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SIR GEORGE TRESSADY, VOLUME II

IN TWO VOLUMES

BY

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

AUTHOR OF "MARCELLA," "THE HISTORY OF DAVID GRIEVE," "ROBERT ELSMERE," ETC.

VOLUME II.

PART II

CHAPTER XIII

On a hot morning at the end of June, some four weeks after the Castle Luton visit, George Tressady walked from Brook Street to Warwick Square, that he might obtain his mother's signature to a document connected with the Shapetsky negotiations, and go on from there to the House of Commons.

She was not in the drawing-room, and George amused himself during his minutes of waiting by inspecting the various new photographs of the Fullerton family that were generally to be found on her table. What a characteristic table it was, littered with notes and bills, with patterns from every London draper, with fashion-books and ladies' journals innumerable! And what a characteristic room, with its tortured decorations and crowded furniture, and the flattered portraits of Lady Tressady, in every caprice of costume, which covered the walls! George looked round it all with an habitual distaste; yet not without the secret admission that his own drawing-room was very like it.

His mother might, he feared, have a scene in preparation for him.

For Letty, under cover of some lame excuse or other, had persisted in putting off the visit which Lady Tressady had intended to pay them at Ferth during the Whitsuntide recess, and since their return to town there had been no meeting whatever between the two ladies. George, indeed, had seen his mother two or three times. But even he had just let ten days pass without visiting her. He supposed he should find her in a mood of angry complaint; nor could he deny that there would be some grounds for it.

"Good morning, George," said a sharp voice, which startled him as he was replacing a photograph of the latest Fullerton baby. "I thought you had forgotten your way here by now."

"Why, mother, I am very sorry," he said, as he kissed her. "But I have really been terribly busy, what with two Committees and this important debate."

"Oh! don't make excuses, pray. And of course—for Letty—you won't even attempt it. I wouldn't if I were you."

Lady Tressady settled herself on a chair with her back to the light, and straightened the ribbons on her dress with hasty fingers. Something in her voice struck George. He looked at her closely.

"Is there anything wrong, mother? You don't look very well."

Lady Tressady got up hurriedly, and began to move about the room, picking up a letter here, straightening a picture there. George felt a sudden prick of alarm. Were there some new revelations in store for him? But before he could speak she interrupted him.

"I should be very well if it weren't for this heat," she said pettishly. "Do put that photograph down, George!—you do fidget so! Haven't you got any news for me—anything to amuse me? Oh! those horrid papers!—I see. Well! they'll wait a little. By the way, the 'Morning Post' says that young scamp, Lord Ancoats, has gone abroad. I suppose that girl was bought off."

She sat down again in a shady corner, fanning herself vigorously.

"I am afraid I can't tell you any secrets," said George, smiling, "for I don't know any. But it looks as though Mrs. Allison and Maxwell between them had somehow found a way out."

"How's the mother?"

"You see, she has gone abroad, too—to Bad Wildheim. In fact, Lord Ancoats has taken her."

"That's the place for heart, isn't it?" said his mother, abruptly. "There's a man there that cures everybody."

"I believe so," said George. "May we come to business, mother? I have brought these papers for you to sign, and I must get to the House in good time."

Lady Tressady seemed to take no notice. She got up again, restlessly, and walked to the window.

"How do you like my dress, George? Now, don't imagine anything absurd! Justine made it, and it was quite cheap."

George could not help smiling—all the more that he was conscious of relief. She would not be asking him to admire her dress if there were fresh debts to confess to him.

"It makes you look wonderfully young," he said, turning a critical eye, first upon the elegant gown of some soft pinky stuff in which his mother had arrayed herself, then upon the subtly rouged and powdered face above it. "You are a marvellous person, mother! All the same, I think the heat must have been getting hold of you, for your eyes are tired. Don't racket too much!"

He spoke with his usual careless kindness, laying a hand upon her arm.

Lady Tressady drew herself away, and, turning her back upon him, looked out of the window.

"Have you seen any more of the Maxwells?" she said, over her shoulders.

George gave a slight involuntary start. Then it occurred to him that his mother was making conversation in an odd way.

"Once or twice," he said, reluctantly, in reply. "They were at the Ardaghs' the other night, of course."

"Oh! you were there?"—Lady Tressady's voice was sharp again. "Well, of course. Letty went as your wife, and you're a member of Parliament. Lady Ardagh knows *me* quite well—but I don't count now; she used to be glad enough to ask me."

"It was a great crush, and very hot," said George, not knowing what to say.

Lady Tressady frowned as she looked out of the window.

"Well!—and Lady Maxwell—is she as absurd as ever?"

"That depends upon one's point of view," said George, smiling. "She seemed as convinced as ever."

"Who sent Mrs. Allison to that place? Barham, I suppose. He always sends his patients there. They say he's in league with the hotel-keepers."

George stared. What was the matter with her? What made her throw out these jerky sentences with this short, hurried breath.

Suddenly Lady Tressady turned.

"George!"

"Yes, mother." He stepped nearer to her. She caught his sleeve.

"George"—there was something like a sob in her voice—"you were quite right. I am ill. There, don't talk about it. The doctors are all fools. And if you tell Letty anything about it, I'll never forgive you."

George put his arm round her, but was not, in truth, much disturbed. Lady Tressady's repertory, alas! had many *rôles*. He had known her play that of the invalid at least as effectively as any other.

"You are just overdone with London and the heat," he said. "I saw it at once. You ought to go away."

She looked up in his face.

"You don't believe it?" she said.

Then she seemed to stagger. He saw a terrible drawn look in her face, and, putting out all his strength, he held her, and helped her to a sofa.

"Mother!" he exclaimed, kneeling beside her, "what is the matter?"

Voice and tone were those of another man, and Lady Tressady quailed under the change. She pointed to a small bag on a table near her. He opened it, and she took out a box, from which she swallowed something. Gradually breath and colour returned, and she began to move restlessly.

"That was nothing," she said, as though to herself—"nothing—and it yielded at once. Well, George, I knew you thought me a humbug!"

Her eyes glanced at him with a kind of miserable triumph. He looked down upon her, still kneeling, horror-struck against his will. After a life of acting, was this the truth—this terror, which spoke in every movement, and in some strange way had seized upon and infected himself?

He urgently asked her to be frank with him. And with a sob she poured herself out. It was the tragic, familiar story that every household knows. Grave symptoms, suddenly observed—the hurried visit to a specialist—his verdict and his warnings.

"Of course, he said at first I ought to give up everything and go abroad—to this very same place—Bad-what-do-you-call-it? But I told him straight out I couldn't and wouldn't do anything of the sort. I am just eaten up with engagements. And as to staying at home and lying-up, that's nonsense—I should die of that in a fortnight. So I told him to give me something to take, and that was all I could do. And in the end he quite came round—they always do if you take your own line—and said I had much better do what suited me, and take care. Besides, what do any of them know? They all confess they're just fumbling about. Now, surgery, of course—that's different. Battye"—Battye was Lady Tressady's ordinary medical adviser—"doesn't believe all the other man said. I knew he wouldn't. And as for making an invalid of me, he sees, of course, that it would kill me at once. There, my dear George, don't make too much of it. I think I was a fool to tell you."

And Lady Tressady struggled to a sitting position, looking at her son with a certain hostility. The frown on her white face showed that she was already angry with him for his emotion—this rare emotion, that she had never yet been able to rouse in him.

He could only implore her to be guided by her doctor—to rest, to give up at least some of the mill-round of her London life, if she would not go abroad. Lady Tressady listened to him with increasing obstinacy and excitability.

"I tell you I know best!" she said, passionately, at last. "Don't go on like this—it worries me. Now, look here—"

She turned upon him with emphasis.

"Promise me not to tell Letty a word of this. Nobody shall know—she least of all. I shall do just as usual. In fact, I expect a very gay season. Three 'drums' this afternoon and a dinner-party—it doesn't look as though I were quite forgotten yet, though Letty does think me an old fogey!"

She smiled at him with a ghastly mixture of defiance and conceit. The old age in her pinched face, fighting with the rouged cheeks and the gaiety of her fanciful dress, was pitiful.

"Promise," she said. "Not a word—to her!"

George promised, in much distress. While he was speaking she had a slight return of pain, and was obliged to submit to lie down again.

"At least," he urged, "don't go out to-day. Give yourself a rest. Shall I go back, and ask Letty to come round to tea?"

Lady Tressady made a face like a spoilt child.

"I don't think she'll come," she said. "Of course, I know from the first she took an ungodly dislike to me. Though, if it hadn't been for me—Well, never mind! Yes, you can ask her, George—do! I'll wait and see if she comes. If she comes, perhaps I'll stay in. It would amuse me to hear what she has been doing. I'll behave quite nicely—there!"

And, taking up her fan, Lady Tressady lightly tapped her son's hand with it in her most characteristic manner.

He rose, seeing from the clock that he should only just have time to drive quickly back to Letty if he was to be at the House in time for an appointment with a constituent, which had been arranged for one o'clock.

"I will send Justine to you as I go out," he said, taking up his hat, "and I shall hear of you from Letty this evening."

Lady Tressady said nothing. Her eyes, bright with some inner excitement, watched him as he looked for his stick. Suddenly she said, "George! kiss me!"

Her tone was unsteady. Infinitely touched and bewildered, the young man approached her, and, kneeling down again beside her, took her in his arms. He felt a quick sobbing breath pass through her; then she pushed him lightly away, and, putting up the slim, pink-nailed hand of which she was so proud, she patted him on the cheek.

"There—go along! I don't like that coat of yours, you know. I told you so the other day. If your figure

weren't so good, you'd positively look badly dressed in it. You should try another man."

Tressady hailed a hansom outside, and drove back to Brook Street. On the way his eyes saw little of the crowded streets. So far, he had had no personal experience of death. His father had died suddenly while he was at Oxford, and he had lost no other near relation or friend. Strange! this grave, sudden sense that all was changed, that his careless, half-contemptuous affection for his mother could never again be what it had been. Supposing, indeed, her story was all true! But in the case of a character like Lady Tressady's, there are for long, recurrent, involuntary scepticisms on the part of the bystander. It seems impossible, unfitting, to grant to such persons *le beau rôle* they claim. It outrages a certain ideal instinct, even, to be asked to believe that they too can yield, in their measure, precisely the same tragic stuff as the hero or the saint.

Letty was at home, just about to share her lunch with Harding Watton, who had dropped in. Hearing her husband's voice, she came out to the stairhead to speak to him.

But after a minute or two George dashed down again to his study, that he might write a hurried note to a middle-aged cousin of his mother's, asking her to go round to Warwick Square early in the afternoon, and making excuses for Letty, who was "very much engaged."

For Letty had met his request with a smiling disdain. Why, she was simply "crowded up" with engagements of all sorts and kinds!

"Mother is really unwell," said George, standing with his hands on his sides, looking down upon her. He was fuming with irritation and hurry, and had to put a force on himself to speak persuasively.

"My dear old boy!"—she rose on tiptoe and twisted his moustache for him—"don't we know all about your mother's ailments by this time? I suppose she wants to give me a scolding, or to hear about the Ardaghs, or to tell me all about the smart parties *she* has been to—or something of the sort. No, really, it's quite impossible—this afternoon. I know I must go and see her some time—of course I will."

She said this with the air of someone making a great concession. It was, indeed, her first formal condonement of the offence offered her just before the Castle Luton visit.

George attempted a little more argument and entreaty, but in vain. Letty was rather puzzled by his urgency, but quite obdurate. And as he ran down the stairs, he heard her laugh in the drawing-room mingled with Harding Watton's. No doubt they were making merry over the "discipline" which Letty found it necessary to apply to her mother-in-law.

In the House of Commons the afternoon was once more given up to the adjourned debate on the second reading of the Maxwell Bill. The House was full, and showing itself to advantage. On the whole, the animation and competence of the speeches reflected the general rise in combative energy and the wide kindling of social passions which the Bill had so far brought about, both in and out of Parliament. Those who figured as the defenders of industries harassed beyond bearing by the Socialist meddlers spoke with more fire, with more semblance, at any rate, of putting their hearts into it than any men of their kind had been able to attain since the "giant" days of the first Factory debates. Those, on the other hand, who were urging the House to a yet sterner vigilance in protecting the worker—even the grown man—from his own helplessness and need, who believed that law spells freedom, and that the experience of half a century was wholly on their side—these friends of a strong cause were also at their best, on their mettle. Owing to the widespread flow of a great reaction, the fight had become a representative contest between two liberties—a true battle of ideas.

Yet George, sitting below the Gangway beside his leader, his eyes staring at the ceiling, and his hands in his pockets, listened to it all in much languor and revolt. He himself had made his speech on the third day of the debate. It had cost him endless labour, only to seem to him in the end—by contrast with the vast majority of speeches made in the course of the debate, even those by men clearly inferior to himself in mind and training—to be a hollow and hypocritical performance. What did he really think and believe? What did he really desire? He vowed to himself once more, as he had vowed at Ferth, that his mind was a chaos, without convictions, either intellectual or moral; that he had begun what he was not able to finish; and that he was doomed to make a failure of his parliamentary career, as he was already making a failure of coal-owning and a failure—

He curbed something bitter and springing that haunted his most inmost mind. But his effort could not prevent his dwelling angrily for a minute on the thought of Letty laughing with Harding Watton—laughing because he had asked her a small kindness, and she had most unkindly refused it.

Yet she *must* help him with his poor mother. How softened were all his thoughts about that difficult and troublesome lady! As it happened, he had a good deal of desultory medical knowledge, for the problems and perils of the body had always attracted his pessimist sense. Yet it did not help him much

at this juncture. At one moment he said to himself, "eighteen months—she will live eighteen months," and at another, "Battye was probably right; Barham took an unnecessarily gloomy view—she may quite well last as long as the rest of us."

* * * * *

Suddenly he was startled by a movement beside him.

"The honourable member has totally misunderstood me," cried Fontenoy, springing to his feet and looking eagerly towards the Speaker.

The member who was speaking on the Government side smiled, put on his hat, and sat down. Fontenoy flung out a few stinging sentences, was hotly cheered both by his own supporters and from a certain area of the Liberal benches, and sat down again triumphant, having scored an excellent point.

George turned round to his companion.

"Good!" he said, with emphasis. "That rubbed it in!"

But when the man opposite was once more on his legs, labouring to undo the impression which had been made, George found himself wondering whether, after all, the point had been so good, and why he had been so quick to praise. *She* would have said, of course, that it was a point scored against common-sense, against humanity. He began to fancy the play of her scornful eyes, the eloquence of her white hand moving and quivering as she spoke.

How long was it—one hurried month only—since he had walked with her along the river at Castle Luton? While the crowded House about him was again listening with attention to the speech which had just brought the protesting Fontenoy to his legs; while his leader was fidgeting and muttering beside him; while to his left the crowd of members round the door was constantly melting, constantly reassembling, Tressady's mind withdrew itself from its surroundings, saw nothing, heard nothing, but the scenes of a far-off London and a figure that moved among them.

How often had he been with her since Castle Luton? Once or twice a week, certainly, either at St. James's Square or in the East End, in spite of Parliament, and Fontenoy, and his many engagements as Letty's husband. Strange phenomenon—that little *salon* of hers in the far East! For it was practically a *salon*, though it existed for purposes the Hôtel Rambouillet knew nothing of. He found himself one of many there. And, like all *salons*, it had an inner circle. Charles Naseby, Edward Watton, Lady Madeleine Penley, the Levens—some or all of these were generally to be found in Lady Maxwell's neighbourhood, rendering homage or help in one way or another. It was touching to see that girl, Lady Madeleine, looking at the docker or the shirtmaker, with her restless greenish eyes, as though she realised for the first time what hideous bond it is—the one true commonalty—that crushes the human family together!

Well!—and what had he seen? Nothing, certainly, of which he had not had ample information before. Under the fresh spur of the talk that occupied the Maxwell circle he had made one or two rounds through some dismal regions in Whitechapel, Mile End, and Hackney, where some of the worst of the home industries to which, at last, after long hesitation on the part of successive Governments, Maxwell's Bill was intended to put an end, crowded every house and yard. He saw some of it in the company of a lady rent-collector, an old friend of the Maxwells, who had charge of several tenement blocks where the trouser and vest trade was largely carried on; and he welcomed the chance of one or two walks in quest of law-breaking workshops with a young inspector, who could not say enough in praise of the Bill. But if it had been only a question of fact, George would have felt when the rounds were done merely an added respect for Fontenoy, perhaps even for his own party as a whole. Not a point raised by his guides but had been abundantly discussed and realised—on paper, at any rate—by Fontenoy and his friends. The young inspector, himself a hot partisan, and knowing with whom he had to deal, would have liked to convict his companion of sheer and simple ignorance; but, on the contrary, Tressady was not to be caught napping. As far as the trade details and statistics of this gruesome slopwork of East London went, he knew all that could be shown him.

Nevertheless, cool and impassive as his manner was throughout, the experience in the main did mean the exchange of a personal for a paper and hearsay knowledge. When, indeed, had he, or Fontenoy, or anyone else ever denied that the life of the poor was an odious and miserable struggle, a scandal to gods and men? What then? Did they make the world and its iron conditions? And yet this long succession of hot and smelling dens, this series of pale, stooping figures, toiling hour after hour, at fever pace, in these stifling backyards, while the June sun shone outside, reminding one of English meadows and the ripple of English grass; these panting, dishevelled women, slaving beside their husbands and brothers, amid the rattle of the machines and the steam of the pressers' irons, with the

sick or the dying, perhaps, in the bed beside them, and their blanched children at their feet—sights of this sort, thus translated from the commonplace of reports and newspapers into a poignant, unsavoury truth, had at least this effect—they vastly quickened the personal melancholy of the spectator, they raised and drove home a number of piercing questions which, probably, George Tressady would never have raised, and would have lived happily without raising, if it had not been for a woman, and a woman's charm.

For that woman's *solutions* remained as doubtful to him as ever. He would go back to that strange little house where she kept her strange court, meet her eager eyes, and be roused at once to battle. How they had argued! He knew that she had less hope than ever of persuading him even to modify his view of the points at issue between the Government and his own group. She could not hope for a moment that any act of his would be likely to stand between Maxwell and defeat. He had not talked of his adventures to Fontenoy—would rather, indeed, that Fontenoy knew nothing of them. But he and she knew that Fontenoy, so far, had little to fear from them.

And yet she had not turned from him. To her personal mood, to her wifely affection even, he must appear more plainly than ever as the callous and selfish citizen, ready and glad to take his own ease while his brethren perished. He had been sceptical and sarcastic; he had declined to accept her evidence; he had shown a persistent preference for the drier and more brutal estimate of things. Yet she had never parted from him without gentleness, without a look in her beautiful eyes that had often tormented his curiosity. What did it mean? Pity? Or some unspoken comment of a personal kind she could not persuade her womanly reticence to put into words?

Or, rather: had she some distant inkling of the real truth—that he was beginning to hate his own convictions—to feel that to be right with Fontenoy was nothing, but to be wrong with her would be delight?

What absurdity! With a strong effort, he pulled himself together—steadied his rushing pulse. It was like someone waking at night in a nervous terror, and feeling the pressure of some iron dilemma, from which he cannot free himself—cold vacancy and want on the one side, calamity on the other.

For that cool power of judgment in his own case which he had always possessed did not fail him now. He saw everything nakedly and coldly. His marriage was not three months old, but no spectator could have discussed its results more frankly than he was now prepared to discuss them with himself. It was monstrous, no doubt. He felt his whole position to be as ugly as it was abnormal. Who could feel any sympathy with it or him? He himself had been throughout the architect of his own misfortune. Had he not rushed upon his marriage with less care—relatively to the weight of the human interest in such a matter—than an animal shows when it mates?

Letty's personal idiosyncrasies even—her way of entering a room, her mean little devices for attracting social notice, the stubborn extravagance of her dress and personal habits, her manner to her servants, her sharp voice as she retailed some scrap of slanderous gossip—her husband had by now ceased to be blind or deaf to any of them. Indeed, his senses in relation to many things she said and did were far more irritable at this moment—possibly far less just—than a stranger's would have been. Often and often he would try to recall to himself the old sense of charm, of piquancy. In vain. It was all gone—he could only miserably wonder at the past. Was it that he knew now what charm might mean, and what divinity may breathe around a woman!

* * * * *

"I say, where are you off to?"

Tressady looked up with a start as Fontenoy rose beside him.

"Good opportunity for dinner, I think," said Fontenoy, with a motion of the head towards the man who had just caught the Speaker's eye. "Are you coming? I should like a word with you."

George followed him into the Lobby. As the swing-door closed behind him, they plunged into a whirlpool of talk and movement. All the approaches to the House were full of folk; everybody was either giving news or getting it. For the excitement of a coming crisis was in the air. This was Friday, and the division on the second reading was expected on the following Monday.

"What a crowd, and what a temperature!" said Fontenoy. "Come on to the Terrace a moment."

They made their way into the air, and as they walked up and down Fontenoy talked in his hoarse, hurried voice of the latest aspect of affairs. The Government would get their second reading, of course that had never been really doubtful; though Fontenoy was certain that the normal majority would be a

good deal reduced. But all the hopes of the heterogeneous coalition which had been slowly forming throughout the spring hung upon the Committee stage, and Fontenoy's mind was now full of the closest calculations as to the voting on particular amendments.

For him the Bill fell into three parts. The first part, which was mainly confined to small amendments and extensions of former Acts, would be sharply criticised, but would probably pass without much change. The second part contained the famous clause by which it became penal to practise certain trades, such as tailoring, boot-finishing, and shirt-making, in a man's or woman's own home—in the same place, that is to say, as the worker uses for eating and sleeping. This clause, which represented the climax of a long series of restrictions upon the right of a man to stitch even his own life away, still more upon his right to force his children or bribe his neighbour to a like waste of the nation's force, was by now stirring the industrial mind of England far and wide.

And not the mind of England only. Ireland and Scotland, town and country, talked of it, seethed with it. The new law, if it passed, was to be tried, indeed, at first, in London only. But every provincial town and every country district knew that, if it succeeded, there was not a corner of the land that would not ultimately feel the yoke, or the deliverance, of it. Every workman's club, every trade-union meeting, every mechanics' institute was ringing with it. Organised labour, dragged down at every point—in London, at any rate—by the competition of the starving and struggling crew of home-workers, clamoured for the Bill. The starving and struggling crew themselves were partly voiceless, partly bewildered; now drawn by the eloquence of their trade-union fellows to shout for the revolution that threatened them, now surging tumultuously against it.

On this vital clause, in Fontenoy's belief, the Government would go down. But if, by amazing good-fortune and good generalship, they should get through with it, then the fight would but rage the more fiercely round the last two sections of the Bill.

The third section dealt with the hours of labour in the new workshops that were to be. For the first time it became directly penal for a man, as well as a woman, to work more than the accepted factory-day of ten and a half hours, with a few exceptions and exemptions in the matter of overtime. On this clause, if it were ever reached, the Socialist vote, were it given solidly for the Government, might, no doubt, pull them through. "But if we have any luck—damn it! they won't get the chance!" Fontenoy would say, with that grim, sudden reddening which revealed from moment to moment the feverish tension of the man.

In the last section of the Bill the Government, having made its revolution, looked round for a class on which to lay the burden of carrying it into action, and found it in the landlords. The landlords were to be the policemen of the new Act. To every owner of every tenement or other house in London the Bill said: *You* are responsible. If, after a certain date, you allow certain trades to be carried on within your walls at all, even by the single man or the single woman working in their own room, penalty and punishment shall follow.

Of this clause in the Bill Fontenoy could never speak with calmness. One might see his heart thumping in his breast as he denounced it. At bottom it was to him the last and vilest step in a long and slanderous campaign against the class to which he belonged, against property,—against the existing social order. He fell upon the subject to-night *à propos* of a Socialist letter in the morning papers; and George, who was mostly conscious at the moment of a sick fatigue with Fontenoy and Fontenoy's arguments, had to bear it as best he might. Presently he interrupted:

"One assumption you make I should like to contest. You imagine, I think, that if they carry the prohibition and the hours clauses we shall be able to whip up a still fiercer attack on the 'landlords' clause. Now, that isn't my view."

Fontenoy turned upon him, startled.

"Why isn't it your view?" he said abruptly.

"Because there are always waverers who will accept a *fait accompli*; and you know how opposition has a trick of cooling towards the end of a Bill. Maxwell has carried his main point, they will say; this is a question of machinery. Besides, many of those Liberals who will be with us on the main point don't love the landlords. No! don't flatter yourself that, if we lose the main engagement, there will be any Prussians to bring up. The thing will be done."

"Well, thank God!" grumbled Fontenoy, "we don't mean to lose the main engagement. But if one of *our* men were to argue in that way, I should know what to say to him."

George made no reply.

They walked on in silence, the summer twilight falling softly over the river and the Hospital, over the Terrace with its groups, and the towering pile of buildings beside them.

Presently Fontenoy said, in another voice:

"I have really never had the courage to talk to you of the matter, Tressady, but didn't you see something of that lad Ancoats before he went off abroad?"

"Yes, I saw him several times, first at the club; then he came and dined with me here one night."

"And did he confide in you?"

"More or less," said George, smiling rather queerly at the recollection.

Fontenoy made a sound between a growl and a sigh.

"Really, it's rather too much to have to think out that young man's affairs as well as one's own. And the situation is so extraordinary!—Maxwell and I have to be in constant consultation. I went to see him in his room in the House of Lords the other night, and met a man coming out, who stopped, and stared as though he were shot. Luckily I knew him, and could say a word to him, or there would have been all sorts of cock-and-bull stories abroad."

"Well, and what are you and Maxwell doing?"

"Trying to get at the young woman. One can't buy her off, of course. Ancoats is his own master, and could outbid us. But Maxwell has found a brother—a decent sort of fellow—a country solicitor. And there is a Ritualist curate, a Father somebody,"—Fontenoy raised his shoulders,— "who seems to have an intermittent hold on the girl. When she has fits of virtue she goes to confess to him. Maxwell has got hold of *him*."

"And meanwhile Ancoats is at Bad Wildheim?"

"Ancoats is at Bad Wildheim, and behaving himself, as I hear from his poor mother." Fontenoy sighed. "But the boy was frightened, of course, when they went abroad. Now she is getting better, and one can't tell—"

"No, one can't tell," said George.

"I wish I knew what the thing really *meant*," said Fontenoy, presently, in a tone of perplexed reverie. "What do you think? Is it a passion—?"

"Or a pose?"

George pondered.

"H'm," he said at last—"more of a pose, I think, than a passion. Ancoats always seems to me the *jeune premier* in his own play. He sees his life in scenes, and plays them according to all the rules."

"Intolerable!" said Fontenoy, in exasperation. "And at least he might refrain from dragging a girl into it! We weren't saints in my day, but we weren't in the habit of choosing well-brought-up maidens of twenty in our own set for our confidantes. You know, I suppose, what broke up the party at Castle Luton?"

"Ancoats told me nothing. I have heard some gossip from Harding Watton," said George, unwillingly. It was one of his strongest characteristics, this fastidious and even haughty dislike of chatter about other people's private affairs, a dislike which, in the present case, had been strengthened by his growing antipathy to Harding.

"How should he know?" said Fontenoy, angrily. He was glad enough to use Watton as a political tool, but had never yet admitted him to the smallest social intimacy.

Yet with Tressady he felt no difficulty in talking over these private affairs; and he did, in fact, report the whole story—that same story with which Marcella had startled Betty Leven on the night in question: how Ancoats on this Sunday evening had decoyed this handsome, impressionable girl, to whom throughout the winter he had been paying decided and even ostentatious court, into a *tête-à-tête*—had poured out to her frantic confessions of his attachment to the theatrical lady—a woman he could never marry, whom his mother could never meet, but with whom, nevertheless, come what might, he was determined to live and die. She—Madeleine—was his friend, his good angel. Would she go to his mother and break it to her? Would she understand, and forgive him? There must be no opposition, or he would shoot himself. And so on, till the poor girl, worn out with excitement and grief, tottered into

Mrs. Allison's room more dead than alive.

But at that point Fontenoy stopped abruptly.

George agreed that the story was almost incredible, and added the inward and natural comment of the public-school man—that if people will keep their boys at home, and defraud them of the kickings that are their due, they may look out for something unwholesome in the finished product. Then, aloud, he said:

"I should imagine that Ancoats was acting through the greater part of that. He had said to himself that such a scene would be effective—and would be new."

"Good heavens!—why, that makes it ten thousand times more abominable than before!"

"I daresay," said George, coolly. "But it also makes the future, perhaps, a little more hopeful—throws some light on the passion or pose alternative. My impression is, that if we can only find an effective exit for Ancoats,—a last act that he would consider worthy of him,—he will bow himself out of the business willingly enough."

Fontenoy smiled rather gloomily, and the two walked on in silence.

Once or twice, as they paced the Terrace, George glanced sidelong at his leader. A corner of Fontenoy's nightly letter to Mrs. Allison was, he saw, sticking out of the great man's coat-pocket. Every night he wrote a crowded sheet upon his knee, under the shelter of a Blue Book, and on one or two nights George's quick eyes had not been able to escape from the pencilled address on the envelope to which it was ultimately consigned. The sheet was written with the regularity and devotion of a Prime Minister reporting to the Sovereign.

Well! it was all very touching and very remarkable. But George had some sympathy with Ancoats. To be virtually saddled with a stepfather, with whom your minutest affairs are confidentially discussed, and yet to have it said by all the world that your poor mother is too unselfish and too devoted to her son to marry again—the situation is not without its pricks. And that Ancoats was acutely conscious of them George had good reason to know.

"I say, Tressady, will you pair till eleven?" cried a man, swinging bareheaded along the Terrace with his hat in his hand. "I want an hour or two off badly, and there will be no big guns on till eleven or so."

George exchanged a word or two with Fontenoy, then stood still, and thought a moment. A sudden animation flushed into his face. Why not?

"All right!" he said; "till eleven."

Then he and Fontenoy went back to dine. As they mounted the dark staircase leading from the Terrace another man caught Tressady by the arm.

"The strike notices are out," he said. "I have just had a wire. Everyone leaves work to-night."

George shrugged his shoulders. He had been expecting the news at any moment, and was glad that the long shilly-shallying on both sides was at last over.

"Good luck to them!" he said. "I'm glad. The fight had to come."

"Oh! we shall be in the middle of arbitration before a fortnight's up. The men won't stand."

George shook his head. He himself believed that the struggle would last on through the autumn.

"Well, to be sure, there's Burrows," said his informant, himself a large coal-owner in the Ferth district; "if Burrows keeps sober, and if somebody doesn't buy him, Burrows will do his worst."

"That we always knew," said George, laughing, and passed on. He had but just time to catch his train.

He walked across to the Underground station, and by the time he reached it he had clean forgotten his pits and the strike, though as he passed the post-office in the House a sheaf of letters and telegrams had been put into his hands. Rather, he was full of a boy's eagerness and exultation. He had never supposed he could be let off to-night, till the offer of Dudley's pair tempted him. And now, in half an hour he would be in that queer Mile End room, watching her—quarrelling with her.

A little later, however, as he was sitting quietly in the train, quick composite thoughts of Letty, of his miners, and his money difficulties began to clutch at him again. Perhaps, now that the strike was a

reality, it might even be a help to him and a bridle to his wife. Preposterous, what she was doing and planning at Perth! His face flushed and hardened as he thought of their many wrangles during the past fortnight, her constant drag upon his purse, his own weakness, the annoyance and contempt that made him yield rather than argue.

What was that fellow, Harding Watton, doing in the house at all hours, and beguiling Letty, by his collector's airs, into a hundred foolish wants and whims? And that brute Cathedine! Was it decent, was it bearable, that a bride of three months should take no more notice of her husband's wishes and dislikes in such a matter than Letty had shown with regard to her growing friendship with that disreputable person? It seemed to George that he called most afternoons. Letty laughed, excused herself, or abused her visitor as soon as he had departed; but the rebuff which George's pride would not let him ask of her directly, while yet his whole manner demanded it, was never given.

He sat solitary in his brilliantly lit carriage, staring at the advertisements opposite, his long chin thrust forward, his head, with its fair curls, thrown moodily back. And all the time his mind was working with an appalling clearness. This cold light, in which he was beginning to see his wife and all she did—it was already a tragedy.

What was he flying to, what was he in search of—there in the East End? His whole being flung the answer. A little sympathy, a little heart, a little tenderness and delicacy of soul!—nothing else. He had once taken it for granted that every woman possessed them in some degree. Or, was it only since he had found them in this unexampled fulness and wealth that he had begun to thirst for them in this way? He made himself face the question. "One needn't lie to oneself!"

At Aldgate, as he was making his way out of the station, he stumbled upon Edward Watton.

"Hullo! You bound for No. 20, too?"

"No; there is no function to-night. Lady Maxwell is at a meeting. It has grown rather suddenly from small beginnings, and two days ago they made her promise to speak. I came down because I am afraid of a row. Things are beginning to look ugly down here, and I don't think she has much idea of it. Will you come?"

"Of course."

Watton looked at him with an amused and friendly eye.

It was another instance of her power—that she had been able to bind even this young enemy to her chariot-wheels. He hoped Letty had the sense to approve! As a matter of fact, Watton had never, by his own choice, become well acquainted with his cousin Letty, and had always secretly marvelled at Tressady's sudden marriage.

CHAPTER XIV

The two men were soon on the top of the Mile End Road tramcar, on their way eastward. It was a hot, dull evening. The setting sun behind them was already swallowed up in mist, and the heavy air held down and made palpable all the unsavoury odours of street and shop. Before them stretched the wide, interminable road which was once the highway from the great city to Colchester and East Anglia. A broad and comely thoroughfare on the whole, save that from end to end it has now the dyed and patched look that an old village street inevitably puts on when it has been swallowed up by the bricks and mortar of an overtaking town.

Tressady looked round him in a reverie, interested in the place and the streets because *she* cared for them, and had struck one of her roots here. Strange medley everywhere—in this main street, at all events—of old and new! Here were the Trinity almshouses, with their Jacobean gables and their low, spreading quadrangle behind the fine ironwork that shelters them from the street—a poetic fragment from the days of Wren and Dryden, sore threatened now by an ever-advancing London, hungry for ground and space. Here was a vast mission-hall, there a still vaster brewery; on the right, the quiet entrance to the oldworld quiet of Stepney-Green; and to the left a huge flame-ringed gin-palace, with shops on either side, hung to the roof with carpets, or brooms, or umbrellas, plastered with advertisements, and blazing with gas. While in the street between streamed the ever-moving crowd of

East London folk, jostling, chattering, loafing, doing their business or their pleasure, and made perpetually interesting, partly by their frank preoccupation with the simplest realities of life: with eating, drinking, earning, marrying, child-rearing; still more, perhaps, by the constant presence among them of that "leisured class" which, alike at the bottom and the top of things, has time to be gay, curious, and witty.

As he rolled along, watching the scene, Tressady thought to himself, as he had often thought before, that the East End, in many of its aspects, is a very decentish sort of place, about which many people talk much nonsense. He made the remark, carelessly, to Watton.

Watton shrugged his shoulders, and pointed silently to the entrances, right and left, of two side-streets, the typical streets of the East End: long lines of low houses,—two storeys always, or two storeys and a basement,—all of the same yellowish brick, all begrimed by the same smoke, every door-knocker of the same pattern, every window-blind hung in the same way, and the same corner "public" on either side, flaming in the hazy distance.

Watton hardly put his comment into words; but Tressady, who knew him well, understood, and nodded over his cigarette. Watton meant, of course, to suggest the old commonplace of the mean and dull monotony that weighs like a nightmare upon this vast East London and its human hive, which hums and toils, drones and feeds, by night and day, in these numberless featureless boxes of wood and stone, on this flat, interminable earth that stretches eastward to Essex marshes and southward to the river, and bears yellow brick and cemeteries for corn. Well! Tressady knew that the thought of this monotony, and of the thousands under its yoke, was to Watton a constant sting and oppression; he knew, too, or guessed, the religious effects it produced in him. For Watton was a religious man, and the action of the dream within showed itself in him and all he did. But why should everyone make a grief of East London? He was in the mood again to-night to feel it a kind of impertinence, this endless, peering anxiety about a world you never planned and cannot mend. Whose duty is it to cry for the moon?

