about heaven. Animals will go to heaven; it wouldn't be heaven unless they were there."

That memory of the astonishment in Robbie's eyes seemed to put knives in her heart, but over the sharpness she grasped her conviction.

In all the despair of his grief, the boy had, in answering her, the disciplined logic of his more formal faith, more clearly seen fact.

"Dear Eppie, animals have no souls."

"How do you know?" she retorted, almost with anger.

"One only has to think. They stop, as Robbie has."

"How do you know he has stopped? It's only," said Eppie, groping, "that he doesn't want his body any longer."

"But it's Robbie in his body that we want. It's his body, with Robbie in it, that we know. God has done with wanting him—that's it, perhaps; but we want him. Oh, Eppie, it's no good: as we know him, as we want him, he is dead—dead forever. Besides,"—in speaking this Gavan straightened himself,—"we shall forget him." He turned, in speaking, from her consolations, as though their inefficiency hurt him.

"I won't forget him," said Eppie.

Gavan made no reply. He had risen, and standing now at the widely opened window, looked out over the chill, misty dawn. Beneath was the garden, its golden-gray walls rippling with green traceries, the clotted color of the hanging fruit among them. Over the hilltop, the solitary group of pines, the running wave of mountain, was a great

piece of palest blue, streaked with milky filaments. The boughs of the pine-tree were just below the window, drenched with dew through all their fragrant darkness.

Eppie, too, rose, and stood beside him.

The hardened misery on his young face hurt her childish, yet comprehending heart even more than Robbie's supplicating and astonished eyes had done. She could imagine that look of steeled endurance freezing through it forever, and an answering hardness of opposition rose in her to resist and break it. "We won't forget him."

"People do forget," Gavan answered.

She found a cruel courage. "Could you forget your mother?"

Gavan continued to look stonily out of the window and did not answer her.

"Could you?" she repeated.

"Don't, Eppie, don't," he said.

She saw that she had stirred some black terror in him, and her ignorant, responsive fear made her pitiless: "Could you forget her if she died? Never. Never as long as you lived."

"Already," he said, as though the words were forced from him by her will, "I haven't remembered her all the time."

"She is there. You haven't forgotten her."

"Years and years come. New things come. Old things fade and fade,—all but the deepest things. They couldn't fade. No," he repeated, "they couldn't. Only, even they might get dimmer."

She saw that he spoke from an agony of doubt, and he seemed to wrench the knife she had stabbed him with from his heart as he added: "But Robbie is such a little thing. And little things people do forget, I am sure of it. It's that that makes them so sad."

"Well, then,"—Eppie, too, felt the relief of the lesser pain,—"they will remember again. When you see Robbie in heaven you will remember all about him. But I won't forget him," she repeated once more, swallowing the sob that rose chokingly at the thought of how long it would be till they should see Robbie in heaven.

Gavan had now a vague, chill smile for the pertinacity of her faith. Something had broken in him, as if, with Robbie's passing, a veil had been drawn from reality, an illusion of confidence dispelled forever. He leaned out of the window and breathed in the scent of the wet pine-tree, looking, with an odd detachment and clearness of observation,—as if through that acceptation of tragedy all his senses had grown keener,—at the bluish bloom the dew made upon the pine-needles; at the flowers and fruit in the garden below, the thatched roof of the summer-house, the fragile whiteness of the roses growing near it, like a bridal veil blown against the ancient wall. It was, in a moment of strange, suspended vision, as if he had often and often seen tragic dawn in the garden before and was often to see it again. What was he? Where was he? All the world was like a dream and he seemed to see to its farthest ends and back to its beginnings.

Eppie stood silent beside him.

He was presently conscious of her silence, and then, the uncanny crystal, gazing sense slipping from him, of a possible unkindness in his repudiating grief. He looked round at her. The poor child's eyes, heavy with weeping and all the weight of the dark, encompassing woe he had shown her, dwelt on him with a somber compassionateness.

"Poor, darling little Eppie," he said, putting an arm about her, "what a brute, a selfish brute, I am."

"Why a brute, Gavan?"

"Making you suffer—more. I'm always making you suffer, Eppie, always; and you are really such a happy person. Come, let us go out for a walk. Let us go out on the moor. It will be delicious in the heather now. I want to see it and smell it. It will do us good."

She resented his wisdom. "But you won't forget Robbie, while we walk."

For a moment, as if in great weariness, Gavan leaned his head against her shoulder. "Don't talk of Robbie, please. We must forget him—just now, or try to, or else we can't go on at all."

Still she persisted, for she could not let it go like that: "I can think of him and go on too. I don't want to run away from Robbie because he makes me unhappy."

Gavan sighed, raising his head. "You are stronger than I am, Eppie. I must—I must run away." He took her hand and drew her to the door, and she followed him, though glancing back, as she went, at the little form under the shroud.

VI

ROBBIE'S death overshadowed the last days of Gavan's stay. Eppie did not feel, after it, after his avowed and helpless breakdown, the barrier sense so strongly. He didn't attempt to hide dejection; but that was probably because she too was dejected and there was no necessity for keeping up appearances that would only jar and hurt. Eppie gave herself whole-heartedly to her griefs, and this was her grief as well as his. He could share it. It was no longer the holding her at arm's length from a private woe. Yet the grief was not really shared, Eppie knew, for it was not the same grief that they felt. Of the difference they did not speak again. Then there came the sadness of the parting, so near now and for the first time realized in all its aspects.

Eppie gathered, from chance remarks of the general's, that this parting was to be indefinite. The summer at Kirklands was no precedent for future summers, as she and Gavan had quite taken for granted. An uncle of Gavan's, his father's eldest brother, was to give him his home in England. This uncle had been traveling in the East this summer, and Gavan did not formally come under his jurisdiction until autumn. But the general conjectured that the jurisdiction would be well defined and tolerably stringent. Sir James Palairet had clearly cut projects for Gavan; they would, perhaps, not include holidays at Kirklands. The realization was, for Gavan, too, a new one.

"Am I not to come back here next summer?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not, Gavan; we haven't first claim, you see. Perhaps Sir James will lend you to us now and then; but

from what I know of him I imagine that he will want to do a lot with you, to put you through a great deal. There won't be much time for this sort of thing. You will probably travel with him."

They were in the library and, speaking from the depths of her fear, Eppie asked: "Do you like Sir James, Uncle Nigel?" She suspected a pitying quality in the cogitating look that the general bent upon Gavan.

"I hardly know him, my dear. He is quite an eminent man. A little severe, perhaps,—something of a martinet,—but just, conscientious. It is a great thing for Gavan," the general continued, making the best of a rather bleak prospect, "to have such an uncle to give him a start in life. It means the best sort of start."

Directly the two children were alone, both sitting in the deep window-seat, Gavan said, "Don't worry, Eppie. Of course I'll come back—soon." His face took on the hardness that its delicacy could so oddly express. He was confronting his ambiguous fate in an attitude of cold resolution. For his sake, Eppie controlled useless outcries. "You have seen your uncle, Gavan?"

"Yes, once; in India. He came up to Darjeeling one summer."

"Is he nice—nicer than Uncle Nigel made out, I mean?"

"He isn't like my father," said Gavan, after a moment.

"You mean that he isn't wicked?" Eppie asked baldly.

"Oh, a good deal more than that. He is just and conscientious, as the general said. That's what my mother felt; that's why she could bear it, my going to him. And the general is right, you know, Eppie, about its being a great thing for me. He is a very important person, in his way, and he is going to put me through. He is determined that my father sha'n't spoil my life. And, as you know, Eppie, my mother's life, any chance for her, depends on me. To make her life, to atone to her in any way for all she has had to bear, I must make my own. My uncle will help me."

The steeliness of his resolves made his face almost alien. Eppie felt this unknown future, where he must fight alone, for objects in which she had no share, shutting her out, and a child's sick misery of desolation filled her, bringing back the distant memory of her mother's death, that suffocating sense of being left behind and forgotten; but, keeping her eyes on his prospect, she managed in a firm voice to question him about the arid uncle, learned that he was married, childless, had a house in the country and one in London, and sat in Parliament. He was vastly busy, traveled a great deal, and wrote books of travel; not books about foreign people and the things they ate and wore, as Eppie with her courageous interest hopefully surmised, but books of dry, colorless fact, with lots of statistics in them, Gavan said.

"He wants me to go in for the same sort of thing—politics and public life."

"You are going to be a Pitt—make laws, Gavan, like Pitt?" Eppie kept up her dispassionate tone.

He smiled at the magnified conception. "I'll try for a seat, probably, or some governmental office; that is, if I turn out to be worth anything."

How the vague vastness shut her out! What should she do, meanwhile? How carve for herself a future that would keep her near him in the great outside world? And would he want her near him in it when he was to be so great, too? This question brought the irrepressible tears to her eyes at last, though she turned away her head and would not let them fall. But Gavan glanced at her and leaned forward to look, and then she saw, as her eyes met his, that the hard resolve was for her, too, and did not shut her out, but in.

"I'm coming back, Eppie," he said, taking her hand and holding it tightly. "Next to my mother, it's *you*,—you know it."

"I haven't any mother," said Eppie, keeping up the bravery, though it was really harder not to cry now. He understood where she placed him.

Eppie was glad that it was raining on the last morning. Sunshine would have been a mockery, and this tranquilly falling rain, that turned the hills to pale, substanceless ghosts and brought the end of the moor, where it disappeared into the white, so near, was not tragic. Gavan was coming back. She would think only of that. She would not—would not cry. He should see how brave she could be. When he was gone—well, she allowed herself a swift thought of the Petit Trianon, its hidden refuge. There, all alone, she would, of course, howl. There was a grim comfort in this vision of herself, rolling upon the pine-needle carpet of the Petit Trianon and shrieking her woes aloud.

At breakfast Gavan showed a tense, calm face. She was impressed anew with the sense of his strength, for, in spite of his resolves, he was suffering, perhaps more keenly than herself. Suffering, with him, partook of horror. She could live in hopes, and on them. To Gavan, this parting was the going into a dark cavern that he must march through in fear. And then, he would never roll and shriek.

After breakfast, they hardly spoke to each other. Indeed, what was there to say? Eppie filled the moments in superintending the placing of fruit and sandwiches in his dressing-case. The carriage was a little late, so that when the final moment came, there was a hurried conventionality of farewell. Gavan was kissed by the aunts and shook hands with Miss Grimsby, while the general called out that there was no time to lose.

"Come back to us, dear boy; keep your feet dry on the journey," said Miss Rachel, while Miss Barbara, holding his hand, whispered gently that she would always pray for him.

Eppie and Gavan had not looked at each other, and when the moment came for their farewell, beneath the eyes of aunts, uncle, Miss Grimsby, and the servants, it seemed the least significant of all, was the shortest, the most formal. They looked, they held hands for a moment, and Gavan faltered out some words. Eppie did not speak and kept her firm smile. Only when he had followed the general into the carriage and it was slowly grinding over the gravel did something hot, stinging, choking, flare up in her, something that made her know this smooth parting to be intolerable—not to be borne.

She darted out into the rain. Bobbie was dead; Gavan was gone; why, she was alone—alone—and a question was beating through her as she ran down the drive and, with a leap to its step, caught the heavy old carriage in its careful turning at the gate. Gavan saw, at the window, her white, freckled face, her startled eyes, her tossed hair all beaded with the finely falling rain—like an apparition on the ghostly background of mist.

"Oh, Gavan, don't forget me!" That had been the flaring terror.

He had just time to catch her hand, to lean to her, to kiss her. He did not speak. Mutely he looked at the little comrade all the things he could not say: what she was to him, what he felt for her, what he would always feel,—always, always, always, his eyes said to hers as she stepped back to the road and was gone.

PART II

I

HE had never seen Eppie again, and sixteen years had passed.

It was of this that Gavan was thinking as the Scotch express bore him northward on a dark October night.

A yellow-bound, half-cut volume of French essays lay beside him. He had lighted a cigar and, his feet warmly ensconced on the hot-water tin, his legs enfolded in rugs, the fur collar of his coat turned up about his ears, he leaned back, well fortified against the sharp air that struck in from the half-opened window.

Gavan, at thirty, had oddly maintained all the more obvious characteristics of his boyhood. He was long, pale, emaciated, as he had been at fourteen. His clean-shaved face was the boy's face, matured, but unchanged in essentials. The broad, steep brow, the clear, aquiline jut of nose and chin, the fineness and strength of the jaw, sculptured now by the light overhead into vehement relief and shadow, were more emphatic, only, than they had been.

At fourteen his face had surprised with its maturity and at thirty it surprised with its quality of wistful boyishness. This was the obvious. The changes were there, but they were subtle, consisting more in a certain hardening of youth's hesitancy into austerity; as though the fine metal of the countenance had been tempered by time into a fixed, enduring type. His pallor was the scholar's, but his emaciation the athlete's; the fragility, now, was a braced and disciplined fragility. No sedentary softness was in him. In his body, as in his face, one felt a delicacy as strong as it was fine. The great change was that hardening to fixity.

To-night, he was feeling the change himself. The journey to Kirklands, after the long gap that lay between it and his farewell, made something of an epoch for his thoughts. He did not find it significant, but the mere sense of comparison was arresting.

The darkness of the October night, speeding by outside, the solitude of the bright railway carriage, London two hours behind and, before, the many hours of his lonely journey,—time and place were like empty goblets, only waiting to be filled with the still wine of memory.

Gavan had not cast aside his book, lighted his cigar, and, leaning back, drawn his rugs about him with the conscious intention of yielding himself to retrospect. On the contrary, he had, at first, pushed aside the thoughts that, softly, persistently, pressed round him. Then the languor, the opportunity of the hour seized him. He allowed himself to drift hither and thither, as first one eddy lapped over him and then another. And finally he abandoned himself to the full current and, once it had him, it carried him far.

It was, at the beginning, as far back as Eppie and childhood that it carried him, to the sunny summer days and to the speechless parting of the rainy autumn morning. And, with all that sense of change, he was surprised to find how very much one thing had held firm. He had never forgotten. He had kept the mute promise of that misty morning. How well he had kept it he hadn't known until he found the chain of memory hold so firm as he pulled upon it. The promise had been made to himself as well as to her, given in solemn hostage to his own childish fears. Even then what an intuitive dread had been upon him of the impermanence of things. But it wasn't impermanent after all, that vision.

Dear little Eppie. It was astonishing now to find how well he remembered, how clearly he could see, in looking back,—more clearly than even his acute child's perception had made evident to him,—what a dear little Eppie she had been. She lived in his memory, and probably nowhere else: in the present Eppie he didn't fancy that he should find much trace of the child Eppie, and it was sad, in its funny way, to think that he, who had, with all his forebodings, so felt the need of a promise, should so well remember her who, undoubtedly, had long ago forgotten him. He took little interest in the present Eppie. But the child wore perfectly with time.

Dear child Eppie and strange, distant boy, groping toward the present Gavan; unhappy little boy, of deep, inarticulate, passionate affections and of deep hopes and dreads. There they walked, knee-deep in heather; he smelled it, the sun warm upon it, Eppie in her white, Alice-in-Wonderland frock and her "striped" hair. And there went Robbie, plunging through the heather before them.

Robbie. Eppie had been right, then. He had not forgotten him at all. He and Eppie stood at the window looking out at the dawn; the scent of the wet pine-tree was in the air, and their eyes were heavy with weeping. How near they had been. Had any one, in all his life, ever been nearer him than Eppie?

Curious, when he had so well kept the promise never to forget, that the other promise, the promise to return, he had not been able to keep. In making it, he had not imagined, even with his foreboding, what manacles of routine and theory were to be locked upon him for the rest of his boyhood. He had soon learned that protest, pleading, rebellion, were equally vain, and that outward conformity was the preservative of inner freedom. He could not jeopardize the purpose of his life—his mother's rescue—by a persistence that, in his uncle's not unkind and not unhumorous eyes, was merely foolish. He was forced to swallow his own longings and to endure, as best he could, his pangs of fear lest Eppie should think him slack, or even faithless. He submitted to the treadmill of a highly organized education, that could spare no time for insignificant summers in Scotland. Every moment in Gavan's youth was to be made significant by tangible achievement. The distilled knowledge of the past, the intellectual trophies of civilization, were to be his; if he didn't want them, they, in the finished and effective figure of his uncle, wanted him, and, in the sense of the fulfilment of his uncle's hopes, they got him.

During those years Gavan wrote to Eppie, tried to make her share with him in all the lonely and rather abstract interests of his life. But he found that the four years of difference, counting for nothing in the actual intercourse of word and look, counted for everything against any reality of intercourse in writing. Translated into that formality, the childish affection became as unlike itself as a pressed flower is unlike a fresh one. Eppie's letters, punctual and very fond, were far more immature than she herself. These letters gave accounts of animals, walks, lessons, very bald and concise, and of the Grainger cousins and their doings, and then of her new relation, cousin Alicia, whose daughters, children of Eppie's own age, soon seemed to poor Gavan, in his distant prison, to fill his place. Eppie went away with

these cousins to Germany, where they all heard wonderful music, and after that they came to Kirklands for the summer. Altogether, when Gavan's opportunity came and, with the dignity of seventeen to back his request, he had his uncle's consent to his spending of a month in Scotland, he felt himself, even as he made it, rather silly in his determination to cling at all costs to something precious but vanishing. Then it was that Eppie had been swept away by the engulfing relative. At the very moment of his own release, she was taken to the Continent for three years of travel and study. The final effort of childhood to hold to its own meaning was frustrated. The letters, after that, soon ceased. Silence ended the first chapter.

Gavan glanced out at the rushing darkness on either side. It was like the sliding of a curtain before the first act of a drama. His cigar was done and he did not light another. His eyes on that darkness that passed and passed, he gave himself up to the long vision of the nearer years. Through them went always the link with childhood, the haunting phrase that sounded in every scene—that fear of life, that deep dread of its evil and its pain that he had tried to hide from Eppie, but that, together, they had glanced at.

In that first chapter, whose page he had just turned, he had seen himself as a very unhappy boy—unhappy from causes as apparent as a cage about a pining bird. His youth had been weighted with an over-mature understanding of wrong and sorrow. His childish faith in supreme good had shaped itself to a conception of life as a place of probation where oneself and, far worse, those one loved were burned continually in the fiery furnace of inexplicable affliction. One couldn't say what God might not demand of one in the way of endurance. He had, helpless, seen his fragile, shrinking mother hatefully bullied and abused or more hatefully caressed. He had been parted from her to brood and tremble over her distant fate. Loved things had died; loved things had all, it seemed, been taken from him; the soulless machinery of his uncle's system had ground and polished at his stiffening heart. No wonder that the boy of that first chapter had been very unhappy. But in the later chapters, to which he had now come, the causes for unhappiness were not so obvious, yet the gloom that overhung them deepened. He saw himself at Eton in the hedged-round world of buoyant youth, standing apart, preoccupied, indifferent. He had been oddly popular there. His selflessness, his gentle candor, his capacity for a highly keyed joy,—strung, though it was, over an incapacity for peace,—endeared him; but even to his friends he remained a veiled and ambiguous personality. He seemed to himself to stand on the confines of that artificially happy domain, listening always for the sound of sorrow in the greater world outside. History, growing before his growing mind, loomed blood-stained, cruel, disastrous. The defeat of goodness, its degradation by the triumphant forces of evil, haunted him. The dependence of mind, of soul, on body opened new and ominous vistas. For months he was pursued by morbid fears of what a jostled brain-cell or a diseased body might do to one. One might become a fiend, it seemed, or an imbecile, if one's atoms were disarranged too much. Life was a tragic duty,—he held to that blindly, fiercely at times; but what if life's chances made even goodness impossible? what if it were to rob one of one's very selfhood? It became to him a thing dangerous, uncertain, like an insecurely chained wild beast that one must lie down with and rise with and that might spring at one's throat at any moment.

Under the pressure of this new knowledge, crude enough in its materialistic forms, and keen, new thought, already subtle, already passing from youthful crudity, the skeptical crash of his religious faith came at last upon him. Religion had meant too much to him for its loss to be the merely disturbing epoch of readjustment that it is in much young development. He found himself in a reeling horror of darkness where the only lights were the dim beacons of science and the fantastic will-o'-the-wisps of estheticism. In the midst of the chaos he saw his mother again. He dreaded the longed-for meeting. How could he see her and hide from her the inner desolation? And when she came, at last, after all these years, a desperate pity nerved him to act a part. She was changed; the years had told on her more than even his imagination had feared. She drooped like a tired, fading flower. She was fading, that he saw at the first glance. Mentally as well as physically, there was an air of withering about her, and the look of sorrow was stamped ineffaceably upon her aging features. To know that he had lost his faith, his hold on life, his trust in good, would have been, he thought, to kill her. He kept from her a whisper of his desolation; and to a fundamental skepticism like his, acting was facile. But when she was gone, back to her parched life, he knew that to her, as well as to him, something essential had lacked. Her love, again and again, must have fluttered, however blindly, against that barrier between them. The years of separation had been sad, but, in looking back at it, the summer of meeting was saddest of all.

The experience put an edge to his hardening strength. He must fail her in essentials; they could never meet in the blessed nearness of shared hopes; but he wouldn't fail her in all the lesser things of life. The time of her deliverance was near. Love and beauty would soon be about her. He worked at Oxford with the inner passion of a larger purpose than mere scholarship that is the soul of true scholarship. He felt the sharp, cold joy of high achievement, the Alpine, precipitous scaling of the mind. And here he embarked upon the conscious quest for truth, his skepticism grown to a doubt of its own premises.

Gavan looked quietly back upon the turmoil of that quest.

He watched himself in those young years pressing restlessly, eagerly, pursued by the phantoms of death and nothingness, through spiral after spiral of human thought: through Spinoza's horror of the meaninglessness of life and through Spinoza's barren peace; through Kant's skepticism that would not let him rest in Kant's super-rational assurance; precipitated from Hegel's dialectics—building their pyramid of paradox to the apex of an impersonal Absolute—into Schopenhauer's petulant despair. And more and more clearly he saw, through all the forms of thought, that the finite self dissolved like mist in the one all-embracing, all-transcending Subject. Science, philosophy, religion, seemed, in their final development, to merge in a Monism that conceived reality as spirit, but as impersonal spirit, a conception that, if in western thought it did not reduce to illusion every phase of experience, yet reduced the finite self to a contradiction and its sense of moral freedom, upon which were built all the valuations of life and all its sanctions, to a self-deception. His own dual life deepened his abiding intuition of unreality. There was the Gavan of the river, the debate, the dinner, popular among his fellows, gentle, debonair; already the man of the world through the fineness of his perception, his instinct for the fitting, his perfection of mannerless manner that was the flower of selflessness. And there was the Gavan of the inner thought, fixed, always, in its knot of torturing perplexity. To the inner Gavan, the Gavan of human relations was a wraith-like figure. Now began for him the strange experience at which childish terrors had hinted. It was in the exhaustions that followed a long wrench of thought, or after an illness, a shock of sorrow that left one pulseless and inert, that these pauses of an awful peace would come to him. One faced, then, the dread vision, and it seized one, as when, in the deep stillness of the night, the world drops from one and only a consciousness, dispassionate and contemplative, seeing all life as dream,

remains. It was when life was thus stilled, its desires quenched by weakness or great sorrow, that this peace stole into the empty chambers, and whispered that all pain, all evil, all life were dreams and that the dreams were made by the strife and restlessness of the fragmentary self in its endless discord. See oneself as discord, as part of the whole, every thought, every act, every feeling determined by it, and one entered, as it were, into the unwilling redemption. Desire, striving, hope, and fear fell from one. One found the secret of the Eternal Now, holding in its timelessness the vast vision of a world of change. But to Gavan, in these moments, the sorrow, the striving, the agony of life was sweet and desirable; for, to the finite life that strove, and hoped, and suffered the vision became the sightless gaze of death, and nothingness was the guerdon of such attainment. To turn, with an almost physical sickness of horror, from the hypnotic spell, to forcibly forget thought, to clasp life about him like a loved Nessus-robe, was a frequent solution during these years of struggle; to reënter the place of joy and sorrow, taking it, so to speak, at its own terms. But the specter was never far from the inner Gavan, who more and more suspected that the longing for reality, for significance, that flamed up in him with each renewal of personal force and energy, was the mere result of life, not its sanction. And more and more, when, in such renewals, his nature turned with a desperate trust to action, as a possible test of worth, he saw that it was not action, not faith, that created life and the trust in life, but life, the force and will incarnated in one, that created faith and action. The very will to act was the will to live, and the will to live was the will of the Whole that the particular discord of one's personal self should continue to strive and suffer.

Life, indeed, clutched him, and that quite without any artificial effort of his own, when his mother came home to England to die.

Gavan had just left Oxford. He was exquisitely equipped for the best things of life, and, with the achievement, his long dependence on his uncle suddenly ceased. An eccentric old cousin, a scholarly recluse, who had taken a fancy to him, died, leaving him a small estate in Surrey and fifteen hundred pounds a year.

With the good fortune came the bitter irony that turned it to dust and ashes. All his life he had longed to help his mother, to smooth her rough path and put power over fate into her hand. Now he could only help her to die in peace.

He took her to the quiet old house, among its lawns, its hedges, its high-walled gardens and deep woods. He gave her all that it was now too late to give—beauty, ease, and love.

She was changed by disease, more changed than by life and sorrow; gentle, very patient, but only by an effort showing her appreciation of the loveliness, only by an effort answering his love.

Of all his fears the worst had been the fear that, with the conviction of the worthlessness of life, the capacity for love had left him. Now, as with intolerable anguish, her life ebbed from her, there was almost relief in his own despair; in feeling it to the full; in seeing the heartlessness of thought wither in the fierce flame of his agony.

It seemed to him that he had never before known what it was to love. It was as if he were more her than himself. He relived her life and its sorrows. He relived her miserable married years, the long loneliness, parted from her child, her terror of the final parting, coming so cruelly upon them; and he lived the pains of her dissolution. He understood as he had never understood, all that she was and felt; he yearned as he had never yearned, to hold and keep her with him in joy and security; he suffered as he had never suffered.

Such passionate rebellion filled him that he would walk for hours about the country, while merciful anesthetics gave her oblivion, in a blind rage of mere feeling—feeling at a white heat, a core of tormented life. And the worst was that her life of martyrdom was not to be crowned by a martyr's happy death; the worst was that her own light died away from before her feet, that she groped in darkness, and that, since he was to lose her, he might not even have her to the end.

For months he watched the slow fading of all that had made her herself, her relapse into the instinctive, almost into the animal. Her lips, for many days, kept the courage of their smile, but it was at last only an automatic courage, showing no sweetness, no caress. Her eyes, in the first tragic joy of their reunion, had longed, grieved, yearned over the son who hid his sorrow for her sake. Afterward, all feeling, except a sort of chill resentment, died from her look. For the last days of her life, when, in great anguish, she never spoke at all, these eyes would turn on him with a strange immensity of indifference. It was as if already his mother were gone and as if a ghost had stolen into his life. She died at last, after a long night of unconsciousness, without a word or look that brought them near.

Gavan lived through all that followed in a stupor.

On the day of her funeral, when all was over, he walked out into the spring woods.

The day was sweet and mild. Pools of shallow water shone here and there in the hollows, among the slender tree-stems. Pale slips of blue were seen among the fine, gray branches, and pushing up from last year's leaves were snowdrops growing everywhere, white and green among the russet leaves, lovely, lovely snowdrops. Seeing them, in his swift, aimless wandering, Gavan paused.

The long nights and days had worn him to that last stage of exhaustion where every sense is stretched fine and sharp as the highest string of a musical instrument. Leaning against a tree, his arms folded, he looked at the snowdrops, at their vivid green, and their white, as fresh, as delicate as flakes of newly fallen snow.

"Lovely, lovely," he said, and, looking all about him, at the fretwork of gray branches on the blue, the pale, shining water,—a little bird just hopping to its edge among the shorter grass to drink,—he repeated, "Lovely," while the anguish in his heart and the sweet beauty without combined in the sharp, exquisite tension of a mood about to snap, the fineness of a note, unendurably high, held to an unendurable length.

A dimness overtook him: as if the note, no longer keenly singing, sank to an insect-like buzz, a chaos of minute, whirring vibrations that made a queer, dizzy rhythm; and, in a daze of sudden indifference, both to beauty and anguish, he seemed to see himself standing there, collapsed against the tree, his frail figure outworn with misery,—to see himself, and the trees, the pools of water, the drinking bird, and the snowy flowers,—like a picture held before calm, dying eyes.

"Yes," he thought, "she saw it like this,—me, herself, life; that is why she didn't care any longer."

He continued to look, and from the dimness and the buzzing the calm grew clear—clear as a sharply cut hallucination. He knew the experience, he had often before known it; but he had never yet felt it so unutterably, so finally. Something in him had done struggling forever; something was relinquished; he had accepted something. "Yes, it is like that," he thought on; "they are all of them right."

With the cold eye of contemplation he gazed on the illusion of life: joy, suffering, beauty, good and evil. His

individual life, enfranchised from its dream of a separate self, drifted into the life about him. He was part of it all; in him, as in those other freed ones, the self suddenly knew itself as fleeting and unsubstantial as a dream, knew its own profound irrationality and the suffering that its striving to be must always mean.

He was perfectly at peace, he who had never known peace. “I am as dead as she is,” he thought.

In his peace he was conscious of no emotion, yet he found himself suddenly leaning his head against the tree and weeping. He wept, but he knew that it was no longer with grief or longing. He watched the exhausted machine give way, and noted its piteous desolation of attitude,—not pitying it,—while he thought, “I shall feel, perhaps suffer, perhaps enjoy again; but I shall always watch myself from above it all.”

The mystic experience had come overwhelmingly to him and his mind was never to lose the effect of that immediacy of consciousness, untransmissible, unspeakable, ineffaceable. And that with which he found himself one was far from any human thoughts or emotions; rather it was the negation of them, the infinite negation of finite restlessness.

He went back to the house, to the darkened, empty room. The memories that crowded there, of pity and love and terror, were now part of the picture he looked at, as near and yet as far, as the vision of the snowdrops, the bird, and the spring sky.

All was quiet. She was gone as he would go. The laboring breath was stilled forever.

II

AVAN did not address himself to an ascetic remodeling of his life. He pursued the path traced out before him. He yielded placidly to the calls of life, willing to work, to accomplish, willing even to indulge his passions, since there could lurk for him no trap among the shows of life. His taste soon drew back, disdainful and delicate, from his experience of youthful dissipation; his ironic indifference made him deaf to the lures of ambition; but he was an accurate and steady worker and a tolerably interested observer of existence.

As he had ceased to have value for himself, so others had no value in his eyes. Social effort and self-realization were, as ideals, equally meaningless to him; and though pity was always with him, it was a pity gentle and meditative, hopeless of alleviation: for suffering was life, and to cure one, one must abolish the other. Material remedies seemed to him worse than useless; they merely renewed the craving forces. The Imitation of Christ was a fitter panacea than organized charities and progressive legislation.

Physical pain in the helpless, the dumbly conscious, in children or animals, hurt him and made him know that he, too, lived; and he would spend himself to give relief to any suffering thing. He sought no further in metaphysical systems; he desired no further insight. Now and then, finding their pensive pastures pleasant, he would read some Hindoo or medieval mystic; but ecstasies were as alien to him as materialism: both were curious forms of self-deception—one the inflation of the illusory self into the loss of any sense of relation, and the other the self’s painful concentration into imbecilely selfish aims. The people most pleasing to him were the people who, without self-doubt and without self-consciousness, performed some inherited function in the state; the simply great in life; or those who, by natural gift, the fortunately finished, the inevitably distinguished, followed some beautifully complex calling. The mediocre and the pretentious were unpleasing phenomena, and the ideals of democracy mere barbarous nonsense.

His own pursuits were those of a fashionable and ambitious man, and, to the casual observer, the utter absence of any of the pose of disillusionized youth made all the more apparent what seemed to be a man of the world cynicism. Those who knew him better found him charming and perplexing. He seemed to have no barriers, yet one could not come near him. His center receded before pursuit. And he was much pursued. He aroused conjecture, interest, attachment. His exquisite head, the chill sweetness of his manner, the strange, piercing charm of his smile, drew eyes and hearts to him. Idly amused, he saw himself, all inert, boosted from step to step, saw friends swarm about him and hardly an enemy’s face.

It was rare for him to meet dislike. One young man, vaguely known at Oxford, noticed with interest as a relative of Eppie’s, he had, indeed, by merely being, it seemed, antagonized. Gavan had really felt something of a shy, derivative affection for this Jim Grainger, a dogged, sullen, strenuous youth; because of the dear old memory, he had made one or two delicate, diffident approaches—approaches repulsed with bull-dog defiance. Gavan, who understood most things, quite understood that to the serious, the plain, the obviously laborious son of an impecunious barrister, he might have given the impression, so funnily erroneous, of a sauntering dilettantism, an aristocratic *flânerie*. At all events, Grainger was intrenched in a resolute disapproval, colored, perhaps, with some tinge of reminiscent childish jealousy. When their paths again crossed in London and Gavan found his suavity encountered by an even more scowling sarcasm, jealousy, of another type, was an obvious cause. Grainger, scornful of social dexterities and weapons, had worked himself to skin and bone in preparation for a career, and a career that he intended to be of serious significance. And at its outset he found himself in apparent competition with Gavan for a post that, significant indeed to him, as the first rung on the political ladder, could only be decorative to his rival—the post of secretary to a prominent cabinet-minister. Grainger had his justified hopes, and he was, except for outward graces, absolutely fitted for the place.

In his path he found the listless figure of the well-remembered and heartily disliked Gavan—a gilded youth, pure and simple, and as such being lifted, by all accounts, onto the coveted rung of the coveted ladder. Gavan’s scholarly fitness for the post Grainger only half credited. Of the sturdy professional class, with a streak of the easily suspicious bourgeois about him, he was glad to believe tales of drawing-room influence. He expressed himself with disgusted openness as to the fatal effect of a type like Palairet’s on public life. Gavan heard a little and guessed more. He found himself sympathizing with Grainger; he had always liked him. With an effort that he had never used on his own behalf, he managed to get him fitted into the pair of shoes that were standing waiting for his own feet. It had been, indeed, though in superficial ways, an affair of drawing-room influence. The wife of the great statesman, as well as that high personage himself, was one of Gavan’s devoted and baffled friends. She said that he made her think of a half-frozen bird that one longed to take in one’s hands and warm, and she hopefully communed with her husband as

to the invigorating effect of a career upon him. She suspected Gavan—his influence over her husband—when she found that an alien candidate was being foisted upon her.

"Grainger!" she exclaimed, vexed and incredulous. "Why Grainger? Why not anybody as well as Grainger? Yes, I've seen the young man. He looks like a pugilistic Broad-Church parson. All he wants is to climb and to reform everything."

"Exactly the type for British politics," Gavan rejoined. "He is in earnest about politics, and I'm not; you know I'm not." His friend helplessly owned that he was exasperating. Grainger, had he known to whom he was indebted for his lift, would have felt, perhaps, a heightened wrath against "drawing-room influence."

Happily and justifiably unconscious, he proceeded to climb.

Meanwhile another pair of shoes was swiftly found for Gavan. He went out to India as secretary to the viceroy.

Here, in the surroundings of his early youth, the second great moral upheaval of his life came to him. Three years had passed since his mother's death. He was twenty-six years old.

During a long summer among the mountains of Simla, he met Alice Grafton. She was married, a year older than himself, but a girl still in mind and appearance—fragile, hesitant, exquisite. Gavan at his very first seeing of her felt something knocking in his heart. It seemed like pity, instinctive pity, the bond between him and life, and for some time he deluded himself with this comparatively safe interpretation. He did not quite know why he should pity Mrs. Grafton. That she should look like a girl was hardly a reason, nor that her husband, large, masterful, embossed with decorations, was uninteresting. She had been married to him—by all accounts the phrase applied—at nineteen and could not find him sympathetic; but, after all, many cheerful women were in that situation. He was a kindly, an admiring husband, and her life was set in luxurious beauty. Yet piteousness was there. She was all promise and unfulfilment; and dimly, mutely, she seemed to feel that the promise would never be fulfilled, as though a too-early primrose smiled wistfully through a veil of ice. Should she never become consciously unhappy that would be but another symptom of permanent immaturity.

Gavan rode with her and talked with her, and read with her in her fresh, flower-filled drawing-room. Their tastes were not at all alike; but he did not in the least mind that when she lifted her lovely eyes to him over poor poetry; and when she played and sang to him her very ineffectuality added a pathos, full of charm, to the obvious ballads that she liked. It was sweet, too, and endearing, to watch her, by degrees, molding her taste to his until it became a delightful and intuitive echo.

He almost wondered if it was also in echo that she began to feel for herself his own appreciation of her. Certainly she matured to consciousness of lack. She began to confide; not with an open frankness, but vaguely, as though she groped toward the causes of her sadness. She shrank, and knew now why she shrank, when her loud-voiced, cheerful husband came tramping into the room. Then she began to see that she was horribly lonely. Unconsciously, in the confidences now, she plead for help, for reassurance. She probed him constantly as to religious hopes and the real significance of life. Her soft voice, with its endearing little stammer, grew to Gavan nearer and dearer than all the voices of the world. At first it appealed, and then it possessed him. He had thought that what he felt for her was only pity. He had thought himself too dead to all earthly pangs for the rudimentary one of love to reach him. But when, one day, he found her weeping, alone, among her flowers, he took her into his arms and the great illusion seized him once more.

It seized him, though he knew it for illusion. He laughed at the specter of nothingness and gloried in the beauty of the rainbow moment. This human creature needed him and he her: that was, for them, the only reality; who cared for the blank background where their lives flashed and vanished? The flash was what mattered. He sprang from the dead self, as from a tomb, when he kissed her lips. Life might mean sorrow and defeat, but its tragedy was atoned for by a moment of such joy.

"Gavan, Gavan, do we love each other? Do we?" she wept.

He saw illusion and joy where her woman's heart felt only reality and terror in the joy.

They obviously loved each other, though it was without a word of love that they found themselves in each other's arms. Had ever two beings so lonely so needed love? Her sweet, stunned eyes were a rapture of awakening to him, and though, under all, ran the deep, buried river of knowledge, whispering forever, "Vanity of vanities," he was far above it in the sunlight of the upper air. He felt himself, knew himself only as the longing to look forever into her eyes, to hold her to him forever. That, on the day of awakening, seemed all that life meant.

