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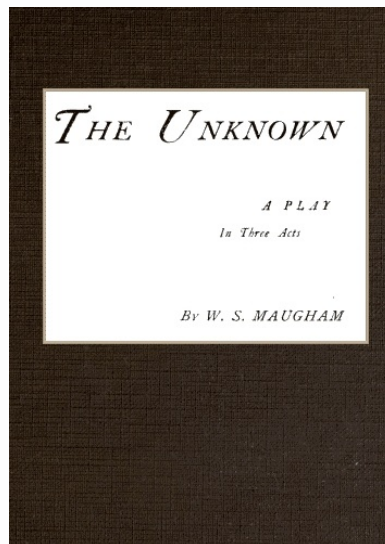
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK *THE UNKNOWN; A PLAY IN THREE ACTS* ***



THE UNKNOWN

CHARACTERS

ACT I

ACT II

ACT III

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

PLAYS (Uniform with this Volume):

THE EXPLORER

MRS. DOT

A MAN OF HONOUR

PENELOPE

JACK STRAW

LADY FREDERICK

THE TENTH MAN

SMITH

LANDED GENTRY

NOVELS:

THE EXPLORER
THE MAGICIAN
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND
THE MOON AND SIXPENCE
MRS. CRADDOCK
OF HUMAN BONDAGE

T H E U N K N O W N

A PLAY

In Three Acts

By W. S. MAUGHAM

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
MCMXX

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To
VIOLA TREE.

This play was produced on Monday, August 9, 1920, at the Aldwych Theatre with the following cast:

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| COLONEL WHARTON | MR. CHARLES V. FRANCE |
| MAJOR WHARTON (JOHN) | MR. BASIL RATHBONE |
| MRS. WHARTON | LADY TREE |
| MRS. LITTLEWOOD | MISS HAIDEE WRIGHT |
| REV. NORMAN POOLE | MR. H. R. HIGNETT |
| MRS. POOLE | MISS LENA HALLIDAY |
| SYLVIA BULLOUGH | MISS ELLEN O'MALLEY |
| DR. MACFARLANE | MR. CLARENCE BLAKISTON |
| KATE | MISS GWENDOLEN FFLOYD |

THE UNKNOWN

CHARACTERS

COLONEL WHARTON
MAJOR WHARTON (JOHN)
MRS. WHARTON
MRS. LITTLEWOOD
REV. NORMAN POOLE
MRS. POOLE
SYLVIA BULLOUGH
DR. MACFARLANE
KATE
COOK

The action of the play takes place at the Manor House, Stour, in the County of Kent.

The author ventures to suggest to the readers of this play that he makes no pretensions to throw a new light on any of the questions which are discussed in it, nor has he attempted to offer a solution of problems which, judging from the diversity of opinion which they have occasioned, may be regarded as insoluble. He has tried to put into dramatic form some of the thoughts and emotions which have recently agitated many, and for this purpose he has chosen the most ordinary characters in the circle with which, owing to his own circumstances, he is best acquainted. But because it is a good many years since he was on terms of intimate familiarity with a parish priest, and he was not certain how much the views of the clergy

had changed, the author has put into the mouth of the Rev. Norman Poole phrases from Dr. Gore's "The Religion of the Church," and from a sermon by Dr. Stewart Holden. Since it is impossible in a play to indicate by quotation marks what is borrowed, the author takes this opportunity to acknowledge his indebtedness for the Rev. Norman Poole's most characteristic speeches.

THE UNKNOWN

ACT I

The drawing-room at the Manor House, COLONEL WHARTON'S residence. It is a simple room, somewhat heavily furnished in an old-fashioned style; there is nothing in it which is in the least artistic; but the furniture is comfortable, and neither new nor shabby. On the papered walls are the Academy pictures of forty years ago. There are a great many framed photographs of men in uniform, and here and there a bunch of simple flowers in a vase. The only things in the room which are at all exotic are silver ornaments from Indian bazaars and flimsy Indian fabrics, used as cloths on the occasional tables and as drapery on the piano.

At the back are French windows leading into the garden; and this, with its lawn and trees, is seen through them. It is summer, and the windows are open. Morning.

MRS. WHARTON is sitting in the corner of the sofa, knitting a khaki comforter. She is a slight, tall woman of five-and-fifty; she has deliberate features, with kind eyes and a gentle look; her dark hair is getting very gray; it is simply done; and her dress, too, is simple; it is not at all new and was never fashionable.

KATE, a middle-aged maid-servant, in a print dress, a cap and apron, comes in.

KATE.

If you please, ma'am, the butcher's called.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh! I arranged with Cook that we should have cold roast beef again for luncheon to-day, Kate. Tell the butcher to bring two and a half pounds of the best end of the neck for to-night, and tell him to pick me out a really nice piece, Kate. It's so long since the Major has had any good English meat.

KATE.

Very good, ma'am.

MRS. WHARTON.

And he might send in a couple of kidneys. The Colonel and Major Wharton enjoyed the kidneys that they had for breakfast yesterday so much.

KATE.

Very good, ma'am. If you please, ma'am, the gardener hasn't sent in a very big basket of pease. Cook says it won't look much for three.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, well, it doesn't matter as long as there are enough for the gentlemen. I'll just pretend to take some.

KATE.

Very good, ma'am.

As she is going, COLONEL WHARTON enters from the garden with a basket of cherries. He is a thin old man, much older than his wife, with white hair; but though very frail he still carries himself erectly. His face is bronzed by long exposure to tropical suns, but even so it is the face of a sick man. He wears a light tweed suit which hangs about him loosely, as though he had shrunk since it was made for him. He has a round tweed hat of the same material.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Has the paper come yet, Kate?

KATE.

Yes, sir. I'll bring it.

[*Exit KATE*

COLONEL WHARTON.

I've brought you in some cherries, Evelyn. They're the only ripe ones I could find.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, that is nice. I hope you're not tired.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Great Scott, I'm not such a crock that it can tire me to pick a few cherries. If I'd been able to find a ladder I'd have got you double the number.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, my dear, you'd better let the gardener get them. I don't approve of your skipping up and down ladders.

COLONEL WHARTON.

The gardener's just as old as I am and not nearly so active. Hasn't John come in yet? He said he was only going to the post.

MRS. WHARTON.

Perhaps he went in to see Sylvia on the way back.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I shouldn't have thought she wanted to be bothered with him in the morning.

MRS. WHARTON.

George!

COLONEL WHARTON.

Yes, dear.

MRS. WHARTON.

It seems so extraordinary to hear you say: "Hasn't John come in yet? He said he was only going to the post." It makes me rather want to cry.

COLONEL WHARTON.

It's been a long time, Evelyn. It's been a bad time for both of us, my dear. But worse for you.

MRS. WHARTON.

I tried not to be troublesome, George.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Dear child, aren't I there to share your troubles with you?

MRS. WHARTON.

It seems so natural that he should come in any minute, it seems as though he'd never been away—and yet somehow I can't quite believe it. It seems incredible that he should really be back.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*Patting her hand.*] My dear Evelyn!

[*KATE brings in the paper and gives it to the COLONEL. She goes out.*

COLONEL WHARTON.

Thank you. [*While he puts on his spectacles.*] It's a blessing to be able to read the births, deaths, and marriages like a gentleman instead of turning before anything else to the casualties.

MRS. WHARTON.

I hope before long that we shall be composing a little announcement for that column.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Have they settled a day yet, those young people?

MRS. WHARTON.

I don't know. John hasn't said anything, and I didn't see Sylvia yesterday except for a moment after church.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Evelyn dear, the gardener tells me he hasn't got much in the way of pease ready for to-night, so I've told him to send in a few carrots for me; I think they're probably better for my digestion.

MRS. WHARTON.

Nonsense, George. You know how much you like pease, and I'm not very fond of them. I was hoping there'd only be enough for two so that I shouldn't have to eat any.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Evelyn, where do you expect to go when you die if you tell such stories?

MRS. WHARTON.

Now, George, don't be obstinate. You might give in to me sometimes. They're the first pease out of the garden and I should like you to eat them.

COLONEL WHARTON.

No, my dear, I'd like to see you eat them. I'm an invalid, and I must have my own way.

MRS. WHARTON.

You tyrant! You haven't seen Dr. Macfarlane this morning? I'm so anxious.

COLONEL WHARTON.

You old fusser! No sooner have you stopped worrying over your boy than you start worrying over me.

MRS. WHARTON.

Even though you won't let me call my soul my own, I don't want to lose you just yet.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Don't be alarmed. I shall live to plague you for another twenty years.

[KATE comes in.]

KATE.

If you please, ma'am, Mrs. Poole has called.

MRS. WHARTON.

Why haven't you shown her in?

KATE.

She wouldn't come in, ma'am. She said she was passing and she just stopped to enquire how you were.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Tell her to come in, Kate. What's she making all this fuss about.

KATE.

Very well, sir.

[Exit.]

MRS. WHARTON.

I expect she wants to hear all about John.

COLONEL WHARTON.

If she'll wait a minute she'll have the chance of seeing the young fellow himself.

[KATE comes in, followed by MRS. POOLE. The visitor is a thin, rather dour person of middle age, brisk in her movements, competent and firm. She is a woman who knows her own mind and has no hesitation in speaking it. She is not unsympathetic. She wears a serviceable black coat and skirt and a black straw hat.]

KATE.

Mrs. Poole.

[Exit.]

COLONEL WHARTON.

What do you mean by trying to get away without showing yourself? Is this how you do your district visiting?

MRS. POOLE.

[Shaking hands with MRS. WHARTON and with the COLONEL.] I wanted to come in, but I thought you mightn't wish to see me to-day, so I put it like that to make it easier for you to send me about

my business.

MRS. WHARTON.

We always wish to see you, my dear.

MRS. POOLE.

If I had a son that I hadn't seen for four years and he'd been dangerously wounded, I think I'd want to keep him to myself for the first few days after he got home.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Then you're not as unselfish a woman as Evelyn.

MRS. WHARTON.

Or perhaps not nearly so vain.

MRS. POOLE.

Did you go down to the station to meet him on Saturday?

MRS. WHARTON.

The Colonel went. He wouldn't let me go because he said I'd make a fool of myself on the platform.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I took Sylvia. I thought that was enough. I knew I could trust her to control herself.

MRS. POOLE.

And when are they going to be married.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, I hope very soon. It's been a long and anxious time for her.

MRS. POOLE.

Can you bear to give him up when he's only just come back to you?

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, but it's not giving him up when he's marrying Sylvia. She's been like a daughter to us. D'you know, they've been engaged for seven years.

MRS. POOLE.

I hope they'll be very happy. Sylvia certainly deserves to be.

COLONEL WHARTON.

She's done cheerfully the most difficult thing anyone can do. All through the war when she was pining to be off and do her bit she stayed at home with a bed-ridden mother.

MRS. WHARTON.

Poor Mrs. Bullough.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Yes, but poor Sylvia too. It's easy enough to do your duty when duty is dangerous and exciting, but when you can do nothing—no one knows better than I what it is to sit still and look on when others are doing the things that are worth while. This war came ten years too late for me.

MRS. POOLE.

That's what the Vicar has been saying ever since the war began. But after all your son has taken your place, and I think you can be proud of him.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*With intense satisfaction.*] The rascal with his Military Cross and his D.S.O.

MRS. POOLE.

I'm so glad that his first day here was a Sunday.

MRS. WHARTON.

You don't know what I felt when we knelt down side by side in church. I was very grateful.

MRS. POOLE.

I know. I could see it in your face and the Colonel's.

COLONEL WHARTON.

God has vouchsafed us a great mercy.

MRS. POOLE.

The Vicar was dreadfully disappointed that he didn't stay for Holy Communion. You know that he looks upon that as the essential part of the service.

MRS. WHARTON.

I think we were a little disappointed, too. We were so surprised when John walked out.

MRS. POOLE.

Did he say why he had?

MRS. WHARTON.

No. I talked it over with the Colonel. We didn't quite know what to do. I don't know whether to mention it or not.

MRS. POOLE.

I do hope he'll stay next Sunday.

MRS. WHARTON.

He was always a very regular communicant.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I don't see why you shouldn't say something to him about it, Evelyn.

MRS. WHARTON.

I will if you like.

[There is the sound of a laugh in the garden.]

Why, here he is. And Sylvia.

[SYLVIA BULLOUGH and JOHN WHARTON come in. She is no longer quite young. She has a pleasant, friendly look rather than beauty, and she suggests the homely virtues of a girl very well brought up in a nice English family; she gives the impression of a practical, competent, and sensible woman. She will make a good wife and an excellent mother. She is very simply dressed in light summery things, and she wears a straw hat. She is carrying a string bag, in which are a number of household purchases. JOHN WHARTON is in mufti. He is a man of thirty.]

SYLVIA.

Good morning everybody!

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, how nice of you to come in.

JOHN.

She didn't want to, but I made her.

[SYLVIA kisses MRS. WHARTON and shakes hands with MRS. POOLE, then she kisses the COLONEL.]

SYLVIA.

[Gaily.] That's a deliberate lie, John.

MRS. WHARTON.

This is my son, Mrs. Poole.

JOHN.

[Shaking hands with her.] I daresay you suspected it.

MRS. POOLE.

I had a good look at you in church, you know.

JOHN.

Is that how vicars' wives behave themselves?

MRS. POOLE.

They allow themselves a little licence when young people come home on leave.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Did you meet in the village?

JOHN.

Not exactly. I saw Sylvia darting into Mrs. Gann's shop, evidently to avoid me....

SYLVIA.

[*Interrupting.*] I don't know how you imagined I could see you out of the back of my head.

JOHN.

So I ran like a hare, and caught her in the very act of buying two pounds of vermicelli.

SYLVIA.

To say nothing of a tin of sardines and a packet of mustard.

JOHN.

Now take off your hat, Sylvia. You mustn't hide the best feature you've got.

SYLVIA.

[*Taking it off.*] I hope you don't think I shall go on doing exactly what you tell me a minute after the war's over.

JOHN.

I haven't noticed any startling alacrity to do what I tell you as it is.

SYLVIA.

You ungrateful fellow! When have I hesitated to carry out your slightest wish?

MRS. WHARTON.

He's only been back forty-eight hours, poor dear.

JOHN.

Didn't I go down to you on my bended knees in the middle of the road and ask you to come for a walk with me?

SYLVIA.

Oh, well, I wanted to see your father. I was anxious to hear what the specialist had said.

JOHN.

[*Surprised.*] Have you been seeing a specialist, father? Aren't you well?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Perfectly. It was only to satisfy your poor mother.

JOHN.

But why didn't you tell me? Is anything the matter with him, mother?

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, your father wouldn't let me tell you anything about it when you came. He didn't want you to be worried. And I thought myself it might just as well keep till to-day.

COLONEL WHARTON.

The fact is I haven't been quite up to the mark lately, and Dr. Macfarlane thought I'd better see a specialist. So I went into Canterbury on Saturday and saw Dr. Keller.

MRS. POOLE.

Yes, I heard you'd been to see him. They say he's very clever.

JOHN.

What did he say?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Well, you know what these doctor fellows are. He wouldn't say much to me. He said he'd write to Macfarlane.

JOHN.

Well?

COLONEL WHARTON.

I suppose Macfarlane got the letter this morning. He'll probably be round presently.

MRS. POOLE.

I saw him going along the Bleane Road in his dog-cart about an hour ago. You might ask him who it was he was going to see.