"Better get down here, I think," said Watton, signalling to the tram-conductor, "and find out whether they have really gone, or not."

They stopped, half-way down the Mile End Road, before a piece of wall with a door in it. A trim maiden of fifteen in a spotless cotton frock and white apron opened to them.

Inside was a small flagged courtyard and the old-fashioned house that Marcella Maxwell, a year before,—some time after their first lodging had been given up,—had rescued from demolition and the builder, to make an East End home out of it. Somewhere about 1750 some City tradesman had built it among fields, and taken his rest there; while somewhat later, in a time of Evangelical revival, a pious widow had thrown out a low room to one side for class-meetings. In this room Marietta now held her gatherings, and both Tressady and Watton knew it well.

The little handmaid bubbled over with willing talk. Oh, yes, there was a meeting up Manx Road, and her Ladyship had gone with Lord Naseby, and Lady Madeleine, and Mr. Everard, the inspector, and, she thought, one or two besides. She expected the ladies back about ten, and they were to stay the night.

"An they do say, sir," she said eagerly, looking up at Watton, whom she knew, "as there'll be a lot o' rough people at the meetin."

"Oh! I daresay," said Watton. "Well, we're going up, too, to look after her."

As they walked on they talked over the general situation in the district, and Watton explained what he knew of this particular meeting. In the first place, he repeated, he could not see that Lady Maxwell understood as yet the sort of opposition that the Bill was rousing, especially in these East End districts. The middle-class and parliamentary resistance she had always appreciated; but the sort of rage that might be awakened among a degraded class of workers by proposals that seemed to threaten their immediate means of living, he believed she had not yet realised, in anything like its full measure and degree. And he feared that this meeting might be a disagreeable experience.

For it was the direct fruit of an agitation that, as Tressady knew, was in particular Fontenoy's agitation. The Free Workers' League, which had called upon the trade-unionist of Mile End to summon the meeting, and to hear therein what both sides had to say, was, in fact, Fontenoy's creation. It had succeeded especially in organising the women home-workers of Mile End and Poplar. Two or three lady-speakers employed by the League had been active to the point of frenzy in denouncing the Bill and shrieking "Liberty!" in the frightened ear of Mile End. Watton could not find a good word for any of them—was sure that what mostly attracted them was the notoriety of the position, involving, as it did, a sort of personal antagonism to Lady Maxwell, who had, so to speak, made Mile End her own. And to be

Lady Maxwell's enemy was, Watton opined, the next best thing, from the point of view of advertisement, to being her friend.

"Excellent women, I daresay," said Tressady, laughing—"talking excellent sense. But, tell me, what is this about Naseby—why Naseby?—on all these occasions?"

"Why not, indeed?" said Watton. "Ah! you don't know? It seems to be Naseby that's going to get the egg out of the hat for us."

And he plunged eagerly into the description of certain schemes wherewith Naseby had lately astonished the Maxwell circle. Tressady listened, languidly at first, then with a kind of jealous annoyance that scandalised himself. How well he could understand the attraction of such things for her quick mind! Life was made too easy for these "golden lads." People attributed too much importance to their fancies.

Naseby, in fact,—but so much George already knew,—had been for some months now the comrade and helper of both the Maxwells. His friends still supposed him to be merely the agreeable and fashionable idler. In reality, Naseby for some years past had been spending all the varied leisure that his commission in the Life Guards allowed him upon the work of a social and economic student. He had joined the staff of a well-known sociologist, who was at the time engaged in an inquiry into certain typical East London trades. The inquiry had made a noise, and the evidence collected under it had already been largely used in the debates on the Maxwell Bill. Tressady, for instance, had much of it by heart, although he never knew, until he became a haunter of Lady Maxwell's circle, that Naseby had played any part in the gathering of it.

At the same time, as George had soon observed, Naseby was no blind follower of the Maxwells. In truth, under his young gaiety and coolness he had the temper of the student, who was more in love with his problem itself than with any suggested solution of it. As he had told Lady Betty, he had "no opinions"—would himself rather leave the sweated trades alone, and trust to much slower and less violent things than law-making. All this the Maxwells knew perfectly, and liked and trusted him none the less.

Now, however, it seemed there was a new development. If the Bill passed, Naseby had a plan. He was already a rich man, independently of the marquisate to come. His grandmother had left him a large preliminary fortune, and through his friends and connections besides he seemed to command as much money as he desired. And of this money, supposing the Bill passed, he proposed to make original and startling use. He had worked out the idea of a syndicate furnished with, say, a quarter of a million of money, which should come down upon a given district of the East End, map it out, buy up all the existing businesses in its typical trade, and start a system of new workshops proportioned to the population, supplying it with work just as the Board schools supply it with education. The new scheme was to have a profit-sharing element: the workers were to be represented on the syndicate, and every nerve was to be strained to secure the best business management. The existing middlemen would be either liberally bought out, or absorbed into the new machine. It was by no means certain that they would show it any strong resistance.

Tressady made a number of unfriendly comments on the scheme as Watton detailed it. A bit of amateur economics, which would only help the Bill to ruin a few more people than would otherwise have gone down!

"Ah! well," said Watton, "if this thing passes there are bound to be experiments, and Naseby means to be in 'em. So do I, only I haven't got a quarter of a million. Here's our road! We're late, of course—the meeting's begun. I say, just look at this!"

For Manx Road, as they turned into it, was already held by another big meeting of its own. The room in the Board school which crossed the end of the street must be full, and this crowd represented, apparently, those who had been turned away.

As the two friends pushed their way through, Tressady's quick eye recognised in the throng a number of familiar types. Well-to-do "pressers" and machinists, factory-girls of different sorts, hundreds of sallow women, representing the home-workers of Mile End, Bow, and Stepney—poor souls bowed by toil and maternity, whose marred fingers labour day and night to clothe the Colonies and the army; their husbands and brothers, too, English slop-tailors for the most part, of the humbler sort—the short side-street was packed with them. It was an anxious, sensitive crowd, Tressady thought, as he elbowed his passage through it. A small thing might inflame it; and he saw a number of rough lads on the skirts of it.

Jews, too, there were in plenty. For the stress of this Bill had brought Jew and Gentile together in a

new comradeship that amazed the East End. Here were groups representing the thrifty, hard-working London Jew of the second generation,—small masters for the most part, pale with the confinement and "drive" of the workshop,—men who are expelling and conquering the Gentile East Ender, because their inherited passion for business is not neutralised by any of the common English passions for spending—above all by the passion for drink. Here, too, were men of a far lower type and grade—the waste and refuse of the vast industrial mill. Tressady knew a good many of them by sight—sullen, quick-eyed folk, who buy their "greeners" at the docks, and work them day and night at any time of pressure; whose workshops are still flaring at two o'clock in the morning, and alive again by the winter dawn; who fight and flout the law by a hundred arts, and yet, brutal and shifty as many of them are, have a curious way of winning the Gentile inspector's sympathy, even while he fines and harasses them, so clearly are they and their "hands" alike the victims of a huge world-struggle that does but toss them on its surge.

These gentry, however, were hard hit by more than one clause of the Maxwell Bill, and they were here to-night to protest, as they had been already protesting at many meetings, large and small, all over the East End. And they had their slaves with them,—ragged, hollow-eyed creatures, newly arrived from Russian Poland, Austria, or Romania, and ready to shout or howl in Yiddish as they were told,—men whose strange faces and eyes under their matted shocks of black or reddish hair suggested every here and there the typical history and tragic destiny of the race which, in other parts of the crowd, was seen under its softer and more cosmopolitan aspects.

As the two men neared the door of the school, where the press was densest, they were recognised as probably belonging to the Maxwell party, and found themselves a good deal jeered and hustled, and could hardly make any way at all. However, a friendly policeman came to their aid. They were passed into a lobby, and at last, with much elbowing and pushing, found themselves inside the schoolroom.

So crowded was the place and so steaming the atmosphere, that it was some minutes before Tressady could make out what was going on. Then he saw that Naseby was speaking—Naseby, looking remarkably handsome and well curled, and much at his ease, besides, in the production of a string of Laodicean comments on the Bill, his own workshop scheme, and the general prospects of East End labour. He described the scheme, but in such a way as rather to damn it than praise it; and as for the Bill itself, which he had undertaken to compare with former Factory Bills, when he sat down he left it, indeed, in a parlous case—a poor, limping, doubtful thing, quite as likely to ruin the East End as to do it a hand's turn of good.

Just as the speaker was coming to his peroration Tressady suddenly caught sight of a delicate upraised profile on the platform, behind Naseby. The repressed smile on it set him smiling, too.

"What on earth do they make Naseby speak for!" said Watton, indignantly. "Idiocy! He spoils everything he touches. Let him give the money, and other people do the talking. You can see the people here don't know what to make of him in the least. Look at their faces.—Who's he talking to?"

"Lady Madeleine, I think," said Tressady. "What amazing red hair that girl has! and what queer, scared eyes! It is like an animal—one wants to stroke her."

"Well, Naseby strokes her," said Watton, laughing. "Look at her; she brightens up directly he comes near."

Tressady thought of the tale Fontenoy had just told him, and wondered. Consolation seemed to come easy to maidens of quality.

Meanwhile various trade-unionists—sturdy, capable men, in black coats—were moving and seconding resolutions; flinging resentful comments, too, at Naseby whenever occasion offered. Tressady heard very little of what they had to say. His eyes and thoughts were busy with the beautiful figure to the left of the chair. Its dignity and charm worked upon him like a spell—infused a kind of restless happiness.

When he woke from his trance of watching, it was to turn upon Watton with impatience. How long was this thing going on? The British workman spoke with deplorable fluency. Couldn't they push their way through to the platform?

Watton looked at the crowd, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not yet—I say! who's this they've put up. Come, my dear fellow, that looks like the real thing!"

Tressady turned, and saw an old man, a Jew, with a long greyish beard, coming slowly to the front of the platform. His eyes were black and deep, sunk under white brows; he was decently but poorly dressed; and he began to speak with a slight German accent, in an even, melancholy voice, rather under-pitched, which soon provoked the meeting. He was vociferously invited to speak up or sit down; and at the first interruption he stopped timorously, and looked towards the Chair.

An elderly, grey-haired woman was presiding—no doubt to mark the immense importance of the Bill for the women of the East End. She came forward at the man's appeal.

"My friends," she said quietly, "you let this man speak, and don't you be hard on him. He's got a sad story to tell you, and he won't be long about it. You give him his chance. Some of you shall have yours soon."

Up. The speaker was the paid secretary of one of the women's unions; but she had been a tailoress for years, and had known a tragic life. Once, at a meeting where some flippant speaker had compared the reality and frequency of "starvation" in London to the reality and frequency of the sea serpent, Tressady had seen her get up and, with a sudden passion, describe the death of her own daughter from hardship and want, with the tears running down her cheeks. Her appeal to the justice of the meeting succeeded, and the old man was allowed to go on. It soon appeared that he had been put up by one of the tailoring unions to denounce the long hours worked in some of the Whitechapel and Spitalfields workshops. His facts were appalling. But he put them badly, with a dull, stumbling voice, and he got no hold on the meeting at all till suddenly he stepped forward, paused,—his miserable face working, his head turning from if side to side,—and finally said, with a sharp change of note:

"And now, if you please, I will tell you how it was about Isaac—my brother Isaac. It was Mr. Jacobs"—he looked round, and pointed to the tradeunion secretary who had been speaking before him—"Mr. Jacobs it was that put it in my mind to come here and tell you about Isaac. For the way Isaac died was like this. He and I were born in Spitalfields; he wasn't one of your greeners—he was a reg'lar good worker, first-rate general coat-hand, same as me. But he got with a hard master. And last winter season but one there came a rush. And Isaac must be working six days a week—and he must be working fourteen hours a day—and, more'n that, he must be doing his bastes overtime, two hours one time, and an hour or so, perhaps, another; anyway, they made it up to half a day—eight hours and more in the week. *You* know how they reckon it."

He stopped, grinning feebly. The trade-unionists about the platform shouted or groaned in response. The masters round the door, with their "greeners," stood silent.

"And about Wednesday in the third week," he went on, "he come to the master, and he says—Isaac was older than me, and his chest it would be beginning to trouble him pretty bad, so he says: 'I'm done,' he says; 'I must go home. You can get another chap to do my bastes to-night—will you?' And the master says to Isaac: 'If you don't do your bastes overtime, if you're too high and mighty,' he says, 'why, there's plenty as will, and you don't need to come to-morrow neither.' And Isaac had his wife Judith at home, and four little uns; and he stopped and done his bastes, of *course*. And next night he couldn't well see, and he'd been dreadful sick all day, and he says to the master again, he says as he must go home. And the master, he says the same to him—and Isaac stops. And on Friday afternoon he come home. And the shop had been steamin hot, but outside it was a wind to cut yer through. And his wife Judith says to him, 'Isaac, you look starved!' and she set him by the fire. And he sat by the fire, and he didn't say nothing. Then his hands fell down sudden like that—"

The old man let his hands drop heavily by his side with a simple dramatic gesture. By this time there was not a sound in the crowded room. Even the wildest and most wolfish of the greeners were staring silently, craning brown necks forward.

"And his wife ran to him, and he falls against her; and he says, 'Lay me down, Judith, and don't you let em wake me—not the young uns,' he says 'not for nothing and nobody. For if it was the trump of the Most High,' he says—and Isaac was a religious man, and careful in his speech—'I must have my sleep.' And she laid him down, and the children and she watched—and by midnight Isaac turned himself over. He just opened his eyes once, and groaned. And he never spoke no more—he was gone before mornin.—And his master gave Judith five shillings towards the coffin, and the men in the shop, they raised the rest."

The old man paused. He stood considering a moment, his face and ragged beard thrown out—a spot of greyish white—against the figures behind, his eyes blinking painfully under the gas.

"Well, we've tried many things," he said at last. "We've tried strikes and unions, and it isn't no good. There's always one treading on another, and if you don't do it, someone else will. It's the *law* as'll have to do it. You may take that and smoke it!—you won't get nothing else. Why!"—his hoarse voice trembled—"why, they use us up cruel in the sort of shop I work for. Ten or twelve years, and a man's all to pieces. It's the irons, and the heat, and the sitting—*you* know what it is. I've lasted fifteen year, but I'm breaking up now. If my master give me the sack for speaking here I'll have nothing but the Jewish Board of Guardians to look to. All the same, I made up my mind as I'd come and say how they served Isaac."

He stopped abruptly, and stood quite still a moment, fronting the meeting, as though appealing to them, through the mere squalid physical weakness he could find no more words to express. Then, with a sort of shambling bow, he turned away, and the main body of the meeting clapped excitedly, while at the back some of the "sweaters" grinned, and chatted sarcastic things in Yiddish with their neighbours. Tressady saw Lady Maxwell rise eagerly as the old man passed her, take his hand, and find him a seat.

"That, I suppose, was an emotion," said Tressady, looking down upon his companion.

"Or an argument," said Watton—"as you like!"

One other "emotion" of the same kind—the human reality at its simplest and cruellest—Tressady afterwards remembered.

A "working-woman" was put up to second an amendment condemning the workshops clause, which had been moved in an angry speech by one of "Fontenoy's ladies," a shrill-voiced, fashionable person, the secretary to the local branch of the Free Workers' League. Tressady had yawned impatiently through the speech, which had seemed to him a violent and impertinent performance. But as the speaker sat down he was roused by an exclamation from a man beside him.

"*That woman!*" cried a tall curate, straining on tiptoe to see. "No! They ought to be ashamed of themselves!"

Tressady wondered who and why; but all that he saw was that a thin, tall woman was being handed along the bench in front of him, while her neighbours and friends clapped her on the back as she passed, laughing and urging her on. Then, presently, there she stood on the platform, a thin, wand-like creature, with her battered bonnet sideways on her head, a woollen crossover on her shoulders, in spite of July, her hands clasped across her chest, her queer light eyes wandering and smiling hither and thither. In her emaciation, her weird cheerfulness, she was like a figure from a Dance of Death. But what was amazing was her self-possession.

"Now yer laffin' at me," she began in a conversational tone, nodding towards the group of women she had just left. "You go 'long! I told the lidy I'd speak, an I will. Well, they comes to me, an they ses, Mrs. Dickson, yer not to work at 'ome no longer—they'll put yer in prison if yer do't, they ses; yer to go out ter work, same as the shop 'ands, they ses; and what's more, if they cotch Mr. Butterford—that's my landlord; p'raps yer dunno 'im—"

She looked down at the meeting with a whimsical grin, her eyes screwed up and her crooked brows lifted, so that the room roared merely to look at her. The trim lady-secretary, however, bent forward with an air of annoyance. She had not, perhaps, realised that Mrs. Dickson was so much of a character.

"If they cotch Mr. Butterford, they'll make 'im pay up smart for lettin yer do such a thing as make knickers in 'is 'ouse. So I asks the lidy, Wot's ter become o' me an the little uns? An she says she done know, but yer mus come and speak Tuesday night, she says—Manx Road Schools, she says—if yer want to perwent em making a law ov it. Which I'm a doin of—aint I?"

Fresh laughter and response from the room. She went on satisfied.

"An, yer know, if I can't make the knickers at 'ome, I can't make 'em awy from 'ome. For ther aint no shops as want kids squallin round, as fer as I can make out. An Jimmy's a limb, as boys mos'ly are in my egspierence. Larst week 'e give the biby a 'alfpenny and two o' my biggest buttons to swaller, an I ony jest smacked 'em out of 'er in time. Ther'd be murder done if I was to leave 'em. An 'ow 'ud I be able to pay anyone fer lookin' after em? I can't git much, yer know, shop or no shop. I aint wot I was."

She stopped, and pointed significantly to her chest. Tressady shuddered as the curate whispered to him.

"I've been in orspital—cut about fearful. I can't go at the pace them shops works at. They'd give me the sack, double-quick, if I was to go try in 'em. No, it's *settin* as does it—settin an settin. I'm at it by seven, an my 'usband—yer can see im there—e'll tell yer."

She stopped, and pointed to a burly ruffian standing amid a group of "pals" round the door. This gentleman had his arms folded, and was alternately frowning and grinning at this novel spectacle of his wife as a public performer. Bribes had probably been necessary to bring him to consent to the spectacle at all. But he was not happy, and when his wife pointed at him, and the meeting turned to look, he suddenly took a dive head-foremost into the crowd about him; so that when the laughter and horse-play that followed had subsided, it was seen that Mr. Tom Dickson's place knew him no more.

Meanwhile Mrs. Dickson stood grinning—grinning wide and visibly. It was the strangest mirth, as

though hollow pain and laughter strove with each other for the one poor indomitable face.

"Well, ee *could* 'a told yer, if e'd ad the mind," she said, nodding, "for ee knows. Ee's been out o' work this twelve an a arf year—well, come, I'll bet yer, anyway, as ee 'asn't done a 'and's turn this three year—an I don't blime im. Fust, there isn't the work to be got, and then yer git out of the way o' wantin it. An beside, I'm used to im. When Janey—no, it were Sue!—were seven month old, he come in one night from the public, an after ee'd broke up most o' the things, he says to me, 'Clear out, will yer!' An I cleared out, and Sue and me set on the doorstep till mornin. And when mornin come, Tom opened the door, an ee says, 'What are you doin there, mother? Why aint yer got my breakfast?' An I went in an got it. But, bless yer, nowadays—the *women won't do it!*—"

Another roar went up from the meeting. Mrs. Dickson still grinned.

"An so there's nothink but *settin'*, as I said before—settin' till yer can't set no more. If I begin o' seven, I gets Mr. Dickson to put the teathings an the loaf andy, so as I don't 'ave to get up more'n jes to fetch the kettle; and the chillen gets the same as me—tea an bread, and a red 'erring Sundays; an Mr. Dickson, 'e gets 'is meals out. I gives 'im the needful, and 'e don't make no trouble; an the children is dreadful frackshus sometimes, and gets in my way fearful. But there, if I can *set*—set till I 'ear Stepney Church goin twelve—I can earn my ten shillin a week, an keep the lot of 'em. Wot does any lidy or genelman want, a comin' meddlin down 'ere? Now, that's the middle an both ends on it. Done? Well, I dessay I is done. Lor, I ses to em in the orspital it do seem rummy to me to be layin abed like that. If Tom was 'ere, why, 'e'd—"

She made a queer, significant grimace. But the audience laughed no longer. They stared silently at the gaunt creature, and with their silence her own mood changed.

Suddenly she whipped up her apron. She drew it across her eyes, and flung it away again passionately.

"I dessay we shall be lyin abed in Kingdom Come," she said defiantly, yet piteously. "But we've got to git there fust. An I don't want no shops, thank yer!"

She rambled on a little longer, then, at a sign from the lady-secretary, made a grinning curtsy to the audience and departed.

"What do they get out of that?" said Watton, in Tressady's ear—"Poor galley-slave in praise of servitude!"

"Her slavery keeps her alive, please."

"Yes—and drags down the standard of a whole class!"

"You'll admit she seemed content?"

"It's that content we want to kill.—Ah! *at last!*" and Watton clapped loudly, followed by about half the meeting, while the rest sat silent. Then Tressady perceived that the chair-woman had called upon Lady Maxwell to move the next resolution, and that the tall figure had risen.

She came forward slowly, glancing from side to side, as though doubtful where to look for her friends. She was in black, and her head was covered with a little black lace bonnet, in the strings of which, at her throat, shone a small diamond brooch. The delicate whiteness of her face and hands, and this sparkle of light on her breast, that moved as she moved, struck a thrill of pleasure through Tressady's senses. The squalid monotony and physical defect of the crowd about him passed from his mind. Her beauty redressed the balance. "Loveliness, magic, and grace—they are here; they are set in the world!"—and ugliness and pain have not conquered while this face still looks and breathes." This, and nothing less, was the cry of the young man's heart and imagination as he strained forward, waiting for her voice.

Then he settled himself to listen—only to pass gradually from expectation to nervousness, from nervousness to dismay.

What was happening? She had once told him that she was not a speaker, and he had not believed her. She had begun well, he thought, though with a hesitation he had not expected. But now—had she lost her thread—or what? Incredible! when one remembered her in private life, in conversation. Yet these stumbling sentences, this evident distress!

Tressady found himself fidgeting in sympathetic misery. He and Watton looked at each other.

A little more, and she would have lost her audience. She *had* lost it. At first there had been eager

listening, for she had plunged straightway into a set explanation and defence of the Bill point by point, and half the room knew that she was Lord Maxwell's wife. But by the end of ten minutes their attention was gone. They were only staring at her because she was handsome and a great lady. Otherwise, they seemed not to know what to make of her. She grew white; she wavered. Tressady saw that she was making great efforts, and all in vain. The division between her and her audience widened with every sentence, and Fontenoy's lady-organiser, in the background, sat smilingly erect. Tressady, who had been at first inclined to hate the thought of her success in this Inferno, grew hot with wrath and irritation. His own vanity suffered in her lack of triumph.

Amazing! How *could* her personal magic—so famous on so many fields—have deserted her like this in an East End schoolroom, before people whose lives she knew, whose griefs she carried in her heart?

Then an idea struck him. The thought was an illumination—he understood. He shut his eyes and listened. Maxwell's sentences, Maxwell's manner—even, at times, Maxwell's voice! He had been rehearsing to her his coming speech in the House of Lords, and she was painfully repeating it! To his disgust, Tressady saw the reporters scribbling away—no doubt they knew their business! Aye, there was the secret. The wife's adoration showed through her very failure—through this strange conversion of all that was manly, solid, and effective in Maxwell, into a confused mass of facts and figures, pedantic, colourless, and cold!

Edward Watton began to look desperately unhappy. "Too long," he said, whispering in Tressady's ear, "and too technical. They can't follow."

And he looked at a group of rough factory-girls beginning to scuffle with the young men near them, at the restless crowd of "greeners," at the women in the centre of the hall lifting puzzled faces to the speaker, as though in a pain of listening.

Tressady nodded. In the struggle of devotion with a half-laughing annoyance he could only crave that the thing should be over.

But the next instant his face altered. He pushed forward instinctively, turning his back on Watton, hating the noisy room, that would hardly let him hear.

Ah!—those few last sentences, that voice, that quiver of passion—they were her own—herself, not Maxwell. The words were very simple, and a little tremulous—words of personal reminiscence and experience. But for one listener there they changed everything. The room, the crowd, the speaker—he saw them for a moment under another aspect: that poetic, eternal aspect, which is always there, behind the veil of common things, ready to flash out on mortal eyes. He *felt* the woman's heart, oppressed with a pity too great for it; the delicate, trembling consciousness, like a point in space, weighed on by the burden of the world; he stood, as it were, beside her, hearing with her ears, seeing the earth-spectacle as she saw it, with that terrible second sight of hers: the all-envirning woe and tragedy of human things—the creeping hunger and pain—the struggle that leads no whither—the life that hates to live and yet dreads to die—the death that cuts all short, and does but add one more hideous question to the great pile that hems the path of man.

A hard, reluctant tear rose in his eyes. Is it starved tailoresses and shirtmakers alone who suffer? Is there no hunger of the heart, that matches and overweighs the physical? Is it not as easy for the rich as the poor to miss the one thing needful, the one thing that matters and saves? Angrily, and in a kind of protest, he put out his hand, as it were, to claim his own share of the common pain.

"Make way there! make way!" cried a police-sergeant, holding back the crowd, "and let the lady pass."

Tressady did his best to push through with Lady Maxwell on his arm. But there was an angry hum of voices in front of him, an angry pressure round the doors.

"We shall soon get a cab," he said, bending over her. "You are very tired, I fear. Please lean upon me."

Yet he could but feel grateful to the crowd. It gave him this joy of protecting and supporting her. Nevertheless, as he looked ahead, he wished that they were safely off, and that there were more police!

For this meeting, which had been only mildly disorderly and inattentive while Marcella was speaking, had suddenly flamed, after she sat down, into a fierce confusion and tumult—why, Tressady hardly now understood. A man had sprung up to speak as she sat down who was apparently in bad repute with most of the unions of the district. At any rate, there had been immediate uproar and protest. The trade-unionists would not hear him—hurled names at him—"thief," "blackleg"—as he attempted to speak. Then the Free Workers, for whom this dubious person had been lately acting, rose in a mass and booed

at the unionists; and finally some of the dark-eyed, black-bearded "greeners" near the door, urged on, probably, by the masters, whose slaves they were, had leaped the benches near them, shouting strange tongues, and making for the hostile throng around the platform.

Then it had been time for Naseby and the police to clear the platform and open a passage for the Maxwell party. Unfortunately, there was no outlet to the back, no chance of escaping the shouting crowd in Manx Road. Tressady, joining his friends at last by dint of his height and a free play of elbows, found himself suddenly alone with Lady Maxwell, Naseby and Lady Madeleine borne along far behind, and no chance but to follow the current, with such occasional help as the police stationed along the banks of it might be able to give.

Outside, Tressady strained his eyes for a cab.

"Here, sir!" cried the sergeant in front, carving a passage by dint of using his own stalwart frame as a ram.

They hurried on, for some rough lads on the edges of the crowd had already begun stone-throwing. The faces about them seemed to be partly indifferent, partly hostile. "Look at the bloomin bloats!" cried a wild factory-girl with a touzled head as Lady Maxwell passed. "Let 'em stop at 'ome and mind their own 'usbands—yah!"

"Garn! who paid for your bonnet?" shouted another, until a third girl pulled her back, panting, "If you say that any more I'll scrag yer!" For this third girl had spent a fortnight in the Mile End Road house, getting fed and strengthened before an operation.

But here was the cab! Lady Maxwell's foot was already on the step, when Tressady felt something fly past him.

There was a slight cry. The form in front of him seemed to waver a moment. Then Tressady himself mounted, caught her, and in another moment, after a few plunges from the excited horse, they were off down Manx Road, followed by a shouting crowd that gradually thinned.

"You are hurt!" he said.

"Yes," she said faintly, "but not much. Will you tell him to drive first to Mile End Road?"

"I have told him. Can I do anything to stop the bleeding?"

He looked at her in despair. The handkerchief, and the delicate hand itself that she was holding to her brow, were dabbled in blood.

"Have you a silk handkerchief to spare?" she asked him, smiling slightly and suddenly through her pallor, as though at their common predicament.

By good fortune he had one. She took off her hat, and gave him a few business-like directions. His fingers trembled as he tried to obey her; but he had the practical sense that the small vicissitudes and hardships of travel often develop in a man, and between them they adjusted a rough but tolerable bandage.

Then she leant against the side of the cab, and he thought she would have swooned. There was a pause, during which he watched the quivering lines of the lips and nostrils and the pallor of the cheeks with a feeling of dismay.

But she did not mean to faint, and little by little her will answered to her call upon it. Presently she said, with eyes shut and brow contracted:

"I *trust* the others are safe. Oh! what a failure—what a failure! I am afraid I have done Aldous harm!"

The tone of the last words touched Tressady deeply. Evidently she could hardly restrain her tears.

"They were not worthy you should go and speak to them," he said quickly. "Besides, it was only a noisy minority."

She did not speak again till they drew up before the house in the Mile End Road. Then she turned to him.

"I was to have stayed here for the night, but I think I must go home. Aldous might hear that there had been a disturbance. I will leave a message here, and drive home."

"I trust you will let me go with you. We should none of us be happy to think of you as alone just yet."

And I am due at the House by eleven."

She smiled, assenting, then descended, leaning heavily upon him in her weakness.

When she reappeared, attended by her two little servants, all frightened and round-eyed at their mistress's mishap, she had thrown a thick lace scarf round her head, which hid the bandage and gave to her pale beauty a singularly touching, appealing air.

"I wish I could see Madeleine," she said anxiously, standing beside the cab and looking up the road. "Ah!"

For she had suddenly caught sight of a cab in the distance driving smartly up. As it approached, Naseby and Lady Madeleine were plainly to be seen inside it. The latter jumped out almost at Marcella's feet, looking more scared than ever as she saw the bandage and the black scarf twisted round the white face. But in a few moments Marcella had soothed her, and given her over, apparently, to the care of another lady staying in the house. Then she waved her hand to Naseby, who, with his usual coolness, asked no questions and made no remarks, and she and Tressady drove off.

"Madeleine will stay the night," Marcella explained as they sped towards Aldgate. "That was our plan. My secretary will look after her. She has been often here with me lately, and has things of her own to do. But I ought not to have taken her to-night. Lady Kent would never have forgiven me if she had been hurt. Oh! it was all a mistake—all a great mistake! I suppose I imagined—that is one's folly—that I could really do some good—make an effect."

She bit her lip, and the furrow reappeared in the white brow.

Tressady felt by sympathy that her heart was all sore, her moral being shaken and vibrating. After these long months of labour and sympathy and emotion, the sudden touch of personal brutality had unnerved her.

Mere longing to comfort, to "make-up," overcame him.

"You wouldn't talk of mistake—of failing—if you knew how to be near you, to listen to you, to see you, touches and illuminates some of us!"

His cheek burnt, but he turned a manly, eager look upon her.

Her cheek, too, flushed, and he thought he saw her bosom heave.

"Oh no!—no!" she cried. "How *impossible!*—when one feels oneself so helpless, so clumsy, so useless. Why couldn't I do better? But perhaps it is as well. It all prepares one—braces one—against—"

She paused and leaned forward, looking out at the maze of figures and carriages on the Mansion House crossing, her tight-pressed lips trembling against her will.

"Against the last inevitable disappointment." That, no doubt, was what she meant.

"If you only understood how loth some of us are to differ from you," he cried,—*"how hard it seems to have to press another view,—to be already pledged."*

"Oh yes!—*please*—I know that you are pledged," she said, in hasty distress, her delicacy shrinking as before from the direct personal argument.

They were silent a little. Tressady looked out at the houses in Queen Victoria Street, at the lamplit summer night, grudging the progress of the cab, the approach of the river, of the Embankment, where there would be less traffic to bar their way—clinging to the minutes as they passed.

"Oh! how could they put up that woman?" she said presently, her eyes still shut, her hand shaking, as it rested on the door. "How *could* they? It is the thought of women like that—the hundreds and thousands of them—that goads one on. A clergyman who knows the East End well said to me the other day, 'The difference between now and twenty years ago is that the women work much more, the men less.' I can never get away from the thought of the women! Their lives come to seem to me the mere refuse, the rags and shreds, that are thrown every day into the mill and ground to nothing—without a thought—without a word of pity, an hour of happiness! Cancer—three children left out of nine—and barely forty, though she looked sixty! They tell me she may live eighteen months. Then, when the parish has buried her, the man has only to hold up his finger to find someone else to use up in the same way. And she is just one of thousands."

"I can only reply by the old, stale question," said Tressady, sturdily. "Did we make the mill? Can we stop its grinding? And if not, is it fair even to the race that has something to gain from courage and

gaiety—is it *reasonable* to take all our own poor little joy and drench it in this horrible pain of sympathy, as you do! But we have said all these things before."

He bent over to her, smiling. But she did not look up. And he saw a tear which her weakness, born of shock and fatigue, could not restrain, steal from the lashes on the cheek. Then he added, still leaning towards her:

"Only, what I never have said—I think—is what is true to-night. At last you have made one person feel—if that matters anything!—the things you feel. I don't know that I am particularly grateful to you! And, practically, we may be as far apart as ever. But I was without a sense when I went into this game of politics; and now—"

His heart beat. What would he not have said, mad youth!—within the limits imposed by her nature and his own dread—to make her look at him, to soften this preposterous sadness!

But it needed no more. She opened her eyes, and looked at him with a wild sweetness and gratitude which dazzled him, and struck his memory with the thought of the Southern, romantic strain in her.

"You are very kind and comforting!" she said; "but then, from the first—somehow—I knew you were a friend to us. One felt it—through all difference."

The little sentences were steeped in emotion—emotion springing from many sources, fed by a score of collateral thoughts and memories—with which Tressady had, in truth, nothing to do. Yet the young man gulped inwardly. She had been a tremulous woman till the words were said. Now—strange!—through her very gentleness and gratefulness, a barrier had risen between them. Something stern and quick told him this was the very utmost of what she could ever say to him—the farthest limit of it all.

They passed under Charing Cross railway bridge. Beside them, as they emerged, the moon shone out above the darks and silvers of the river, and in front, the towers of Westminster rose purplish grey against a west still golden.

"How were things going in the House this afternoon?" she asked, looking at the towers. "Oh! I forgot. You see, the clock says close on eleven. Please let me drop you here. I can manage by myself quite well."

He protested, and she yielded, with a patient kindness that made him sore. Then he gave his account, and they talked a little of Monday's division and of the next critical votes in Committee—each of them, so he felt in his exaltation, a blow dealt to her—that he must help to deal. Yet there was a fascination in the topic. Neither could get away from it.

Presently, Pall Mall being very full of traffic, they had to wait a moment at the corner of the street that turns into St. James's Square. In the pause Tressady caught sight of a man on the pavement. The man smiled, looked astonished, and took off his hat. Lady Maxwell bowed coldly, and immediately looked away. Tressady recognised Harding Watton. But neither he nor she mentioned his name.

In another minute he had seen her vanish within the doors of her own house. Her hand had rested gently, willingly, in his.

"I am so grateful!" she had said; "so will Maxwell be. We shall meet soon, and laugh over our troubles!"

And then she was gone, and he was left standing a moment, bewildered.

Eleven? What had he to do?

Then he remembered his pair, and that he had promised to call for Letty at a certain house, and take her on to a late ball. The evening, in fact, instead of ending, was just beginning. He could have laughed, as he got back into his cab.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Marcella had sped through the outer hall into the inner, where one solitary light, still burning, made a rather desolate dark-in-light through the broad, pillared space. A door opened at the farther side.

"Aldous!"

"You!"

He came out, and she flew to him. He felt her trembling as she touched him. In ten words she told

him something of what had happened. Then he saw the bandage round her temple. His countenance fell. She knew that he turned white, and loved him for it. How few things had power to move him so!

He wanted to lead her back into his library, where he was at work. But she resisted.

"Let me go up to Annette," she said. "The little wound—oh! it is not much, I *know* it is not much—ought to be properly seen to. We will do it between us in a moment. Then come—I will send her down for you. I want to tell you."

But in her heart of hearts she was just a little afraid of telling him. What if an exaggerated version should get into the papers—if it should really do him harm—at this critical moment! She was always tormented by this dread, a dread born of long-past indiscretions and mistakes.