Later on he found that more fundamental things had clutched him through the broken barriers of thought—jealousies and desires that showed him his partaking of the common life of humanity.

Gavan's skepticism had not come face to face with a moral test as yet, and he could but contemplate curiously in himself the strong, instinctive revolt of all the man of hereditary custom and conscience from any dishonorable form of illegal love. He couldn't justify it, but it was there, as strong as his longing for the woman.

It was not that he cared a rap, so he analyzed it, for laws or conventions: it was merely that he could not do anything that he felt as dishonorable.

He told Alice that she must leave her husband and come openly to him. They would go back to Europe; live in Italy—the land of happy outcasts from unhappy forms; there they would study and travel and make beauty grow about them. Holding her hands gently, he put it all before her with a reverent devotion that gave the proposal a matrimonial dignity.

"You know me well enough, dear Alice," he said, "to know that you need fear none of the usual dangers in such cases. I don't care about anything but you; I never will—ambition, country, family. Nothing outside me, or inside me, could make me fail you. All I want, or shall ever want, is to make you happy, and to be happy with you."

But the things he put away as meaningless dreams the poor woman with the girl's mind saw as grim realities. It was easy for Gavan to barter a mirage for the one thing he cared to have; the world was not a mirage to her, and even her love could not make it so. Her thin young nature knew only the craving to keep and not the revulsion from a hidden wrong. Every fiber in her shrank from the facing of a hostile order of things, the bearing through life of a public dishonor. It was as if it were he who purposed the worse disgrace, not she.

She wept and wept in his arms, hoping, perhaps, to weaken him by her feebleness and her abandonment, so that an open avowal of cowardice, an open appeal that he should yield to it, might be needless; but at last, since he would

not speak, only stroking her hair, her hand, sharing her sorrow, she moaned out, “Oh, Gavan, I can’t, I can’t.”

He only half understood, feeling his heart freeze in the renunciation that she might demand. But when she sobbed on brokenly, “Don’t leave me. Stay with me. I can’t live without you. No one need ever know,” he understood.

Standing white and motionless, it was he now who repeated, “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

She wept on, incredulous, supplicating, reproachful. “You will not leave me! You will not abandon me!”

“I cannot—stay with you.”

“You win my heart—humiliate me,—see that I’m yours—only yours,—and then cast me off!”

“Don’t speak so cruelly, Alice. Cast you off? I, who only pray you to let me take you with me?”

“A target for the world!”

“Darling, poor darling, I know that I ask all—all; but what else is there—unless I leave you?”

She hid her face on his shoulder, sobbing miserably, her sobs her only answer, and to it he rejoined: “We can’t go on, you know that; and to stay, to deceive your husband, to drag you through all the baseness, the ugliness, the degradation, Alice, of a hidden intrigue—I can’t do that; it’s the only thing I can’t do for you.”

“You despise me; you think me wicked—because I can’t have such horrible courage. I think what you ask is more wicked; I think it hurts everybody more; I think that it would degrade us more. People can’t live like that—cut off from everything—and not be degraded in the end.”

It was a new species of torture that now tore at Gavan’s heart and mind. He saw too clearly the force of the arguments that underlay her specious appeal—more clearly, far, than she could see. It was horribly true that the life of happy outlawry he proposed might wither and debase more than a conscious sin. The organized, crafty wisdom of life was on her side. And on his was a mere matter of taste. He could find no sanction for his resistance to her and to himself except in that instinctive recoil from what he felt as dishonor. He was sacrificing them both to a silly, subjective figment. The lurid realization, that burned and froze, went through him, and with it the unanswerable necessity. He must, he must, sacrifice them. And he must talk the language of right and wrong as though he believed in it. He acted as if he did, yet nothing was further from him than such belief; that was the strange agony that wrenched his brain as he said: “You are blind, not wicked. Some day you will thank me if I make it possible for you to let me go.” And, he too incredulous, he cried, “Alice, Alice, will you really let me go without you?”

She would not consent to the final alternative, and the struggle lasted for a week, through their daily meetings—the dream-like, deft meetings under the eyes of others,—and while they rode alone over the hills—long, sad rides, when both, often in a moody silence, showed at once their hope and their resistance.

Her fear won at last. “And I can’t even pretend that it’s goodness,” she said, her voice trembling with self-scorn. “You’ve abased me to the dust, Gavan. Yes, it’s true, if you like—my fear is greater than my love.” Irony, a half-felt anger, helped her to bear the blow, for, to the end, she could not believe that he would find strength to leave her.

The parting came suddenly. Wringing her hands, looking hard into her face, where he saw still a fawning hope and a half-stupefied despair, he left her, and felt that he had torn his heart up by the very roots.

And he had sacrificed her and himself, to what? Gavan could ask himself the question at leisure during the following year.

Yet, from the irrational sacrifice was born a timid, trembling trust, a dim hope that the unbannered combat had not been in vain, that even the blind holding to the ambiguous right might blossom in a better life for her than if he had taken the joy held out to him. The trust was as irrational as the sacrifice, but it was dear to him. He cherished it, and it fluttered in him, sweet, intangible, during all the desolate year. Then, at the year’s end, he met Alice, suddenly, unexpectedly, and found her ominously changed. Her girlhood was gone. A hard, glittering surface, competent, resourceful, hid something.

The strength of his renouncement was so rooted that he felt no personal fear, and for her, too, he no longer felt fear in his nearness. What he felt was a new pity—a pity suffocating and horrible. Whispers of discreet scandal enlightened him. Alice was in no danger of what she most shrank from—a public pillory; but she was among those of whom the world whispers, with a half-condoning smile and shrug.

Gavan saw her riding one morning with a famous soldier, a Nietzschian type of strength, splendor, and high indifference. And now he understood all. He knew the man. He was one who would have stared light irony at Gavan’s chivalrous willingness to sacrifice his life to a woman; to such a charming triviality as an intrigue he would sacrifice just enough and no more. He knew the rules of the game and with him Alice was safe from any open pillory. People would never do more than whisper.

A bitter daylight flooded for Gavan that sweet, false dawn, and once again the cruelty, the caprice at the heart of all things were revealed to him. He knew the flame of impotent remorse. He had tossed the miserable child to this fate, and though remorse, like all else, was meaningless, he loathed himself for his futile, empty magnanimity.

She had seen his eyes upon her as she rode. She sent for him, and, alone with him, the glitter, the hardness, broke to dreadful despair.

She confessed all at his knees. Hardness and glitter had been the shield of the racked, terror-stricken heart. The girl was a woman and knew the use of shields.

“And Gavan, Gavan, worst of all,—far worst,—I don’t love him; I never loved him. It was simply—simply”—she could hardly speak—“that he frightened and flattered me. It was vanity—recklessness—I don’t know what it was.”

After the confession, she waited, her face hidden, for his reproach or anger. Neither came. Instead, she felt, in the long silence, that something quiet enveloped her.

She looked up to see his eyes far from her.

“Gavan, can you forgive me?” she whispered.

Once more he was looking at it all—all the cruel, the meaningless drama in which he had been enmeshed for a little while. Once more his thought had risen far above it, and the old peace, the old, dead peace, with no trembling of the hopes that meant only a deeper delusion, was regained. He knew how deep must be the reattained tranquillity, when, the woman he had loved at his feet, he felt no shrinking, no reproach, no desire, only an immense, an indifferent pity.

“Forgive you, Alice? Poor, poor Alice. Perhaps you should forgive me; but it isn’t a question of that. Don’t cry;

don’t cry,” he repeated mechanically, gently stroking her hair—hair whose profuse, wonderful gold he had once kissed with a lover’s awed delight.

“You forgive me—you do forgive me, Gavan?”

“It isn’t a question of forgiveness; but of course I forgive you, dear Alice.”

“Gavan, tell me that you love me still. Can you love me? Oh, say that I haven’t lost that.”

He did not reply, looking away and lifting his hand from her hair.

The woman, leaning on his knees, felt a stealing sense of awe, worse than any fear of his anger. And worse than a vehement disavowal of love, worse than a spurning of her from him, were his words: “I want you not to suffer, dear Alice; I want you to find peace.”

“Peace! What peace can I find?”

He looked at her now, wondering if she would understand and willing to put it before her as he himself saw it: “The peace of seeing it all, and letting it all go.”

“Gavan, I swear to you that I will never see him again. Oh, Gavan, what do you mean? If you would forgive me—really forgive me—and take me now, I would follow you anywhere. I am not afraid any longer. I have found out that the only thing to be afraid of is oneself. If I have you, nothing else matters.”

He looked steadily at her, no longer touching her. “You have said what I mean. You have found it out. The only thing to be afraid of is ourselves. You will not see this man again? You will keep that promise to me?”

“Any promise! Anything you ask! And, indeed, indeed, I could not see him now,” she shuddered. “Gavan, you will take me away with you?”

He wondered at her that she did not see how far he was from her—how far, and yet how one with her, how merged in her through his comprehension of the essential unity that bound all life together, that made her suffering part of him, even while he looked down upon it from an almost musing height.

He felt unutterable gentleness and unutterable ruthlessness. “I don’t mean that, Alice. You won’t lose yourself by clinging to me, by clinging to what you want.”

“You don’t love me! Oh, you don’t love me! I have killed your love!” she wailed out, rising to her feet, pierced by her full realization. She stepped back from him to gaze at him with a sort of horror. “You talk as if you had become a priest.”

He appreciated what his attitude must seem to her—priestly indeed, almost sleek in its lack of personal emotion, its trite recourse to the preaching of renunciation. And, almost with a sense of humor, that he felt as hateful at such a moment, the perception came that he might serve her through the very erroneousness of her seeing of him. The sense of humor was hateful, and his skilful seizing of her suggestion had a grotesque aspect as well. Even in his weariness, he was aware that the cup of contemplation was full when it could hold its drop of realized irony.

“I think that I have become a priest, Alice,” he said. “I see everything differently. And weren’t you brought up in a religious way—to go to church, seek props, say your prayers, sacrifice yourself and live for others? Can’t you take hold of that again? It’s the only way.”

Her quick flaming was justified, he knew; one shouldn’t speak of help when one was so far away; he had exaggerated the sacerdotal note. “Oh, you despise me! It is because of that, and you are trying to hide it from me! What is religion to me, what is anything—anything in the world to me—if I have lost you, Gavan? Why are you so cruel, so horrible? I can’t understand it! I can’t bear it! Oh, I can’t! Why are our lives wrecked like this? Why did you leave me? Why have I become wicked? I was never, never meant to be wicked.” Tears, not of abasement, not of appeal, but of pure anguish ran down her face.

He was nearer to that elemental sadness and could speak with a more human tone. “You are not wicked—no more—no less—than any one. I don’t despise you. Believe me, Alice. If I hadn’t changed, this would have drawn me to you; I should have felt a deeper tenderness because you needed me more. But think of me as a priest: I have changed as much as that. And remember that what you have yourself found out is true—the only thing to be afraid of is oneself, and the only escape from fear is to—is to”—he paused, hearing the triteness of his own words and wondering with a new wonder at their truth, their gray antiquity, their ever-verdant youth—“is to renounce,” he finished.

He was standing now, ready for departure. In her eyes he saw at last the dignity of hopelessness, of an accepted doom, a pain far above panic.

“Dear Alice,” he said, taking her hand—“dear Alice.” And, with all the delicacy of his shrinking from a too great directness, his eyes had a steadiness of demand that sank into the poor woman’s tossed, unstable soul, he added, “Don’t ever do anything ugly—or foolish—again.”

Her lover lost,—the very slightness of the words “ugly,” “foolish,” told her how utterly lost,—a deep thrill of emotional exaltation went through the emptiness he left. She longed to clasp the lost lover and to sink at the knees of the priest.

“I will be good. I will renounce myself,” she said, as though it were a creed before an altar; and hurriedly she whispered, poor child, “Perhaps in heaven—we will find each other.”

Gavan often thought of that pathetic human clutch. So was the dream of an atoning heaven built. It kept its pathos, even its beauty, for him, when the whole tale ended in the world’s shrug and smile. He heard first that Alice had become an emotionally devout churchwoman;—that lasted for a year;—and then, alas! alas!—but, after all, the smile and shrug was the best philosophy,—that she rode once more with the Nietzschian lover. He had one short note from her: he would have heard—perhaps, at any rate, he would know what to think when he did hear that she saw the man again. And she wanted him to know from her that it was not as he might think: she really loved him now—the other; not as she had loved Gavan,—that would always be first,—but very much; and she needed love, she must have it in her life, and she was lifting this man who loved her, was helping his life, and she had broader views now and did not believe in creeds or in the shibboleths that guided the vulgar. And she was harming no one, no one knew. Life was far too complicated, the intricacies of modern civilization far too enmeshing, for duty to be seen in plain black and white. The whole question of marriage was an open one, and one had a right to interpret one’s duty according to one’s own lights. Gavan saw the hand of the new master through it all. Shortly after, the death of Alice’s husband, killed while tiger-shooting, set her free, and the new master proved himself at all events a fond one by

promptly marrying her. So ended Alice in his life.

There was not much more to look back on after that. His return to England; his entering the political arena, with neither desire nor reluctance; his standing for the town his uncle's influence marked out for him; the fight and the very gallant failure,—there had been, for him, an amused interest in the game of it all. The last year he had spent in his Surrey home, usually in company with a really pathetic effigy of the past—his father, poor and broken in health, the old serpent of Gavan's childhood basking now in torpid insignificance, its fangs drawn.

People probably thought that he had been soured by an initial defeat. Gavan knew that the game had merely ceased to amuse him. What amused him most was concentrated and accurate scholarship. He was writing a book on some of the obscurer phases of religious enthusiasm, studying from a historical and psychological point of view the origin and formation of queer little sects,—failures in the struggle for survival,—their brief, ambiguous triumphs and their disintegrations.

His unruffled stepping-back from the arena of political activity was to the more congenial activity of understanding and observation. But there burned in him none of the observer's, the thinker's passion. He worked as he rode or ate his breakfast. Work was part of the necessary fuel that kept life's flame bright. While he lived he didn't want a feeble, flickering flame. But at his heart, he was profoundly indifferent to work, as to all else.

GAVAN'S mind, as he leaned back in the railway carriage, had passed over the visual aspect of this long retrospect, not in meditation, but in a passive seeing of its scenes and faces. Eppie's face, fading in the mist; Robbie, silhouetted on the sky; the sulky Grainger; his uncle; his mother, and the vision of the spring day where he had wandered in the old dream of pain and into its cessation; finally, Alice, her pale hair and wistful eyes and her look when, at parting, she had said that they might be together in heaven.

He had rarely known a greater lucidity than in those swift, lonely hours of night. It was like a queer, long pause between a past accomplished and a future not yet begun—as though one should sunder time and stand between its cloven waves. The figures crossed the stage, and he seemed to see them all in the infinite leisure of an eternal moment.

This future, its figures just about to emerge from the wings into full view, slightly troubled his reverie. It was at dawn that his mind again turned to it with a conjecture half amused and half reluctant. There was something disturbing in the linkage he must make between that child's face on the mist and the Miss Gifford he was so soon to see. That she would, at all events in her own conception, dominate the stage, he felt sure; she might even expect a special attention from a spectator whose memory could join hers in that far first act. He was pretty sure that his memory would have to do service for both; and quite sure that memory would not hold for her, as it did for him, a distinct tincture of pain, of restlessness, as though there strove in it something shackled and unfulfilled.

One's thoughts, at four o'clock in the morning, after hours of sleeplessness, became fantastic, and Gavan found himself watching, with some shrinking, this image of the past, suddenly released, brought gasping and half stupefied to the air, to freedom, to new, strong activity, after having been, for so long, bound and gagged and thrust into an underground prison.

He turned to a forecast of what Eppie would probably be like. He had heard a good deal about her, and he had not cared for what he had heard. The fact that one did hear a good deal was not pleasing. Every one, in describing her, used the word charming; he had gathered that it meant, as applied to her, more than mere prettiness, wit, or social deftness; and it was precisely for the more that it meant that he did not care.

Apparently what really distinguished her was her energy. She traveled with her cousin, Lady Alicia Waring, a worldly, kindly dabbler in art and politics; she rushed from country-house to country-house; she worked in the slums; she sat on committees; she canvassed for parliamentary friends; she hunted, she yachted, she sang, she broke hearts, and, by all accounts, had high and resolute matrimonial ambitions. Would Eppie Gifford "get" So-and-so was a question that Gavan had heard more than once repeated, with the graceless terseness of our modern colloquialism, and it spoke much for Eppie's popularity that it was usually asked in sympathy.

This reputation for a direct and vigorous worldliness was only thrown into more pungent relief by the startling tale of her love-affair. She had fallen in love, helplessly in love, with an impecunious younger son, an officer in the Guards—a lazy, lovable, petulant nobody, the last type one would have expected her to lose her head over. He was not stupid, but he didn't count and never would. The match would have been a reckless one, for Eppie had, practically, only enough to pay for her clothes and her traveling expenses. The handsome guardsman had not even prospects. Yet, deliberately sacrificing all her chances, she had fallen in love, been radiantly engaged, and then, from the radiance, flung into stupefying humiliation. He had thrown her over, quite openly, for an ugly little heiress from Liverpool. Poor Eppie had carried off her broken heart—and she didn't deny that it was broken—for a year or so of travel. This had happened four years ago. She had mended as bravely as possible,—it wasn't a deep break after all,—and on the thrilling occasion of her first meeting with the faithless lover and his bride was magnificently sweet and regal to the ugly heiress. It was surmised that the husband was as uncomfortable as he deserved to be. But this capacity for recklessness, this picture of one so dauntless, dazed and discomfited, hardly redeemed the other, the probably fundamental aspect. She had lost her head; but that didn't prove that when she had it she would not make the best possible use of it. There was talk now—Eppie's was the publicity of popularity—of Gavan's old-time rival, Grainger, who had inherited an immense fortune and, unvarnished and defiantly undecorative on his lustrous background, was one of the world's prizes. All that he had was at Eppie's feet, and some more brilliant alternative could be the only cause for hesitation in a young woman seared by misfortune and cured forever of folly.

So the talk went, and Gavan took such gabble with a large pinch of ironic incredulity; but at the same time the gossip left its trail. The impetuous and devastating young lady, with her assurance and her aim at large successes, was to him a distasteful figure. There was pain in linking it with little Eppie. It stood waiting in the wings and was altogether novel and a little menacing to one's peace of mind. He really did not want to see Miss Gilford; she belonged to a modern type intensely wearisome to him. But she was staying with her uncle and aunt—only Miss Barbara was left—at Kirklands, and the general, after a meeting in London, had written begging him to pay them all a visit, and, since there had seemed no reason for not going, here he was.

Here he was, and round the corner of the wing the new Eppie stood waiting. Poor little Eppie of childhood—she was lost forever.

But all the clearness of the night concentrated, at dawn, into that vivid memory of the past where they had wandered together, sharing joy and sorrow.

That was long, long over. To-morrow was already here, and to-morrow belonged to the new Eppie.

III

GAVAN spent the morning in Edinburgh, seeing an old relative, and reached Kirklands at six.

It was a cold October evening, the moors like a dark, sullenly heaving ocean and a heavy bar of sunset lying along the horizon.

The windows of the old white house mirrored the dying color, and here and there the inner light of fire and candle seemed like laughter on a grave face. With all its loneliness it was a happy-looking house; he remembered that; and in the stillness of the vast moors and the coming night it made him think of a warmly throbbing heart filling with courage and significance a desolate life.

The general came from the long oak library, book in hand, to welcome him. Gavan was almost automatically observant of physical processes and noted now the pronounced limp, the touch of garrulity—symptoms of the fine old organism's placid disintegration. Life was leaving it unreluctantly, and the mild indifference of age made his cordiality at once warmer and more impersonal than of old.

As he led Gavan to his room, the room of boyhood, near Eppie's, overlooking the garden and the wooded hills, he told him that Eppie and Miss Barbara were dressing and that he would have time for a talk with them before dinner at eight.

"It's changed since you were here, Gavan. Ah! time goes—it goes. Poor Rachel! we lost her five years ago. If Eppie didn't look after us so well we should be lonely, Barbara and I. We seldom get away now. Too old to care for change. But Eppie always gives us three or four months, and a letter once a week while she's away. She puts us first. This is home, she says. She sees clever people at Alicia Waring's, has the world at her feet,—you've heard, no doubt,—but she loves Kirklands best. She gardens with me—a great gardener Eppie, but she is good at anything she sets herself to; she drives her aunt about, she reads to us and sings to us,—you have heard of her singing, too,—keeps us in touch with life. Eppie is a wonderful person for sharing happiness," the general monologued, looking about the fire-lit room; and Gavan felt that, from this point of view, some of the little Eppie might still have survived.

"So you have given up the idea of the House?" the general went on.

"I'm no good at it," said Gavan; "I've proved it."

"Proved it? Nonsense. Wait till you are fifty before saying that. Why, you've everything in your favor. You weren't enough in earnest; that was the trouble. You didn't care enough; you played into your opponents' hands. The British public doesn't understand idealism or irony. Eppie told us all about it."

"Eppie? How did Eppie know?" He found himself using her little name as a matter of course.

"She knows everything," the general rejoined, with his air of happy, derived complacency; "even when she's not in England, she never loses touch. Eppie is very much behind the scenes."

The simile recalled to Gavan his own vision of the stage and the waiting figure. "Even behind my scenes!" he ejaculated, smiling at so much omniscience.

"From the moment you came into public life, yes."

"And she knows why I failed at it? Idealism and irony?"

"That's what she says; and I usually find Eppie right." The general, after the half-humorous declaration, had a pause, and before leaving his guest, he added, "Right, except about her own affairs. She is a child there yet."

Eppie's disaster must have been keenly felt and keenly resented at Kirklands. The general made no further reference to it and Gavan asked no question.

There was a fire, a lamp, and several clusters of candles in the long, dark library when Gavan entered it an hour later, so that the darkness was full of light; yet he had wandered slowly down its length, looking about him at the faded tan, russet, and gilt of well-remembered books, at the massive chairs and tables, all in their old places, all so intimately familiar, before seeing that he was not alone in the room.

Some one in white was sitting, half submerged in a deep chair, behind the table with its lamp—some one who had been watching him as he wandered, and who now rose to meet him, taking him so unawares that she startled him, all the light in the dim room seeming suddenly to center upon her and she herself to throw everything, even his former thoughts of her, into the background.

It was Eppie, of course, and all that he had heard of her, all that he had conjectured, fell back before the impression that held him in a moment, long, really dazzled, yet very acute.

Her face was narrow, pale, faintly freckled; the jaw long, the nose high-bridged, the lips a little prominent; and, as he now saw, a clear flush sprang easily to her cheeks. Eyes, lips, and hair were vivid with color: the hair, with its remembered rivulets of russet and gold, piled high on her head, framing the narrow face and the long throat; the eyes gray or green or gold, like the depths of a mountain stream.

He had heard many analogies for the haunting and fugitive charm of Miss Gifford's face—a charm that could only, apparently, be caught with the subtleties of antithesis. One appreciator had said that she was like an angelic jockey; another, that with a statesman's gaze she had a baby's smile; another, that she was a Flying Victory done by Velasquez. And with his own dominant impression of strength, sweetness, and daring, there crowded other similes. Her eyes had the steeplechaser's hard, smiling scrutiny of the next jump; the halloo of the hunt under a morning sky was in them, the joyous shouts of Spartan boys at play; yet, though eyes of heroism and laughter, they were eyes sad and almost tragically benignant.

She was tall, with the spare lightness of a runner poised for a race, and the firm, ample breast of a hardy nymph. She suggested these pagan, outdoor similes while, at the same time, luxuriously feminine in her more than fashionable aspect, the last touches of modernity were upon her: her dress, the eighteenth-century, interpreted by Paris, her decorations all discretion and distinction—a knot of silver-green at her breast, an emerald ring on her

finger, and emerald earrings, two drops of smooth, green light, trembling in the shadows of her hair.

Altogether Gavan was able to grasp the impression even further, to simplify it, to express at once its dazzled quality and its acuteness, as various and almost violent, as if, suddenly, every instrument in an orchestra were to strike one long, clear, vibrating note.

His gaze had been prolonged, and hers had answered it with as open an intentness. And it was at last she who took both his hands, shook them a little, holding them while, not shyly, but with that vivid flush on her cheek, "*You*," she said.

For she was startled, too. It *was* he. She remembered, as if she had seen them yesterday, his air of quick response, surface-shrinking, deep composure, the old delicious smile, and the glance swiftly looking and swiftly averted.

"And *you*," Gavan repeated. "I haven't changed so much, though," he said.

"And I have? Really much? Long skirts and turned up hair are a transformation. It's wonderful to see you, Gavan. It makes one get hold of the past and of oneself in it."

"Does it?"

"*Doesn't* it?" She let go his hands, and moving to the fire and standing before it while she surveyed him, she went on, not waiting for an answer:

"But I don't suppose that you have my keenness of memory. It all rushes back—our walks, our games, our lessons, the smell of the heather, the very taste of the heather-honey we ate at tea, and all the things you did and said and looked; your building the Petit Trianon, and your playing dolls with me that day; your Agnes, in her pink dress, and my Elspeth, whom I used to whip so."

"I remember it all," said Gavan, "and I remember how I broke poor Elspeth."

"Do you?"

"All of it: the attic windows and the pine-tree under them, and the great white bird, and the dreadful, soft little thud on the garden path."

"Yes, I can see your face looking down. You were quite silent and frozen. I screamed and screamed. Aunt Barbara thought that *you* had fallen at first from the way I screamed."

"Poor little Eppie. Yes, I remember; it was horrid."

Their eyes, smiling, quizzical, yet sad, watched, measured each other, while they exchanged these trophies from the past. He had joined her beside the fire, and, turning, she leaned her hands on the mantel and looked into the flames. So looking, her face had its aspect of almost tragic brooding. It was as if, Gavan thought, under the light memories, all those visions of his night were there before her, as if, astonishingly, and in almost uncanny measure, she shared them.

"And do you remember Robbie?" she asked presently.

"I was just thinking of Robbie," Gavan answered. It was her face that had brought back the old sorrow, and that memory, more than any, linked them over all that was new and strange. They glanced at each other.

"I am so glad," said Eppie.

"Because I remember?"

"Yes, that you haven't forgotten. You said you would."

"Did I?" he asked, though he quite remembered that, too.

"Yes; and I should have felt Robbie more dead if you had forgotten him."

This was wonderfully not the Miss Gifford, and wonderfully the old Eppie. She saw that thought, too, answering it with, "Things haven't really changed so much, have they? It's all so very near—all of that."

So near, that its sudden sharing was making Gavan a little uncomfortable, with the discomfort of the night before justified, intensified.

He hadn't imagined such familiar closeness with a woman really unknown, nor that, sweeping away all the formalities that might have grown up between them, she should call him Gavan and make it natural for him to call her Eppie. He didn't really mind. It was amusing, charming perhaps, perhaps even touching—yes, of course it was that; but she was rather out of place: much nearer than where he had imagined she would be, on the stage before him.

Passing to another memory, she now said, "I clung for years, you know, to your promise to come back."

"I couldn't come—really and simply could not."

"I never for a moment thought you could, any more than I thought you could forget Robbie."

"And when I could come, you were gone."

"How miserable that made me! I was in Rome when I had the news from Uncle Nigel."

He felt bound fully to exonerate the past. "I had the life, during my boyhood, of a sumptuous galley-slave. I had everything except liberty and leisure. I was put into a system and left there until it had had its will of me. And when I was free I imagined that you had forgotten all about me. To a shy, warped boy, a grown-up Eppie was an alarming idea."

"I never thought you had forgotten *me*!" said Eppie, smiling.

Again she actually disturbed him; but, lightly, he replied with the truth, feeling a certain satisfaction in its lightness: "Never, never; though, of course, you fell into a background. You can't deny that *I* did."

"Oh, no, I don't deny it." Her smile met his, seemed placidly to perceive its meaning. She did not for a moment imply, by her admissions, any more than he did; the only question was, What did his admissions imply?

She left them there, going on in an apparent sequence, "Have you heard much about me, Gavan?"

"A good deal," he owned.

"I ask because I want to pick up threads; I want to know how many stitches are dropped, so to speak. Since you have heard, I want to know just what; I often seem to leave reverberations behind me. Some rather ugly ones, I fear. You heard, perhaps, that I was that rather ambiguous being, the young woman of fashion, materialistic, ambitious, hard." Her gaze, with its cool scrutiny, was now upon him.

“Those are really too ugly names for what I heard. I gathered, on the whole, that you were merely very vigorous and that you had more opportunities than most people for vigor.”

“I’m glad that you saw it so; but all the same, the truth, at times, hasn’t been beautiful. I have, often, been too indifferent toward people who didn’t count for me, and too diplomatic toward those who did. You see, Gavan,” she put it placidly before him, not at all as if drawing near in confidence,—she was much further in her confidences than in her memories,—but merely as if she unrolled a map before him so that he might clearly see where, at present, they found themselves, “you see, I am a nearly penniless girl—just enough to dress and go about. Of course if I didn’t dress and didn’t go about I could keep body and soul together; but to the shrewd eyes of the world, a girl living on her friends, making capital of her personality, while she seeks a husband who will give her the sort of place she wants—oh, yes, the world isn’t so unfair, either, when one takes off the veils. And this girl, with the personality that pays, was put early in a place from where she could see all sorts of paths at once, see the world, in its ladder aspect, before her—all the horridness of low rungs and all the satisfaction of high ones. I have been tempted through complexity of understanding; perhaps I still am. One wants the best; and when one doesn’t see clearly what the best is, one is in danger of becoming ugly. But echoes are often distorting.”

Miss Gifford was now very fully before him, as she had evidently intended to be. It was as if she herself had drawn between them the barrier of the footlights and as if, on her chosen stage, she swept a really splendid curtsey. And this frank and panoplied young woman of the world was far easier to deal with than the reminiscent Eppie. He could comfortably smile and applaud from his stall, once more the mere spectator—easiest of attitudes.

“The echoes, on the whole, were rather magnificent, as if an Amazon had galloped across mountains and left them calling her prowess from peak to peak.”

Her eyes, quickly on his, seemed to measure the conscious artificiality, to compare it with what he had already, more helplessly, shown her. He felt his rather silly deftness penetrated and that she guessed that the mountain calls had not at all enchanted him. She owned to her own acuteness in her next words:

“And you don’t like young ladies to gallop across mountains. Well, I love galloping, though I’m sorry that I leave over-loud echoes. You, at all events, are noiseless. You seem to have sailed over my head in an air-boat. It was hard for me to keep any trace of you.”

“But I don’t at all mean that I dislike Amazons to have their rides.”

“Let us talk of you now. I have had an eye on you, you know, even when you disappeared into the Indian haze; you had just disappeared when I first came to London. I only heard of lofty things—scholarly distinction, diplomatic grace, exquisite indifference to the world’s prizes and to noisy things in general. It’s all true, I can see.”

“Well, I’m not indifferent to you,” said Gavan, smiling, tossing his appropriate bouquet.

She had at this another, but a sharper, of her penetrative pauses. It was pretty to see her, rather like a deer arrested in its careless speed, suddenly wary, its head high. And, in another moment, he saw that the quick flush, almost violently, sprang to her cheek. Turning her head a little from him, she looked away, almost as if his glib acceptance of a frivolous meaning in her words abashed her—and more for him than for herself; as if she suddenly suspected him of being stupid enough to accept her at the uglier valuation of those echoes he had heard. She had not meant to say that she was one of the world’s prizes, and she had perhaps meant to say, generously, that if he found her noisy she wouldn’t resent indifference. Perhaps she had meant to say nothing of herself at all. She certainly wasn’t on the stage, and in thinking her so he felt that he had shown himself disloyal to something that she, more nobly, had taken for granted. The flush, so vivid, that stayed made him feel himself a blunderer.

But, in a moment, she went on with a lightness of allusion to his speech that yet oddly answered the last turn of his self-reproach. “Oh, you are loyal, I am sure, even to a memory. I wasn’t thinking of particulars, but of universals. My whole impression of you was of something fragrant, elusive, impalpable. I never felt that I had a glimpse of really *you*. It was almost gross in comparison actually to see your name in the papers, to read of your fight for Camley, to think of you in that earthly scuffle. It was like roast-beef after roses; and I was glad, because I’m gross. I like roast-beef.”

He was grateful to her for the lightness that carried him so kindly over his own blunder.

“It was only the fragrance of the roast, too, you see, since I was defeated,” he said.

“You didn’t mind a bit, did you?”

“It would sound, wouldn’t it, rather like sour grapes to say it?”

“You can say it. It was so obvious that you might have had the bunch by merely stretching out your hand—they were under it, not over your head. You simply wouldn’t play the game.” She left him now, reaching her chair with a long stride and a curving, gleaming turn of her white skirts, suggesting a graceful adaptation of some outdoor dexterity. As she leaned back in her chair, fixing him with that look of cheerful hardness, she made him think so strongly of the resolute, winning type, that almost involuntarily he said, “You would have played it, wouldn’t you?”

“I should think so! I care for the grapes, you see. It’s what I said—you didn’t care enough.”

“Well, it’s kind of you to see ineffectuality in that light.” Still examining the steeplechaser quality, he added, “You do care, don’t you, a lot?”

“Yes, a lot. I am worldly to my finger-tips.” Her eyes challenged him—gaily, not defiantly—to misunderstand her again.

“What do you mean, exactly, by worldly?” he asked.

“I mean by it that I believe in the world, that I love the world; I believe that its grapes are worth while,—and by grapes I mean the things that people strive for and that the strong attain. The higher they hang and the harder the climb, the more I like them.”

Gavan received these interpretations without comment. “A seat in the House isn’t very high, though, is it?” he remarked.

“That depends on the sitter. It might be a splendid or a trivial thing.”

“And in my case, if I’d got it, what would it have been? Can you see that, too, you very clear-sighted young woman?”

He stood above her, smiling, but now without suavity or artificiality; looking at her as though she were a pretty gipsy whose palm he had crossed with silver. And Eppie answered, quite like a good-natured gipsy, conscious of an

admiring but skeptical questioner, “I think it would have been neither.”

“But what then? What would this sitter have made of it?”

“A distraction? An experiment upon himself? I’m sure I don’t know. Indeed, I don’t pretend to know you at all yet. Perhaps I will in time.”

Once more he was conscious of the discomfort, slight and stealing, as though the gipsy knew too much already. But he protested, and with sincerity: “If there is anything to find you will certainly find it. I hope that you will find it worth your while. I hope that we shall be great friends.”

She smiled up at him, clearly and quietly: “I have always been your great friend.”

“Always? All this while?”

“All this while. Never mind if you haven’t felt it; I have. I will do for both.”

Her smile, her look, made him finally and completely understand the application of the well-worn word to her. She was charming. She could be lavish, pour out unasked bounty upon one, and yet, in no way undervaluing it, be full of delicacy, of humor, in her generosity.

“I thought I hadn’t any right to feel it,” said Gavan. “I thought you would not have remembered.”

“Well, you will find out—I always remember, it’s my strong point,” said Eppie.

IV

EXT morning at breakfast he had quite a new impression of her.

Pale sunlight flooded the square, white room where, in all its dignified complexity of appurtenance, the simple meal was laid out. From the windows one saw the clear sky, the moor, its summer purple turned to rich browns and golds, and, nearer, the griffins with their shields.

Eppie was a little late in coming, and Gavan, while he and the general finished their wandering consumption of porridge and sat down to bacon and eggs, had time to observe by daylight in Miss Barbara, behind her high silver urn, the changes that in her were even more emphatic than in her brother. She was sweeter than ever, more appealing, more affirmative, with all manner of futile, fluttering little gestures and gentle, half-inarticulate little ejaculations of pleasure, approbation, or distress. Her smile, rather silly, worked too continually, as though moved by slackened wires. Her hands defined, described, ejaculated; over-expression had become automatic with her.

Eppie, when she appeared, said that she had had a walk, stooping to kiss her aunt and giving Gavan a firm, chill hand on her way to the same office for the general. She took her seat opposite Gavan, whistling an Irish-terrier to her from the door and, before she began to eat, dropping large fragments of bannock into his mouth. Her loose, frieze clothes smelled of peat and sunshine; her hair seemed to have the sparkle of the dew on it; she suggested mountain tarns, skylarks, morning gladness: but, with all this, Gavan, for the first time, now that she faced the hard, high light, saw how deeply, too, she suggested sadness.

Her face had moments of looking older than his own. It was fresh, it was young, but it had lived a great deal, and felt things to the bone, as it were.

There were little wrinkles about her eyes; her white brow, under its sweep of hair, was faintly lined; the oval of her cheek, long and fine, took, at certain angles, an almost haggard sharpness. It was not a faded face, nor a face to wither with years: every line of it spoke of a permanent beauty; but, with all the color that the chill morning air had brought into it, it yet made one think of bleak uplands, of weather-beaten cliffs. Life had engraved it with ineffaceable symbols. Storms had left their mark, bitter conflicts and bitter endurances.

While she ate, with great appetite, she talked incessantly, to the general, to Miss Barbara, to Gavan, but not so much to him, tossing, in the intervals of her knife and fork and cup, bits of food to the attentive terrier. He saw why the old people adored her. She was the light, the movement of their monotonous days. Not only did she bring them her life: it was their own that she vivified with her interest. The interest was not assumed, dutiful. There was no touch of the conscious being kind. She questioned as eagerly as she told. She knew and cared for every inch of the country, every individual in the country-side. She was full of sagacity and suggestion, full of anecdote and a nipping Scotch humor. And one felt strongly in her the quality of old race. Experience was in her blood, an inheritance of instinct, and, that so significant symptom, the power of playfulness—the intellectual detachment that, toward firm convictions, could afford a lightness scandalous to more crudely compacted natures, could afford gaieties and audacities, like the flights of a bird tethered by an invisible thread to a strong hand.

Miss Barbara, plaintively repining over village delinquencies, was lured to see comedy lurking in the cases of insubordination and thriftlessness, though at the mention of Archie MacHendrie, the local drunkard and wife-beater, Eppie’s brow grew black—with a blackness beside which Miss Barbara’s gloom was pallid. Eppie said that she wished some one would give Archie a thrashing, and Gavan could almost see her doing it herself.