JOHN.

Are you feeling ill, father?

COLONEL WHARTON.

No. I shouldn't have dreamed of going to a specialist, only your mother was worrying.

SYLVIA.

Don't put all the blame on her. I was, too.

JOHN.

[*Going over to him and putting his arm in his.*] Poor old father, you mustn't be ill.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Oh, I'm not going to die just yet, you know.

JOHN.

I should jolly well think not. Wait till you're a hundred and two, and then we'll begin talking about it.

[*The Vicar of Stour, the REV. NORMAN POOLE, appears at the window. He is a tall, thin man, bald, dressed in a short black coat, with a black straw hat. He is energetic, breezy, and cheerful. He likes to show that, although a clergyman, he is a man; and he affects a rather professional joviality. MR. and MRS. POOLE have that physical resemblance which you sometimes see in married people. You wonder if they married because they were so much alike, or if it is marriage which has created the similarity.*]

VICAR.

Hulloa, hulloa, hulloa! May I come in?

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Smiling.*] Of course. How do you do?

COLONEL WHARTON.

My dear Vicar!

VICAR.

[*Entering.*] I suppose I ought to have gone round to the front door, and rung the bell like a gentleman. My dear Dorothy, when will you teach me how to behave?

MRS. POOLE.

I've long given up the attempt.

VICAR.

I thought I'd look in and say how-do-you-do to the wounded hero.

MRS. WHARTON.

My son. The Vicar.

VICAR.

Welcome! I passed you in the village just now. I had half a mind to come up and wring your hand, but I thought you'd say, who the deuce is this clerical gent?

JOHN.

How do you do?

VICAR.

An authentic hero. And he speaks just like you and me. The world's a strange place, my masters. Well, what d'you think of Blighty?

JOHN.

I'm very glad to be home again. I thought I never should get back.

VICAR.

You've not been home since the beginning of the war, have you?

JOHN.

No, you see I was in India when it broke out. What with Gallipoli and one thing and another, I was done out of my leave every time.

VICAR.

Well, it's a long lane that has no turning. But I understand that you've picked up some bits and pieces here and there. The Military Cross and the D.S.O., isn't it?

MRS. POOLE.

You must be a very proud man.

VICAR.

How did you win them?

JOHN.

Oh, I don't know. Playing about generally.

MRS. WHARTON.

I don't think you'll get very much more than that out of John.

VICAR.

[*To JOHN.*] You lucky beggar! You've had your chance and you were able to take it. That's where I should have been, where my heart was, with the brave lads at the front. And my confounded chest has kept me chained to this little tin-pot parish.

MRS. POOLE.

My husband suffers from his lungs.

JOHN.

I'm sorry to hear that.

VICAR.

Yes, the Great White Peril. They say its ravages are terrible. That's why I came here, you know; I was in charge of the parish of St. Jude's, Stoke Newington when I crocked up. I tried to get them to let me go when the war broke out, but they wouldn't hear of it.

MRS. WHARTON.

They also serve who only stand and wait.

VICAR.

I know, I know. It's this confounded energy of mine. I'm a crock, and I've just had to make the best of it. I'm on the shelf. The future is in the hands of you brave lads who've been through the fire. I suppose you went to sleep during my sermon yesterday.

JOHN.

Not at all. I listened to it very attentively.

VICAR.

I shouldn't blame you if you had. That's about all I've been able to do during the war, to preach. And, upon my word, I sometimes wonder what good I've done.

MRS. WHARTON.

You've been a great help to us all.

VICAR.

For my part I don't deplore the war. Our Lord said: "Think not that I come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." The Christian Church has lived by her sword. Every advance which this world of ours has known in liberty, in justice, in enlightenment, has been won for it by the sword of Jesus Christ.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I wish all parsons were as broad-minded. I know what war is. I was in Egypt and in South Africa. I've been through half a dozen wars in India. I have no use for slop and sentimentality. My own belief is that war is necessary to a nation. It brings out all a man's best qualities.

VICAR.

There I heartily agree with you. It is the great school of character. Amid the clash of arms the great Christian virtues shine forth with an immortal lustre. Courage, self-sacrifice, charity, self-reliance. No one knew before the war what a pinnacle of heroism was within the power of our brave lads at the front.

MRS. POOLE.

What do you think about it, Major Wharton?

JOHN.

[*Smiling.*] I? I think it's a lovely day. I have three weeks leave, and the war is a long way off.

VICAR.

[*With a chuckle.*] A very good answer. I've been saying the obvious, I know that just as well as you do, but, you know, sometimes the obvious has to be said, and when it has, I think a man should have the courage to say it. Now, my dear, let's be off.

MRS. POOLE.

I don't know what Mrs. Wharton will think of us for inflicting ourselves on her like this.

VICAR.

We're all friends here, I hope and trust. If we weren't welcome, Mrs. Wharton only had to say so. To my mind the afternoon call is a convention more honoured in the breach than the observance.

MRS. WHARTON.

It's been very good of you to come.

[There is a general shaking of hands.]

VICAR.

[To JOHN.] Well, good-bye, young fellow. I've tried to show you that I'm by way of being rather broad-minded as parsons go. It wouldn't shock me in the least to hear you say "damn" or "blast." I'm often inclined to use a bit of strong language myself. I asked you just now if you'd gone to sleep during my sermon. I wouldn't have turned a hair if you had.

JOHN.

It's very kind of you to say so. I may avail myself of your suggestion on some future occasion.

VICAR.

On a future occasion, perhaps—shall we say next Sunday?—I hope you won't leave the House of God without partaking in the greatest of all the Sacraments of our Church. Don't forget that the Almighty has in His mercy brought you in safety through great and terrible peril. That's all I wanted to say to you. Good-bye, God bless you.

JOHN.

Good-bye.

VICAR.

[Shaking hands with MRS. WHARTON] Good-bye. These parsons, what a nuisance they make of themselves, don't they?

MRS. WHARTON.

I wanted to ask you if you'd seen poor Mrs. Littlewood since her return.

VICAR.

No, she didn't come to church yesterday. And of course, Sunday's my busy day—I'm the only man in the parish who works seven days a week—so I haven't had a chance to see her yet, poor soul.

SYLVIA.

She came down by the 6.35 on Saturday. She was in the same train as John, but I wasn't bothering much about anyone else just then, and I didn't speak to her.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I wish we could do something for her.

MRS. WHARTON.

[Explaining to JOHN.] She was telegraphed for last week to go to Ned at Boulogne. He died on Tuesday.

JOHN.

[With astonishment.] Ned! But he was only a kid.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, he'd grown up since you were home. He was nearly nineteen.

MRS. POOLE.

Both her sons are gone now. She's quite alone.

MRS. WHARTON.

We must all be very kind to her. It will be terrible for her in that big house all by herself. I wish you'd spoken to her on Saturday, George.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I felt rather shy about it. After all, we've had rather an anxious time over that young scamp there. If anything had happened to him—well, I should have had Evelyn, but she, poor soul, has nobody.

SYLVIA.

I ought to have gone to see her yesterday.

MRS. WHARTON.

She must be absolutely prostrated with grief.

VICAR.

I wonder if she'd like to come and stay at the Vicarage. I can't bear to think of her all alone.

MRS. POOLE.

That's a splendid idea, Norman, and just like you. I'll ask her at once. I'll be glad to do what I can for her.

SYLVIA.

Of course one ought to try and find something to occupy her mind.

VICAR.

Happily she has always been a deeply religious woman. When all's said and done, in grief like that there's only one unfailing refuge.

[KATE enters, followed by MRS. LITTLEWOOD. *She is a little elderly woman. She is not dressed in mourning, but in the clothes she may be expected to have been wearing before her bereavement.*

KATE.

Mrs. Littlewood.

[Exit KATE.

MRS. WHARTON.

[Rising and going to meet her.] My dear friend, how very glad I am to see you.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

How do you do? [*She smiles brightly at the assembled company.*] Oh, John, have you come back? [*To MRS. WHARTON.*] I came to ask if you and the Colonel would come and play bridge this afternoon.

MRS. WHARTON.

Bridge!

[*They all look at her with surprise, but no one says anything.*]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I was going to ask Dr. Macfarlane to make a fourth, but perhaps John will come.

MRS. WHARTON..

[*With embarrassment.*] It's very kind of you, but the Colonel hasn't been very well lately. I don't think he feels like going out, and I shouldn't like to leave him.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Oh, I'm sorry.

MRS. WHARTON..

Won't you sit down?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Thank you very much. I won't stay. I'll go round to the Wilkinsons and see if they'll play.

VICAR.

I hope you weren't very tired by your journey.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I wasn't tired at all.

MRS. POOLE.

We thought you were, because we didn't see you in church.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

No, I didn't come. I thought it would bore me.

[*There is a moment's silence.*

MRS. WHARTON.

Did you—did you come straight through from France?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

No. I stayed a couple of nights in London.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With pity in her voice.*] All alone?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

No. I picked up a very nice woman in the hotel, and we went out together. We went to the Gaiety one night and the next we went to the Empire. Do you know that I'd never seen George Robey before?

MRS. POOLE.

Who is George Robey?

VICAR.

I believe he's a comedian.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Very pleasantly.*] How long are you here for, John?

JOHN.

I have three weeks' leave.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

We must all make much of you. I'll give a tennis party for you, shall I?

SYLVIA.

Oh, Mrs. Littlewood, I'm sure you don't want to give parties just now.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I'd love to. It's so seldom one gets an excuse for one in a place like this.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Taking her hand.*] My dear, I want you to know how deeply we all sympathise with you in your great loss.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Patting MRS. WHARTON'S hand, and then releasing her own.*] That's very kind of you. [*To SYLVIA and JOHN.*] Would Wednesday suit you young people? I'll have both courts marked out.

SYLVIA.

[*Desperately.*] I couldn't come, Mrs. Littlewood, I couldn't come.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Why on earth not?

SYLVIA.

[*Controlling herself to civility.*] I'm engaged that day.

COLONEL WHARTON.

John has so short a time at home. I think he and Sylvia have a feeling that they don't want to go to parties.

VICAR.

[*Deliberately.*] I hope you got over to France in time to find your son alive.

[*MRS. LITTLEWOOD gives him a rapid glance, stops a moment as though to collect herself, then answers almost indifferently.*]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

No, he was dead, poor child. [*To MRS. WHARTON.*] Good-bye, my dear, I'm sorry you can't come and play bridge this afternoon. I suppose I shall have to send you a wedding-present, John.

JOHN.

I suppose you will.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*With a smile at the rest of the company.*] Good-bye.

[*She goes out. They are left in amazement.*]

MRS. POOLE.

Is she absolutely heartless?

COLONEL WHARTON.

I always thought she was devoted to her sons.

SYLVIA.

And Ned was her favourite.

MRS. POOLE.

She wasn't wearing mourning.

SYLVIA.

Isn't she going to, do you suppose?

MRS. WHARTON.

I can't understand it. She adored those boys.

MRS. POOLE.

I didn't ask her to come and stay at the Vicarage, Norman.

VICAR.

I don't think we'd better till the situation's a little clearer. She gives one the impression of not caring two straws for Ned's death. She must be as hard as nails.

MRS. WHARTON.

No, she isn't that. I've known her for thirty-five years. D'you think she's mad?

COLONEL WHARTON.

We'd better say a word to Macfarlane when he comes, Evelyn.

VICAR.

I was never so taken aback in my life as when she said she didn't come to church because she thought she'd be bored.

MRS. POOLE.

Norman, I must go. I've got a lot of things to do at home.

VICAR.

Come along then. We'll just walk out through the garden.

[There are farewells, rather distracted by the queer incident that has just occurred, and the VICAR and MRS. POOLE go out. The COLONEL accompanies them to the door.]

SYLVIA.

You're very silent, John.

JOHN.

I was thinking about Mrs. Littlewood. She doesn't give me the impression of being either callous or mad.

SYLVIA.

What does she mean, then?

JOHN.

[Reflectively.] I don't know. *[With a shrug of the shoulders, throwing off his mood.]* And at the moment I don't very much care. Come and sit down and be a comfort to a wounded hero.

SYLVIA.

Idiot!

MRS. WHARTON.

Will you stay to luncheon, Sylvia dear?

SYLVIA.

No, I think I ought to get back to mother.

JOHN.

Before you go let's tell them what we've been talking about.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I don't think it's very hard to guess.

JOHN.

I want Sylvia to marry me as soon as ever it's possible.

MRS. WHARTON.

Of course.

JOHN.

If we look nippy we can get a special licence and be married on Thursday. We don't want to go far for our honeymoon, because I have such a short time. And my suggestion is London.

SYLVIA.

What do you think, Mrs. Wharton?

MRS. WHARTON.

Well, my dear, I think that whatever you and John decide will be quite right.

SYLVIA.

He's only just come back to you. I can't bear to take him away immediately. Wouldn't you prefer us to wait a little longer?

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, we've always decided that you should be married the moment he came back. We've been quite prepared to lose him. And perhaps after a few days, if the Colonel's well enough, you wouldn't mind if we came up to London, too. We'd try not to be in your way.

SYLVIA.

[*Going down on her knees beside MRS. WHARTON and kissing her.*] Oh, my dear, you're so kind to me. I don't know how I can ever thank you for all your kindness.

MRS. WHARTON.

It's been a weary, anxious time for all of us. I know how unhappy you've been sometimes. I want you to have him now. He's a good boy, and I think he'll make you happy.

SYLVIA.

[*Getting up and giving JOHN her hand.*] I'm sure he will. I'll try to make you a good wife, John.

JOHN.

I expect you'll be quite good enough for the likes of me. Then it's to be Thursday next.

SYLVIA.

[*With a smile.*] It is.

[*He draws her to him and kisses her. She very nearly breaks down.*]

SYLVIA.

I've wanted you for so long, John, so dreadfully long.

JOHN.

For goodness' sake don't cry.

SYLVIA.

[*Breaking away from him, with a chuckle.*] You brute, John! I hate you.

MRS. WHARTON.

Did you like the Vicar, John?

JOHN.

He seemed all right.

COLONEL WHARTON.

He's a first-rate fellow. He had a very good living in London at one time, and he resigned and took one in the East End instead.

JOHN.

Really?

COLONEL WHARTON.

He said he wasn't ordained to drink China tea with elderly women of means. [*With a chuckle.*] He says very good things sometimes.

MRS. WHARTON.

They were perfectly wonderful in the East End. They wanted to live in exactly the same way as their parishioners, so they did without a servant, and did all their housework, even their washing, themselves.

JOHN.

It sounds hateful, but of course it really was heroic.

MRS. WHARTON.

D'you remember what he said to you about Holy Communion? Your father and I were a little disappointed that you didn't stay for it yesterday.

JOHN.

I'm sorry for that, mother dear.

MRS. WHARTON.

It would have been such a great pleasure to both of us if we could all three have received it together.

JOHN.

Dear mother.... If you're really going home to luncheon, Sylvia, I'll walk back with you.

MRS. WHARTON.

The Vicar has a Communion service on Wednesday morning. Would you come then? It'll be the last opportunity before your marriage.

JOHN.

Oh, my dear, you're not going to ask me to get up in the middle of the night? After all, one of the pleasures of coming home is to lie in bed in the morning. I don't know how I ever tear myself out of those lavender-scented sheets.

MRS. WHARTON.

Dear John, won't you come to please us?