He acquiesced, but first he insisted on half leading, half carrying her upstairs; and she permitted it, delighting in his strong arm.

Half an hour later she sent for him. The maid found him pacing up and down the hall, waiting.

When he entered her room she was lying on her sofa in a white wrapper of some silky stuff. The black lace had been drawn again round her head, and he saw nothing but a very pale face and her eager, timid eyes—timid for no one in the world but him. As he caught sight of her, she produced in him that exquisite mingled impression of grace, passion, self-yielding, which in all its infinite variations and repetitions made up for him the constant poem of her beauty. But though she knew it, she glanced at him anxiously as he approached her. It had been to her a kind of luxury of feeling, in the few moments that she had been waiting for him, to cherish a little fear of him—of his displeasure.

"Now describe exactly what you have been doing," he said, sitting down by her with a troubled face and taking her hand, as soon as he had assured himself that the cut was slight and would leave no scar.

She told her tale, and was thrilled to see that he frowned. She laid her hand on his shoulder.

"It is the first public thing I have done without consulting you. I meant to have asked you yesterday, but we were both so busy. The meeting was got up rather hurriedly, and they pressed me to speak, after all the arrangements were made."

"We are both of us too busy," he said, rather sadly; "we glance, and nod, and bustle by—"

He did not finish the quotation, but she could. Her eyes scanned his face. "Do you think I ought to have avoided such a thing at such a time? Will it do harm?"

His brow cleared. He considered the matter.

"I think you may expect some of the newspapers to make a good deal of it," he said, smiling.

And, in fact, his own inherited tastes and instincts were all chafed by her story. His wife—the wife of a Cabinet Minister—pleading for her husband's Bill, or, as the enemy might say, for his political existence, with an East End meeting, and incidentally with the whole public—exposing herself, in a time of agitation, to the rowdyism and the stone-throwing that wait on such things! The notion set the fastidious old-world temper of the man all on edge. But he would never have dreamed of arguing the matter so with her. A sort of high chivalry forbade it. In marrying her he had not made a single condition—would have suffered tortures rather than lay the smallest fetter upon her. In consequence, he had been often thought a weak, uxorious person. Maxwell knew that he was merely consistent. No sane man lays his heart at the feet of a Marcella without counting the cost.

She did not answer his last remark. But he saw that she was wistful and uneasy, and presently she laid her fingers lightly on his.

"Tell me if I am too much away from you—too much occupied with other people."

He sighed,—the slightest sigh,—but she winced. "I had just an hour before dinner," he said; "you were not here, and the house seemed very empty. I would have come down to fetch you, but there were some important papers to read before to-morrow." A Cabinet meeting was fixed, as she knew, for the following day. "Then, I have been making Saunders draw up a statement for the newspapers in answer to Watton's last attack, and it would have been a help to talk to you before we sent it off. Above all, if I had known of the meeting I should have begged you not to go. I ought to have warned you yesterday, for I knew that there was some ugly agitation developing down there. But I never thought of you as likely to face a mob. Will you please reflect"—he pressed her hand almost roughly against his lips—"that if that stone had been a little heavier, and flung a little straighter—"

He paused. A dew came to her eyes, a happy glow to her cheek. As for her, she was grateful to the stone that had raised such heart-beats.

Perhaps some instinct told him not to please her in this way too much, for he rose and walked away a moment.

"There! don't let's think of it, or I shall turn tyrant after all, and plunge into 'shalls' and 'sha'n'ts'! You *know* you carry two lives, and all the plans that either of us care about, in your hand. You say that Tressady brought you home?"

He turned and looked at her.

"Yes. Edward Watton brought him to the meeting."

"But he has been down to see you there several times before, as well as coming here?"

"Oh yes! almost every week since we met at Castle Luton."

"It is curious," said Maxwell, thoughtfully; "for he will certainly vote steadily with Fontenoy all through. His election speeches pledged him head over ears."

"Oh! of course he will vote," said Marcella, moving a little uneasily; "but one cannot help trying to modify his way of looking at things. And his tone *is* changed."

Maxwell stood at the foot of her sofa, considering, a host of perplexed and unwelcome notions flitting across his mind. In spite of his idealist absorption in his work, his political aims, and the one love of his life, he had the training of a man of the world, and could summon the shrewdness of one when he pleased. He had liked this young Tressady, for the first time, at Castle Luton, and had seen him fall under Marcella's charm with some amusement. But this haunting of their camp in the East End, at such a marked and critical moment, was strange, to say the least of it. It must point, one would think, to some sudden and remarkable strength of personal influence.

Had she any real consciousness of the power she wielded? Once or twice, in the years since they had been married, Maxwell had watched this spell of his wife's at work, and had known a moment of trouble. "If I were the fellow she had talked and walked with so," he had once said to himself, "I must have fallen in love with her had she been twenty times another man's wife!" Yet no harm had happened; he had only reproached himself for a gross mind without daring to breathe a word to her.

And he dared not now. Besides, how absurd! The young man was just married, and, to Maxwell's absent, incurious eyes, the bride had seemed a lively, pretty little person enough. No doubt it was the nervous strain of his political life that made such fancies possible to him. Let him not cumber her ears with them!

Then gradually, as he stood at her feet, the sight of her, breathing weakness, submission, loveliness, her eyes raised to his, banished every other thought from his happy heart, and drew him like a magnet.

Meanwhile she began to smile. He knelt down beside her, and she put both hands on his shoulders.

"Dear!" she said, half laughing and half crying, "I did speak so badly; you would have been ashamed of me. I couldn't hold the meeting. I didn't persuade a soul. Lord Fontenoy's ladies had it all their own way. And first I was dreadfully sorry I couldn't do such a thing decently—sorry because of one's vanity, and sorry because I couldn't help you. And now I think I'm rather glad."

"Are you?" said Maxwell, drily; "as for me, I'm enchanted! There!—so much penalty you *shall* have."

She pressed his lips with her hand.

"Don't spoil my pretty speech. I am only glad because—because public life and public success make one stand separate—alone. I have gone far enough to know how it might be. A new passion would come in, and creep through one like a poison. I should win you votes—and our hearts would burn dry! There! take me—scold me—despise me. I am a poor thing—but yours!"

With such a humbleness might Diana have wooed her shepherd, stooping her goddess head to him on the Latmian steep.

CHAPTER XV

George went back to the House, and stayed for half an hour or so, listening to a fine speech from a member of a former Liberal Cabinet. The speech was one more sign of the new cleavage of parties that was being everywhere brought about by the pressure of the new Collectivism.

"We always knew," said the speaker, referring to a Ministry in which he had served seven years before, "that we should be fighting Socialism in good earnest before many years were over; and we knew, too, that we should be fighting it as put forward by a Conservative Government. The hands are the hands of the English Tory, the voice is the voice of Karl Marx."

The Socialists sent forth mocking cheers, while the Government benches sat silent. The rank-and-file of the Conservative party already hated the Bill. The second reading must go through. But if only some rearrangement were possible without rushing the country into the arms of revolutionists—if it were only conceivable that Fontenoy, or even the old Liberal gang, should form a Government, and win the country, the Committee stage would probably not trouble the House long.

Meanwhile in the smoking-rooms and lobbies the uncertainties of the coming division kept up an endless hum of gossip and conjecture. Tressady wandered about it all like a ghost, indifferent and preoccupied, careful above all to avoid any more talk with Fontenoy. While he was in the House itself he stood at the door or sat in the cross-benches, so as to keep a space between him and his leader.

A little before twelve he drove home, dressed hastily, and went off to a house in Berkeley Square, where he was to meet Letty. He found her waiting for him, a little inclined to be reproachful, and eager for her ball. As they drove towards Queen's Gate she chattered to him of her evening, and of the people and dresses she had seen.

"And, you foolish boy!" she broke out, laughing, and tapping him on the hand with her fan—"you looked so glum this morning when I couldn't go and see Lady Tressady—and—what do you think? Why, she has been at a party to-night—at a party, my dear!—and *dressed!* Mrs. Willy Smith told me she had seen her at the Webers'."

"I daresay," said George, rather shortly; "all the same, this morning she was very unwell."

Letty shrugged her shoulders, but she did not want to be disagreeable and argue the point. She was much pleased with her dress—with the last glance of herself that she had caught in the cloak-room looking-glass before leaving Berkeley Square—and, finally, with this well-set-up, well-dressed husband beside her. She glanced at him every now and then as she put on a fresh pair of gloves. He had been very much absorbed in this tiresome Parliament lately, and she thought herself a very good and forbearing wife not to make more fuss. Nor had she made any fuss about his going down to see Lady Maxwell at the East End. It did not seem to have made the smallest difference to his opinions.

The thought of Lady Maxwell brought a laugh to her lips.

"Oh! do you know, Harding was so amusing about the Maxwells to-day!" she said, turning to Tressady in her most good-humoured and confiding mood. "He says people are getting so tired of her,—of her meddling, and her preaching, and all the rest of it,—and that everybody thinks him so absurd not to put a stop to it. And Harding says that it doesn't succeed even—that Englishmen will never stand petticoat government. It's all very well—they have to stand it in some forms!"

And, stretching her slim neck, she turned and gave her husband a tiny flying kiss on the cheek. Mechanically grateful, George took her hand in his, but he did not make her the pretty speech she expected. Just before she spoke he was about to tell her of his evening—of the meeting, and of his drive home with Lady Maxwell. He had been far too proud hitherto, and far too confident in himself, to make any secret to Letty of what he did. And, luckily, she had raised no difficulties. In truth, she had been too well provided with amusements and flatteries of her own since their return from the country to leave her time or opportunities for jealousy. Perhaps, secretly, the young husband would have been more flattered if she had been more exacting.

But as she quoted Harding something stiffened in him. Later, after the ball, when they were alone, he would tell her—he would try and make her understand what sort of a woman Marcella Maxwell was. In his trouble of mind a confused plan crossed his thoughts of trying to induce Lady Maxwell to make friends with Letty. But a touch of that charm, that poetry!—he asked no more.

He glanced at his wife. She looked pretty and young as she sat beside him, lost in a pleasant pondering of social successes. But he wondered, uncomfortably, why she must use such a thickness of powder on her still unspoilt complexion; and her dress seemed to him fantastic, and not over-modest. He had begun to have the strangest feeling about their relation, as though he possessed a double personality, and were looking on at himself and her, wondering how it would end. It was characteristic, perhaps, of his half-developed moral life that his sense of ordinary husbandly responsibility towards her

was not strong. He always thought of her as he thought of himself—as a perfectly free agent, dealing with him and their common life on equal terms.

The house to which they were going belonged to very wealthy people, and Letty was looking forward feverishly to the cotillon.

"They say, at the last dance they gave, the cotillon gifts cost eight hundred pounds," she said gleefully, to George. "They always do things extraordinarily well."

No doubt it was the prospect of the cotillon that had brought such a throng together. The night was stifling; the stairs and the supper-room were filled with a struggling mob; and George spent an hour of purgatory wondering at the gaieties of his class.

He had barely more than two glimpses of Letty after they had fought their way into the room. On the first occasion, by stretching himself to his full height so as to look over the intervening crowd, he saw her seated in a chair of state, a mirror in one hand and a lace handkerchief in the other. Young men were being brought up behind her to look into the glass over her shoulder, and she was merrily brushing their images away. Presently a tall, dark fellow advanced, with jet-black moustache and red cheeks. Letty kept her handkerchief suspended a moment over the reflection in the glass. George could see the corners of her lips twitching with amusement. Then she quietly handed the mirror to the leader of the cotillon, rose, gathered up her white skirt a little, the music struck up joyously, and she and Lord Cathedine spun round the room together, followed by the rest of the dancers.

George meanwhile found few people to talk to. He danced a few dances, mostly with young girls in the white frocks of their first season—a species of partner for which, as a rule, he had no affinity at all. But on the whole he passed the time leaning against the wall in a corner, lost in a reverie which was a vague compound of this and that, there and here; of the Manx Road schoolroom, its odours and heats, its pale, uncleanly crowd absorbed in the things of daily bread, with these gay, scented rooms, and this extravagance of decoration, that made even flowers a vulgarity, with these costly cotillon gifts—pins, bracelets, rings—that were being handed round and wondered over by people who had already more of such things than they could wear; of these rustling women, in their silks and diamonds, with that gaunt stooping image of the loafer's wife, smiling her queer defiance at pain and fate, and letting meddling "ladies" know that without sixteen hours' "settin" she could not keep her husband and children alive. Stale commonplace, that all the world knows by heart!—the squalor of the *pauperum tabernae* dimming the glory of the *regum turres*. Yet there are only a few men and women in each generation who really pass into the eclipsing shadow of it. Others talk—*they* feel and struggle. There were many elements in Tressady's nature that might seem destined to force him into their company. Yet hitherto he had resolutely escaped his destiny—and enjoyed his life.

About supper-time he found himself near Lady Cathedine, a thin-faced, silent creature, whose eyes suddenly attracted him. He took her down to supper, and spent an exceedingly dull time. She had the air of one pining to talk, to confide herself. Yet in practice it was apparently impossible for her to do it. She fell back into monosyllables or gentle banalities; and George noticed that she was always restlessly conscious of the movements in the room—who came in, who went out—and throwing little frightened glances towards the door.

He was glad indeed when his task was over. On their way to the drawing-rooms they passed a broad landing, which on one side led out to a balcony, and had been made into a decorated bower for sitting-out. At the farther end he saw Letty sitting beside Harding Watton. Letty was looking straight before her, with a flushed and rather frowning face. Harding was talking to her, and, to judge from his laughing manner, was amusing himself, if not her.

George duly found Lady Cathedine a seat, and returned himself to ask Letty whether it was not time to go. He found, however, that she had been carried off by another partner, and could only resign himself to a fresh twenty minutes of boredom. He leant, yawning, against the wall, feeling the evening interminable.

Then a Harrow and Oxford acquaintance came up to him, and they chatted for a time behind a stand of flowers that stood between them and one of the doorways to the ballroom. At the end of the dance George saw Lady Cathedine hurrying up to this door with the quick, furtive step that was characteristic of her. She passed on the other side of the flowers, and George heard her say to someone just inside the room:

"Robert, the carriage has come!"

A pause; then a thick voice said, in an emphatic undertone:

"Damn the carriage!—go away!"

"But, Robert, you know we *promised* to look in at Lady Tuam's on the way home."

The thick voice dropped a note lower.

"Damn Lady Tuam! I shall come when it suits me."

Lady Cathedine fell back, and George saw her cross the landing, and drop into a chair beside an old general, who was snoozing in a peaceful corner till his daughters should see fit to take him home. The old general took no notice of her, and she sat there, playing with her fan, her rather prominent grey eyes staring out of her white face.

Both George and his friend, as it happened, had heard the conversation. The friend raised his eyebrows in disgust.

"What a brute that fellow is! They have been married four months. However, she was amply warned."

"Who was she?"

"The daughter of old Wickens, the banker. He married her for her money, and lives upon it religiously. By now, I should think, he has dragged her through every torture that marriage admits of."

"So soon?" said George, drily.

"Well," said the friend, laughing, "no doubt it admits of a great many."

"I am ready to go home," said a voice at Tressady's elbow.

Something in the intonation surprised him, and he turned quickly.

"By all means," he said, throwing an astonished look at his wife, who had come up to him on Lord Cathedine's arm. "I will go and look for the carriage."

What was the matter, he asked himself as he ran downstairs—what was the meaning of Letty's manner and expression?

But by the time he had sent for the carriage the answer had suggested itself. No doubt Harding Watton had given Letty news of that hansom in Pall Mall, and no doubt, also—He shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. The notion of having to explain and excuse himself was particularly unpalatable. What a fool he had been not to tell Letty of his East End adventure on their way to Queen's Gate.

He was standing in a little crowd at the foot of the stairs when Letty swept past him in search of her wraps. He smiled at her, but she held her head erect as though she did not see him.

So there was to be a scene. George felt the rise of a certain inner excitement. Perhaps it was as well. There were a good many things he wanted to say.

At the same time, the Cathedine episode had filled him with a new disgust for the violences and brutalities to which the very intimacy of the marriage relation may lead. If a scene there was to be, he meant to be more or less frank, and at the same time to keep both himself and her within bounds.

* * * * *

"You can't deny that you made a secret of it from me," cried Letty, angrily. "I asked you what had been doing in the House, and you never let me suspect that you had been anywhere else the whole evening."

"I daresay," said George, quietly. "But I never meant to make any mystery. Something you said about Lady Maxwell put me off telling you—then. I thought I would wait till we got home."

They were in George's study—the usual back-room on the ground-floor, which George could not find time to make comfortable, while Letty had never turned her attention to it. Tressady was leaning against the mantelpiece. He had turned up a solitary electric light, and in the cold glare of it Letty was sitting opposite to him, angrily upright. The ugly light had effaced the half-tones of the face and deepened the lines of it, while it had taken all the grace from her extravagant dress and tumbled flowers. She seemed to have lost her prettiness.

"Something I said about Lady Maxwell?" she repeated scornfully. "Why shouldn't I say what I like about Lady Maxwell? What does she matter either to you or to me that I should not laugh at her if I

please? Everybody laughs at her."

"I don't think so," said Tressady, quietly. "I have seen her to-night in a curious and touching scene—in a meeting of very poor people. She tried to make a speech, by the way, and spoke badly. She did not carry the meeting with her, and towards the end it got noisy. As we came out she was struck with a stone, and I got a hansom for her, and drove her home to St. James's Square. We were just turning into the Square when Harding saw us. I happened to be with her in the crowd when the stone hit her. What do you suppose I could do but bring her home?"

"Why did you go? and why didn't you tell me at once?"

"Why did I go?" Tressady hesitated, then looked down upon his wife. "Well!—I suppose I went because Lady Maxwell is very interesting to watch—because she is sympathetic and generous, and it stirs one's mind to talk to her."

"Not at all!" cried Letty, passionately. "You went because she is handsome—because she is just a superior kind of flirt. She is always making women anxious about their husbands under this pretence of politics. Heaps of women hate her, and are afraid of her."

She was very white, and could hardly save herself from the tears of excitement. Yet what was working in her was not so much Harding Watton's story as this new and strange manner of her husband's. She had sat haughtily silent in the carriage on their way home, fully expecting him to question her—to explain, entreat, excuse himself, as he had generally been ready to do whenever she chose to make a quarrel. But he, too, said nothing, and she could not make up her mind how to begin. Then, as soon as they were shut into his room her anger had broken out, and he had not yet begun to caress and appease her. Her surprise had brought with it a kind of shock. What was the matter? Why was she not mistress as usual?

As she made her remark about Marcella, Tressady smiled a little, and played with a cigarette he had taken up.

"Whom do you mean?" he asked her. "One often hears these things said of her in the vague, and never with any details. I myself don't believe it. Harding, of course, believes anything to her disadvantage."

Letty hesitated; then, remembering all she could of Harding's ill-natured gossip, she flung out some names, exaggerating and inventing freely. The emphasis with which she spoke reddened all the small face again—made it hot and common.

Tressady raised his shoulders as she came to the end of her tirade.

"Well, you know I don't believe all that—and I don't think Harding believes it. Lady Maxwell, as you once said yourself, is not, I suppose, a woman's woman. She gets on better, no doubt, with men than with women. These men you speak of are all personal and party friends. They support Maxwell, and they like her. But if anybody is jealous, I should think they might remember that there is safety in numbers."

"Oh, that's all very well! But she wants *power*, and she doesn't care a rap how she gets it. She is a dangerous, intriguing woman—and she just trades upon her beauty!"

Tressady, who had been leaning with his face averted from her, turned round with sparkling eyes.

"You foolish child!" he said slowly—"you foolish child!"

Her lips twitched. She put out a shaking hand to her cloak, that had fallen from her arms.

"Oh! very well. I sha'n't stay here to be talked to like that, so good-night."

He took no notice. He walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Don't you know what it is"—he spoke with a curious imperiousness—"that protects any woman—or any man either for the matter of that—from Marcella Maxwell's beauty? Don't you know that she adores her husband?"

"That's a pose, of course, like everything else," cried Letty, trying to move herself away; "you once said it was."

"Before I knew her. It's not a pose—it's the secret of her whole life."

He walked back to the mantelpiece, conscious of a sudden rise of inward bitterness.

"Well, I shall go to bed," said Letty, again half rising. "You might, I think, have had the kindness and the good taste to say you were sorry I should have the humiliation of finding out where my husband spends his evenings, from Harding Watton!"

Tressady was stung.

"When have I ever concealed what I did from you?" he asked her hotly.

Letty, who was standing stiff and scornful, tossed her head without speaking.

"That means," said Tressady after a pause, "that you don't take my word for it—that you suspect me of deceiving you before to-night?"

Letty still said nothing. His eyes flashed. Then a pang of conscience smote him. He took up his cigarette again with a laugh.

"I think we are both a pair of babies," he said, as he pretended to look for matches. "You know very well that you don't really think I tell you mean lies. And let me assure you, my dear child, that fate did not mean Lady Maxwell to have lovers—and that she never will have them. But when that's said there's something else to say."

He went up to her again, and touched her arm.

"You and I couldn't have this kind of scene, Letty, could we, if everything was all right?"

Her breast rose and fell hurriedly.

"Oh! I supposed you would want to retaliate—to complain on your side!"

"Yes," he said deliberately, "I think I do want to complain. Why is it that—I began to like going down to see Lady Maxwell—why did I like talking to her at Castle Luton? Well! of course it's pleasant to be with a beautiful person—I don't deny that in the least. But she might have been as beautiful as an angel, and I mightn't have cared twopence about her. She has something much less common than beauty. It's very simple, too—I suppose it's only *sympathy*—just that. Everybody feels the same. When you talk to her she seems to care about it; she throws her mind into yours. And there's a charm about it—there's no doubt of that."

He had begun his little speech meaning to be perfectly frank and honest—to appeal to her better nature and his own. But something stopped him abruptly, perhaps the sudden perception that he was after playing the hypocrite—perhaps the consciousness that he was only making matters worse.

"It's a pity you didn't say all these things before," she said, with a hard laugh, "instead of denouncing the political woman, as you used to do."

He sat down on the arm of the chair beside her, balancing lightly, with his hands in his pockets.

"Did I denounce the political woman? Well, the Lord knows I'm not in love with her now! It isn't politics, my dear, that are attaching—it's the kind of human being. Ah! well, don't let's talk of it. Let's go back to that point of sympathy. There's more in it than I used to think. Suppose, for instance, you were to try and take a little more interest in my political work than you do? Suppose you were to try and see money matters from my point of view, instead of driving us"—he paused a moment, then went on coolly, lifting his thin, long-chinned face to her as she stood quivering beside him—"driving us into expenses that will, sooner or later, be the ruin of us—that rob us, too, of self-respect. Suppose you were to take a little more account, also, of my taste in people? I am afraid I don't like Harding, though he is your cousin, and I don't certainly see why he should furnish our drawing-rooms and empty our purse for us as he has been doing. Then, as to Lord Cathedine, I'm really not over-particular, but when I hear that fellow's in the house, my impulse is to catch the nearest hansom and drive away from it. I heard him speak to his wife to-night in a way for which he ought to be kicked down Oxford Street—and, in general, I should say that it takes the shine off a person to be much seen with Cathedine."

The calm attitude—the voice, just a shade interrogative, exasperated Letty still more. She, too, sat down, her cheeks flaming.

"I am *extremely* obliged to you! You really couldn't have been more frank. I am sorry that *nothing* I do pleases you. You must be quite sorry by now you married me—but really I didn't force you! Why should I give up my friends? You know very well you won't give up Lady Maxwell."

She looked at him keenly, her little foot beating the ground.
George started.

"But what is there to give up?" he cried. "Come and see her yourself—come with me, and make friends with her. You would be quite welcome."

But as he spoke he knew that he was talking absurdly, and that Letty had reason for her laugh.

"Thank you! Lady Maxwell made it *quite* plain to me at Castle Luton that she didn't want *my* acquaintance. I certainly sha'n't force myself upon her any more. But if you'll give up going to see her—well, perhaps I'll see what can be done to meet your wishes; though, of course, I think all you say about Harding and Lord Cathedine is just unreasonable prejudice!"

George was silent. His mind was torn between the pricks of a conscience that told him Letty had in truth, as far as he was concerned, a far more real grievance than she imagined, and a passionate intellectual contempt for the person who could even distantly imagine that Marcella Maxwell belonged to the same category as other women, and was to be won by the same arts as they. At last he broke out impatiently:

"I cannot possibly show discourtesy to one who has been nothing but kindness to me, as she is to scores of others—to old friends like Edward Watton, or new ones like—"

"She wants your vote, of course!" threw in Letty, with an excited laugh. "*Either* she is a flirt—*or* she wants your vote. Why should she take so much notice of you? She isn't your side—she wants to get hold of you—and it makes you ridiculous. People just laugh at you and her!" She turned upon him passionately. A little more, and the wish to say the wounding, venomous thing would have grown like a madness upon her. But George kept his self-possession.

"Well, they may laugh," he said, with a strong effort to speak good-humouredly. "But politics aren't managed like that, as you and they will find out. Votes are not so simple as they sound."

He got up and walked away from her as he spoke. As usual, his mood was beginning to cool. He saw no way out. They must both accept the *status quo*. No radical change was possible. It is character that makes circumstance, and character is inexorable.

"Well, of course I didn't altogether believe that you would really be such a fool, and wreck all your prospects!" said Letty, violently, her feverish eyes intent the while on her husband and on the thin fingers once more busied with the cigarette. "There now! I think we have had enough of this! It doesn't seem to have led to much, does it?"

"No," said George, coolly; "but perhaps we shall come to see more alike in time. I don't want to tyrannise—only to show you what I think. Shall I carry up your cloak for you?"

He approached her punctiliously. Letty gathered her wraps upon her arm in a disdainful silence, warding him off with a gesture. As he opened the door for her she turned upon him:

"You talk of my extravagance, but you never seem to consider what you might do to make up to me for the burden of being your mother's relation! You expect me to put up with the annoyance and ridicule of belonging to her—and to let her spend all your money besides. I give you fair warning that I sha'n't do it! I shall try and spend it on my side, that she sha'n't get it."

She was perfectly conscious that she was behaving like a vixenish child, but she could not restrain herself. This strange new sense that she could neither bend nor conquer him was becoming more than she could bear.

George looked at her, half inclined to shake her first, and then insist on making friends. He was conscious that he could probably assert himself with success if he tried. But the impulse failed him. He merely said, without any apparent temper, "Then I shall have to see if I can invent some way of protecting both myself and you."

She flung through the door, and almost ran through the long passage to the stairs, in a sobbing excitement. A sudden thought struck George as he stood looking after her. He pursued her, caught her at the foot of the stairs, and held her arm strongly.

"Letty! I wasn't to tell you, but I choose to break my promise. Don't be too cruel, my dear, or too angry. My mother is dying!"

She scanned him deliberately, the flushed face—the signs of strongly felt yet strongly suppressed emotion. The momentary consciousness flew through her that he was at bottom a very human, impressionable creature—that if she could but have broken down and thrown herself on his neck, this miserable evening might open for both of them a new way. But her white-heat of passion was too strong. She pushed him away.

"She made you believe that this morning? Then I'd better hurry up at Ferth; for of course it only means that there will be a fresh list of debts directly!"

He let her go, and she heard him walk quickly back to his study and shut the door. She stared after him triumphantly for a moment, then rushed upstairs.

In her room her maid was waiting for her. Grier's sallow face and gloomy eyes showed considerable annoyance at being kept up so late. But she said nothing, and Letty, who in general was only too ready to admit the woman to a vulgar familiarity, for once held her tongue. Her state of excitement and exhaustion, however, was evident, and Grier bestowed many furtive, examining glances upon her mistress in the course of the undressing. She thought she had heard "them" quarrelling on the stairs. What a pity she had been too tired and cross to listen!

Of course they must come to quarrelling! Grier's sympathies were tolerably impartial. She had no affection for her mistress, and she cordially disliked Sir George, knowing perfectly well that he thought ill of her. But she had a good place, and meant to keep it if she could. To which end she had done her best to strengthen a mean hold on Letty. Now, as she was brushing out Letty's brown hair, and silently putting two and two together the while, an idea occurred to her which pleased her.

After Grier had left her, Letty could not make up her mind to go to bed. She was still pacing up and down the room in her dressing-gown, when she heard a knock—Grier's knock.

"Come in!"

"Please, my lady," said Grier, appearing with something in her hand, "doesn't this belong to your photograph box? I found it on the floor in Sir George's dressing-room this morning."

Letty hastily took it from her, and, in spite of an instant effort to control herself, the red flushed again into a cheek that had been very pale when Grier came in.

"Where did you find it?"

"It had tumbled off Sir George's table, I think," said Grier, with elaborate innocence; "someone must have took it out of your photo-box."

"Thank you," said Letty, shortly. "You may go, Grier."

The maid went, and Letty was left standing with the photograph in her hands.

Two days before Tressady had been in Edward Watton's room in St. James's Street, and had seen this amateur photograph of Marcella Maxwell and her boy on Watton's table. The poetic charm of it had struck him so forcibly that he had calmly put it in his pocket, telling the protesting owner that he in his *rôle* of great friend could easily procure another, and must beware of a grudging spirit. Watton had laughed and submitted, and Tressady had carried off the picture, honestly meaning to present it to Letty for a collection of contemporary "beauties" she had just begun to make.

Later in the day, as he was taking off his coat in the evening to dress for dinner, Tressady drew out the photograph. A sudden instinct, which he himself could hardly have explained, made him delay handing it over to Letty. He thrust it into the top tray of his collar-and-shirt wardrobe. Two days later the butler, coming in a hurry before breakfast to put out his master's clothes, shook the photograph out of the folds of the shirt, where it had hidden itself, without noticing what he had done. The picture slipped between the wardrobe and the wall of the recess in which it stood, was discovered later in the day by the housemaid, and given to Lady Tressady's maid.

Letty laid the photograph down on the dressing-table, and stood leaning upon her hands, looking at it. Marcella was sitting under one of the cedars of Maxwell Court with her boy beside her. A fine corner of the old house made a background, and the photographer had so dealt with his picture as to make it a whole, full of significance, and culminating in the two faces—the sensitive, speaking beauty of the mother, the sturdy strength of the child. Marcella had never looked more wistful, more attaching. It was the expression of a woman at rest, in the golden moment of her life, yet conscious—as all happiness is conscious—of the common human doom that nothing escapes. Meanwhile the fine, lightly furrowed brow above the eyes spoke action and power; so did the strong waves of black hair blown back by the breeze. A noble, strenuous creature, yet quivering through and through with the simplest, most human instincts. So one must needs read her, as one looked from the eyes to the eager clasp of the arm about the boy.

Letty studied it, as though she would pierce and stab it with looking. Then, with a sudden wild movement, she took up the picture, and tore it into twenty pieces. The pieces she left strewn on the

floor, so that they must necessarily strike the eye of anyone coming into the room. And in a few more minutes she was in bed, lying still and wakeful, with her face turned away from the door.

About an hour afterwards there was a gentle knock at her door. She made no answer, and Tressady came in. He stepped softly, thinking she was asleep, and presently she heard him stop, with a stifled exclamation. She made no sound, but from his movement she guessed that he was picking up the litter on the floor. Then she heard it thrown into the basket under her writing-table, and she waited, holding her breath.

Tressady walked to a far window, drew a curtain back softly, and stood looking out at the starlight over the deserted street. Once, finding him so still, she ventured a hasty glance at him over the edge of the sheet. But she could see nothing. And after a time he turned and came to his accustomed place beside her. In twenty minutes at latest, she knew, much to her chagrin, that he was asleep.

She herself had no sleep. She was stung to wakefulness by that recurrent sense of the irrevocable which makes us say to ourselves in wonder, "How can it have happened? Two hours ago—such a little while—it had not happened!" And the mind clutches at the bygone hour, so near, so eternally distant—clutches at its ghost, in vain.

Yet it seemed to her now that she had been jealous from the first moment when she and George had come into contact with Marcella Maxwell. During the long hours of this night her jealousy burnt through her like a hot pain—jealousy, mixed with reluctant memory. Half consciously she had always assumed that it had been a piece of kindness on her part to marry George Tressady at all. She had almost condescended to him. After all, she had played with ambitions so much higher! At any rate, she had taken for granted that he would always admire and be grateful to her—that in return for her pretty self she might at least dispose of him and his as she pleased.

And now, what galled her intolerably was this discernment of the way in which—at least since their honeymoon—he must have been criticising and judging her—judging her by comparison with another woman. She seemed to see at a glance, the whole process of his mind, and her vanity writhed under it.

How much else than vanity? As she turned restlessly from side to side, possessed by plans for punishing George, for humiliating Lady Maxwell, and avenging herself, she said to herself that she did not care,—that it was not worth caring about,—that she would either bring George to his senses, or manage to amuse herself without him.

But in reality she was held tortured and struggling all the time in the first grip of that masterful hold wherewith the potter lifts his clay when he lays it on the eternal whirring of the wheel.

CHAPTER XVI

The newspapers of the morning following these events—that is to say, of Saturday, July 5—gave very lively accounts of the East End meeting, at which, as some put it, Lady Maxwell "had got her answer" from the East End mob. The stone-throwing, the blow, the woman, and the cause were widely discussed that same day throughout the clubs and drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia, no less than among the clubs and "publics" of the East End; and the guests at country-house parties as they hurried out of town for the Sunday, carried the gossip of the matter far and wide. The Maxwells went down alone to Brookshire, and the curious visitors who called in St. James's Square "to inquire" came away with nothing to report.

"A put-up thing, the whole business," said Mrs. Watton, indignantly, to her son Harding, as she handed him the "Observer," on the Sunday morning, in the dining-room of the family house in Tilney Street. "Of course, a little martyrdom just now suits her book excellently. How that man *can* let her make him a laughing-stock in this way—"

"A laughing-stock?" said Harding, smiling. "Not at all. Don't spoil your first remark, mother. For, of course, it is all practical politics. The handsomest woman in England doesn't give her temple to be gashed for nothing. You will see what her friends will make out of it!—and out of the brutal violence of our mob."

"Disgusting!" said Mrs. Watton, playing severely with the lid of the mustard-pot that stood beside her.

She and Harding were enjoying a late breakfast *tête-à-tête*. The old Squire had finished long before, and was already doing his duty with a volume of sermons in the library upstairs, preparatory to going to church. Mrs. Watton and Harding, however, would accompany him thither presently; for Harding was a great supporter of the Establishment.

The son raised his shoulders at his mother's adjective.

"What I want to know," he said, "is whether Lady Maxwell is going to bag George Tressady, or not. He brought her home from the meeting on Friday."

"Brought her home from the meeting?—*George Tressady?*"

Mrs. Watton raised her masculine head and frowned at her son, as though he were, in some sense, personally responsible for this unseemly fact.

"He has been haunting her in the East End for weeks. I got that out of Edward. But, of course, one knew that was going to happen as soon as one saw them together at Castle Luton. She throws her flies cleverly, that woman!"

"All I can say is," observed Mrs. Watton, ponderously, "that in any decent state of society such a woman would be banned!"

Harding rose, and stood by the open window caressing his moustache. It was a perception of long standing with him, that life would have been better worth living had his mother possessed a sense of humour.

"It seems to me," his mother resumed after a pause, "that someone at least should give Letty a hint."

"Oh! Letty can take care of herself," said Watton, laughing. He might have said, if he had thought it worth while, that somebody had already given Letty a hint. Tressady, it appeared, disliked him. Well, people that disliked you were fair game. However, in spite of Tressady's dislike, he had been able to amuse himself a good deal with Letty and Letty's furnishing during the last few months. Harding, who prided himself on the finest of tastes, liked to be consulted; he liked anything, also, that gave him importance, if it were only with the master of a curiosity shop, and, under cover of Letty's large dealings, he had carried off various spoils of his own for his rooms in the Temple—spoils which were not to be despised—at a very moderate price indeed.

"Who could have thought George Tressady would turn out such a weak creature," said his mother, rising, "when one remembers how Lord Fontenoy believed in him?"

"And does still believe in him, more or less," said Harding; "but Fontenoy will have to be warned."