From local topics she followed the general to politics, while he glanced down the columns of the “Scotsman,” so absorbed and so vehement that, meeting at last Gavan’s meditative eye, she seemed to become aware of an irony he had not at all intended, and said, “A crackling of thorns under a pot, all this, Gavan thinks, and, what does it all matter? You have become a philosopher, Gavan; I can see that.”

“Well, my dear, from Plato down philosophers have thought that politics did matter,” said the general, incredulous of indifference to such a topic.

“Unless they were of a school that thought that nothing did,” said Eppie.

“Gavan’s not of that weak-kneed persuasion.”

“Oh, he isn’t weak-kneed!” laughed Eppie.

She drove her aunt all morning in the little pony-cart and wrote letters after lunch, Gavan being left to the general’s care. It was not until later that she assumed toward him the more personal offices of deputy hostess, meeting him in the hall as she emerged from the morning-room, her thick sheaf of letters in her hand, and proposing a walk before tea. She took him up the well-remembered path beside the burn; but now, in the clear autumnal afternoon, he seemed further from her than last night before the fire. Already he had seen that the sense of nearness

or distance depended on her will rather than his own; so that it was now she who chose to talk of trivial things, not referring by word or look to the old memories, deepest of all, that crowded about him on the hilltop, not even when, breasting the wind, they passed the solitary group of pine-trees, where she had so deeply shared his suffering, so wonderfully comprehended his fears.

She strode against the twisted flappings of her skirt, tawny strands of hair whipping across her throat, her hands deeply thrust into her pockets, her head unbowed before the enormous buffets of the wind, and he felt anew the hardy energy that would make tender, lingering touches upon the notes of the past rare things with her.

In the uproar of air, any sequence of talk was difficult. Her clear voice seemed to shout to him, like the cold shocks of a mountain stream leaping from ledge to ledge, and the trivial things she said were like the tossing of spray upon that current of deep, joyful energy.

“Isn’t it splendid!” she exclaimed at last. They had walked two miles along the crest of the hill, and, smiling in looking round at him, her face, all the sky behind it, all the wind around it, made the word match his own appreciation.

“Splendid,” he assented, thinking of her glance and poise.

Still bending her smile upon him, she said, “You already look different.”

“Different from what?” he asked, amused by her expression, as of a kindly, diagnosing young doctor.

“From last night. From what I felt of you. One might have thought that you had lost the capacity for feeling splendor.”

“Why should you have imagined me so deadened?” He kept his cheerful curiosity.

“I don’t know. I did. There,”—she paused to point,—“do you remember the wind-mill, Gavan? The old miller is dead and his son is the miller now; but the mill looks just as it did when we were little. It makes one think of birds and ships, doesn’t it?—with the beauty that it stays and doesn’t pass. When I was a child—did I ever confide it to you?—my dream was to catch one of the sails as it came down and let it carry me up, up, and right around. What fun it would have been! I suppose that one could have held on.”

“In pretty grim earnest, after the first fun.”

“It would be the sense of coming grimness that would make the desperate thrill of it.”

“You are fond of thrills and perils.”

“Not fond, exactly; the love of risk is a deeper thing—something fundamental in us, I suppose.”

She had walked on, down the hillside, where gorse bushes pulled at her skirts, and he was putting together last night’s impressions with to-day’s, and thinking that if she embodied the instinctive, the life-loving, it wasn’t in the simple, unreflecting forms that the words usually implied. She was simple, but not in the least guileless, and her directness was a choice among recognized complexities. It was no spontaneous child of nature who, on the quieter hillside, where they could talk, talked of India, now, of his life there, the people he had known, many of whom she too knew. He knew that he was being managed, being made to talk of what she wanted to hear, that she was still engaged in penetrating. He was quite willing to be managed, penetrated,—for as far as she could get; he could rely on his own deftness in retreat before too deep a probe, though, should she discover that for him the lessons of life had resulted in an outlook perhaps the antipodes from her own, he guessed that her own would show no wavering. Still, she should run, if possible, no such risk. They were to be friends, good friends: that was, as she had said, not only an accomplished, but a long-accomplished fact; but, even more than in childhood, she would be a friend held at arm’s-length.

Meanwhile, unconscious, no doubt, of these barriers, Eppie walked beside him and made him talk about himself. She knew, of course, of his mother’s death; she did not speak of that: many barriers were her own—she was capable of most delicate avoidances. But she asked after his father. “He is still alive, I hear.”

“Yes, indeed, and gives me a good deal of his company.”

“Oh.” She was a little at a loss. He could guess at what she had heard of his father. He went on, though choosing his words in a way that showed a slight wincing behind his wish to be very frank and friendly with her, for even yet his father made him wince, standing, as he did, for the tragedy of his mother’s life: “He is very much alive for a person so gone to pieces. But I can put up with him far more comfortably than when he was less pitiable.”

“How much do you have to put up with him?” she asked, trying to image, as he saw, his ménage in Surrey, in the house he had just been describing to her, its old bricks all vague pinks and mauves, its high-walled gardens clustering near it, its wonderful hedges, that, he said, it ruined him to keep up to their reputation of exquisite formality; and, within, its vast library—all the house a brain, practically, the other rooms like mere places for life’s renewal before centering in the intellectual workshop. She evidently found it difficult to place, among the hedges, the lawns, the long walls of the library, a father, gone to pieces perhaps, but displaying all the more helplessly his general unworthiness. Even in lenient circles, Captain Palairet was thought to have an undignified record.

“Oh, he is there for most of the time. He is there now,” said Gavan, without pathos. “He has no money left, and now that I’ve a little I’m the obvious thing to retire to.”

“I hope that it’s not very horrid for you.”

“I can’t say that it’s horrid at all. I don’t see much of him, and, in many respects, he has remained, for the onlooker, rather a charming creature. He gives me very little trouble—smokes, eats, plays billiards. When we meet, we are very affable.”

Eppie did not say, “You tolerate him because he is piteous,” but he imagined that she guessed it.

V

E was awakened early next morning by the sound of singing in the garden below.

His windows were widely opened and a cold, pure air filled the room. He lay dreamily listening for some moments before recognizing Eppie’s voice—recognizing it, though he had never heard her sing.

Fresh and strong, it put a new vitality into the simple sadness of an old Scotch ballad, as though in the

very sorrow it found joy. It was not an emotional voice. Clearly and firmly it sounded, and seemed a part of the frosty, sunny morning, part of the sky that was like a great chalice filled with light, of the whitened hills, the aromatic pine-woods, and the distant, rushing burn. He had sprung up after the first dreamy listening and looked out at it all, and at her walking through the garden, her dog at her heels. She went out by the little gate sunken deep in the wall, and disappeared in the woods; and still the voice reached him, singing on, and at each repetition of the monotonous, departing melody, a sadder, sweeter sense of pain strove in his heart.

He listened, looking down at the pine-tree beneath the window, at the garden, the summer-house, the withered tangle of the rose upon the wall, and up at the hilltop, at the crystalline sky; and such a sudden pang of recollection pierced him that tears came to his eyes.

What was it that he remembered? or, rather, what did he not? Things deep and things trivial, idle smiles, wrenching despairs, youth, sorrow, laughter,—all the past was in the pang, all the future, too, it seemed, and he could not have said whether his mother, Alice, Eppie with her dolls, and little Robbie, or the clairvoyant intuition of a future waiting for him here—whether presage or remembrance—were its greater part.

Not until the voice had died, in faintest filaments of sound, far away among the woods, did the pain fade, leaving him shaken. Such moods were like dead things starting to life, and reminded him too vividly of the fact that as long as one was alive, one was, indeed, in danger from life; and though his thought was soon able to disentangle itself from the knot of awakened emotions that had entwined it for a moment, a vague sense of fear remained with him. Something had been demanded of him—something that he had, involuntarily, found himself giving. This it was to have still a young nature, sensitive to impressions. He understood. Yet it was with a slight, a foolishly boyish reluctance, as he told himself, that he went down some hours later to meet Eppie at breakfast.

There was an unlooked-for refuge for him when he found her hardly noticing him, and very angry over some village misdemeanor. The anger held her far away. She dilated on the subject all during breakfast, pouring forth her wrath, without excitement, but with a steady vehemence. It was an affair of a public-house, and Eppie accused the publican of enticing his clients to drink, of corrupting the village sobriety, and she urged the general, as local magistrate, to take immediate action, showing a very minute knowledge of the technicalities of the case.

“My dear,” the general expostulated, “indeed I don’t think that the man has done anything illegal; we are powerless about the license in such a case. You must get more evidence.”

“I have any amount of evidence. The man is a public nuisance. Poor Mrs. MacHendrie was crying to me about it this morning. Archie is hardly ever sober now. I shall drive over to Carlowrie and see Sir Alec about it; as the wretch’s landlord he can make it uncomfortable for him, and I’ll see that he makes it as uncomfortable as possible.”

Laughingly, but slightly harassed, the general said: “You see, we have a tyrant here. Eppie is really a bit too hard on the man. He is an unpleasant fellow, I own, a most unpleasant manner—a beast, if you will, but a legal beast.”

“The most unpleasant form of animal, isn’t it? It’s very good of Eppie to care so much,” said Gavan.

“You don’t care, I suppose,” she said, turning her eyes on him, as though she saw him for the first time that morning.

“I should feel more hopeless about it, perhaps.”

“Why, pray?”

“At all events, I shouldn’t be able to feel so much righteous indignation.”

“Why not?”

“He is pretty much of a product, isn’t he?—not worse, I suppose, than the men whose weakness enriches him. It’s a pity, of course, that one can’t painlessly pinch such people out of existence, as one would offensive insects.”

Eppie, across the table, eyed him, her anger quieted. “He is a product of a good many things,” she said, now in her most reasonable manner, “and he is going to be a product of some more before I’m done with him,—a product of my hatred for him and his kind, for one thing. That will be a new factor in his development. Gavan,” she smiled, “you and I are going to quarrel.”

“Dear Eppie!” Miss Barbara interposed. “Gavan, you must not take her seriously; she so often says extravagant things just to tease one.” Really dismayed, alternately nodding and shaking her head in reassurance and protest, she looked from one to the other. “And don’t, dear, say such unchristian things of anybody. She is not so hard and unforgiving as she sounds, Gavan.”

“Aunt Barbara! Aunt Barbara!” laughed Eppie, leaning her elbows on the table, her eyes still on Gavan, “my hatred for Macdougall isn’t nearly as unchristian as Gavan’s indifference. I don’t want to pinch him painlessly out of life at all. I think that life has room for us both. I want to have him whipped, or made uncomfortable in some way, until he becomes less horrid.”

“Whipped, dear! People are never whipped nowadays! It was a very barbarous punishment indeed, and, thank God, we have outgrown it. We will outgrow it all some day. And as to any punishment, I don’t know, I really don’t. Resist not evil,” Miss Barbara finished in a vague, helpless murmur, uncertain as to what course would at once best apply to Macdougall’s case and satisfy the needs of public sobriety.

“Perhaps one owes it to people to resist them,” Eppie answered.

“Oh, Eppie dear, if only you cared a little more for Maeterlinck!” sighed Miss Barbara, the more complex readings of whose later years had been somewhat incongruously adapted to her early simple faiths. “Do you remember that beautiful thing he says,—and Gavan’s attitude reminds me of it,—‘*Le sage qui passe interrompt mille drâmes’?*”

“You will be quoting Tolstoi to me next, Aunt Barbara. I suspect that such sages would interrupt a good deal more than dramas.”

“I hope that you care for Tolstoi, Gavan,” said Miss Barbara, not forgetful of his boyish pieties. “Not the novels,—they are very, very sad, and so long, and the characters have such a number of names it is most confusing,—but the dear little books on religion. It is all there: love of all men, and non-resistance of evil, and self-renunciation.”

“Yes,” Gavan assented, while Eppie looked rather gravely at him.

“How beautiful this world would be if we could see it so—no hatred, no strife, no evil.”

Again Gavan assented with, “None.”

“None; and no life either,” Eppie finished for them.

She rose, thrusting her hands into alternate pockets looking for a note-book, which she found and consulted. “I’m off for the fray, Uncle Nigel, for hatred and strife. You and Gavan are going to shoot, so I’ll bring you your lunch at the corner of the Carlowrie woods.”

“So that you and Gavan may continue your quarrel there. Very well. I prefer listening.”

“Gavan understands that Eppie must not be taken seriously,” Miss Barbara interposed; but Eppie rejoined, drawing on her gloves, “Indeed, I intend to be taken seriously. I quarrel with people I like as well as with those I hate.”

“You are going to be a factor in my development, too?” said Gavan.

“Of course, as you are in mine, as we all are in one another’s. We can’t help that. And my attack on you shall be conscious.”

These open threats didn’t at all alarm him. It was what was unconscious in her that stirred disquiet.

When Eppie had departed and the general had gone off to see to preparations for the morning’s shoot, Miss Barbara, still sitting rather wistfully behind her urn, said: “I hope, dear Gavan, that you will be able to influence Eppie a little. I am so thankful to find you unchanged about all the deeper things of life. You could help her, I am sure. She needs guidance. She is so loving, so clever, a joy to Nigel and to me; but she is very headstrong, very reckless and wilful,—a will in subjection to nothing but her own sense of right. It’s not that she is altogether irreligious,—thank Heaven for that,—but she hasn’t any of the happiness of religion. There is no happiness, is there, Gavan—I feel sure that you see it as I do,—but in having our lives stayed on the Eternal?”

Gavan, as it was very easy to do, assented again.

He spent the morning with the general in shooting over the rather scant covers, and at two, in a sheltered bend of the woods, where the sunlight lay still and bright, Eppie joined them, bringing the lunch-basket in her dog-cart.

She was in a very good humor, and while, sitting above them, she dispensed rations, announced to her uncle the result of her visit to Sir Alec.

“He thinks he can turn him out if any flagrant ease of drunkenness occurs again. We talked over the conditions of his lease.”

“Carston, I am sure, doesn’t care a snap of his fingers about it.”

“Of course not; but he cares that I care.”

“You see, Gavan, by what strings the world is pulled. Carston hasn’t two ideas in his head.”

“Luckily I am here to use his empty head to advantage. I wheedled Lady Carston, too,—the bad influence Macdougall had on church-going. Lady Carston’s one idea, Gavan, is the keeping of the Sabbath. Altogether it was an excellent morning’s work.” Eppie was cheerful and triumphant. She was eating from a plate on her knees and drinking milk out of a little silver cup. “Do you think me a tiresome, managing busybody, Gavan?” She smiled down at him, and her lashes catching the sunlight, an odd, misty glitter half veiled her eyes. “You look,” she added, “as you used to look when you were a little boy. The years collapsed just then.”

He was conscious that, under her sudden glance, he had, indeed, looked shy. It was not her light question, but the strange depth of her half-closed eyes.

“I find a great deal of the old Eppie in you: I remember that you used to want to bully the village people for their good.”

“I’m still a bully, I think, but a more discreet one. Won’t you have some milk, Gavan? You used to love milk when you were a little boy. Have you outgrown that?”

“Not at all. I should still love some; but don’t rob yourself.”

“There ‘s heaps here. I’ve no spare glass. Do you mind?” She held out to him the silver cup, turning its untouched edge to him, something maternal in the gesture, in the down-looking of her sun-dazed eyes.

He felt himself foolishly flushing while he drank the milk; and when, really seized by a silly childish shyness, he protested that he wanted no more, she placidly, with an emphasizing of her air of sweet, comprehending authority, said, “Oh, but you must; it holds almost nothing.”

For the second time that day, as he obediently took from her hand the innocent little cup, Gavan had the unreasoning impulse of tears.

The sunny afternoon was silent. Overhead, the sky had its chalice look, clear, benignant, brimmed with light. The general, the lolling dogs, were part of the background, with the heather and the wood of larches, the finely falling sprays delicately blurred upon the sky.

It was again something sweet, sweet, simple and profound, that brought again that pang of presage and of pain. But the pain was like a joy, and the tears like tears of happiness in the sunny stillness, where her firm and gentle hand gave him milk in a silver cup.

The actual physical sensation of a rising saltness was an alarm signal that, with a swift reversal of mental wheels, brought a revulsion of consciousness. He saw himself threatened once more by nature’s enchantments: wily nature, luring one always back to life with looks from comrade eyes, touches from comrade fingers, pastoral drinks all seeming innocence, and embracing sunlight. Wily Circe. With a long breath, the mirage was seen as mirage and the moment’s dangerous blossoming withered as if dust had been strewn over it.

VI

TO see his own susceptibility so plainly was, he told himself, to be safe from it; not safe from its pang, perhaps, but safe from its power, and that was the essential thing.

It was not to Eppie, as he further assured himself, that he was susceptible. Eppie stood for life, personified its appeals; he could feel, yet be unmoved, by all life’s blandishments.

Meanwhile on a very different plane—the after all remote plane of mental encounters and skirmishes—he felt, with relief, that he was entirely master of his own meaning. There were many of these skirmishes, and though he did not believe any of them planned, believe that she was carrying out her threat of conscious attack, he was aware that she was alert and inquisitive, and dexterously quick at taking any occasion that offered for further penetration.

The first of these occasions was on Sunday evening when, after tea and in the gloaming, they sat together in the deep window-seat of one of the library windows and listened to Miss Barbara softly touching the chords of a hymn on the plaintive old piano and softly singing—a most unobtrusive accompaniment, at her distance and with her softness, for any talk or any thoughts of theirs. They had talked very little, watching the sunset burn itself out over the frosty moorland, and Gavan presently, while he listened, closed his eyes and leaned his head back upon the oak recess. Eppie, looking now from the sunset to him, observed him with an open, musing curiosity. His head, leaning back in the dusk, was like the ivory carving of a dead saint—a saint young, beautiful, at peace after long sorrow. Peace; that was the quality that his whole being expressed, though, with opened eyes, his face had the more human look of patience, verging now and then on a quiet dejection that would overspread his features like a veil. In boyhood, the peace, the placid dejection, had not been there; his face then had shown the tension of struggle and endurance.

"Till in the ocean of thy love
We lose ourselves in heaven above,"

Miss Barbara quavered, and Gavan, opening his eyes at the closing cadence, found Eppie's bent upon him. He smiled, and looked still more, she thought, the sad saint, all benediction and indifference, and an impulse of antagonism to such sainthood made her say, though smiling back, "How I dislike those words."

"Do you?" said Gavan.

"Hate them? Why, dear child?" asked Miss Barbara, who had heard through the sigh of her held-down pedal.

"I don't want to lose myself," said Eppie. "But I didn't mean that I wanted you to stop, Aunt Barbara. Do go on. I love to hear you sing, however much I disapprove of the words."

But Miss Barbara, clasping and unclasping her hands a little nervously, and evidently finding the moment too propitious to be passed over, backed as she was by an ally, rose and came to them.

"That is the very point you are so mistaken about, dear. It's the self, you know, that keeps us from love."

"It's the self that makes love possible," said Eppie, taking her hand and looking up at her. "Do you want to lose me, Aunt Barbara? If you lose yourself you will have to lose me too, you know."

Miss Barbara stood perplexed but not at all convinced by these subtleties, turning mild eyes of query upon Gavan and evidently expecting him to furnish the obvious retort.

"We will all be at one with God," she reverently said at length, finding that her ally left the defense to her.

Eppie met this large retort cheerfully. "You can't love God unless you have a self to love him with. I know what you mean, and perhaps I agree with what you really mean; but I want to correct your Buddhistic tendencies and to keep you a good Christian."

"I humbly hope I'm that. You shouldn't jest on such subjects, Eppie dear."

"I'm not one bit jesting," Eppie protested. And now Gavan asked, while Miss Barbara looked gratefully at him, sure of his backing, though she might not quite be able to understand his methods, "Are they such different creeds?"

Still holding her aunt's hand and still looking up into her face, Eppie answered: "One is despair of life, the other trust in life. One takes all meaning out of life and the other fills it with meaning. The secret of one is to lose life, and the secret of the other to gain it. There is all the difference in the world between them; all the difference between life and death."

"As interpreted by Western youth and vigor, yes; but what of the mystics? I suppose you would call them Christians?"

"Yes, dear, they are Christians. What of them?" Miss Barbara echoed, though slightly perturbed by this alliance with heathendom.

"Buddhists, not Christians," Eppie retorted.

"That's what I mean; in essentials they are the same creed: the differences are only the differences of the races or individuals who hold them."

At this Miss Barbara's free hand began to flutter and protest. "Oh, but, Gavan dear, there I'm quite sure that you are wrong. Buddhism is, I don't doubt, a very noble religion, but it's not the true one. Indeed they are not the same, Gavan, though Christianity, of course, is founded on the renunciation of self. 'Lose your life to gain it,' Eppie dear."

"Yes, to gain it, that's just the point. One renounces, and one wins a realer self."

"What is real? What is life?" Gavan asked, really curious to hear her definition.

She only needed a moment to find it, and, with her answer, gave him her first glance during their battledore colloquy with innocent Aunt Barbara as the shuttlecock. "Selves and love."

"Well, of course, dear," Miss Barbara cried. "That's what heaven will be. All love and peace and rest."

"But you have left out the selves; you won't get love without them. And as for rest and peace—Love is made by difference, so that as long as there is love there must be restlessness."

"Isn't it made by sameness?" Gavan asked.

"No, by incompleteness: one loves what could complete oneself and what one could complete; or so it seems to me."

"And as long as there are selves, will there be suffering, too?"

Her eyes met his thought fearlessly.

"That question, I am sure, is the basis for all the religions of cowardice, religions that deny life because of their craving for peace."

"Isn't the craving for peace as legitimate as the craving for life?"

"Nothing that denies life can be legitimate. Life is the one arbitrator. And restlessness need not mean suffering.

A symphony is all restlessness—a restlessness made by difference in harmony; forgive the well-worn metaphor, but it is a good one. And, suppose that it did mean suffering, all of it. Isn't it worth it?" Her eyes measured him, not in challenge, but quietly.

"What a lover of life you are," he said. It was like seeing him go into his house and, not hastily, but very firmly, shut the door. And as if, rather rudely, she hurled a stone at the shut door, she asked, "Do you love anything?"

He smiled. "Please don't quarrel with me."

"I wish I could make you quarrel. I suspect you of loving everything," Eppie declared.

She didn't pursue him further on this occasion, when, indeed, he might accuse himself of having given her every chance; but on the next day, as they sat out at the edge of the birch-wood in a wonderfully warm afternoon sun, he, she, and Peter the dog (what a strange, changed echo it was), she returned, very lightly, to their discussion, tossing merely a few reconnoitering flowers in at his open window.

She had never, since their remeeting, seemed to him so young. Holding a little branch of birch, she broke off and aimed bits of its bark at a tall gorse-bush near them. Peter basked, full length, in the sunlight at their feet. The day had almost the indolent quiet of summer.

Eppie said, irrelevantly, for they had not been talking of that, but of people again, gossiping pleasantly, with gossip tempered to the day's mildness: "I can't bear the religions of peace, you see—any faith that takes the fight out of people. That Molly Carruthers I was telling you about has become a Christian Scientist, and she is in an imbecile condition of beatitude all the time. 'Isn't the happiness that comes of such a faith proof enough?' she says to me. As if happiness were a proof! A drunkard is happy. Some people seem to me spiritually tipsy, and as unfit for usefulness as the drunkard. I think I distrust anything that gives a final satisfaction."

She amused him in her playing with half-apprehended thoughts. Her assurance was as light as though they were the bits of birch-bark she tossed.

"You make me think a little of Nietzsche," he said.

"I should rather like Nietzsche right side up, I think. As he is standing on his head most of the time, it's rather confusing. If it is a blind, unconscious force that has got hold of us, we get hold of it, and of ourselves, when we consciously use it for our own ends. But I'm not a bit a Nietzschian, Gavan, for, as an end, an Overman doesn't at all appeal to me and I don't intend to make myself a bridge for him to march across. Of course Nietzsche might reply, 'You are the bridge, whether you want to be or not.' He might say, 'It's better to walk willingly to your inevitable holocaust than to be rebelliously haled along; whatever you do, you are only the refuse whose burning makes the flame.' I reply to that, that if the Overman is sure to come, why should I bother about him? I wouldn't lift my finger for a distant perfection in which I myself, and all those I loved, only counted as fuel. But, on the other hand, I do believe that each one of us is going to grow into an Overman—in a quite different sense. Peter, too, will be an Overdog, and will, no doubt, sometime be more conscious than we are now."

Gavan glanced at her and at Peter with his vague, half-unseeing glance.

"Why don't you smile?" Eppie asked. "Not that you don't smile, often. But you haven't a scrap of gaiety, Gavan. Do stop soaring in the sky and come down to real things, to the earth, to me, to dear little rudimentary Overdogs."

"Do you think that dear little rudimentary dogs are nearer reality than the sky?" He did smile now.

"Much nearer. The sky is only a background, an emptiness that shows up their meaning."

She had brought him down, for his eyes lingered on her as she leaned to Peter and pulled him up from his sun-baked recumbency. "Come, sit up, Peter; don't be so comfortable. Watch how well I've trained him, Gavan. Now, Peter, sit up nicely. A dog on all fours is a darling heathen; but a dog sitting up on his hind legs is an ethical creature, and well on his way to Overdogdom. Peter on his hind legs is worth all your tiresome Hindoos—aren't you, dear, Occidental dog?"

He knew that through her gaiety she was searching him, feeling her way, with a merry hostility that she didn't intend him to answer. It was as if she wouldn't take seriously, not for a moment, the implications of his thought—implications that he suspected her of already pretty sharply guessing at. To herself, and to him, she pretended that such thoughts were a game he played at, until she should see just how seriously she might be forced to take them.

VII

FOR the next few days he found himself involved in Eppie's sleuth-hound pursuit of the transgressing publican, amused, but quite willing,—somewhat, he saw, to her surprise,—to help her in her crusade. Not only did he tramp over the country with her in search of evidence, and expound the Gothenberg system to Sir Alec, to the general, to the rather alarmed quarry himself,—not unwilling to come to terms,—but the application of his extraordinarily practical good-sense to the situation was, she couldn't help seeing, far more effective than her own not altogether temperate zeal.

She was surprised and she was pleased; and at the same time, throughout all the little drama, she had the suspicion that it meant for him what that playing of dolls with her in childhood had meant—mere kindliness, and a selfless disposition to do what was agreeable to anybody.

It was on the Saturday following the talk in the library that an incident occurred that made her vision of his passivity flame into something more ambiguous—an incident that gave margins for possibilities in him, for whose bare potentiality she had begun to fear.

They were at evening in the gray, bleak village street, and outside one of the public-houses found a small crowd collected, watching, with the apathy of custom, the efforts of Archie MacHendrie's wife to lead him home. Archie, a large, lurching man, was only slightly drunk, but his head, the massive granite of its Scotch peasant type, had been brutalized by years of hard drinking. It showed, as if the granite were crumbling into earth, sodden depressions and protuberances; his eye was lurid, heavy, yet alert. Mrs. MacHendrie's face, looking as though scantily molded in tallow as the full glare of the bar-room lights beat upon it, was piteously patient. The group, under the cold evening sky, in the cold, steep street, seemed a little epitome of life's degradation; the sordid glare of debasing pleasure lit it; the mean monotony of its daily routine surrounded it in the gaunt stone cottages; above it was the blank, hard sky.

Gavan saw all the unpleasing picture, placed it, its past, its future, as he and Eppie approached; saw more, too, than degradation: for the wife's face, in its patience, symbolized humanity's heroism. Both heroism and degradation were results as necessary as the changes in a chemical demonstration; neither had value: one was a toadstool growth, the other, a flower; this was the fact to him, though the flower touched him and the toadstool made him shrink.

"There, there, Archie mon," Mrs. MacHendrie was pleading, "come awa hame, do."

Archie was declaiming on some wrong he had suffered and threatened to do for an enemy.

That these flowers and toadstools were of vital significance to Eppie, Gavan realized as she left him in the middle of the street and strode to the center of the group. It fell aside for her air of facile, friendly authority, and in answer to her decisive, "What's the matter?" one of the apathetic onlookers explained in his deliberate Scotch: "It's nobbut Archie, Miss Eppie; he's swearin' he'll na go hame na sleep gin he's lickit Tam Donel'. He's a wee bit the waur for the drink and Tam'll soon be alang, and the dei'll be in it gar his gudewife gets him ben."

"Well, she must get him ben," said Eppie, her eye measuring Archie, who shook a menacing fist in the direction of his expected antagonist.

"We must get him home between us, Mrs. MacHendrie. He'll think better of it in the morning."

"Fech, an' it's that I'm aye tellin' him, Miss Eppie; it's the mornin' he'll hae the sair head. Ay, Miss Eppie, he's an awfu' chiel when he's a wee bittie fou." Mrs. MacHendrie put the fringe of her shawl to her eyes.

Archie's low thunder had continued during this dialogue without a pause, and Eppie now addressed herself to him in authoritative tones. "Come on, Archie. Go home and get a sleep, at all events, before you fight Tom."

"It's that I'm aye tellin' you, Archie mon," Mrs. MacHendrie wept.

Archie now brought his eye round to the speakers and observed them in an ominous silence, his thoughts turned from more distant grievances. From his wife his eye traveled back to Eppie, who met it with a firm severity.

"Damn ye for an interferin' fishwife!" suddenly and with startling force he burst out. "Ye're no but a meddlesome besom. Awa wi' ye!" and from this broadside he swung round to his wife with uplifted fists. Flinging herself between them, Eppie found herself swept aside. Gavan was in the midst of the sudden uproar. Like a David before Goliath, he confronted Archie with a quelling eye. Mrs. MacHendrie had slipped into the dusk, and the bald, ugly light now fell on Gavan's contrasting head.

"*Un sage qui passe interrompt mille drâmes*," flashed in Eppie's mind. But on this occasion, the sage had to do more than pass—was forced, indeed, to provide the drama. He was speaking in a voice so dispassionately firm that had Archie been a little less drunk or a little less sober it must have exerted an almost hypnotic effect upon him. But the command to go home reached a brain inflamed and hardly dazed. Goliath fell upon David, and Eppie, with a curious mingling of exultation and panic, saw the two men locked in an animal struggle. For a moment Gavan's cool alertness and scientific resource were overborne by sheer brute force; in another he had recovered himself, and Archie's face streamed suddenly with blood. Another blow, couched like a lance, it seemed, was in readiness, wary and direct, when Mrs. MacHendrie, from behind, seized Gavan around the neck and, with a shrill scream, hung to him and dragged him back. Helpless and enmeshed, he received a savage blow from her husband, and, still held in the wife's strangling clutch, he and she reeled back together. At this flagrant violation of fair play the onlookers interposed. Archie was dragged off, and Eppie, catching Gavan as he staggered free of his encumbrance, turned, while she held him by the shoulders, fiercely on Mrs. MacHendrie. "You well deserve every thrashing you get," she said, her voice stilled by the very force of its intense anger.

Mrs. MacHendrie had covered her face with her shawl. "My mon was a' bluid," she sobbed. "I couldna stan' an' see him done to death."

"Of course you couldn't; it was most natural of you," said Gavan. The blood trickled over his brow and cheek as, gently freeing himself from Eppie, he straightened his collar and looked at Mrs. MacHendrie with sympathetic curiosity.

"Natural!" said Eppie. "It was dastardly. You deserve every thrashing you get. I hope no one will interfere for you next time."

"My dear Eppie!" Gavan murmured, while Mrs. MacHendrie continued to weep humbly.

"Why shouldn't I say it? I am disgusted with her." Eppie turned almost as fierce a stillness of look and tone upon him as upon Mrs. MacHendrie. "Let me tie up your head, Gavan. Yes, indeed, you are covered with blood. I suppose you never thought, Mrs. MacHendrie, that your husband might kill Mr. Palairet." She passed her handkerchief around Gavan's forehead as she spoke, knotting it with fingers at once tender and vindictive.

"I canna say, Miss Eppie," came Mrs. MacHendrie's muffled voice from the shawl. "The wan's my ain mon. It juist cam' ower me, seein' him a' bluid."

"Well, you have the satisfaction now of seeing Mr. Palairet a' bluid." Eppie tied her knots, and Gavan, submitting a bowed head to her ministrations, still kept his look of cogitating pity upon Mrs. MacHendrie. "You see how your husband has wounded him," Eppie went on; "the handkerchief is red already. Come on, Gavan; lean on me, please. Let her get her husband home now as best she can."

But Gavan ignored his angry champion. Mrs. MacHendrie's sorrow, most evidently, interested him more than Eppie's indignation. He went to her, putting down the hand that held the shawl to the poor, disfigured, tallow face, and made her look at him, while he said with a gentle reasonableness: "Don't mind what Miss Gifford says; she is angry on my account and doesn't really mean to be so hard on you. I'm not at all badly hurt,—I can perfectly stand alone, Eppie,—and I'm sorry I had to hurt your husband. It was perfectly natural, what you did. Don't cry; please don't cry." He smiled at her, comforted her, encouraged her. "They are taking your husband home, you see; he is going quite quietly. And now we will take you home. Take my arm. You are the worst off of us all, Mrs. MacHendrie."

Eppie, in silence, stalked beside him while he led Mrs. MacHendrie, dazed and submissive, up the village street. A neighbor's wife was in kindly waiting and Archie already slumbering heavily on his bed. Eppie suspected, as they went, that she saw a gold piece slipped from Gavan's hand to Mrs. MacHendrie's.

"Poor thing," he said, when they were once more climbing the steep street, "I 'm afraid I only made things worse for her"; and laughing a little, irrepressibly, he looked round at Eppie from under his oddly becoming bandage. "My dear Eppie, what a perfect brute you were to her!"

“My dear Gavan, I can’t feel pity for such a fool. Oh, yes I can, but I don’t want to. Please remember that I, too, have impulses, and that I saw you ‘a’ bluid.’”

“Well, then, I’m the brute for scolding you, and you are another poor thing.”

“Are you incapable of righteous indignation, Gavan?”

“Surely I showed enough to please you in my treatment of Archie.”

“You showed none. You looked supremely indifferent as to whether he killed you or you him.”

“Oh, I think I was quite anxious to do for him.”

They were past the village now and upon the country road, and in the darkness their contrasting voices rang oddly—hers deep with its resentful affection, his light with its amusement. It was as if the little drama, that he had made instead of interrupting, struck his sense of the ridiculous. Yet, angry with him as she was, a thrill of exultation remained, for Eppie, in the thought of his calm, deliberate face, beautiful before its foe, and with blood upon it.

VIII

GAVAN’S hurt soon healed, though it made him languid for a day or two—days of semi-invalidism, the unemphatic hours, seemingly so colorless, when she read to him or merely sat silently at hand occupied with her letters or a book, drawing still closer their odd intimacy; it could hardly be called sudden, for it had merely skipped intervening years, and it couldn’t be called a proved intimacy, the intervening years were too full, too many for that. But they were very near in their almost solitude—a solitude surrounded by gentle reminders of the closer past, reminders, in the case of living personalities, who seemed to find the intimacy altogether natural and needing no comment. What the general and Miss Barbara might really be thinking was a wonder that at moments occupied both Gavan and Eppie’s ruminations; but it wasn’t a wonder that needed to go far or deep. What they thought, the dear old people, made very little difference—not even the difference of awkwardness or self-consciousness under too cogitating eyes. Even if they thought the crude and obvious thing it didn’t matter, they would so peacefully relapse from their false inference once time had set it straight for them. Eppie couldn’t quite have told herself why its obviousness was so crude; in all her former experience such obviousness had never been so almost funnily out of the question. But Gavan made so many things almost funnily out of the question.

It was this quality in him, of difference from usual things, that drew intimacy so near. To talk to him with a wonderful openness, to tell him about herself, about her troubles, was like sinking down in a pale, peaceful church and sighing out everything that lay heavily on one’s heart—the things that lay lightly, too, for little things as well as great, were understood by that compassionate, musing presence—to the downlooking face of an imaged saint.

No claim upon one remained after it; one was freed of the load of silence and one hadn’t in the least been shackled by retributory penances. And if one felt some strange lack in the saint, if his sacerdotal quality was more than his humanity, it was just because of that that one was able to say anything one liked.

At moments, it is true, she had an odd, fetish-worshiper’s impulse to smash her saint, and perhaps the reason why she never yielded to it was because, under all the seeing him as image, was the deep hoping that he was more. If he was more, much more, it might be unwise to smash him, for then she would have no pale church in which to take refuge, and, above all, if he were more he mustn’t find it out—and she mustn’t—through any act of her own. The saint himself must breathe into life and himself step down from his high pedestal. That he cared to listen, that he listened lovingly,—just as he had listened lovingly to Mrs. MacHendrie,—she knew.

One day when he was again able to be out and when they were again upon the hilltop, walking in a mist that enshrouded them, she told him all about the wretched drama of her love-affair.

She had never spoken of it to a human being.

It was as if she led him into an empty room, dusty and dark and still, with dreary cobwebs stretching over its once festal furniture, and there pointed out to him faded blood-stains on the floor. No eyes but his had ever seen them.

She told him all, analyzing the man, herself, unflinchingly, putting before him her distracted heart, distorted in its distraction. She had appalled herself. Her part had not been mere piteous nobility. She would have dragged herself through any humiliation to have had him back, the man she had helplessly adored. She would have taken him back on almost any terms. Only the semblance of pride had been left to her; beneath it, with all her scorn of him, was a craving that had been base in its despair.

“But that wasn’t the worst,” said Eppie; “that very baseness had its pathos. Worst of all were my mean regrets. I had sacrificed my ambitions for him; I had refused a man who would have given me the life I wanted, a high place in the world, a great name, power, wide issues,—and I love high places, Gavan, I love power. When I refused him, he too married some one else, and it was after that that my crash came. Love and faith were thrown back at me, and I hadn’t in it all even my dignity. I was torn by mingled despairs. I loathed myself. Oh, it was too horrible!”

His utter lack of sympathetic emotion, even when she spoke with the indignant tears on her cheeks, made it all the easier to say these fundamental things, and more than ever like the saint of ebony and ivory in the pale church was his head against the great wash of mist about them.

“And now it has all dropped from you,” he said.

“Yes, all—the love, the regret certainly, even the shame. The ambition, certainly not; but in that ugly form of a loveless marriage it’s no longer a possible temptation for me. My disappointment hasn’t driven me to worldly materialism. It’s a sane thing in nature, that outgrowing of griefs, though it’s bad for one’s pride to see them fade and one’s heart mend, solidly mend, once more.”