JOHN.

[*Still trying to pass it off lightly.*] Oh, my dear mother, d'you think it's really necessary?

MRS. WHARTON.

I should like it so much, my dear. You know, it means a great deal to us.

JOHN.

[*More gravely.*] Don't you think one should go to a ceremony like that in a certain frame of mind?

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Come, my boy, you're not going to refuse the first request your mother has made you since you came back?

JOHN.

I'm awfully sorry, mother. I beg you not to insist.

MRS. WHARTON.

I don't quite know what you mean. It's not like you to be obstinate.... Won't you come, John?

JOHN.

No, mother.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Why not?

JOHN.

I've been away a long time. There are some things one can't help, you know. I've been through very terrible experiences.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Aghast.*] Do you mean to say you've lost your—faith?

JOHN.

I'm awfully sorry to give you pain, dear.

SYLVIA.

[*Her eyes fixed on him.*] You've not answered your mother's question, John.

JOHN.

If you want a direct answer, I'm afraid it must be—yes.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Overcome.*] Oh, John!

SYLVIA.

But you came to church yesterday.

JOHN.

That was just a formal ceremony. I assisted passively, as a Jew might assist at the wedding of one of his Christian friends.

SYLVIA.

You stood when we stood, and knelt down, and seemed to pray.

JOHN.

I would do that if I were in a Roman Catholic church. That seemed to me only good manners. [*With a smile.*] Do you think it was very deceitful?

SYLVIA.

I don't quite see why you should strain at a gnat.

JOHN.

I don't. It's the camel I can't swallow. I knew it would distress you if I refused to come to church. I didn't want to seem a prig. But the other seems to me different. When I'm asked to take an active part in a ceremony that means nothing to me it's quite another matter. I'd rather not tell a deliberate lie. And surely from your point of view it would be blasphemous.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Occupied with her own thoughts.*] How dreadful!

JOHN.

[*Going up to her and putting his arm round her.*] Don't be unhappy, mother. I can't help feeling as I do. After all, these are matters that only concern oneself.

SYLVIA.

[*Reflecting.*] Are they?

JOHN.

Surely. [*To his mother.*] I would rather not have told you. I knew how much you'd take it to heart. But I was obliged to. And perhaps it's better as it is. I hated the thought of deceiving you and father. Now let's put it out of our minds.

COLONEL WHARTON.

John, have you forgotten, that in three weeks you'll be going back to the Front? Sooner or later you'll find yourself once more in the fighting line. Have you asked yourself what it will be like to face death without the help of Almighty God?

JOHN.

It's always difficult to face death.

COLONEL WHARTON.

You wouldn't be the first who found it easy to stand alone when all was going well and found it a very different thing in danger or illness.

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be.

SYLVIA.

Archie, Mrs. Littlewood's elder boy, was badly wounded on the Somme. His battalion had to retreat and somehow or other he wasn't picked up. He lay in the corner of a wood for three days and kept himself alive on a beet that he pulled out of the field. Heaven knows, I don't want anything like that to happen to you, but are you sure your courage wouldn't fail you then? Are you sure you wouldn't call on God instinctively to help you?

JOHN.

And if I did, what of it? That wouldn't be me, that mangled, bleeding, starved, delirious thing. It's me now that speaks, now that I'm well and conscious and strong. It's the real me now. I disclaim and disown anything I may feel or say when I'm tortured with pain and sickness. It would give my real self just as little as a prisoner on the rack gives the truth.

SYLVIA.

[*Looking at him fixedly.*] You're afraid of something like that happening, aren't you?

JOHN.

Yes, I shouldn't like my body to play me a dirty trick when I hadn't the presence of mind to look after it.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Have you ever been in real danger since you—since you began to think like this?

JOHN.

Yes. Once I was in a trench the Germans had enfiladed. They'd got the line exactly. The shells fell one after another, first at the end of the trench, and then they came slowly down. One could calculate almost mathematically when the shell must come that would blow one to smithereens.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With a little gasp of terror.*] Oh, John, don't!

JOHN.

[*Smiling.*] Well, something went wrong, or else I certainly shouldn't be here now.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Do you mean to say you weren't frightened?

JOHN.

Frightened isn't the word for it. Talk of getting the wind up: it was a perfect hurricane. I felt as though I were shrinking up so that my clothes suddenly hung about me like sacks. And against my will a prayer came to my lips. From long habit, I suppose, they tried to form themselves into an appeal to God to turn the shell away. I had to fight with myself. I had to keep saying to myself: "Don't be a fool. Don't be a damned fool."

MRS. WHARTON.

And you resisted? It was the voice of God speaking to you. The prayer was said in your heart, and He in His mercy heard it. Doesn't that prove to you that you're wrong? At that moment you believed, even though you struggled not to. Your whole soul cried out its belief in God.

JOHN.

No, not my soul: my fear of death.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I've been in battle, too. In South Africa and in the Soudan we were in some pretty tight places now and then. When I went into action I commended my soul to God, and now that I'm an old man I can say that I never knew fear.

JOHN.

I don't think I'm particularly brave. Before an attack I've often had to light a cigarette to hide the trembling of my lips.

COLONEL WHARTON.

The Christian doesn't fear death. His whole life is but a preparation for that awful moment. To him it is the shining gateway to life everlasting.

JOHN.

I should be sorry to think that life was nothing but a preparation for death. To my mind death is very unimportant. I think a man does best to put it out of his thoughts. He should live as though life were endless. Life is the thing that matters.

SYLVIA.

Doesn't that suggest a very base materialism?

JOHN.

No, because you can't make the most of life unless you're willing to risk it, and it's the risk that makes the difference. It's the most precious thing a man has, but it's valueless unless he's prepared to stake it.

SYLVIA.

What do you think it can be worth while to risk life for?

JOHN.

Almost anything. Honour or love. A song, a thought. [*After a moment's reflection, with a smile.*] A five-barred gate.

SYLVIA.

Isn't that rather illogical?

JOHN.

Perhaps. I don't put it very well. I think what I mean is that life in itself has no value. It's what you put in it that gives it worth.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Why do you think you've come safely through the perils and dangers of the war? John, do you know that every day your mother and Sylvia and I prayed that God might see fit to spare you?

JOHN.

[*With sudden energy.*] Were you the only ones? Why didn't He see fit to spare the others?

SYLVIA.

Who are we to question the inscrutable designs of the Omnipotent?

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*Answering his son.*] I don't know what you mean by that. In war somebody's got to be killed. When a commander gives battle he knows pretty accurately what his losses are going to be before he starts.

[*JOHN gives a slight shrug of the shoulders. He recovers his equanimity.*

JOHN.

If you don't mind my saying so, I think we'd much better not start arguing. Arguments never bring one much forrader, do they?

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Gently.*] But we want to understand, John. You were always such a pious boy.

JOHN.

[*Smiling.*] Oh, mother, that's rather a terrible thing to say to anybody.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With an answering smile.*] Oh, I didn't mean it like that. On the contrary, you were rather troublesome. Sometimes you were very headstrong and obstinate.

JOHN.

That's better.

MRS. WHARTON.

We tried to bring you up to fear God. It used to make me happy sometimes to see how simple and touching your faith was. You used to pray to God for all sorts of absurd things, to make a lot of runs in a cricket match or to pass an exam, that you hadn't worked for.

JOHN.

Yes, I remember.

MRS. WHARTON.

If you've lost your faith, we know it can't be as so many lose it, on purpose, because they've given themselves over to sensuality, and dare not believe in a God whom every action of their lives insults. If you'll only tell us everything, perhaps we can help you.

JOHN.

My dear, you'd much better let the matter rest. I should only have to say things that would hurt you all.

MRS. WHARTON.

We're willing to take the risk of that. We know you wouldn't hurt us intentionally. Perhaps they're only difficulties that we might be able to explain. And if we're not clever enough perhaps the Vicar can.

[*JOHN shakes his head without speaking.*

SYLVIA.

Don't you want to believe in God, John?

JOHN.

No.

[*There is a moment's pause. KATE comes in to announce DR. MACFARLANE. This is a rather eccentric old man, with long white hair, small, with rosy cheeks. He is an old-fashioned country doctor, and wears rather shabby black clothes and carries a rusty silk hat in his hand. There is in him something of the gentleman farmer and something of the apothecary of a former day.*

KATE.

Dr. Macfarlane.

[*Exit.*

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh! I'd forgotten for the moment. [*With a smile of welcome.*] We've been expecting you.

DR. MACFARLANE.

[*Shaking hands with the two ladies.*] I've been busy this morning. [To JOHN.] And how are you, John?

JOHN.

Sitting up and taking nourishment, thank you.

DR. MACFARLANE.

You look none the worse for all your adventures. A little older, perhaps.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, of course, you've not seen John before.

DR. MACFARLANE.

No. My wife saw him yesterday in church, but unfortunately I couldn't go. I had to see a patient.

JOHN.

The same patient?

DR. MACFARLANE.

I beg your pardon.

JOHN.

You've had to see a patient at about eleven every Sunday morning for the last twenty-five years. I was wondering if it was the same one.

DR. MACFARLANE.

If it is, I certainly deserve praise for keeping the undertakers at bay so long. [*Going up to the COLONEL*] And how are you feeling to-day, Colonel?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Oh, I'm feeling pretty well, thank you. Have you had a letter from that fellow in Canterbury?

DR. MACFARLANE.

Yes.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Well, what does he say?

DR. MACFARLANE.

You military gentlemen, you want to go so fast.

MRS. WHARTON.

Have you brought the letter with you?

DR. MACFARLANE.

It's very technical. Saving your presence, I don't think any of you would make head or tail of it. Now, Mrs. Wharton, my dear, shall you and I go for a little stroll in your beautiful garden, and we'll have a talk about this old tyrant.

COLONEL WHARTON.

What's the object of that? Evelyn will only tell me everything you've said the moment you're gone. She's never been able to keep anything from me in her life.

DR. MACFARLANE.

You must have patience with me. I'm an old man, and I like to do things in my own way.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Well, *I'm* no chicken, and I'm not going to stand any of your nonsense. Tell us straight out what the doctor says and be damned to you. I beg your pardon, my dear, but I have to talk to the old fool in the only way he understands.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Very rough, isn't he?

JOHN.

The gentlest pirate who ever cut a throat.

COLONEL WHARTON.

You know, you're a transparent old fraud, Doctor. The moment you came in I saw you had some bad news for me. You were expecting to find Evelyn alone.

DR. MACFARLANE.

This is the hour at which all self-respecting retired colonels are reading the *Times* in their study.

MRS. WHARTON.

What does Dr. Keller say?

COLONEL WHARTON.

I suppose he wants an operation. It's a nuisance but, with God's help, I can go through with it.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Well, I suppose you'd have to know sooner or later. Let these young people clear out and we'll talk it all over quietly.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Nonsense. John is my son and Sylvia is almost my daughter. What concerns me concerns them, I fancy. Why, you couldn't make more fuss if I'd only got a month to live.

DR. MACFARLANE.

[*Hesitating.*] Do you want me to tell you the whole thing now—just like this?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Yes. You don't think I'm afraid to hear the worst. Whatever it is, I hope I have the pluck to bear it like a Christian and a gentleman.

[*There is a pause.*]

DR. MACFARLANE.

You're quite right. I have bad news for you. Dr. Keller confirms my diagnosis. I was pretty sure of it, but I didn't want to believe it. I thought I might be mistaken.... I'm afraid you're very ill indeed. You must be extremely careful.

MRS. WHARTON.

George!

COLONEL WHARTON.

Come, come, my dear, don't get in a state. And does he recommend an operation?

DR. MACFARLANE.

No.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*Startled.*] Do you mean to say that.... But I don't feel so bad as all that. Now and then I have attacks of pain, but then ... you don't mean to say you think I'm going to die? For God's sake tell me the truth.

DR. MACFARLANE.

My dear old friend!

COLONEL WHARTON.

You mean I've got a fatal disease. Can—can nothing be done?

DR. MACFARLANE.

I don't know about that. There's always something that can be done.

COLONEL WHARTON.

But a cure, I mean. Can't I be cured?

DR. MACFARLANE.

If you want the truth really, then I'm afraid I can hold out no hope of that.

COLONEL WHARTON.

How long d'you give me? [*Trying to laugh.*] I suppose you're not going to grudge me a year or two?

DR. MACFARLANE.

[*Pretending to take it lightly.*] Oh, you can be quite sure we'll keep you alive as long as we can.

JOHN.

You've got a wonderful physique, father. My own impression is that you'll make fools of the doctors and live for another twenty years.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Medicine isn't an exact science like surgery. It's a doctor's duty to tell a patient the truth when he asks for it, but if I were a patient I would always take it with a grain of salt.

[*The COLONEL looks at him suspiciously.*]

COLONEL WHARTON.

You're keeping something from me. If it was only that, why did you want to see Evelyn alone?

DR. MACFARLANE.

Well, some people are very nervous about themselves. I wasn't quite sure if you'd better know or not. I thought I'd talk it over with her.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Am I in immediate danger of death? For God's sake, tell me. It would be cruel to leave me in ignorance.

MRS. WHARTON.

Please answer quite frankly, doctor.

DR. MACFARLANE.

[*After a pause.*] I think if you have any arrangements to make, it would be wise if you made them soon.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Then it's not a question of a year or two even? Is it months or weeks?

DR. MACFARLANE.

I don't know. No one can tell.

COLONEL WHARTON.

You're treating me like a child. [*With sudden rage.*] Confound you, sir, I order you to tell me.

DR. MACFARLANE.

It may be at any time.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*With a sudden cry of terror.*] Evelyn! Evelyn!

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, my dear! My dear husband!

[*She takes him in her arms as though to protect him.*]

DR. MACFARLANE.

Why did you force me to tell you?

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*In a terrified whisper.*] Oh, Evelyn! Evelyn!

MRS. WHARTON.

[*To the others.*] Please go.

JOHN.

[*To SYLVIA.*] Come. They want to be alone. Dr. Macfarlane, will you come into the garden for a few minutes?

DR. MACFARLANE.

Of course I will. Of course.

[*They go out. COLONEL and MRS. WHARTON are left alone.
For a moment they are silent.*]

MRS. WHARTON.

Perhaps it isn't true, my dear.

COLONEL WHARTON.

It's true. I know it's true now.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, it's so hard. I wish it were I instead. I'd be so glad to take your place, darling.

COLONEL WHARTON.

We've been so happy together, Evelyn.

MRS. WHARTON.

We have very much to be grateful for.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Oh, Evelyn, what shall I do?

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry for you. I'm so dreadfully sorry.... I think you're very brave. If I'd been told like that I—I should have broken down.

COLONEL WHARTON.

It was so unexpected.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Trying to comfort him.*] I'm thankful that your faith has always been so bright and clear. What a comfort that is now, darling, what an immense consolation! [*She draws him more closely to her.*]

You're throwing aside these poor rags of mortality to put on a heavenly raiment. It is what we've always kept in our minds, isn't it? that this brief life is only a place of passage to the mansions of our dear Father. [*She feels the dismay in his heart and she strives to give him courage.*] You've never hesitated at the call of an earthly leader. You're a good soldier; it's a Heavenly Leader that's calling you now. Christ is holding out His loving arms to you.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Evelyn—I don't want to die.

THE END OF THE FIRST ACT.

ACT II

The Scene is the same as in the preceding Act.

Two days have passed. It is Wednesday afternoon.