He looked at the clock, to see if there was time for a cigarette before church, lit it, and, leaning against the window, gazed towards the hazy park with a meditative air.

"Do you mean there is any question of his ratting?" said his mother.

Harding raised his eyebrows.

"Well, no—hardly anything so gross as that. But you can see all the spirit has gone out of him. He does no work for us. The party gets nothing out of him."

Harding spoke as if he had the party in his pocket. His mother looked at him with a severely concealed admiration. There were few limits to her belief in Harding. But it was not her habit to flatter her sons.

"What makes one so mad," she said, as she sailed towards the door in a stiff rustle of Sunday brocade, "is the way in which the people who admire her talk of her. When one thinks that all this 'slumming,' and all this stuff about the poor, only means keeping her husband in office and surrounding herself with a court of young men, it turns one sick!"

"My dear mother, we keep all our little hypocrisies," said Harding, indulgently. "Don't forget that Lady Maxwell provides me with a deal of good copy."

And after his mother had left him he smoked on, thinking with pleasure of an article of his on "The Woman of the Slums," packed with allusions to Marcella Maxwell, which was to appear in the next number of the "Haymarket Reporter," the paper that he and Fontenoy were now running. Harding was not the editor. He disliked drudgery and office-hours; and his father was good for enough to live upon. But he was a powerful adviser in the conduct of the new journal, and wrote, perhaps, the smartest

articles.

The paper, indeed, was written by the smartest people conceivable, and had achieved the smartest combinations. "Liberty" was its catchword; but the employer must be absolute. To care or think about religion was absurd; but whoso threw a stone at the Established Church, let him die the death. Christianity must be steadily, even ferociously supported; in the policing of an unruly world it was indispensable. But the perennial butt of the paper was the fool who "went about doing good." The young men who lived in "settlements," for instance, and gave University Extension Lectures—the paper pursued all such with a hungry malice, only less biting than that wherewith day by day it attacked Lord Maxwell, the arch offender of all the philanthropic tribe. To help a man who had toiled his ten or twelve hours in the workshop or the mine to read Homer or Dante in the evening,—well! in the language of Hedda Gabler "people don't do these things,"—not people with any sense of the humorous or the seemly. Harding and his crew had required a good deal of help in their time towards the reading of those authors; that, however, was only their due, and in the order of the universe. The same universe had sent the miner below to dig coals for his betters, while Harding Watton went to college.

But the last and worst demerit in the eyes of Harding and his set was that old primitive offence that Cain already found so hard to bear. Half the violence which the new paper had been lavishing on Maxwell—apart from passionate conviction of the Fontenoy type, which also spoke through it—sprang from this source. Maxwell, in spite of his obvious drawbacks, threatened to succeed, to be accepted, to take a large place in English political life. And his wife, too, reigned, and had her way without the help of clever young men who write. There was the sting. Harding at any rate found it intolerable.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in spite of newspapers to right of it and newspapers to left of it, the political coach clattered on.

The following day—Monday—was a day of early arrivals, packed benches, and much excitement in the House of Commons; for the division on the second reading was to be taken after the Home Secretary's reply on the debate. Dowson was expected to get up about ten o'clock, and it was thought that the division would be over by eleven.

On this afternoon and evening Fontenoy was ubiquitous. At least so it seemed to Tressady. Whenever one put one's head into the Smoking-room or the Library, whenever one passed through the Lobby, or rushed on to the Terrace for ten minutes' fresh air, Fontenoy's great brow and rugged face were always to be seen, and always in fresh company.

The heterogeneous character of the Opposition with which the Government was confronted, the conflicting groups and interests into which it was split up, offered large scope for the intriguing, contriving genius of the man. And he was spending it lavishly. The small eyes were more invisible, the circles round them more saucer-like than ever.

Meanwhile George Tressady had never been so keenly conscious as on this critical afternoon that his party had begun to drop him out of its reckonings. Consultations that would once have included him as a matter of course were going on without him. During the whole of this busy day Fontenoy even had hardly spoken to him; the battle was leaving him on one side.

Well, what room for bitterness?—though, with the unreason that no man escapes, he was not without bitterness. He had disappointed them as a debater—and, in other ways, what had he done for them since Whitsuntide? No doubt also the mention of his name in the reports of the Mile End meeting had not been without its effect. He believed that Fontenoy's personal regard for him still held. Otherwise, he was beginning to feel himself placed in a tacit isolation.

What wonder, good Lord! During the dinner-hour he found himself in a corner of the library, dreaming over a biography of Lord Melbourne. Poor Melbourne! in those last tragic years of waiting and pining, every day expecting the proffer of office that never came and the familiar recognition that would be his no more. But Melbourne was old, and had had his day.

"I wanted to speak to you," said a hoarse voice, over his shoulder.

"Say on, and sit down," said George, smiling, and pushing forward a chair beside him. "I should think you'll want a week's sleep after this."

"Have you got some time to spare this week," said Fontenoy, abruptly, as he sat down.

George hesitated.

"Well, no. I ought to go down to the country immediately, and see after my own affairs and the strike, before Committee begins. There is a meeting of coal-owners on Wednesday."

"What I want wouldn't take long," said Fontenoy, persistently, after a pause. "I hear you have been going round workshops lately?"

His keen, peremptory eyes fixed his companion.

"I had a round or two with Everard," said George. "We saw a fair representative lot."

The thought that flashed through Fontenoy's mind was, "Why the deuce didn't you speak of it to me?" Aloud, he said with impatience:

"Representing what Everard chose to show, I should think. However, what I want is this. You know the series of extracts from reports that has been going on lately in the 'Chronicle.'"

George nodded.

"We want something done to correct the impression that has been made. You and I know perfectly well that the vast majority of workshops work factory-hours and an average of four and a half days a week. You have just had personal experience, and you can write. Will you do three or four signed articles for the 'Reporter' this week or next? Of course the office will give you every help."

George considered.

"I think not," he said presently, looking up. "I shouldn't do it well. Perhaps I have become too conscious of the exceptions—the worst cases. Frankly, the whole thing has become more of a problem to me than it was."

Fontenoy moved, and grunted uneasily.

"Does that mean," he said at last, in his harshest manner, "that you will feel any difficulty in—?"

"In voting? No. I shall vote right enough. I am all for delay. This particular Bill doesn't convince me any more than it did. But I don't want to take a strong public part just at present."

The two men eyed each other in silence.

"I thought there was something brewing," said Fontenoy at last.

"Well, I'm not sorry to have had these few words," was George's reply, after a pause. "I wanted to tell you that, though I shall vote, I don't think I shall speak much more. I don't believe I'm the stuff people in Parliament ought to be made of. I shall be remorseful presently for having led you into a mistake!" He forced a smile.

"I made no mistake," said Fontenoy, grimly, and departed. Then, as he walked down the corridor, he completed his sentence—"except in not seeing that you were the kind of man to be made a fool of by women!"

First of all, a hasty marriage with a silly girl who could be no help to him or to the cause; now, according to Watton—who had called upon Fontenoy that morning, at his private house, to discuss various matters of business—the Lady-Maxwell fever in a pronounced form. Most likely. It was the best explanation.

The leader's own sense of annoyance and disappointment was considerable. There was no man for whom he had felt so much personal liking as for Tressady since the fight began.

Somewhere before midnight the division on the second reading was taken, amid all those accompaniments of crowd, expectation, and commotion, that are usually evoked by the critical points of a contested measure. The majority for Government was forty-four—less by twenty-four votes than its normal figure.

As the cheers and counter-cheers subsided, George found himself borne into the Lobby with the crowd pouring out of the House. As he approached the door leading to the outer lobby, a lady in front of him turned. George received a lightning impression of beauty, of a kind of anxious joy, and recognised Marcella Maxwell.

She held out her hand.

"Well, the first stage is over!" she said.

"Yes, and well over," he said, smiling. "But you have shed a great many men already."

"Oh! I know—I know. The next few weeks will be intolerable; one will feel sure of nobody." Then her voice changed—took a certain shyness. "A good many people from here are coming down to us at Mile End during the next few weeks—will you come some time, and bring Lady Tressady?"

"Thank you," said George, rather formally. "It is very kind of you."
Then, in another voice: "And you are really none the worse?"

His eyes sought the injured temple, and she instinctively put up her hand to the black wave of hair that had been drawn forward so as to conceal the mark.

"Oh no! That boy was not an expert, luckily. How absurd the papers have been!"

George shook his head.

"I don't know what else one could expect," he said, laughing.

"Not at all!"—the flush mounted in the delicate hollow of the cheek. "Why should there be any more fuss about a woman's being struck than a man? We don't want any of this extra pity and talk."

"Human nature, I am afraid," said George, raising his shoulders. Did she really suppose that women could mix in the political fight on the same terms as men—could excite no more emotion there than men? Folly!

Then Maxwell, who was standing behind her, came forward, greeted Tressady kindly, and they talked for a few minutes about the evening's debate. The keen look of the elder scanned the younger's face and manner the while with some minuteness. As for George, his dialogue with the Minister, at which more than one passer-by threw looks of interest and amusement, gave him no particular pleasure. Maxwell's qualities were not of the kind that specially appealed to him; nor was he likely to attract Maxwell. Nevertheless, he could have wished their ten minutes' talk to last interminably, merely because of the excuse it gave him to be near her!—played upon by her movements and her tones. He talked to Maxwell of speeches, and votes, and little incidents of the day. And all the time he knew how she was surrounded; how the crowd that was always gathering about her came and went; with whom she talked; above all, how that eager, sensitive charm which she had shown in its fulness to him—perhaps to him only, beside her husband, of all this throng—played through her look, her voice, her congratulations, and her dismays. For had he not seen her in distress and confusion—seen her in tears, wrestling with herself? His heart caressed the thought like a sacred thing, all the time that he was conscious of her as the centre of this political throng—the adored, detested, famous woman, typical in so many ways of changing custom and of an expanding world.

Then, in a flash, as it were, the crowd had thinned, the Maxwells had gone, and George was running down the steps of the members' entrance, into the rain outside. He seemed to carry with him the scent of a rose,—the rose she had worn on her breast,—and his mind was tormented with the question he had already asked himself: "How is it going to end?"

He pushed on through the wet streets, lost in a hundred miseries and exaltations. The sensation was that of a man struggling with a rising tide, carried helplessly in the rush and swirl of it. Yet conscience had very little to say, and, when it did speak, got little but contempt for its pains. What had any clumsy code, social or moral, to do with it? When would Marcella Maxwell, by word or look or thought, betray the man she loved? Not till

A' the seas gang dry, my dear,
An the rocks melt wi' the sun!

How he found his way home he hardly knew; for it was a moment of blind crisis with him. All that crowded, dramatic scene of the House—its lights, its faces, its combinations—had vanished from his mind. What remained was a group of three people, contemplated in a kind of terror—terror of what this thing might grow to! Once, in St. James's Street, the late hour, the soft, gusty night, suddenly reminded him of that other gusty night in February when he had walked home after his parting with Letty, so well content with himself and the future, and had spoken to Marcella Maxwell for the first time amid that little crowd in the Mall. Nothing had been irreparable then. He had his life in his hands.

As for this passion, that was creeping into all his veins, poisoning and crippling all his vitalities, he was still independent enough of it to be able to handle it with the irony it deserved. For it was almost as ludicrous as it was pitiable. He did not want any man of the world, any Harding Watton, to tell him that.

What amazed him was the revelation of his own nature that was coming out of it. He had always been rather proud to think of himself as an easygoing fellow with no particular depths. Other men were proud of a "storm period"—of feasting and drinking deep—made a pose of it. Tressady's pose had been the very opposite. Out of a kind of good taste, he had wished to take life lightly, with no great emotion. And marriage with Letty had seemed to satisfy this particular canon.

Now, for the first time, certain veils were drawn aside, and he knew what this hunger for love, and love's response, can do with a man—could do with *him*, were it allowed its scope!

Had Marcella Maxwell been another woman, less innocent, less secure!

As it was, Tressady no sooner dared to give a sensuous thought to her beauty than his own passion smote him back—bade him beware lest he should be no longer fit to speak and talk with her, actually or spiritually. For in this hopeless dearth of all the ordinary rewards and encouragements of love he had begun to cultivate a sort of second, or spiritual, life, in which she reigned. Whenever he was alone he walked with her, consulted her, watched her dear eyes, and the soul playing through them. And so long as he could maintain this dream he was conscious of a sort of dignity, of reconciliation with himself; for the passions and tragedies of the soul always carry with them this dignity, as Dante, of all mortals, knew first and best.

But with the turn into Upper Brook Street, the dream suddenly and painfully gave way. He saw his own house, and could forget Letty and the problem of his married life no more. What was he going to do with her and it? What relation was he going to establish with his wife, through all these years that stretched so interminably before them? Remorse mingled with the question. But perhaps impatience, still more—impatience of his own misery, of this maze of emotion in which he felt himself entangled, as it were against his will.

During the three days which had passed since his quarrel with Letty, their common life had been such a mere confusion of jars and discomforts that George's hedonist temper was almost at the end of its patience; yet so far, he thought, he had not done badly in the way of forbearance. After the first moment of angry disgust, he had said to himself that the tearing up of the photograph was a jealous freak, which Letty had a right to if it pleased her. At any rate, he had made no comment whatever upon it, and had done his best to resume his normal manner with her the next day. She had been, apparently, only the more enraged; and, although there had been no open quarrelling since, her cutting, contemptuous little airs had been very hard to bear. Nor was it possible for George to ignore her exasperated determination to have her own way in the matter both of friends and expenses.

As he took his latch-key out of the lock, and turned up the electric light, he saw two handsome marqueterie chairs standing in the hall. He went to look at them in some perplexity. Ah! no doubt they had been sent as specimens. Letty had grown dissatisfied with the chairs originally bought for the dining-room. He remembered to have heard her say something about a costly set at a certain Asher's, that Harding had found.

He studied them for a few moments, his mouth tightening. Then, instead of going upstairs, he went into his study, and sat down to his table to write a letter.

Yes—he had better go off to Staffordshire by the early train; and this letter, which he would put upon her writing-desk in the drawing-room, should explain him to Letty.

The letter was long and candid, yet by no means without tenderness. "I have written to Asher," it said, "to direct him to send in the morning for the chairs I found in the hall. They are too expensive for us, and I have told him that I will not buy them, I need not say that in writing to him I have avoided every word that could be annoying to you. If you would only trust me, and consult me a little about such things,—trifles as they be,—life just now would be easier than it is."

Then he passed to a very frank statement of their financial position, and of his own steady resolve not to allow himself to drift into hopeless debt. The words were clear and sharp, but not more so than the course of the preceding six weeks made absolutely necessary. And their very sharpness led him to much repentant kindness at the end. No doubt she was disappointed both in him and in his circumstances; and, certainly, differences had developed between them that they had never foreseen at the time of their engagement. But to "make a good thing" of living together was never easy. He asked her not to despair, not to judge him hardly. He would do his best—let her only give him back her confidence and affection.

He closed the letter, and then paced restlessly about the little room for a time. It seemed to him that he was caught in a vice—that neither happiness, nor decent daily comfort, nor even the satisfactions of ambition, were ever to be his.

Next day he was off to Euston before Letty was properly awake. She found his letter waiting for her when she descended, and spent the day in a pale excitement. Yet by the end of it she had pretty well made up her mind. She would have to give in on the money question. George's figures and her natural shrewdness convinced her that the ultimate results of fighting him in this matter could only be more uncomfortable for herself than for him. But as to her freedom in choosing her own friends, or as to her jealousy of Lady Maxwell, she would never give in. If George had ceased to court his wife, then he could have nothing to say if she looked for the amusement and admiration that were her due from other people. There was no harm in that. Everybody else did it; and she was not going to be pretty and young for nothing. Whereupon she sat down and wrote a line to Lord Cathedine to tell him that she and "Tully" would be at the Opera on the following night, and to beg him to make sure that she got her "cards for Clarence House." Moreover, she meant to make use of him to procure her a card for a very smart ball, the last of the season, which was coming off in a fortnight. That could be arranged, no doubt, at the Opera.

* * * * *

George returned from the North in a few days looking, if possible, thinner and more careworn than when he went. He had found the strike a very stubborn business. Burrows was riding the storm triumphantly; and while upon his own side Tressady looked in vain for a "man," there was a dogged determination to win among the masters. George's pugnacity shared it fully. But he was beginning to ask himself a number of questions about these labour disputes which, apparently, his co-employers did not ask themselves. Was it that here, no less than in matters that concerned the Bill before Parliament, *her* influence, helped by the power of an expanding mind, had developed in him that fatal capacity for sympathy, for the double-seeing of compromise, which takes from a man all the joy of battle.

Letty, at any rate, was not troubled by anything of the sort. When he came back he found that she was ready to be on fairly amicable terms with him. Moreover, she had postponed the more expensive improvements and changes she had begun to make at Perth against his will; nor was there any sign of the various new purchases for the London house with which she had threatened him. On the other hand, she ceased to consult him about her own engagements; and she let him know, though without any words on the subject, that she had entirely broken with his mother—would neither see her nor receive her. As her attitude on this point involved—or, apparently, must involve—a refusal to accept her husband's statement made solemnly under strong emotion, George's pride took it in absolute silence. No doubt it was her revenge upon him for their crippled income—and for Lady Maxwell.

The effect of her behaviour on this point was to increase his own pity for his mother. He told her frankly that Letty could not get over the inroads upon their income and the shortening of their resources produced by the Shapetsky debt, just at a time when they should have been able to spend, and were already hampered by the state of the coal trade. It would be better that she and Letty should not meet for a time. He would do his best to make it up.

Lady Tressady took his news with a curious equanimity.

"Well, she always hated me!" she said—"I don't exactly know why—and was a little jealous of my gowns, too, I think. Don't mind, George. I must say it out. You know, she doesn't really dress very well—Letty doesn't. Though, my goodness, the bills! Wait till you see them before you call *me* extravagant. You should make her go to that new woman—what do they call her? She's a *darling*, and such a style! Never mind about Letty; you needn't bother. I daresay she isn't very nice to *you* about it. But if you don't come and see me, I shall cut my throat, and leave a note on the dressing-table. It would spoil your career dreadfully, so you'd better take care."

But, indeed, George came, without any pressing, almost every day. He saw her in her bursts of gaiety and affectation, when the habits of a lifetime asserted themselves as strongly as ever; and he saw her in her moments of pain and collapse, when she could hide the omens of inexorable physical ill neither from herself nor him. By the doctor's advice, he ceased to press her to give in, to resign herself to bed and invalidism. It was best, even physically, to let her struggle on. And he was both astonished and touched by her pluck. She had never been so repellent to him as on those many occasions in the past when she had feigned illness to get her way. Now that Death was really knocking, the half-gay, half-frightened defiance with which she walked the palace of life, one moment listening to the sounds at the gate, the next throwing herself passionately into the revelry within, revealed to the son a new fact about her—a fact of poetry unutterably welcome.

Even her fawning dependents, the Fullertons, ceased to annoy him. They were poor parasites, but she thought for them, and they professed to love her in return. She had emptied her life of finer things, but this relation of patron and flatterer, such as it was, did something to fill the vacancy; and George made no further effort to disturb it.

It was surprising, indeed, how easily, as the weeks went on, he came to bear many of those ways of hers which had once set him most on edge—even her absurd outbursts of affection towards him, and preposterous praise of him in public. In time he submitted even to being flown at and kissed before the Fullertons. Amazing into what new relations that simple perspective of *the end* will throw all the stuff of life!

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In Parliament the weeks rushed by. The first and comparatively non-contentious sections of the Bill passed with a good deal of talk and delay. George spoke once or twice, without expecting to speak, instinctively pleasing Fontenoy where he could. They had now but little direct intercourse. But George did not feel that his leader had become his enemy, and was not slow to recognise a magnanimity he had not foreseen. Yet, after all, he had not offered the worst affront to party discipline. Fontenoy could still count on his vote. As to the rest of his party, he saw that he was to be finally reckoned as a "crank," and let alone. It was not, he found, altogether to be regretted. The position gave him a new freedom of speech.

Meanwhile he and Marcella Maxwell rarely met. Week after week passed, and still Tressady avoided those gatherings at the Mile End house, of which he heard full accounts from Edward Watton. He once formally asked Letty if she would go with him to one of Lady Maxwell's East End "evenings," and she, with equal formality, refused. But he did not take advantage of her refusal to go himself. Was it fear of his own weakness, or compunction towards Letty, or the mere dread of being betrayed into something at once ridiculous and irreparable?

At the same time, it was surprising how often during these weeks he had occasion to pass through St. James's Square. Once or twice he saw her go out or come in, and sometimes was near enough to catch the sudden smile and look which surely must be the smile and look she gave her friends, and not to every passing stranger! Once or twice, also, he met her for a few minutes in the Lobby, or on the Terrace, but always in a crowd. She never repeated her invitation. He divined that she was, perhaps, vexed with herself for having seemed to press the point on the night of the second reading.

* * * * *

July drew to an end. The famous "workshop clause" had been debated for nearly ten days, the whole country, as it were, joining in. One evening in the last week of the month Naseby and Lady Madeleine were sitting together in a corner of a vast drawing-room in Carlton House Terrace. The drawing-room was Mrs. Allison's. She had returned about a fortnight before from Bad Wildheim, and was now making an effort, for the boy's sake, to see some society. As she moved about the room in her black silk and lace she was more gentle, but in a sense more inaccessible, than ever. She talked with everyone, but her eyes followed her son's auburn head, with its strange upstanding tufts of hair above the fair, freckled face; or they watched the door, even when she was most animated. She looked ill and thin, and the many friends who loved her would have gladly clung about her and cherished her. But it was not easy to cherish Mrs. Allison.

"Do you see how our hostess keeps a watch for Fontenoy?" said Naseby, in a low voice, to Lady Madeleine.

Madeleine turned her startled face to him. Nature had given her this hunted look—the slightly open mouth, the wide eyes of one who perpetually hears or expects bad news. Naseby did not like it, and had tried to laugh her out of her scared ways before this. But he had no sooner laughed at her than he found himself busy—to use Watton's word—in "stroking" and making it up to her, so tender and clinging was the girl's whole nature, so golden was her hair, so white her skin!

"Isn't it the division news she is expecting?"

"Yes—but don't look so unhappy! She will bear up—even if they are beaten. And they will be beaten. Fontenoy's hopes have been going down. The Government will get through this clause at all events—by a shave."

"What a fuss everybody is making about this Bill!"

"Well, you don't root up whole industries without a fuss. But, certainly, Maxwell has roused the country finely."

"*She* will break down if it goes on," said Lady Madeleine, in a melancholy voice.

Naseby laughed.

"Not at all! Lady Maxwell was made for war—she thrives on it. Don't you, too, enjoy it?"

"I don't know," said the girl, drearily. "I don't know what I was made for."

And over her feather fan her wide eyes travelled to the distant ogress figure of her mother, sitting majestical in black wig and diamonds beside the Russian Ambassador. Naseby's also travelled thither—unwillingly. It was a disagreeable fact that Lady Kent had begun to be very amiable to him of late.

Lady Madeleine's remark made him silent a moment. Then he looked at her oddly.

"I am going to offend you," he said deliberately. "I am going to tell you that you were made to wear white satin and pearls, and to look as you look this evening."

The girl flushed hotly.

"I knew you despised women," she said, in a strained voice, staring back at him reproachfully. During her months of distress and humiliation she had found her only comfort in "movements" and "causes"—in the moral aspirations generally—so far as her mother would allow her to have anything to do with them. She had tried, for instance, to work with Marcella Maxwell—to understand her.

But Naseby held his ground.

"Do I despise women because I think they make the grace and poetry of the world?" he asked her. "And, mind you, I don't draw any lines. Let them be county councillors and guardians, and inspectors, and queens as much as they like. I'm very docile. I vote for them. I do as I'm told."

"Only, you don't think that *I* can do anything useful!"

"I don't think you're cut out for a 'platform woman,' if that's what you mean," he said, laughing—"even Lady Maxwell isn't. And if she was, she wouldn't count. The women who matter just now—and you women are getting a terrible amount of influence—more than you've had any time this half century—are the women who sit at home in their drawing-rooms, wear beautiful gowns, and attract the men who are governing the country to come and see them."

"Lady Maxwell doesn't sit at home and wear beautiful gowns!"

"I vow she does!" said Naseby, with spirit. "I can vouch for it. I was caught that way myself. Not that I belong to the men who are governing the country. And now she has roped me to her chariot for good and all. Ah, Ancoats! how do you do?"

He got up to make room for the master of the house as he spoke. But as he walked away he said to himself, with a kind of delight: "Good! she didn't turn a hair."

Lady Madeleine, indeed, received her former suitor with a cool dignity that might have seemed impossible to anyone so plaintively pretty. He lingered beside her, twirling his carefully pointed moustache, that matched the small Richelieu chin, and looking at her with a furtive closeness from time to time.

"Well—so you have just come back from Paris?" she said indifferently.

"Yes; I stayed a day or two after my mother. One didn't want to come back to this dull hole."

"Did you see the new piece at the Francais?"

He made a face.

"Not I! One couldn't be caught by such *vieux jeu* as that! There was a splendid woman in one of the *cafés chantants*—but I suppose you don't go to *cafés chantants*?"

"No," said Madeleine, eyeing him over her fan with a composure that astonished herself. "No, I don't go to *cafés chantants*."

Ancoats looked blank a moment, then resumed, with fervour:

"This woman's divine—*épatant!* Then, at the Chat Noir—but—ah! well, perhaps you don't go to the Chat Noir?"

"No, I don't go to the Chat Noir."

He fidgeted for a minute. She sat silent. Then he said:

"There are some new French pictures in the next room. Will you come and see them?"

"Thank you, I think I'll stay here," she said coldly.

He lingered another second or two, then departed. The girl drew a long breath, then instinctively turned her white neck to see if Naseby had really left her. Strange! he too, from far away, was looking round. In another moment he was making his way slowly back to her.

* * * * *

"Ah, there's Tressady! Now for news."

The remark was Naseby's. He and Lady Madeleine were, as it happened, inspecting the very French pictures that the girl had just refused to look at in Ancoats's company.

But now they hurried back to the main drawing-room where the Tressadys were already surrounded by an eager crowd.

"Eighteen majority," Tressady was saying. "The Socialists saved it at the last moment, after growling and threatening till nobody knew what was going to happen. Forty Ministerialists walked out, twenty more, at least, were away unpaired, and the Old Liberals voted against the Government to a man."

"Oh! they'll go—they'll go on the next clause," said an elderly peer, whose ruddy face glowed with delight. "Serve them right, too! Maxwell's whole aim is revolution made easy. The most dangerous man we have had for years! Looks so precious moderate, too, all the time. Tell me how did Slade vote after all?"

And Tressady found himself buttonholed by one person after another; pressed for the events and incidents of the evening: how this person had voted, how that; how Ministers had taken it; whether, after this Pyrrhic victory there was any chance of the Bill's withdrawal, or at least of some radical modification in the coming clauses. Almost everyone in the crowded room belonged, directly or indirectly, to the governing political class. Barely three people among them could have given a coherent account of the Bill itself. But to their fathers and brothers and cousins would belong the passing or the destroying of it. And in this country there is no game that amuses so large a number of intelligent people as the political game.

"I don't know why he should look so d—d excited over it," said Lord Cathedine to Naseby in a contemptuous aside, with a motion of the head towards Tressady, showing pale and tall above the crowd. "He seems to have voted straight this time, but he's as shaky as he can be. You never know what that kind of fellow will be up to. Ah, my lady! and how are you?"

He made a low bow, and Naseby, turning, saw young Lady Tressady advancing.

"Are you, too, talking politics?" said Letty, with affected disgust, giving her hand to Cathedine and a smile to Naseby.

"We will now talk of nothing but your scarlet gown," said Cathedine in her ear. "Amazing!"

"You like it?" she said, with nonchalant self-possession. "It makes me look dreadfully wicked, I know." And she threw a complacent glance at a mirror near, which showed her a gleam of white shoulders in a setting of flame-coloured tulle.

"Well, you wouldn't wish to look good," said Cathedine, pulling his black moustache. "Any fool can do that!"

"You cynic!" she said, laughing. "Come and talk to me over there. Have you got me my invitations?"

Cathedine followed, a disagreeable smile on his full lips, and they settled themselves in a corner out of the press. Nor were they disturbed by the sudden hush and parting of the crowd when, five minutes later, amid a general joyous excitement, Fontenoy walked in.

Mrs. Allison forgot her usual dignity, and hurried to meet the leader as he came up to her, with his usual flushed and haggard air.

"Magnificent!" she said tremulously. "Now you are going to win!"

He shook his head, and would hardly let himself be congratulated by any of the admirers, men or women, who pressed to shake hands with him. To most of them he said, impatiently, that it was no good hallooing till one was out of the wood, that for his own part he had expected more, and that the Government might very well rally on the next clause. Then, when he had effectively chilled the

enthusiasm of the room, he drew his hostess aside.

"Well, and are you happier?" he said to her in a low voice, his whole expression changing.

"Oh, dear friend! don't think of me," she said, putting out a thin hand to him with a grateful gesture. "Yes, the boy has been very good—he gives me a great deal of his time. But how can one *know*—how can one possibly know?"

Her pale, small face contracted with a look of pain. Fontenoy, too, frowned as he looked across at Ancoats, who was leaning against the wall in an affected pose, and quoting bits from a new play to George Tressady.

After a pause, he said:

"I think if I were you I should cultivate Tressady. Ancoats likes him. It might be possible some time for you to work through him."

The mother assented eagerly, then said, with a smile:

"But I gather you don't find him much to be depended on in the House?"

Fontenoy shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Maxwell has bedevilled him somehow. You're responsible!"

"Poor Castle Luton! You must tell me how it and I can make up. But you don't mean that there is any thought of his going over?"

"His vote's all safe—I suppose. He would make too great a fool of himself if he failed us there. But he has lost all heart for the business. And Harding Watton tells me it's all her doing. She has been taking him about in the East End—getting her friends to show him round."

"And *now* you are in the mood to put the women down—to show them their place?"

She looked at him with gentle humour—a very delicate high-bred figure, in her characteristic black-and-white. Fontenoy's whole aspect changed as he caught the reference to their own relation. The look of premature old age, of harsh fatigue, was for the moment effaced by something young and ardent as he bent towards her.

"No—I take the rough with the smooth. Lady Maxwell may do her worst. We have the counter-charm."

A flush showed itself in her lined cheek. She was fourteen years older than he, and had refused a dozen times to marry him. But she would have found it hard to live without his devotion, and she had brought him by now into such good order that she dared to let him know it.

* * * * *

Half an hour later George and Letty mounted another palatial staircase, and at the top of it Letty put on fresh smiles for a new hostess. George, tired out with the drama of the day, could hardly stifle his yawns; but Letty had treated the notion of going home after one party when, they might, if they pleased, "do" four, with indignant amazement.

So here they were at the house of one of the greatest of bankers, and George stalked through the rooms in his wife's train, taking comparatively little part in the political buzz all about him, and thinking mostly of a hurried little talk with Mrs. Allison that had taken up his last few minutes in her drawing-room. Poor thing! But what could he do for her? The lad was as stage-struck as ever—could barely talk sense on any other subject, and not much on that.

But if he, owing to the clash of an inner struggle, was weary of politics, the world in general could think and speak of nothing else. The rooms were full of politicians and their wives, of members just arrived from the House, of Ministers smiling at each other with lifted eyebrows, like boys escaped from a birching. A tempest of talk surged through the rooms—talk concerned with all manner of great issues, with the fate of a Government, the rousing of a country, the fortunes of individual statesmen. Through it all the little host himself, a small fair-haired man, with the tired eyes and hot-house air of the financier, walked about from group to group, gossiping over the incidents of the division, and now and then taking up some newcomer to be introduced to his pretty and fashionable wife.

Somewhere in the din George stumbled across Lady Leven, who was talking merrily to young Bayle; and found her, notwithstanding, very ready to turn and chat with him.

"Of course we are all waiting for the Maxwells," she said to him. "Will they come, I wonder?"

"Why not?"

"Do people show on their way to disaster? I think I should stay at home if I were she."

"Why, they have to hearten their friends!"

"No good," said Betty, pursing her pretty lips; "and they have fought so hard."

"And may win yet," said George, an odd sparkle in his eye, as he stood looking over his tiny companion to the door. "Nobody is sure of anything, I can tell you."

"I don't believe *you* care," she said audaciously, shaking her golden head at him.

"Pray, why?"

"Oh! you don't seem at all desperate," she said coolly. "Perhaps you're like Frank—you think the other side make so much better points than you do. 'If Dowson makes another speech,' Frank said to me yesterday, 'I vow I shall rat!' There's a way of talking of your own chiefs. Oh! I shall have to take him out of politics."

And she unfurled her fan with a jerk half melancholy, half decided. Then, suddenly, a laugh flashed over her face; she raised herself eagerly on tiptoe.

"Ah! bravo!" she said. "Here they are!"

George turned with the crowd, and saw them enter, Marcella first, in a blaze of diamonds; then the quiet face and square shoulders of her husband.

Nothing, he thought, could have been better than the manner in which both bore themselves as they passed through the throng, answering the greetings of friend and foe, and followed by the keen or hostile scrutiny of hundreds. There was no bravado, no attempt to disguise the despondency that must naturally follow on a division so threatening and in many ways so wounding. Maxwell looked grey with fatigue and short nights, while her black eyes passed wistfully from friend to friend, and had never been more quick, more responsive. Their cause was in danger; nevertheless, the impression on Tressady's mind was of two people consciously in the grip of forces infinitely greater than they—forces that would hold on their path whatever befell their insignificant mortal agents.

I steadier step when I recall,
Howe'er I slip, thou canst not fall.

So cries the thinker to his mistress, Truth. And in the temper of that cry lies the secret of brave living. One looker-on, at least,—and that an opponent,—recalled the words as he watched Marcella and her husband taking their way through the London crowd, amid the doubts of their friends and the half-concealed triumph of their foes.

It seemed to him that he could have no chance of speech with her. But presently, from the other side of the room, he saw that she had recognised and was greeting him, and, do what he would, he must needs make his way to her.

She welcomed him with great friendliness, and without a word of small reproach on the score of the weeks he had let pass without coming to see her. They fell into talk about the speeches of the evening. George thought he could see that she, or Maxwell speaking through her, was dissatisfied with Dowson's conduct of the Bill in the House, and chafing under the constitutional practice that made it necessary to give him so large a share in the matter. But she said nothing ungenerous; nor was there any bitterness towards the many false friends who had deserted them that night in the division-lobby. She spoke with eager hope of a series of speeches Maxwell was about to make in the North, and then she turned upon her companion.

"You haven't spoken since the second reading—on any of the fighting points, at least. I have been wondering what you thought of many things."

George threw his head back against the wall beside her, and was silent a moment. At last he said, looking down upon her:

"Perhaps, very often I haven't known what to think."

She started—reddened ever so little. "Does that mean"—she hesitated for a phrase—"that you have moved at all on the main question?"

"No," he said deliberately—"no! I think as I always did, that you are calling in law to do what law can't do. But perhaps I appreciate better than I once did what provokes you to it. It seems to me difficult now to meet the case your side is putting forward by a mere *non possumus*. One wants to stop the machine a bit and think it out. So much I admit."

She met his smile with a curious, tremulous look. Instinctively he guessed that this partial triumph in him of her cause—of Maxwell's cause—had let flow some inner font of feeling.

"If you only knew," she said, "how all this Parliamentary rush and clatter seem to me beside the mark. People talk to me of divisions and votes. I think all the time of persons I know—of faces of children—sick-beds, horrible rooms—"

She had turned her face from the crowd towards the open window, in whose recess they were standing. As she spoke they both fell back a little into comparative solitude, and he drew her on to talk—trying in a young eager way to make her rest in his kindness, to soothe her weariness and disappointment. And as she spoke, he clutched at the minutes; he threw more and more sympathy at her feet to keep her talking, to enchain her there beside him, in her lovely whiteness and grace. And, mingled with it all, was the happy guess that she liked to linger with him—that amid all this hard clamour of public talk and judgment she felt him a friend in a peculiar sense—a friend whose loyalty grew with misfortune. As for this wild-beast world, that was thwarting and libelling her, he began to think of it with a blind, up-swelling rage—a desire to fight and win for her—to put down—

"Tressady, your wife sent me to find you. She wishes to go home."