“They do go, when one really sees them.”

“Some do.”

“All, when one really sees them,” he repeated unemphatically. “I know all about it, Eppie. I’ve been through the fire, too. Now that it’s gone, you see that it’s only a dream, that love, don’t you?”

Eppie gazed before her into the mist, narrowing her eyes as though she concentrated her thoughts upon his

exact meaning, and she received his casual confidence with some moments of silence.

"That would imply that seeing destroyed feeling, wouldn't it?" she said at last. "I see that *such* love is a dream, if you will; but dreams may be mirrors of life, not delusions; hints of an awakened reality."

He showed only his unmoved face. This talk, so impersonal, with all its revealment of human pathos and weakness, so much a picture that they both looked at it together,—a picture of outlived woe,—claimed no more than his contemplation; but when her voice seemed to grope toward him, questioning in its very clearness of declaration, he felt again the flitting fear that he had already recognized, not as danger, but as discomfort. It flitted only, hardly stirred the calm he showed her, as the wings of a flying bird just skim and ruffle the surface of still, deep waters. That restless bird, always hovering, circling near, its shadow passing, repassing over the limpid water—he saw and knew it as the water might reflect in its stillness the bird's flight. Life; the will to live, the will to want, and to strive, and to suffer in striving. All the waters of Eppie's soul were broken by the flight of this bird of life; its wings, cruel and beautiful, furrowed and cut; its plumage, darkly bright, was reflected in every wave.

He said nothing after her last words.

"You think all feelings delusions, Gavan?"

"Not that, perhaps, but very transitory; and to be tied to the transitory is to suffer."

"On that plan one ends with nothingness."

"Do you think so?"

"Do *you* think so?" She turned his question on him and her eyes, with the question, fixed hard on his face.

He felt suddenly that after all the parrying and thrusting she had struck up his foil and faced him with no mask of gaiety—in deadly earnest. There was the click of steel in the question.

He did not know whether he were the more irritated, for her sake, by her persistency, or the more fearful that, unwillingly, he should do her faith some injury.

"I think," he said, "more or less as Tolstoi thinks. You understood all that very well the other evening; so why go into it?"

"You think that our human identity is unreal—an appearance?"

"Most certainly."

"And that the separation between us is the illusion that makes hatred and evil, and that with the recognition of the illusion, love would come and all selfish effort cease?"

"Yes."

"And don't you see that what that results in is the Hindoo thing, the abolishing of consciousness, the abolishing of life—of individual life?"

"Yes, I see that," Gavan smiled, "but I'm a little surprised to see that you do. So many people are like Aunt Barbara."

But Eppie was pushing, pushing against the closed doors and would not be lured away by lightness. "Above all, Gavan, do you see that he is merely an illogical Hindoo when he tries to bridge his abyss with ethics? On his own premises he is utterly fatalistic, so that the very turning from the evil illusion, the very breaking down of the barrier of self, is never, with him, the result of an effort of the will, never a conscious choice, but something deep and rudimentary, subconscious, an influx of revelation, a vision that sets one free, perhaps, but that can only leave one with emptiness."

Above all, as she had said, he saw it; and now he was silent, seeking words that might rid him of pursuit, yet not infect her.

She had stopped short before his silence. Smiling, now, on the background of mist, her eyes, her lips, her poise challenged him, incredulous, actually amused. "Don't you think that *I* have an identity?" she asked.

He was willing at that to face her, for he saw suddenly and clearly,—it seemed to radiate from her in the smile, the look,—that he, apparently, couldn't hurt her. She was too full of life to be in any danger from him, and perhaps the only way of ending pursuit was to fling wide the doors and, since she had said the word, show her the emptiness within.

"You force me to talk cheap metaphysics to you, Eppie, but I'll try to say what I do think," he said. "I believe that the illusion of a separate identity, self-directing and permanent, is the deepest and most tenacious of all illusions—the illusion that makes the wheels go round, the common illusion that makes the common mirage. The abolishing of the identity, of the self, is the final word of science, and of philosophy, and of religion, too. The determinism of science, the ecstatic immediacy of the mystic consciousness, the monistic systems of the Absolutists, all tend toward the final discovery that,—now I'm going to be very glib indeed,—but one must use the technical jargon,—that under all the transitory appearance is a unity in which, for which, diversity vanishes."

Eppie no longer smiled. She had walked on while he spoke, her eyes on him, no longer amused or incredulous, with an air now of almost stern security.

"Odd," she said presently, "that such a perverse and meaningless Whole should be made up of such significant fragments."

"Ah, but I didn't say that Reality was meaningless. It has all possible meaning for itself, no doubt; it's our meaning for it that is so unpleasantly ambiguous. We are in it and for it, as if we were the kaleidoscope it turned, the picture it looked at; and we are and must be what it thinks or sees. Your musical simile expressed it very nicely: Reality an eternal symphony and our personalities the notes in it—discords to our own limited consciousness, but to Reality necessary parts of the perfect whole. Reality is just that will to contemplate, to think, the infinite variety of life, and it usually thinks us as wanting to live. All ethics, all religions, are merely records of the ceasing of this want. A man comes to see himself as discord, and with the seeing the discord is resolved to silence. One comes to see as the Reality sees, and since it is perfectly satisfied, although it is perhaps quite unconscious,—or so some people who think a great deal about it say,—we, in partaking of its vision, find in unconsciousness the goal, and are satisfied."

"You are satisfied with such a death in life?" Eppie asked in her steady voice.

"What you call life is what I call death, perhaps, Eppie."

"Your metaphysics may be very cheap; I know very little about them. But if all that were true, I should still say

that the illusion is more real than that nothingness—for to us such a reality would be nothingness. And I should say, let us live our reality all the more intensely, since, for us, there is no other."

"How you care for life," said Gavan, as he had said it once before. He looked at her marching through the mist like a defiant Valkyrie.

"Care for it? I've hated it at times, the bits that came to me."

"Yet you want it, always."

"Always," she repeated. "Always. I have passed a great part of my life in being very unhappy—that is to say, in wanting badly something I've not got. Yet I am more glad than I can say to have lived."

"Probably because you still expect to get what you want."

"Of course." She smiled a little now, though a veiled, ambiguous smile. And as they began the steep descent, the mist infolding them more closely, even the semblance of the smile faded, leaving a new sadness.

"Poor Gavan," she said.

He just hesitated. "Why?"

"Your religion is a hatred, a distrust of life; mine is trust in it, love of it. You see it as a sort of murderous uncle, beckoning to the babes in the wood; I own that I wouldn't stir a step to follow it if I suspected it of such a character. And I see life—" She paused here, looking down, musing, it seemed, on what she saw, and the pause grew long. In it, suddenly, Gavan knew again the invasion of emotion. Her downcast, musing face pervaded his consciousness with that sense of trembling. "You see life as what?" he asked her, not because he wanted to know, but because her words were always less to him than her silences.

Eppie, unconscious, was finding words.

"As something mysterious, beautiful. Something strange, yet near, like the thought of a mother about her unborn child, but, more still, like the thought of an unborn child about its unknown mother. We are such unborn children. And this something mysterious and beautiful says: Come; through thorns, over chasms, past terrors, and in darkness. So, one goes."

Gavan was silent. Looking up at him, her eyes full of her own vision, she saw tears in his.

For a moment the full benignity, sweet, austere, of a maternal thing in her rested on him, so that it might have been she who said "Come." Then, looking away from him again, knowing that she had seen more than he had meant to show, she said, "Own that if it's all illusion, mine's the best to live with."

He had never seen her so beautiful as at this moment when she did not pursue, but looked away, quiet in her strength, and he answered mechanically, conscious only of that beauty, that more than beauty, alluring when it no longer pursued: "No; there are no thorns, nor chasms, nor terrors any longer for me. I am satisfied, Eppie."

She was walking now, a little ahead of him, down the thread-like path that wound among phantom bracken. The islet of space where they could see seemed like a tiny ship gliding forward with them into a white, boundless ocean. Such, thought Gavan, was human life.

In a long silence he felt that her mood had changed. Over her shoulder she looked round at him at last with her eyes of the spiritual steeplechaser. "It's war to the knife, Gavan."

She hurt him in saying it. "You only have the knife," he answered, and his gentleness might have reproached the sudden challenge.

"You have poison."

"I never put it to your lips, dear."

She saw his pain. "Oh, don't be afraid for me," she said. "I drink your poison, and it is a tonic, a wine, that fills me with greater ardor for the fight."

IX

THEY were on the path that led to the deeply sunken garden gate, and they had not spoken another word while they followed it, while they stooped a little under the tangle of ivy that drooped from the stone lintel, while they went past the summer-house and on between the rows of withered plants and the empty, wintry spaces of the garden; only when they were nearly at the house, under the great pine-tree, did Eppie cheerfully surmise that they would be exactly on time for tea, and by her manner imply that tea was far more present to her thoughts than daggers or poison.

He felt that in some sense matters had been left in the lurch. He didn't quite know where he stood for her with his disastrous darkness about him—whether she had really taken up a weapon for open warfare or whether she hadn't wisely fallen back upon the mere pleasantness of friendly intercourse, turning her eyes away from his accompanying gloom.

He was glad to find her alone that evening after dinner when he had left the general in the smoking-room over a review and a cigar. Miss Barbara had gone early to bed, so that Eppie, in her white dress, as on the night of his arrival, had the dark brightness of the firelit room all to herself. He was glad, because the sense of uncertainty needed defining, and uncertainty, since that last moment of trembling, had been so acute that any sort of definition would be a relief.

An evening alone with her, now that they were really on the plane of mutual understanding, would put his vague fears to the test. He would learn whether they must be fled from or whether, as mere superficial tremors, tricks of the emotions, they could not be outfaced smilingly. He really didn't want to run away, especially not until he clearly knew from what he ran.

Eppie sat before the fire on the low settle, laying down a book as he came in. In her aspect of exquisite worldliness, the white dress displaying her arms and shoulders with fashionable frankness, she struck him anew as being her most perfectly armed and panoplied self. Out on the windy hillside or singing among the woods, nature seemed partially to absorb and possess her, so that she became a part of the winds and woods; but indoors, finished and fine from head to foot, her mastered conventionality made her the more emphatically personal. She embodied

civilization in her dress, her smile, her speech, her very being; the loose coils of her hair and the cut of her satin shoe were both significant of choice, of distinctive simplicity; and the very bareness of her shoulders—Gavan gave an amused thought to the ferociously sensitive Tolstoi—symbolized the armor of the world-lover, the world-user. It was she who possessed the charms and weapons of the civilization that crumbled to dust in the hand of the Russian mystic. He could see her confronting the ascetic's eye with the challenge of her radiant and righteous self-assurance. Her whole aspect rebuilt that shattered world, its pomp and vanity, perhaps, its towering scale of values; each tier narrowing in its elimination of the lower, cruder, less conscious, more usual; each pinnacle a finely fretted flowering of the rare; a dazzling palace of foam. She embodied all that; but, more than all for Gavan, she embodied the deep currents of trust that flowed beneath the foam.

Her look welcomed him, though without a smile, as he drew a deep chair to the fire and sat down near her, and for a little while they said nothing, he watching her and she with gravely downcast eyes.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked at last.

"Of you, of course," she answered. "About our talk this afternoon; we haven't finished it yet."

She, too, then, had felt uncertainty that needed relief.

"Are you sharpening your knife?"

She put aside his lightness. "Gavan, we are friends. May I talk as I like to you?"

"Of course you may. I've always shown you that."

"No, you have tried to prevent me from talking. But now I will. I have been thinking. It seems to me that it is your life that has so twisted your mind; it has been so joyless."

"Does that make it unusual?"

"You must love life before you can know it."

"You must love it, and lose it, before you can know it. I have had joy, Eppie; I have loved life. My experience has not been peculiarly personal; it is merely the history of all thought, pushed far enough."

"Of all mere thought, yes."

She rested her head on her hand as she looked at him, seeming to wonder over him and his thought, his mere thought, dispassionately. "Don't be shy, or afraid, for me. Why should you mind? I've given you my story; give me yours. Tell me about your life."

He felt, suddenly, sunken there in his deep chair, passive and peaceful in the firelight, that it would be very easy to tell her. Why shouldn't she see it all and understand it all? He couldn't hurt her; it would be only a strange, a sorrowful picture to her; and to him, yes, there would be a relief in the telling. To speak, for the first time in his life—it would be like the strewing of rosemary on a grave, a commemoration that would have its sweetness and its balm.

But he hesitated, feeling the helplessness of his race before verbal self-expression.

Eppie lent him a hand.

"Begin with when you left me."

"What was I then? I hardly remember. A tiresome, self-centered boy."

"No; you weren't self-centered. You believed in God, then, and you loved your mother. Why have both of them, as personalities, become illusions to you?"

She saw facts clearly and terribly. She was really inside the doors at last, and though it would be all the easier to make her understand the facts she saw, Gavan paled a little before the sudden, swift presence.

For, yes, God was gone, and yes,—worse, far worse, as he knew she felt it,—his mother, too—except as that ghost, that pang of memory.

She saw his pallor and helped him again, to the first and easier avowal.

"How did you lose your faith? What happened to you when you left me?"

"It's a commonplace enough story, that."

"Of course it is. But when loss of faith becomes permanent and permanently means a loss of feeling, it's not so commonplace."

"Oh, I think it is—more commonplace than people know, in temperaments as unvital and as logical as mine."

"You are not unvital."

"My reason isn't often blurred by my instincts."

"That is because you are strong—terribly strong. It's not that your vitality is so little as that your thought is so abnormal."

"No, no; it's merely that I understand my own experience."

But she had put his feet upon the road, and, turning his eyes from her as he looked, he contemplated its vista.

It was easy enough, after all, to gather into words that retrospect of the train; it was easy to be brief and lucid with such a comprehending listener,—to be very impersonal, too; simply to hold up before her eyes the picture that he saw.

His eyes met hers seldom while he told her all that was essential to her true seeing. It was wonderful, the sense of her secure, strong life that made it possible to tell her all.

The stages of his young, restless, tortured thought were swiftly sketched for an intelligence so quick, and the growing intuition of the capriciousness, the suffering of life. He only hesitated when it came to the reunion with his mother, the change that had crept between them; and her illness, her death; choosing his words with a reticence that bit them the more deeply into the listening mind.

But, in the days that followed the death,—days ghost-like, yet sharp,—he lingered, so that she paused with him in that pause of stillness in his life, that morning in the spring woods when everything had softly, gently shown an abiding strangeness. He told her all about that: about the look of the day, not knowing why he so wanted her to see it, too, but it seemed to explain more than anything else—the pale, high sky, the gray branches, the shining water and the little bird that hopped to drink. He himself looked ghost-like while he spoke—sunken, long, dark, impalpable, in the deep chair, his thin white fingers lightly interlocked, his face showing only the oddity of its strange yet beautiful oval and its shadowy eyes and lips. All whiteness and shadow, he might have been a projection from the

thought of the woman, who, before him, leaned her head on her hand, warm, breathing, vivid with color, her steady eyes seeing phantoms unafraid.

After that there wasn't much left to explain, it seemed—except Alice, that last convulsive effort of life to seize and keep him; and that didn't take long—made, as it were, a little allegory, with nameless abstractions to symbolize the old drama of the soul entrameled and finally set free again. The experience of the spring woods had really been the decisive one. He came back to that again, at the end of his story. "It's really, that experience, what in another kind of temperament is called conversion."

Her eyes had looked away from him at last. "No," she said, "conversion is something that gives life."

"No," he rejoined, "it's something that lifts one above it."

The fundamental contest spoke again, and after that they were both silent. He, too, had looked away from her when the story was over, and he knew, from her deep, slow breathing, that the story had meant a great deal to her. It was not a laboring breath, nor broken by pain to sighs; but it seemed, in its steady rhythm, to accept and then to conquer what he had put before her. That he should so hear it, not looking at her, filled the silence with more than words; and, as in the afternoon, he sought the relief of words.

"So you see," he said, in his lighter voice, "thorns and precipices and terrors dissolve like dreams." She had seen everything and he was ushering her out. But his eyes now met hers, looking across the little space at him.

"And I? Do I, too, dissolve like a dream?" she said.

His smile now was lighter than his voice had been. "Absolutely. Though I own that you are a highly colored phantom. Your color is very vivid indeed. Sometimes it almost masters my thought."

He had not, in his mere wish for ease, quite known what he meant to say, and now her look did not show him any deepened consciousness; but, suddenly, he felt that under his lightness and her quiet the current ran deeply.

"I master your thought?" she repeated. "Doesn't that make you distrust thought sometimes?"

"No," he laughed. "It makes me distrust you, dear Eppie."

There were all sorts of things before them now. What they were he really didn't know; perhaps she didn't, either. At all events he kept his eyes off them, and shaking his crossed foot a little, he still looked at her, smiling.

"Why?" she asked.

He felt that he must now answer her, and himself, in words that wouldn't imply more than he could face.

"Well, the very force of your craving for life, the very force of your will, might sweep me along for a bit. I might be caught up for a whirl on the wheel of illusion; not that you could ever bind me to it: it would need my own will, blind again, for that."

Her eyes had met his so steadily that he had imagined only contemplation or perhaps that maternal severity behind the steadiness. But the way in which they received these last tossed pebbles of metaphor showed him unrealized profundities. They deepened, they darkened, they widened on him. They seemed to engulf him in a sudden abyss of pain. And pain in her was indeed a color that could infect him.

"How horrible you are, Gavan," she said, and her voice went with the words and with the look.

"Eppie!" he exclaimed on a tense, indrawn breath, as if over the sudden stab of a knife. "Have I hurt you?"

Her eyes turned from him. "Not what you say, or do. What you are."

"You didn't see, before, what I am?"

"Never—like this."

He leaned toward her. "Dear Eppie, why do you make me talk? Let me be still. I only ask to be still."

"You are worse still. Don't you think I see what stillness means?"

She had pushed her low seat from him,—for he stretched his hands to her with his supplication,—and, rising to her feet, stepping back, she stood before the fire, somberly looking down at him.

Gavan, too, rose. Compunction, supplication, a twist of perplexity and suffering, made him careless of discretion. Face to face, laying his hands on her shoulders, he said: "Don't let me frighten you. It would be horrible if I could convince you, shatter you."

Standing erect under his hands, she looked hard into his face.

"You could frighten me, horribly; but you couldn't shatter me. You are ambiguous, veiled, all in mists. I am as clear, as sharp—."

Her dauntlessness, the old defiance, were a relief—a really delicious relief. He was able to smile at her, a smile that pled for reassurance. "How can I frighten you, then?"

Her somber gaze did not soften. "Your mists come round me, chill, suffocating. They corrode my clearness."

"No; no; it's you who come into them. Don't. Don't. Keep away from me."

"I'm not so afraid of you as that," she answered.

His hands were still on her shoulders and their eyes on each other—his with their appealing, uncertain smile, and hers unmoved, unsmiling; and suddenly that sense of danger came upon him: as if, in the mist, he felt upon him the breathing, warm, sweet, ominous, of some unseen creature. And in the fear was a strange delight, and like a hand drawn, with slow, deep pressure, across a harp, the nearness drew across his heart, stirring its one sad note—its dumb, its aching note—to a sudden ascending murmur of melody.

He was caught swiftly from this inner tumult by its reflection in her face. She flushed, deeply, painfully. She drew back sharply, pushing his hands from her.

Gavan sought his own equilibrium in an ignoring of that undercurrent.

"Now you are not frightened; but why are you angry?" he asked.

For a moment she did not speak.

"Eppie, I am so sorry. What is it? You are really angry, Eppie!"

Then, after that pause of speechlessness, she found words.

"If I think of you as mist you must not think of me as glamour." This she gave him straight.

Only after disengaging her train from the settle, from his feet, after wheeling aside his chair to make a clear

passage for her departure, did she add: “I have read your priggish Schopenhauer.”

She gave him no time for reply or protestation. Quite mistress of herself, leaving him with all the awkwardness of the situation—if he chose to consider it awkward—upon his hands, very fully the finished mondaine and very beautifully the fearless and assured nymph of the hillside, she went to the piano, turned and rejected, in looking over it, some music, and sitting down, striking a long, full chord, she began to sing, in her voice of frosty dawn, the old Scotch ballad.

He might go or listen as he liked. She had put him away, him and his mists, his ambiguous hold upon her, his ambiguous look at her. She sang to please herself as much as when she had gone up through the woodlands. And if the note of anger still thrilled in her voice she turned it to the uses of her song and made a higher triumph of sadness.

She was still singing when the general came in.

SHE had been quite right; she had seen with her perfect sharpness and clearness indeed, and no wonder that she had been angry. He himself saw clearly, directly the hand was off the harp. It was laughably simple. He was a man, she a woman; they were both young and she was beautiful. That summed it up, sufficiently and brutally; and no wonder, again, that she had felt such summing an offense. It wasn’t in the light of such summings that she regarded herself.

With him she had never, for a moment, made use of glamour. His was the rudimentary impulse, and Gavan’s sensitive cheek echoed her flush when he thought of it. Never again, he promised himself, after this full comprehension of it, should such an impulse dim their friendship. He would make it up to her by helping her to forget it.

But for all that, it was with the strangest mixture of relief and dismay that he found upon the breakfast-table next morning an urgent summons for his return home. It was the affable little rector of the parish in Surrey who wrote to tell him of his father’s sudden breakdown,—softening of the brain. When Eppie appeared, a little grave, but all clear composure, he was able to show her the letter and to tell her of his immediate departure with a composure as assured as her own, but he wondered, while he spoke, if to her also the parting would mean any form of relief. At all events, for her, it couldn’t mean any form of wrench.

Looking in swift glances at her face, while she questioned him about his father, suggested trains and nurses, and gave practical advice for his journey, he was conscious that the relief was the result of a pretty severe strain, and that though it was relieved it hadn’t stopped aching.

The very fact that Eppie’s narrow face, the hair brushed back from brow and temples, showed, in the clear morning light, more of its oddity than its beauty, made its charm cling the more closely. Her eyes looked small, her features irregular; he saw the cliff-like modeling of her temples, the cheeks, a little flat, pale, freckled; the long, queer lines of her chin. Bare, exposed, without a flicker of sunlight on her delicate analogies of ruggedness, of weather-beaten strength, she might almost have been called ugly; and, with every glance, he was feeling her as sweetness, sweetness deep and reticent, embodied.

The general and Miss Barbara were late. She poured out his coffee, saw him embarked on a sturdy breakfast, insisted, now with the irradiating smile that in a moment made her lovely, that he should eat a great deal before his journey, made him think anew of that maternal quality in her,—the tolerance, the tenderness. And in the ambiguous relief came the sharpened dismay of seeing how great was the cause for it.

He wanted to say a word, only one, about their little drama of last night, but the time didn’t really seem to come for it; perhaps she saw that it shouldn’t come. But on the old stone steps with their yellow lichen spots, his farewells over to the uncle and aunt, and he and Eppie standing out there in a momentary solitude, she said, shaking his hand, “Friends, you know. Look me up when you are next in London.” She had her one word to say, and she had said it when and how she wished. It wasn’t anything so crude as reassurance; it was rather a sunny assurance, in which she wished him to share, that none was needed.

He looked, like the boy of years ago, a real depth of gratitude into her eyes. She had given him his chance.

“I’ll never frighten you again; I’ll never displease you again.”

“I know you won’t. I won’t let you,” Eppie smiled.

“I wish I were more worth your while—worth your being kind to me.”

“You think you are still—gloomy, tiresome, self-centered?”

“That defines it well enough.”

“Well, you serve my purpose,” said Eppie, “and that is to have you for my friend.”

She seemed in this parting to have effaced all memory of glamour, but Gavan knew that the deeper one was with him.

It was with him, even while, in the long journey South, he was able to unwrap film after film of the mirage from its central core of reality, to see Eppie, in all her loveliness, in all her noblest aspects, as a sort of incarnation of the world, the flesh, and the devil. He could laugh over the grotesque analogy; it proved to him how far from life he was when its symbol could show in such unflattering terms, and yet it hurt him that he could find it in himself so to symbolize her. It was just because she was so lovely, so noble, that he must—he must—. For, under all, was the wrench that would take time to stop aching.

X

CAPTAIN PALAIRET had gone to pieces and was now as unpleasant an object as for years he had been a pleasant one.

Gavan’s atrophied selfishness felt only a slight shrinking from the revolting aspects of dissolution, and his father’s condition rather interested him. The captain’s childish clinging to his son was like an animal instinct suddenly asserting itself, an almost vegetable instinct, so little more than mere instinct was it. It affected Gavan much as the suddenly contracting tentacles of a sea-anemone upon his finger might have done. He

was not at all touched; but he felt the claim of a possible pang of loneliness and desolation in the dimness of decay, and, methodically, with all the appearances of a solicitous kindness, he responded to the claim.

The man, immersed in his rudimentary universe of sense, showed a host of atavistic fears; fears of the dark, of strange faces, fears of sudden noises or of long stillness. He often wept, leaning his swollen face on Gavan's shoulder, filled with an abject self-pity.

"You know how I love you, Gavan," he would again and again repeat, his lax lips fumbling with the words, "always loved you, ever since you were a little fellow—out in India, you know. I and your dear mother loved you better than life," and, wagging his head, he would repeat, "better than life," and break into sobs—sobs that ceased when the nurse brought him his wine-jelly. Then it might be again the tone of feeble whining. "It doesn't taste right, Gavan. Can't you make it taste right? Do you want to starve me between you all?"

Gavan, with scientific scrutiny, diagnosed and observed while he soothed him or engaged his vagrant mind in games.

In his intervals of leisure he pursued his own work, and rode and walked with all his usual tempered athleticism. He did not feel the days as a strain, hardly as disagreeable; he was indifferent or interested. At the worst he was bored. The undercurrent of pity he was accustomed to living with.

Only at night, in hours of rest, he would sink into a half-dazed disgust, find himself on edge, nearly worn out. So the winter passed.

He was playing draughts with his father on a day in earliest spring, when he was told that Mrs. Arley and Miss Gifford were below.

Gavan was feeling dull and jaded. The conducting of the game needed a monotonous patience and tact. The captain would now pick up a draught and gaze curiously at it for long periods of time, now move in a direction contrary to all the rules of the game and to his own advantage. When such mistakes were pointed out to him he would either apologize humbly or break into sudden peevish wrath. To-day he was in a peculiarly excitable condition and had more than once wept.

Gavan, after the servant's announcement, holding a quietly expectant draught in his thin, poised fingers, looked hard at the board that still waited for his father's move. He then felt that a deep flush had mounted to his face.

In spite of the one or two laconic letters that they had interchanged, Eppie had been relegated for many months to her dream-place—a dream, in spite of its high coloring, more distant than this nearer dream of ugly illness. It was painful to look back at the queer turmoil she had roused in him during the autumnal fortnight, and more painful to realize, as in his sudden panic of reluctance now, that, though a dream, she was an abiding and constant one.

Mrs. Arley he knew, and her motor-car had recently made her a next-door neighbor in spite of the thirty miles between them. She was a friend with whom Eppie had before stayed on the other side of the county. Nothing could be more natural than that she and Eppie should drop in upon a solitude that must, to their eyes, have all the finished elements of pathos. Yet he was a little vexed by the intrusion, as well as reluctant to meet it.

His father broke into vehement protest when he heard that he was to be abandoned at an unusual hour, and it needed some time for Gavan and the nurse to quiet him. Twenty minutes had passed before he could go down to his guests, and he surmised that they would feel in this delay yet further grounds for pity.

They were in the hall, before a roaring fire, Eppie standing with her back to it, in a familiar attitude, though her long, caped cloak and hooded motoring-cap, the folds of gray silk gathered under her chin and narrowly framing her face, gave her an unfamiliar aspect. Her eyes met his as he turned the spacious staircase and came down to them, and he felt that they watched his every movement and noted every trace in him of fatigue and dejection.

Mrs. Arley, fluent, flexible, amazingly pretty, for all the light powdering and wrinkling of her fifty years, came rustling forward.

"Eppie is staying with me for the week-end,—I wrench her from her slums now and then,—and we wanted to hear how you are, to see how you are. You look dreadfully fagged; doesn't he, Eppie? How is your father?"

Eppie gave him her hand in silence.

"My father will never be any better, you know," he said. "As for me, I'm all right. I should have come over to see you before this, and looked you up, too, Eppie, but I can't get away for more than an hour or so at a time."

He led them into the library while he spoke,—Mrs. Arley exclaiming that such devotion was dear and good of him,—and Eppie looked gravely round at the room that he had described to her as the room that he really passed his life in. The great spaces of ranged books framed for her, he knew, pictures of his own existence. He knew, too, that her gravity was the involuntary result of the impression that he made upon her. She was sorry for him. Poor Eppie, their relationship since childhood seemed to have consisted in that—in the sense of her pursuing pity and in his retreat before it, for her sake. He retreated now, as he knew, in his determination to show her that pity was misplaced, uncalled for.

Mrs. Arley had thrown off her wrap and loosened her hood in a manner that made it almost imperative to ask them to stay with him for lunch—an invitation accepted with an assurance showing that it had been expected, and it wasn't difficult, in conventional battledore and shuttlecock with her, to show a good humor and frivolity that discountenanced pathetic interpretations. What Mrs. Arley's interpretations were he didn't quite know; her eyes, fatigued yet fresh, were very acute behind their trivial meanings, and he could wonder if Eppie had shared with her her own sense of his "horribleness," and if, in consequence, her conception of Eppie's significance as the opponent of that quality was tinged with sentimental associations.

Eppie's gaze, while they rattled on, lost something of its gravity, but he was startled, as if by an assurance deeper than any of Mrs. Arley's, when she rose to slip off her coat and went across the room to a small old mirror that hung near the door to take off her cap as well.

In her manner of standing there with her back to them, untying her veils, pushing back her hair, was the assurance, indeed, of a person whose feet were firmly planted on certain rights, all the more firmly for "knowing her place" as it were, and for having repudiated mistaken assumptions. She might almost have been a new sick-nurse come to take up her duties by his side. She passed from the mirror to the writing-table, examining the books laid there, and then, until lunch was announced, stood looking out of the window. Quite the silent, capable, significant new nurse, with many theories of her own that might much affect the future.

The dining-room at Cheylesford Lodge opened on a wonderful old lawn, centuries in its green. Bordered by beds, just alight with pale spring flowers, it swept in and out among shrubberies of rhododendron and laurel, the emerald nook set in a circle of trees, a high arabesque on the sky.

Eppie from her seat at the table faced the sky, the trees, the lawn. What a beautiful place, she was thinking. A place for life, sheltered, embowered. How she would have loved, as a child, those delicious rivulets of green that ran into the thick mysteries of shadow. How she would have loved to play dolls on a hot summer afternoon in the shade of the great yew-tree that stretched its dark branches half across the sky. The house, the garden, made her think of children; she saw white pinafores and golden heads glancing in and out among the trees and shrubs, and the vision of young life, blossoming, growing in security and sunlight, filled her thought with its pictured songs of innocence, while, at the same time, under the vision, she was feeling it all—all the beauty and sheltered sweetness—as dreadful in its emptiness, its worse than emptiness: a casket holding a death's-head. She came back with something of a start to hear her work in the slums enthusiastically described by Mrs. Arley. "I thought it was only in novels that children clung to the heroine's skirts. I never believed they clung in real life until seeing Eppie with her ragamuffins; they adore her."

This remark, to whose truth she assented by a vague smile, gave Eppie's thoughts a further push that sent them seeing herself among the golden heads and white pinafores on the lawn at Cheylesford Lodge; and though the vision maintained its loving aunt relationship of the slums, there was now a throb and flutter in it, as though she held under her hand a strange wild bird that only her own will not to look kept hidden.

These dreams were followed by a nightmare little episode.

In the library, again, the talk was still an airy dialogue, Eppie, her eyes on the flames as she drank her coffee, still maintaining her ruminating silence. In the midst of her thoughts and their chatter, the door opened suddenly and Captain Palairet appeared on the threshold.

His head neatly brushed, a sumptuous dressing-gown of padded and embroidered silk girt about him, he stood there with moist eyes and lips, faintly and incessantly shaking through all his frame, a troubling and startling figure.

Gavan had been wondering all through the visit how his father was bearing the abandonment, and his appearance, he saw now, must have been the triumphant fruit of contest with the nurse whose face of helpless disapprobation hovered outside.

Gavan went to his side, and, leaning on his son's arm, the captain said that he had come to pay his respects to Mrs. Arley and to Miss Gifford.

Taking Mrs. Arley's hand, he earnestly reiterated his pleasure in welcoming her to his home.

"Gavan's in fact, you know; but he's a good son. Not very much in common, perhaps: Gavan was always a book-worm, a fellow of fads and theories; I love a broad life, men and things. No, not much in common, except our love for his mother, my dear, dead wife; that brought us together. We shook hands over her grave, so to speak," said the captain, but without his usual sentiment. An air of jaunty cheerfulness pervaded his manner. "She is buried near here, you know. You may have seen the grave. A very pretty stone; very pretty indeed. Gavan chose it. I was in India at the time. A great blow to me. I never recovered from it. I forget, for the moment, what the text is; but it's very pretty; very appropriate. I knew I could trust Gavan to do everything properly."

Gavan's face had kept its pallid calm.

"You will tire yourself, father," he said. "Let me take you up-stairs now. Mrs. Arley and Miss Gifford will excuse us."

The captain resisted his attempt to turn him to the door.

"Miss Gifford. Yes, Miss Gifford," he repeated, turning to where Eppie stood attentively watching father and son, "But I want to see Miss Elspeth Gifford. It was that I came for." He took her hand and his wrecked and restless eyes went over her face. "So this is Miss Elspeth Gifford."

"You have heard of me?" Eppie's composure was as successful as Gavan's own and lent to the scene a certain matter-of-fact convention.

The captain bowed low. "Heard of you? Yes. I have often heard of you. I am glad, glad and proud, to meet at last so much goodness and wit and beauty. You have a name in the world, Miss Gifford. Yes, indeed, I have heard of you." Suddenly, while he held her hand and gazed at her, his look changed. Tears filled his eyes; a muscle in his lip began to shake; a flush of maudlin indignation purpled his face.

"And you are the girl my son jilted! And you come to our house! It's a noble action. It's a generous action. It's worthy of you, my dear." He tightly squeezed her hand, Gavan's attempt—and now no gentle one—to draw him away only making his clutch the more determined.

"No, Gavan, I will not go. I will speak my mind. This is my hour. The time has come for me to speak my mind. Let's have the truth; truth at all costs is my motto. A noble and generous action. But, my dear," he leaned his head toward her and spoke in a loud whisper, "you're well rid of him, you know—well rid of him. Don't try to patch it up. Don't come in that hope. So like a woman—I know, I know. But give it up; that's my advice. Give it up. He's a poor fellow—a very poor fellow. He wouldn't make you happy; just take that from me—a friend, a true friend. He wouldn't make any woman happy. He's a poor creature, and a false creature, and I'll say this," the captain, now trembling violently, burst into tears: "if he has been a false lover to you he has been a bad son to me."

With both hands, sobbing, he clung to her, while, with a look of sick distress, Gavan tried, not too violently, to draw him from his hold on her.

Eppie had not flushed. "Don't mind," she said, glancing at the helpless son, "he has mixed it up, you see." And, bending on the captain eyes severe in kindly intention, like the eyes of a nurse firmly administering a potion, "You are mistaken about Gavan. It was another man who jilted me. Now let him take you up-stairs. You are ill."

But the captain still clung, she, erect in her spare young strength, showing no shrinking of repulsion. "No, no," he said; "you always try to shield him. A woman's way. He won your heart, and then he broke it, as he has mine. He has no heart, or he'd take you now. Give it up. Don't come after him. Sir, how dare you! I won't submit to this. How dare you, Sir!" Gavan had wrenched him away, and in a flare of silly passion he struck at him again and again, like a furious child. It was a wrestle with the animal, the vegetable thing, the pinioning of vicious tentacles. Mrs. Arley fluttered in helpless consternation, while Eppie, firm and adequate, assisted Gavan in securing the wildly striking

hands. Caught, held, haled toward the door, the captain became, with amazing rapidity, all smiles and placidity.

"Gently, gently, my dear boy. This is unseemly, you know, very childish indeed. Temper! Temper! You get it from me, no doubt—though your mother could be very spiteful at moments. I'll come now. I've said my say. Well rid of him, my dear, well rid of him," he nodded from the door.

"Eppie! My dear!" cried Mrs. Arley, when father and son had disappeared. "How unutterably hateful. I am more sorry for him than for you, Eppie. His face!"

Eppie was shrugging up her shoulders and straightening herself as though the captain's grasp still threatened her.

"Hateful indeed; but trivial. Gavan understands that I understand. We must make him feel that it's nothing."

"He's quite mad, horrible old man."

"Not quite; more uncomfortably muddled than mad. We must make him see that we think nothing of it," Eppie repeated. She turned to Gavan, who entered as she spoke, still with his sick flush and showing a speechless inability to frame apologies.

"This is what it is to have echoes, Gavan," she said. "My little misfortunes have reached your father's ears." She went to him, she took his hand, she smiled at him, all her radiance recovered, a garment of warmth and ease to cover the shivering the captain's words might have made. "Please don't mind. I wasn't a bit bothered, really."

He could almost have wept for the relief of her smile, her sanity. The linking of their names in such an unthinkable connection had given him the nausea qualm of a terrifying obsession. He could find now only trite words in which to tell her that she was very kind and that he was more sorry than he could say.

"But you mustn't be. It was such an obvious muddle for a twisted mind. He knew," said Eppie, still smiling with the healing radiance, "that I had been jilted, and he knew that I was very fond of you, and he put together the one and one make two that happened to be before him." She saw that his distress had been far greater than her own, that she now gave him relief.

Afterward, as she and Mrs. Arley sped away, her own reaction from the healing attitude showed in a rather grim silence. She leaned back in the swift, keen air, her arms folded in the fullness of her capes.

But Mrs. Arley could not repress her own accumulations of feeling. "My dear Eppie," she said, her hand on her shoulder, and with an almost more than maternal lack of reticence, "I want you to marry him. Don't glare Medusa at me. I hate tact and silences. Heaven knows I would have scouted the idea of such a match for you before seeing him to-day. But my hard old heart is touched. He is such a dear; so lonely. It's a nice little place, too, and there is some money. Jim Grainger is too drab-colored a person for you,—all his force, all his sheckles, can't gild him,—and Kenneth Langley is penniless. This dear creature is not a bit drab and not quite penniless. And you are big enough to marry a man who needs you rather than one you need. *Will* you think of it, Eppie?"