MRS. WHARTON is sitting by a little table, looking reflectively in front of her. On the table is a work-basket, and by the side of this a baby's shirt that she is making. A fire is alight in the grate. After a minute, JOHN comes in. She looks up at him with a pleasant smile. He goes to her and puts his hand on her shoulder. She gently pats his hand.

JOHN.

Are you idling, mother? It's not often I catch you giving the devil an opportunity.

MRS. WHARTON.

Isn't it wicked of me?

JOHN.

What is this you're up to? What in heaven's name are you making a baby's shirt for? Hang it all, I'm not married yet.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Pretending to be a little shocked.*] Don't be naughty, John. It's for poor Annie Black's baby.

JOHN.

Who's she?

MRS. WHARTON.

She was engaged to Edward Driffield, the carpenter's second man, and they were going to be married next time he came home on leave. He's been killed, and she's expecting a baby.

JOHN.

Poor thing.

MRS. WHARTON.

The Pooles are looking after her. You see, she had nowhere to go, and they didn't want her to have to go to the Workhouse, so Mrs. Poole has taken her in at the Vicarage. And I said I'd make all the baby's things.

JOHN.

[*Affectionately.*] You're a nice old mother.

MRS. WHARTON.

Don't you think it was good of the Pooles?

JOHN.

Yes, charming.

MRS. WHARTON.

They're coming here this afternoon, John. I wanted the Vicar to see your father.... I haven't told your father they're coming.

JOHN.

Haven't you?

MRS. WHARTON.

He's rather sensitive just now. It's quite natural, isn't it? And I didn't know exactly how he'd take it. I thought if Mrs. Poole came too it would look as though it were just a friendly visit. And perhaps the Vicar will have an opportunity to say a few words to your father.

JOHN.

[*Smiling.*] I take it that you want me to help you to leave them alone together.

MRS. WHARTON.

I hate doing anything underhand, John, but I think it would help your father so much if he could have a little private talk with the Vicar.

JOHN.

Why didn't you suggest it to him?

MRS. WHARTON.

I didn't like to. I was afraid he'd be vexed. I thought he'd suggest it himself.

JOHN.

[*Very tenderly.*] Don't distress yourself, mother.

MRS. WHARTON.

I'm trying not to think of it, John. My only hope is that the end may come without suffering.

JOHN.

I wasn't thinking of that.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*After a moment's pause.*] I don't know what you mean, John.

JOHN.

Yes, you do. You only have to look in father's face.

MRS. WHARTON.

I really don't understand. [*Almost vehemently.*] You're wrong, John. He suffers much more pain than you think. That's what gives him that look.

JOHN.

[*Gravely.*] It's fear that's in his face, mother, the fear of death. You know it just as well as I do.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With dismay.*] I was so hoping that no one would know but me. It tears my heart. And I can do nothing. And he's so strange. Sometimes he looks at me almost as though I were his enemy.

JOHN.

He doesn't want to die, does he? At the bottom of his heart is envy because you can go on living.

MRS. WHARTON.

Have you noticed that? I tried not to see it.

JOHN.

Don't be angry with him or disappointed. You know, it's a hard thing to die for all of us. Generally one's vitality is lowered so that life seems rather a burden, and it's not very hard then to make a seemly end. But poor father's got something much more difficult to face.

MRS. WHARTON.

He's been supported all his life by his confidence in the great truths of our religion. Oh, John, it's so dreadful that just at this moment, when he must put them all to the test, he should falter. It's almost a betrayal of the God who loves him.

JOHN.

My dear, you can't imagine that God won't understand? What do these last weeks matter beside a life that has been cheerful and innocent, devout, unselfish, and dutiful? We were talking about it the other day, don't you remember? And I claimed that a man should be judged by what he believed and did in the heyday of his strength, and not by what was wrung from him in a moment of anguish. Pray that God may give my father courage and resignation.

MRS. WHARTON.

How can you ask me to pray, John, when you don't believe in God?

JOHN.

Pray all the same, my dear, and for me too.

MRS. WHARTON.

I don't suppose I shall survive your father very long, dear. Husbands and wives who've been so much to one another as we have don't often make a very good job of separation. I'm so glad to think that you'll have Sylvia.

JOHN.

Sylvia's a good girl, isn't she?

MRS. WHARTON.

When you were away I was dreadfully anxious on my own account, of course, but I was anxious on hers too. She's had a very hard time with her mother, and there's been dreadfully little money, only their pensions; if anything had happened to you, when her mother died she would have had practically nothing. You've been engaged so long and she's not very young any more. It's not likely that anyone else would have wanted to marry her.

JOHN.

Mother darling, you're being terribly sentimental now.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With comic indignation.*] I'm not, John. You don't know what it is for a penniless woman to be quite alone in the world when she's lost her youth.

JOHN.

Yes, I do. But the tears needn't come into your eyes, because Sylvia and I are going to be married and her future is quite adequately provided for.

MRS. WHARTON.

She's the only girl I've ever known that I could bear to think of your marrying.

JOHN.

Well, as she's the only girl I ever knew that I could bear to marry, we're both quite satisfied.

[*KATE enters, followed by* MRS. LITTLEWOOD.]

KATE.

Mrs. Littlewood.

[*Exit* KATE.]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Kissing* MRS. WHARTON.] How do you do?

MRS. WHARTON.

How are you, my dear?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*To* JOHN.] I brought you a wedding present, John.

[*She hands him a small case in which is a pearl pin.*]

JOHN.

Oh, I say, that is splendid of you. Just look, mother. Isn't it a ripper?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

It was Archie's, you know. He always used to be so proud of it.

JOHN.

It's awfully good of you to give me something that belonged to him.

MRS. WHARTON.

That is nice of you, Charlotte.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Nonsense. It wasn't any use to me any more. I thought it much better that John should have it

than that it should lie in a safe. They tell me pearls go yellow if they're not worn.

MRS. WHARTON.

John, dear, go and smoke a cigarette in the garden. I want to have a chat with Mrs. Littlewood.

JOHN.

All right, mother.

[He goes out.]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Do you know that I'm thinking of letting my house? I only kept it so that the boys should have a home to come to when they had a holiday, and now that they're both dead, I think I shall find it more amusing to live in London. I shall join a bridge club.

MRS. WHARTON.

Charlotte, what does it mean? Why do you talk like that?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

My dear, why shouldn't I join a bridge club? *[With a smile.]* At my age it's surely quite respectable.

MRS. WHARTON.

I'm bewildered. Don't you want me to talk of your boys?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Drily.] If you feel you really must pour out your sympathy, you may; but I don't know that I particularly want it.

MRS. WHARTON.

No one can understand you. You've behaved so strangely since you came back from France.... I think it was dreadful of you to go to the theatre when the poor lad was hardly cold in his grave. You seem to think of nothing but bridge.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I suppose different people take things in different ways.

MRS. WHARTON.

I wonder if you're quite in your right mind.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Somewhat amused.] Yes, I saw you wondered that.

MRS. WHARTON.

If you only knew how eager I am to help you. But you won't let me come near you. We've known one another for more than thirty years, Charlotte. Why do you put up a stone wall between us?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Gently, as though she were talking to a child.] My dear, don't worry your kind heart. If I wanted your help I would come to you at once. But I don't. I really don't.

[MRS. WHARTON hears her husband's step on the stairs.]

MRS. WHARTON.

Here is George. *[Going to the window.]* You can come in when you want to, John.

[The COLONEL comes into the room. His face is a little whiter than it was two days ago, and there is in his eyes every now and then a haunted look.]

MRS. WHARTON.

Charlotte Littlewood is here, George.

COLONEL WHARTON.

So I see. How do you do?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

You're not looking quite up to the mark to-day, Colonel.

COLONEL WHARTON.

That's a cheering thing to say to a man. I'm feeling pretty well.

MRS. WHARTON.

I was thinking he was looking much better the last day or two.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I presume it's not on my account that you've lit the fire on a day like this.

MRS. WHARTON.

No, I feel a little chilly. You always forget that I'm not as young as I was, George.

[*The COLONEL sits down in an arm-chair and MRS. WHARTON takes a couple of cushions.*

MRS. WHARTON.

Let me put them behind you, darling.

COLONEL WHARTON.

For goodness' sake don't fuss me, Evelyn. If I want cushions I'm perfectly capable of getting them for myself.

[*JOHN enters with SYLVIA and hears the last two speeches.*

JOHN.

Come, come, father, you mustn't spoil mother. She's waited on us both for thirty years. Don't let her get into bad habits at her time of life.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, Sylvia, we didn't expect to see you to-day. You said you'd be too busy.

SYLVIA.

I felt I must just look in and see how you all were.

[*The COLONEL gives her a suspicious look. She kisses MRS. WHARTON and MRS. LITTLEWOOD and the COLONEL.*

JOHN.

[*Showing SYLVIA the pearl pin.*] Look what Mrs. Littlewood has given me. Makes it worth while being married, doesn't it?

SYLVIA.

Oh, how lovely!

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

You'll find a little present waiting for you when you get home.

SYLVIA.

How exciting! I shall run all the way back.

MRS. WHARTON.

Now you're here you'd better stay to tea, darling.

SYLVIA.

I really can't. I've got so much to do at home.

JOHN.

Nonsense. You've got nothing to do at all. We're not going to dream of letting you go.

SYLVIA.

Remember that you'll have me always from to-morrow on. Don't you think you could well spare me to-day?

JOHN.

No.

SYLVIA.

Tiresome creature. Though I must say it's rather pleasing.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I never saw two young people who were so thoroughly satisfied with one another as you are.

JOHN.

[*Putting his arm round SYLVIA'S waist.*] But I'm not in the least satisfied with Sylvia. I should like her to have jet black hair and eyes like sloes.

SYLVIA.

What are sloes, idiot?

JOHN.

I don't know, but I've read about them from my youth up.

SYLVIA.

Oh, Colonel, d'you know that on my way here through the fields, I actually saw a rabbit?

JOHN.

I hear there's absolutely nothing on the place now, father.

COLONEL WHARTON.

No, the vermin's been allowed to increase so. There are one or two cock pheasants round the house and that's about all. I don't know what next season—but after all, I needn't worry myself about next season. That'll be your trouble, John.

JOHN.

I wish I had as much chance of getting a shot at those cock pheasants as you have.

COLONEL WHARTON.

By George, I wish I were twenty years younger. I'd take my chance of being shot by a German. It's a bit better than dying like a rat in a trap.

[KATE enters to announce the VICAR and MRS. POOLE.]

KATE.

Mr. and Mrs. Poole.

[Exit.]

MRS. WHARTON.

How do you do?

[There are general greetings. The COLONEL looks at them and from them to his wife, suspiciously. The POOLLES are rather cold with MRS. LITTLEWOOD.]

COLONEL WHARTON.

How do you do? It's good of you to have come. Sit down.

MRS. POOLE.

Well, Sylvia, are you all ready for to-morrow?

SYLVIA.

More or less.

MRS. POOLE.

We thought you might intend to postpone the wedding for a few days.

COLONEL WHARTON.

They've waited long enough. Why should they wish to do that?

SYLVIA.

[Hastily.] I told Mrs. Poole yesterday that I didn't think I could possibly get everything arranged by to-morrow.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I see that my wife has told you that I'm not very well.

MRS. POOLE.

Oh, aren't you, Colonel? I'm so sorry to hear that.

VICAR.

She told me this morning after Communion that you weren't quite up to the mark these days.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I remember in Egypt, when a horse or a mule sickened, the vultures used to gather round out of an empty sky. Most remarkable.

MRS. WHARTON.

George, what are you saying?

COLONEL WHARTON.

[With a bitter chuckle.] Did Evelyn ask you to come and minister to me?

VICAR.

It's not very unnatural that when I hear you're ill I should like to come and see you. And, of course, it does happen to be one of the duties of my office.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I don't know why Evelyn should think I want to be molly-coddled out of the world like an old woman. I've faced death before. I don't suppose anyone wants to die before he must, but when my time comes I hope to face it like a gentleman and a soldier.

JOHN.

Oh, that I should live to hear my own father talking through his hat. Don't you believe a word those rotten old doctors say. You'll live to bully your devoted family for another twenty years.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Don't talk nonsense to me, John. You all treat me like a child. No one must cross me. I must be petted and spoilt and amused and humoured. God damn it, you never let me forget it for a minute.

MRS. WHARTON.

Shall we go for a little turn in the garden? The sun is out now.

COLONEL WHARTON.

If you like. I shall stay here. I'm chilly.

MRS. WHARTON.

A stroll would do you good, George. The Vicar was asking how the new Buff Orpingtons were getting on.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*With a chuckle.*] You're very transparent, my poor Evelyn. When I want to have a chat with the Vicar I'll let him know.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Who has been watching the scene with some amusement.*] Why don't you have a game of piquet with me, Colonel?

COLONEL WHARTON.

I haven't played piquet for years. I will with pleasure. Where are the cards, Evelyn?

MRS. WHARTON.

I'll get them for you.

[*She gets cards from a drawer, and puts them on the card table. The COLONEL sits down at the table and sorts the piquet cards out of the pack.*]

VICAR.

I called on you on Monday, Mrs. Littlewood.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

So I heard.

VICAR.

I was told you were not at home. As I walked away it was impossible for me not to see that you were in your garden.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

It's inadequately protected from the road.

VICAR.

I was rather hurt. I'm not aware that there's been anything in my behaviour since I came here to justify you in treating me with discourtesy. Our relations have always been more than cordial.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I didn't wish to see you.

VICAR.

So much as that I had the intelligence to infer. But I felt it my duty not to allow pique to interfere with the due discharge of my office. I had various things to say to you which I thought you should hear, so yesterday I called again, and again was told you were out.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Coolly.*] I didn't wish to see you.

VICAR.

May I ask why?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Well, I suppose you wanted to talk about my boy. I didn't think your conversation could give him back to me.

VICAR.

Don't you think I could have helped you to bear your loss? I think I could have found in my heart words to persuade you to resignation. I might at least have offered you my sympathy.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I'm sorry to seem ungracious, but I don't want your sympathy.

VICAR.

Your attitude amazes me.

MRS. POOLE.

If we didn't all know how devoted you were to your sons, one might really think you were indifferent to their loss.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Reflectively.*] No, I'm not exactly indifferent.

VICAR.

Since you won't see me alone, I must say things to you here and now which I should rather have kept for your private ear. I have a right to remonstrate with you because your behaviour is a scandal to my parish.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*With a smile.*] Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought it was my welfare you were concerned with. If it's that of the parish, pray say anything you like.

VICAR.

[*Flushing, but not to be put off.*] I think it was horrible to go to a music-hall on the very day you had returned from your son's grave in France. But that was in London, and you outraged nobody but yourself. What you do here is different. This is a very small place, and it's shameful that you should give parties and go about from house to house playing cards.

MRS. POOLE.

It seems so heartless not to wear mourning.

JOHN.

[*Rather flippantly, to prevent the conversation from growing too awkward.*] Why? I certainly should hate anyone to wear mourning for me.

VICAR.

You give all and sundry the impression that you're perfectly callous. What influence do you think such a thing may have on these young fellows in the village who have to risk their lives with all the other brave lads at the front? You take from them the comfort that we at home love them and if they fall will hold their memories gratefully in our hearts for ever.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I shouldn't have thought the eccentricity of one old woman could matter very much to anyone.