The voice was Harding Watton's. That observant young man advanced bowing, and holding out his hand to Lady Maxwell.

When Marcella had drifted once more into the fast-melting crowd, George found himself face to face with Letty. She was very white, and stared at him with wide, passionate eyes.

And on the way home George, with all his efforts, could not keep the peace. Letty flung at him a number of bitter and insulting things that he found very hard to bear.

"What do you want me to do?" he said to her at last, impatiently. "I have hardly spoken six sentences to Lady Maxwell, since the meeting, till tonight—I suppose because you wished it. But neither you nor anyone else shall make me rude to her. Don't be such a fool, Letty! Make friends with her, and you will be ashamed of saying or even thinking such things."

Whereat Letty burst into hysterical tears, and he soon found himself involved in all the remorseful, inconsequent speeches to which a man in such a plight feels himself driven. She allowed herself to be calmed, and they had a dreary making-up. When it was over, however, George was left with the uneasy conviction that he knew very little of his wife. She was not of a nature to let any slight to her go unpunished. What was she planning? What would she do?

CHAPTER XVII

"Hullo! Are you come back?"

The speaker was George Tressady. He was descending the steps of his club in Fall Mall, and found his arm caught by Naseby, who had just dismissed his hansom outside.

"I came back last night. Are you going homewards? I'll walk across the Square with you."

The two men turned into St. James's Square, and Naseby resumed:

"Yes, we had a most lively campaign. Maxwell spoke better than I ever heard him."

"The speeches have been excellent reading, too. And you had good meetings?"

"Splendid! The country is rallying, I can tell you. The North is now strong for Maxwell and the Bill—or seems to be."

"Just as we are going to kick it out in the House! It's very queer—for no one could tell, a month ago,

how the big towns were going. And it looked as though London even were deserting them."

"A mere wave, I think. At least, I'll bet you anything they'll win this Stepney election. Shall we get the division on the hours clause to-morrow?"

"They say so."

"If you know your own interests, you'll hurry up," said Naseby, smiling.
"The country is going against you."

"I imagine Fontenoy has got his eye on the country! He's been letting the Socialists talk nonsense till now to frighten the steady-going old fellows on the other side or putting up our men to mark time. But I saw yesterday there was a change."

"Between ourselves, hasn't he been talking a good deal of nonsense on his own account?"

Naseby threw a glance of laughing inquiry at his companion. George shrugged his shoulders in silence. It had become matter of public remark during the last few days that Fontenoy was beginning at last to show the strain of the combat—that his speeches were growing hysterical and his rule a tyranny. His most trusted followers were now to be heard grumbling in private over certain aspects of his bearing in the House. He had come into damaging collision with the Speaker on one or two occasions, and had made here and there a blunder in tactics which seemed to show a weakening of self-command. Tressady, indeed, knew enough to wonder that the man's nerve and coolness had maintained themselves in their fulness so long.

"So Maxwell took a party to the North?" said George, dropping the subject of Fontenoy.

"Lady Maxwell, of course—myself, Bennett, and Madeleine Penley. It was a pleasure to see Lady Maxwell. She has been dreadfully depressed in town lately. But those trade-union meetings in Lancashire and Yorkshire were magnificent enough to cheer anyone up."

George shook his head.

"I expect they come too late to save the Bill."

"I daresay. Well, one can't help being tremendously sorry for her. I thought her looking quite thin and ill over it. It makes one doubt about women in politics! Maxwell will take it a deal more calmly, unless one misunderstands his cool ways. But I shouldn't wonder if *she* had a breakdown."

George made no reply. Naseby talked a little more about Maxwell and the tour, the critical side of him gaining upon the sympathetic with every sentence. At the corner of King Street he stopped.

"I must go back to the club. By the way, have you heard anything of Ancoats lately?"

George made a face.

"I saw him in a hansom last night, late, crossing Regent Circus with a young woman—the young woman, to the best of my belief."

In the few moments' chat that followed Tressady found that Naseby, like Fontenoy, regarded him as the new friend who might be able to do something for a wild fellow, now that mother and old friends were alike put aside and ignored. But, as he rather impatiently declared—and was glad to declare—such a view was mere nonsense. He had tried, for the mother's sake, and could do nothing. As for him, he believed the thing was very much a piece of *blague*—

"Which won't prevent it from taking him to the devil," said Naseby, coolly; "and his mother, by all accounts, will die of it. I'm sorry for her. He seems to think tremendous things of you. I thought you might, perhaps, have knocked it out of him." George shook his head again, and they parted.

In truth, Tressady was not particularly flattered by Ancoats's fancy for him. He did not care enough about the lad in return. Yet, in response to one or two outbreaks of talk on Ancoats's part—talks full of a stagey railing at convention—he had tried, for the mother's sake, to lecture the boy a little—to get in a word or two that might strike home. But Ancoats had merely stared a moment out of his greenish eyes, had shaken his queer mane of hair, as an animal shakes off the hand that curbs it, had changed the subject at once, and departed. Tressady had seen very little of him since.

And had not, in truth, taken it to heart. He had neither time nor mind to think about Ancoats. Now, as he walked home to dinner, he put the subject from him impatiently. His own moral predicament absorbed him—this weird, silent way in which the whole political scene was changing in aspect and

composition under his eyes, was grouping itself for him round one figure—one face.

Had he any beliefs left about the Bill itself? He hardly knew. In truth it was not his reason that was leading him. It now was little more than a passionate boyish longing to wrench himself free from this odious task of hurting and defeating Marcella Maxwell. The long process of political argument was perhaps tending every day to the loosening and detaching of those easy convictions of a young Chauvinism, that had drawn him originally to Fontenoy's side. Intellectually he was all adrift. At the same time he confessed to himself, with perfect frankness, that he could and would have served Fontenoy happily enough, but for another influence—another voice.

Yet his old loyalty to Fontenoy tugged sorely at his will. And with this loyalty of course was bound up the whole question of his own personal honour and fidelity—his pledges to his constituents and his party.

Was there no rational and legitimate way out? He pondered the political situation as he walked along with great coolness and precision. When the division on the hours clause was over the main struggle on the Bill, as he had all along maintained, would be also at an end. If the Government carried the clause—and the probability still was that they would carry it by a handful of votes—the two great novelties of the Bill would have been affirmed by the House. The homework in the scheduled trades would have been driven by law into inspected workshops, and the male workers in these same trades would have been brought under the time-restrictions of the Factory Acts.

Compared to these two great reforms, or revolutions, the remaining clause—the landlords clause—touched, as he had already said to Fontenoy, questions of secondary rank, of mere machinery. Might not a man thereupon—might not he, George Tressady—review and reconsider his whole position?

He had told Fontenoy that his vote was safe; but must that pledge extend to more than the vital stuff, the main proposals of the Bill? The hours clause?—yes. But after it?

Fontenoy, no doubt, would carry on the fight to the bitter end, counting on a final and hard-wrung victory. The sanguine confidence which had possessed him about the time of the second reading was gone. He did not, Tressady knew, reckon with any certainty on turning out the Government in this coming division. The miserable majority with which they had carried the workshops clause would fall again—it would hardly be altogether effaced. That final wiping-out would come—if indeed it were attained—in the last contest of all, to which Fontenoy was already heartening and urging on his followers.

Fontenoy's position, of course, in the matter was clear. It was that of the leader and the irreconcilable.

But for the private member, who had seen cause to modify some of his opinions during the course of debate, who had voted loyally with his party up till now—might not the division on the hours clause be said to mark a new stage in the Bill—a stage which restored him his freedom?

The House would have pronounced on the main points of the Bill; the country was rallying in a remarkable and unexpected way to the Government—might it not be fairly argued that the war had been carried far enough?

He already, indeed, saw signs of that backing down of opposition which he had prophesied to Fontenoy. The key to the whole matter lay, he believed, in the hands of the Old Liberals, that remnant of a once great host, who were now charging the Conservative Government with new and damaging concessions to the Socialist tyranny. These men kept a watchful eye on the country; they had maintained all along that the country had not spoken. George had already perceived a certain weakening among them. And now, this campaign of Maxwell's, this new enthusiasm in the industrial North—no doubt they would have their effect.

He hurried on, closely weighing the whole matter, the prey to a strange and mingled excitement.

Meanwhile the streets through which he walked had the empty, listless air which marks a stage from which the actors have departed. It was nearing the middle of August, and society had fled.

All the same, as he reflected with a relief which was not without its sting, he and Letty would not be alone at dinner. Some political friends were coming, stranded, like themselves, in this West End, which had by now covered up its furniture and shut its shutters.

What a number of smart invitations had been showering upon them during the last weeks of the season, and were now still pursuing them, for the country-house autumn! The expansion of their social circle had of late often filled George with astonishment. No doubt, he said to himself,—though with a

curious doubtfulness,—Letty was very successful; still, the recent rush of attentions from big people, who had taken no notice of them on their marriage, was rather puzzling. It had affected her so far more than himself. For he had been hard pressed by Parliament and the strike, and she had gone about a good deal alone—appearing, indeed, to prefer it.

* * * * *

"Come out with me on the Terrace," said Marcella to Betty Leven; "I had rather not wait here. Aldous, will you take us through?"

She and Betty were standing in the inner lobby of the House of Commons. The division had just been called and the galleries cleared. Members were still crowding into the House from the Library, the Terrace, and the smoking-rooms; and all the approaches to the Chamber itself were filled with a throng about equally divided between the eagerness of victory and the anxieties of defeat.

Maxwell took the ladies to the Terrace, and left them there, while he himself went back to the House. Marcella took a seat by the parapet, leant both hands upon it, and looked absently at the river and the clouds. It was a cloudy August night, with a broken, fleecy sky, and gusts of hot wind from the river. A few figures and groups were moving about the Terrace in the flickering light and shade—waiting like themselves.

"Will you be very sad if it goes wrongly?" said Betty, in a low voice, as she took her friend's hand in hers.

"Yes—" said Marcella, simply. Then, after a pause, she added, "It will be all the harder after this time in the North. Everything will have come too late."

There was a silence; then Betty said, not without sheepishness, "Frank's all right."

Marcella smiled. She knew that little Betty had been much troubled by Frank's tempers of late, and had been haunted by some quite serious qualms about his loyalty to Maxwell and the Bill. Marcella had never shared them. Frank Leven had not grit enough to make a scandal and desert a chief. But Betty's ambition had forced the boy into a life that was not his; had divided him from the streams and fields, from the country gentleman's duties and pleasures, that were his natural sphere. In this hot town game of politics, this contest of brains and ambitions, he was out of place—was, in fact, wasting both time and capacity. Betty would have to give way, or the comedy of a lovers' quarrel might grow to something ill-matched with the young grace and mirth of such a pair of handsome children.

Marcella meant to tell her friend all this in due time. Now she could only wait in silence, listening for every sound, Betty's soft fingers clasping her own, the wind as it blew from the bridge cooling her hot brow.

"Here they are!" said Betty.

They turned to the open doorway of the House. A rush of feet and voices approached, and the various groups on the Terrace hurried to meet it.

"Just saved! By George, what a squeak!" said a man's voice in the distance; and at the same moment Maxwell touched his wife on the shoulder.

"A majority of ten! Nobody knew how it had gone till the last moment."

She put up her face to him, leaning against him.

"I suppose it means we can't pull through?" He bent to her.

"I should think so. Darling, don't take it to heart so much!"

In the darkness he felt the touch of her lips on his hand. Then she turned, with a white cheek and smiling mouth, to meet the greetings and rueful congratulations of the friends that were crowding about them.

The Terrace was soon a moving mass of people, eagerly discussing the details of the division. The lamps, blown a little by the wind, threw uncertain lights on faces and figures, as they passed and re-passed between the mass of building on the one hand and the wavering darkness of the river on the other. To Marcella, as she stood talking to person after person—talking she hardly knew what—the whole scene was a dim bewilderment, whence emerged from time to time faces or movements of special significance.

Now it was Dowson, the Home Secretary, advancing to greet her, with his grey shaven face, eyelids

somewhat drooped, and the cool, ambiguous look of one not quite certain of his reception. He had been for long a close ally of Maxwell's. Marcella had thought him a true friend. But certainly, in his conduct of the Bill of late there had been a good deal to suggest the attitude of a man determined to secure himself a retreat, and uncertain how far to risk his personal fortunes on a doubtful issue. So that she found herself talking to him with a new formality, in the tone of those who have been friends, yet begin to foresee the time when they may be antagonists.

Or, again, it was Fontenoy—Fontenoy's great head and overhanging brows, thrown suddenly into light against the windy dusk. He was walking with a young viscount whose curls, clothes, and shoulders were alike unapproachable by the ordinary man. This youth could not forbear an exultant twitching of the lip as he passed the Maxwells. Fontenoy ceremoniously took off his hat. Marcella had a momentary impression of the passionate, bull-like force of the man, before he disappeared into the crowd. His eye had wavered as it met hers. Out of courtesy to the woman he had tried not to *look* his triumph.

And now it was quite another face—thin, delicately marked, a noticeable chin, an outstretched hand.

She was astonished by her own feeling of pleasure.

"Tell me," she said quickly, as she moved eagerly forward—"tell me! is it about what you expected?"

They turned towards the river. George Tressady hung over the wall beside her.

"Yes. I thought it might be anything from eight to twenty."

"I suppose Lord Fontenoy now thinks the end quite certain."

"He may. But the end is not certain!"

"But what can prevent it! The despairing thing for us is, that if the country had been roused earlier, everything might have been different. But now the House—"

"Has got out of hand? It may be; but I find a great many people affected by Lord Maxwell's speeches in the North, and his reception there. To-day's result was inevitable, but, if I'm not mistaken, we shall now see a number of new combinations."

The sensitive face became in a moment all intelligence. She played the politician, and cross-examined him. He hesitated. What he was doing was already a treachery. But he only hesitated to give way. They lingered by the wall together, discussing possibilities and persons; and when Maxwell at last turned from his own conversations to suggest to his wife that it was time to go home, she came forward with a mien of animation that surprised him. He greeted Tressady with friendliness, and then, as though a thought had struck him, suddenly drew the young man aside.

"Ancoats, of course," said George to himself; and Ancoats it was.

Maxwell, without preliminaries, and taking his companion's knowledge of the story for granted—no doubt on Fontenoy's information—said a few words about the renewal of the difficulty. Did he not think it had all begun again? Yes, George had some reason to think so. "If you can do anything for us—"

"Of course! but what can I do? As we all know, Ancoats does not sit still to be scolded."

Their colloquy lasted only a minute or two; yet when it was over, and the Maxwells had gone, George was left with a vivid impression of the great man's quiet strength and magnanimity. No one could have guessed from his anxious and well-considered talk on this private matter that he was in the very heat of a political struggle that must affect all his own fortunes. Tressady had been accustomed to spend his wit on the heavier sides of Maxwell's character. To-night, he said to himself, half in a passion, grudging the confession, that it was not wonderful she loved him!

She! The remembrance of how her whole nature had brightened from its cloud as he drew out for her his own forecast of what might still happen; the sweet confidence and charm that she had shown him; the intimacy of the tone she had allowed between them; the mingling all through of a delicate abstinence from anything touching on his own personal position, with an unspoken recognition of it—the impulse of a generosity that could not help rewarding what seemed to it the yielding of an adversary; these things filled him with a delicious pleasure as he walked home. In a hundred directions—political, social, spiritual—the old horizons of the mind seemed to be lightening and expanding. The cynical, indifferent temper of his youth was breaking down; the whole man was more intelligent, capable, tender. Yet what sadness and restlessness of soul as soon as the brief moment of joy had come and gone!

A few afternoons of Supply encroached upon the eight days that still remained before the last clause

of the Bill came to a division. But the whole eight days, nevertheless, were filled with the new permutations and combinations which Tressady had foreseen. The Government carried the Stepney election, and in other quarters the effects of the speechmaking in the North began to be visible. Rumours of the syndicate already formed to take over large numbers of workshops in both the Jewish and Gentile quarters of the East End, and of the hours and wages that were likely to obtain in the new factories, were driving a considerable mass of working-class opinion, which had hitherto held aloof, straight for the Government, and splitting up much of that which had been purely hostile.

Nevertheless, the situation in the House itself was hardly changing with the change in the country. The Socialist members very soon developed the proposal to make the landlords responsible for the carrying-out of the new Act into a furious general attack on the landlords of London. Their diatribes kept up the terrors which had already cost the Government so many men. It was not possible, not seemly, to yield, as Maxwell was yielding, all along the line to these fellows!

But the Old Liberals, or the New Whigs, as George had expected, were restless. They felt the country, and they had no affection for landlords as such. Did a man arise who could give them a lead, there was no saying how soon they might not break away from the Fontenoy combination. Fontenoy felt it, and prowled among them like a Satan, urging them to complete their deed, to give the *coup de grâce*.

On the Wednesday afternoon before the Friday on which he thought the final vote would be taken, George let himself into his own house about six o'clock, thankful to feel that he had a quiet evening before him. He had been wandering about the House of Commons and its appurtenances all day, holding colloquies with this person and that, unable to see his way—to come to any decision. And, as was now usual, he and Fontenoy had been engaged in steering out of each other's way as much as possible.

As he went upstairs he noticed a letter lying on the step. He took it up, and found an open note, which he read, at first without thinking of it:

"My dear Lady,—Chatsworth can't be done. I have thrown my flies with great skill, but—no go! I don't seem to have influence enough in that quarter. But I have various other plans on hand. You shall have a jolly autumn, if I can manage it. There are some Scotch invitations I can certainly get you—and I should like to show you the ways of those parts. By the way, I hope your husband shoots decently. People are very particular. And you really must consult me about your gowns—I'm deuced clever at that sort of thing! I shall come to-morrow, when I have packed off my family to the country. Don't know why God made families!

"Yours always,

"CATHEDINE."

"George! is that you?" cried Letty from above him, in a voice half angry, half hesitating; "and—and—that's my note. Please give it me at once."

He finished it under her eyes, then handed it to her with formal courtesy. They walked into the drawing-room, and George shut the door. He was very pale, and Letty quailed a little.

"So Cathedine has been introducing us into society," he said, "and advising you as to your gowns. Was that—quite necessary—do you think?"

"It's very simple what he has been doing," was her angry reply. "You never take any pains to make life amusing to me, so I must look elsewhere, if I want society—that's all."

"And it never occurs to you that you are thereby incurring an unseemly obligation to a man whom I dislike, whom I have warned you against, who bears everywhere an evil name? You think I am likely to enjoy—to put up with, even—the position of being asked on sufferance—as your appendage—provided I 'shoot decently'?"

His tone of scorn, his slight figure, imperiously drawn up, sent her a challenge, which she answered with sullen haste.

"That's all nonsense, of course! And he wouldn't be rude to you if you weren't always rude to him."

"Rude to him!" He smiled. "But now, let us get to the bottom of this thing. Did Cathedine get us the cards for Clarence House—and that Goodwood invitation?"

Letty made no answer. She stared at him defiantly, twisting and untwisting the ribbons of her blue dress.

George reddened hotly. His personal pride in matters of social manners was one of his strongest characteristics.

"Let me beg you, at any rate, to write and tell Lord Cathedine that we will not trouble him for any more of these kind offices. And, moreover, I shall not go to any of these houses in the autumn unless I am quite certain he has had nothing to do with it."

"I have accepted," said Letty, breathing hard.

"I cannot help that. You should have been frank with me. I am not going to do what would destroy my own self-respect."

"No—you prefer making love to Lady Maxwell!"

He looked steadily a moment at her pallor and her furious eyes. Then he said, in another tone:

"Letty, does it ever occur to you that we have not been married yet five months? Are our relations to each other to go on for ever like this? I think we might make something better of them."

"That's your lookout. But as to these invitations, I have accepted them, and I shall go."

"I don't think you will. You would find it wouldn't do. Anyway, Cathedine must be written to."

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" she cried.

"Then I shall write myself."

She rose, quivering with passion, supporting herself on the arm of her chair.

"If you do, I will find some way of punishing you for it. Oh, if I had never made myself miserable by marrying you!"

Their eyes met. Then he said:

"I think I had better go and dine at the club. We are hardly fit to be together."

"Go, for heaven's sake!" she said, with a disdainful gesture.

Outside the door he paused a moment, head bent, hands clenched. Then a wild, passionate look overspread his young face. "It is her evening," he said to himself. "Letty turns me out. I will go."

Meanwhile Letty stood where he had left her till she had heard the street-door close. The typical, significant sound knelled to her heart. She began to walk tempestuously up and down, crying with excitement.

Time passed on. The August evening closed in; and in this deserted London nobody came to see her. She dined alone, and afterwards spent what seemed to her interminable hours pacing the drawing-room and meditating. At last there was a pause in the rush of selfish or jealous feeling which had been pulsing through her for weeks past, dictating all her actions, fevering all her thoughts. And there is nothing so desolate as such a pause, to such a nature. For it means reflection; it means putting one's life away from one, and looking at it as a whole. And to the Lettys of this world there is no process more abhorrent—none they will spend more energy in escaping.

It was inexplicable, intolerable that she should be so unhappy. What was it that tortured her so—hatred of Marcella Maxwell, or pain that she had lost her husband? But she had never imagined herself in love with him when she married him. He had never obtained from her before a tenth part of the thought she had bestowed upon him during the past six weeks. During all the time that she had been flirting with Cathedine, and recklessly placing herself in his power by the favours she asked of him, she saw now, with a kind of amazement, that she had been thinking constantly of George, determined to impress him with her social success, to force him to admire her and think much of her.

Cathedine? Had he any real attraction for her? Why, she was afraid of him, she knew him to be coarse and brutal, even while she played with him and sent him on her errands. When she compared him with George—even George as she had just seen him in this last odious scene—she felt the tears of anger and despair rising.

But to be forced to dismiss him at George's word, to submit in this matter of the invitations, to let herself be trampled on, while George gave all his homage, all his best mind, to Lady Maxwell—something scorching flew through her veins as she thought of it. Never! never! She would find, she had

already thought of, a startling way of avenging herself.

Late at night George came home. She had locked her door, and he turned into his dressing-room. When the house was quiet again, she pressed her face into the pillows, and wept till she was amazed at her own pain, and must needs turn her rage upon herself.

* * * * *

When Tressady arrived at the house in Mile End Road he found the pretty, bare room where Marcella held her gatherings full of guests. The East End had not "gone out of town." The two little workhouse girls, in the whitest of caps and aprons, were carrying round trays of coffee and cakes; and beyond the open window was a tiny garden, backed by a huge Board School and some tall warehouses, yet as pleasant within its own small space as a fountain and flowers, constantly replenished from Maxwell Court, could make it.

Amid the medley of workmen, union officials, and members of Parliament that the room contained, George was set first of all to talk to a young schoolmaster or two, but he had never felt so little able to adjust his mind to strangers. The thought of his home miseries burnt within him. When could he get his turn with her? He was thirsty for the sound of her voice, the kindness of her eyes.

She had received him with unusual warmth, and an eagerness of look that seemed to show she had at least as much to say to him as he to her. And at last his turn came. She took some of her guests into the garden. George followed, and they found themselves side by side. He noticed that she was very pale. Yet how was it that fatigue and anxiety instead of marring her physical charm, only increased it? This thin black dress in which the tall figure moved so finely, the black lace folded in a fashion all her own about her neck and breast, the waving lines of hair above the delicate stateliness of the brow—those slight tragic hollows in cheek and temple with their tale of spirit and passionate feeling, and all the ebb and flow of noble life—he had never felt her so rare, so adorable.

"Well! what do you think of it all to-day? Are you still inclined to prophesy?" she asked him, smiling.

"I might be—if I saw any chance of the man you want. But he doesn't seem to be forthcoming, and—"

"And to-morrow is the end!"

"The Government has quite made up its mind not to take defeat—not to accept modifications?"

She shook her head.

They were standing at the end of the garden, looking into the brightly lit windows of the Board School, where evening-classes were going on. She gave a long sigh.

"As for us personally, we can only be thankful to have it over. Neither of us could have borne it much longer. I suppose, when the crisis is all over, we shall go away for a long time."

By "the crisis" she meant, of course, the resignation of Ministers and a change of Government. So that a few days hence she would be no longer within his reach at all. Maxwell, once out of office, would, no doubt, for a long while to come prefer to spend the greater part of his time in Brookshire, away from politics. A sudden sharp perception woke in Tressady of what it would mean to him to find himself in a world where, on going out of a morning, it would be no longer possible to come across her.

At last she broke the silence.

"How little I really thought, in spite of all one's anxiety, that Lord Fontenoy was going to win! He has played his cards amazingly well."

George took no notice. Thoughts were whirling in his brain.

"What would you say to me, I wonder," he said at last, "if I were to try the part?"

He spoke in a bantering tone, poking at the black London earth with his stick.

"What part?"

"Well, it seems to me I might put the case. One wants to argue the thing in a common-sense way. I don't feel towards this clause as I did towards the others. I know a good many men don't."

He turned to her with a light composure.

She stared in bewilderment.

"I don't understand."

"Well; why shouldn't one put the case? We have always counted on the hostility of the country. But the country seems to be coming round. Some of us now feel the Bill should have its chance—we are inclined to let Ministers take the responsibility. But, gracious heavens!—to suppose the House would pay any attention to me!"

He took up a stone and jerked it over the wall. She did not speak for a moment. At last she said:

"It would be a grave thing for *you* to do."

He turned, and their eyes met, hers full of emotion, and his hesitating and reflective. Then he laughed, his pride stung a little by her expression.

"You think I should do myself more harm, than good to anybody else?"

"No.—Only it would be serious," she repeated after a pause.

Instantly he dropped the subject as far as his own action was concerned. He led her back into discussion of other people, and of the situation in general.

Then suddenly, as they talked, a host of thoughts fled cloud-like, rising and melting, through Marcella's memory. She remembered with what prestige—considering his youth and inexperience—he had entered Parliament, the impression made by the short and brilliant campaign of his election. Now, since the real struggle of the session had begun, his energies seemed to have been unaccountably in abeyance, and eclipse. People she noticed had ceased to talk of him. But supposing, after all, there had been a crisis of mind and conviction underlying it?—supposing that now, at the last moment, in a situation that cried out for a leader, something should suddenly release his powers and gifts to do their proper work—

It vexed her to realise her own excitement, together with an odd shrinking and reluctance that seemed to be fighting with it. All in a moment, to Tressady's astonishment, she recalled the conversation to the point where it had turned aside.

"And you think—you *really* think"—her voice had a nervous appealing note—"that even at this eleventh hour—No, I don't understand!—I *can't* understand!—why, or how you should still think it possible to change things enough!"

He felt a sting of pleasure, and the passing sense of hurt pride was soothed. At least he had conquered her attention, her curiosity!

"I am sure that anything might still happen," he said stubbornly.

"Well, only let it be settled!" she said, trying to speak lightly, "else there will be nothing left of some of us."

She raised her hand, and pushed back her hair with a childish gesture of weariness, that was quite unconscious, and therefore touching.

As she spoke, indeed, the thought of a strong man harassed with overwork, and patiently preparing to lay down his baffled task, and all his cherished hopes, captured her mind, brought a quick rush of tears even to her eyes. Tressady looked at her; he saw the moisture in the eyes, the reddening of the cheek, the effort for self-control.

"Why do you let yourself feel it so much?" he said resentfully; "it is not natural, nor right."

"That's our old quarrel, isn't it?" she answered, smiling.

He was staring at the ground again, poking with his stick.

"There are so many things one *must* feel," he said in a bitter low voice; "one may as well try to take politics calmly."

She looked down upon him, understanding, but not knowing how to meet him, how to express herself. His words and manner were a confession of personal grief,—almost an appeal to her,—the first he had ever made. Yet how to touch the subject of his marriage! She shrank from it painfully. What ominous, disagreeable things she had heard lately of the young Lady Tressady from people she trusted! Why, oh! why had he ruined his own life in such a way!

And with the yearning towards all suffering which was natural to her, there mingled so much else—

inevitable softness and gratitude for that homage towards herself, which had begun to touch and challenge all the loving, responsive impulse which was at the root of her character—an eager wish to put out a hand and guide him—all tending to shape in her this new longing to rouse him to some critical and courageous action, action which should give him at least the joy that men get from the strenuous use of natural powers, from the realisation of themselves. And through it all the most divinely selfish blindness to the real truth of the situation! Yet she tried not to think of Maxwell—she wished to think only of and for her friend.

After his last words they stood side by side in silence for a few moments. But the expression of her eyes, of her attitude, was all sympathy. He must needs feel that she cared, she understood, that his life, his pain, his story mattered to her. At last she said, turning her face away from him, and from the few people who had not yet left the garden to go and listen to some music that was going on in the drawing-room:

"Sometimes, the best way to forget one's own troubles—don't you think?—is to put something else first for a time—perhaps in your case, the public life and service. Mightn't it be? Suppose you thought it all really out, what you have been saying to me—gave yourself up to it—and then *determined*. Perhaps afterwards—"

She paused—overcome with doubt, even shyness—and very pale too, as she turned to him again. But so beautiful! The very perplexity which spoke in the gently quivering face as it met his, made her lovelier in his eyes. It seemed to strike down some of the barrier between them, to present her to him as weaker, more approachable.

But after waiting a moment, he gave a little harsh laugh.

"Afterwards, when one has somehow settled other people's affairs, one might see straighter in one's own? Is that what you mean?"

"I meant," she said, speaking with difficulty, "what I have often found—myself—that it helps one sometimes, to throw oneself altogether into something outside one's own life, in a large disinterested way. Afterwards, one comes back to one's own puzzles—with a fresh strength and hope."

"Hope!" he said despondently, with a quick lifting of the shoulders. Then, in another tone—

"So that's your advice to me—to take this thing seriously—to take myself seriously—to think it out?"

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly; "don't trifle with it—with what you might think and do—till it is too late to think and do anything."

Suddenly it flashed across them both how far they had travelled since their first meeting in the spring. Her mind filled with a kind of dread, an uneasy sense of responsibility—then with a tremulous consciousness of power. It was as though she felt something fluttering like a bird in her hands. And all the time there echoed through her memory a voice speaking in a moonlit garden—"You know—you don't mind my saying it?—nobody is ever converted—politically—nowadays."

No, but there may be honest advance and change—why not? And if she had influenced him—was it not Maxwell's work and thought that had spoken through her?

"Well, anyway," said Tressady's voice beside her, "whatever happens—you'll believe—"

"That you won't help to give us the *coup de grâce* unless you must?" she said, half laughing, yet with manifest emotion. "Anyway, I should have believed that."

"And you really care so much?" he asked her again, looking at her wondering.

She suddenly dropped her head upon her hands. They were alone now in the moonlit garden, and she was leaning over the low wall that divided them from the school enclosure. But before he could say anything—before he could even move closer to her—she had raised her face again, and drawn her hand rapidly across her eyes.

"I suppose one is tired and foolish after all these weeks," she said, with a breaking voice—"I apologise. You see when one comes to see everything through another's eyes—to live in another's life—" He felt a sudden stab, then a leap of joy—hungry, desolate joy—that she should thus admit him to the very sanctuary of her heart—let him touch the "very pulse of the machine." At the same moment that it revealed the eternal gulf between them, it gave him a delicious passionate sense of intimacy—of privilege.

"You have—a marvellous idea of marriage"—he said, under his breath, as he moved slowly beside her towards the house.

She made no answer. In another minute she was talking to him of indifferent things, and immediately afterwards he found himself parted from her in the crowd of the drawing-room.

When the party dispersed and he was walking alone towards Aldgate through the night, he could do nothing but repeat to himself fragments of what she had said to him—lost all the time in a miserable yearning memory of her eyes and voice.

His mind was made up. And as he lay sleepless and solitary through the night, he scarcely thought any more of the strait to which his married life had come. Forty-eight hours hence he should have time for that. For the present he had only to "think out" how it might be possible for him to turn doubt and turmoil into victory, and lay the crown of it at Marcella Maxwell's feet.

Meanwhile Marcella, on her return to St. James's Square, put her hands on Maxwell's shoulders, and said to him, in a voice unlike herself: "Sir George Tressady was at the party to-night. I *think* he may be going to throw Lord Fontenoy over. Don't be surprised if he speaks in that sense to-morrow."

Maxwell looked extraordinarily perturbed.

"I hope he will do nothing of the kind," he said, with decision. "It will do him enormous harm. All the conviction he has ever shown has been the other way. It will be thought to be a mere piece of caprice and indiscipline."

Marcella said nothing. She walked away from him, her hands clasped behind her, her soft skirt trailing—a pale muse of meditation—meditation in which for once she did not invite him to share.

"Tressady, by all that's wonderful!" said a member of Fontenoy's party to his neighbour. "What's *he* got to say?"

The man addressed bent forward, with his hands on his knees, to look eagerly at the speaker.

"I knew there was something up," he said. "Every time I have come across Tressady to-day he has been deep with one or other of those fellows"—he jerked his head towards the Liberal benches. "I saw him buttonholing Green in the Library, then with Speedwell on the Terrace. And just look at their benches! They're as thick as bees! Yes, by George! there *is* something up."

His young sportsman's face flushed with excitement, and he tried hard through the intervening heads to get a glimpse of Fontenoy. But nothing was to be seen of the leader but a hat jammed down over the eyes, a square chin, and a pair of folded arms.

The House, indeed, throughout the day had worn an aspect which, to the experienced observer—to the smooth-faced Home Secretary, for instance, watching the progress of this last critical division—meant that everything was possible, the unexpected above all. Rumours gathered and died away. Men might be seen talking with unaccustomed comrades; and those who were generally most frank had become discreet. It was known that Fontenoy's anxiety had been growing rapidly; and it was noticed that he and the young viscount who acted as the Whip of the party had kept an extraordinarily sharp watch on all their own men through the dinner-hour.

Fontenoy himself had spoken before dinner, throwing scorn upon the clause, as the ill-conceived finish of an impossible Bill. So the landlords were to be made the executants, the police, of this precious Act? Every man who let out a tenement-house in workmen's dwellings was to be haled before the law and punished if a tailor on his premises did his work at home, if a widow took in shirtmaking to keep her children. Pass, for the justice or the expediency of such a law in itself. But who but a madman ever supposed you could get it carried out! What if the landlords refused or neglected their part? *Quis custodiet?* And was Parliament going to make itself ridiculous by setting up a law, which, were it a thousand times desirable, you simply could not enforce?

The speech was delivered with amazing energy. It abounded in savage epigram and personality; and a month before it would have had great effect. Every Englishman has an instinctive hatred of paper reforms.

During the dinner-hour Tressady met Fontenoy in the Lobby, and suddenly stopped to speak. The young man was deeply flushed and holding himself stiffly erect. "If you want me," he said—"you will find me in the Library. I don't want to spring anything upon you. You shall know all I know."

"Thank you," said the other with slow bitterness—"but we can look after ourselves. I think you and I understood each other this morning."

The two men parted abruptly. Tressady walked on, stung and excited afresh by the memory of the hateful half hour he had spent that morning in Fontenoy's library. For after all, when once he had come to his decision, he had tried to behave with frankness, with consideration.

Fontenoy hurried on to look for the young viscount with the curls and shoulders, and the two men stood about the inner lobby together, Fontenoy sombrely watching everybody who came out or in.

It was about ten o'clock when Tressady caught the Speaker's eye. He rose in a crowded House, a House conscious not only that the division shortly to be taken would decide the fate of a Government, but vaguely aware, besides, that something else was involved—one of those personal incidents that may at any moment make the dulllest piece of routine dramatic, or rise into history by the juxtaposition of some great occasion.

The House had not yet made up its opinion about him as a speaker. He had done well; then, not so well. And, moreover, it was so long since he had taken any part in debate that the House had had time to forget whatever qualities he might once have shown.

His bearing and voice won him a first point. For youth, well-bred and well-equipped, the English House of Commons has always shown a peculiar indulgence. Then members began to bend eagerly forward, to crane necks, to put hands to ears. The Treasury Bench was seen to be listening as one man.