"Grace, you are worse than Captain Palairet," said Eppie, whose eyes were firmly fixed on the neat leather back of the chauffeur in front of them.

"Don't be cross, Eppie. Why should you mind my prattle?"

"Because I care for him so much."

"Well, that's what I say."

"No; not as I mean it."

"*He* of course cares, as I mean it."

Eppie did not pause over this.

"It's something different, quite different, from anything else in the world. It can't be talked about like that. Please, Grace, never, never be like Captain Palairet again. *You* haven't softening of the brain. I shall lose Gavan if my friends and his father have such delusions too openly."

XI

GAVAN went down the noisy, dirty thoroughfare, looking for the turning which would lead him, so the last policeman consulted said, to Eppie's little square.

It was a May day, suddenly clear after rain, liquid mud below, and above a sharply blue sky, looking its relentless contrast at the reeking, sordid streets, the ugly, hurrying life of the wide thoroughfare.

All along the gutter was a vociferous fringe of dripping fruit-and food-barrows, these more haphazard conveniences faced by a line of gaudy, glaring shops.

The blue above was laced with a tangle of tram-wires and cut with the jagged line of chimney-pots.

The roaring trams, the glaring shops, seemed part of a cruel machinery creative of life, and the grim air of permanence, the width and solidity of the great thoroughfare, were more oppressive to Gavan's nerves, its ugliness fiercer, more menacing, than the narrower meanness of the streets where life seemed to huddle with more despondency.

In one of these he found that he had, apparently, lost his way.

A random turn brought him to a squalid court with sloping, wet pavement and open doors disgorging, from inner darkness, swarms of children. They ran; tottered on infantile, bandy legs; locked in scuffling groups, screaming shrilly, or squatted on the ground, absorbed in some game.

Gavan surveyed them vaguely as he wandered seeking an outlet. His eye showed neither shrinking nor tenderness, rather a bleak, hard, unmoved pity, like that of the sky above. He was as alien from that swarming, vivid life as the sky; but, worn as he was with months of nervous overstrain, he felt rising within him now and then a faint sense of nausea such as one might feel in contemplating a writhing clot of maggots.

He threaded his way among them all, and at a corner of the court found a narrow exit. This covered passage led, apparently, to another and fouler court, and emerging from it, coming suddenly face to face with him, was Eppie. She was as startling, seen here, as "a lily in the mouth of Tartarus," and he had a shock of delight in her mere

aspect. For Eppie was as exquisite as a flower. Her garments had in no way adapted themselves to mud and misery. Her rough dress of Japanese blue showed at the open neck of its jacket a white linen blouse; her short, kilted skirt swung with the grace of petals; her little upturned cap of blue made her look like a Rosalind ready for a background of woodland glade, streams, and herds of deer.

And here she stood, under that cruel sky, among the unimaginable ugliness of this City of Dreadful Night.

In her great surprise she did not smile, saying, as she gave him her hand, “Gavan! by all that’s wonderful!”

“You asked me to come and see you when I was next in London.”

“So I did.”

“So here I am. I had a day off by chance; some business that had to be seen to.”

“And your father?”

“Slowly going.”

“And you have come down here, for how long?”

“For as long as you’ll keep me. I needn’t go back till night.”

Her eye now wandered away from him to the maggots, one of whom, Gavan observed, had attached itself to her skirt, while a sufficiently dense crowd surrounded them, staring.

“You have a glimpse of our children,” said Eppie, surveying them with, not exactly a maternal, but, as it were, a fraternal eye of affectionate familiarity.

“What’s that, Annie?” in answer to a husky whisper. “Do I expect you to-night? Rather! Is that the doll, Ada? Well, I can’t say that you’ve kept it very tidy. Where’s its pinafore?” She took the soiled object held up to her and examined its garments. “Where’s its petticoat?”

“Please, Miss, Hemly took them.”

“Took them away from you?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“For her own doll, I suppose.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Eppie cogitated. “I’ll speak to Emily about it presently. You shall have them back.”

“Please, Miss, I called her a thief.”

“You spoke the truth. How are you, Billy? You look decidedly better. Gavan, my hands are full for the next hour or so and I can’t even offer to take you with me, for I’m going to sick people. But I shall be back and through with all my work by tea-time, if you don’t mind going to my place and waiting. You’ll find Maude Allen there. She lives down here, and with me when I am here. She is a nice girl, though she will talk your head off.”

“How do I find her? I don’t mind waiting.”

“You follow this to the end, take the first turning to the right, and that will bring you to my place. I’ll meet you there at five.”

Gavan, thus directed, made his way to the dingy little house occupied by the group of energetic women whom Eppie joined yearly for her three months of—dissipation? he asked himself, amused by her variegated vigor.

The dingy little house looked on a dingy little square—shell of former respectable affluence from which the higher form of life had shriveled. The sooty trees were thickly powdered with young green, and uneven patches of rough, unkempt grass showed behind broken iron railings. A cat’s-meat man called his dangling wares along the street, and Gavan, noticing a thin and furtive cat, that stole from a window-ledge, stopped him and bought a large three-penny-worth, upon which he left the cat regaling itself with an odd, fastidious ferocity.

He entered another world when he entered Eppie’s sitting-room. Here was life at its most austerely sweet. Books lined the walls, bowls of primroses and delicate Japanese bronzes set above their shelves; chintz-covered chairs were drawn before the fire; the latest reviews lay on a table, and on the piano stood open music; there were wide windows in the little room, and crocuses, growing in flat, earthenware dishes, blew out their narrow chalices against the sunlit muslin curtains.

Miss Allen sat sewing near the crocuses, and, shy and voluble, rose to greet him. She was evidently accustomed to Eppie’s guests—accustomed, too, perhaps, to taking them off her hands, for though she was shy her volubility showed a familiarity with the situation. She was almost as funny a contrast to Eppie as the slum children had been an ugly one. She wore a spare, drab-colored skirt and a cotton shirt, its high, hard collar girt about by a red tie that revealed bone buttons before and behind. Her sleek, fair hair, relentlessly drawn back, looked like a varnish laid upon her head. Her features, at once acute and kindly, were sharp and pink.

She was sewing on solid and distressingly ugly materials.

“Yes, I am usually at home. Miss Gifford is the head and I am the hands, you see,” she smiled, casting quick, upward glances at the long, pale young man in his chair near the fire. “Miss Henderson, Miss Grey, and I live here all year round, and I do so look forward to Miss Gifford’s coming. Oh, yes, it’s a most interesting life. Do you do anything of the sort? Are you going to take up a club? Perhaps you are going into the Church?”

Miss Allen asked her swift succession of questions as if in a mild desperateness.

Gavan admitted that his interest was wholly in Miss Gifford.

“She *is* interesting,” Miss Allen, all comprehension, agreed. “So many people find her inspiring. Do you know Mr. Grainger, the M.P.? He comes here constantly. He is a cousin, you know. He has known her, of course, ever since she was a child. I think it’s very probable that she influences his political life—oh, quite in a right sense, I mean. He is such a conscientious man—everybody says that. And then she isn’t at all eccentric, you know, as so many fashionable women who come down here are; they do give one so much trouble when they are like that,—all sorts of fads that one has to manage to get on with. She isn’t at all faddish. And she isn’t sentimental, either. I think the sentimental ones are worst—for the people, especially, giving them all sorts of foolish ideas. And it’s not that she doesn’t *care*. She cares such a lot. That’s the secret of her not getting discouraged, you see. She never loses her spirit.”

“Is it such discouraging work?” Gavan questioned from his chair. With his legs crossed, his hat and stick held on

his knee, he surveyed Miss Allen and the crocuses.

“Well, not to me,” she answered; “but that’s very different, for I have religious faith. Miss Gifford hasn’t that, so of course she must care a great deal to make up for it. When one hasn’t a firm faith it is far more difficult, I always think, to see any hope in it all. I think she would find it far easier if she had that. She can’t resign herself to things. She is rather hot-tempered at times,” Miss Allen added, with one of her sharp, shy glances.

Gavan, amused by the idea that Eppie lacked religious faith, inquired whether the settlement were religious in intention, and Miss Allen sighed a little in answering no,—Miss Grey, indeed, was a Positivist. “But we Anglicans are very broad, you know,” she said. “I can work in perfectly with them all—better with Miss Grey and Miss Gifford than with Miss Henderson, who is very, very Low. Miss Gifford goes in more for social conditions and organization—trades-unions, all that sort of thing; that’s where she finds Mr. Grainger so much of a help, I think.” And he gathered from Miss Allen’s further conversation, from its very manner of vague though admiring protest, a clearer conception of Eppie’s importance down here. To Miss Allen, she evidently embodied a splendid, pagan force, ambiguous in its splendor. He saw her slightly shrinking vision of an intent combatant; no loving sister of charity, but a young Bellona, the latest weapons of sociological warfare in her hands, its latest battle-cry on her lips. And all for what? thought Gavan, while, with a sense of contrasting approval, he looked at Miss Allen’s tidy little head against the sunlit crocuses and watched the harmless occupation of her hands. All for life, more life; the rousing of desire; the struggling to higher forms of consciousness. She was in it, the strife, the struggle. He had seen on her face to-day, with all its surprise, perhaps its gladness, that alien look of grave preoccupation that passed from him to the destinies she touched. In thinking of it all he felt particularly at peace, though there was the irony of his assurance that Eppie’s efforts among this suffering life where he found her only resulted in a fiercer hold on suffering. Physical degradation and its resultant moral apathy were by no means the most unendurable of human calamities. Miss Allen’s anodynes—the mere practical petting, soothing, telling of pretty tales—were, in their very short-sightedness, more fitted to the case.

Miss Allen little thought to what a context her harmless prattle was being adjusted. She would have been paralyzed with horror could she have known that to the gentle young man, sitting there so unalarmingly, she herself was only a rather simple symptom of life that he was quietly studying. In so far from suspecting, her shyness went from her; he was so unalarming—differing in this from so many people—that she found it easy to talk to him. And she still had a happy little hope of a closer community of interest than he had owned to. He looked, she thought, very High Church. Perhaps he was in the last stages of conversion.

She had talked on for nearly an hour when another visitor was announced. This proved to be a young man slightly known to Gavan, a graceful, mellifluous youth, whose artificiality of manner and great personal beauty suggested a mingling of absinthe and honey. People had rather bracketed Gavan and Basil Mayburn together; one could easily deal with both as lumped in the same category,—charming drifters, softly disdainful of worldly aims and efforts. Mayburn himself took sympathy for granted, though disconcerted at times by finding his grasp of the older man to be on a sliding, slippery surface. Palairet had, to be sure, altogether the proper appreciations of art and literature, the rhythm of highly evolved human intercourse; the aroma distilled for the esthete from the vast tragic comedy of life; so that he had never quite satisfied himself as to why he could get no nearer on this common footing. Palairet was always charming, always interested, always courteous; but one’s hold did slip.

And to Gavan, Basil Mayburn, with his fluent ecstasies, seemed a sojourner in a funny half-way house. To Mayburn the hallucination of life was worth while esthetically. His own initial appeal to life had been too fundamentally spiritual for the beautiful to be more to him than a second-rate illusion.

Miss Allen greeted Mr. Mayburn with a coolness that at once discriminated for Gavan between her instinctive liking for himself and her shrinking from a man who perplexed and displeased her.

Mayburn was all glad sweetness: delighted to see Miss Allen; delighted to see Palairet; delighted to wait in their company for the delightful Miss Gifford; and, turning to Miss Allen, he went on to say, as a thing that would engage her sympathies, that he had just come from a service at the Oratory.

“I often go there,” he said; “one gets, as nowhere else that I know of in London, the quintessence of aspiration—the age-long yearning of the world. How are your schemes for having that little church built down here succeeding? I do so believe in it. Don’t let any ugly sect steal a march on you.”

Miss Allen primly replied that the plans for the church were prospering; and adding that Miss Gifford would be here in a moment and that she must leave them, she gathered up her work and departed with some emphasis.

“Nice, dear little creature, that,” said Mayburn, “though she does so dislike me. I hope I didn’t say the wrong thing. I never quite know how far her Anglicanism goes; such a pity that it doesn’t go a little further and carry her into a nunnery of the Catholic Church. She is the nun type. She ought to be done up in their delicious costume; it would lend her the flavor she lacks so distressingly now. Did you notice her collar and her hair? Astonishing the way that Eppie makes use of all these funny, *guindée* creatures whom she gets hold of down here. Have you ever seen Miss Grey?—dogmatic, utilitarian, strangely ugly Miss Grey, another nun type corrupted by our silly modern conditions. She reeks of Comte and looks like a don. And all the rest of them,—the solemn humanitarians, the frothy socialists, the worldly, benign old ecclesiastics,—Eppie works them all; she has a genius for administration. It’s an art in her. It almost consoles one for seeing her wasted down here for so much of the year.”

“Why wasted?” Gavan queried. “She enjoys it.”

“Exactly. That’s the alleviation. Wasted for us, I mean. You have known her for a long time, haven’t you, Palairet?”

Gavan, irked by the question and by the familiarity of Mayburn’s references to their absent hostess, answered dryly that he had known Miss Gifford since childhood; and Mayburn, all tact, passed at once to less personal topics, inquiring with a new earnestness whether Palairet had seen Selby’s Goya, and expatiating on its exquisite horror until the turning of a key in the hall-door, quick steps on the stairs leading up past the sitting-room, announced Eppie’s arrival.

She was with them in a moment, cap and jacket doffed, her muddy shoes changed for slender patent-leather, fresh in her white blouse. She greeted Mayburn, turning to Gavan with, “I’m so glad you waited. You shall both have tea directly.”

With all her crisp kindliness, Gavan fancied a change in her since the greeting of an hour and a half before.

Things hadn't gone well with her. And he could flatter himself, also, with the suspicion that she was vexed at finding their tête-à-tête interrupted.

Mayburn loitered about the room after her while she straightened the shade on the student's lamp, just brought in, and made the tea, telling her about people, about what was going on in the only world that counted, telling her about Chrissie Bentworth's astounding elopement, and, finally, about the Goya. "You really must see it soon," he assured her.

Eppie, adjusting the flame of her kettle, said that she didn't want to see it.

"You don't care for Goya, dear lady?"

"Not just now."

"Well, of course I don't mean just now. I mean after you have burned out this particular flame. But, really, it's a sensation before you and you mustn't miss having it. An exquisite thing. Horror made beautiful."

"I don't want to see it made beautiful," Eppie, with cheerful rudeness, objected.

"Now that," said Mayburn, drawing up to the tea-table with an appreciative glance for the simple but inviting fare spread upon it—"now that is just where I always must argue with you. Don't you agree with me, Palairet, that life is beautiful—that it's only in terms of beauty that it has significance?"

"If you happen to see it so," Gavan ambiguously assented.

"Exactly; I accept your amendment—if you happen to have the good fortune to see it so; if you have the faculty that gives the vision; if, like Siegfried, the revealing dragon's-blood has touched your lips. Eppie has the gift and shouldn't wilfully atrophy it. She shouldn't refuse to share the vision of the Supreme Artist, to whom all horror and tragedy are parts of the picture that his eternal joy contemplates; she should not refuse to listen with the ear of the Supreme Musician, to whom all the discords that each one of us is, before we taste the dragon's-blood,—for what is man but a dissonance, as our admirable Nietzsche says,—to whom all these discords melt into the perfect phrase. All art, all truth is there. I'm rather dithyrambic, but, in your more reticent way, you agree with me, don't you, Palairet?"

Eppie's eye, during this speech, had turned with observant irony upon Gavan.

"How do you like your echo, Gavan?" she inquired, and she answered for him: "Of course he agrees, but in slightly different terms. He doesn't care a fig about the symphony or about the Eternal Goya. There isn't a touch of the 'lyric rapture' about him. Now pray don't ask him to define his own conceptions, and drink your tea. And don't say one word to me, either, about your gigantic, Bohemian deity. You have spoken of Nietzsche, and I know too well what you are coming to: the Apollonian spirit of the world of Appearances in which the Dionysiac spirit of Things-in-Themselves mirrors its vital ecstasy. Spare me, I'm not at all in the humor to see horror in terms of loveliness."

"*Ay de mi!*" Mayburn murmured, "you make me feel that I'm still a dissonance when you talk like this."

"A very wholesome realization."

"You are cross with life to-day, and therefore with me, its poor little appreciator."

"I'm never cross with life."

"Only with me, then?"

"Only with you, to-day."

Mayburn, folding his slice of bread-and-butter, took her harshness with Apollonian serenity. "At least let me know that I've an ally in you," he appealed to Gavan, while Eppie refilled her cup with the business-like air of stoking an engine that paused for a moment near wayside trivialities.

Gavan had listened to the dithyrambics with some uneasiness, conscious of Eppie's observation, and now owned that he felt little interest in the Eternal Goya.

"Don't, don't, I pray of you, let him take the color out of life for you," Mayburn pleaded, turning from this rebuff, tea-cup in hand, to Eppie; and Eppie, with a rather grim smile, again full of reminiscences for Gavan, declared that neither of them could take anything out of it for her.

She kept, after that, the talk in pleasant enough shallows; but Mayburn fancied, more than once, that he heard the grating of his keel on an unpropitious shore. Eppie didn't want him to-day, that was becoming evident; she wasn't going to push him off into decorative sailing. And presently, wondering a little if his tact had already been too long at fault, wondering anew about the degree of intimacy between the childhood friends, who had, evidently, secrets in which he did not share, he gracefully departed.

Eppie leaned back in her chair, folded her arms, and closed her eyes as though to give herself the relief of a long silence.

Her hair softly silhouetted against the green shade and the flickering illumination of the firelight upon her, her passive face showed a stern wistfulness. Things had gone wrong with her.

Looking at her, Gavan's memory went back to the last time they had been together, alone, in firelight, to his impulse and her startlingly acute interpretation of it. Her very aspect now, her closed eyes and folded arms, seemed to show him how completely she disowned, for both of them, even the memory of such an unfitting episode. More keenly than ever he recognized the fineness in her, the generosity, the willingness to outlive trifles, to put them away forever; and the contagion of her somber peace enveloped him.

She remarked presently, not opening her eyes: "I should like to make a bon-fire of all the pictures in the world, all the etchings, the carvings, the tapestries, the bric-à-brac in general,—and Basil Mayburn, in sackcloth and ashes, should light it."

"What puritanic savagery, Eppie!"

"I prefer the savage puritan to the Basil Mayburn type; at least I do just now."

"What's the matter?" Gavan asked, after a little pause.

"Do I show it so evidently?" she asked, with a faint smile. "Everything is the matter."

"What, in particular, has gone wrong?"

Eppie did not reply at first, and he guessed that she chose only to show him a lesser trouble when she said, "I've had a great quarrel with Miss Grey, for one thing."

"The positivistic lady?"

“Yes; did Maude tell you that? She really is a very first-rate person—and runs this place; but I lost my temper with her—a stupid thing to do, and not suddenly, either, which made it the less excusable.”

“Are your theories so different that you came to a clash?”

“Of course they are different, though it was apparently only over a matter of practical administration that we fought.” Eppie drew a long breath, opening her eyes. “I shall stay on here this spring—I usually go to my cousin Alicia for the season. But one can’t expect things to go as one wants them unless one keeps one’s hand on the engine most of the time. She has almost a right to consider me a meddling outsider, I suppose. I shall stay on till the end of the summer.”

“And smash Miss Grey?”

Eppie, aware of his amusement, turned an unresentful glance upon him.

“No, don’t think me merely brutally dominant. I really like her. I only want to use her to the best advantage.”

At this he broke into a laugh. “Not brutally dominant, I know; but I’m sorry for Miss Grey.”

“Miss Grey can well take care of herself, I assure you.”

“What else has gone wrong?”

Again Eppie chose something less wrong to show him. “The factory where some of my club-girls work has shut down half of its machinery. There will be a great deal of suffering. And we have pulled them above a flippant acceptance of state relief.”

“And because you have pulled them up, they are to suffer more?”

“Exactly, if you choose to put it so,” said Eppie.

He saw that she had determined that he should not frighten her again, or, at all events, that he should never see it if he did frighten her; and he had himself determined that his mist should never again close round her. She should not see, even if she guessed at it pretty clearly, the interpretation that he put upon the afternoon’s frictions and failures, and, on the plane of a matter-of-fact agreement as to practice, he drew her on to talk of her factory-girls, of the standards of wages, the organization of woman’s labor, so that she presently said, “What a pleasure it is to hear you talking sense, Gavan!”

“You have heard me talk a great deal of nonsense, I’m sure.”

“A great deal. Worse than Basil Mayburn’s.”

“I saw too clearly to-day the sorry figure I must have cut in your eyes. I have learned to hold my tongue. When one can only say things that sound particularly silly that is an obvious duty.”

“I am glad to hear you use the word, my dear Gavan; use it, even though it means nothing to you. *Glissez mortel, n’appuyez pas* should be your motto for a time; then, after some wholesome skating about on what seems the deceptive, glittering surface of things you will find, perhaps, that it isn’t an abyss the ice stretches over, but a firm meadow, the ice melted off it and no more need of skates.”

He was quite willing that she should so see his case; he was easier to live with, no doubt, on this assumption of his curability.

Eppie, still leaning back, still with folded arms, had once more closed her eyes, involuntarily sighing, as though under her own words the haunting echo of the abyss had sounded for her.

She had not yet shown him what the real trouble was, and he asked her now, in this second lull of their talk, “What else is there besides the factory-girls and Miss Grey?”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “You guess that there is something else.”

“I can see it.”

“And you are sorry?”

“Sorry, dear Eppie? Of course.”

“It’s a child, a cripple,” said Eppie. “It had been ill for a long time, but we thought that we could save it. It died this morning. I didn’t know. I didn’t get there in time. I only found out after leaving you this afternoon. And it cried for me.” She had turned her head from him as it leaned against the chair, but he saw the tears slowly rolling down her cheeks.

“I am so sorry, dear Eppie,” he said.

“The most darling child, Gavan.” His grave pity had brought him near and it gave her relief to speak. “It had such a wistful, dear little face. I used to spend hours with it; I never cared for any child so much. What I can’t bear is to think that it cried for me.” Her voice broke. Without a trace, now, of impulse or glamour, he took her hand, repeating his helpless phrase of sympathy. Yes, he thought, while she wept, here was the fatal flaw in any Tolstoian half-way house that promised peace. Love for others didn’t help their suffering; suffering with them didn’t stop it. Here was the brute fact of life that to all peace-mongers sternly said, Where there is love there is no peace.

It was only after her hand had long lain in his fraternal clasp that she drew it away, drying her tears and trying to smile her thanks at him. Looking before her into the fire, and back into a retrospect of sadness, she said: “How often you and I meet death together, Gavan. The poor monkey, and Bobbie, and Elspeth even, ought to count.”

“You must think of me and death together,” he said.

He felt in a moment that the words had for her some significance that he had not intended. In her silence was a shock, and in her voice, when she spoke, a startled thing determinedly quieted.

“Not more than you must think of me and it together.”

“You and death, dear Eppie! You are its very antithesis!”

She did not look at him, and he could not see her eyes, but he knew, with the almost uncanny intuition that he so often had in regard to her, that a rising strength, a strength that threatened something, strove with a sudden terror.

“Life conquers death,” she said at last.

He armed himself with lightness. “Of course, dear Eppie,” he said; “of course it does; always and always. The poor baby dies, and—I wonder how many other babies are being born at this moment? Conquers death? I should think it did!”

“I did not mean in that way,” she answered. She had risen, and, looking at the clock, seemed to show him that their time was over. “But we won’t discuss life and death now,” she said.

“You mean that it’s late and that I must go?” he smiled.

“Perhaps I mean only that I don’t want to discuss,” she smiled back. “Though—yes, indeed, it is late; almost seven. I have a great many things to do this evening, so that I must rest before dinner, and let you go.”

“I may come again?”

“Whenever you will. Thank you for being so kind to-day.”

“Kind, dear Eppie?”

“For being sorry, I mean.”

“Who but a brute would not have been?”

“And you are not a brute.”

The shaded light cast soft upward shadows on her face, revealing sweet oddities of expression. In their shadow he could not fathom her eyes; but a tenderness, peaceful, benignant, even a recovered gaiety, hovered on her brow, her upper lip, her cheeks. It was like a reflection of sunlight in a deep pool, this dim smiling of gratitude and gaiety.

He had a queer feeling, and a profounder one than in their former moment when she had repudiated his helpless emotion, that she spared him, that she restrained some force that might break upon this fraternal nearness. For an instant he wondered if he wanted to be spared, and with the wonder was once more the wrench at leaving her there, alone, in her fire-lit room. But it was her strength that carried them over all these dubious undercurrents, and he so relied on it that, holding her hand in good-by, he said, “I will come soon. I like it here.”

“And you are coming to Kirklands this summer. Uncle expects it. You mustn’t disappoint him, and me. I shall be there for a month.”

“I’ll come.”

“Jim Grainger will be there, too. You remember Jim. You can fight with him from morning till night, but you and I will fight about nothing, absolutely nothing, Gavan. We will—*glisser*. We will talk about Goya! We will be perfectly comfortable.”

He really believed that they might be, so happily convincing was her tone.

“Grainger is a great chum of yours, isn’t he?” he asked.

“You remember, he and his brother were old playmates; Clarence has turned out a poor creature; he’s a nobody in the church. I’m very fond of Jim. And I admire him tremendously. He is the conquering type, you know—the type that tries for the high grapes.”

“You won’t set him at me, to mangle me for your recreation?”

“Do I seem such a pitiless person?”

“Oh, it would be for my good, of course.”

“You may come with no fear of manglings. You sha’n’t be worried or reformed.”

They had spoken as if the captain were non-existent, but Gavan put the only qualifying touch to his assurance of seeing her at Kirklands. “I’ll come—if I can get there by then.”

XII

UT he did not go to her again in the slums. The final phases of his father’s long illness kept him in Surrey, and he found, on thinking it over, that he was content to rest in the peace of that last seeing of her.

It was clear to him that, were it not for that paralysis of the heart and will, he would have been her lover. Like a veiled, exquisite picture, the impossible love was with him always; he could lift the veil and look upon it with calmness. That he owed something of this calmness to Eppie he well knew. She loved him,—that, too, was evident,—but as a sister might love, perhaps as a mother might. He was her child, her sick child or brother, and he smiled over the simile, well content, and with an odd sense of safety in his assurance. Peace was to be their final word, and in the long months of a still, hot summer, this soft, persistent note of peace was with him and filled a lassitude greater than any he had known.

Monotonously the days went by like darkly freighted boats on a sultry sea—low-lying boats, sliding with the current under sleepy sails.

He watched consciousness fade from his father’s body and found strange, sly analogies (they were like horrid nudges in the dark)—with his mother’s death, the worthless man, the saintly woman, mingling in the sameness of their ending, the pitifulness, after all, of the final insignificance that overtook them both. And so glassy was the current, so sleepy the wind, that the analogy shook hardly a tremor of pain through him.

In the hour of his father’s death, a more trivial memory came—trivial, yet it lent a pathos, even a dignity, to the dying man. In the captain’s eyes, turned wonderingly on him, in the automatic stretching out of his wasted hand for his,—Gavan held it to the end—was the reminiscence of the poor monkey’s far-away death, the little tropical creature that had drooped and died at Kirklands.

On the day of the funeral, Gavan sat in the library at dusk, and the lassitude had become so deep, partly through the breakdown of sheer exhaustion, that the thought of going on watching his own machinery work—toward that same end,—the end of the monkey, of his father, his mother,—was profoundly disgusting.

It was a positively physical disgust, a nausea of fatigue, that had overtaken him as he watched the rooks, above the dark yet gilded woods, wheel against a sunset sky.

Almost automatically, with no sense of choice or effort, he had unlocked a drawer of the writing-table beside him and taken out a case of pistols, merely wondering if the machine were going to take the final and only logical move of stopping itself.

He was a little interested to observe, as he opened the case, that he felt no emotion at all. He had quite expected that at such a last moment life would concentrate, gather itself for a final leap on him, a final clinging. He

had expected to have a bout with the elemental, the thing that some men called faith in life and some only desire of life, and, indeed, for a moment, his mind wandered in vague, Buddhistic fancies about the wheel of life to which all desire bound one, desire, the creator of life, so that as long as the individual felt any pulse of it life might always suck him back into the vortex. The fancy gave him his one stir of uneasiness. Suppose that the act of departure were but the final act of will. Could it be that such self-affirmation might tie him still to the wheel he strove to escape, and might the drama still go on for his unwilling spirit in some other dress of flesh? To see the fear as the final bout was to quiet it; it was a fear symptomatic of life, a lure to keep him going; and, besides, how meaningless such surmises, on their ethical basis of voluntary choice, as if in the final decision one would not be, as always, the puppet of the underlying will. His mind dropped from the thread-like interlacing of teasing metaphysical conjecture to a calm as quiet and deep as though he were about to turn on his pillow and fall asleep.

Now, like the visions in a dreamy brain, the memories of the day trooped through the emptiness of thought. He was aware, while he watched the visions, of himself sitting there, to a spectator a tragic or a morbid figure. Morbid was of course the word that a frightened or merely stupid humanity would cast at him. And very morbid he was, to be sure, if life were desirable and to cease to desire it abnormal.

He saw himself no longer in either guise. He was looking now at his father's coffin lowered into the earth of the little churchyard beside his mother's grave; the fat, genial face of the sexton, the decorous sadness on the little rector's features. Overhead had been the quietly stirring elms; sheep grazed beyond the churchyard wall and on the horizon was the pastoral blue of distant hills. He saw the raw, new grave and the heave of the older grave's green sod, the old stone, with its embroidery of yellow lichen and its text of eternal faith.

And suddenly the thought of that heave of sod, that headstone, what it stood for in his life, the tragic memory, the love, the agony,—all sinking into mere dust, into the same dust as the father whom he had hated,—struck with such unendurable anguish upon him that, as if under heavy churchyard sod a long-dead heart strove up in a tormented resurrection, life rushed appallingly upon him and, involuntarily, as a drowning man's hand seizes a spar and clings, his hand closed on the pistol under it. Leave it, leave it,—this dream where such resurrections were possible.

He had lifted the pistol, pausing for a moment in an uncertainty as to whether head or heart were the surer exit, when a quiet step at the door arrested him.

"Shall I bring the lamps, sir?" asked Howson's quiet voice.

Gavan could but admire his own deftness in tossing a newspaper over the pistol. He found himself perfectly prepared to keep up the last appearances. He said that he didn't want the lamps yet and that Howson could leave the curtains undrawn. "It's sultry this evening," he added.

"It is, sir; I expect we'll have thunder in the night," said Howson, whose voice partook of the day's decorous gloom. He had brought in the evening mail and laid the letters and newspapers beside Gavan, slightly pushing aside the covered pistol to make room for them, an action that Gavan observed with some intentness. But Howson saw nothing.

Left alone again, Gavan, not moving in his chair, glanced at the letters and papers neatly piled beside his elbow.

After the rending agony of that moment of hideous realization, when, in every fiber, he had felt his own woeful humanity, an odd sleepiness almost overcame him.

He felt much more like going to sleep than killing himself, and, yawning, stretching, he shivered a little from sheer fatigue.

The edge of the newspaper that covered the pistol was weighted down by the pile of papers, and in putting out his hand for it, automatically, he pushed the letters aside, then, yawning again, picked them up instead of the pistol. He glanced over the envelops, not opening them,—the last hand at cards, that could hold no trumps for him. It was with as mechanical an interest as that of the condemned criminal who, on the way to the scaffold, turns his head to look at some unfamiliar sight. But at the last letter he paused. The post-mark was Scotch; the writing was Eppie's.

He might have considered at that moment that the shock he felt was a warning that life was by no means done with him, and that his way of safety lay in swift retreat.

But after the wrench of agony and the succeeding sliding languor, he did not consider anything. It was like a purely physical sensation, what he felt, as he held the letter and looked at Eppie's writing. Soft, recurrent thrills went through him, as though a living, vibrating thing were in his hands. Eppie; Kirklands; the heather under a summer sky. Was it desire, or a will-less drifting with a new current that the new vision brought? He could not have told.

He opened the letter and read Eppie's matter-of-fact yet delicate sympathy.

He must be worn out. She begged him to remember his promise and to come to them at once.

At once, thought Gavan. It must be that, indeed, or not at all. He glanced at the clock. He could really go at once. He could catch the London train, the night express for Scotland, and he could be at Kirklands at noon next day. He rose and rang the bell, looking out at the darker pink of the sky, where the rooks no longer wheeled, until Howson appeared.

"I'm going to Scotland to-night, at once." He found himself repeating the summons of the letter. "Pack up my things. Order the trap."

Howson showed no surprise. A flight from the house of death was only natural.

Gavan, when he was gone, went to the table and closed the box of pistols with a short, decisive snap—a decision in sharp contrast to the mist in which his mind was steeped.

The peace the pistols promised, the peace of the northern sky and the heather: why did he choose the latter? But then he did not choose. Something had chosen for him. Something had called him back. Was it that he was too weary to resist? or did all his strength consist in yielding? He could not have told. Let the play go on. Its next act would be sweet to watch. Of that he was sure.

PART III

I

THE moor was like an amethyst under a radiant August sky, and the air, with its harmony of wind and sunlight, was like music.

Eppie walked beside him and Peter trotted before. The forms were changed, but it might almost have been little Eppie, the boy Gavan, and Robbie himself who went together through the heather. The form was changed, but the sense of saneness so strong that it would have seemed perfectly natural to pass an arm about a child Eppie's neck and to talk of the morning's reading in the Odyssey.

Never had the feeling of reality been so vague or the dream sense been so beautiful. His instinctive choice of this peace, instead of the other, had been altogether justified. It was all like a delightful game they had agreed to play, and the only rule of the game was to take each other's illusions for granted and, in so doing, to put them altogether aside.

It was as if they went in a dream that tallied while, outside their dream, the sad life of waking slept. It was all limpid, all effortless, all clear sunlight and clear wind: limpid, like a happy dream, yet deliciously muddled too, as a happy dream is often muddled, with its mazed consciousness that, since it is a dream, ordinary impossibilities may become quite possible, that one only has to direct a little the turnings of the fairy-tale to have them lead one where one will, and yet that to all strange happenings there hovers a background of contradiction that makes them the more of an enchanted perplexity.

In the old white house the general and Miss Barbara would soon be expecting them back to tea, both older, both vaguer, both, to Gavan's appreciation, more and more the tapestried figures, the background to the young life that still moved, felt, thought in the foreground until it, too, should sink and fade into a tapestry for other dramas, other fairy-tales.

The general retold his favorite anecdotes with shorter intervals between the tellings; cared more openly, with an innocent greediness, about the exactitudes of his diet; was content to sit idly with an unremembering, indifferent benignancy of gaze. All the sturdier significances of life were fast slipping from him, all the old martial activities; it was like seeing the undressing of a child, the laying aside of the toy trumpet and the soldier's kilt preparatory to bed. Miss Barbara was sweeter than ever—a sweetness even less touched with variations than last year. And she was sillier, poor old darling; her laugh had in it at moments the tinkling, feeble foolishness of age.

Gavan saw it all imperturbably—how, in boyhood, the apprehension of it would have cut into him!—and it all seemed really very good—as the furniture to a fairy-tale; the sweet, dim, silly tapestry was part of the peace. How Eppie saw it he didn't know; he didn't care; and she seemed willing not to care, either, about what he saw or thought. Eppie had for him in their fairy-tale all the unexacting loveliness of summer nature, healing, sunny, smiling. He had been really ill, he knew that now, and that the peace was in part the languor of convalescence, and, for the sake of his recovery, she seemed to have become a part of nature, to ask no questions and demand no dues.

To have her so near, so tender, so untroubling, was like holding in his hands a soft, contented wild bird. He could, he thought, have held it against his heart, and the heart would not have throbbed the faster.

There was nothing in her now of the young Valkyrie of mists and frosts, shaking spears and facing tragedy with stern eyes. She threatened nothing. She saw no tragedy. It was all again as if, in a bigger, more beautiful way, she gave him milk to drink from a silver cup. Together they drank, no potion, no enchanted, perilous potion, but, from the cup of innocent summer days, the long, sweet dream of an Eternal Now.

To-day, for the first time, the hint of a cloud had crept into the sky.

"And to-morrow, Eppie, ends our tête-à-tête," he said. "Or will Grainger make as little of a third as the general and Miss Barbara?"

"He sha'n't spoil things, if that's what you mean," said Eppie.

She wore a white dress and a white hat wreathed with green; the emerald drops trembled in the shadow of her hair. She made him think of some wandering princess in an Irish legend, with the white and green and the tranquil shining of her eyes.

"Not our things, perhaps; but can't he interfere with them? He will want to talk with you about all the things we go on so happily without talking of."

"I'll talk to him and go on happily with you."

It was almost on his lips to ask her if she could marry Grainger and still go on happily, like this, with him, Gavan. That it should have seemed possible to ask it showed how far into fairy-land they had wandered; but it was one of the turnings that one didn't choose to take; one was warned in one's sleep of lurking dangers on that road. It might lead one straight out of fairy-land, straight into uncomfortable waking.

"How happily we do go on, Eppie," was what he did choose to say. "More happily than ever before. What a contrast this—to East London."

She glanced at him. "And to Surrey."

"And to Surrey," he accepted.

"Surrey was worse than East London," she said.

"I didn't know how much of a strain it had been until I got away from it."

"One saw it all in your face."

"'One' meaning a clever Eppie, I suppose. But, yes, I had a bad moment there."

The memory of that heave of sod had no place in fairy-land, even less place than the forecast of an Eppie married to Jim Grainger, and he didn't let his thought dwell on it even when he owned to the bad moment, and he was thinking, really with amusement over her unconsciousness, of the two means of escape from it that he had found to his hand,—the pistol and her letter,—when she took up his words with a quiet, "Yes, I knew you had."

"Knew that I had had a strain, you mean?"

"No, had a bad moment," she answered.

"You saw it in my face?"

"No. I knew. Before I saw you."

He smiled at her. “You have a clairvoyant streak in your Scotch blood?”

She smiled back. “Probably. I knew, you see.”

Her assurance, with its calm over what it knew, really puzzled him.