[*She pauses and looks out into the open for a moment, and then makes up her mind to speak. She speaks quite quietly, almost to herself.*

When they sent for me and I went over to France I wasn't very anxious, because I knew that God, who had taken my eldest son, would leave my second. You see, he was the only one I had left. And when I got there and found he was dead—I suddenly felt that it didn't matter.

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, what do you mean? How can you say such a thing?

JOHN.

Don't, mother. Let her go on.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I didn't feel that anything very much mattered. It's difficult to explain exactly what I mean. I feel that I have nothing more to do with the world and the world has nothing more to do with me. So far as I'm concerned it's a failure. You know I wasn't very happy in my married life, but I loved my two sons, and they made everything worth while, and now they're gone. Let others take up the—the adventure. I step aside.

MRS. WHARTON.

You've suffered too much, my dear.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

No, the strange thing is that I haven't suffered very much. Don't you know how sometimes one has a horrid dream and knows one's only dreaming all the time? [*To the VICAR, with the same good temper, almost amused.*] You're surprised that I should go to the theatre. Why? To me, it's no more unreal a spectacle than life. Life does seem to me just like a play now. I can't take it very seriously. I feel strangely detached. I have no ill-feeling for my fellow-creatures, but you don't seem very real to me or very important. Why shouldn't I play bridge with you?

VICAR.

Oh, but, my dear, my dear, there's one reality that you can never escape from. There's God.

[A flash passes behind the old woman's eyes. She rises and puts out her hand as though to ward off a blow.]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I don't think we'll talk about God if you please. I prefer to play piquet.

[She sits down at the table at which the COLONEL has already taken his seat.]

COLONEL WHARTON.

Do you play four hands or six to the game?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Four—and double the first and last. It makes it more exciting.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Shall we cut for deal?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Cutting.] You're not likely to beat that.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I suppose in the Vicar's presence we daren't play for money?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

We'll pretend he's not there. Will a shilling a hundred suit you?

COLONEL WHARTON.

I don't think that'll break either of us.

[KATE enters, followed by DR. MACFARLANE.]

KATE.

Dr. Macfarlane.

[Exit.]

DR. MACFARLANE.

How d'you do?

MRS. WHARTON.

[Shaking hands with him.] So nice of you to come in.

DR. MACFARLANE.

How is the Colonel to-day?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Playing piquet.

JOHN.

You're coming to-morrow, aren't you, Doctor?

DR. MACFARLANE.

Of course I am. I brought you both into the world. I have almost a personal interest in seeing you made one flesh.

VICAR.

[Jovially.] It's many a long day since you've been inside a church, Doctor.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Since you clerical gentlemen left off threatening me with eternal flames I feel justified in following my own inclinations in the matter.

VICAR.

[Chaffing him.] But we still believe in annihilation.

DR. MACFARLANE.

I'm willing to take my chance of that. It has no terrors for a man who's not had a holiday for twenty years.

VICAR.

You're not an irreligious man. I don't know why you don't come to church.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Shall I tell you? Because after repeated experiment I've reached the conclusion that I'm not a whit the better for it.

JOHN.

You'll have to give him up, Vicar. He's a stubborn old thing. He takes advantage of the fact that he's the only doctor within ten miles who won't kill you so long as he can make seven and sixpence a visit by keeping you alive.

COLONEL WHARTON.

Do you mean to say that our Church doesn't believe any longer in eternal punishment?

JOHN.

Oh, father, hell has always left me perfectly cold. You and I are quite safe. You see, mother would never be happy in heaven without us, and God couldn't refuse her anything she asked.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Affectionately.*] John, what nonsense you talk.

MRS. POOLE.

I sometimes think the modern Church has been very rash in surrendering a belief which has the authority of Our Lord himself. How many sinners have been brought to repentance by the fear of everlasting punishment!

JOHN.

That rather suggests calling down fire from heaven to light a cigar.

MRS. POOLE.

That may be funny, but I don't see the point of it.

JOHN.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Well, I should have thought it hardly required anything so tremendous as eternity to deal with human wickedness. I suppose sin is due to a man's character, which he can't help, or to his ignorance, for which he isn't to blame.

VICAR.

In fact, to your mind sin is all moonshine.

JOHN.

I think it a pity that Christianity has laid so much stress on it. We assert in church that we're miserable sinners, but I don't think we mean it, and what's more I don't think we are.

MRS. POOLE.

We are conceived in sin, and sin is part of our inheritance. Why did Christ die if not to atone for the sin of men?

JOHN.

In war one gets to know very intimately all sorts of queer people. I don't suppose I shall ever know any men so well as I knew the men in my company. They were honest and brave and cheerful, unselfish, good fellows; perhaps they swore a good deal, and they got drunk if they had the chance, and they had the glad eye for a pretty girl. But do you think they were sinners for that? I don't.

VICAR.

Look in your own heart and say if you are not conscious of grievous, terrible sin.

JOHN.

Frankly, I'm not.

VICAR.

Do you mean to say that you have nothing to reproach yourself with?

JOHN.

I've done a certain number of things which I think were rather foolish, but I can't think of anything that I'm particularly ashamed of.

VICAR.

Do you mean to tell me that you've always been perfectly chaste?

JOHN.

I'm normal and healthy. I've been no more chaste than any other man of my age.

VICAR.

And isn't that sin?

JOHN.

I don't think so. I think it's human nature.

VICAR.

We're arguing at cross-purposes. If when you say "white" you mean what the rest of the world calls "black," all words are futile.

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] The singular thing is that if I'd answered your question with a "yes," you would probably have thought me a liar or a fool.

VICAR.

This terrible condition of humanity, which seems to cry out against the very idea either of man's dignity, or of God's justice, has but one explanation, and that is sin.

JOHN.

You're referring to the war? It needs some explaining, doesn't it?

VICAR.

Every Christian must have asked himself why God allows the infamous horror of war. I'm told the padres are constantly being asked by the brave lads at the Front why the Almighty allows it to continue. I can't blame anyone for being puzzled. I've wrestled with the question long and anxiously.... I can't believe that God would leave His children to suffer without a clue to His intention.

MRS. POOLE.

The ways of God are inscrutable. How can we tell what are the aims of the eternal? We only know that they are good.

JOHN.

Meanwhile men are being killed like flies, their wives and mothers are left desolate, and their children fatherless.

VICAR.

You mustn't forget exactly what is meant by "Almighty." It means not so much able to do all things as powerful over all things.

JOHN.

Ah, the padre of my regiment told me that. I may be very stupid, but I think the distinction rather fine. For the plain man the difficulty remains. Either God can't stop the war even if He wants to, or He can stop it and won't.

MRS. POOLE.

In my opinion there can be no hesitation. It is written: "Not a sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father."

VICAR.

Remember that we have free will and God makes use of our free will to punish us and to teach us and to make us more worthy of His grace and mercy. Man, born in sin, justly brought this long-drawn disaster on himself as surely as Adam brought on himself the divine punishment which we all inherit.

JOHN.

If I saw two small boys fighting I'd separate them, even though one was a lazy little beggar and the other had stolen Farmer Giles' apples. I wouldn't sit by and let them seriously hurt one another so that they should be better boys in future.

MRS. POOLE.

But you speak as though all this suffering must be useless. We all know how suffering can purify and elevate. I've seen it myself over and over again.

DR. MACFARLANE.

People say that. They're generally thinking of elderly ladies in comfortable circumstances who with the aid of a very good doctor show a becoming resignation in a chronic disease.

JOHN.

I should like some of those people who talk about the purifying influence of suffering to have a mouthful of gas and see how they liked it.

VICAR.

The war is terrible. Its cruelty is terrible. The suffering it has caused is terrible. There is only one explanation for it; and that is the loving kindness and the infinite mercy of our heavenly Father.

JOHN.

Can you bring yourself to believe that?

VICAR.

We were given over to drunkenness and lust, to selfishness and flippancy and pride. It needed this tremendous trial to purify us. It will be a nobler England that comes out of the furnace. Oh, I pray to God that all this blood may wash our souls clean so that we may once more be found worthy in His sight.

MRS. POOLE.

Amen.

JOHN.

You must evidently know much more about it than I do. When the men in my company did things I thought were wrong I used to jolly them a bit. I fancy I got better results than if I'd bashed them on the head with a sledge-hammer.

VICAR.

Sin began with the beginning of the human story and has continued through all its course. The motive of the divine redemption lies in the fact that men, though created for so lofty a purpose, have plunged so deep into sin and have so deeply defaced in themselves the image of God, that only the self-sacrificing act of God in redeeming them can raise them from ruin.

JOHN.

I wish you'd been a company-commander and had seen how gaily a man can give his life for his friend.

VICAR.

But I know, my dear boy, I know. And do you think God will be unmindful of their sacrifice? I pray and believe that they will find mercy in His sight. I am sure He is more ready to pardon than to punish. After all, our Lord came to call sinners to repentance, and who should know better than the Ministers of God that to err is human, to forgive, divine?

[The piquet players have played their game with a certain distraction, and during the last few speeches have made no more pretence of playing at all. MRS. LITTLEWOOD has listened attentively. Now she puts down her cards, gets up, and walks up to the VICAR.]

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

And who is going to forgive God?

MRS. WHARTON.

[With horror.] Charlotte!

VICAR.

[With grave disapproval.] Don't you think that is rather blasphemous?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Quietly and deliberately at first, but with ever-increasing excitement.] Ever since I was a child I've served God with all my might, and with all my heart, and with all my soul. I've tried always to lead my life in accordance with His will. I never forgot that I was as nothing in His sight. I've been weak and sinful, but I've tried to do my duty.

MRS. WHARTON.

Yes, dear, you've been an example to us all.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[Taking no notice.] Honestly, I've done everything I could that I thought was pleasing in His sight. I've praised Him and magnified His name. You've heard that my husband deserted me when I'd borne him two children, and I was left alone. I brought them up to be honest, upright and God-fearing men. When God took my eldest son I wept, but I turned to the Lord and said: "Thy will be done." He was a soldier, and he took his chance, and he died in a good cause.

VICAR.

A great and a good cause.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

But why did God take my second? He was the only one I had left, the only comfort of my old age, my only joy, the only thing I had to prevent me from seeing that my life had been wasted and it would have been better if I had never been born. I haven't deserved that. When a horse has served me long and faithfully till he's too old to work I have the right to send him to the knacker's yard, but I don't, I put him out to grass. I wouldn't treat a dog as my Father has treated me. I've been cheated. You say that God will forgive us our sins, but who is going to forgive God? Not I. Never. Never!

*[In a height of frenzy she rushes out into the garden.
There is silence in the room.]*

MRS. WHARTON.

Don't be angry with her, Vicar. She's beside herself with grief.

VICAR.

She'll come back. She's like a petulant child that has been thwarted for its good. It cries and stamps, but in a little while it throws itself into its mother's arms, and begs, all tears, for forgiveness.

MRS. POOLE.

[With a little sigh of relief.] I knew you'd take it like that, Norman. You're so tolerant and broad-minded.

VICAR.

I think I see my way to help her, poor soul.

JOHN.

I wonder how. Your only explanation of evil is sin. I daresay you can get people to acknowledge that they've deserved their own suffering. But you'll never prevent them from being revolted at the suffering of others. Why is evil permitted in the world by an all-good God?

VICAR.

I can hardly hope that any answer of mine will satisfy you. By God's grace I am a Christian. You are an atheist.

[There is a moment's embarrassment. JOHN realises that his mother or SYLVIA has repeated what he has said.]

JOHN.

That suggests a very dogmatic attitude. I don't see how anyone can positively assert that there is no God. It would be as reasonable as to assert that there's nothing on the other side of a wall that you can't look over.

VICAR.

Do you believe in God?

JOHN.

I don't think it's quite your business to ask me. *[With a smile.]* Wasn't it St. Paul who said: "Be not zealous overmuch."

VICAR.

You can't be unaware that by certain statements of yours the other day you gave the greatest pain to those nearest and dearest to you.

SYLVIA.

What you said made me very unhappy, John. I didn't know what to do. I went to the Vicar and asked his advice.

JOHN.

Don't you think that a man's belief is his own affair? I don't want to interfere with other people's. Why can't they leave me quietly to mine?

SYLVIA.

It can't be entirely your affair, John. You and I propose to be married to-morrow. It's only reasonable that I should know exactly how you stand in a matter that concerns me so closely.

JOHN.

I hadn't thought of that. I daresay there's something in what you say. I'm willing to do my best to explain to you and to father and mother. But I really think we needn't drag strangers in.

MRS. WHARTON.

I think it would be much better if you would talk with the Vicar, John. We don't pretend to be

very clever, and it wouldn't mean much if you asked us questions that we couldn't answer.

VICAR.

When you're ill you send for a doctor, he prescribes for you, and you get well.

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] What do you think of that, doctor?

DR. MACFARLANE.

It is an idea that we do our little best to spread about the world.

VICAR.

Anyhow, you take a doctor's advice and you don't argue with him. Why? Because he's an expert, and you presume that he knows his business. Why should the science of the immortal soul be a less complicated affair than the science of the perishable body?

MRS. WHARTON.

Look upon us as very silly, old-fashioned people, and be kind to us. If various doubts are troubling you, put them frankly before the Vicar. Perhaps he can help you.

VICAR.

[*Sincerely.*] Believe me, I'll do everything in my power.

MRS. WHARTON.

And if he can convince you that you were wrong, I know you too well to dream that pride would stop you from confessing it. It would give us such heartfelt joy, my dear, if you could believe again as you did when you were a little child and used to say your prayers kneeling on my lap.

VICAR.

I really think I can help you. Won't you forget that I'm a stranger and let me try?

DR. MACFARLANE.

Perhaps you'd like me to leave you. I was only waiting till the Colonel had finished his game so that I might take him upstairs and have a look at him. But I can come back later.

JOHN.

I don't mind your staying at all. [*To the Vicar.*] What is it you wish to ask me?

VICAR.

Do you believe in the God in whose name you were baptised into the Church?

JOHN.

No!

VICAR.

That at all events is frank and honest. But aren't you a little out of date? One of the most gratifying occurrences of recent years has been the revival of belief among thoughtful men.

JOHN.

I should have thought it was a revival of rhetoric rather than of religion. I'm not enormously impressed by the cultured journalist who uses God to balance a sentence or adorn a phrase.

VICAR.

But it hasn't only been among educated men. Not the least remarkable thing about the war has been the return of our brave lads at the Front to the faith which so many of us thought they had forgotten. What is your explanation of that?

JOHN.

Fear with the most part. Perplexity with the rest.

VICAR.

Don't you think it very rash to reject a belief that all the ablest men in the world have held since the dawn of history?

JOHN.

When you're dealing with a belief, neither the number nor the ability of those who hold it makes it a certainty. Only proof can do that.

MRS. POOLE.

Are you quite sure that at the bottom of your heart it's not conceit that makes you think differently from the rest of us?

VICAR.

No, my dear, let us not ascribe unworthy motives to our antagonist.

JOHN.

[*Smiling.*] At all events, not yet.

VICAR.

What makes you think that the existence of God can't be proved?

JOHN.

I suppose at this time of day people wouldn't still be proving it if proof were possible.

VICAR.

My dear fellow, the fact that there is no people on the face of the earth, however barbarous and degraded, without some belief in God, is the most conclusive proof you can want.

JOHN.

What of? It's conclusive proof that the desire for His existence is universal. It's not proof that the desire is fulfilled.