Before the speech was over many of those present had already recognised in it a political event of the first order. The speaker had traced with great frankness his own relation to the Bill—from an opinion which was but a prejudice, to a submission which was still half repugnance. He drew attention to the remarkable and growing movement in support of the Maxwell policy which was now spreading throughout the country, after a period of coolness and suspended judgment; he pointed to the probable ease with which, as it was now seen, the "harassed trades" would adapt themselves to the new law; he showed that the House, in at least three critical divisions, and under circumstances of enormous difficulty, had still affirmed the Bill; that the country, during the progress of the measure, had rallied unmistakably to the Government, and that all that remained was a question of machinery. That being so, he—and, he believed, some others—had reconsidered their positions. Their electoral pledges, in their opinion, no longer held, though they would be ready at any moment to submit themselves to consequences, if consequences there were to be.

Then, taking up the special subject-matter of the clause, he threw himself upon his leader's speech with a nervous energy, an information, and a resource which held the House amazed. He tore to pieces Fontenoy's elaborate attack, showed what practical men thought of the clause, and with what careful reliance upon their opinion and their experience it had been framed; and, finally—with a reference not lacking in a veiled passion that told upon the House, to those "dim toiling thousands" whose lot, "as it comes to work upon the mind, is daily perplexing if not transforming the thoughts and ideals of such men as I"—he, in the plainest terms, announced his intention of voting with the Government, and sat down, amid the usual mingled storm, in a shouting and excited House.

The next hour passed in a tumult. One speaker after another got up from the Liberal benches—burly manufacturers and men of business, who had so far held a strong post in the army of resistance—to tender their submission, to admit that the fight had gone far enough, that the country was against them, and that the Bill must be borne. What use, too, in turning out a Government which would either be sent back with redoubled strength or replaced by combinations that had no attractions whatever from men of moderate minds? Sadness reigned in the speeches of this Liberal remnant; nor could the House from time to time forbear to jeer them. But they made their purpose plain, and the Government Whip, standing near the door, gleefully struck off name after name from his Opposition list.

Then followed the usual struggle between the division that all men wanted and the speakers that no man could endure. But at last the bell was rung, the House cleared. As Tressady turned against the stream of his party, Fontenoy, with a sarcastic smile, stood elaborately aside to let him pass.

"We shall soon know what you have cost us," he said hoarsely in Tressady's ear; then, advancing a little towards the centre of the floor, he looked up markedly and deliberately at the Ladies' Gallery. Tressady made no reply. He held his fair head higher than usual as he passed on his unaccustomed way to the Aye Lobby. Many an eager eye strained back to see how many recruits would join him as he reached the Front Opposition Bench; many a Parliamentary Nestor watched the young man's progress with a keenness born of memory—memory that burnt anew with the battles of the past.

"Do you remember Chandos," said one old man to another—"young Chandos, that went for Peel in '46 against his party? It was my first year in Parliament. I can see him now. He was something like this young fellow."

"But *his* ratting changed nothing," said his companion, with an uneasy laugh; and they both struggled forward among the Noes.

Twenty minutes later the tellers were at the table, and the moment that was to make or mar a great Ministry had come.

"Ayes, 306; Noes, 280. The Ayes have it!"

"By Jove, he's done it!—the Judas!" cried a young fellow, crimson with excitement, who was standing beside Fontenoy!

"Yes—he's done it!" said Fontenoy, with grim composure, though the hand that held his hat shook. "The curtain may now fall."

"Where is he?" shouted the hot bloods around him, hooting and groaning, as their eyes searched the House for the man who had thus, in an afternoon, pulled down and defeated all their hopes.

But Tressady was nowhere to be seen. He had left the House just as the great news, surging like a wave through Lobby and corridor, reached a group of people waiting in a Minister's private room—and Marcella Maxwell knew that all was won.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I Shall go straight to Brook Street, and see if I can be a comfort to Letty," said Mrs. Watton, with a tone and air, however, that seemed to class her rather with the Sons of Thunder than the Sons of Consolation.

She was standing on the steps of the Ladies' Gallery entrance to the House of Commons, and Harding, who had just called a cab for her, was beside her.

"Could you see from the Gallery whether George had left?"

"He was still there when I came down," said Mrs. Watton, ungraciously, as though she grudged to talk of such a monster. "I saw him near the door while they hooted him. But, anyway, I should go to Letty—I don't forget that I am her only relative in town."

As a matter of fact, her eyes had played her false. But the wrath with which her large face and bonnet were shaking was cause enough for hallucinations.

"Then I'll go, too," said Harding, who had been hesitating. "No doubt Tressady'll stay for his thanks! But I daresay we sha'n't find Letty at home yet. I know she was to go to the Lucys' to-night."

"Poor lamb!" said Mrs. Watton, throwing up her hands.

Harding laughed.

"Oh! Letty won't take it like a lamb—you'll see!"

"What can a woman do?" said his mother, scornfully. "A decent woman, I mean, whom one can still have in one's house. All she can do is to cry, and take a district."

When they reached Upper Brook Street, the butler reported that his mistress had just come in. He made, of course, no difficulty about admitting Lady Tressady's aunt, and Mrs. Watton sailed up to the drawing-room, followed by Harding, who carried his head poked forward, as was usual to him, an opera-hat under his arm, and an eyeglass swinging from a limp wrist.

As they entered the drawing-room door, Letty, in full evening-dress, was standing with her back to them. She had the last edition of an evening paper open before her, so that her small head and shoulders seemed buried in the sheet. And so eager was her attention to what she was reading that she had not heard their approach.

"Letty!" said Mrs. Watton.

Her niece turned with a violent start.

"My dear Letty!" The aunt approached, quivering with majestic sympathy, both hands outstretched.

Letty looked at her a moment, frowning; then recoiled impatiently, without taking any notice of the hands.

"So I see George has spoken against his party. There has been a scene. What has happened? What's the end?"

"Only that the Government has won its clause," said Harding, interposing his smooth falsetto—"won by a substantial majority, too. No chance of the Lords playing the fool!"

"The Government has won?—the Maxwells have won, that is,—she has won!" said Letty, still frowning, her voice sharp and tingling.

"If you like to put it so," said Harding, raising his shoulders. "Yes, I should think that set's pretty jubilant to-night."

"And you mean to say that George did and said nothing to prepare you, my poor child?" cried Mrs. Watton, in her heaviest manner. She had picked up the newspaper, and was looking with disgust at the large head-lines with which the hastily printed sheet strove to eke out the brevity of the few words in which it announced the speech of the evening: "*Scene in the House of Commons—Break-down of the Resistance to the Bill—Sir George Tressady's Speech—Unexampled Excitement.*"

Letty breathed fast.

"He said something a day or two ago about a change, but of course I never believed—He has disgraced himself!"

She began to pace stormily up and down the room, her white skirts floating behind her, her small hands pulling at her gloves. Harding Watton stood looking on in an attitude of concern, one pensive finger laid upon his lip.

"Well, my dear Letty," said Mrs. Watton, impressively, as she laid down the newspaper, "the only thing to be done is to take him away. Let people forget it—if they can. And let me tell you, for your comfort, that he is not the first man, by a long way, that woman has led astray—nor will he be the last."

Letty's pale cheeks flamed into red. She stopped. She turned upon her comforter with eyes of hot resentment and dislike.

"And they dare to say that he did it for her! What right has anybody to say it?"

Mrs. Watton stared. Harding slowly and compassionately shook his head.

"I am afraid the world dares to say a great many unpleasant things—don't you know? One has to put up with it. Lady Maxwell has a characteristic way of doing things. It's like a painter: one can't miss the touch."

"No more than one can mistake a saying of Harding Watton's," said a vibrating voice behind them.

And there in the open doorway stood Tressady, pale, spent, and hollow-eyed, yet none the less the roused master of the house, determined to assert himself against a couple of intruders.

Letty looked at him in silence, one foot beating the ground. Harding started, and turned aside to search for his opera-hat, which he had deposited upon the sofa. Mrs. Watton was quite unabashed.

"We did not expect you so soon," she said, holding out a chilly hand.

"And I daresay you will misunderstand our being here. I cannot help that. It seemed to me my duty, as Letty's nearest relative in London, to come here and condole with her to-night on this deplorable event."

"I don't know what you mean," said Tressady, coolly, his hand on his side. "Are you speaking of the division?"

Mrs. Watton threw up her hands and her eyebrows. Then, gathering up her dress, she marched across the room to Letty.

"Good-night, Letty. I should have been glad to have had a quiet talk with you, but as your husband's come in I shall go. Oh! I'm not the person to interfere between husband and wife. Get him to tell you, if you can, *why* he has disappointed the friends and supporters who got him into Parliament; why he has broken all his promises, and given everybody the right to pity his unfortunate young wife! Oh! don't

alarm yourself, Sir George! I say my mind, but I'm going. I know very well that I am intruding. Good-night. Letty understands that she will always find sympathy in *my* house."

And the fierce old lady swept to the door, holding the culprit with her eyes. Harding, too, stepped up to Letty, who was standing now by the mantelpiece, with her back to the room. He took the hand hanging by her side, and folded it ostentatiously in both of his.

"Good-night, dear little cousin," he said, in his most affected voice. "If you have any need of us, command us."

"Are you going?" said Tressady. His brow was curiously wrinkled.

Harding made him a bow, and walked with rather sidling steps to the door. Tressady followed him to the landing, called to the butler, who was still up, and ceremoniously told him to get Mrs. Watton a cab. Then he walked back to the drawing-room, and shut the door behind him.

"Letty!"

His tone startled her. She looked round hastily.

"Letty! you were defending me as I came in."

He was extraordinarily pale—his blue eyes flashed. Every trace of the hauteur with which he had treated the Wattons had disappeared.

Letty recovered herself in an instant. The moment he showed softness she became the tyrant.

"Don't come!—don't touch me!" she said passionately, putting out her hand as he approached her. "If I defended you, it was just for decency's sake. You *have* disgraced us both. It is perfectly true what Aunt Watton says. I don't suppose we shall ever get over it. Oh! don't try to bully me"—for Tressady had turned away with an impatient groan. "It's no use. I know you think me a little fool! *I'm* not one of your great political ladies, who pretend to know everything that they may keep men dangling after them. I don't pose and play the hypocrite, as some—some people do. But, all the same, I know that you have done for yourself, and that people will say the most disgraceful things. Of course they will! And you can't deny them—you know you can't. Why did you never tell me a thing? *Who* made you change over? Ah! you can't answer—or you won't!"

Tressady was walking up and down with folded arms. He paused at her challenge.

"Why didn't I tell you? Do you remember that I wanted to talk to you yesterday morning—that I suggested you should come and hear my speech—and you wouldn't have it? You didn't care about politics, you said, and weren't going to pretend.—What made me go over? Well—I changed my mind—to some extent," he said slowly.

"To some extent?" She laughed scornfully, mimicking his voice. "*To some extent!* Are you going to try and make me believe there was nothing else?"

"No. As I walked home to-night I determined not to conceal the truth from you. Opinions counted for something. I voted—yes, taking all things together, I think it may be said that I voted honestly. But I should never have taken the part I did but—" he hesitated, then went on deliberately—"but that I had come to have a strong—wish—to give Lady Maxwell her heart's desire. She has been my friend. I repaid her what I could."

Letty, half beside herself, flung at him a shower of taunts hysterical and hardly intelligible. He showed no emotion. "Of course," he said disdainfully, "if you choose to repeat this to others you will do us both great damage. I suppose I can't help it. For anybody else in the world—for Mrs. Watton and her son, for instance—I have a perfectly good political defence, and I shall defend myself stoutly. I have no intention whatever of playing the penitent in public."

And what, she asked him, striving with all her might to regain the self-command which could alone enable her to wound him, to get the mastery—what was to be her part in this little comedy? Did he expect *her* to put up with this charming situation—to take what Marcella Maxwell left?

"No," he said abruptly. "You have no right to reproach me or her in any vulgar way. But I recognise that the situation is impossible. I shall probably leave Parliament and London."

She stared at him in speechless passion, then suddenly gathered up her fan and gloves and fled past him.

He caught at her, and stopped her, holding her satin skirt.

"My poor child!" he cried in remorse; "bear with me, Letty—and forgive me!"

"I hate you!" she said fiercely, "and I will never forgive you!"

She wrenched her dress away; he heard her quick steps across the floor and up the stairs.

Tressady fell into a chair, broken with exhaustion. His day in the House of Commons alone would have tried any man's nervous strength; this final scene had left him in a state to shrink from another word, another sound.

He must have dozed as he sat there from pure fatigue, for he found himself waking suddenly, with a sense of chill, as the August dawn was penetrating the closed windows and curtains.

He sprang up, and pulled the curtains back with a stealthy hand, so as to make no noise. Then he opened the window and stepped out upon the balcony, into a misty haze of sun.

The morning air blew upon him, and he drew it in with delight. How blessed was the sun, and the silence of the streets, and the dappled sky there to the east, beyond the Square!

After those long hours of mental tension in the crowd and heat of the House of Commons, what joy! what physical relief! He caught eagerly at the sensation of bodily pleasure, driving away his cares, letting the morning freshness recall to him a hundred memories—the memories of a traveller who has seen much, and loved Nature more than man. Blue surfaces of rippling sea, cool steeps among the mountains, streams brawling over their stones, a thousand combinations of grass and trees and sun—these things thronged through his brain, evoked by the wandering airs of this pale London sunrise and the few dusty plains which he could see to his right, behind the Park railings. And, like heralds before the presence, these various images flitted, passed, drew to one side, while memory in trembling revealed at last the best she had—an English river flowing through June meadows under a heaven of flame, a woman with a child, the scents of grass and hawthorn, the plashing of water.

He hung over the balcony, dreaming.

But before long he roused himself, and went back into the house. The gaudy drawing-room looked singularly comfortless and untidy in the delicate purity of the morning light. The flowers Letty had worn in her dress the night before were scattered on the floor, and the evening paper lay on the chair, where she had flung it down.

He stood in the centre of the room, his head raised, listening. No sound. Surely she was asleep. In spite of all the violence she had shown in their after-talk, the memory of her speech to Mrs. Watton lingered in the young fellow's mind. It astonished him to realise, as he stood there, in this morning silence, straining to hear if his wife were moving overhead, how, *pari passu* with the headlong progress of his act of homage to the one woman, certain sharp perceptions with regard to the other had been rising in his mind.

His life had been singularly lacking till now in any conscious moral strain. That a man's desires should outrun his conscience had always seemed to him, on the whole, the normal human state. But all sorts of new standards and ideals had begun to torment him since the beginning of his friendship with Marcella Maxwell, and a hundred questions that had never yet troubled him were even now pressing through his mind as to his relations to his wife, and the inexorableness of his debt towards her.

Moreover, he had hardly left the House of Commons and its uproar—his veins were still throbbing with the excitement of the division—when a voice said to him, "This is the end! You have had your 'moment'—now leave the stage before any mean anti-climax comes to spoil it all. Go. Break your life across. Don't wait to be dismissed and shaken off—take her gratitude with you, and go!"

Ah! but not yet—not yet! He sat down before his wife's little writing-table, and buried his face in his hands, while his heart burnt with longing. One day—then he would accept his fate, and try and mend both his own life and Letty's.

Would it be generous to drop out of her ken at once, leave the gift in her lap, and say nothing? Ah! but he was not capable of it. His act must have its price. Just one half hour with her—face to face. Then, shut the door—and, good-bye! What was there to fear? He could control himself. But after all these weeks, after their conversation of the night before, to go away without a word would be discourteous—unkind even—almost a confession to her of the whys and wherefores of what he had done.

He had a book of hers which he had promised to return. It was a precious little manuscript book, containing records written out by herself of lives she had known among the poor. She prized it much, and had begged him to keep it safe and return it.

He took it out of his pocket, looked at it, and put it carefully back. In a few hours the little book should pass him into her presence. The impulse that possessed him barred for the moment all remorse, all regret.

Then he looked for paper and pen and began to write.

He sat for some time, absorbed in his task, doing his very best with it. It was a letter to his constituents, and it seemed to him he must have been thinking of it in his sleep, so easily did the sentences run.

No doubt, ill-natured gossip of the Watton type would be humming and hissing round her name for the next few days. Well, let him write his letter as well as he could, and publish it as soon as possible! It took him about an hour and a half, and when he read it over it appeared to him the best piece of political statement he had yet achieved. Very likely it would make Fontenoy more savage still. But Fontenoy's tone and attitude in the House of Commons had been already decisive. The breach between them was complete.

He put the sheets down at last, groaning within himself. Fustian and emptiness! What would ever give him back his old self-confidence, the gay whole-heartedness with which he had entered Parliament? But the thing had to be done, and he had done it efficiently. Moreover, the brain-exercise had acted as a tonic; his tension of nerve had returned. He stood beside the window once more, looking out into a fast-awakening London with an absent and frowning eye. He was thinking out the next few hours.

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A little after eight Letty was roused from a restless sleep by the sound of a closing door. She rang hastily, and Grier appeared.

"Who was that went out?"

"Sir George, my lady. He's just dressed and left word that he had gone to take a packet to the 'Pall Mall' office. He said it must be there early, and he would breakfast at his club."

Letty sat up in bed, and bade Grier draw the curtains, and be quick in bringing her what she wanted. The maid glanced inquisitively, first at her mistress's haggard looks, then at the writing-table, as she passed it on her way to draw the blinds. The table was littered with writing-materials; some torn sheets had been transferred to the waste-paper basket, and a sealed letter was lying, address downwards, on the blotting-book. Letty, however, did not encourage her to talk. Indeed, she found herself sent away, and her mistress dressed without her.

Half an hour later Letty in her hat and cape slipped out of her room. She looked over the banisters into the hall. No one was to be seen, and she ran downstairs to the hall-door, which closed softly behind her. Five minutes later a latch-key turned quietly in the lock, and Letty reappeared. She went rapidly up to her room, a pale, angry ghost, glancing from side to side.

"Is Lady Maxwell at home?"

The butler glanced doubtfully at the inquirer.

"Sir George Tressady, I believe, sir? I will go and ask, if you will kindly wait a moment. Her ladyship does not generally see visitors in the morning."

"Tell her, please, that I have brought a parcel to return to her."

The butler retired, and shortly appeared at the corner of the stairs beckoning to the visitor. George mounted.

They passed through the outer drawing-room, and the servant drew aside the curtain of the inner room. Was it February again? The scent of hyacinth and narcissus seemed to be floating round him.

There was a hasty movement, and a tall figure came with a springing step to meet him.

"Sir George! How kind of you to come! I wish Maxwell were in. He would have enjoyed a chat with you so much. But Lord Ardagh sent him a note at breakfast-time, and he has just gone over to Downing Street. Hallin, move your puzzle a little, and make a way for Sir George to pass. Will you sit there?"

Hallin sprang up readily enough at the sight of his friend Sir George, put a fat hand into his, and then gave his puzzle-map of Europe a vigorous push to one side that drove Crete helplessly into the arms of

the United Kingdom.

"Oh! what a muddle!" cried his mother, laughing, and standing to look at the disarray. "You must try, Hallin, and see if you can straighten it out—as Sir George straightened out father's Bill for him last night."

She turned to him; but the softness of her eyes was curiously veiled. It struck George at once that she was not at her ease—that there had been embarrassment in her very greeting of him.

They began to talk of the debate. She asked him minutely about the progress of the combination that had defeated Fontenoy. They discussed this or that man's attitude, or they compared the details of the division with those of the divisions which had gone before.

All through it seemed to Tressady that the person sitting in his chair and talking politics was a kind of automaton, with which the real George Tressady had very little to do. The automaton wore a grey summer suit, and seemed to be talking shrewdly enough, though with occasional lapses and languors. The real Tressady sat by, and noted what passed. *"How pale she is! She is not really happy—or triumphant. How she avoids all personal talk—nothing to be said, or hardly, of my part in it—my effort. Ah! she praises my speech, but with no warmth—I see! she would rather not owe such a debt to me. Her mind is troubled—perhaps Maxwell?—or some vile talk?"*

Meanwhile, all that Marcella perceived was that the man beside her became gradually more restless and more silent. She sat near him, with Hallin at her feet, her beautiful head held a little stiffly, her eyes at once kind and reserved. Nothing could have been simpler than her cool grey dress, her quiet attitude. Yet it seemed to him he had never felt her dignity so much—a moral dignity, infinitely subtle and exquisite, which breathed not only from her face and movements, but from the room about her—the room which held the pictures she loved, the books she read, the great pots of wild flowers or branching green it was her joy to set like jewels in its shady corners. He looked round it from time to time. It had for him the associations and the scents of a shrine, and he would never see it again! His heart swelled within him. The strange double sense died away.

Presently, Hallin, having put his puzzle safely into its box, ran off to his lessons. His mother looked after him, wistfully. And he had no sooner shut the door than Tressady bent forward. "You see—I thought it out!"

"Yes indeed!" she said, "and to some purpose."

But her voice was uncertain, and veiled like her eyes. Something in her reluctance to meet him, to talk it over, both alarmed and stung him. What was wrong? Had she any grievance against him? Had he so played his part as to offend her in any way? He searched his memory anxiously, his self-control, that he had been so sure of, failing him fast.

"It was a strange finish to the session—wasn't it?" he said, looking at her. "We didn't think it would end so, when we first began to argue. What a queer game it all is! Well, my turn of it will have been exciting enough—though short. I can't say, however, that I shall much regret putting down the cards. I ought never to have taken a hand."

She turned to him, in flushed dismay.

"You *are* thinking of leaving Parliament? But why—*why* should you?"

"Oh yes!—I am quite clear about that," he said deliberately. "It was not yesterday only. I am of no use in Parliament. And the only use it has been to me, is to show me—that—well!—that I have no party really, and no convictions. London has been a great mistake. I must get out of it—if only—lest my private life should drift on a rock and go to pieces. So far as I know it has brought me one joy only, one happiness only—to know you!"

He turned very pale. The hand that was lying on her lap suddenly shook. She raised it hastily, took some flowers out of a jar of poppies and grass that was standing near, and nervously put them back again. Then she said gently, almost timidly:

"I owe a great deal to your friendship. My mind—please believe it—is full of thanks. I lay awake last night, thinking of all the thousands of people that speech of yours would save—all the lives that hang upon it."

"I never thought of them at all," he said abruptly. His heart seemed to be beating in his throat.

She shrank a little. Evidently her presence of mind failed her, and he took advantage.

"I never thought of them," he repeated, "or, at least, they weighed with me as nothing compared with another motive. As for the thing itself, by the time yesterday arrived I had given up my judgment to yours—I had simply come to think that what you wished was good. A force I no longer questioned drove me on to help you to your end. That was the whole secret of last night. The rest was only means to a goal."

But he paused. He saw that she was trembling—that the tears were in her eyes.

"I have been afraid," she said, trying hard for composure—"it has been weighing upon me all through these hours—that—I had been putting a claim—a claim of my own forward." It seemed hardly possible for her to find the words. "And I have been realising the issues for *you*, feeling bitterly that I had done a great wrong—if it were not a matter of conviction—in—in wringing so much from a friend. This morning everything,—the victory, the joy of seeing hard work bear fruit,—it has all been blurred to me."

He gazed at her a moment—fixing every feature, every line upon his memory.

"Don't let it be," he said quietly, at last. "I have had my great moment. It does not fall to many to feel as I felt for about an hour last night. I had seen you in trouble and anxiety for many weeks. I was able to brush them away, to give you relief and joy,—at least, I thought I was"—he drew himself up with a half-impatient smile. "Sometimes I suspected that—that your kindness might be troubled about me; but I said to myself, 'that will pass away, and the solid thing—the fact—will remain. She longed for this particular thing. She shall have it. And if the truth is as she supposes it,—why not?—there are good men and keen brains with her—what has been done will go on gladdening and satisfying her year by year. As for me, I shall have acknowledged, shall have repaid—'"

He hesitated—paused—looked up.

A sudden terror seized her—her lips parted.

"Don't—don't say these things!" she said, imploring, lifting her hand. It was like a child flinching from a punishment.

He smiled unsteadily, trying to master himself, to find a way through the tumult of feeling.

"Won't you listen to me?" he said at last, "I sha'n't ever trouble you again."

She could make no reply. Intolerable gratitude and pain held her, and he went on speaking, gazing straight into her shrinking face.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "the people who grow up in the dry and mean habit of mind that I grew up in, break through in all sorts of different ways. Art and religion—I suppose they change and broaden a man. I don't know. I am not an artist—and religion talks to me of something I don't understand. To me, to know you has broken down the walls, opened the windows. It always used to come natural to me—well! to think little of people, to look for the mean, ugly things in them, especially in women. The only people I admired were men of action—soldiers, administrators; and it often seemed to me that women hampered and belittled them. I said to myself, one mustn't let women count for too much in one's life. And the idea of women troubling their heads with politics, or social difficulties, half amused, half disgusted me. At the same time I was all with Fontenoy in hating the usual philanthropic talk about the poor. It seemed to be leading us to mischief—I thought the greater part of it insincere. Then I came to know you.—And, after all, it seemed a woman could talk of public things, and still be real—the humanity didn't rub off, the colour stood! It was easy, of course, to say that you had a personal motive—other people said it, and I should have liked to echo it. But from the beginning I knew that didn't explain it. All the women,"—he checked himself,—"*most of the women I had ever known judged everything by some petty personal standard. They talked magnificently, perhaps, but there was always something selfish and greedy at bottom. Well, I was always looking for it in you! Then instead—suddenly—I found myself anxious lest what I said should displease or hurt you—lest you should refuse to be my friend. I longed, desperately, to make you understand me—and then, after our talks, I hated myself for posing, and going further than was sincere. It was so strange to me not to be scoffing and despising.*"

Marcella woke from her trance of pain—looked at him with amazement. But the sight of him—a man, with the perspiration on his brow, struggling now to tell the bare truth about himself and his plight—silenced her. She hung towards him again, as pale as he, bearing what fate had sent her.

"And ever since that day," he went on, putting his hand over his eyes, "when you walked home with me along the river, to be with you, to watch you, to puzzle over you, has built up a new self in me, that strains against and tears the old one. So these things—these heavenly, exquisite things that some men talk of—this sympathy, and purity, and sweetness—were true! They were true because you existed—"

because I had come to know something of your nature—had come to realise what it might be—for a man to have the right—"

He broke off, and buried his face in his hands, murmuring incoherent things. Marcella rose hurriedly, then stood motionless, her head turned from him, that she might not hear. She felt herself stifled with rising tears. Once or twice she began to speak, and the words died away again. At last she said, bending towards him:

"I have done very ill—very, *very* ill. I have been thinking all through of my personal want—of personal victory."

He shook his head, protesting. And she hardly knew how to go on. But suddenly the word of nature, of truth, came; though in the speaking it startled them both.

"Sir George!"—she put out her hand timidly and touched him—"may I tell you what I am thinking of? Not of you, nor of me—of another person altogether!"

He looked up.

"My wife?" he said, almost in his usual voice.

She said nothing; she was struggling with herself. He got up abruptly, walked to the open window, stood there a few seconds, and came back.

"It has to be all thought out again," he said, looking at her appealingly. "I must go away, perhaps—and realise—what can be done. I took marriage as carelessly as I took everything else. I must try and do better with it."

A sudden perception leapt in Marcella, revealing strange worlds. How she could have hated—with what fierceness, what flame!—the woman who taught ideal truths to Maxwell! She thought of the little self-complacent being in the white satin wedding-dress, that had sat beside her at Castle Luton—thought of her with overwhelming soreness and pain. Stepping quickly, her tears driven back, she went across the room to Tressady.

"I don't know what to say," she began, stopping suddenly beside him, and leaning her hand for support on a table while her head drooped. "I have been very selfish—very blind. But—mayn't it be the beginning—of something quite—quite—different? I was thinking only of Maxwell—or myself. But I ought to have thought of you—of my friend. I ought to have seen—but oh! how *could* I!" She broke off, wrestling with this amazing difficulty of choosing, amid all the thoughts that thronged to her lips, something that might be said—and if said, might heal.

But before he could interrupt her, she went on: "The harm was, in acting all through—by myself—as if only you and I, and Maxwell's work—were concerned. If I had made you known to *him*—if I had remembered—had thought—"

But she stopped again, in a kind of bewilderment. In truth she did not yet understand what had happened to her—how it could have happened to her—to *her*, whose life, soul, and body, to the red ripe of its inmost heart, was all Maxwell's, his possession, his chattel.

Tressady looked at her with a little sad smile.

"It was your unconsciousness," he said, in a low trembling voice, "of what you are—and have—that was so beautiful."

Somehow the words recalled her natural dignity, her noble pride as Maxwell's wife. She stood erect, composure and self-command returning. She was not her own, to humble herself as she pleased.

"We must never talk to each other like this again," she said gently, after a little pause. "We must try and understand each other—the *real* things in each other's lives.—Don't lay a great remorse on me, Sir George!—don't spoil your future, and your wife's—don't give up Parliament! You have great, great gifts! All this will seem just a passing misunderstanding—both to you—and me—by and by. We shall learn to be—real friends—you and we—together?"

She looked at him appealing—her face one prayer.

But he, flushing, shook his head.

"I must not come into your world," he said huskily. "I must go."

The wave of grief rolled upon her again. She turned away, looking across the room with wide dim eyes, as though asking for some help that did not come.

Tressady walked quickly back to the chair where he had been sitting, and took up his hat and gloves. Suddenly, as he looked back to her, he struck one of the gloves across his hand.

"What a *coward*—what a mean whining wretch I was to come to you this morning! I said to myself—like a hypocrite—that I could come—and go—without a word. My God—if I had!"—the low hoarse voice became a cry of pain—"I might still have taken some joy—"

He wrestled with himself.

"It was mad selfishness," he said at last, recovering himself by a fierce effort. "Mad it must have been—or I could never have come here to give you pain. Some demon drove me. Oh, forgive me!—forgive me! Good-bye! I shall bless you while I live. But you—you must never think of me, never speak of me—again."

She felt his grasp upon her fingers. He stooped, passionately kissed her hand and a fold of her dress. She rose hurriedly; but the door had closed upon him before she had found her voice or choked down the sob in her throat.

She could only drop back into her chair, weeping silently, her face hidden in her hands.

A few minutes passed. There was a step outside. She sprang up and listened, ready to fly to the window and hide herself among the curtains. Then the colour flooded into her cheek. She waited. Maxwell came in. He, too, looked disturbed, and as he entered the room he thrust a letter into his pocket, almost with violence. But when his eyes fell on his wife a pang seized him. He hurried to her, and she leant against him, saying in a sobbing voice:

"George Tressady has been here. I seem to have done him a wrong—and his wife. I am not fit to help you, Aldous. I do such rushing, blind, foolish things—and all that one hoped and worked for turns to mere selfishness and misery. Whom shall I hurt next? You, perhaps—*you!*"

And she clung to him in despair.

* * * * *

A few minutes later the husband and wife were in conference together, Marcella sitting, Maxwell standing beside her. Marcella's tears had ceased; but never had Maxwell seen her so overwhelmed, so sad, and he felt half ashamed of his own burning irritation and annoyance with the whole matter.

Clearly, what he had dimly foreseen on the night of her return from the Mile End meeting had happened. This young man, ill-balanced, ill-mated, yet full of a sensitive ability and perception, had fallen in love with her; and Maxwell owed his political salvation to his wife's charm.

The more he loved her, the more odious the situation was to him. That any rational being should have even the shred of an excuse for regarding her as the political coquette, using her beauty for a personal end, struck him as a kind of sacrilege, and made him rage inwardly. Nevertheless, the idea struck him—struck and kindled him all at once that the very perfectness of this tie that bound them together weakened her somewhat as a woman in her dealing with the outside world. It withdrew from her some of a woman's ordinary intuitions with regard to the men around her. The heart had no wants, and therefore no fears. To any man she liked she was always ready, as she came to know him, to show her true self with a freedom and loveliness that were like the freedom and loveliness of a noble child. To have supposed that such a man could have any feelings towards her other than those she gave to her friends would have seemed to her a piece of ill-bred vanity. Such contingencies lay outside her ken; she would have brushed them away with a laughing contempt had they been presented to her. Her life was at once too happy and too busy for such things. How could anyone fall in love with Aldous's wife? Why should they?—if one was to ask the simplest question of all.

Yet Maxwell, as he stood looking down upon her, conscious of a certain letter in his inner pocket, felt with growing yet most unwilling determination that he must somehow try and make her turn her eyes upon this dingy world and see it as it is.

For it was not the case merely of a spiritual drama in which a few souls, all equally sincere and void of offence, were concerned. That, in Maxwell's eyes, would have been already disagreeable and tragic enough. But here was this keen, spiteful crowd of London society watching for what it might devour—those hateful newspapers!—not to speak of the ordinary fool of everyday life.

There had not been wanting a number of small signs and warnings. The whole course of the previous

day's debate, the hour of Tressady's speech, while Maxwell sat listening in the Speaker's Gallery overhead, had been for him—for her, too—poisoned by a growing uneasiness, a growing distaste for the triumph laid at their feet. She had come down to him from the Ladies' Gallery pale and nervous, shrinking almost from the grasp of his hand.

"What will happen? Has he made his position in Parliament impossible?" she had said to him as they stood together for a moment in the Home Secretary's room; and he understood, of course, that she was speaking of Tressady. In the throng that presently overwhelmed them he had no time to answer her; but he believed that she, too, had been conscious of the peculiar note in some of the congratulations showered upon them on their way through the crowded corridors and lobbies. On the steps of St. Stephen's entrance an old white-haired gentleman, the friend and connection of Maxwell's father, had clapped the successful Minister on the back, with a laughing word in his ear: "Upon my word, Aldous, your beautiful lady is a wife to conjure with! I hear she has done the whole thing—educated the young man, brought him to his bearings, spoilt all Fontenoy's plans, broken up the group, in fact. Glorious!" and the old man looked with eyes half sarcastic, half admiring at the form of Lady Maxwell standing beside the carriage-door.

"I imagine the group has broken itself up," said Maxwell, shortly, shaking off his tormentor. But as he glanced back from, the carriage-window to the crowded doorway, and the faces looking after them, the thought of the talk that was probably passing amid the throng set every nerve on edge.

Meanwhile she sat beside him, unconsciously a little more stately than usual, but curiously silent—till at last, as they were nearing Trafalgar Square, she threw out her hand to him, almost timidly:

"You *do* rejoice?"

"I do," he said, with a long breath, pressing the hand. "I suppose nothing ever happens as one has foreseen it. How strange, when one looks back to that Sunday!"

She made no reply, and since then Tressady's name had been hardly mentioned between them. They had discussed every speech but his—even when the morning papers came, reflecting the astonishment and excitement of the public. The pang in Marcella's mind was—"Aldous thinks I asked a personal favour—*Did* I?" And memory would fall back into anxious recapitulation of the scene with Tressady. Had she indeed pressed her influence with him too much—taken advantage of his Parliamentary youth and inexperience? In the hours of the night that followed the division, merely to ask the question tormented a conscience as proud as it was delicate.

And now!—this visit—this incredible declaration—this eagerness for his reward! Maxwell's contempt and indignation were rising fast. Mere chivalry, mere decent manners even, he thought, might have deterred a man from such an act. Meanwhile, in rapid flashes of thought he began to debate with himself how he should use this letter in his pocket—this besmirching, degrading letter.

But Marcella had much more to say. Presently she roused herself from her trance and looked at her husband.

"Aldous!"—she touched him on the arm, and he turned to her gravely—"There was one moment at Mile End, when—when I did play upon his pity—his friendship. He came down to Mile End on Thursday night. I told you. I saw he was unhappy—unhappy at home. He wanted sympathy desperately. I gave it him. Then I urged him to throw himself into his public work—to think out this vote he was to give. Oh! I don't know!—I don't know—" she broke off, in a depressed voice, shaking her head slowly—"I believe I threw myself upon his feelings—I felt that he was very sympathetic, that I had a power over him—it was a kind of bribery."

Her brow drooped under his eye.

"I believe you are quite unjust to yourself," he said unwillingly. "Of course, if any man chooses to misinterpret a confidence—"

"No," she said steadily. "I knew. It was quite different from any other time. I remember how uncomfortable I felt afterwards. I did try to influence him—just through, being a woman. There!—it is quite true."

He could not withdraw his eyes from hers—from the mingling of pride, humility, passion, under the dark lashes.

"And if you did, do you suppose that *I* can blame you?" he said slowly.

He saw that she was holding an inquisition in her own heart, and looking to him as judge. How could

he judge?—whatever there might be to judge. He adored her.