“Well, what did you know?”

She had kept on quietly smiling while she looked at him, and, though she now became grave, it was not as if for pain but for thankfulness. “It was in the evening, the day after I wrote to you, the day your father was buried. I went to my room to dress for dinner, my room next yours, you know. And I was looking out,—at the pine-tree, the summer-house where we played, and, in especial, I remember, at the white roses that I could smell in the evening so distinctly,—when I knew, or saw, I don’t know which, that you were in great suffering. It was most of all as if I were in you, feeling it myself, rather than seeing or knowing. Then,” her voice went on in its unshaken quiet, “I did seem to see—a grave; not your father’s grave. You were seeing it, too,—a green grave. And then I came back into myself and knew. You were in some way,—going. I stood there and looked at the roses and seemed only to wait intensely, to watch intensely. And after that came a great calm, and I knew that you were not going.”

She quietly looked at him again,—her eyes had not been on him while she spoke,—and, though he had paled a little, he looked as quietly back.

He found himself accepting, almost as a matter of course, this deep, subconscious bond between them.

But in another moment, another realization came. He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“I always make you suffer.”

“No,” she answered, though she, now, was a little pale, “I didn’t suffer. I was beyond, above all that. Whatever happened, we were really safe. That was another thing I knew.”

He relinquished the kissed hand. “Dear Eppie, dear, dear Eppie, I am glad that this happened.”

It had been, perhaps, to keep the dream safely around them that she had shown him only the calm; for now she asked, and he felt the echo of that suffering—that shared suffering—in it, “You had, then, chosen to go?”

Somehow he knew that they were safe in the littler sense, that she would keep the dream unawakened, even if they spoke of the outside life. “Yes,” he said, “you saw what was happening to me, Eppie. I had chosen to go. But your letter came, and, instead, I chose to come to you.”

She asked no further question, walking beside him with all her tranquillity.

But, to her, it was not in a second childhood, not in a fairy-tale, that they went. She was tranquil, for him; a child, for him; healing, unexacting nature, for him. But she knew she had not needed his admission to know it, that it was life and death that went together.

Sometimes, as they walked, the whole glory of the day melted into a phantasmagoria, unreal, specious, beside the intense reality of their unspoken thoughts, his thoughts and hers; those thoughts that left them only this little strip of fairy-land where they could meet in peace. Thoughts only, not dislikes, not indifferences, sundered them. Their natures, through all nature’s gamut, chimed; they looked upon each other—when in fairy-land—with eyes of love. But above this accord was a region where her human breath froze in an icy airlessness, where her human flesh shattered itself against ghastly precipices. To see those thoughts of Gavan’s was like having the lunar landscape suddenly glare at one through a telescope. His thoughts and hers were as real as life and death; they alone were real; only—and this was why, under its burden, Eppie’s heart throbbed more deeply, more strongly,—only, life conquered death. No, more still,—for so the strange evening vision had borne its speechless, sightless witness,—life had already conquered death. She had not needed him to tell her that, either.

And these days were life; not the dream he thought them, not the fairy-tale, but balmy dawn stealing in, fresh, revivifying, upon his long, arctic night; the flush of spring over the lunar landscape. So she saw it with her eyes of faith.

The mother was strong in her. She could bide her time. She could see death near him and, so that he should not see her fear, smile at him. She could play games with him, and wait.

II

JIM GRAINGER arrived that evening, and Gavan was able to observe, at the closest sort of quarters, his quondam rival.

His condition was so obvious that its very indifference to observation took everybody into its confidence. Nobody counted with Mr. Grainger except his cousin, and since he held open before her eyes—with angry constancy, gloomy patience—the page of his devotion, the rest of the company were almost forced to read with her. One couldn’t see Mr. Grainger without seeing that page.

He held it open, but the period of construing had evidently passed. All that there was to understand she understood long since, so that he was, for the most part, silent.

In Eppie’s presence he would wander aimlessly about, look with an oddly irate, unseeing eye at books or pictures, and fling himself into deep chairs, where he sat, his arms folded in a sort of clutch, his head bent forward, gazing at her with an air of dogged, somber resolve.

He was not by nature so taciturn. It was amusing to see the vehemence of reaction that would overtake him in the smoking-room, where his volubility became almost as overbearing and oppressive as his silences.

He was a man at once impatient and self-controlled. His face was all made up of short, resolute lines. His nose, chopped off at the tip; his lips, curled yet compressed; the energetic modeling of his brows with their muscular protuberances; the clefted chin; the crest of chestnut hair,—all expressed a wilful abruptness, an arrested force, the more vehement for its repression.

And at present his appearance accurately expressed him as a determined but exasperated lover.

“Of course,” Miss Barbara said, in whispered confidence to Gavan, mingled pity and reprobation in her voice, “as her cousin he comes when he wishes to do so. But she has refused him twice already—he told me so himself; and, simply, he will not accept it. He only spoke of it once, and it was quite distressing. It really grieved me to hear him.

He said that he would hang on till one or the other of them was dead." Grainger's words in Miss Barbara's voice were the more pathetic for their incongruity.

"And you don't think she will have him,—if he does hang on?" Gavan asked.

Miss Barbara glanced at him with a soft, scared look, as though his easy, colloquial question had turned a tawdry light on some tender, twilight dreaming of her own.

He had wondered, anew of late, what Miss Barbara did think about him and Eppie, and what she had thought he now saw in her eyes, that showed their little shock, as at some rather graceless piece of pretence. He was quite willing that she should think him pretending, and quite willing that she should place him in Grainger's hopeless category, if future events would be most easily so interpreted for her; so that he remained silent, as if over his relief, when she assured him, "Oh, I am sure not. Eppie does not change her mind."

Grainger's presence, for all its ineffectuality, thus witnessed to by Miss Barbara, was as menacing to peace and sunshine as a huge thunder-cloud that suddenly heaves itself up from the horizon and hangs over a darkened landscape. But Eppie ignored the thunder-cloud; and, hanging over fairy-land, it became as merely decorative as an enchanted giant tethered at a safe distance and almost amusing in his huge helplessness.

Eppie continued to give most of her time to Gavan, coloring her manner with something of a hospital nurse's air of devotion to an obvious duty, and leaving Grainger largely to the general's care while she and Gavan sat reading for hours in the shade of the birch-woods.

Grainger often came upon them so; Eppie in her white dress, her hat cast aside, a book open upon her knees, and Gavan, in his white flannels, lying beside her, frail and emaciated, not looking at her,—Grainger seldom saw him look at her,—but down at the heather that he softly pulled and wrenched at. They were as beautiful, seen thus together, as any fairy-tale couple; flakes of gold wavering over their whiteness, the golden day all about their illumined shade, and rivulets from the sea of purple that surrounded them running in among the birches, making purple pools and eddies.

Very beautiful, very strange, very pathetic, with all their serenity; even the unimaginative Grainger so felt them when, emerging from the gold and purple, he would pause before them, swinging his stick and eying them oddly, like people in a fairy-tale upon whom some strange enchantment rested. One might imagine—but Grainger's imagination never took him so far—that they would always sit there among the birches, spellbound in their peace, their smiling, magic peace.

"Come and listen to Faust, Jim. We are polishing up our German," Eppie would cheerfully suggest; but Grainger, remarking that he had none to polish, would pass on, carrying the memory of Gavan's impassive, upward glance at him and the meaning in Eppie's eyes—eyes in which, yes, he was sure of it, and it was there he felt the pathos, some consciousness seemed at once to hide from and to challenge him.

"Is he ill, your young Palairet?" he asked her one day, when they were alone together in the library. His rare references to his own emotions made the old, cousinly intimacy a frequent meeting-ground.

He noticed that a faint color drifted into Eppie's cheek when he named Gavan.

"He is as old as you are, Jim," she remarked.

"He looks like a person to be taken care of, all the same."

"He has been ill. He took care of some one else, as it happens. He nursed his father for months."

"Um," Grainger gave an inarticulate grunt, "just about what he's fit for, isn't it? to help dying people out of the world."

Eppie received this in silence, and he went on: "He looks rather like a priest, or a poet—something decorative and useless."

"Would you call Buddha decorative and useless?"

"After all, Palairet isn't a Hindoo. One expects something more normal from a white man."

His odd penetration was hurting her, but she laughed at his complacent Anglo-Saxondom. "If you want a white man, what do you make of the one who wrote the Imitation?"

"Make of him? Nothing. Nor any one else, I fancy. What does your young Palairet do?" Grainger brought the subject firmly back from her digression.

Eppie was sitting in the window-seat, and, leaning her head back, framed in an arabesque of creepers, she now owned, after a little pause, and as if with a weariness of evasion she was willing to let him see as she did: "Nothing, really."

"Does he care about anything?" Grainger placed himself opposite her, folding his arms with an air of determined inquiry.

And again Eppie owned, "He believes in nothing, so how can he care?"

"Believes in nothing? What do you mean by that?"

"Well," with a real sense of amusement over the inner icy weight, she was ready to put it in its crudest, most inclusive terms, "he doesn't believe in immortality."

Grainger stared, taken aback by the ingenuous avowal.

"Immortality? No more do I," he retorted.

"Oh, yes, you do," said Eppie, looking not at him but out at the summer sky. "You believe in life and so you do believe in immortality, even though you don't know that you do. You are, like most energetic people, too much preoccupied with living to know what your life means, that's all."

"My dear child,"—Grainger was fond of this form of appellation, an outlet for the pent-up forces of his baffled tenderness,—"any one who is alive finds life worth while without a Paradise to complete it, and any one who isn't a coward doesn't turn from it because it's also unhappy."

"If you think that Gavan does that you mistake the very essence of his skepticism, or, if you like to call it so, of his faith. It's not because he finds it unhappy that he turns from it, but because he finds it meaningless."

"Meaningless?—a place where one can work, achieve, love, suffer?"

Grainger jerked out the words from an underlying growl of protest.

Eppie now looked from the sky to him, her unconscious ally. “Dear old Jim, I like to hear you. You’ve got it, all. Every word you say implies immortality. It’s all a question of being conscious of one’s real needs and then of trusting them.”

“Life, here, now, could satisfy my needs,” he said.

She kept her eyes on his, at this, for a grave moment, letting it have its full stress as she took it up with, “Could it? With death at the end of it?” and without waiting for his answer she passed from the personal moment. “You said that life was worth while, and you meant, I suppose, that it was worth while because we were capable of making it good rather than evil.”

“Well, of course,” said Grainger.

“And a real choice between good and evil is only possible to a real identity, you’ll own?”

“If you are going to talk metaphysics I’ll cut and run, I warn you. Socratic methods of tripping one up always infuriate me.”

“I’m only trying to talk common-sense.”

“Well, go on. I agree to what you say of a real identity. We’ve that, of course.”

“Well, then, can an identity destroyed at death by the destruction of the body be called real? It can’t, Jim. It’s either only a result of the body, a merely materialistic phenomenon, or else it is a transient, unreal aspect of some supremely real World-Self and its good and its evil just as fated by that Self’s way of thinking it as the color of its hair and eyes is fated by nature. And if that were so the sense of freedom, of identity, that gives us our only sanction for goodness, truth, and worth, would be a mere illusion.”

Her earnestness, as she worked it out for him, held his eyes more than her words his thoughts. He was observing her with such a softening of expression as rarely showed itself on his virile countenance.

“You’ve thought it all out, haven’t you?” he said.

“I’ve tried to. Knowing Gavan has made me. It has converted me,” she smiled.

“So that’s your conversion.”

“Oh, more than that. I know that I’m *in* life; *for* it, and that’s more than all such reasoning.”

“And you believe that you’ll go on forever as you are now,” he said. His eyes dwelt on her: “Young and beautiful.”

“*Forever*; what queer words we must use to try to express it. We are in Forever now. It’s just that one casts in one’s lot, open-eyed, with life.”

“And has Palairet cast in his with death?”

Again the change of color was in her cheek, but it was to pallor now.

“He thinks so.”

“And he doesn’t frighten you?”

She armed herself to smile over Gavan’s old question. “Why should he?”

Grainger left her for some moments of aimless, silent wandering. He came back and paused again before her. He did not answer her.

“I throw in my lot with life, too, Eppie,” he said, “and I ask no more of it than the here and the now of our human affair. But that I do ask with all my might, and if might can give it to me, I’ll get it.”

She looked up at him gravely, without challenge, with a sympathy too deep for pity.

“At all events,” he added slowly, “at all events, in so far, our lots are cast together.”

“Yes,” she assented.

His eyes studied hers; his keen mind questioned itself: Could a woman look so steadily, with such a clear, untroubled sympathy, upon such a love as his, were there no great emotion within her, controlling her, absorbing her, making her indifferent to all lesser appeals? Had this negative, this aimless, this ambiguous man, captured, without any fight for it, her strong, her reckless heart? So he questioned, while Eppie still answered his gaze with eyes that showed him nothing but their grave, deep friendship.

“So it’s a contest between life and death?” he said at last.

“Between me and Gavan you mean?”

The shield of their personal question had dropped from her again, and the quick flush was in her cheek.

“Oh, I come into it, too,” he ventured.

“You don’t, in any way, depend on it, Jim.”

“So you say.” His eyes still mercilessly perused her. “That remains to be seen. If you lose, perhaps I shall come into it.”

Eppie found no answer.

III

IT was night, and Eppie, Gavan, and Jim Grainger were on the lawn before the house waiting for a display of fireworks.

Grainger was feeling sore for his own shutting-out from the happy child-world of games and confidences that the other two inhabited, for it had been to Gavan that she had spoken of her love for fireworks and he who had at once sent for them.

Grainger was sore and his heart heavy, and not only it seemed to him, on his own account. Since the encounter in the library there had been a veil between him and Eppie, and through it he seemed to see her face as waiting the oncoming of some unknown fate. Grainger could not feel that fate, whatever the form it took, as a happy one.

She stood between them now, in her white dress, wrapped around with a long, white Chinese shawl, and the light from the open window behind them fell upon her hair, her neck, her shoulders, and the shawl’s soft, thick

embroideries that were like frozen milk.

Gavan and Grainger leaned against the deep creepers of the old walls, Gavan's cigarette a steady little point of light, the glow of Grainger's pipe, as he puffed, coming and going in sharp pulses of color.

Aunt Barbara sat within at the open window, and beyond the gates, at the edge of the moor, the general and the gardener, dark figures fitfully revealed by the light of lanterns, superintended the preparations.

The moment was like that in which one watches a poised orchestra, in which one waits, tense and expectant, for the fall of the conductor's bâton and for the first, sweeping note.

It seemed to break upon the stillness, sound made visible, when the herald rocket soared up from the dark earth, up to the sky of stars.

Bizarre, exquisite, glorious, it caught one's breath with the swiftness, the strength, the shining, of its long, exultant flight; its languor of attainment; its curve and droop; the soft shock of its blossoming into an unearthly metamorphosis of splendor far and high on the zenith.

The note was struck and after it the symphony followed.

Like a ravished Ganymede, the sense of sight soared amazed among dazzling ecstasies of light and movement.

Thin ribbons of fire streaked the sky; radiant sheaves showered drops of multitudinous gold; fierce constellations of color whirled themselves to stillness on the night's solemn permanence; a rain of stars drifted wonderfully, with the softness of falling snow, down gulfs of space. And then again the rockets, strong, suave, swift, and their blossoming lassitude.

Eppie gazed, silent and motionless, her uplifted profile like a child's in its astonished joy. Once or twice she looked round at Gavan and at Grainger,—always first at Gavan,—smiling, and speechless with delight. Her folded arms had dropped to her sides and the shawl fell straightly from her shoulders. She made one think of some young knight, transfixed before a heavenly vision, a benediction of revealed beauty. The trivial occasion lent itself to splendid analogies. The strange light from above bathed her from head to foot in soft, intermittent, heavenly color.

Suddenly, in darkness, Grainger seized her hand. She had hardly felt the pressure, short, sharp with all the exasperation of his worship, before it was gone.

She did not turn to look at him. More than the unjustifiableness of the action, its unexpectedness, she felt a pain, a perplexity, as for something mocking, incongruous. And as if in instinctive seeking she turned her eyes on Gavan and found that he was looking at her.

Was it, then, her eyes, seeking and perplexed, that compelled him; was it his own enfranchised impulse; was it only a continuation of fairy-land fitness, the child instinct of sharing in a unison of touch a mutual wonder? In the fringes of her shawl his hand sought and found her hand. Another rose of joy had expanded on the sky; and they stood so, hand in hand, looking up.

Eppie looked up steadily; but now the outer vision was but a dim symbol, a reflection, vaguely seen, of the inner vision that, in a miracle of accomplished growth, broke upon her. She did not think or know. Her heart seemed to dilate, to breathe itself away in long throbs, that worshiped, that trembled, that prayed. Her strength was turned to weakness and her weakness rose to strength, and, as she looked up at the sky, the stars, the dream-like constellations that bloomed and drifted away, universes made and unmade on the void, her mind, her heart, her spirit were all one prayer and its strength and its humility were one.

She had known that she loved him, but not till now that she loved him with a depth that passed beyond knowledge; she had known that he loved her, but not till now had she felt that all that lived in him was hers forever. His voice, his eyes, might hide, might deny, but the seeking, instinctive hand confessed, dumbly, to all.

She had drawn him to her by her will; she had held him back from death by her love. His beloved hand clasped hers; she would never let him go.

Looking up at the night, the stars, holding his hand, she gave herself to the new life, to all that it might mean of woe and tragedy. Let it lead her where it would, she was beside him forever.

Yet, though her spirit held the sky, the stars, her heart, suffocated and appalled with love, seemed to lie at his feet, and the inarticulate prayer, running through all, said only, over and over, "O God, God."

Meanwhile Grainger leaned against the wall, puffing doggedly at his pipe, unrepentant and unsatisfied.

"There, that is the end," Miss Barbara sighed. "How very, very pretty. But they have made me quite sleepy."

A few fumes still smoldered at the edge of the moor, and the night, like an obscure ocean, was engulfing the lights, the movements; after the radiance the darkness was thick, oppressive.

Eppie knew, as Gavan released her hand, that his eyes again sought hers, but she would not look at him. What could they say, here and now?

He went on into the house, and Grainger, lingering outside, detained her on the steps. "You forgive me?" he said.

She had almost forgotten for what, but fixing her eyes and thoughts upon him, she said, "Yes, Jim, of course."

"I couldn't stand it,—you were so lovely," said Grainger; "I didn't know that I was such a sentimental brute. But I had no business not to stand it. It's my business in life to stand it."

"I am so sorry, Jim," Eppie murmured. "You know, I can do nothing—except forgive you."

"I am not ungrateful. I know how good it is of you to put up with me. Do I bother you too much, Eppie?"

"No, Jim dear; you don't."

He stood aside for her to enter the house. He saw that, with all her effort to be kind, her thought passed from him. Pausing to knock the ashes of his pipe against the wall, he softly murmured, "Damn," before following her into the house.

Eppie, in her own room, put out her candle and went to the window.

Leaning out, she could see the soft maze of tree-tops emerge from the dim abyss beneath. The boughs of the pine-tree made the starlit sky pale with their blackness.

This was the window where she and Gavan had stood on the morning of Robbie's death. Here Gavan had shuddered, sobbing, in her arms. He had suffered, he had been able to love and suffer then.

The long past went before her, this purpose in it all, her purpose; in all the young, unconscious beginnings, in the reunion, in her growing consciousness of something to oppose, to conquer, to save. And to-night had consecrated her to that sacred trust. What lived in him was hers. But could she keep him in life? The memory, a dark shadow, of the deep indifference that she had seen in his contemplative eyes went with a chill over her.

Leaning out, she conquered her own deep fear, looking up at the stars and still praying, “O God, God.”

IV

SHE could not read his face next day. It showed a change, but the significance of the change was hidden from her. He knew that she knew; was that it? or did he think that they could still pretend at the unchanged fairy-tale where one clasped hands simply, like children? Or did he trust her to spare them both, now that she knew?

When they were alone, this, more than all, the pale, jaded face seemed to tell her, it would be able to hide nothing; but its strength was in evasion; he would not be alone with her.

All the morning he spent with the general and in the afternoon he went away, a book under his arm, down to the burn.

From the library window Eppie watched him go. She could see for a long time the flicker of his white figure among the distant birches.

She sat in a low chair in the deep embrasure of the window-seat, silent and motionless. She felt, after the night’s revelation, an apathy, mental and physical; a willing pause; a lull of the spirit, that rested in its accepted fate, should it be joyful or tragic. The very fact of such acceptance partook of both tragedy and joy.

Grainger was with her, walking, as usual, up and down the room, glancing at her as he passed and repassed.

He felt, all about him, within and without, the pressure of some crisis; and his ignorance, his intuitions, struggling within him, made a consciousness, oddly mingled, of sharp pain, deep dread, and, superficially, a suffocating irritation, continually rising and continually repressed.

Eppie’s aspect intensified the mingled consciousness. Her figure, in its thin dress of black and white, showed lassitude. With her head thrown back against the chair, her hands, long, white, inert, lying along the chair-arms, she looked out from the cool shadow of the room at the day, fierce in its blue and gold, its sunlight and its wind.

He had seen Gavan pass, so strangely alone; he had watched her watching of him. She was languid; but she was patient, she was strong. That was part of the suffocation, that such strength, such patience, should be devoted to ends so undeserving. More than by mere jealousy, though that seethed in him, he was oppressed by the bitter sense of waste, of the futile spending of noble capacity; for, more than all, she was piteous; there came the part of pain and dread, the presage of doom that weighed on his heart.

In her still figure, her steady look out at the empty, splendid vault of blue, the monotonous purple stretches of the moor, his unesthetic, accurate mind felt, with the sharp intuition that carried him so much further than any conscious appreciation, a symbol of the human soul contemplating the ominous enigma of its destiny. She made him dimly think of some old picture he had seen, a saint, courageous, calm, enraptured, in the luminous pause before a dark, accepted martyrdom. He did violence to the simile, shaking it off vehemently, with a clutch at the sane impatience of silly fancies.

Stopping abruptly before her, though hardly knowing for what end, he found himself saying, and the decisive words, as he heard, rather than thought them, had indeed the effect of shattering foolish visions, “I shall go to-day, Eppie.”

In seeing her startled, pained, expostulatory, he saw her again, very sanely, as an unfortunate woman bent on doing for herself and unable to hide her situation from his keen-sightedness. For really he didn’t know whether a hopeless love-affair or a hopeless marriage would the more completely “do” for her.

“My dear Jim, why to-day?” Eppie asked in a tone of kindest protest.

He was glad to have drawn her down to the solid ground of his own grievances. She hurt him less there.

“Why not to-day?” he retorted.

She replied that, if for no better reason, the weather was too lovely not to be enjoyed by them all together.

“Thanks, but I don’t care about the weather. Nor do I care,” Grainger went on, taking the sorry comfort that his own mere ill-temper afforded him, “to watch other people’s enjoyment—of more than weather. I’m not made of such selfless stuff as that.”

She understood, of course; perhaps she had all along understood what he was feeling more clearly than clumsy he had, and she met all that was beneath the mannerless words with her air of sad kindliness.

“You can share it, Jim.”

“No, I can’t share it. I share nothing—except the weather.”

She murmured, as she had the night before, that she was sorry, adding that she must have failed; but he interrupted her with: “It’s not that. You are all right. You give me all you can. It’s merely that you can’t give me anything I want. I came to see if there was any chance for me, and all I do see is that I may as well be off. I do myself no good by staying on,—harm, rather; you may begin to resent my sulkiness and my boorish relapses from even rudimentary good manners.”

“I have resented nothing, Jim. I can’t imagine ever resenting anything—from you.”

“Ah, that’s just the worst of it,” Grainger muttered.

“For your own sake,” Eppie went on, “you are perhaps wise to go. I own that I can’t see what happiness you can find in being with me, while you feel as you do.”

“While I feel as I do,” he repeated, not ironically, but as if weighing the words in a sort of wonder. “That ‘while’ is funny, Eppie. You are right. I don’t find happiness, and I came to seek it.” The “while” had cut deep. He paused, then added, eying her, “So I’ll go, and leave Palairet to find the happiness.”

Eppie was silent. Paler than before, her eyes dropped, she seemed to accept with a helpless magnanimity whatever he might choose to say. “You find me impertinent,”—Grainger, standing before her, clutched his arms across his chest and put his own thought of himself into the words,—“brutal.”

Without looking up at him she answered: “I am so fond of you, so near you, that I suppose I give you the right.”

The patient words, so unlike Eppie in their patience, the downcast eyes, were a torch to his exasperation.

“I can take it, then—the right?” he said. “I am near enough to say the truth and to ask it, Eppie?”

She rose and walked away from him.

With the sense of hot pursuit that sprang up in him he felt himself as ruthless as a boy, pushing through the thickets of reticence, through the very supplications of generosity, to the nest of her secret. It was not joy he sought, but his own pain, and to see it clearly, finally. He must see it. And when Eppie, her back to him, leaning her arm on the mantel and looking down into the empty cavern of the great chimney-place, answered, accepting all his implications, “Gavan hasn’t found any happiness,” he said, “He finds all that he asks for.”

It was as if he had wrenched away the last bough from the nest, and the words gave him, with their breathless determination, an ugly feeling of cruel, breaking malignity.

Eppie’s face was still turned from him so that he could not see how she bore the rifling, but in the same dulled and gentle voice she answered, “He doesn’t ask what you do.”

At that Grainger’s deepest resentment broke out.

“Doesn’t ask your love? No, I suppose not. The man’s a mollusk,—a wretched, diseased creature.”

He had struck at last a flash from her persistent gentleness. She faced him, and he saw that she tried to smile over deep anger.

“You say that because Gavan is not in love with me? It is a sick fancy that sees every man not in love with me as sick too.”

She had taken up a weapon at last, she really challenged him; and he felt, full on that quivering nerve of dread, that she defended at once herself and the man she loved from her own and from his unveiling.

It made a sort of rage rise in him.

“A man who cares for you,—a man who depends on you,—as he does,—a man whom you care for,—so much,—is a bloodless vampire if he doesn’t—respond.”

When he had driven the knife in like that, straight up to the hilt, he hardly knew whether his anger or his adoration were the greater; for, as if over a disabling wound, she bent her head in utter surrender, quite still for a moment, and then saying only, while she looked at him as if more sorry for him than for herself, “You hurt me, Jim.”

Tears of fury stood in his eyes. “You hurt, too. My love for you—a disease. *My* love, Eppie!”

“Forgive me.”

“Forgive you! I worship everything you say or do!”

“It was that it hurt too much to see—what you did, with your eyes.”

“Then—then—you don’t deny it,—if I have eyes to see, he too must see—how much you care?”

“I don’t deny it.”

“And if I have courage enough to ask it, you have courage enough to answer me? You love him, Eppie?”

He had come to her, his eyes threatening her, beseeching her, adoring her, all at once. She saw it all—all that he felt, and the furious pity that was deeper than his own deep pain. She could resent nothing, deny nothing. As she had said, he was so near.

She put her hand on his shoulder, keeping him from her, yet accepting him as near, and then all that she found to say—but it was in a voice that brought a rapt pallor to his face—was, “Dear Jim.”

He understood her—all that she accepted, all that she avowed. Her hand was that of a comrade in misfortune. She forgave brutality from a heart as stricken as his. She forgave even his cruelly clear seeing of her own desperate case—a seeing that had revealed to her that it was indeed very desperate. But if she too was stricken, she too was resolute, and she could do no more for him than look with him at the truth. Their eyes recognized so many likenesses in each other.

He took the hand at last in both his own, looking down at it, pressing it hard.

“Poor darling,” he said.

“No, Jim.”

“Yes; even if he loves you.”

“Even if he doesn’t love me—and he does love me in a strange, unwilling way; but even if he doesn’t love me,—as you and I mean love,—I am not piteous.”

“Even if he loves you, you are piteous.” All his savagery had fallen from him. His quiet was like the slow dropping of tears.

“No, Jim. There is the joy of loving. You know that.”

“You are more piteous than I, Eppie. You, *you*, to sue to such a man. He is the negation of everything you mean. To live with him would be like fighting for breath. If you marry him,—if you bring him to it,—he’ll suffocate you.”

“No, Jim,” she repeated,—and now, looking up, he saw in those beloved eyes the deep wells of solemn joy,—“I am the stronger.”

“In fighting, yes, perhaps. Not in every-day, passive life. He’ll kill you.”

“Even if he kills me he’ll not conquer me.”

He shook away the transcendentalism with a gentle impatience, “Much good that would do to me, who would only know that you were gone. Oh, Eppie!—“

He pressed and let fall her hand.

The words of the crisis were over. Anything else would be only, as it were, the filling in of the grave.

He had walked away from her to the window, and said presently, while he looked out: “And I thought that you were ambitious. I loved you for it, too. I didn’t want a wife who would acquiesce in the common lot or make a virtue

of incapacity. I wanted a woman who would rather fail, open-eyed, in a big venture than rest in security. You would have buckled the sword on a man and told him that he must conquer high places for you. You would have told him that he must crown you and make you shine in the world's eyes, as well as in his own. And I could do it. You are so worthy of all the biggest opportunities and so unfit for little places. It's so stupid, you know," he finished, "that you aren't in love with me."

"It is stupid, I own it," Eppie acquiesced.

He found a certain relief in following these bitterly comic aspects of their case and presently took it up again with: "I am so utterly the man for you and he is so utterly not the man. I don't mean that I'm big enough or enough worth your while, but at least I could give you something, and I could fight for you. He won't fight, for you, or for anything."

"I shall have to do all the fighting if I get him."

"You want him so that you don't mind anything else. I see that."

"Exactly. For a long time I didn't know how I loved him just because I had always taken all that you are saying for granted, in the funniest, most naïvely conceited way; I took it for granted that I was a very big person and that the man I married must stand for big opportunities. Now, you see," she finished, "he is my big opportunity."

He was accepting it all now with no protest. "Next to no money, I suppose?" he questioned simply.

"Next to none, Jim."

"It means obscurity, unless a man has ambition."

"It means all the things I've always hated." She smiled a little over these strange old hatreds.

Again a silence fell, and it was again Grainger who broke it.

"You may as well let me have the last drop of gall," he said. "Own that if it hadn't been for him you might have come to care for me."

Still he did not look at her, and it was easier, so, to let him have the last gulp.

"I probably should."

He meditated the mixed flavor for some moments; pure gall would have been easier to swallow. And he took refuge at last in school-boy phraseology. "I should like to break all the furniture in the room."

"I should like to break some, too," she rejoined, but she laughed out suddenly at this anticlimax, and, even before the unbroken heaviness of the gaze now turned on her, that comic aspect of their talk, the dearly, sanely comic, carried her laugh into a peal as boyish as his words.

Grainger still gazed at her. "I love that in you," he said—"your laugh. You could laugh at death."

"Ah, Jim," she said, smiling on, though with the laughter tears had come to her eyes, "it's a good deal more difficult to laugh at life, sometimes. And we both have to do a lot of living before we can laugh at death."

"A lot of living," he repeated. His stern, firm face had a queer grimace of pain at the prospect of it, and again she put out her hand to him.

"Let me count for as much as I can, always," she said. "You will always count for so much with me."

He had taken the hand, and he looked at her in a long silence that promised, accepted, everything.

But an appeal, a demand, wistful yet insistent, came into his silence as he looked—looked at the odd, pale, dear face, the tawny, russet hair, the dear, deep eyes.

"I'm going now," he said, holding to his breast the hand she had given him. "And I will ask one thing of you—a thing I've never had and never shall, I suppose, again."

"What is it, Jim?" But before his look she almost guessed and the guessing made her blanch.

"Let me take you in my arms and kiss you," said Grainger.

"Ah, Jim!" Seeing herself as cruel, ungenerous, she yet, in a recoil of her whole nature, seemed to snatch from him a treasure, unclaimed, but no longer hers to give.

Grainger eyed her. "You could. You would—if it weren't for him."

"You understand that, too, Jim. I could and would."

"He robs me of even that, then—your gift of courageous pity."

His comprehension had arrested the recoil. And now the magnanimity she felt in him, the tragic force of the love he had seen barred from her forever, set free in her something greater than compassion and deeper than little loyalties, deeper than the lesser aspects of her own deep love. It was that love itself that seemed, with an expansion of power, to encircle all life, all need, all sorrow, and to find joy in sacrificing what was less to what was greater.

He saw the change that, in its illumined tenderness, shut away his craving heart yet drew him near for the benison that it could grant, and as she said to him, "No, Jim, he shall not rob you," his arms went round her.

She shut her eyes to the pain there must be in enduring his passion of gratitude; but, though he held her close, kissing her cheeks, her brow, her hair, it was with a surprising, an exquisite tenderness.

The pain that came for her was when,—pausing to gaze long into her face, printing forever upon his mind the wonderful memory of what she could look like, for him—he kissed her lips; it came in a pang of personal longing; in a yearning, that rose and stifled her, for other arms, other kisses; and, opening her eyes, she saw, an ironic answer to the inner cry, Gavan's face outside, turned upon her in an instant of swift passing.

Grainger had not seen. He did not speak another word to her. The kiss upon her lips had been in farewell. He had had his supreme moment. He let her go and left her.

V

 AVAN came up from the burn, restless and dissatisfied.

He had wanted solitude, escape; but when he was alone, and walking beside the sun-dappled water, the loneliness weighed on him and he had seemed to himself walking with his own ghost, looking into eyes familiar yet alien, with curiosity and with fear. Was it he or that phantom of the solitude who smiled the long, still smile of mockery?

How he wanted something and how he wanted not to want; to be freed from the intolerable stirring and striving within him, as of a maimed thing, with half-atrophied wings, that could never rise and fly to its goal. It was last night that had wakened this turmoil, and as he walked his thought turned and turned about those moments under the dazzling sky when he had found her hand in the fringes of her shawl.

He knew that there had been a difference in the yielding of her hand, as he had known, in his own helpless stretching out for it in the darkness, another impulse than that of childlike tenderness. It had been as if some deep, primeval will beneath his own had stretched his hand out, searching in the dark; and with the strange blissfulness of so standing with her beneath the stars, there came a strange, new fear, as though he no longer knew himself and were become an automaton held by some incalculable force.

Wandering through the woods in the hope of reëntering nature's beneficent impersonality, he felt no anodynes—only that striving and stirring within him of maimed limbs and helpless wings.

There was no refuge in nature, and there was none in himself. The thought of Eppie as refuge did not form itself, but it was again in seeking, as if through darkness for he knew not what, that he turned to the house. And then, on all his tangled mood, fell the vibrating shock of that vision at the window.

With his quick looking away he did not know whether Eppie had seen him see. He went on, knowing nothing definite, until, suddenly, as if some fierce beast had seized him, he found himself struggling, choking, torn by a hideous, elemental jealousy.

He stood still in the afternoon sunlight as he became aware of this phenomenon in himself, his hands involuntarily clenched, staring as if at a palpable enemy.

The savage, rudimentary man had sprung up in him. He hated Grainger. He longed to beat him into the earth, to crush the breath out of him; and for a moment, most horrible of all,—a moment that seemed to set fangs in his throat,—he could not tell whether he more hated Eppie or more desired to tear her from the rival, to seize her and bear her away, with a passion untouched by any glamour.

And Gavan was conscious, through it all, that only inhuman heights made possible such crumbling, crashing falls into savagedom; conscious that Grainger could not have known such thoughts. They were as ugly as those of a Saint Anthony. Wholesome manhood would recoil from their debasement. He, too, recoiled, but the debasement was within him, he could not flee from it. The moment of realization, helpless realization, was long. Ultra-civilization stood and watched barbarian hordes swarm over its devastated ruins. Then, with a feeling of horrible shame, a shame that was almost a nausea, he went on into the house.

In his own room he sat down near the window, took his head in his hands, the gesture adding poignancy to his humiliation, and gazed at the truth. He had stripped himself of all illusion only to make himself the more helpless before its lowest forms. More than the realized love was the realized jealousy; more than the anguish at the thought of having lost her was the rage of the dispossessed, unsatisfied brute. Such love insulted the loved woman. He could not escape from it, but he could not feel the added grace and piety that, alone, could make it tolerable. From the fixed contemplation of his own sensations his mind dropped presently to the relief of more endurable thoughts. To feel the mere agony of loss was a dignifying and cleansing process. For, apparently, he had lost her. It was strange, almost unthinkable, that it should be so, and stranger the more he thought. He, who had never claimed, had no right to feel a loss. But he had not known till now how deep was his consciousness of their union.

She had long ago guessed the secret of the voiceless, ambiguous love that could flutter only as far as pain, that could never rise to rapture. She had guessed that behind its half-tortured, momentary smile was the impersonal Buddha-gaze; and because she so understood its inevitable doom she had guarded herself from its avowal—guarded herself and him. He had trusted her not to forget the doom, and not to let him forget it, for a moment. But all the time he had known that in her eyes he was captive to some uncanny fate, and that could she release him from his chains her love would answer his. He had been sure of it. Hence his present perplexity.

Perplexity began to resolve itself into a theory of commonplace expediency, and, feeling the irony of such resentment, he resented this tame sequel to their mute relationship.

Unconsciously, he had assumed that had he been able to ask her to be his wife she would have been able to consent. Her courage, in a sense, would have been the reward of his weakness, for what he would see in himself as weakness she would see as strength. Courage on her part it certainly would have needed, for what a dubious offering would his have been: glamour, at its best,—a helpless, drugged glamour,—and, at its worst, the mere brute instinct that, blessedly, this winding path of thought led him away from.

But she had probably come to despair of releasing him from chains, had come to see clearly that at the end of every avenue she walked with him the Buddha statue would be waiting in a serenity appalling and permanent; and, finding last night the child friendship dangerously threatened, discovering that the impossible love was dangerously real and menaced both their lives, she had swiftly drawn back, she had retreated to the obvious safeguards of an advantageous marriage. He couldn't but own that she was wise and right; more wise, more right,—there was the odd part of it, the unadjusted bit where perplexity stung him,—than he could have expected her to be. Ambition and the common-sense that is the very staff of life counted for much, of course; but he hadn't expected them to count so soon, so punctually, as it were.