VICAR.

I see you have the usual Rationalistic arguments at your fingers' ends. Believe me, they're old friends, and if I've answered them once I've answered them a thousand times.

JOHN.

And have you ever convinced anyone who wasn't convinced before?

VICAR.

I can't make the blind to see, you know.

JOHN.

I wonder that hasn't suggested to you a very obvious conclusion.

VICAR.

What?

JOHN.

Why, that arguments are futile. Think for a minute. You don't believe in God for any of the reasons that are given for His existence. You believe in Him because with all your heart you *feel* that He exists. No argument can ever touch that feeling. The heart is independent of logic and its rules.

VICAR.

I daresay there's something in what you say.

JOHN.

Well, it's the same with me. If you ask me why I don't believe in the existence of God I suppose I can give you a certain number of reasons, but the real one, the one that gives all the others their force, is that I feel it in my heart.

VICAR.

What is the cause of your feeling?

JOHN.

I'm sure you'll think it very insufficient. I had a friend and he was killed.

VICAR.

I'm afraid one must be prepared to lose one's friends in a war like this.

JOHN.

I daresay it's very silly and sentimental of me. One gets used to one's pals dying. Someone says to you: "So-and-So's knocked out." And you answer: "Is he really? Poor chap." And you don't think very much more about it. Robbie Harrison wasn't quite an ordinary man.

MRS. WHARTON.

I was afraid you'd feel his death very much. You never mentioned it in your letters. I felt it was because you couldn't bear to speak of it.

JOHN.

He was one of those lucky beggars who do everything a little better than anybody else. He was clever and awfully nice-looking and amusing. I never knew anyone who loved life so much as he did.

MRS. WHARTON.

Yes, I remember his saying to me once: "Isn't it ripping to be alive?"

JOHN.

But there was something more in him than that. He had one quality which was rather out of the ordinary. It's difficult to explain what it was like. It seemed to shine about him like a mellow light. It was like the jolly feeling of the country in May. And do you know what it was? Goodness. Just goodness. He was the sort of man that I should like to be.

MRS. WHARTON.

He was a dear.

JOHN.

I was awfully excited when war was declared. I was in India at the time. I moved heaven and earth to get out to the Front. I thought war the noblest sport in the world. I found it a dreary, muddy, dirty, stinking, bloody business. And I suppose Robbie's death was the last straw. It seemed so unjust. I don't know that it was grief so much that I felt as indignation. I was revolted by all the horror and pain and suffering.

MRS. POOLE.

You must have seen some dreadful things.

JOHN.

Perhaps it's Christianity that has shown us the possibility of a higher morality than Christianity teaches. I daresay I'm quite wrong. I can only tell you that all that's moral in my soul revolts at the thought of a God who can permit the monstrous iniquity of war. I can't believe that there is a God in heaven.

VICAR.

But do you realise that if there isn't, the world is meaningless?

JOHN.

That may be. But if there is it's infamous.

VICAR.

What have you got to put in the place of religion? What answer can you give to the riddle of the universe?

JOHN.

I may think your answer wrong and yet have no better one to put in its place.

VICAR.

Have you nothing to tell us at all when we ask you why man is here and what is his destiny? You are like a rudderless ship in a stormy sea.

JOHN.

I suppose the human race has arisen under the influence of conditions which are part of the earth's history, and under the influence of other conditions it will come to an end. I don't see that there is any more meaning in life than in the statement that two and two are four.

SYLVIA.

[*With suppressed passion.*] Then you think that all our efforts and struggles, our pain and sorrow, our aims, are senseless?

JOHN.

Do you remember our going to the Russian ballet before the war? I've never forgotten a certain gesture of one of the dancers. It was an attitude she held for an instant, in the air; it was the most lovely thing I ever saw in my life; you felt it could only have been achieved by infinite labour, and the fact that it was so fleeting, like the shadow of a bird flying over a river, made it all the more wonderful. I've often thought of it since, and it has seemed to me a very good symbol of life.

SYLVIA.

John, you can't be serious.

JOHN.

I'll tell you what I mean. Life seems to me like a huge jig-saw puzzle that doesn't make any picture, but if we like we can make little patterns, as it were, out of the pieces.

SYLVIA.

What is the use of that?

JOHN.

There's no use, and no need. It's merely something we can do for our own satisfaction. Pain and sorrow are some of the pieces that we have to deal with. By making the most of all our faculties, by using all our opportunities, out of the manifold events of life, our deeds, our feelings, our thoughts, we can make a design which is intricate, dignified, and beautiful. And death at one stroke completes and destroys it.

[There is a moment's silence.]

MRS. POOLE.

I wonder why you're coming to church to-morrow to be married?

JOHN.

[With a smile.] I think Sylvia would be outraged at the thought of being married in a registry office.

MRS. POOLE.

It's lucky for you the Vicar is broad-minded. A stricter man might think it his duty to refuse the blessing of the Church to an unbeliever.

MRS. WHARTON.

[Anxiously.] Vicar, you're not thinking of doing anything like that?

VICAR.

I confess the question has crossed my mind. *[Kindly.]* I don't think I can bring myself to expose such good Christians as you and Sylvia to such a humiliation.

SYLVIA.

You need not harass yourself, Vicar. I've decided not to marry John.

JOHN.

[Aghast.] Sylvia! Sylvia, you can't mean that!

SYLVIA.

I was dreadfully troubled the other day when you told us you'd lost your faith, but I hadn't the courage to say anything then. It came as such an awful shock.

JOHN.

But you never made the least sign.

SYLVIA.

I hadn't time to think it out, but I've been thinking hard ever since, day and night, and I've listened very carefully to what you've said to-day. I can't keep up the pretence any more. I've quite made up my mind. I won't marry you.

JOHN.

But in God's name, why?

SYLVIA.

You are not the John I loved and promised myself to. It's a different man that has come back from abroad. I have nothing in common with that man.

JOHN.

Sylvia, you don't mean to say that you don't care for me any more because on certain matters I don't hold the same views as you?

SYLVIA.

But those matters are the most important in the world. You talk as though it were a difference of opinion over the colour of our drawing-room curtains. You don't even understand me any more.

JOHN.

How can I understand something that seems absolutely unreasonable to me?

SYLVIA.

Do you think religion is something I take up with my Prayer-book when I go to church, and put away on a shelf when I get home again? John, God is a living presence that is always with me. I never at any moment lose the consciousness of that divine love which with infinite mercy tends and protects me.

JOHN.

But, dear heart, you know me well enough. You know I would never hinder you in the exercise of your religion. I would always treat it with the utmost respect.

SYLVIA.

How could we possibly be happy when all that to me is the reason and the beauty of life, to you is nothing but a lie?

JOHN.

With tolerance on both sides, and, I hope, respect, there's no reason why two people shouldn't live peaceably together no matter how different their views are.

SYLVIA.

How can I be tolerant when I see you deep in error? Oh, it's more than error, it's sin. You've had your choice between light and darkness, and you've deliberately chosen darkness. You are a deserter. If words mean anything at all you are condemned.

JOHN.

But, my dear, a man believes what he can. You don't seriously think that a merciful God is going to punish him because he's unable to believe something that he finds incredible?

SYLVIA.

No one doubts that Our Lord will have mercy on those who have never had the chance of receiving His teaching. You've had the chance, and you've refused to take it. Do you forget the Parable of the Ten Talents? It is a terrible warning.

JOHN.

After all, if I'm wrong I hurt nobody but myself.

SYLVIA.

You forget what marriage is. It makes us one flesh. I am bidden to cleave to you and to follow you. How can I, when our souls must ever be separated by an unsurpassable abyss?

MRS. WHARTON.

Sylvia, this is a dreadfully grave decision you're making. Be careful that you're acting rightly.

JOHN.

Sylvia, you can't throw me over like this after we've been engaged for seven years. It's too heartless.

SYLVIA.

I don't trust you. I have no hold over you. What have you to aim at beside the satisfaction of your own vulgar appetite? Sin means nothing to you.

JOHN.

My dear, you don't suppose it's religion that makes a man decent? If he's kind and honest and truthful it's because it's his nature, not because he believes in God or fears hell.

SYLVIA.

We're neither of us very young any more, there's no reason why we should make a mystery of natural things. If we married my greatest hope was that we should have children.

JOHN.

It was mine too.

SYLVIA.

Have you asked yourself how this would affect them? Which are they to be, Christians or Agnostics?

JOHN.

My dear, I promise you I will not interfere with your teaching of them.

SYLVIA.

Do you mean to say you will stand by while they are taught a pack of worthless lies?

JOHN.

Your faith has been the faith of our people for hundreds of years. In the case of a difference of opinion I could not take it on myself to refuse children instruction in it. When they reach years of discretion they can judge for themselves.

SYLVIA.

And supposing they ask you about things? The story of Our Saviour appeals to children, you know. It's very natural that they should put you questions. What will you answer?

JOHN.

I don't think you could ask me to say what I thought untrue.

MRS. WHARTON.

He could always refer them to you, Sylvia dear.

SYLVIA.

You naturally wouldn't come to church. What sort of an example would you set your children in a matter of which I was impressing on them the enormous importance?

JOHN.

[*With a smile.*] My dear, surely you're letting a lack of humour cloud a lively intelligence. Vast numbers of excellent churchmen don't go to church, and I'm not aware that their children are corrupted by it.

SYLVIA.

[*Passionately.*] You don't understand. You'll never understand. It's a joke to you. It's all over and done with, John. Let me go. I beseech you to let me go.

COLONEL WHARTON.

[*Half rising from his chair.*] I feel most awfully ill.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*In alarm.*] George!

JOHN.

[*Simultaneously.*] Father!

[*MRS. WHARTON, JOHN, and the DOCTOR hurry towards him.*]

DR. MACFARLANE.

What's the matter?

MRS. WHARTON.

George, are you in pain?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Awful!

DR. MACFARLANE.

You'd better lie down on the sofa.

COLONEL WHARTON.

No, I'd rather go upstairs.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Don't crowd round him.

COLONEL WHARTON.

I feel as if I were going to die.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Do you think you can manage to walk?

COLONEL WHARTON.

Yes. Help me, Evelyn.

JOHN.

Put your arm round my neck, father.

COLONEL WHARTON.

No, it's all right. I can manage.

DR. MACFARLANE.

We'll get you upstairs and put you to bed.

MRS. WHARTON.

Come, darling, put all your weight on me.

DR. MACFARLANE.

That's right. You needn't come, John. You'll only be in the way.

[*MRS. WHARTON and the DOCTOR help the COLONEL out of the room.*]

MRS. POOLE.

We'd better go, Norman. [*To JOHN.*] I hope it's nothing very serious.

JOHN.

I'm sure I hope not.

MRS. POOLE.

Please don't bear us a grudge for any of the things Norman or I have said to you to-day. You know, I saw the letter your Colonel wrote to Mrs. Wharton when you were wounded, and I know how splendid you've been.

JOHN.

Oh, nonsense!

VICAR.

I'm afraid you may have to go through a good deal of distress in the near future. If you should change your mind in some of the things that we've talked about this afternoon no one would be more happy than myself.

JOHN.

It's very good of you to say so, but I don't think it likely.

VICAR.

One never knows by what paths the Most High will call His creatures to Himself. He is more cunning to save His children than they are to lose themselves. If you listen to the call, come to the Communion Table. I will ask no questions. It will be a joyful day for me if I am privileged to offer you the Blessed Sacrament of Our Lord and Saviour.

[He stretches out his hand and JOHN takes it.]

JOHN.

Good-bye.

[THE VICAR and MRS. POOLE go into the garden. JOHN turns to SYLVIA.]

JOHN.

Is it the question that the Vicar put me when we were talking about sin that has upset you, Sylvia?

SYLVIA.

No, I don't think it was very nice of him to put it. I never thought about the matter. I don't see why I should expect you to be better than other men.

JOHN.

Did you really mean all you said just now?

SYLVIA.

Every word.

[She takes off her engagement ring and hands it to him. He does not take it.]

JOHN.

[With deep emotion.] Sylvia, I couldn't say it before all those people, it seemed too intimate and private a matter. Doesn't it mean anything to you that I love you? It's been so much to me in all I've gone through to think of you. You've been everything in the world to me. When I was cold and wet and hungry and miserable, I've thought of you, and it all grew bearable.

SYLVIA.

I'm very sorry. I can't marry you.

JOHN.

How can you be so cold and heartless? Sylvia, my dear, I love you! Won't you give it a chance?

[She looks at him steadily for a moment. She braces herself for the final effort.]

SYLVIA.

But I don't love you any more, John.

[She hands him the ring again and he takes it silently.]

JOHN.

It's not a very swagger one, is it? I was none too flush in those days and I didn't want to ask father to help me. I wanted to buy it out of my own money.

SYLVIA.

I've worn it for seven years, John.

[He turns away from SYLVIA and walks over to the fire-]

place. When SYLVIA sees what he is going to do she makes a gesture as though to prevent him, but immediately controls herself. He stands looking at the fire for a moment, then throws the ring in; he watches what will happen to it. SYLVIA clutches her heart. She can hardly prevent the sobs which seem to tear her breast.

SYLVIA.

I think I'll be getting home. John—if your father or mother want me you can send, can't you?

JOHN.

[*Looking over his shoulder.*] Of course. I'll let you know at once.

SYLVIA.

[*In a natural voice.*] Good-bye, John.

JOHN.

Good-bye, Sylvia.

[*He turns back to look at the fire, and she walks slowly out of the room.*

THE END OF THE SECOND ACT.

ACT III

The Scene is the same as in the preceding Acts. It is early morning on the following Wednesday. The dead ashes of yesterday's fire are still in the grate. Not far away is heard the ringing of a church bell to call the faithful to the first service.

MRS. WHARTON *is standing by a table on which is a large basket of white flowers which she had just brought in from the garden. She picks up a rose, and with a faint smile gives it a little caress. SYLVIA comes in from the garden.*

SYLVIA.

[*With surprise.*] Mrs. Wharton!

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, Sylvia, is it you?

SYLVIA.

It startled me to see you there. I came in this way because I saw the door was open and your front door bell's so noisy. I thought if the Colonel was asleep it might wake him.

MRS. WHARTON.

It's early, isn't it?

SYLVIA.

Yes, I'm on my way to the early service. I thought I'd look in just to ask how the Colonel was. But I didn't expect to see you. I thought Kate or Hannah might be about.

MRS. WHARTON.

George is dead, Sylvia.

SYLVIA.

[*In amazement.*] Mrs. Wharton!

MRS. WHARTON.

He died quite peacefully about an hour ago. I've just been to gather some flowers to put in his room.

SYLVIA.

Oh, Mrs. Wharton, I'm so sorry. I'm so dreadfully sorry for you.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*Patting her hand.*] Thank you, my dear; you've been very kind to us during these days.

SYLVIA.

Where is John?

MRS. WHARTON.

I think he must have gone out for a walk. I went to his room a little while ago and he wasn't there. He wanted to sit up with me last night, but I wouldn't let him.

SYLVIA.

But ... but doesn't John know his father is dead?

MRS. WHARTON.

No, not yet.

SYLVIA.

Didn't you call him?

MRS. WHARTON.

I had no idea the end was so near. George wanted to be alone with me, Sylvia. We'd been married for thirty-five years, you see. He was conscious almost to the last. He died quite suddenly, like a child going to sleep.

SYLVIA.