For the moment she did not answer him. She clasped her hands round her knees, thinking aloud.

"From the beginning, I remember I thought of him as somebody quite new and fresh to what he was doing—somebody who would certainly be influenced—who ought to be influenced. And then"—she raised her eyes again, half shrinking—"there was the feeling, I suppose, of personal antagonism to Lord Fontenoy! One could not be sorry to detach one of his chief men. Besides, after Castle Luton, George Tressady was so attractive! You did not know him, Aldous; but to talk to him stirred all one's energies; it was a perpetual battle—one took it up again and again, enjoying it always. As we got deeper in the fight I tried never to think of him as a member of Parliament—often I stopped myself from saying things that might have persuaded him, as far as the House was concerned. And yet, of course"—her face, in its nobility, took a curious look of hardness—"I *did* know all the time that he was coming to think more and more of me—to depend on me. He disliked me at first—afterwards he seemed to avoid me—then I felt a change. Now I see I thought of him all along; just in one capacity—in relation to what I wanted—whether I tried to persuade him or no. And all the time—"

A cloud of pain effaced the frown. She leant her head against her husband's arm.

"Aldous!"—her voice was low and miserable,—"what can his wife have felt towards me? I never thought of her after Castle Luton—she seemed to me such a vulgar, common little being. Surely, surely!—if they are so unhappy, it can't be—*my* doing; there was cause enough—"

Nothing could have been more piteous than the tone. It was laden with the remorse that only such a nature could feel for such a cause. Maxwell's hand touched her head tenderly. A variety of expressions crossed his face, then a sharp flash of decision.

"Dear! I think you ought to know—she has written to me."

Marcella sprang up. Face and neck flushed crimson. She threw him an uncertain look, the nostrils quivering.

"Will you show me the letter?"

He hesitated. On his first reading of it he had vowed to himself that she should never see it. But since her confessions had begun to make the matter clearer to him a moral weight had pressed upon him. She must realise her power, her responsibility! Moreover, they two, with conscience and good sense to guide them, had got to find a way out of this matter. He did not feel that he could hide the letter from her if there was to be common action and common understanding.

So he gave it to her.

She read it pacing up and down, unconscious sounds of pain and protest forcing themselves to her lips from time to time, which made it very difficult for him to stand quietly where he was. On that effusion of gall and bitterness poor Letty had spent her sleepless night. Every charge that malice could bring, every distortion that jealousy could apply to the simplest incident, every insinuation that, judged by her own standard, had seemed to her most likely to work upon a husband—Letty had crowded them all into the mean, ill-written letter—the letter of a shopgirl trying to rescue her young man from the clutches of a rival.

But every sentence in it was a stab to Marcella. When she had finished it she stood with it in her hand beside her writing-table, looking absently through the window, pale, and deep in thought. Maxwell watched her.

When her moment of consideration broke her look swept round to him.

"I shall go to her," she said simply. "I must see her!"

Maxwell pondered.

"I think," he said reluctantly, "she would only repulse and insult you."

"Then it must be borne. It cannot end so."

She walked up to him and let him draw his arm about her. They stood in silence for a minute or two. When she raised her head again, her eyes sought his beseechingly.

"Aldous, help me! If we cannot repair this mischief,—you and I,—what are we worth? I will tell you my plan—"

There was a sound at the door. Husband and wife moved away from each other as the butler entered.

"My lord, Mrs. Allison and Lord Fontenoy are in the library. They asked me to say that they wish to consult your lordship on something very urgent. I told them I thought your lordship was engaged, but I would come and see."

Marcella and Maxwell looked at each other. Ancoats! No doubt the catastrophe so long staved off had at last arrived. Maxwell's stifled exclamation was the groan of the overworked man who hardly knows how to find mind enough for another anxiety. But a new and sudden light shone in his wife's face. She turned to the servant almost with eagerness:

"Please tell Mrs. Allison and Lord Fontenoy to come up."

CHAPTER XIX

The door opened silently, and there came in a figure that for a moment was hardly recognised by either Maxwell or his wife. Shrunken, pale, and grief-stricken, Ancoats's poor mother entered, her eye seeking eagerly for Maxwell, perceiving nothing else. She was in black, her veil hurriedly thrown back, and the features beneath it were all blurred by distress and fatigue.

Marcella hurried to her. Mrs. Allison took her hand in both her own with the soft, appealing motion habitual to her, then said hastily, still looking at Maxwell:

"Maxwell, the boy has gone. He left me two days ago. This morning, in my trouble, I sent for Lord Fontenoy, my kind, kind friend. And he persuaded me to come to you at once. I begged him to come too—"

She glanced timidly from one to the other, implying many things.

But even with this preface, Maxwell's greeting of his defeated antagonist was ceremony itself. The natural instinct of such a man is to mask victory in courtesy. But a paragraph that morning in Fontenoy's paper—a paragraph that he happened to have seen in Lord Ardagh's room—had appealed to another natural instinct, stronger and more primitive. It amazed him that even this emergency and Mrs. Allison's persuasions could have brought the owner of the paper within his doors on this particular morning.

Fontenoy, immersed in the correspondence of the morning, had not yet chanced to see the paragraph, which was Harding Watton's. Yet, if he had, he could not have shown a more haughty and embarrassed bearing. He was there under a compulsion he did not know how to resist, a compulsion of tears and grief; but the instinct for manners, which so often upon occasion serves the man of illustrious family, as well, almost, as good feeling or education may serve another, had been for the time weakened in him by the violences and exhaustion of the political struggle, and he did not feel certain that he could trust himself. He was smarting still through every nerve, and the greeting especially that Maxwell's tall wife extended to him was gall and bitterness. She meanwhile, as she advanced towards him, was mostly struck with the perfection of his morning dress. The ultra-correctness and strict fashion that he affected in these matters were generally a surprise to those who knew him only by reputation.

After five minutes' question and answer the Maxwells understood something of the situation. A servant of Ancoats's had been induced to disclose what he knew. There could be no question that the young fellow had gone off to Normandy, where he possessed a chalet close to Trouville, in the expectation that his fair lady would immediately join him there. She had not yet started. So much Fontenoy had already ascertained. But she had thrown up a recent engagement within the last few days, and before Ancoats's flight all Fontenoy's information had pointed to the likelihood of a *coup* of some sort. As for the boy himself, he had left his mother at Castle Luton, three days before, on the pretext of a Scotch visit, and had instead taken the evening train to Paris, leaving a letter for his mother in which the influence of certain modern French novels of the psychological kind could perhaps be detected. "The call of the heart that drives me from you," wrote this incredible young man, "is something independent of myself. I wring my hands, but I follow where it leads. Love has its crimes,—that I admit,—but they are the only road to experience. And experience is all I care to live for! At any rate, I cannot accept the limits that you, mother, would impose upon me. Each of us must be content to recognise the other's personality. I have tried to reconcile you to an affection that must be content to

be irregular. You repel it and me, under the influence of a bigotry in which I have ceased to believe. Suffer me, then, to act for myself in this respect. At any time that you like to call upon me I will be your dutiful son, so long as this matter is not mentioned between us. And let me implore you not to bring in third persons. They have already done mischief enough. Against them I should know how to protect myself."

Maxwell returned the letter with a disgust he could hardly repress. Everything in it seemed to him as pinchbeck as the passion itself. Mrs. Allison took it with the same miserable look, which had in it, Marcella noticed, a certain strange sternness, as of some frail creature nerving itself to desperate things.

"Now what shall we do?" said Maxwell, abruptly.

Fontenoy moved forward. "I presume you still command the same persons you set in motion before? Can you get at them to-day?"

Maxwell pondered. "Yes, the clergyman. The solicitor-brother is too far away. Your idea is to stop the girl from crossing?"

"If it were still possible." Fontenoy dropped his voice, and his gesture induced Maxwell to follow him to the recess of a distant window.

"The chief difficulty, perhaps," said Fontenoy, resuming, "concerns the lad himself. His mother, you will understand, cannot run any risk of being brought in contact with that woman. Nor is she physically fit for the voyage; but someone must go, if only to content her. There has been some wild talk of suicide, apparently—mere bombast, of course, like so much of it, but she has been alarmed."

"Do you propose, then, to go yourself?"

"I am of no use," said Fontenoy, decisively.

Maxwell had cause to know that the statement was true, and did not press him. They fell into a rapid consultation.

Meanwhile, Marcella had drawn Mrs. Allison to the sofa beside her, and was attempting a futile task of comfort. Mrs. Allison answered in monosyllables, glancing hither and thither. At last she said in a low, swift voice, as though addressing herself, rather than her companion, "If all fails, I have made up my mind. I shall leave his house. I can take nothing more from him."

Marcella started. "But that would deprive you of all chance, all hope of influencing him," she said, her eager, tender look searching the other woman's face.

"No; it would be my duty," said Mrs. Allison, simply, crossing her hands upon her lap. Her delicate blue eyes, swollen with weeping, the white hair, of which a lock had escaped from its usual quiet braids and hung over her blanched cheeks, her look at once saintly and indomitable—every detail of her changed aspect made a chill and penetrating impression. Marcella began to understand what the Christian might do, though the mother should die of it.

Meanwhile she watched the two men at the other side of the room, with a manifest eagerness for their return. Presently, indeed, she half rose and called:

"Aldous!"

Lord Maxwell turned.

"Are you thinking of someone who might go to Trouville?" she asked him.

"Yes, but we can hit on no one," he replied, in perplexity.

She moved towards him, bearing herself with a peculiar erectness and dignity.

"Would it be possible to ask Sir George Tressady to go?" she said quietly.

Maxwell looked at her open-mouthed for an instant. Fontenoy, behind him, threw a sudden, searching glance at the beautiful figure in grey.

"We all know," she said, turning back to the mother, "that Ancoats likes Sir George."

Mrs. Allison shrunk a little from the clear look. Fontenoy's rage of defeat, however modified in her

presence, had nevertheless expressed itself to her in phrases and allusions that had both perplexed and troubled her. *Had* Marcella indeed made use of her beauty to decoy a weak youth from his allegiance? And now she spoke his name so simply.

But the momentary wonder died from the poor mother's mind.

"I remember," she said sadly, "I remember he once spoke to me very kindly about my son."

"And he thought kindly," said Marcella, rapidly; "he is kind at heart. Aldous! if Cousin Charlotte consents, why not at least put the case to him? He knows everything. He might undertake what we want, for her sake,—for all our sakes,—and it might succeed."

The swift yet calm decision of her manner completed Maxwell's bewilderment.

His eyes sought hers, while the others waited, conscious, somehow, of a dramatic moment. Fontenoy's flash of malicious curiosity made him even forget, while it lasted, the little tragic figure on the sofa.

"What do you say, Cousin Charlotte?" said Maxwell at last.

His voice was dry and business-like. Only the wife who watched him perceived the silent dignity with which he had accepted her appeal.

He went to sit beside Mrs. Allison, stooping over her, while they talked in a low key. Very soon she had caught at Marcella's suggestion, with an energy of despair.

"But how can we find him?" she said at last, looking helplessly round the room, at the very chair, among others, where Tressady had just been sitting.

Maxwell felt the humour of the situation without relishing it.

"Either at his own house," he said shortly, "or the House of Commons."

"He may have left town this morning. Lord Fontenoy thought"—she looked timidly at her companion—"that he would be sure to go and explain himself to his constituents at once."

"Well, we can find out. If you give me instructions,—if you are sure this is what you want,—we will find out at once. Are you sure?"

"I can think of nothing better," she said, with a piteous gesture. "And if he goes, I have only one message to give him. Ancoats knows that I have exhausted every argument, every entreaty. Now let him tell my son"—her voice grew firm, in spite of her look of anguish—"that if he insists on surrendering himself to a life of sin I can bear him company no more. I shall leave his house, and go somewhere by myself, to pray for him."

Maxwell tried to soothe her, and there was some half-whispered talk between them, she quietly wiping away her tears from time to time.

Meanwhile, Marcella and Fontenoy sat together a little way off, he at first watching Mrs. Allison, she silent, and making no attempt to play the hostess. Gradually, however, the sense of her presence beside him, the memory of Tressady's speech, of the scene in the House of the night before, began to work in his veins with a pricking, exciting power. His family was famous for a certain drastic way with women; his father, the now old and half-insane Marquis, had parted from his mother while Fontenoy was still a child, after scenes that would have disgraced an inn parlour. Fontenoy himself, in his reckless youth, had simply avoided the whole sex, so far as its reputable members were concerned; till one woman by sympathy, by flattery perhaps, by the strange mingling in herself of iron and gentleness, had tamed him. But there were brutal instincts in his blood, and he became conscious of them as he sat beside Marcella Maxwell.

Suddenly he broke out, bending forward, one hand on his knee, the other nervously adjusting the eyeglass without which he was practically blind.

"I imagine your side had foreseen last night better than we had?"

She drew herself together instantly.

"One can hardly say. It was evident, wasn't it, that the House as a whole was surprised? Certainly, no one could have foreseen the numbers."

She met his look straight, her white hand playing with Mrs.

Allison's card.

"Oh! a slide of that kind once begun goes like the wind," said Fontenoy. "Well, and are you pleased with your Bill—not afraid of your promises—of all the Edens you have held out?"

The smile that he attempted roused such ogerish associations in Marcella, she must needs say something to give colour to the half-desperate laugh that caught her.

"Did you suppose we should be already *en penitence*?" she asked him.

The man's wrath overcame him. So England—all the serious forces of the country—were to be more and more henceforward at the mercy of this kind of thing! He had begun the struggle with a scornful disbelief in current gossip. He—politically and morally the creation of a woman—had yet not been able to bring himself to fear a woman. And now he sat there, fiercely saying to himself that this woman, playing the old game under new names, had undone him.

"Ah! I see," he said. "You are of the mind of the Oxford don—never regret, never retract, never apologise?"

The small, reddish eyes, like needle-points, fixed the face before him. She looked up, her beautiful lips parting. She felt the insult—marvelled at it! On such an errand, in her own house! Scorn was almost lost in astonishment.

"A quotation which nobody gets right—isn't it so?" she said calmly. "If a wise man said it, I suppose he meant, 'Don't explain yourself to the wrong people,' which is good advice, don't you think?"

She rose as she spoke, and moved away from him, that she might listen to what her husband was saying. Fontenoy was left to reflect on the folly of a man who, being driven to ask a kindness of his enemy, cannot keep his temper in the enemy's house. Yet his temper had been freshly tried since he entered it. The whole suggestion of Tressady's embassy was to himself galling in the extreme. "There is a meaning in it," he thought; "of course she thinks it will save appearances!" There was no extravagance, no calumny, that this cold critic of other men's fervours was not for the moment ready to believe.

Nevertheless, as he threw himself back in his chair, and his eye caught Mrs. Allison's bent figure on the other side of the room, he knew that he must needs submit—he did submit—to anything that could give that torn heart ease. Of his two passions, one, the passion for politics, seemed for the moment to have lost itself in disgust and disappointment; to the other he clung but the more strongly. Once or twice in her talk with Maxwell, Mrs. Allison raised her gentle eyes and looked across to Fontenoy. "Are you there, my friend?" the glance seemed to say, and a thrill spread itself through the man's rugged being. Ah, well! the follies of this young scapegrace must wear themselves out in time, and either he would marry and so free his mother, or he would so outrage her conscience that she would separate herself from him. Then would come other people's rewards.

Presently, indeed, Mrs. Allison rose from her seat and advanced to him with hurried steps.

"We have settled it, I think; Maxwell will do all he can. It seems hard to trust so much to a stranger like Sir George Tressady, but if he will go—if Ancoats likes him? We must do the best, mustn't we?"

She raised to him her delicate, small face, in a most winning dependence. Fontenoy did not even attempt resistance.

"Certainly—it is not a chance to lose. May I suggest also"—he looked at Maxwell—"that there is no time to lose?"

"Give me ten minutes, and I am off," said Maxwell, hurriedly carrying a bundle of unopened letters to a distance. He looked through them, to see if anything especially urgent required him to give instructions to his secretary before leaving the house.

"Shall I take you home?" said Fontenoy to Mrs. Allison.

She drew her thick veil round her head and face, and said some tremulous words, which unconsciously deepened the gloom on Fontenoy's face. Apparently they were to the effect that before going home she wished to see the Anglican priest in whom she especially confided, a certain Father White, who was to all intents and purposes her director. For in his courtship of this woman of fifty, with her curious distinction and her ethereal charm, which years seemed only to increase, Fontenoy had not one rival, but two—her son and her religion.

Fontenoy's fingers barely touched those of Maxwell and his wife. As he closed the door behind Mrs.

Allison, leaving the two together, he said to himself contemptuously that he pitied the husband.

When the latch had settled, Maxwell threw down his letters and crossed the room to his wife.

"I only half understood you," he said, a flush rising in his face. "You really mean that we, on this day of all days—that I—am to personally ask this kindness of George Tressady?"

"I do!" she cried, but without attempting any caress. "If I could only go and ask it myself!" "That would be impossible!" he said quickly.

"Then you, dear husband—dear love!—go and ask it for me! Must we not—oh! do see it as I do!—must we not somehow make it possible to be friends again, to wipe out that—that half-hour once for all?"—she threw out her hand in an impetuous gesture. "If you go, he will feel that is what we mean—he will understand us at once—there is nothing vile in him—nothing! Dear, he never said a word to me I could resent till this morning. And, alack, alack! was it somehow my fault?" She dropped her face a moment on the back of the chair she held. "How I am to play my own part—well! I must think. But I cannot have such a thing on my heart, Aldous—I cannot!"

He was silent a moment; then he said:

"Let me understand, at least, what it is precisely that we are doing. Is the idea that it should be made possible for us all to meet again as though nothing had happened?"

She shrank a moment from the man's common sense; then replied, controlling herself:

"Only not to leave the open sore—to help him to forget! He must know—he does know"—she held herself proudly—"that I have no secrets from you. So that when the time comes for remembering, for thinking it over, he will shrink from you, or hate you. Whereas, what I want"—her eyes filled with tears—"is that he should *know* you—only that! I ought to have brought it about long ago."

"Are you forgetting that I owe him this morning my political existence?"

The voice betrayed the inner passion.

"He would be the last person to remember it!" she cried. "Why not take it quite, quite simply?—behave so as to say to him, without words, 'Be our friend—join with us in putting out of sight what hurts us no less than you to think of. Shut the door upon the old room—pass with us into a new!'—oh! if I could explain!"

She hid her face in her hands again.

"I understand," he said, after a long pause. "It is very like you. I am not quite sure it is very wise. These things, to my mind, are best left to end themselves. But I promised Mrs. Allison; and what you ask, dear, you shall have. So be it."

She lifted her head hastily, and was dismayed by the signs of agitation in him as he turned away. She pursued him timidly, laying her hand on his arm.

"And then—"

Her voice sank to its most pleading note. He caught her hand; but she withdrew herself in haste.

"And then," she went on, struggling for a smile, "then you and I have things to settle. Do you think I don't know that I have made all your work, and all your triumph, gall and bitterness to you—do you think I don't know?"

She gazed at him with a passionate intensity through her tears, yet by her gesture forbidding him to come near her. What man would not have endured such discomforts a thousand times for such a look?

He stooped to her.

"We are to talk that out, then, when I come back?—Please give these letters to Saunders—there is nothing of importance. I will go first to Tressady's house."

* * * * *

Maxwell drove away through the sultry streets, his mind running on his task. It seemed to him that politics had never put him to anything so hard. But he began to plan it with his usual care and precision. The butler who opened the door of the Upper Brook Street house could only say that his master was not at home.

"Shall I find him, do you imagine, at the House of Commons?"

The butler could not say. But Lady Tressady was in, though just on the point of going out. Should he inquire?

But the visitor made it plain that he had no intention of disturbing Lady Tressady, and would find out for himself. He left his card in the butler's hands.

"Who was that, Kenrick?" said a sharp voice behind the man as the hansom drove away. Letty Tressady, elaborately dressed, with a huge white hat and lace parasol, was standing on the stairs, her pale face peering out of the shadows. The butler handed her the card, and telling him to get her a cab at once, she ran up again to the drawing-room.

Meanwhile Maxwell sped on towards Westminster, frowning over his problem. As he drove down Whitehall the sun brightened to a naked midday heat, throwing its cloak of mists behind it. The gilding on the Clock Tower sparkled in the light; even the dusty, airless street, with its withered planes, was on a sudden flooded with gaiety. Two or three official or Parliamentary acquaintances saluted the successful minister as he passed; and each was conscious of a certain impatience with the gravity of the well-known face. That a great man should not be content to look victory, as well as win it, seemed a kind of hypocrisy.

In the House of Commons, a few last votes and other oddments of the now dying session were being pushed through to an accompaniment of empty benches. Tressady was not there, nor in the library. Maxwell made his way to the upper lobby, where writing-tables and materials are provided in the window-recesses for the use of members.

He had hardly entered the lobby before he caught sight at its further end of the long straight chin and fair head of the man he was in quest of. And almost at the same moment, Tressady, who was sitting writing amid a pile of letters and papers, lifted his eyes and saw Lord Maxwell approaching.

He started, then half rose, scattering his papers. Maxwell bowed as he neared the table, then stopped beside it, without offering his hand.

"I fear I may be disturbing you," he said, with simple but cold courtesy. "The fact is I have come down here on an urgent matter, which may perhaps be my excuse. Could you give me twenty minutes, in my room?"

"By all means," said Tressady. He tried to put his papers together, but to his own infinite annoyance his hand shook. He seemed hardly to know what to do with them.

"Do not let me hurry you," said Maxwell, in the same manner. "Will you follow me at your leisure?"

"I will follow you immediately," said Tressady; "as soon as I have put these under lock and key."

His visitor departed. Tressady remained standing a moment by the table, his blue eyes, unusually wide open, fixed absently on the river, a dark red flush overspreading the face. Then he rapidly threw his papers together into a black bag that stood near, and walked with them to his locker in the wall.

For an hour after he left Marcella Maxwell he had wandered blindly up and down the Green Park; at the end of it a sudden impulse had driven him to the House, as his best refuge both from Letty and himself. There he found waiting for him a number of letters, and a sheaf of telegrams besides from his constituency, with which he had just begun to grapple when Maxwell interrupted him. Some hours of hard writing and thinking might, he thought, bring him by reaction to some notion of what to do with the next days and nights—how to take up the business of his private life again.

Now, as he withdrew his key from the lock, in a corridor almost empty of inhabitants, abstraction seized him once more. He leant against the wall a moment, with his hands in his pockets, seeing her face—the tears on her cheek—feeling the texture of her dress against his lips. Barely two hours ago! No doubt she had confided all to Maxwell in the interval. The young fellow burnt with mingled rage and shame. This interview with the husband seemed to transform it all to vaudeville, if not to farce. How was he to get through it with any dignity and self-command? Moreover, a passionate resentment towards Maxwell developed itself. His telling of his secret had been no matter for a common scandal, a vulgar jealousy. *She* knew that—she could not have so misrepresented him. A sense of the situation to which he had brought himself on all sides made his pride feel itself in the grip of something that asked his submission. Yet why, and to whom?

He walked along through the interminable corridors towards Maxwell's room in the House of Lords, a prey to what afterwards seemed to him the meanest moment of his life. Little knowing the pledges that

a woman had given for him, he did say to himself that Maxwell owed him much—that he was not called upon to bear everything from a man he had given back to power. And all the time his thoughts built a thorn-hedge about her face, her pity. Let him see them no more, not even in the mirror of the mind. Great heaven! what harm could such as he do to her?

By the time he reached Maxwell's door he seemed to himself as hard and cool as usual. As he entered, the minister was standing by an oriel window, overlooking the river, turning over the contents of a despatch-box that had just been brought him. He advanced at once; and Tressady noticed that he had already dismissed his secretary.

"Will you sit by the window?" said Maxwell. "The day promises to be extraordinarily hot."

Tressady took the seat assigned him. Maxwell's grey eye ran over the young man's figure and bearing. Then he bent forward from a chair on the other side of a small writing-table.

"You will probably have guessed the reason of my intrusion upon you—you and I have already discussed this troublesome affair—and the kind manner in which you treated our anxieties then—"

"Ancoats!" exclaimed Tressady, with a start he could not control. "You wish to consult me about Ancoats?"

A flash of wonder crossed the other's mind. "He imagined—" Instinctively Maxwell's opening mildness stiffened into a colder dignity.

"I fear we may be making an altogether improper claim upon you," he said quietly; "but this morning, about an hour ago, Ancoats's mother came to us with the news that he had left her two days ago, and was now discovered to be at Trouville, where he has a chalet, waiting for this girl, of whom we all know, to join him. You will imagine Mrs. Allison's despair. The entanglement is in itself bad enough. But she—I think you know it—is no ordinary woman, nor can she bring any of the common philosophy of life to bear upon this matter. It seems to be sapping her very springs of existence, and the impression she left upon myself—and upon Lady Maxwell"—he said the words slowly—"was one of the deepest pity and sorrow. As you also know, I believe, I have till now been able to bring some restraining influence to bear upon the girl, who is of course not a girl, but a very much married woman, with a husband always threatening to turn up and avenge himself upon her. There is a good man, one of those High Church clergymen who interest themselves specially in the stage, who has helped us many times already. I have telegraphed to him, and expect him here before long. We know that she has not yet left London, and it may be possible again, at the eleventh hour, to stop her. But that—"

"Is not enough," said Tressady, quickly, raising his head. "You want someone to grapple with Ancoats?"

Face and voice were those of another man—attentive, normal, sympathetic. Maxwell observed him keenly.

"We want someone to go to Ancoats; to represent to him his mother's determination to leave him for good if this disgraceful affair goes on; to break the shock of the girl's non-arrival to him, if, indeed, we succeed in stopping her; and to watch him for a day or two, in case there should be anything in the miserable talk of suicide with which he seems to have been threatening his mother."

"Oh! Suicide! Ancoats!" said Tressady, throwing back his head.

"We rate him, apparently, much the same," said Maxwell, drily. "But it is not to be wondered at that the mother should be differently affected. She sent you"—the speaker paused a moment—"what seemed to me a touching message."

Tressady bent forward.

"Tell him that I have no claim upon him—that I am ashamed to ask this of him. But he once said some kind words to me about my son, and I know that Ancoats desired his friendship. His help *might* save us. I can say no more."

Tressady looked up quickly, reddening involuntarily.

"Was Fontenoy there—did he agree?"

"Fontenoy agreed," said Maxwell, in the same measured voice. "In fact, you grasp our petition. To speak frankly, my wife suggested it, and I was deputed to bear it to you. But I need not say that we are quite prepared to find that you are not able to do what we have ventured to ask of you, or that your engagements will not permit it."

A strange gulp rose in Tressady's throat. He understood—oh! he understood her—perfectly.

He leant back in his chair, looking through the open window to the Thames. A breeze had risen and was breaking up the thunderous sky into gay spaces of white and blue. The river was surging and boiling under the tide, and strings of barges were mounting with the mounting water, slipping fast along the terrace wall. The fronts of the various buildings opposite rose in shadow against the dazzling blue and silver of the water. Here over the river, even for this jaded London, summer was still fresh; every mast and spar, every track of boat or steamer in the burst of light, struck the eye with sharpness and delight.

Each line and hue printed itself on Tressady's brain. Then he turned slowly to his companion. Maxwell sat patiently waiting for his reply; and for the first time Tressady received, as it were, a full impression of a personality he had till now either ignored or disliked. In youth Maxwell had never passed for a handsome man. But middle life and noble habit were every year giving increased accent and spiritual energy to the youth's pleasant features; and Nature as she silvered the brown hair, and drove deep the lines of thought and experience, was bringing more than she took away. A quiet, modest fellow Maxwell would be to the end; not witty; not brilliant; more and more content to bear the yoke of the great commonplaces of life as subtlety and knowledge grew; saying nothing of spiritual things, only living them—yet a man, it seemed, on whom England would more and more lay the burden of her fortunes.

Tressady gazed at him, shaken with new reverences, new compunctions. Maxwell's eyes were drawn to his—mild, penetrating eyes, in which for an instant Tressady seemed to read what no words would ever say to him. Then he sprang up.

"There is an afternoon train put on this month. I can catch it. Tell me, if you can, a few more details."

Maxwell took out a half-sheet of notes from his pocket, and the two men standing together beside the table went with care into a few matters it was well for Tressady to know. Tressady threw a quick intelligence into his questions that inevitably recalled to Maxwell the cut-and-thrust of his speech on the preceding evening; nor behind his rapid discussion of a vulgar business did the constrained emotion of his manner escape his companion.

At last all was settled. At the last moment an uneasy question rose in Maxwell's mind. "Ought *we*, at such a crisis, to be sending him away from his wife?" But he could not bring himself to put it, even lightly, into words, and as it happened Tressady did not leave him in doubt.

"I am glad you caught me," he said nervously, in what seemed an awkward pause, while he looked for his hat, forgetting where he had put it. "I was intending to leave London to-night. But my business can very well wait till next week. Now I think I have everything."

He gathered up a new Guide-Chaix that Maxwell had put into his hand, saw that the half-sheet of notes was safely stowed into his pocket-book, and took up his hat and stick. As he spoke, Maxwell had remembered the situation and Mrs. Allison's remark. No doubt Tressady had proposed to go north that night on a mission of explanation to his Market Malford constituents, and it struck one of the most scrupulous of men with an additional pang, that he should be thus helping to put private motives in the way of public duty. But what was done was done. And it seemed impossible that either should speak a word of politics.

"I ought to say," said Tressady, pausing once more as they moved together towards the door, "that I have not ultimately much hope for Mrs. Allison. If this entanglement is put aside, there will be something else. Trouville itself, in August, I should imagine, is a place of *bonnes fortunes* for the man who wants them, and Ancoats's mind runs to such things."

He spoke with a curious eagerness, like one who pleads that his good-will shall not be judged by mere failure or success.

Maxwell raised his shoulders.

"Nothing that can happen will in the least affect our gratitude to *you*," he said gravely.

"Gratitude!" muttered the young man under his breath. His lip trembled. He looked uncertainly at his companion. Maxwell did not offer his hand, yet as he opened the door for his visitor there was a quiet cordiality and kindness in his manner that made his renewed words of thanks sound like a strange music in Tressady's ears.

When the minister was once more alone he walked back to the window, and stood looking down thoughtfully on the gay pageant of the river. She was right—she was always right. There was nothing vile in that young fellow, and his face had a look of suffering it pained Maxwell to remember. Why had he personally not come to know him better? "I think too little of men, too much of machinery," he said to himself, despondently; "unconsciously I leave the dealing with human beings far too often to her, and then I wonder that a man sees and feels her as she is!"

Yet as he stood there in the sunshine a feeling of moral relief stole upon him, the feeling that rewards a man who has tried to deal greatly with some common and personal strait. Some day, not yet, he would make Tressady his friend. He calmly felt it to be within his power.

Unless the wife!—He threw up his hand, and turned back to his writing-table. What was to be done with that letter? Had Tressady any knowledge of it? Maxwell could not conceive it possible that he had. But, no doubt, it would come to his knowledge, as well as Maxwell's reply.

For he meant to reply, and as he glanced at the clock on his table he saw that he had just half an hour before his clergyman-visitor arrived. Instantly, in his methodical way, he sat down to his task, labouring it, however, with toil and difficulty, when it was once begun.

The few words he ultimately wrote ran as follows:

"Dear Lady Tressady,—Your letter was a great surprise and a great pain to me. I believe you will recognise before long that you wrote it under a delusion, and that you have said in it both unkind and unjust things of one who is totally incapable of wronging you or anyone else. My wife read your letter, for she and I have no secrets. She will try and see you at once, and I trust you will not refuse to see her. She will prove to you, I think, that you have been giving yourself quite needless torture, for which she has no responsibility, but for which she is none the less sorrowful and distressed.

"I have treated your letter in this way because it is impossible to ignore the pain and trouble which drove you to write. I need not say that if it became necessary for me to write or act in another way, I should think only of my wife. But I will trust to the effect upon you of her own words and character; and I cannot believe that you will misconstrue the generosity that prompts her to go to you.

"Is it not possible, also, that your misunderstanding of your husband may be in its own way as grave as your misunderstanding of Lady Maxwell? Forgive an intrusive question, and believe me,

"Yours faithfully,

"MAXWELL."

He read it anxiously over and over, then took a hasty copy of it, and finally sealed and sent it. He was but half satisfied with it. How was one to write such a letter without argument or recrimination? The poor thing had a vulgar, spiteful, little soul; that was clear from her outpouring. It was also clear that she was miserable; nor could Maxwell disguise from himself that in a sense she had ample cause. From that hard fact, with all its repellent and unpalatable consequences, a weaker man would by now have let his mind escape, would at any rate have begun to minimise and make light of George Tressady's act of the morning. In Maxwell, on the contrary, after a first movement of passionate resentment which had nothing whatever in common with ordinary jealousy, that act was now generating a compelling and beneficent force, that made for healing and reparation. Marcella had foreseen it, and in her pain and penitence had given the impulse. For all things are possible to a perfect affection, working through a nature at once healthy and strong.

Yet when Maxwell was once more established in his room at the Privy Council, overwhelmed with letters, interviews, and all the routine of official business, those who had to do with him noticed an unusual restlessness in their even-tempered chief. In truth, whenever his work left him free for a moment, all sorts of questions would start up in his mind: "Is she there? Is that woman hurting and insulting her? Can I do nothing? My love! my poor love!"

* * * * *

But Marcella's plans so far had not prospered.

When George Tressady, after hastily despatching his most urgent business at the House, drove up to his own door in the afternoon just in time to put his things together and catch a newly-put-on dining-train to Paris, he found the house deserted. The butler reminded him that Letty accompanied by Miss Tulloch had gone to Hampton Court to join a river party for the day. George remembered; he hated the people she was to be with, and instinct told him that Cathedine would be there.

A rush of miserable worry overcame him. Ought he to be leaving her?

Then, in the darkness of the hall, he caught sight of a card lying on the table. *Her card!* Amazement made him almost dizzy, while the man at his arm explained.

"Her ladyship called just after luncheon. She thought she would have found my lady in—before she went out. But her ladyship is coming again, probably this evening, as she wished to see Lady Tressady particularly."

Tressady gave the man directions to pack for him immediately, then took the card into his study, and stood looking at it in a tumult of feeling. Ah! let him be gone—out of her way! Oh, heavenly goodness and compassion! It seemed to him already that an angel had trodden this dark house, and that another air breathed in it.

That was his first thought. Then the rush of sore longing, of unbearable self-contempt, stirred all his worsen self to life again. Had she not better after all have left him and Letty alone! What did such lives as theirs matter to her?

He ran upstairs to make his last preparations, wrote a few lines to Letty describing Mrs. Allison's plight and the errand on which he was bound, and in half an hour was at Charing Cross.

CHAPTER XX

"Did you ring, my lady?"

"Yes. Kenrick, if Lady Maxwell calls to see me to-night, you will say, please, that I am particularly engaged, and unable to receive anyone."

Letty Tressady had just come in from her river party. Dressed in a delicate gown of lace and pale green chiffon, she was standing beside her writing-table with Lady Maxwell's card in her hand. Kenrick had given it to her on her arrival, together with the message which had accompanied it, and she had taken a few minutes to think it over. As she gave the man his order, the energy of the small figure, as it half turned towards the door, the brightness of the eyes under the white veil she had just thrown back, no less than the emphasis of her tone, awakened in the butler the clear perception that neither the expected visit nor his mistress's directions were to be taken as ordinary affairs. After he left the drawing-room, Grier passed him on the stairs. He gave her a slight signal, and the two retired to some nether region to discuss the secrets of their employers.

Meanwhile Letty, having turned on the electric light in the room, walked to the window and set it half open behind the curtain. In that way she would hear the carriage approaching, it was between eight and nine o'clock. No doubt Lady Maxwell would drive round after dinner.

Then, still holding the card lightly in her hand, she threw herself on the sofa. She was tired, but so excited that she could not rest—first, by the memory of the day that had just passed; still more by the thought of the rebuff she was about to administer to the great lady who had affronted her. No doubt her letter had done its work. The remembrance of it tilled her with an uneasy joy. Did George know of it by now? She did not care. Lady Maxwell, of course, was coming to try and appease her, to hush it up. There had been a scene, it was to be supposed, between her and her stiff husband. Letty gloated over the dream of it. Tears, humiliation, reproaches, she meted them all out in plenty to the woman she hated. Nor would things end there. Why, London was full of gossip! Harding's paragraph—for of course it was Harding's—had secured that. How clever of him! Not a name!—not a thing that could be taken hold of!—yet so clear. Well!—if she, Letty, was to be trampled on and set aside, at any rate other people should suffer too.