Perhaps,—and his mind, disentangled from the personal clutch where such an interpretation might have hurt or horrified, safe once more on its Stylites pillar, dwelt quite calmly on this final aspect,—perhaps, with her, too, sudden glamour and instinct had counted, answering the appeal of Grainger's passion. He suspected the whole fabric of the love between men and women to be woven of these blind, helpless impulses,—impulses that created their own objects. Her mind, with its recognition of danger, had chosen Grainger as a fitting mate, and, in his arms, she had felt that justification by the senses that people so funnily took for the final sanctification of choice.

This monkish understanding of the snares of life was quite untouched by monkish reprobation; even the sense of resentment had faded. And it spoke much for the long training of his thought in the dissecting and destroying of

transitory desires that he was presently able to contemplate his loss—as he still must absurdly term it—with an icy tranquillity.

A breathlessness, as from some drastic surgical operation, was beneath it, but that was of the nature of a mere physical symptom, destined to readjust itself to lopped conditions; and with the full turning of his mind from himself came the fuller realization of how well it was with Eppie and a cold, acquiescent peace that, in his nature, was the equivalent for an upwelling of religious gratitude, for her salvation.

But the stress of the whole strange seizure, wrench and renouncement had told on him mentally and physically. Every atom of his being, as if from some violent concussion, seemed altered, shifted.

The change was in his face when, in the closing dusk of the day, he went down to the library. It was not steeled to the hearing of the news that must await him: such tension of endurance had passed swiftly into his habitual ease; but a look of death had crossed and marked it. It looked like a still, drowned face, sinking under deep waters, and Eppie, in her low chair near the window, where she had sat for many hours, saw in his eyes the awful, passionless detachment from life.

After his pause at the unexpected sight of her, sitting there alone, a pause in which she did not speak, although he saw that her eyes were on him, he went on softly down the room, glancing out at each window as he passed it; and he looked, as he went, like an evening moth, drifting, aimless, uncanny.

Outside, the moor stretched like a heavily sighing ocean, desolate and dark, to the horizon where, from behind the huge rim of the world, the sun's dim glow, a gloomy, ominous red, mounted far into the sky.

Within the room, a soft, magical color pervaded the dusk, touching Eppie's hair, her hands, the vague folds and fallings of her dress.

He waited for her to speak, though it seemed perfectly fitting that neither should. In the silence, the sadness of this radiant gloom, they needed no words to make more clear the accepted separation, and the silence, the sadness, were like a bleeding to quiet, desired death.

The day was dying, and the instable, impossible love was dying, too.

She had let go, and he quietly sank.

But when she spoke her words were like sharp air cutting into drowned lungs.

"I saw you pass this afternoon, Gavan."

From the farthest window, where he had paused, he turned to her.

"Did you, Eppie?"

"Didn't you see that I did?"

"I wasn't sure." He heard the flavor of helplessness in his own voice and felt in her a hard hostility, pleased to play with his helplessness.

"Why did you not speak of what you saw?" Her anger against him was almost like a palpable presence between them in the dark, glowing room. He began to feel that through some ugly blunder he was very much at her mercy, and that, for the first time, he should find little mercy in her; and, for the first time, too, a quick hostility rose in him to answer hers. It was as if he had tasted too deeply of release; all his strength was with him to fight off the threat of the returning grasp.

"Why should I?" he asked, letting her see in his gaze at her that just such a hard placidity would meet any interpretation she chose to give.

"Didn't you care to understand?"

"I thought that I did understand."

"What did you think, then?" Eppie asked.

He had to give her the helpless answer. "That you had accepted him."

He knew, now, that she hadn't, and that for him to have thought so was to have cruelly wronged her; and she took it in a long silence, as though she must give herself time to see it clearly, to adjust herself to it and to all that it meant—in him, for her.

What it meant, in her and for him, was filling his thoughts with a dizzy enough whirl of readjustment, and there mingled with it a strange after-flavor of the jealousy, and of the resentment against her; for, after all, though he had probably now an added reason for considering himself a warped wretch, there had been some reason for his mistake: if she hadn't accepted him, why had he seen her so?

"Jim is gone," she said at last.

"Because—It was unwillingly, then?"

The full flame of her scorn blazed out at that, but he felt, like an echo of tears in himself, that she would have burst into tears of wretchedness if she had not been able so to scorn him.

"Unwillingly! Why should you think him insolent and me helpless? Can you conceive of nothing noble?" she said.

"I am sorry, Eppie. I have been stupid."

"You have—more than stupid. He was going and he asked me for that. And I gave it—proudly."

"I am sorry," Gavan repeated. "I see, of course. Of course it was noble."

"You should be more than sorry. You knew that I did not love him."

"I am more than sorry. I am ashamed," he answered gravely.

He had the dignity of full contrition; but under it, unshaken after all, was the repudiation of the nearness that her explanation revealed. His heart throbbed heavily, for he saw, as never before, how near it was; yet he had never feared her less. He had learned too much that afternoon to fear her. He was sure of his power to save her from what he had so fully learned.

He looked away from her and for long out at the ebbing red, and it was the unshaken resolve that spoke at last. "But all the same I am sorry that it was only that. He would have made you happy."

"You knew that I did not love him," Eppie repeated.

"With time, as his wife, you might love him." Facing her, now, folding his arms, he leaned back against the mantel at his far end of the room. "I know that I've seemed odiously to belittle and misunderstand you, and I am

ashamed, Eppie—more ashamed than you can guess; but, in another way, it wasn't so belittling, either. I thought you very wise and courageous. I thought that you had determined to take the real thing that life offered you and to turn your back, for once and for all, on—on unreal things." He stopped at that, as though to let it have its full drop, and Eppie, her eyes still fixed on him from her distant chair, made no answer and no sign of dissent.

As he spoke a queer, effervescent blitheness had come to him, a light indifference to his own cruelty; and the hateful callousness of his state gave him a pause of wonder and interest. However, he couldn't help it; it was the reaction, no doubt, from the deep disgust of his abasement, and it helped him, as nothing else would have done, thoroughly to accomplish his task.

"He can give you all the things you need," he went on, echoing poor Grainger's *naïf* summing up of his own advantages. "He has any amount of money, and a very big future before him; and then, really above all, you do care for him so much. You see the same things in life. You believe in the same things; want the same things. If you would take him he would never fail you in anything."

Still her heavy silence was unbroken. He waited in vain for a sign from her, and in the silence the vibration of her dumb agony seemed to reach him, so that, with all the callousness, he had to conquer an impulse to go to her and see if she wept. But when he said, "I wish you would take him, Eppie," and she at last answered him, there were no tears in her voice.

"I will never take him."

"Don't say that," he replied. "One changes."

"Is that a taunt?"

"Not a taunt—a reminder."

She rose and came to him, walking down the long room, past the somber illuminations of the windows, straight to him. They stood face to face, bathed in the unearthly light. All their deep antagonism was there between them, almost a hatred, and the love that swords clashed over.

"You do not believe that of me," she said.

He was ready and unfaltering, and was able to smile at her, a bright, odd smile. "I believe it of any one."

It was love that eyed him—love more stern, more relentless in its silence than if she had spoken it, and never had she been so near as when, sending her clarion of open warfare across the abyss, she said, "I will never change—to you."

The words, the look,—a look of solemn defiance,—shattered forever the palace of pretence that they had dwelt in for so long. Till now, it might have stood for them. In its rainbow chambers they might still have smiled and sorrowed and eluded each other, only glanced through the glittering casements at the dark realities outside; but when the word of truth was spoken, casements, chambers, turrets, fell together and reality rushed in. She had spoken the word. After that it was impossible to pretend anything.

Gavan, among the wreck, had grown pale; but he kept his smile fixed, even while he, too, spoke the new language of reality.

"I am afraid of you, then."

"Of course you are afraid of me."

Still he smiled. "I am afraid *for* you."

"Of course you are. You have your moments of humanity."

"I have. And so I shall go to-morrow," said Gavan.

She looked at him in silence, her face taking on its haggard, unbeautiful aspect of strange, rocky endurance. And never had his mind been more alert, more mocking, more aloof from any entanglement of feeling than while he saw her love and his; saw her sorrow and his sorrow—his strange, strange sorrow that, like a sick, helpless child, longed, in its darkness, its loneliness, to hide its head on her breast and to feel her arms go round it. Love and sorrow were far, far away—so far that it was as if they had no part at all in himself, as if it were not he that felt them.

"Are you so afraid as that?" Eppie asked.

"After last night?" he answered. "After what I felt when I saw you here, with him? After this? Of course I am as afraid as that. I must flee—for your life, Eppie. I am its shadow—its fatal shadow."

"No, I am yours. Life is the shadow to you."

"Well, on both sides, then, we must be afraid," he assented.

She made no gesture, no appeal. Her face was like a rock. It was only that deep endurance and, under it, that deep threat. Never, never would she allure; never draw him to her; never build in her cathedral a Venusberg for him. He must come to her. He must kneel, with her, before her altar. He must worship, with her, her God of suffering and triumph. And, the dying light making her face waver before his eyes with a visionary strangeness, stern and angelic, he seemed to see, deep in her eyes, the burning of high, sacramental candles.

That was the last he saw. In silence she turned and went. And what she left with him was the sad, awed sense of beauty that he knew when watching kneeling multitudes bowed before the great myth of the Church,—in silence, beneath dim, soaring heights. He was near humanity in such moments of self-losing, when the cruder myth of the great world, built up by desire, slipped from it. And Eppie, in this symbolic seeing of her, was nearer than when he desired or feared her. Beauty, supreme and disenfranchising, he saw. He did not know what he felt.

Far away, on the horizon, in the gloomy waste of embers, the sun's deep core still burned, and in his heart was a deep fatigue, like the sky's slow smoldering to gray.

VI

GRAINGER had gone, and Gavan announced his departure for the next morning. The situation was simplified, he felt, by Eppie's somber preoccupation. He was very willing that she should be seen as a gloomy taker of scalps and that his own should be supposed to be hanging at her girdle. The resultant muteness and melancholy in the general and Miss Barbara were really a comfort. The dear old figures in the tapestry seemed fading to-night into mere plaintive shadows, fixing eyes of sad but unquestioning contemplation upon the latent tragedies of the foreground figures.

It was a comfort to have the tapestry so reticent and so submissive, but, all the same, it made the foreground tragedy, for his eyes, painfully distinct. He could look at nothing else. Eppie seemed to stand, with her broken and bleeding heart, in the very center of the design. For the first time he saw what the design was—saw all of it, from the dim reaches of the past, as working to this end.

The weaving of fate was accomplished. There she stood, suffering, speechless, and he, looking at her, fatal shuttle of her doom that he was, felt under all the ashes a dull throbbing.

After dinner he smoked a cigar with the general, who, tactfully, as to one obviously maimed, spoke only of distant and impersonal matters. Gavan left him over some papers in the quiet light of the smoking-room and went to the library. Eppie, with her broken heart, was not there. The night was very hot. By an open window Miss Barbara sat dozing, her hands upturned with an appealing laxity on her knees, sad even in her sleep.

Eppie was not there and she had not spoken one word to him since those last words of the afternoon. Perhaps she intended to speak no more, to see him no more. Pausing on the threshold, he was now conscious of a slow, rising misery.

If he was to be spared the final wrench, he was also to be robbed of something. He hadn't known, till then, of how much. He hadn't known, while she stood there before him, this fully revealed Eppie, this Eppie who loved far beyond his imagining, far beyond prudence, ambition, even happiness, what it would be not to see her again, to part from her speechlessly, and with a sort of enmity unresolved between them.

The cathedral simile was still with him, not in her interpretation of it, as the consecration of human love, but in his own, as a place of peace, where together they might still kneel in farewell.

But she barred him out from that; she wouldn't accept such peace. He could only submit and own that she was perhaps altogether right in risking no more battles and in proudly denying to him the opportunity of any reconciling. She was right to have it end there; but the core among the embers ached.

He wandered out into the dark, vague night, sorrowfully restless.

It was not a radiant night. The trees and the long undulations of the moorland melted into the sky, making all about a sea of enveloping obscurity. The moor might have been the sky but for its starlessness; and there were few stars to-night, and these, large and soft, seemed to float like helpless expanded flowers on a still ocean.

A night for wandering griefs to hide in, to feel at one with, and, with an instinct that knew that it sorrowed but hardly knew that it sought, Gavan went on around the house, through the low door in the garden wall, and into the garden.

Here all the warmth and perfume of the summer day seemed still to exhale itself in a long sigh like that of a peaceful sleeper. Earth, trees, fruit, and flowers gave out their drowsy balms. Veiled beauty, dreaming life, were beneath, above, about him, and the high walls inclosed a place of magic, a shadow paradise.

He walked on, past white phlox, white pansies, and white foxglove, through the little trellis where white jasmine starred its festoons of frail, melancholy foliage, and under the low boughs of the small, gnarled fruit-trees. Near the summer-house he paused, looking in at the darkness and seeing there the figures of the past—two children at play. His heart ached on dully, the smoldering sorrow rising neither to passionate regret nor to passionate longing, acquiescing in its own sorrow that was part of the vision. Moved by that retrospect, he stepped inside.

The sweet old odor, so well remembered, half musty, half fresh, of cobwebbed wood, lichened along the lintels and doorway beams, assailed him while he groped lightly around the walls, automatically reaching out his hand to the doll's locker, the little row of shelves, the low, rustic bench and the table that, he remembered as it rocked slightly under his touch, had always been unsteady. All were in their old, accustomed places, and among them he saw himself a ghost, some sightless, soundless creature hovering in the darkness.

The darkness and the familiar forms he evoked from it grew oppressive, and he stepped out again into the night, where, by contrast with the uncanny blindness, he found a new distinctness of form, almost of color, and where a memory, old and deep, seemed to seize him with gentle, compelling hands, in the fragrance of the white roses growing near the summer-house. Wine-like and intoxicating, it filled the air with magic; and he had gone but a few steps farther when, like a picture called up by the enchantment, he saw the present, the future too, it seemed, and, with a shock that for all its quiet violence was not unexpected, stood still to gaze, to feel in the one moment of memory and forecast all his life gathered into his contemplation.

Eppie sat on a low garden bench in the garden's most hidden corner. With the fresh keenness of sight he could see the clustering white roses on the wall behind her, see against them the darkness of her hair, the whiter whiteness of her dress, as she sat there with head a little bent, looking down, the long white shawl folded about her.

It was no longer the Eppie of the past, not even the Eppie of the present: the present was only that long pause. It was the future that waited there, silent, motionless, almost as if asleep; waited for the word and touch that would reveal it.

She had not heard his light step, and it seemed to be in the very stillness of his pause that the sense of his presence came to her. Raising her head she looked round at him.

He could only see the narrow oval of her face, but he felt her look; it seized him, compelling as the fragrance had been—compelling but not gentle. He felt it like firm hands upon him while he walked on slowly toward her, and not until he was near her, not until he had sat down beside her, did he see as well as feel her fixed and hostile gaze.

All swathed and infolded as she was, impalpable and unsubstantial in the darkness, her warm and breathing loveliness was like the aroma of a midnight flower. She was so beautiful sitting there, a blossoming of the darkness, that her beauty seemed aware of itself and of its appeal; and it was as if her soul, gazing at him, dominated the appeal; menaced him should he yield to it; yet loved, ah, loved him with a love the greater for the courage, the will, that could discipline it into this set, stern stillness.

Yes, here was the future, and what was he to do with it? or, rather, what was it to do with him? He was at her mercy.

He had leaned near her, his hand on the bench, to look into her eyes, and in a shaken, supplicating voice he said, “Eppie, Eppie, what do you want?”

Without change, looking deeply at him, she answered, “You.”

That crashed through him. He was lost, drowned, in the mere sense of beauty—the beauty of the courage that could so speak and so hold him at the point of a sword heroically drawn. And with the word the future seized him. He hid his face upon her shoulder and his arms went round her. Her breast heaved. For a moment she sat as if stricken with astonishment. Then, but with sternness, as of a just and angry mother, she clasped him, holding him closely but untenderly.

“I did not mean this,” she said.

“No; but you *are* it,” Gavan murmured.

She held him in the stern, untender clasp, her head drawn back from him, while, slowly, seeking her words over the tumult she subdued, she said: “It’s *you* I want—not your unwilling longing, not your unwilling love. I want you so that I can be really myself; I want you so that you can be really yourself.”

He strained her to him, hiding his face on her breast.

“Can’t you live? Can’t you be—if I help you?” she asked him.

For a long time he was silent, only pressing closely to her as though to hide himself from her questions—from his own thoughts.

He said at last: “I can’t think, Eppie. Your words go like birds over my head. Your suffering, my longing, hurt me; but it’s like the memory of a hurt. I am apart from it, even while I feel it. Even while I love you—oh, Eppie! Eppie!—I don’t care. But when we are like this—at last like this—I am caught back into it all, all that I thought I’d got over forever, this afternoon,—all the dreadful dream—the beautiful dream. It’s for this I’ve longed—you have known it: to hold you, to feel your breath on me, to dream with you. How beautiful you are, how sweet! Kiss me, Eppie,—darling, darling Eppie!”

“I will not kiss you. It would be real to me.”

He had raised his head and was seeing now the suffering of her shadowy eyes, the shadowy lips she refused him tragically compressed lest they should tremble. Behind her pale head and its heavy cloud of hair were the white roses giving out—how his mind reeled with the memory of it—the old, sweet, wine-like fragrance.

He closed his eyes to the vision, bending his lips to her hand, saying: “Yes, that’s why I wanted to spare you—wanted to run away.”

In the little distance now of his drawing from her, even while he still held her, his cheek on her hand, she could speak more easily.

“It is that that enrages me,—your mystic sickness. I am awake, but you aren’t even dreaming. You are drugged—drugged with thought not strong enough to find its real end. You have paralyzed yourself. No argument could cure you. No thought could cure you. Only life could cure you. You must get life, and to get it you must want it.”

“I don’t want it. I can’t want it. I only want you,” said Gavan, with such a different echo.

She understood, more fully than he, perhaps, the helpless words.

Above his bowed head, her face set, she looked out into the night. Her mind measured, coldly it seemed to her, the strength of her own faith and of his negation.

Her love, including but so far transcending all natural cravings, had its proud recoil from the abasement—oh, she saw it all!—that his limitation would bring to it. Yet, like the mother again, adapting truth to the child’s dim apprehension, leading it on by symbols, she brooded over her deep thoughts of redemption and looked clearly at all dangers and all hopes. Faith must face even his unspiritual seeing. Faith must endure his worse than pagan love. Bound to her by every natural tie, her strength must lift him, through them, to their spiritual aspect, to their reality. Life was her ally. She must put her trust in life. She consecrated herself to it anew. Let it lead her where it would.

The long moment of steady forecast had, after its agony of shame and fear, its triumph over both.

He felt the deep sigh that lifted her breast—it was almost a sob; but now her arms took him closely, gently, to her and her voice had the steadfastness, no longer of rejection, but of acceptance.

“Gavan, dream with me, then; that’s better than being drugged. Perhaps you will wake some day. There, I kiss you.”

She said it, and with the words his lips were on hers.

In the long moment of their embrace he had a strange intuition. Something was accomplished; some destiny that had led them to this hour was satisfied and would have no more to do with them. He seemed almost to hear this thought of finality, like the far, distant throbbing of a funeral bell, though the tolling only shut them the more closely into the silence of the wonderful moment.

Drugged? No, he was not drugged. But was she really dragging him down again, poor child, into her own place of dreams?

After the ecstasy, in the darkness of her breast and arms, he knew again the horrible surge of suffering that life had always meant to him. He saw, as though through deep waters, the love, the strife, the clinging to all that went; he saw the withering of dreams, and death, and the implacable, devouring thought that underlay all life and found its joy in the rending sorrow of the tragedy it triumphed over.

It was like a wave catching him, sucking him down into a gulf of blackness. The dizziness of the whirlpool reeled its descending spiral through his brain. Eppie was the sweet, the magical, the sinister mermaid; she held him, triumphing, and he clung to her, helpless; while, like the music of rushing waters, the horror and enchantment of life rang in his ears. But the horror grew and grew. The music rang on to a multitudinous world-cry of despair,—the cry of all the torments of the world turning on their rack of consciousness,—and, in a crash of unendurable anguish, came the thought of what it all would mean; what it all might mean now—now—unless he could save her; for he guessed that her faith, put to the test, might accept any risk, might pay any price, to keep him. And the anguish was for her.

He started from her, putting away her arms, yet pinioning her, holding her from him with a fierceness of final challenge and looking in the darkness into her darker eyes.

"Suppose I do," he said. "Suppose I marry you,"—for he must show her that some tests she should not be put to. "Suppose I take you and reënter the dream. Look at it, Eppie. Look at your life with me. It won't stay like this, you know. Look far, far ahead."

"I do," she said.

"No, no. You don't. You can't. It would, for a year, perhaps, perhaps only for a day, be dream and ecstasy,—ah, Eppie, don't imagine that I don't know what it would be,—the beauty, the joy, the forgetfulness, a radiant mist hanging over an abyss. Your will could keep me in it—for a year, perhaps. But then, the inevitable fading. See what comes. Eppie, don't you know, don't you feel, that I'm dead—dead?"

"No; not while you suffer. You are suffering now—for me."

"The shadow of a shadow. It will pass. No, don't speak; wait; as you said, we can't argue, we can't, now, go into the reasons of it. As you said, thought can't cure me; it's probably something far deeper than our little thought: it's probably the aspect we are fated to be by that one reality that makes and unmakes our dreams. And I'm not of the robust Western stuff that can work in its dream,—create more dream, and find it worth while. I've not enough life in me to create the illusion of realities to strive for. Action, to me, brings no proof of life's reality; it's merely a symptom of life, its result, not its cause or its sanction. And the power of action is dead in me because the desire of life is dead,—unless you are there to infect me with it."

"I am here, Gavan."

"Yes, you are,—can I forget it? And I'm yours—while you want me. But, Eppie, look at it; look at it straight. See the death that I will bring into the very heart of your life. See the children we may have; see what they would mean to you, and what they would mean to me: Transient appearances; creatures lovely and pathetic, perhaps, but empty of all the significance that you would find in them. I would have no love for our children, Eppie, as you understand love. We will grow old, and all the glamour will go—all the passion that holds us together now. I will be kind—and sorry; but you will know that, beside you, I watch you fading into listlessness, indifference, death, and know that even if I am to weep over you, dead, I will feel only that you have escaped forever, from me, from consciousness, from life. Eppie, don't delude yourself with one ray of hope. To me your faith is a mirage. And it all comes to that. Have you faith enough to foresee all the horror of emptiness that you'll find in me for the sake of one year of ecstasy?"

She had not moved while he spoke—spoke with a passion, a vehemence, that was like a sudden rushing into flame of a forest fire. There was something lurid and terrible in such passion, such vehemence, from him. It shook him as the forest is shaken and was like the ruinous force of the flames. She sat, while he held her, looking at it, as he had told her, "straight." She knew that she looked at everything. Her eyes went back to his eyes as she gave him her answer.

"Not for the sake of the year of ecstasy; in spite of it."

"For what, then?" he asked, stammering suddenly.

Her eyes, with their look of dedication, held him fast.

"For the sake of life—the long life—together; the life without the glamour, when my faith may altogether infect you."

"You believe, Eppie, that you are so much stronger than I?"

"It's not that I'm strong; but life is stronger than anything; life is the only reality. I am on the winning side."

"So you will hope?"

"Hope! Of course I hope. You could never make me stop hoping—not even if you broke my heart. You may call it a mirage if you like—that's only a word. I'll fill your trance with my mirage, I'll flood your whiteness with my color, and, God grant, you will feel life and know that you are at last awake. You are right—life *is* endless contest, endless pain; it's only at that price that we can have it; but you will know that it's worth the price. I see it all, Gavan, and I accept. I accept not only the certainty of my own suffering, but the certainty of yours."

Through the night they gazed at each other, his infinite sadness, her infinite valor. Their faces were like strange, beautiful dreams—dreams holding in their dimness such deep, such vivid significance. They more saw the significance—that sadness, that valor—than its embodiment in eyes and lips.

It was finally with a sense of realization so keen that it trembled on the border of oblivion, of the fainting from over-consciousness, that Gavan once more laid his head upon her breast. He, too, accepting, held her close,—held her and all that she signified, while, leaning above him, her cheek against his hair, she said in a voice that over its depth upon depth of steadiness trembled at last a little: "I see it all. Imagine what a faith it is that is willing to make the thing it loves most in the whole world suffer—suffer horribly—so that it may live."

He gave a long sigh. At its height emotion dissolved into a rapt contemplation. "How beautiful," he said.

"Beautiful?" she repeated, with almost a gentle mockery for the word. "Well, begin with beauty if you will. You will find that—and more besides—as an end of it all."

VII

SHE left him in the garden. They had talked quietly, of the past, of their childhood, and, as quietly, of the future—their immediate marriage and departure for long, wonderful voyages together. His head lay on her breast, and often, while they spoke of that life together, of the homecoming to Cheylesford Lodge and when he heard her voice tremble a little, he kissed the dear hand he held.

When she rose at last and stood before him, he said, still holding her hands, that he would sit on there in the darkness and think of her.

She felt the languor of his voice and told him that he was very tired and would do much better to go to bed and forget about her till morning; but, looking up at her, he shook his head, smiling: "I couldn't sleep."

So she left him; but, before she went, after the last gazing pause in which there seemed now no discord, no strife, nothing to hide or to threaten, she had suddenly put her arms around his neck, bending to him and murmuring, “Oh, I love you.”

“I seem to have loved you forever, Eppie,” he said.

But, once more, in all the strange oblivion of his acceptance, there had been for him in their kiss and their embrace the undertone of anguish, the distant tolling—as if for something accomplished, over forever—of a funeral bell.

He watched her figure—white was not the word for it in this midnight world—pass away into the darkness. And, as she disappeared, the bell seemed still to toll, “Gone. Gone. Gone.”

So he was alone.

He was alone. The hours went by and he still sat there. The white roses near him, they, too, only a strange blossoming of darkness, symbolized, in their almost aching sweetness, the departed presence. He breathed in their fragrance; and, as he listened to his own quiet breaths, they seemed those of the night made conscious in him. The roses remembered for him; the night breathed through him; it was an interchange, a mingling. Above were the deep vaults of heaven, the profundities of distance, the appalling vastness, strewn with its dust of stars. And it, too, was with him, in him, as the roses were, as his own breath came and went.

The veils had now lifted from the night and it was radiant, all its stars visible; and veil after veil seemed drifting from before his soul.

A cool, light breeze stirred his hair.

Closing his eyes, at last, his thought plunged, as his sight had plunged, into gulf under gulf of vacancy.

After the unutterable fatigue, like the sinking under anæsthesia, of his final yielding, he could not know what was happening to him, nor care. It had often happened before, only never quite like this. It was, once more, the great peace, lapping wave after wave, slow, sliding, immeasurable waves, through and through him; dissolving thought and feeling; dissolving all discord, all pain, all joy and beauty.

The hours went by, and, as they went, Eppie’s face, like a drift of stars, sank, sank into the gulf. What had he said to her? what promised? Only the fragrance of the roses seemed to remember, nothing in himself. For what had he wanted? He wanted nothing now. Her will, her life, had seized him; but no, no, no,—the hours quietly, in their passing seemed to say it,—they had not kept him. He had at last, after a lifelong resistance, abandoned himself to her, and the abandonment had been the final step toward complete enfranchisement. For, with no effort now of his own at escape, no will at all to be free, he had left her far behind him, as if through the waters of the whirlpool his soul, like a light bubble, had softly, surely, risen to the air. It had lost itself, and her.

He thought of her, but now with no fear, no anguish. A vast indifference filled him. It was no longer a question of tearing himself from her, no longer a question of saving himself and her. There was no question, nor any one to save. He was gone away, from her, from everything.

When the dawn slowly stole into the garden, so that the ghosts of day began to take shape and color, Gavan rose among them. The earth was damp with dew; his hair and clothes were damp. Overhead the sky was white, and the hills upon it showed a flat, shadowless green. Between the night’s enchantments of stillness, starriness, veiled, dreaming beauty and the sunlit, voluble enchantments of the day,—songs and flights of birds, ripple and shine of water, the fugitive, changing color of land and sky,—this hour was poor, bare, monotonous. There wasn’t a ray of enchantment in it. It was like bleak canvas scenery waiting for the footlights and a decorated stage.

Gavan looked before him, down the garden path, shivering a little. He was cold, and the sensation brought him back to the old fact of life, that, after all, was there as long as one saw it. The coming of the light seemed to retwist once more his own palely tinted prism of personality, and with the cold, with the conscious looking back at the night and forward to the day, came a long, dull ache of sadness. It was more physical than mental; hunger and chill played their part in it, he knew, while, as the prism twined its colors, the fatiguing faculty of analysis once more built up the world of change and diversity. He looked up at the pale walls of the old house, laced with their pattern of creepers. The pine-tree lay like an inky shadow across it, and, among the branches, were the windows of Eppie’s room, the window where he and she had stood together on the morning of Robbie’s death—a white, dew-drenched morning like this. There she slept, dear, beautiful, the shadow of life. And here he stood, still living, after all, in their mutual mirage; still to hurt her. He didn’t think of her face, her voice, her aspect. The only image that came was of a shadow—something darkly beautiful that entranced and suffocated, something that, enveloping one, shut out peace and vacancy.

His cold hands thrust into his pockets, he stood thinking for a moment, of how he would have to hurt her, and of how much less it was to be than if what they had seen in the night’s glamour had been possible.

He wondered why the mere fact of the night’s revelation—all those passing-bell hours—had made it so impossible for him to go on, by sheer force of will, with the play. Why couldn’t he, for her sake, act the lifelong part? In her arms he would know again the moments of glamour. But, at the mere question, a sickness shuddered through him. He saw now, clearly, what stood in the way: suffering, hideous suffering, for both of them—permanent, all-pervading suffering. The night had proved too irrevocably that any union between them was only momentary, only a seeming, and with her, feeling her faith, her hope, her love, he could know nothing but the undurable discord of their united and warring notes.

Could life and death be made one flesh?

The horror of the thought spurred him from his rigor of contemplation. That, at least, had been spared her. Destiny, then, had not meant for them that final, tragic consummation.

He threaded his way rapidly among the paths, the flower-beds, under the low boughs of the old fruit-trees. She had left the little door near the morning-room open for him, and through it he entered the still house.

It wasn’t escape, now, from her, but from that pressing horror, as of something, that, unless he hastened, might still overtake them both. Yet outside her door he paused, bent his head, listened with a strange curiosity, helpless before the nearness of that loved, that dreaded being, the warring note that he sought yet fled from.

She slept. Not a sound stirred in the room.

He closed his eyes, seeing, with a vividness that was almost a hallucination, her face, her wonderful face,

asleep, with the dark rivers of her hair flowing about it.

And, fixed as he was in his frozen certainty of truth, he felt, once more like the striking of a hand across a harp, a longing, wild and passionate, to enter, to take her, sleeping, in his arms, to see her eyes open on him; to hide himself in life, as in the darkness of her breast and arms, and to forget forever the piercing of inexorable thought.

He found that his hand was on the lock and that he was violently trembling.

It was inexorable thought, the knowledge of the horror that would await them, that conquered the leap of blind instinct.

Half an hour later a thin, intense light rimmed all the eastern hills, and a cold, clear cheerfulness spread over the earth. The moors were purple and the sky overhead palely, immaculately blue. About the tall lime-trees the rooks circled, cawing, and a skylark sang far and high, a floating atom of ecstasy.

And in the clearness Gavan's figure showed, walking rapidly away from the white house, down the road that led through the heather and past the birch-woods, walking away from it forever.

VIII

RAINGER stood in Eppie's little sitting-room, confronting, as Gavan had confronted the spring before, Miss Allen's placidly sewing figure.

The flowers against which her uneventful head now bent were autumnal. Thickly growing Michaelmas daisies, white and purple, screened the lower section of the square outside. Above were the shabby tree-tops, that seemed heavily painted upon an equally solid sky. The square was dusty, the trees were dusty, the very blue of the sky looked grimed with dust.

The hot air; the still flowers, not stirred by a breath of breeze; Miss Allen's figure, motionless but for its monotonously moving hand, were harmonious in their quiet, and in contrast to them Grainger's pervasive, restless, irritable presence was like a loud, incessant jangling.

He walked back and forth; he picked up the photographs on the mantel-shelf, the books on the table, flinging them down in a succession of impatient claps. He threw himself heavily into chairs,—so heavily that Miss Allen glanced round, alarmed for the security of the furniture,—and he asked her half a dozen times if Miss Gifford would be in at five.

"She is seldom late," or, "I expect her then," Miss Allen would answer in the tone of mild severity that one might employ toward an unseemly child over whom one had no authority.

But though there was severity in Miss Allen's voice, the acute glances that she stole at the clamorous guest were not unsympathetic. She placed him. She pitied and she rather admired him. Even while emphasizing the dismay of her involuntary starts when the table rattled and the chairs groaned, she felt a satisfaction in these symptoms of passion; for that she was in the presence of a passion, a hopeless and rather magnificent passion, she made no doubt. She associated such passions with Eppie,—it was trailing such clouds of glory that she descended upon the arid life of the little square,—and none had so demonstrated itself, none had so performed its part for her benefit. She was sorry that it was hopeless; but she was glad that it was there, in all its Promethean wrathfulness, for her to observe. Miss Allen felt pretty sure that this was the nearest experience of passion she would ever know.

"In at five, as a rule, you say?" Grainger repeated for the fourth time, springing from the chair where, with folded arms, he had sat for a few moments scowling unseeingly at the pansies.

He stationed himself now beside her and, over her head, stared out at the square. It was at once alarming and delightful,—as if the Titan with his attendant vulture had risen from his rock to join her.

"You've no idea from which direction she is coming?"

"None," said Miss Allen, decisively but not unkindly. "It's really no good for you to think of going out to meet her. She is doing a lot of different things this afternoon and might come from any direction. You would almost certainly miss her." And she went on, unemphatically, but, for all the colorless quality of her voice, so significantly that Grainger, realizing for the first time the presence of an understanding sympathy, darted a quick look at her. "She gets in at five, just as I go out. She knows that I depend on her to be here by then."

So she would not be in the way, this little individual. She made him think, now that he looked at her more attentively, as she sat there with her trimly, accurately moving hand, of a beaver he had once seen swiftly and automatically feeding itself; her sleek head, her large, smooth front teeth, were like a beaver's. It was really very decent of her to see that he wanted her out of the way; so decent that, conscious of the link it had made between them, he said presently, abruptly and rather roughly, "How is she?"

"Well, of course she has not recovered," said Miss Allen.

"Recovered? But she wasn't actually ill." Grainger had a retorting air.

"No; I suppose not. It was nervous prostration, I suppose—if that's not an illness."

"This isn't the place for her to recover from nervous prostration in." He seemed to fasten an accusation, but Miss Allen understood perfectly.

"Of course not. I've tried to make her see that. But,"—she was making now quite a chain of links,—"she feels she must work, must lose herself in something. Of course she overdoes it. She overdoes everything."

"Overwork, do you think? The cause, I mean?"

Grainger jerked this out, keeping his eyes on the square.

Miss Allen, not in any discreet hesitation, but in sincere uncertainty, paused over her answer.

"It couldn't be, quite. She was well enough when she went away in the summer, though she really isn't at all strong,—not nearly so strong as she looks. She broke down, you know, at her uncle's, in Scotland"; and Miss Allen added, in a low-pitched and obviously confidential voice, "I think it was some shock that nobody knows anything about."

Grainger stood still for some moments, and then plunging back into the little room, he crossed and re-crossed it with rapid strides. Her guessing and his knowledge came too near.

Only after a long pause did Miss Allen say, “She’s really frightfully changed.” The clock was on the stroke. Rising, gathering up her work, dropping, with neat little clicks, her scissors, her thimble, into her work-box, she added, and she fixed her eyes on him for a moment as she spoke, “Do, if you can, make her—“

“Well, what? Go away?” he demanded. “I’ve no authority—none. Her people ought to kidnap her. That’s what I’d do. Lift her out of this hole.”

Miss Allen’s eyes dwelt on his while she nerved herself to a height of adventurous courage that, in looking back at it, amazed her. “Here she is,” she said, and almost whispering, “Well, kidnap her, then. That’s what she needs—some one stronger than herself to kidnap her.”

She slid her hand through his, a panic of shyness overtaking her, and darted out, followed by the flutter of a long, white strip of muslin.

Grainger stood looking at the open door, through which in a moment Eppie entered.

His first feeling was one of relief. He did not, in that first moment, see that she was “frightfully changed.” Even her voice seemed the same, as she said with all the frank kindness of her welcome and surprise, “Why, Jim, this is good of you,” and all her tact was there, too, giving him an impression of the resource and flexibility of happy vitality, in her ignoring by glance or tone of their parting.

She wore, on the hot autumn day, a white linen frock, the loose bodice belted with green, a knot of green at her throat, and, under the white and green of her little hat, her face showed color and its dear smile.

Relief was so great, indeed, that Grainger found himself almost clinging to her hand in his sudden thankfulness.

“You’re not so ill, then,” he brought out. “I heard it—that you had broken down—and I came back. I was in the Dolomites. I hadn’t had news of you since I left.”

“So ill! Nonsense,” said Eppie, giving his hand a reassuring shake and releasing her own to pull off her soft, loose gloves. “It was a breakdown I had, but nothing serious. I believe it to have been an attack of biliousness, myself. People don’t like to own to liver when they can claim graceful maladies like nervous prostration,—so it was called. But liver, only, I fear it was. And I’m all right now, thank goodness, for I loathe being ill and am a horrid patient.”

She had taken off her hat, pushing back her hair from her forehead and sinking into a chair that was against the light. The Michaelmas daisies made a background for the bronze and white of her head, for, as she rested, the color that her surprise and her swift walking had given her died. She was glad to rest, her smile said that, and he saw, indeed, that she was utterly tired.

Suddenly, as he looked at her, seeing the great fatigue, seeing the pallor, seeing the smile only stay as if with determination, the truth of Miss Allen’s description was revealed to him. She was frightfully changed. Her smile, her courage, made him think of a *danse macabre*. The rhythm, the gaiety of life were there, but life itself was gone.

The revelation came to him, but he felt himself clutch it silently, and he let her go on talking.

She went on, indeed, very volubly, talking of her breakdown, of how good the general and her aunt had been to her, and of how getting back to her work had picked her up directly.

“I think I’ll finally pitch my tent here,” she went on. “The interest grows all the time,—and the ties, the responsibility. One can’t do things by half measures; you know that, thorough person that you are. I mustn’t waste my mite of income by gadding about. I’m going to chuck all the rest and give myself altogether to this.”