It's such a terrible loss. You poor dear, you must be quite heart-broken.

MRS. WHARTON.

It's a very great loss, but I'm not heart-broken. George is happy and at rest. We should be very poor Christians if the death of those we love made us unhappy. George has entered into eternal life.

SYLVIA.

Oh, Mrs. Wharton, what a blessed thing it is to have a faith like yours.

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, a very wonderful thing happened last night. I can't feel grief for dear George's death because of the recollection of that. I feel so strange. I feel as though I were walking in an enchanted garden.

SYLVIA.

I don't know what you mean.

MRS. WHARTON.

Since that day when George refused to talk with the Vicar I never dared mention the subject. He was not himself. It made me so unhappy. And then last night, soon after Dr. Macfarlane went away, he asked of his own accord for Mr. Poole. The Vicar's a dear, kind man. He'd said to me that if ever George asked for him he'd come at once, at any hour of the day or night. So I sent for him. He gave George the Holy Sacrament. And Sylvia, a miracle happened.

SYLVIA.

A miracle?

MRS. WHARTON.

No sooner had the bread and the wine touched his lips than he was transfigured. All his—his anxiety left him, and he was once more his dear, good, brave self. He was quite happy to die. It was as though an unseen hand had pulled back a dark curtain of clouds and he saw before him, not night and a black coldness, but a path of golden sunshine that led straight to the arms of God.

SYLVIA.

I'm so glad. I'm happy too now.

MRS. WHARTON.

The Vicar read the prayers for the dying and then he left us. We talked of the past and of our reunion in a little while. And then he died.

SYLVIA.

It's wonderful. Yes, it was a miracle.

MRS. WHARTON.

All through my life I've been conscious of the hand of God shaping the destinies of man. I've never seen His loving mercy more plainly manifest.

[KATE *opens the door and stands on the threshold, but does not come into the room.*]

KATE.

The woman's come, ma'am.

MRS. WHARTON.

Very well. I'm just coming.

[KATE goes out and shuts the door behind her. MRS. WHARTON takes up her basket of flowers.]

MRS. WHARTON.

John will be in immediately, Sylvia. He promised to come and relieve me at half-past eight, so that I might get something to eat. Will you see him?

SYLVIA.

Yes, Mrs. Wharton, if you wish me to.

MRS. WHARTON.

Will you tell him that his father is dead? I know you'll do it very gently.

SYLVIA.

Oh, Mrs. Wharton, wouldn't you prefer to tell him yourself?

MRS. WHARTON.

No.

SYLVIA.

Very well.

MRS. WHARTON.

You know he loves you, Sylvia. It would make me so happy if you two could arrive at some understanding. It seems such a pity that the happiness of both of you should be ruined.

SYLVIA.

I would do anything in the world for John, but I can't sacrifice what is and must be dearer to me even than he.

MRS. WHARTON.

Can't you teach him to believe?

SYLVIA.

Oh, I wish I could. I pray for him night and day.

MRS. WHARTON.

I wished afterwards that I'd asked him to be present when his father and I received the Communion. I think at that last solemn moment he might have been moved to receive it with us.

SYLVIA.

D'you think.... Perhaps a miracle would have taken place in him, too. Perhaps he would have believed.

MRS. WHARTON.

I must go upstairs.

[An idea seizes SYLVIA, and she gives a strange little gasp. As MRS. WHARTON is about to leave the room she stops her with a sudden question.]

SYLVIA.

Mrs. Wharton ... Mrs. Wharton, do you think the end can ever justify the means?

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, what an extraordinary question! It can never be right to do evil that good may come.

SYLVIA.

Are you quite sure that that's so always? After all, no one would hesitate to tell a lie to save another's life.

MRS. WHARTON.

Perhaps not. [With a faint smile.] We must thank God that we're not likely to be put in such a position. Why did you ask me that?

SYLVIA.

I was wondering what one should do if one could only rescue somebody from terrible danger by committing a great sin. Do you think one ought to do it or not?

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, you haven't the right to offend God for the sake of anyone in the world.

SYLVIA.

Not even for the sake of anyone you loved?

MRS. WHARTON.

Surely not, my dear. And no one who loved you would wish you for a moment to do a wicked thing for his sake.

SYLVIA.

But take your own case, Mrs. Wharton; if you saw the Colonel or John in deadly peril wouldn't you risk your life to save them?

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With a smile.*] Of course I should. I should be happy and thankful to have the opportunity. But that's not the same. I should only be risking my life, not my soul.

SYLVIA.

[*Almost beside herself.*] But if their souls were in peril, wouldn't you risk your soul?

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, what do you mean? You seem so excited.

SYLVIA.

[*Controlling herself with a great effort.*] I? You mustn't pay any attention to me. I haven't been sleeping very well the last three or four nights. I daresay I'm a little hysterical.

MRS. WHARTON.

Wouldn't you prefer to go home, darling?

SYLVIA.

No, I'd like to stay here if you don't mind. I'd like to see John.

MRS. WHARTON.

Very well. I shan't be very long.

[*She goes out. The church bell gives a hurried tinkle and then stops. SYLVIA walks up and down the room and stands still in front of a photograph of JOHN in his uniform. She takes it up and looks at it. Then putting it down she clasps her hands and raises her eyes. She is seen to be praying. She hears a sound in the garden, inclines her head to listen, and goes to the window. She hesitates a moment and then braces herself to a decision. She calls.*

SYLVIA.

John!

[*He comes, stops for a moment on the threshold, and then walks forward casually.*

JOHN.

Good morning! You're very early.

SYLVIA.

I looked in to ask how your father was.

JOHN.

When I left him last night he was fairly comfortable. I'll go and find out from mother how he is.

SYLVIA.

No, don't—don't disturb him.

JOHN.

I'm going to take mother's place in a few minutes. I awoke early, so I went for a walk.... You've been very good and kind to all of us during these wretched days, Sylvia. I don't know what we should have done without you.

SYLVIA.

I've been so dreadfully sorry. And you all had so much to bear. It wasn't only the thought that the poor dear couldn't—can't recover, but ... it was so much worse than that.

JOHN.

[*With a quick glance at her.*] I suppose it was inevitable that you should see it too. Somehow I hoped that only I and mother knew.

SYLVIA.

Oh, John, you can't mind about me. I've loved your father as though he were my own. Nothing he did could make me love him less.

JOHN.

He's afraid to die. It's dreadful to see his terror and to be able to do nothing to help him.

SYLVIA.

Would you do anything to help him if you could?

JOHN.

Of course.

SYLVIA.

It's unfortunate that you found it necessary to say what you did about religion. He's always been a very simple man. He always accepted without question the faith in which he was brought up. Perhaps he's not quite so sure now.

JOHN.

Nonsense, Sylvia. Father's faith is very much too steady for it to be unsettled by any opinions of mine.

SYLVIA.

Ordinarily, I dare say. But he's ill, he's in terrible pain, he's not himself. I think perhaps it's a pity you didn't hold your tongue. It's so easy to create doubts and so hard to allay them.

JOHN.

[*Much disturbed.*] That's an awful thought to have put into my head, Sylvia. I should never forgive myself if....

SYLVIA.

If you'd believed as we believe, he would have been supported, as it were, by all our faith. It would have made that terrible passage from this life to the life to come a little less terrible. You've failed him just when he needed you.

JOHN.

[*Indignantly.*] Oh, Sylvia, how can you say anything so heartless?

SYLVIA.

[*Coldly.*] It's true.

JOHN.

Heaven knows, I know that death isn't easy. You can't think I'd be so inhuman as to do anything to make it more difficult?

SYLVIA.

Except mortify your pride.

JOHN.

[*Impatiently.*] What has pride got to do with it?

SYLVIA.

There was pride in every word you said. Are you sure it's not pride of intellect that's responsible for your change of heart?

JOHN.

[*Icily.*] Perhaps. How do you suggest I should mortify it?

SYLVIA.

Well, you see, you can confess your error.

JOHN.

I don't think it's an error.

SYLVIA.

At least you can undo some of the harm you've done. Do you know what is chiefly tormenting your father? Your refusal to receive the Holy Communion. He keeps talking about it to your mother. He keeps harping on it. He's dreadfully distressed about it. If you received the Communion, John, it would give your father peace.

JOHN.

Sylvia, how can I?

SYLVIA.

All your life your father has done everything in the world for you. Nothing's been too good for you. You owe him all your happiness, everything you are and hope to be. Can't you do this one little thing for him?

JOHN.

No, it's out of the question. I really can't. I'm awfully sorry.

SYLVIA.

How can you be so hard? It's the last wish he'll ever have in the world. It's your last chance of showing your love for him. Oh, John, show a little mercy to his weakness!

JOHN.

But, Sylvia, it would be blasphemous.

SYLVIA.

What are you talking about? You don't believe. To you it's merely an idle ceremony. What can it matter to you if you go through a meaningless form?

JOHN.

I've been a Christian too long. I have a hundred generations of Christianity behind me.

SYLVIA.

You never hesitated at coming to church when we were going to be married.

JOHN.

That was different.

SYLVIA.

How? That was a sacrament, too. Are you afraid of a little bread and wine that a priest has said a few words over?

JOHN.

Sylvia, don't torment me. I tell you I can't.

SYLVIA.

[*Scornfully.*] I never imagined you would be superstitious. You're frightened. You feel just like people about sitting thirteen at table. Of course it's all nonsense, but there may be something in it.

JOHN.

I don't know what I feel. I only know that I, an unbeliever, can't take part in a ceremony that was sacred to me when I believed.

SYLVIA.

[*Bitterly.*] It's very natural. It only means that you love yourself better than anyone else. Why should one expect you to have pity for your father, or gratitude?

JOHN.

Oh, Sylvia, where did you learn to say such cruel things? I can't, I tell you, I can't. If father were in his normal mind, neither he nor mother would wish me to do such a thing.

SYLVIA.

But your mother does wish it. Oh, John, don't be stubborn. For God's sake give yourself the opportunity. Your father's dying, John; you have no time to lose.... John, the Communion Service has only just begun. If you get on your bicycle you'll be there in time. The other day the Vicar said if you presented yourself at the Communion table he would not hesitate to administer it.

[*JOHN looks steadily in front of him for a moment, then makes up his mind; he stands up suddenly and without a word goes out of the room.*

SYLVIA.

[*In a whisper.*] O God, forgive me, forgive me, forgive me!

[*The Curtain is lowered for one minute to denote the lapse of half an hour. When it rises SYLVIA is standing at the window, looking out into the garden.*

[*MRS. LITTLEWOOD enters.*

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

May I come in?

SYLVIA.

Oh, Mrs. Littlewood, do!

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I met Dr. Macfarlane just outside my house, and he told me the Colonel was dead. I came with him to see if I could be of any use.

SYLVIA.

It's very kind of you. Is Dr. Macfarlane here?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Yes. He went upstairs. Where is John?

SYLVIA.

He'll be here directly.

[MRS. WHARTON *comes in, followed by* DR. MACFARLANE. MRS. LITTLEWOOD *goes up to her and the two old ladies kiss one another. For a moment they stand clasped in one another's arms.*

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

My dear old friend!

MRS. WHARTON.

It was dear of you to come, Charlotte. I knew you'd feel for me.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Now sit down, my dear Mrs. Wharton, sit down and rest yourself.
[*He puts her into a chair and places a cushion behind her.*

MRS. WHARTON.

Hasn't John come in yet?

SYLVIA.

I'm sure he won't be long now. He should be here almost at once.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Sylvia, my dear child, won't you go and get Mrs. Wharton a cup of tea? I think it would do her good.

SYLVIA.

Certainly.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, my dear, don't trouble.

SYLVIA.

But it's no trouble. You know I love doing things for you.

[*She goes out.*

MRS. WHARTON.

Everybody's so very kind in this world. It makes one feel humble.... George and I have been married for five and thirty years. He never said a cross word to me. He was always gentle and considerate. I daresay I was very troublesome now and then, but he was never impatient with me.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Is it true that John and Sylvia are not going to be married after all?

MRS. WHARTON.

I'm afraid so.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Isn't it strange how people in this world seem to go out of their way to make themselves unhappy!

MRS. WHARTON.

I've talked it over with Sylvia. Religion means so much to her. She wouldn't have minded if John had come back blind and crippled, she'd have devoted her life to him without a murmur.

DR. MACFARLANE.

People always think they could put up with the faults we haven't got. Somehow or other it's always those we have that stick in their throats.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, Doctor, don't say sarcastic things. You don't know how deeply Sylvia is suffering. But it's

a matter of conscience. And I do see that one can't ask anyone to compromise with his soul.

DR. MACFARLANE.

I have an idea our souls are like our manners, all the better when we don't think too much about them.

MRS. WHARTON.

Sylvia's giving up a great deal. I don't know what's to become of her if she doesn't marry John. When her mother dies she'll only have thirty pounds a year.

[*SYLVIA comes back with a cup of tea on a small tray and puts it on a table by MRS. WHARTON'S side.*]

SYLVIA.

Here is the tea, Mrs. Wharton.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, thank you, my dear, so much. You do spoil me.... I can't imagine why John is so long. He's generally so very punctual.

SYLVIA.

[*In a low voice.*] John came in, Mrs. Wharton.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, then, you saw him?

SYLVIA.

Yes.

MRS. WHARTON.

Did you speak to him?

SYLVIA.

Yes.

MRS. WHARTON.

Why did he go out again? Where has he gone?

SYLVIA.

He'll be back immediately.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Drink your tea, dear lady, drink your tea.

[*SYLVIA takes her place again at the window and looks into the garden. She takes no notice of the people in the room.*]

MRS. WHARTON.

I'm glad to have you two old friends with me now. The only thing that really seems to belong to me any more is the past, and you were both so much part of it.

DR. MACFARLANE.

You came here immediately after your honeymoon. Is that really thirty-five years ago?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

My mother and I were the first people who called on you. I remember how stylish we thought you in your green velvet, Evelyn.

MRS. WHARTON.

I remember it well. I had it dyed black its third year. I think the fashions were very much more ladylike in those days. A bustle did set off a woman's figure, there's no denying that.

DR. MACFARLANE.

What waists you had and how tight you used to lace!

MRS. WHARTON.

I often wonder if the young people ever enjoy themselves as much as we used to. Do you remember the picnics we used to have?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

And now it's all as if it had never been, all our love and pain and joy and sorrow. We're just two funny old women, and it really wouldn't have mattered a row of pins if we'd never been born.

DR. MACFARLANE.

I wonder, I wonder.

MRS. WHARTON.

You've had the privilege of giving two sons to a noble cause. Wasn't it worth while to be born for that?

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Sometimes I've asked myself if this world in which we're living now isn't hell. Perhaps all the unhappiness my husband caused me and the death of those two boys of mine is a punishment for sins that I committed in some other life in some other part of the universe.

MRS. WHARTON.

Charlotte, sometimes you say things that frighten me. I'm haunted by the fear that you may destroy yourself.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

I? No, why should I? I don't feel that life is important enough for me to give it a deliberate end. I don't trouble to kill the fly that walks over my ceiling.

DR. MACFARLANE.

I've been curing or killing people for hard on fifty years, and it seems to me that I've seen innumerable generations enter upon the shifting scene, act their little part, and pass away. Alas, who can deny that in this world virtue is very often unrewarded and vice unpunished? Happiness too rarely comes to the good, and the prizes of this life go too frequently to the undeserving. The rain falls on the just and on the unjust alike, but the unjust generally have a stout umbrella. It looks as though there were little justice in the world, and chance seems to rule man and all his circumstances.