“You used to think that the rest helped you in this,” said Grainger.

“To a certain extent it did, and will, for I’ve had so much that it will last me for a long time.”

“You intend to live permanently down here?”

“I shall have my holidays, and I shall run up to civilization for a dinner or two now and then. It’s not that I’ve any illusions about my usefulness or importance. It’s that all this is so useful to me. It’s something I can do with all my might and main, and I’ve such masses of energy you know, Jim, that need employment. And then, though of course one works at the wrong side of the tapestry and has to trust that the pattern is coming right, I do believe that, to a certain extent, it does need me.”

He leaned back in his chair opposite her, listening to the voice that rattled on so cheerfully. With his head bent, he kept that old gaze upon her and clutched the clearer and clearer revelation: Eppie—Eppie in torment; Eppie shattered;—Eppie—why, it was as if she sat there before him smiling and rattling over a huge hole in her chest. And, finally, the consciousness of the falsity in her own tone made her falter a little. She couldn’t continue so glibly while his eyes were saying to her: “Yes; I see, I see. You are wounded to death.” But if she faltered it was only, in the pause, to look about for another shield.

“And you?” she said. “Have you done a great deal of climbing? Tell me about yourself, dear Jim.”

It was a dangerous note to strike and the “dear Jim” gave away her sense of insecurity. It was almost an appeal to him not to see, or, at all events, not to tell her that he saw.

“Don’t talk about me,” he said very rudely. She knew the significance of his rudeness.

“Let us talk of whatever you will.”

“Of you, then. Don’t try to shut me out, Eppie.”

“Am I shutting you out?”

“You are trying to. You have succeeded with the rest, I suppose; but, as of course you know, you can’t succeed with me. I know too much. I care too much.”

His rough, tense voice beat down her barriers. She sat silent, oddly smiling.

He rose and came to her and stood above her, pressing the tips of his fingers heavily down upon her shoulder.

“You must tell me. I must know. I won’t stand not knowing.”

Motionless, without looking up at him, she still smiled before her.

“That—that coward has broken your heart,” he said. There were tears in his voice, and, looking up now, the smile stiffened to a resolute grimace, she saw them running down his cheeks. But her own face did not soften. With a glib dryness she answered:

“Yes, Jim; that’s it.”

“Oh—“ It was a long growl over her head.

She had looked away again, and continued in the same crisp voice: “I’d lie if I could, you may be sure. But you put it so, you look so, that I can’t. I’m at your mercy. You know what I feel, so I can’t hide it from you. I hate any one, even you, to know what I feel. Help me to hide it.”

“What has he done?” Grainger asked on the muffled, growling note.

“Gavan? Done? He’s done nothing.”

“But something happened. You aren’t where you were when I left you. You weren’t breaking down then.”

“Hope deferred, Jim—“

“It’s not that. Don’t fence, to shield him. It’s not hope deferred. It’s hope dead. Something happened. What was it?”

“All that happened was that he went, when I thought that he was going to stay, forever.”

“He went, knowing—“

“That I loved him? Yes; I told him.”

“And he told you that he didn’t love you?”

“No, there you were wrong. He told me that he did. But he saw what you saw. So what would you have asked of him?”

“Saw what I saw? What do you mean?”

“That he would suffocate me. That he was the negation of everything I believed in.”

“You mean to tell me,” said Grainger, his fingers still pressing down upon her shoulder, “that it all came out,—that you had it there between you,—and then that he ran away?”

“From the fear of hurting my life. Yes.”

“From the fear of life itself, you mean.”

“If that was it, wasn’t it enough?”

“The coward. The mean, bloodless coward,” said Jim Grainger.

“I let you say it because I understand; it’s your relief. But he is not a coward. He is only—a saint. A saint without a saint’s perquisites. A Spinoza without a God. An imitator of Christ without a Christ. I have been thinking, thinking it all out, seeing it all, ever since.”

“Spinoza! What has he to do with it! Don’t talk rot, dear child, to comfort yourself.”

“Be patient, Jim. Perhaps I can help you. It calms one when one understands. I have been reading up all the symptoms. Listen to this, if you think that Spinoza has nothing to do with it. On the contrary, he knew all about it and would have seen very much as Gavan does.”

She took up one of the books that had been so frequently flung down by Grainger in his waiting and turned its pages while he watched her with the enduring look of a mother who humors a sick child’s foolish fancies.

“Listen to Spinoza, Jim,” she said, and he obediently bent his lowering gaze to the task. “‘When a thing is not loved, no strife arises about it; there is no pang if it perishes, no envy if another bears it away, no fear, no hate; yes, in a word, no tumult of soul. These things all come from loving that which perishes.’ And now the Imitation: ‘What canst thou see anywhere which can continue long under the sun? Thou believest, perchance, that thou shalt be satisfied, but thou wilt never be able to attain unto this. If thou shouldst see all things before thee at once, what would it be but a vain vision?’ And this: ‘Trust not thy feeling, for that which is now will be quickly changed into somewhat else.’”

Her voice, as she read on to him,—and from page to page she went, plucking for him, it seemed, their cold, white blossoms, fit flowers to lay on the grave of love,—had lost the light dryness as of withered leaves rustling. It seemed now gravely to understand, to acquiesce. A chill went over the man, as though, under his hand, he felt her, too, sliding from warm life into that place of shadows where she must be to be near the one she loved.

“Shut the books, for God’s sake, Eppie,” he said. “Don’t tell me that you’ve come to see as he has.”

She looked up at him, and now, in the dear, deep eyes, he saw all the old Eppie, the Eppie of life and battle.

“Can you think it, Jim? It’s because I see so clearly what he sees that I hate it and repudiate it and fight it with every atom of my being. It’s that hatred, that repudiation, that fight, that is life. I believe in it, I’m for it, as I never believed before, as I never was before.”

He was answering her look, seeing her as life’s wounded champion, standing, shot through, on the ramparts of her beleaguered city. She would shake her banner high in the air as she fell. The pity, the fury, the love of his eyes dwelt on her.

And suddenly, under that look, her eyes closed. She shrank together in her chair; she bowed down her head upon her knees, covering her face.

“Oh, Jim,” she said, “my heart is broken.”

He knew that he had brought her to this, that never before an onlooker had she so fallen into her own misery. He had forced her to show the final truth that, though she held the banner, she was shot through and through. And he could do nothing but stand on above her, his face set to a flintier, sharper endurance, as he heard the great sobs shake her.

He left her presently and walked up and down the room while she wept, crouched over upon her knees. It was not for long. The tempest passed, and, when she sat in quiet, her head in her hands, her face still hidden, he said, “You must set about mending now, Eppie.”

“I can’t mend. I’ll live; but I can’t mend.”

“Don’t say it, Eppie. This may pass as—well—other things in your life have passed.”

“Do you, too, talk Spinoza to me, Jim?”

“Damn Spinoza! I’m talking life to you—the life we both believe in. I’m not telling you to turn your back on it because it has crippled you. You won’t, I know it. I know that you are brave. Eppie, Eppie,”—before her, now, he bent to her, then knelt beside her chair,—“let me be the crutch. Let me have the fragments. Let’s try, together, to mend them. I ask nothing of you but that trying, with my help, to mend. He isn’t for you. He’s never for you. I’ll say no

more brutalities of him. I'll use your own words and say that he can't,—that his saintship can't. So won't you, simply, let me take you? Even if you're broken for life, let me have the broken Eppie."

She had never, except in the moment of the kiss, seen this deepest thing in him, this gentleness, this reverent tenderness that, under the bullying, threatening, angry aspects of his love, now supplicated with a beauty that revealed all the angel in humanity. Strange—she could think it in all her sorrow—that the thing that held him to her was the thing that held her to Gavan, the deep, the mysterious, the unchangeable affinity. For him, as for her, there could be but one, and for that one alone could these depths and heights of the heart open themselves.

"Jim, dear, dear Jim, never, never," she said. "I am his, only his, fragments, all of me, for as long as I am I."

Grainger hid his face on the arm of her chair.

"And he is mine," said Eppie. "He knows it, and that is why he fears me. He is mine forever."

"I am glad for your sake that you can believe that," Grainger muttered, "and glad, for my own, that I don't."

"Why, Jim?"

"I could hardly live if I thought that you were going to love him in eternity and that I was, forever, to be shut away. Thank goodness that it's only for a lifetime that my tragedy lasts."

She closed her eyes to these perplexities, laying her hand on his.

"I don't know. We can only think and act for this life. It's this we have to shape. Perhaps in eternity, really in eternity, whatever that may mean, I won't need to shut you out. Dear, dear Jim, it's hard that it must seem that to you now. You know what I feel about you. And who could feel it as I do? We are in the same boat."

"No, for he, at least, loves no one else. You haven't that to bear. As far as he goes,—and it isn't far,—he is yours. We are not at all in the same boat. But that's enough of me. I suppose I am done for, as you say, forever."

He had got upon his feet, and, as if at their mutual wreckage, looked down with a face that had found again its old shield of grimness.

"As for you," he went on, "I sha'n't, at all events, see you suffocating. You must mend alone, then, as best you can. Really, you're not as tragic as you might have been."

Then, after this salutary harshness, and before he turned from her to go, he added, as once before, "Poor darling."

IX

GRAINGER hardly knew why he had come and, as he walked up the deep Surrey lane from the drowsy village station, his common-sense warred with the instinct, almost the obsession, that was taking him to Cheylesford Lodge. Eppie had been persistently in his thoughts since their meeting of the week before, and from his own hopelessness had sprung the haunting of a hope for her. Turn from it as he would, accuse himself angrily of madness, morbidity, or a mere tendency to outrageous meddling,—symptomatic of shattered nerves,—he couldn't escape it. By day and night it was with him, until he saw himself, in a lurid vision, as responsible for Eppie's very life if he didn't test its validity. For where she had failed might not a man armed with the strength of his selfless love succeed?

He had said, in his old anger, that as Gavan's wife Gavan would kill her; but he hadn't really meant that literally; now, literally, the new fear had come that she might die of Gavan's loss. Her will hadn't snapped, but her vitality was like the flare of the candle in its socket. To love, the eremite of Cheylesford Lodge wouldn't yield—perhaps for very pity's sake; but if he were made to see the other side of it?—Grainger found a grim amusement in the paradox—the lover, in spite of love, might yield to pity. Couldn't his own manliness strike some spark of manliness from Gavan? Couldn't he and Eppie between them, with their so different appeals,—she to what was soft, he to what was tough,—hoist his tragically absurd head above water, as it were, into the air of real life, that might, who knew? fill and sustain his aquatic lungs? It gave him a vindictive pleasure to see the drowning simile in the most ludicrous aspects—Gavan, draped in the dramatic robes of his twopenny-halfpenny philosophies, holding his head in a basin of water, there resolved to die. Grainger felt that as far as his own inclinations were concerned it would have given him some pleasure to help to hold him under, to see that, while he was about it, he did it thoroughly; but the question wasn't one of his own inclinations: it was for Eppie's sake that he must try to drag out the enraptured suicide. It was Eppie, bereft and dying,—so it seemed to him in moments of deep fear,—whose very life depended on the submerged life. And to see if he could fish it up for her he had come on this undignified, this ridiculous errand.

Very undignified and very ridiculous he felt the errand to be, as he strode on through the lane, its high hedgerows all dusty with the autumn drought; but he was indifferent enough to that side of it. He felt no confusion. He was completely prepared to speak his mind.

Coming to a turning of the lane, where he stood for a moment, uncertain, at branching paths, he was joined by an alert little parson who asked him courteously if he could direct him on his way. They were both, it then appeared, going to Cheylesford Lodge; and the Reverend John Best, after introducing himself as the rector of Dittleworth parish, and receiving Grainger's name, which had its reverberations, with affable interest, surmised that it was to another friend of Mr. Palairet's that he spoke.

"Yes. No. That is to say, I've known him after a fashion for years, but seen little of him. Has he been here all summer?" Grainger asked, as they walked on.

It seemed that Gavan had only returned from the Continent the week before, but Mr. Best went on to say, with an evidently temperamental loquacity, that he was there for most of the time as a rule and was found a very charming neighbor and a very excellent parishioner.

This last was a rôle in which Gavan seemed extremely incongruous, and Grainger looked his perplexity, murmuring, "Parishioner?"

"Not, I fear, that we can claim him as an altogether orthodox one," Mr. Best said, smiling tolerantly upon his companion's probable narrowness. "We ask for the spirit, rather than the letter, nowadays, Mr. Grainger; and Mr. Palairet is, at heart, as good a Christian as any of us, of that I am assured: better than many of us, as far as living the

Christian life goes. Christianity, in its essence, is a life. Ah, if only you statesmen, you active men of the world, would realize that; would look past the symbols to the reality. We, who see life as a spiritual organization, are able to break down the limitations of the dry, self-centered individualism that, for so many years, has obscured the glorious features of our faith. And it is the spirit of the Church that Mr. Palairet has grasped. Time only is needed, I am convinced, to make him a partaker of her gifts."

Grainger walked on in a sardonic silence, and Mr. Best, all unsuspecting, continued to embroider his congenial theme with illustrations: the village poor, to whom Mr. Palairet was so devoted; the village hospital, of which he was to talk over the plans to-day; the neighborly thoughtfulness and unfailing kindness and charity he showed toward high and low.

"Palairet always seemed to me very ineffectual," said Grainger when, in a genial pause, he felt that something in the way of response was expected of him.

"Ah, I fear you judge by the worldly standard of outward attainment, Mr. Grainger."

"What other is there for us human beings to judge by?"

"The standard of our unhappy modern plutocratic society is not that by which to measure the contemplative type of character."

Grainger felt a slight stress of severity in the good little parson's affability.

"Oh, I think its standards aren't at all unwholesome," he made reply. He could have justified anything, any standard, against Gavan and his standards.

"Unwholesome, my dear Mr. Grainger? That is just what they are. See the beauty of a life like our friend's here. It judges your barbarous Christless civilization. He lives laborious, simple days. He does his work, he has his friends. His influence upon them counts for more than an outside observer could compute. Great men are among them. I met Lord Taunton at his house last Sunday. A most impressive personality. Even though Mr. Palairet has abandoned the political career, one can't call him ineffectual when such a man is among his intimates."

"The monkish type doesn't appeal to me, I own."

"Ah, there you touch the point that has troubled me. It is not good for a man to live alone. My chief wish for him is that he may marry. I often urge it on him."

"Well done."

"One did hear," Mr. Best went on, his small, ruddy face taking on a look of retrospective reprobation, "that there was an attachment to a certain young woman—the tale was public property—only as such do I allude to it—a very fashionable, very worldly young woman. I was relieved indeed when the rumor came to nothing. He escaped finally, I can't help fancying it, this summer. I was much relieved."

"Why so, pray?"

"I am rural, old-fashioned, my dear young man, and that type of young woman is one toward which, I own it, I find it difficult to feel charitably. She represents the pagan, the Christless element that I spoke of in our modern world. Her charm could not have been a noble one. Had our friend here succumbed to it, she could only have meant disaster in his life. She would have urged him into ambition, pleasure-seeking, dissipation. Of course I only cite what I have heard in my quiet corner, though I have had glimpses of her, passing with a friend, a very frivolous person, in a motor-car. She looked completely what I had imagined."

"If you mean Miss Gifford," said Grainger, trying for temperateness, "I happen to know her. She is anything but a pleasure-seeker, anything but frivolous, anything, above all, but a pagan. If Palairet had been lucky enough to marry her it would have been the best thing that ever happened to him in his life, and a very dubious thing for her. She is a thousand times too good for him."

"My dear Mr. Grainger, pardon me; I had no idea that you knew the lady. But," Mr. Best had flushed a little under this onslaught, "I cannot but think you a partisan."

"Do you call a woman frivolous who spends half of her time working in the slums?"

"That is a phase, I hear, of the ultra-smart young woman. But no doubt rumor has been unjust. I must beg you to pardon me."

"Oh, don't mind that. You heard, no doubt, the surface things. But no one who knows Miss Gifford can think of them, that's all."

"And if I have been betrayed into injustice, I hope that you will reconsider a little more charitably your impression of Mr. Palairet," said Mr. Best, in whom, evidently, Grainger's roughness rankled.

Grainger laughed grimly. "I can't consider him anything but a thousand times too bad for Miss Gifford."

They had reached the entrance to Cheylesford Lodge on this final and discordant phrase. Mr. Best kept a grieved silence and Grainger's thoughts passed from him.

He had had in his life no training in appreciation and was indifferent to things of the eye, but even to his insensible nature the whole aspect of the house that they approached between high yew hedges, its dreaming quiet, the tones of its dim old bricks, the shadowed white of paneled walls within, spoke of pensive beauty, of a secure content in things of the mind. He felt it suddenly as oppressive and ominous in its assured quietness. It had some secret against the probes of feeling. Its magic softly shut away suffering and encircled safely a treasure of tranquillity.

That was the secret, that the magic; it flashed vaguely for Grainger—though by its light he saw more vividly his own errand as ridiculous—that a life of thought, pure thought, if one could only achieve it, was the only *safe* life. Where, in this adjusted system of beauty and contemplation, would his appeals find foothold?

He dashed back the crowding doubts, summoning his own crude forces.

The man who admitted them said that Mr. Palairet was in the garden, and stepping from opened windows at the back of the house, they found themselves on the sunny spaces of the lawn with its encompassing trees and its wandering border of flowers.

Gavan was sitting with a book in the shade of the great yew-tree. In summer flannels, a panama hat tilted over his eyes, he was very white, very tenuous, very exquisite. And he was the center of it all, the secret securely his, the magic all at his disposal.

Seeing them he rose, dropping his book into his chair, strolling over the miraculous green to meet them, showing no haste, no hesitation, no surprise.

“I’ve come on particular business,” Grainger said, “and I’ll stroll about until you and Mr. Best are done with the hospital.”

Mr. Best, still with sadness in his manner, promised not to keep Mr. Palairet long and they went inside.

Grainger was left standing under the yew-tree. He took up Gavan’s book, while the sense of frustration, and of rebellion against it, rose in him. The book was French and dealt with an obscure phase of Byzantine history. Gavan’s neat notes marked passages concerning some contemporary religious phenomena.

Grainger flung down the book, careless of crumpled leaves, and wandered off abruptly, among the hedges and into the garden. It was a very different garden from the old Scotch one where a sweet pensiveness seemed always to hover and where romance whispered and beckoned. This garden, steeped in sunlight, and where plums and pears on the hot rosy walls shone like jewels among their crisp green leaves, was unshadowed, unhaunted, smiling and decorous—the garden of placid wisdom and Epicurean calm. Grainger, as he walked, felt at his heart a tug of strange homesickness and yearning for that Northern garden, its dim gray walls and its disheveled nooks and corners. Were they all done with it forever?

By the time he had returned to the lawn Gavan was just emerging from the house. They met in the shadow of the yew.

“I’m glad to see you, Grainger,” Gavan said, with a smile that struck Grainger as faded in quality. “This place is a sort of harbor for tired workers, you know. You should have looked me up before, or are you never tired enough for that?”

“I don’t feel the need of harbors, yet. One never sees you in London.”

“No, the lounging life down here suits me.”

“Your little parson doesn’t see it in that light. He has been telling me how you live up to your duties as neighbor and parishioner.”

“It doesn’t require much effort. Nice little fellow, isn’t he, Best? He tells me that you walked up together.”

“We did,” said Grainger, with his own inner sense of grim humor at the memory. “I should think you would find him rather limited.”

“But I’m limited, too,” said Gavan, mildly. “I like being with people so neatly adapted to their functions. There are no loose ends about Best; nothing unfulfilled or uncomfortable. He’s all there—all that there is of him to be there.”

“Not a very lively companion.”

“I’m not a lively companion, either,” Gavan once more, with his mild gaiety, retorted.

Grainger at this gave a harsh laugh. “No, you certainly aren’t,” he agreed.

They had twice paced the length of the yew-tree shadow and Gavan had asked no question; and Grainger felt, as the pause grew, that Gavan never would ask questions. Any onus for a disturbance of the atmosphere must rest entirely on himself, and to disturb it he would have to be brutal.

He jerked aside the veils of the placid dialogue with sudden violence. “I’ve seen Eppie,” he said.

He had intended to use her formal name only, but the nearer word rushed out and seemed to shatter the magic that held him off.

Gavan’s face grew a shade paler. “Have you?” he said.

“You knew that she had been ill?”

“I heard of it, recently, from General Carmichael. It was nothing serious, I think.”

“It will be serious.” Grainger stood still and gazed into his eyes. “Do you want to kill her?”

It struck him, when he had said it, and while Gavan received the words and seemed to reflect on them, that however artificial his atmosphere might be he would never evade any reality brought forcibly into it. He contemplated this one and did not pretend not to understand.

“I want Eppie to be happy,” he said presently.

“Happy, yes. So do I,” broke from Grainger with a groan.

They stood now near the great trunk of the yew-tree, and turning away, striking the steel-gray bark monotonously with his fist, he went on: “I love her, as you know. And she loves you. She told me—I made her tell me. But any one with eyes could see it; even your gossiping little fool of a parson here had heard of it—was relieved for your escape. But who cares for the cackling? And you have crippled her, broken her. You have tossed aside that woman whose little finger is worth more to the world than your whole being. I wish to God she’d never seen you.”

“So do I,” Gavan said.

“I’d kill you with the greatest pleasure—if it could do her any good.”

There was relief for Grainger in getting out these fundamental things.

“Yes,—I quite understand that. So would I,” Gavan acquiesced,—“kill myself, I mean,—if it would do her any good.”

“Don’t try that. It wouldn’t. She’s beyond all help but one. So I am here to put it to you.”

The still, hot day encompassed their shadow and with its quiet made more intense Grainger’s sense of his own passion—passion and its negation, the stress between the two. Their words, though they spoke so quietly, seemed to fill the world.

“I am sorry,” Gavan said; “I can do nothing.”

Grainger beat at the tree.

“You love her.”

“Not as she must be loved. I only want her, when I am selfish. When I think for her I have no want at all.”

“Give her your selfishness.”

“Ah, even that fades. That’s what I found out. I can’t count on my selfishness. I’ve tried to do it. It didn’t work.”

Grainger turned his bloodshot eyes upon him; these moments under the yew-tree, that white figure with its pale smile, its comprehending gravity confronting him, would count in his life, he knew, among its most racking memories.

"I consider you a madman," he now said.

"Perhaps I am one. You don't think it for Eppie's happiness to marry a madman?"

"My God, I don't know what to think! I want to save her."

"But so do I," Gavan's voice had its first note of eagerness. "*I* want to save her. And I want her to marry you. That's her chance, and yours—and mine, though mine really doesn't count. That's what I hope for."

"There's no hope there."

"Have patience. Wait. She will, perhaps, get over me."

Grainger's eyes, with their hot, jaded look of baffled purpose, so selfless that it transcended jealousy and hatred, were still on him, and he thought now that he detected on the other's face the strain of some inner tension. He wasn't so dead, then. He was suffering. No, more yet, and the final insight came in another vague flash that darkly showed the trouble at the heart of all the magic, the beauty, he, too, more really than Eppie, perhaps, was dying for love. Madman, devoted madman that he was, he was dying for love of the woman from whom he must always flee. It was strange to feel one's sane, straightforward mind forced along this labyrinth of dazed comprehension, turning in the cruelly knotted paradox of this impossible love-story. Yet, against his very will, he was so forced to follow and almost to understand.

There wasn't much more to say. And he had his own paradoxical satisfaction in the sight of the canker at the core of thought. So, at all events, one wasn't safe even so.

"She won't get over you," he said. "It isn't a mere love-affair. It's her life. She may not die of it; that's a figure of speech that I had no right, I suppose, to use. At all events, she'll try her best not to die. But she won't get over you."

"Not even if I get out of the way forever?"

Gavan put the final proposition before him, but Grainger, staring at the sunlight, shook his head.

"The very fact that you're alive makes her hold the tighter. No, you can't save her in that way. I wish you could."

X

GRAINGER had had his insight, but, outwardly, in the year that followed, Gavan's life was one of peace, of achieved escape.

The world soon ceased to pull at him, to plead or protest. With a kindly shrug of the shoulders the larger life passed him by as one more proved ineffectual. The little circle that clung about him, as the flotsam and jetsam of a river drift from the hurrying current around the stability and stillness of a green islet, was, in the main, composed of the defeated or the indifferent. One or two cynical fighters moored their boats, for a week-end, at his tranquil shores, and the powerful old statesman who believed nothing, hoped nothing, felt very little, and who, behind his show-life of patriotic and hard-working nobleman, smiled patiently at the whole foolish comedy, was his most intimate companion. To the world at large, Lord Taunton was the witty Tory, the devoted churchman, the wise upholder of all the hard-won props of civilization; to Gavan, he was the skeptical and pessimistic metaphysician; together they watched the wheels go round.

Mayburn came down once or twice to see his poor, queer, dear old Palairet, and in London boasted much of the experience. "He's too, too wonderful," he said. "He has achieved a most delicate, recondite harmony. One never heard anything just like it before, and can't, for the life of one, tell just what the notes are. Effort, constant effort, amidst constant quiet and austerity. Work is his passion, and yet never was any creature so passionless. He's like a rower, rowing easily, indefatigably, down a long river, among lilies, while he looks up at the sky."

But Mayburn felt the quiet and austerity a little disturbing. He didn't, after all, come to look at quiet and austerity unless some one were there to hear him talk about them; and his host, all affability, never seemed quite there.

So a year, more than a year, went by.

It was on an early spring morning that Gavan found on his breakfast-table a letter written in a faltering hand,—a hand that faltered with the weeping that shook it,—Miss Barbara's old, faint hand.

He read, at first, hardly comprehending.

It was of Eppie she wrote: of her overwork—they thought it must be that—in the winter, of the resultant fragility that had made her succumb suddenly to an illness contracted in some hotbed of epidemic in the slums. They had all thought that she would come through it. People had been very kind. Eppie had so many, many friends. Every one loved her. She had been moved to Lady Alicia's house in Grosvenor Street. She, Aunt Barbara, had come up to town at once, and the general was with her.

It was with a fierce impatience that he went on through the phrases that were like the slow trickling of tear after tear, as if he knew, yet refused to know, the tragedy that the trivial tears flowed for, knew what was coming, resented its insufferable delay, yet spurned its bare possibility. At the end, and only then, it came. Her strength had suddenly failed. There was no hope. Eppie was dying and had asked to see him—at once.

A bird, above the window open to the dew and sunlight, sang and whistled while he read, a phrase, not joyous, not happy, yet strangely full of triumph, of the innocent praise of life. Gavan, standing still, with the letter in his hand, listened, while again and again, monotonously, freshly, the bird repeated its song.

He seemed at first to listen quietly, with pleasure, appreciative of this heraldry of spring; then memory, blind, numbed from some dark shock, stirred, stole out to meet it—the memory of Eppie's morning voice on the hillside, the voice monotonous yet triumphant with its sense of life; and at each reiteration, the phrase seemed a dagger plunged into his heart.

Oh, memory! Oh, cruel thought! Cruel life!

After he had ordered the trap, and while waiting for it, he walked out into the freshness and back and forth,

over and over across the lawn, with the patient, steady swiftness of an animal caged and knowing that the bars are about it. So this was to be the end. But, though already he acquiesced, it seemed in some way a strange, inapt ending. He couldn't think of Eppie and death. He couldn't see her dead. He could only see her looking at death.

THE early train he caught got him to London by eleven, and in twenty minutes he was in Grosvenor Street. He had wired from the country, and Miss Barbara met him in the drawing-room of the house, hushed in its springtime gaiety. She was the frail ghost of her shadowy old self, her voice tremulous, her face blurred with tears and sleepless nights. Yet he saw, under the woe, the essential listlessness of age, the placidity beneath the half-mechanical tears. "Oh, Gavan," she said, taking his hand and holding it in both her own—"Oh, Gavan, we couldn't have thought of this, could we, that she would go first." And that his own face showed some sharp fixity of woe he felt from its reflection on hers—like a sword-flash reflected in a shallow pool.

She told him that it was now an affair of hours only. "I would have sent for you long ago, Gavan; I knew—I knew that you would want it. But she wouldn't—not while there was hope. I think she was afraid of hurting you. You know she had never been the same since—since—"

"Since what?" he asked, knowing.

"Since you went away. She was so ill then. Poor child! She never found herself, you see, Gavan. She did not know what she wanted. She has worn herself out in looking for it."

Miss Barbara was very ignorant. He himself could not know, probably Eppie herself didn't know, what had killed her, though she had so well known what she wanted; but he suspected that Grainger had been right, and that it was on him that Eppie's life had shattered itself.

Her will, evidently, still ruled those about her, for when Miss Barbara had led him up-stairs she said, pausing in the passage, that Eppie would see him alone; the nurse would leave them. She had insisted on that, and there was now no reason why she should not have her way. The nurse came out to them, telling him that Miss Gifford waited; and, just before she let him go, Miss Barbara drew his head down to hers and kissed him, murmuring to him to be brave. He really didn't know whether he were more the felon, or more the victim that she thought him. Then the door closed behind him and he was alone with Eppie.

Eppie was propped high on pillows, her hair twisted up from her brows and neck and folded in heavy masses on her head.

In the wide, white room, among her pillows, so white herself, and strange with a curious thinness, he had never received a more prodigious impression of life than in meeting her eyes, where all the forces of her soul looked out. So motionless, she was like music, like all that moves, that strives and is restless; so white, she was like skies at dawn, like deep seas under sunlight. In the stillness, the whiteness, the emptiness of the room she was illusion itself, life and beauty, a wonderful rainbow thing staining "the white radiance of eternity." And as if, before its final shattering, every color flamed, her whole being was concentrated in the mere fact of its existence—its existence that defied death. A deep, quiet excitement, almost a gaiety, breathed from her. In the tangled rivers of her hair, the intertwined currents of dark and gold winding in a lovely disorder,—in the white folds of lawn that lay so delicately about her; in the emerald slipping far down her finger, the emeralds in her ears, shaking faintly with her ebbing heart-beats, there was even a sort of wilful and heroic coquetry. She was, in her dying, triumphantly beautiful, yet, as always, through her beauty went the strength of her reliance on deeper significances.

She lay motionless as Gavan approached her, and he guessed that she saved all her strength. Only as he took the chair beside her, horror at his heart, the old familiar horror, she put out her hand to him.

He took it silently, looking up, after a little while, from its marvelous lightness and whiteness to her eyes, her smile. Then, at last, she spoke to him.

"So you think that you have got the better of me at last, don't you, Gavan dear?" she said. Her voice was strange, as though familiar notes were played on some far-away flute, sweet and melancholy among the hills. The voice was strange and sad, but the words were not. In them was a caress, as though she pitied his pity for her; but the old antagonism, too, was there—a defiance, a willingness to be cruel to him. "I did play fair, you see," she went on. "I wouldn't have you come till there was no danger, for you, any more. And now this is the end of it all, you think. You will soon be able to say of me, Gavan,

"her words to Scorn
Are scattered, and her mouth is stopt with Dust!"

His hand shut involuntarily, painfully, on hers, and as though his breath cut him, he said, "Don't—don't, Eppie."

But with her gaiety she insisted: "Oh, but let us have the truth. You must think it. What else could you think?" and, again with the note of pity that would atone for the cruel lightness, "Poor Gavan! My poor, darling Gavan! And I must leave you with your thoughts—your empty thoughts, alone."

He had taken a long breath over the physical pang her words had inflicted, and now he looked down at her hand, gently, one after the other, as though unseeingly, smoothing her fingers.

"While I go on," she said.

"Yes, dear," he assented.

"You humor me with that. You are so glad, for me, that I go with all my illusions about me. Aren't you afraid that, because of them, I'll be caught in the mill again and ground round and round in incarnations until, only after such a long time, I come out all clean and white and selfless, not a scrap of dangerous life about me—Alone with the Alone."

He felt now the fever in her clearness, the hovering on the border of hallucination. The colors flamed indeed, and her thoughts seemed to shoot up in strange flickerings, a medley of inconsequent memories and fancies strung on their chain of unnatural lucidity.

He answered with patient gentleness, "I'm not afraid for you, Eppie. I don't think all that."

"Nor I for myself," she retorted. "I love the mill and its grindings. But what you think,—I know perfectly what you think. You can't keep it from me, Gavan. You can't keep anything from me. And I found something that said it all. I can remember it. Shall I say it to you?"

He bowed his head, smoothing her hand, not looking up at her while, in that voice of defiance, of fever, yet of such melancholy and echoing sweetness, she repeated:

"Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie,
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord?

"Elle est dans ma voix, la criarde!
C'est tout mon sang, ce poison noir!
Je suis le sinistre miroir
Où la mégère se regarde!

"Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et le victime et le bourreau!"

She paused after it, smiling intently upon him, and he met the smile to say:

"That's only one side of it, dear."

"Ah, it's a side I know about, too! Didn't I see it, feel it? Haven't I been all through it—with you, for you, because of you? Ah, when you left me—when you left me, Gavan—"

Still she smiled, with brilliant eyes, repeating,

"Qui me secoue et qui me mord."

He was silent, sitting with his pallid, drooping head; and suddenly she put her other hand on his, on the hand that gently, mechanically, smoothed her fingers.

"You caress me, you try to comfort me,—while I am tormenting you. It's strange that I should want to torment you. Is it that I'm so afraid you sha'n't feel? I want you to feel. I want you to suffer. It is so horrible to leave you. It is so horrible to be afraid—sometimes afraid—that I shall never, never see you again. When you feel, when you suffer, I am not so lonely. But you feel nothing, do you?"

He did not answer her.

"Will you ever miss me, Gavan?"

He did not answer.

"Won't you even remember me?" she asked.

And still he did not answer, sitting with downcast eyes. And she saw that he could not, and in his silence, of a dumb torture, was his reply. He looked the stricken saint, pierced through with arrows. And which of them was the victim, which the executioner?

With her question a clearness, quieter, deeper, came to her, as though in the recoil of its engulfing anguish she pushed her way from among vibrating discords to a sudden harmony that, in holy peace, resolved them all in unison. Her eyelids fluttered down while, for an instant, she listened. Yes, under it all, above it all, holding them all about, there it was. She seemed to see the pain mounting, circling, flowing from its knotted root into strength and splendor. But though he was with her in it he was also far away,—he was blind, and deaf,—held fast by cruel bonds.

"Look at me," she commanded him gently.

And now, reluctantly, he looked up into her eyes.

They held him, they drew him, they flooded him. With the keenness of life they cut into his heart, and like the surging up of blood his love answered hers. As helpless as he had ever been before her, he laid his head on her breast, his arms encircling her, while, with closed eyes, he said: "Don't think that I don't feel. Don't think that I don't suffer. It's only that;—I have only to see you;—something grasps me, and tortures me—"

"Something," she said, her voice like the far flute echo of the voice that had spoken on that night in the old Scotch garden, "that brings you to life—to God."

"Oh, Eppie, what can I say to you?" he murmured.

"You can say nothing. But you will have to wake. It will have to come,—the sorrow, the joy of reality,—God—and me."

It was his face, with closed eyes, with its stricken, ashen agony, that seemed the dying face. Hers, turned gently toward him, had all the beneficence, the radiance of life. But when she spoke again there was in her voice a tranced stillness as though already it spoke from another world.

"You love me, Gavan."

"I love you. You have that. That is yours, forever. I long for you, always, always,—even when I think that I am at peace. You are in everything: I hear a bird, and I think of your voice; I see a flower, or the sky, and it's of your face I think. I am yours, Eppie—yours forever."

"You make me happy," she said.

"Eppie, my darling Eppie, die now, die in my arms, dearest—in your happiness."

"No, not yet; I can't go yet—though I wish it, too," she said. "There are still horrid bits—dreadful dark places—like the dreadful poem—the poem of you, Gavan—where I lose myself; burning places, edges of pain, where I fight to find myself again; long, dim places where I dream—dream—. I won't have you see me like that; you might think that you watched the scattering of the real me. I won't have you remember me all dim and broken."

Her voice was sinking from her into an abyss of languor, and she felt the swirl of phantom thoughts blurring her mind even while she spoke.

As on that far-away night when he held her hand and they stood together under the stars, she said, speaking now her prayer, "O God! God!"; and seeming in the effort of her will to lift a weight that softly, inexorably, like the lid of a tomb, pressed down upon her, "I am here," she said. "You are mine. I will not be afraid. Remember me. So

good-by, Gavan."

"I will remember," he said.

His arms still held her. And through his mind an army seemed to rush, galloping, with banners, with cries of lamentations, agony, regret, passionate rebellion. It crashed in conflict, blood beneath it, and above it tempests and torn banners. And the banners were desperate hopes riddled with bullets; and the blood was love poured out and the tempest was his heart. It was, he thought, even while he saw, listened, felt, the last onslaught upon his soul. She was going—the shadow of life was sliding from her—and from him, for she was life and its terror and beauty. Above the turmoil was the fated peace. He had won it, unwillingly. He could not be kept from it even by the memory that would stay.

But though he knew, and, in knowing, saw his contemplative soul far from this scene of suffocating misery, Eppie, his dear, his beautiful, was in his arms, her eyes, her lips, her heart. He would never see her again.

He raised his head to look his last, and, like a faint yet piercing perfume, her soul's smile still dwelt on him as she lay there speechless. For the moment—and was not the moment eternity?—the triumph was all hers. The moment, when long, long past, would still be part of him and her triumph in it eternal. To spare her the sight of his anguish would be to rob her. Anguish had been and was the only offering he could make her. He felt—felt unendurably, she would see that; he suffered, he loved her, unspeakably; she had that, too, while, in their last long silence, he held her hands against his heart. And her eyes, still smiling on him with their transcendent faith, showed that her triumph was shadowless.

HE heard next day that she had died during the night.

Peace did not come to him for long; the wounds of the warring interlude of life had been too deep. He forgot himself at last in the treadmill quiet of days all serene laboriousness, knowing that it could not be for many years that he should watch the drama. She had shattered herself on him; but he, too, had felt that in himself something had broken. And he forgot the wounds, except when some sight or sound, the song of a bird in Spring, a spray of heather, a sky of stars, startled them to deep throbbing. And then a hand, stretched out from the past, would seize him, a shudder, a pang, would shake him, and he would know that he was alone and that he remembered.

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