MRS. WHARTON.

But we know that all that is mere idle seeming.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Seeming perhaps, but why idle? Seeming is all we know. The other day when you were talking I held my tongue, because I thought you'd say I was a silly old fool if I put my word in, but I've puzzled over suffering and pain too. You see, in my trade we see so much of them. It made me unhappy, and for long I doubted the goodness of God, as you doubt it, dear friend.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*With a smile.*] I think you're preaching at me, Doctor.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Then it's the first time in my life.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Go on.

DR. MACFARLANE.

I want to tell you how *I* found peace. My explanation is as old as the hills, and I believe many perfectly virtuous persons have been frizzled alive for accepting it. Our good Vicar would say I was a heretic. I can't help it. I can't see any other way of reconciling the goodness of God with the existence of evil.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Well, what is it?

DR. MACFARLANE.

I don't believe that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. But I think He struggles against evil as we do. I don't believe He means to chasten us by suffering or to purify us by pain. I believe pain and suffering are evil, and that He hates them, and would crush them if He could. And I believe that in this age-long struggle between God and evil we can help, all of us, even the meanest; for in some way, I don't know how, I believe that all our goodness adds to the strength of God, and perhaps—who can tell?—will give Him such power that at last He will be able utterly to destroy evil—utterly, with its pain and suffering. [*With a smile.*] When we're good, we're buying silver bullets for the King of Heaven, and when we're bad, well, we're trading with the enemy.

SYLVIA.

[*Without looking round.*] John has just ridden back on his bicycle.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Come, Mrs. Littlewood, they don't want us here just now.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

[*Getting up.*] No, I'm sure you will prefer to be alone with John.

MRS. WHARTON.

It was very good of you to come. Good-bye, my dear, and God bless you.

MRS. LITTLEWOOD.

Good-bye.

[*They kiss one another and MRS. LITTLEWOOD goes out.*]

DR. MACFARLANE.

[*Shaking hands with MRS. WHARTON.*] I may look in later in the day to see how you are.

MRS. WHARTON.

Oh, my dear doctor, I'm not in the least ill, you know.

DR. MACFARLANE.

Still, don't try to do too much. You're not quite a young woman, you know. Good-bye, Sylvia.

[*SYLVIA does not answer. DR. MACFARLANE goes out. SYLVIA advances into the room and then turns and looks again at the door through which JOHN must come. She does all she can to control her great nervousness.*]

MRS. WHARTON.

Sylvia, is anything the matter?

SYLVIA.

No. Why?

MRS. WHARTON.

You seem so strange.

SYLVIA.

[*Paying no attention to the remark.*] John is just coming.

MRS. WHARTON.

You know, my dear, it seems to me that in this life most difficulties can be arranged if both parties are willing to give way a little.

SYLVIA.

Sometimes it's impossible to give way, and then the only hope is—a miracle.

[*She says the last word with a little smile to conceal the fact that she attaches the greatest importance to it. JOHN comes in. He is pale and looks extremely tired. He stops for a moment in surprise on seeing his mother. He goes over and kisses her.*]

JOHN.

Oh, mother, I thought you were upstairs. I'm afraid I'm very late.

MRS. WHARTON.

It doesn't matter, my dear. How dreadfully white you look.

JOHN.

I went for a walk this morning. I've had nothing to eat. I'm rather tired.

MRS. WHARTON.

My dear, you frighten me, your face is all drawn and pinched.

JOHN.

Oh, mother, don't worry about me. I shall be all right after breakfast. After all, it's quite enough to have one invalid on your hands.

[*MRS. WHARTON looks at him in surprise. SYLVIA gives a nervous start, but immediately controls herself.*]

SYLVIA.

Have you been—where you said you were going?

JOHN.

Yes.

[*SYLVIA opens her mouth to speak, but stops; she gives JOHN a long, searching look; she realises that what she had hoped for has not taken place, and with a little gasp of misery turns away her head and sinks, dejected and exhausted, into a chair. JOHN has held her look with*]

his and now turns to his mother.

JOHN.

Is father asleep?

MRS. WHARTON.

[*With a little shiver.*] John!

JOHN.

What's the matter?

MRS. WHARTON.

I thought you knew. My dearest, your father's dead.

JOHN.

Mother!

MRS. WHARTON.

I asked Sylvia to break it to you. I thought....

SYLVIA.

[*In a dull voice.*] I didn't tell him when you asked me to, Mrs. Wharton.

JOHN.

I don't understand. It seems impossible. He was well enough last night. When did he die?

MRS. WHARTON.

At about seven this morning.

JOHN.

But, mother dear, why didn't you call me?

MRS. WHARTON.

I didn't expect it. We'd been talking and he said he was tired and he thought he could sleep a little. He dozed off quietly, and in a little while I saw he was dead.

JOHN.

Oh, my poor mother, how will you bear your grief?

MRS. WHARTON.

You know, it's so strange, I'm not in the least unhappy. I don't feel that he's left me. I feel him just as near to me as before. I don't know how to explain it to you. I think he's never been so much alive as now. Oh, John, I know that the soul is immortal.

JOHN.

Darling, I'm so glad you're not unhappy. Your dear eyes are positively radiant.

MRS. WHARTON.

If you only knew what I seem to see with them!

JOHN.

Won't you take me up and let me see him?

MRS. WHARTON.

I think the women are not done yet, John. I'll go up and see. I'll call you as soon as everything is ready.

JOHN.

I'm sorry I've caused you so much pain since I came back, mother. I wish I could have avoided it.

MRS. WHARTON.

[*She puts her arms round his neck, and he kisses her.*]

My dear son!

[*She goes out. JOHN goes towards the window and looks out into the garden. For a moment SYLVIA does not dare to speak to him. At last she makes an effort.*]

SYLVIA.

[*Desperately.*] John, whatever you have to say to me, say it.

JOHN.

[*With frigid politeness.*] I don't think I have anything in particular to say to you.

SYLVIA.

I suppose you think I'm just a wicked liar.

JOHN.

I ask you no questions. I make you no reproaches. What is the matter?

SYLVIA.

Oh, John, after all we've been to one another it's brutal to talk to me like that. If you think I did wrong, say so.

JOHN.

Why?

SYLVIA.

You're cruel and hard. [*She goes up to him.*] John, you must listen to me.

JOHN.

Well?

SYLVIA.

Your mother asked me to tell you of your father's death. I concealed it from you. I told you a whole tissue of lies. I traded deliberately on your tenderness for your father. I was horrified at myself. It was my only chance of getting you to take the Communion.

JOHN.

If you'd had any affection for me, you couldn't have done such an abominable thing. If you'd had any respect for me you couldn't have done it.

SYLVIA.

Let me speak, John.

JOHN.

Be quiet! You've insisted on talking about it, and now, by God, you're going to listen to me. Do you know what I felt? Shame. When I took the bread and the wine, I thought they'd choke me. Because once I believed so devoutly it seemed to me that I was doing an awful thing. Deliberately, with full knowledge of what I was doing, I told a dirty lie. And I feel dirty to the depths of my soul.

SYLVIA.

I thought perhaps it wouldn't be a lie. I had to do it, John. It was my only chance.

JOHN.

Why did you do it?

SYLVIA.

Don't look at me so sternly. I can't bear it. You frighten me. I can't collect my thoughts.

JOHN.

Why did you do it? Shall I tell you? Because at the back of all your Christian humility there's the desire to dominate. It isn't so much that I didn't believe as that I didn't believe what you wanted me to believe. You wanted to grind my face in the dust.

SYLVIA.

[*Passionately.*] John, if you only knew! I only thought of you. I only thought of you all the time.

JOHN.

Don't be such a hypocrite.

SYLVIA.

[*Brokenly.*] I expected a miracle.

JOHN.

At this time of day?

SYLVIA.

For God's sake have mercy on me! It was your mother who put the idea in my head. Your father received the Communion last night.

JOHN.

You have no charity for human weakness. You were all so terrified that he shouldn't make an edifying end. As if it mattered if the poor dear's nerve failed him at the last.

SYLVIA.

[*Eagerly.*] But it didn't. That's just it. You noticed your mother's face yourself. Notwithstanding all her grief she's happy. Do you know why?

JOHN.

Why?

SYLVIA.

[*As though suddenly inspired.*] Because when he'd received the Blessed Sacrament the fear of death left him. He was once more a brave and gallant gentleman. He had no dread any longer of the perilous journey before him. He was happy to die.

JOHN.

[*More gently.*] Is that true? Dear father, I'm very glad.

SYLVIA.

It was a miracle. It was a miracle.

JOHN.

I still don't follow.

SYLVIA.

I thought that when you knelt at the chancel steps, and received the Communion as you used to receive it when you were a boy, all the feelings of your boyhood would rush back on you. I had to make you take it.

JOHN.

In my frame of mind? Surely I had no right to.

SYLVIA.

I know. That's what makes my sin the greater. Perhaps I was mad. To God all things are possible. I felt certain you'd believe.

JOHN.

[*Very gravely.*] Perhaps you have worked a miracle, but not the one you expected.

SYLVIA.

What do you mean?

JOHN.

When you said you wouldn't marry me I was—I was knocked endways—I felt like a man who's been shipwrecked. All my plans for the future had been bound up with you. I couldn't imagine it without you. I felt utterly forlorn.

SYLVIA.

But don't you know what it cost me?

JOHN.

At first I couldn't think you meant it. When you said you didn't love me, I couldn't believe it. It seemed too preposterous. I was awfully miserable, Sylvia.

SYLVIA.

John, I didn't want you to be unhappy.

JOHN.

And then, when I received the Communion something quite strange took place in me. I can't tell you what I felt. I felt as though mother had heard me saying something obscene. I forced myself to go through with it, because I really did think it might give poor father some peace of mind. But it was you who made me do it. The thought of you filled me with horror.

SYLVIA.

[*With dismay.*] John!

JOHN.

You've cured me, Sylvia. I ought to be grateful to you for that. My love for you has fallen from me as a cloak might fall from one's shoulders. I see the truth now. You were quite right. In these long years we've become different people and we have nothing to say to one another any more.

SYLVIA.

[*Passionately.*] But I love you, John! How can you be so blind? Don't you see that I only did it because I loved you? Oh, John, you can't leave me now! I've waited for you all these years. I've longed for you to come back. Forgive me if I did wrong. I can't lose you now. I love you, John, you won't leave me?

JOHN.

[*After a moment's pause.*] Of course I won't leave you. I thought you didn't want to marry me.

SYLVIA.

[*Hardly knowing what she is saying.*] I'm not young any more. I've lost my freshness. I've got nobody but you now. Oh, John, don't forsake me! I couldn't bear it.

JOHN.

[*As though he were talking to a child.*] My dear, don't distress yourself. I'm not thinking of forsaking you. We'll be married as soon as ever we can.

SYLVIA.

Yes, we'll be married, won't we? I love you so much, John, I'll make you love me. I couldn't lose you now. I've waited too long.

JOHN.

Come, darling, you mustn't be unhappy. It's all settled now. Dry your eyes. You don't want to look a fright, do you?

SYLVIA.

[*Clinging to him.*] I'm so miserable.

JOHN.

Nonsense, give me a nice kiss, and we'll forget all about our troubles. I'll try to make you a good husband, Sylvia. I'll do all I can to make you happy. Give me a kiss.

[*When he seeks to raise her face in order to kiss her, she tears herself violently from him.*]

SYLVIA.

No, don't! Don't touch me! God give me strength! I'm so pitifully weak.

JOHN.

Sylvia!

SYLVIA.

Don't come near me! For God's sake! [*She puts her hands before her face, trying to control and to collect herself, and there is a moment's pause.*] It never occurred to me that you didn't care for me any more, and when you told me, for a moment I lost my head. Forgive me for that, dear, and forget it. I'm not going to marry you.

JOHN.

Now, Sylvia, don't be idiotic. It would be so unseemly if I had to drag you to the altar by the hair of your head.

SYLVIA.

You're very kind, John. I suppose it wouldn't be very good form to back out of it now. I'm poor, and I've wasted my best years waiting for you. You needn't worry about what is going to happen to me. I can earn my living as well as other women.

JOHN.

Oh, Sylvia, you're torturing yourself and me. Can't you forget what I said in a moment of exasperation? You must know how deep my affection is for you.

SYLVIA.

I don't want to forget. It is the will of God. I lied. I did an abominable and evil thing. I don't think you can imagine how terrible my sin has been. I risked my soul to save you, John, and God has inflicted on me a punishment infinitely less than I deserved. He has taken out of your heart the love you bore me.

JOHN.

But you love me, Sylvia.

SYLVIA.

Better than anyone in the world. I've loved you ever since I was a child of ten. That's only the weakness of my flesh. My soul exults in the great mercy that God has shown me.

JOHN.

Oh, my dear, you're going to be so unhappy.

SYLVIA.

No, don't be sorry for me. You've given me a great opportunity.

JOHN.

I?

SYLVIA.

I've been mortified because I was able to do so little in the war. I knew it was my duty to stay here and look after mother. But I wanted to go out to France and do my bit like all my friends.

JOHN.

That was very natural.

SYLVIA.

Now at last I have the chance to do something. No sacrifice is worthless in the eyes of God. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. I sacrifice now all that was precious to me in the world, my love and my hope of happiness in this life, and I sacrifice it with a cheerful heart, and I pray that God may accept it. So shall I do my part to atone for the sins which have brought on this horrible war.

JOHN.

It would have been better if I'd never come back. I've caused misery and suffering to all of you.

SYLVIA.

John, you took away the ring you gave me when we became engaged. You threw it in the fire.

JOHN.

I'm afraid that was very silly of me. I did it in a moment of bitterness.

SYLVIA.

You went into Canterbury to buy a wedding ring. What have you done with it?

JOHN.

I have it here. Why?

SYLVIA.

Can I have it?

JOHN.

Of course.

[He takes it out of his waistcoat pocket, and, wondering, gives it to her.]

SYLVIA.

[Slipping the ring on her finger.] I will put the love of man out of my life. I will turn from what is poor and transitory to what is everlasting. I will be the bride of One whose love is never denied to them that seek it. The love of God is steadfast and enduring. I can put all my trust in that and I shall never find it wanting.... Good-bye, John, God bless you now and always.

JOHN.

Good-bye, dear child.

[She goes out quickly. In a minute KATE comes in. She is carrying a square wooden box in which are papers, firewood, a hearth-brush, and a large soiled glove.]

KATE.

Please, sir, Mrs. Wharton says, will you go upstairs now?

JOHN.

Yes.

[He goes out. KATE goes to the fire-place, kneels down, puts on the glove, and begins to rake out the ashes. The COOK enters. She is a stout homely body of forty-five.]

COOK.

The butcher's come, Kate. I don't exactly like to go up to Mrs. Wharton just now. I've got the cold beef for lunch, but they'll be wanting something for dinner.

KATE.

Oh, well, they always like best end. You can't go far wrong if you have that.

COOK.

I've got a fine lot of pease.

KATE.

Well, they'll do nicely.

Cook.

I was thinking I'd make a fruit tart. I think p'raps I'd better order two and a half pounds of best end.

[*She goes out. KATE continues to lay the fire.*]

THE END.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE UNKNOWN; A PLAY IN THREE ACTS ***

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