So George had gone off to France, leaving her alone, without "Good-bye." She did not believe a word of his excuse; and, if it were true, it was only another outrage that he should have thought twice of such a matter at such a crisis. But it was probably a mere device of his and *hers*—she would find out for what.

Her state of tension was too great to allow her to stay in the same place for more than a few minutes. She got up, and went to the glass before the mantelpiece. Taking out the pins that held her large Gainsborough hat, she arranged her hair with her hands, putting the curls of the fringe in their right

place, fastening up some stray ends. She had given orders, as we have seen, to admit no one, and was presumably going to bed. Nevertheless, her behaviour was instinctively the behaviour of one who expects a guest.

When, more or less to her satisfaction, she had restored the symmetry of the little curled and crimped head, she took her face between her hands, and stared at her own reflection. Memories of the party she had just left, of the hot river, the slowly filling locks, the revelry, the champagne, danced in her mind, especially of a certain walk through a wood. She defiantly watched the face in the glass grow red, the eyelids quiver. Then, like the tremor from some volcanic fire far within, a shudder ran through her. She dropped her head on her hands. She hated—*hated* him! Was it to-morrow evening she had told him he might come? She would go down to Ferth.

Wheels in the quiet street! Letty flew to the window like an excited child, her green and white twinkling through the room.

A brougham, and a tall figure in black stepping slowly out of it. Letty sheltered herself behind a curtain, held her breath, and listened.

Presently her lower lip dropped a little. What was Kenrick about? The front door had closed, and Lady Maxwell had not re-entered her carriage.

She opened the drawing-room door with care, and was stooping over the banisters when she saw Kenrick on the stairs. He seemed to be coming from the direction of George's study.

"What have you been doing?" she asked him in a hard under-voice, looking at him angrily. "I told you not to let Lady Maxwell in."

"I told her, my lady, that you were engaged and could see no one. Then her ladyship asked if she might write a few lines to you and send them up, asking when you would be able to see her. So I showed her into Sir George's study, my lady, and she is writing at Sir George's desk."

"You should have done nothing of the sort," said Letty, sharply. "What is that letter?"

She took it from his hand before the butler, somewhat bewildered by the responsibilities of his position, could explain that he had just found it in the letterbox, where it might have been lying some little time, as he had heard no knock.

She let him go downstairs again, to await Lady Maxwell's exit, and herself ran back to read her letter, her heart beating, for the address of the sender was on the envelope.

When she had finished she threw it down, half suffocating.

"So I am to be lectured and preached to besides. Good heavens! In his lofty manner, I suppose, that people talk of. Prig—odious, insufferable prig! So I have mistaken George, have I? My own husband! And insulted her—*her!* And she is actually downstairs, writing to me, in my own house!"

She locked her hands, and began stormily to pace the room again. The image of her rival, only a few feet from her, bending over George's table, worked in her with poisonous force. Suddenly she swept to the bell and rang it. A door opened downstairs. She ran to the landing.

"Kenrick!"

"Yes, my lady." She heard a pause, and the soft rustle of a dress.

"Tell Lady Maxwell, please"—she struggled hard for the right, the dignified tone—"that if it is not too late for her to stay, I am now able to see her."

She hurried back into the drawing-room and waited. *Would* she come? Letty's whole being was now throbbing with one mad desire. If Kenrick let her go!

But steps approached; the door was thrown open.

Marcella Maxwell came in timidly, very pale, the dark eyes shrinking from the sudden light of the drawing-room. She was bareheaded, and wore a long cloak of black lace over her white evening dress. Letty's flash of thought as she saw her was twofold: first, hatred of her beauty, then triumph in the evident nervousness with which her visitor approached her.

Without making the slightest change of position, the mistress of the house spoke first.

"Will you please tell me," she said, in her sharpest, thinnest voice, "to what I owe the honour of this

visit?"

Marcella paused half-way towards her hostess.

"I read your letter to my husband," she said quietly, though her voice shook, "and I thought you would hardly refuse to let me speak to you about it."

"Then perhaps you will sit down," said Letty, in the same voice; and she seated herself.

If she had wished to heighten the effect of her reception by these small discourtesies she did not succeed. Rather, Marcella's self-possession returned under them. She looked round simply for a chair, brought one forward within speaking distance of her companion, moving once more, in her thin, tall grace, with all that unconscious dignity Letty had so often envied and admired from a distance.

But neither dignity nor grace made any bar to the emotion that filled her. She bent forward, clasping her hands on her knee.

"Your letter to my husband made me so unhappy—that I could not help coming," she said, in a tone that was all entreaty, all humbleness. "Not—of course—that it seemed to either of us a true or just account of what had happened"—she drew herself up gently—"but it made me realise—though indeed I had realised it before I read it—that in my friendship with your husband I had been forgetting—forgetting those things—one ought to remember most. You will let me put things, won't you, in my own way, as they seem to me? At Castle Luton Sir George attracted me very much. The pleasure of talking to him there first made me wish to try and alter some of his views—to bring him across my poor people—to introduce him to our friends. Then, somehow, a special bond grew up between him and me with regard to this particular struggle in which my husband and I"—she dropped her eyes that she might not see Letty's heated face—"have been so keenly interested. But what I ought to have felt—from the very first—was, that there could be, there ought to have been, something else added. Married people"—she spoke hurriedly, her breath rising and falling—"are not two, but one—and my first step should have been to come—and—and ask you to let me know you too—to find out what your feelings were, whether you wished for a friendship—that—that I had perhaps no right to offer to Sir George alone. I have been looking into my own heart"—her voice trembled again—"and I see that fault, that great fault. To be excluded myself from any strong friendship my husband might make, would be agony to me!" The frank, sudden passion of her lifted eyes sent a thrill even through Letty's fierce and hardly, kept silence. "And that I wanted to say to you, first of all. I wronged my own conception of what marriage should be, and you were quite, quite right to be angry!"

"Well, I think it's quite clear, isn't it, that you forgot from the beginning George had a wife?" cried Letty, in her most insulting voice. "That certainly can't be denied. Anybody could see that at Castle Luton!"

Marcella looked at her in perplexity. What could suggest to her how to say the right word, touch the right chord? Would she be able to do more than satisfy her own conscience and then go, leaving this strange little fury to make what use she pleased of her visit and her avowals?

She shaded her eyes with her hand a moment, thinking. Then she said:

"Perhaps it is of no use for me to ask you to remember how full our minds—my husband's and mine—have been of one subject—one set of ideas. But, if I am not keeping you too long, I should like to give you an account, from my point of view, of the friendship between Sir George and myself. I think I can remember every talk of ours, from our first meeting in the hospital down to—down to this morning."

"This morning!" cried Letty, springing up. "This *morning!* He went to you to-day?"

The little face convulsed with passion raised an intolerable distress in Marcella.

"Yes, he came to see me," she said, her dark eyes, full of pain, full, too, once more, of entreaty, fixed upon her interrogator. "But do let me tell you! I never saw anyone in deeper trouble—trouble about you—trouble about himself."

Letty burst into a wild laugh.

"Of course! No doubt he went to complain of me—that I flirted—that I ill-treated his mother—that I spent too much money—and a lot of other pleasant little things. Oh! I can imagine it perfectly. Besides that, I suppose he went to be thanked. Well, he deserved *that*. He has thrown away his career to please you; so if you didn't thank him, you ought! Everybody says his position in Parliament now isn't worth a straw—that he must resign—which is delightful, of course, for his wife. And I saw it all from the beginning—I understood exactly what you *wanted* to do at Castle Luton—only I couldn't believe then—I

was only six weeks married—"

A wave of excitement and self-pity swept over her. She broke off with a sob.

Marcella's heart was wrung. She knew nothing of the real Letty Tressady. It was the wife as such, slighted and set aside, that appealed to the imagination, the remorse of this happy, this beloved woman. She rose quickly, she held out her hands, looking down upon the little venomous creature who had been pouring these insults upon her.

"Don't—*don't* believe such things," she said, with sobbing breath. "I never wronged you consciously for a moment. Can't you believe that Sir George and I became friends because we cared for the same kind of questions; because I—I was full of my husband's work and everything that concerned it; because I liked to talk about it, to win him friends. If it had ever entered my mind that such a thing could pain and hurt you—"

"Where have you sent him to-day?" cried Letty, peremptorily, interrupting her, while she drew her handkerchief fiercely across her eyes.

Instantly Marcella was conscious of the difficulty of explaining her own impulse and Maxwell's action.

"Sir George told me," she said, faltering, "that he must go away from London immediately, to think out some trouble that was oppressing him. Only a few minutes after he left our house we heard from Mrs. Allison that she was in great distress about her son. She came, in fact, to beg us to help her find him. I won't go into the story, of course; I am sure you know it. My husband and I talked it over. It occurred to us that if Maxwell went to him—to Sir George—and asked him to do us and her this great kindness of going to Ancoats and trying to bring him back to his mother, it would put everything on a different footing. Maxwell would get to know him,—as I had got to know him. One would find a way—to silence the foolish, unjust things—that have been said—I suppose—I don't know—"

She paused, confused by the difficulties in her path, her cheeks hot and flushed. But the heart knew its own innocence. She recovered herself; she came nearer.

"—If only—at the same time—I could make you realise how truly—how bitterly—I had felt for any pain you might have suffered—if I could persuade you to look at it all—your husband's conduct and mine—in its true light, and to believe that he cares—he *must* care—for nothing in the world so much as his home—as you and your happiness!"

The nobleness of the speaker, the futility of the speech, were about equally balanced! Candour was impossible, if only for kindness' sake. And the story, so told, was not only unconvincing, it was hardly intelligible even, to Letty. For the two personalities moved in different worlds, and what had seemed to the woman who was all delicate impulse and romance the natural and right course, merely excited in Letty, and not without reason, fresh suspicion and offence. If words had been all, Marcella had gained nothing.

But a strange tumult was rising in Letty's breast. There was something in this mingling of self-abasement with an extraordinary moral richness and dignity, in these eyes, these hands that would have so gladly caught and clasped her own, which began almost to intimidate her. She broke out again, so as to hold her own bewilderment at bay:

"What right had you to send him away—to plan anything for *my* husband without my consent? Oh, of course you put it very finely; I daresay you know about all sorts of things *I* don't know about; I'm not clever, I don't talk politics. But I don't quite see the good of it, if it's only to take husbands away from their wives. All the same, I'm not a hypocrite, and I don't mean to pretend I'm a meek saint. Far from it. I've no doubt that George thinks he's been perfectly justified from the beginning, and that I have brought everything upon myself. Well! I don't care to argue about it. Don't imagine, please, that I have been playing the deserted wife all the time. If people injure me, it's not my way to hold my tongue, and I imagine that, after all, I do understand my own husband, in spite of Lord Maxwell's kind remarks!" She pointed scornfully to Maxwell's letter on the table. "But as soon as I saw that nothing I said mattered to George, and that his whole mind was taken up with your society, why, of course, I took my own measures! There are other men in the world—and one of them happens to amuse me particularly at this moment. It's your doing and George's, you see, if he doesn't like it!"

Marcella recoiled in sudden horror, staring at her companion with wide, startled eyes. Letty braved her defiantly, her dry lips drawn into a miserable smile. She stood, looking very small and elegant, beside her writing-table, her hand, blazing with rings, resting lightly upon it, the little, hot withered face alone betraying the nerve tension behind.

The situation lasted a few seconds, then with a quick step Marcella hurried to a chair on the further

side of the room, sank into it, and covered her face with her hands.

Letty's heart seemed to dip, as it were, into an abyss. But there was a frenzied triumph in the spectacle of Marcella's grief and tears.

Marcella Maxwell—thus silenced, thus subdued! The famous name, with all that it had stood for in Letty's mind, of things to be envied and desired, echoed in her ear, delighted her revenge. She struggled to maintain her attitude.

"I don't know why what I said should make you so unhappy," she said coldly, after a pause.

Marcella did not reply. Presently Letty saw that she was resting her cheek on her hand and gazing before her into vacancy. At last she turned round, and Letty could satisfy herself that in truth her eyes were wet.

"Is there no one," asked the full, tremulous voice, "whom you care for, whom you would send for now to advise and help you?"

"Thank you!" said Letty, calmly, leaning against the little writing-table, and beating the ground slightly with her foot. "I don't want them. And I don't know why you should trouble yourself about it."

But for the first time, and against its owner's will, the hard tone wavered.

Marcella rose impetuously again, and came towards her.

"When one thinks of all the long years of married life," she said, still trembling, "of the children that may come—"

Letty lifted her eyebrows.

"If one happened to wish for them. But I don't happen to wish for them, never did. I daresay it sounds horrid. Anyway, one needn't take that into consideration."

"And your husband? Your husband, who must be miserable, whose great gifts will be all spoiled unless you will somehow give up your anger and make peace. And instead of that, you are only thinking of revenging yourself, of making more ruin and pain. It breaks one's heart! And it would need such a *little* effort on your part, only a few words written or spoken, to bring him back, to end all this unhappiness!"

"Oh! George can take care of himself," said Letty, provokingly; "so can I. Besides, you have sent him away."

Marcella looked at her in despair. Then silently she turned away, and Letty saw that she was searching for some gloves and a handkerchief she had been carrying in her hand when she came in.

Letty watched her take them up, then said suddenly, "Are you going away?"

"It is best, I think. I can do nothing."

"I wish I knew why you came to see me at all! They say, of course, you are very much in love with Lord Maxwell. Perhaps—that made you sorry for me?"

Marcella's pride leapt at the mention by those lips of her own married life. Then she drove her pride down.

"You have put it better than I have been able to do, all the time." Her mouth parted in a slight, sad smile—"Good-night."

Letty took no notice. She sat down on the arm of a chair near her. Her eyes suddenly blazed, her face grew dead-white.

"Well, if you want to know—" she said—"no, don't go—I don't mean to let you go just yet—I *am* about the most miserable wretch going! There, you may take it or leave it; it's true. I don't suppose I cared much about George when I married him; plenty of girls don't. But as soon as he began to care about *you*,—just contrariness, I suppose,—I began to feel that I could kill anybody that took him from me, and kill myself afterwards! Oh, good gracious! there was plenty of reason for his getting tired of me. I'm not the sort of person to let anyone get the whip-hand of me, and I *would* spend his money as I liked, and I *would* ask the persons I chose to the house; and, above all, I wasn't going to be pestered with looking after and giving up to his *dreadful* mother, who made my life a burden to me. Oh! why do you look so white? Well, I daresay it does sound atrocious. I don't care. Perhaps you'll be still more horrified when

you know that they came round this afternoon, when I was out and George was gone, to tell me that Lady Tressady was frightfully ill—dying, I think my maid said. And I haven't given it another thought since—not one—till now"—she struck one hand against the other—"because directly afterwards the butler told me of your visit this afternoon, and that you were coming again—and I wasn't going to think of anything else in the world but you, and George. No, don't look like that, don't come near me—I'm not mad. I assure you I'm not mad! But that's all by the way. What was I saying? Oh! that George had cause enough to stop caring about me. Of course he had; but if he's lost to me—I shall give him a good deal more cause before we've done. That other man—you know him—Cathedine—gave me a kiss this afternoon, when we were in a wood together"—the same involuntary shudder overtook her, while she still held her companion at arm's length. "Oh, he is a brute—a *brute!* But what do I care what happens to me? It's so strange I don't—rather creditable, I think—for after all I like parties, and being asked about. But now George hates me—and let you send him away from me—why, of course, it's all simple enough! I—Don't—don't come. I shall never, never forgive—it's just being tired—"

But Marcella sprang forward. Mercifully, there is a limit to nerve endurance, and Letty in her raving had overpassed it. She sank gasping on a sofa, still putting out her hand as though to protect herself. But Marcella knelt beside her, the tears running down her cheeks. She put her arms—arms formed for tenderness, for motherliness—round the girl's slight frame. "Don't—don't repulse me," she said, with trembling lips, and suddenly Letty yielded. She found herself sobbing in Lady Maxwell's embrace, while all the healing, all the remorse, all the comfort that self-abandonment and pity can pour out on such a plight as hers, descended upon her from Marcella's clinging touch, her hurried, fragmentary words. Assurances that all could be made right entreaties for gentleness and patience—revelations of her own inmost heart as a wife, far too sacred for the ears of Letty Tressady—little phrases and snatches of autobiography steeped in an exquisite experience: the nature Letty had rained her blows upon, kept nothing back, gave her all its best. How irrelevant much of it was!—chequered throughout by those oblivions, and optimisms, and foolish hopes by which such a nature as Marcella's protects itself from the hard facts of the world. By the time she had ranged through every note of entreaty and consolation, Marcella had almost persuaded herself and Letty that George Tressady had never said a word to her beyond the commonplaces of an ordinary friendship; she had passionately determined that this blurred and spoiled marriage could and should be mended, and that it lay with her to do it; and in the spirit of her audacious youth she had taken upon herself the burden of Letty's character and fate, vowing herself to a moral mission, to a long patience. The quality of her own nature, perhaps, made her bear Letty's violences and frenzies more patiently than would have been possible to a woman of another type; generous remorse and regret, combined with her ignorance of Letty's history and the details of Letty's life, led her even to look upon these violences as the effects of love perverted, the anguish of a jealous heart. Imagination, keen and loving, drew the situation for her in rapid strokes, draped Letty in the subtleties and powers of her own heart, and made forbearance easy.

As for Letty, her whole being surrendered itself to a mere ebb and flow of sensations. That she had been able thus to break down the barriers of Marcella's stateliness filled her all through, in her passion as in her yielding, with a kind of exultation. A vision of a tall figure in a white and silver dress, sitting stiff and unapproachable beside her in the Castle Luton drawing-room, fled through her mind now and then, only to make the wonder of this pleading voice, these confidences, this pity, the more wonderful. But there was more than this, and better than this. Strange up-wellings of feelings long trampled on and suppressed—momentary awakenings of conscience, of repentance, of regret—sharp realisations of an envy that was no longer ignoble but moral, softer thoughts of George, the suffocating, unwilling recognition of what love meant in another woman's life—these messengers and forerunners of diviner things passed and repassed through the spaces of Letty's soul as she lay white and passive under Marcella's yearning look. There was a marvellous relief besides, much of it a physical relief, in this mere silence, this mere ceasing from angry railing and offence.

Marcella was still sitting beside her, holding her hands, and talking in the same low voice, when suddenly the loud sound of a bell clanged through the house. Letty sprang up, white and startled.

"What can it be? It's past ten o'clock. It can't be a telegram."

Then a guilty remembrance struck her. She hurried to the door as Kenrick entered.

"Lady Tressady's maid would like to see you, my lady. They want Sir George's address. The doctors think she will hardly live over to-morrow."

And behind Kenrick, Justine, the French maid, pushed her way in, weeping and exclaiming. Lady Tressady, it seemed, had been in frightful pain all the afternoon. She was now easier for the moment, though dangerously exhausted. But if the heart attacks returned during the next twenty-four hours, nothing could save her. The probability was that they would return, and she was asking piteously for

her son, who had seen her, Justine believed, the day before these seizures began, just before his departure for Paris, and had written. "Et la pauvre âme!" cried the Frenchwoman at last, not caring what she said to this amazing daughter-in-law, "elle est là toujours, quand les douleurs s'apaisent un peu, écoutant, espérant—et personne ne vient—*personne!* Voulez-vous bien, madame, me dire où on peut trouver Sir George?"

"Poste Restante, Trouville," said Letty, sullenly. "It is the only address that I know of."

But she stood there irresolute and frowning, while the French girl, hardly able to contain herself, stared at the disfigured face, demanding by her quick-breathing silence, by her whole attitude, something else, something more than Sir George's address.

Meanwhile Marcella waited in the background, obliged to hear what passed, and struck with amazement. It is perhaps truer of the moral world than the social that one half of it never conceives how the other half lives. George Tressady's mother—alone—dying—in her son's absence—and Letty Tressady knew nothing of her illness till it had become a question of life and death, and had then actually refused to go—forgotten the summons even!

When Letty, feverish and bewildered, turned back to the companion whose heart had been poured out before her during this past hour of high emotion, she saw a new expression in Lady Maxwell's eyes from which she shrank.

"Ought I to go?" she said fretfully, almost like a peevish child, putting her hand to her brow.

"My carriage is downstairs," said Marcella, quickly. "I can take you there at once. Is there a nurse?" she asked, turning to the maid.

Oh, yes; there was an excellent nurse, just installed, or Justine could not have left her mistress; and the doctor close by could be got at a moment's notice. But the poor lady wanted her son, or at least some one of the family,—Justine bit her lip, and threw a nervous side glance at Letty,—and it went to the heart to see her. The girl found relief in describing her mistress's state to this grave and friendly lady, and showed more feeling and sincerity in speaking of it than might have been expected from her affected dress and manner.

Meanwhile Letty seemed to be wandering aimlessly about the room. Marcella went up to her.

"Your hat is here, on this chair. I have a shawl in the carriage. Won't you come at once, and leave word to your maid to bring after you what you want? Then I can go on, if you wish it, and send your telegram to Sir George."

"But you wanted him to do something?" said Letty, looking at her uncertainly.

"Mothers come first, I think!" said Marcella, with a smile of wonder. "It is best to write it before we go. Will you tell me what to say?"

She went to the writing-table, and had to write the telegram with small help from Letty, who in her dazed, miserable soul was still fighting some demonic resistance or other to the step asked of her. Instinctively and gradually, however, Marcella took command of her. A few quiet words to Justine sent her to make arrangements with Grier. Then Letty found a cloak that had been sent for being drawn round her shoulders, and was coaxed to put on her hat. In another minute she was in the Maxwells' brougham, with her hand clasped in Marcella's.

"They will want me to sit up," she said, dashing an irrelevant tear from her eyes, as they drove away. "I am so tired—and I hate illness!"

"Very likely they won't let you see her to-night. But you will be there if the illness comes on again. You would feel it terribly if—if she died all alone, with Sir George away."

"Died!" Letty repeated, half angrily. "But that would be so horrible—what could I do?"

Marcella looked at her with a strange smile.

"Only be kind, only forget everything but her!"

The softness of her voice had yet a severity beneath it that Letty felt, but had no spirit to resent. Rather it awakened an uneasy and painful sense that, after all, it was not she who had come off conqueror in this great encounter. The incidents of the last half-hour seemed in some curious way to have reversed their positions. Letty, smarting, felt that her relation to George's dying mother had revealed her to Lady Maxwell far more than any wild and half-sincere confessions could have done. Her

vanity felt a deep inner wound, yet of a new sort. At any rate, Marcella's self-abasement was over, and Letty instinctively realised that she would never see it again, while at the same time a new and clinging need had arisen in herself. The very neighbourhood of the personality beside her had begun to thrill and subjugate her. She had been conscious enough before—enviously, hatefully conscious—of all the attributes and possessions that made Maxwell's wife a great person in the world of London. What was stealing upon her now was glamour and rank and influence of another kind.

Not unmixed, no doubt, with more mundane thoughts! No ordinary preacher, no middle-class eloquence perhaps would have sufficed—nothing less dramatic and distinguished than the scene which had actually passed, than a Marcella at her feet. Well! there are many modes and grades of conversion. Whether by what was worst in her, or what was best; whether the same weaknesses of character that had originally inflamed her had now helped to subdue her or no, what matter? So much stood—that one short hour had been enough to draw this vain, selfish nature within a moral grasp she was never again to shake off.

Meanwhile, as they drove towards Warwick Square Marcella's only thought was how to hand her over safe to her husband. A sense of agonised responsibility awoke in the elder woman at the thought of Cathedine. But no more emotion—only common sense and gentleness.

As they neared Warwick Square, Letty withdrew her hand.

"I don't suppose you will ever want to see me again," she said huskily, turning her head away.

"Do you think that very possible between two people who have gone through such a time as you and I have?" said Marcella, pale, but smiling. "When may I come to see you to-morrow? I shall send to inquire, of course, very early."

Some thought made Letty's breath come quickly. "Will you come in the afternoon—about four?" she said hastily. "I suppose I shall be here." They were just stopping at the door in Warwick Square. "You said you would tell me—"

"I have a great deal to tell you.... I will come, then, and see if you can be spared.... Good-night. I trust she will be better! I will go on and send the telegram."

Letty felt her hand gravely pressed, the footman helped her out, and in another minute she was mounting the stairs leading to Lady Tressady's room, having sent a servant on before her to warn the nurse of her arrival.

The nurse came out, finger on lip. She was very glad to see Lady Tressady, but the doctor had left word that nothing whatever was to be allowed to disturb or excite his patient. Of course, if the attack returned—But just now there was hope. Only it was so difficult to keep her quiet. Instead of trying to sleep, she was now asking for Justine, declaring that Justine must read French novels aloud to her, and bring out two of her evening dresses, that she might decide on some alteration in the trimmings. "I daren't fight with her," said the nurse, evidently in much perplexity. "But if she only raises herself in bed she may kill herself."

She hurried back to her patient, promising to inform the daughter-in-law at once if there was a change for the worse, and Letty, infinitely relieved, made her way to the spare room of the house, where Grier was already unpacking for her.

After a hasty undressing she threw herself into bed, longing for sleep. But from a short nightmare dream she woke up with a start. Where was she? In her mother-in-law's house,—she could actually hear the shrill affected voice laughing and talking in the room next door,—and brought there by Marcella Maxwell! The strangeness of these two facts kept her tossing restlessly from side to side. And where was George? Just arrived at Paris, perhaps. She thought of the glare and noise of the Gare du Nord—she heard his cab rattling over the long stone-paved street outside. In the darkness she felt a miserable sinking of heart at the thought of his going with every minute farther, farther away from her. Would he ever forgive her that letter to Lord Maxwell, when he knew of it? Did she want him to forgive her?

A mood that was at once soft and desolate stole upon her, and made her cry a little. It sprang, perhaps, from a sense of the many barriers she had heaped up between herself and happiness. The waves of feeling, half self-assertive, half repentant, ebbed and flowed. One moment she yearned for the hour when Marcella was to come to her; the next, she hated the notion of it. So between dream and misery, amid a maze of thought without a clue, Letty's night passed away. By the time the morning dawned, the sharp conviction had shaped itself within her that she had grown older, that life had passed into another stage, and could never again be as it had been the day before. Two emotions, at least, or excitements, had emerged from all the rest and filled her mind—the memory of the scene with Marcella, and the thought of George's return.

PART III

CHAPTER XXI

"My dear, you don't mean to say you have had her here for ten days?"

The speaker was Betty Leven, who had just arrived at Maxwell Court, and was sitting with her hostess under the cedars in front of the magnificent Caroline mansion, which it was the never-ending task of Marcella's life to bring somehow into a democratic scheme of things.

A still September afternoon, lightly charged with autumn mists, lay gently on the hollows of the park. Betty was in her liveliest mood and her gayest dress. Her hat, a marvel in poppies, was perched high upon no less ingenious waves and frettings of hair. Her straw-coloured gown, which was only simple for the untrained eye, gave added youth even to her childish figure; and her very feet, clothed in the smallest and most preposterous of shoes, had something merry and provocative about them, as they lay crossed upon the wooden footstool Marcella had pushed towards her.

The remark just quoted followed upon one made by her hostess, to the effect that Lady Tressady would be down to tea shortly.

"Now, Betty," said Marcella, seriously, though she laughed, "I meant to have a few words with you on this subject first thing—let's have them. Do you want to be very kind to me, or do you ever want me to be very nice to you?"

Betty considered.

"You can't do half as much for me now as you once could, now that Frank's going to leave Parliament," she remarked, with as much worldly wisdom as her face allowed. "Nevertheless, the quality of my nature is such that, sometimes, I might even be nice to you for nothing. But information before benevolence—why have you got her here?"

"Because she was fagged and unhappy in London, and her husband had gone to take his mother abroad, after first doing Maxwell a great kindness," said Marcella,—not, however, without embarrassment, as Betty saw,—"and I want you to be kind to her."

"Reasons one and two no reasons at all," said Betty, meditating; "and the third wants examining. You mean that George Tressady went after Ancoats?"

Marcella raised her shoulders, and was silent.

"If you are going to be stuffy and mysterious," said Betty, with vivacity, "you know what sort of a hedgehog I can be. How can you expect me to be nice to Letty Tressady unless you make it worth my while?"

"Betty, you infant! Well, then, he did go after Ancoats—got him safely away from Trouville, brought him to Paris to join Mrs. Allison, and, in general, has laid us all under very great obligations. Meanwhile, she was very much tired out with nursing her mother-in-law—"

"Oh, and such a mother-in-law—such a jewel!" ejaculated Betty.

"And I brought her down here to rest, till he should come back from Wildheim and take her home. He will probably be here to-night."

The speaker reddened unconsciously during her story, a fact not lost on Betty.

"Well, I knew most of that before," said Betty, quietly. "And what sort of a time have you been having this ten days?"

"I have been very glad to have her here," came the quick reply. "I ought to have known her long ago."

Betty looked at the speaker with a half-incredulous smile.

"You have been 'collecting' her, I suppose, as Hallin collects grasses. Of course, what I pine to know is what sort of a time *she's* had. You're not the easiest person in the world to get on with, my lady."

"I know that," said Marcella, sighing; "but I don't think she has been unhappy."

Betty's green eyes opened suddenly to the light.

"Are you ever going to tell me the truth? Have you got her under your thumb? Does she adore you?"

"Betty, don't be an idiot!"

"I expect she does," said Betty, thoughtfully, a myriad thoughts and conjectures passing through her quick brain as she studied her friend's face and attitude. "I see exactly what fate is going to happen to you in middle life. Women couldn't get on with you when you were a girl—you didn't like them, nor they you; and now everywhere I hear the young women beginning to talk about you, especially the young married women; and in a few years you will have them all about you like a cluster of doves, cooing and confessing, and making your life a burden to you."

"Well, suppose you begin?" said Marcella, with meaning. "I'm quite ready. How are Frank's spirits since the great decision?"

"Frank's spirits?" said Betty. She leisurely took off her glove. "Frank's spirits, my dear, if you wish to know, are simply an affront to his wife. My ruined ambitions appear to affect him as Parrish's food does the baby. I prophesy he will have gained a stone by Christmas."

For the great step had been taken. Betty had given way, and Frank was to escape from politics. For three years Betty had held him to his task—had written his speeches, formed his opinions, and done her very best to train him for a statesman. But the young man had in truth no opinions, save indeed whatever might be involved in the constant opinion that Heaven had intended him for a country gentleman and a sportsman, and for nothing else. And at last a mixture of revolt and melancholy had served his purpose. Betty was subdued; the Chiltern Hundreds were in sight. The young wife, with many sighs, had laid down all dreams of a husband on the front bench. But—in compensation—she had regained her lover, and the honeymoon shone once more.

"Frank came to see me yesterday," said Marcella, smiling.

Betty sprang forward.

"What did he say? Didn't he tell you I was an angel? Now there's a bargain! Repeat to me every single word he said, and I will devote myself, body and bones, to Letty Tressady."

"Hush!" said Marcella, laying two fingers on the pretty mouth. "Here she comes."

Letty Tressady, in fact, had just emerged from a side-door of the house, and was slowly approaching the two friends on the terrace. Lady Leven's discerning eye ran over the advancing figure. Marcella heard her make some exclamation under her breath. Then she rose with little, hurrying steps, and went to greet the newcomer with a charming ease and kindness.

Letty responded rather nervously. Marcella looked up with a smile, and pointed to a low chair, which Letty took with a certain stiffness. It was evident to Marcella that she was afraid of Lady Leven, who had, indeed, shown a marked indifference to her society at Castle Luton.

But Betty was disarmed. The "minx" had lost her colour, and, for the moment, her prettiness. She looked depressed, and talked little. As to her relation to Marcella Betty's inquisitive brain indulged itself in a score of conjectures. "How like her!" she thought to herself, "to forget the wife's existence to begin with, and then to make love to her by way of warding off the husband!"

Meanwhile, aloud, Lady Leven professed herself exceedingly dissatisfied with the entertainment provided for her. Where were the gentlemen? What was the good of one putting on one's best frock to come down to a Maxwell Court Saturday to find only a "hen tea-party" at the end? Marcella protested that there were only too many men somewhere on the premises already, and more—with their wives—were arriving by the next train. But Maxwell had taken off such as had already appeared for a long cross-country walk.

Betty demanded the names, and Marcella gave them obediently. Betty perceived at once that the party was the party of a political chief obliged to do his duty. She allowed herself a good many shrugs of her small shoulders. "Oh, Mrs. Lexham,—very charming, of course,—but what's the good of being friends with a person who has five hundred people in London that call her Kelly? Lady *Wendover*? I ought to have had notice. A good mother? I should think she is! That's the whole point against her. She always gives you the idea of having reared fifteen out of a possible twelve. To see her beaming on her offspring makes me positively ashamed of being in the same business myself. Don't you agree, Lady

Tressady?"

But Letty, whose chief joy a month before would have been to dart in on such a list with little pecking proofs of acquaintance, was leaning back listlessly in her chair, and could only summon a forced smile for answer.

"And Sir George, too, is coming to-night, isn't he?" said Lady Leven.

"Yes, I expect my husband to-night," said Letty, coldly, without looking at her questioner. Betty glanced quickly at the expression of the eyes which were bent upon the further reaches of the park; then, to Letty's astonishment, she bent forward impulsively and laid her little hand on Lady Tressady's arm.

"Do you mind telling me," she said in a loud whisper, with a glance over her shoulder, "your candid opinion of *her* as a country lady?"

Letty, taken aback, turned and laughed uneasily; but Betty went rattling on. "Have you found out that she treats her servants like hospital nurses; that they go off and on duty at stated hours; that she has workshops and art schools for them in the back premises; and that the first footman has just produced a cantata which has been sent in to the committee of the Worcester Festival (Be quiet, Marcella; if it isn't that, it's something near it); that she teaches the stable boys and the laundry maids old English dances, and the *pas de quatre* once a fortnight, and acts showman to her own pictures for the benefit of the neighbourhood once a week? I came once to see how she did it, but I found her and the Gairsley ironmonger measuring the ears of the Holbeins—it seems you can't know anything about pictures now unless you have measured all the ears and the little fingers, which I hope you know; I didn't!—so I fled, as she hadn't a word to throw to me, even as one of the public. Then perhaps you don't know that she has invented a whole, new, and original system of game-preserving—she and Frank fight over it by the hour—that she has upset all the wage arrangements of the county—that, perhaps, you do know, for it got into the papers—and a hundred other trifles. Has she revealed these things?"

Letty looked in perplexity from Betty's face, full of sweetness and mirth, to Marcella's.

"She hasn't talked about them," she said, hesitating. "Of course, I haven't understood a good many things that are done here—"

"Don't try," said Marcella, first laughing and then sighing.

Nothing appeased, Lady Leven chattered away, while Letty watched her hostess in silence. She had come down to the Court gloating somewhat, in spite of her very real unhappiness, over the prospect of the riches and magnificence she was to find there. And to discover that wealth might be merely the source of one long moral wrestle to the people who possessed it, burdening them with all sorts of problems and remorse that others escaped, had been a strange and, on the whole, jarring experience to her. Of course there must be rich and poor; of course there must be servants and masters. Marcella's rebellion against the barriers of life had been a sort of fatigue and offence to Letty ever since she had been made to feel it. And daily contact with the simple, and even Spartan, ways of living that prevailed—for the owners of it, at least—in the vast house, with the overflowing energy and humanity that often made its mistress a restless companion, and led her into a fair percentage of mistakes—had roused a score of half-scornful protests in the small, shrewd mind of her guest. Nevertheless, when Marcella was kind, when she put Letty on the sofa, insisting that she was tired, and anxiously accusing herself of some lack of consideration or other; when she took her to her room at night, seeing to every comfort, and taking thought for luxuries that in her heart she despised; or when, very rarely, and turning rather pale, she said a few words—sweet, hopeful, encouraging—about George's return, then Letty was conscious of a strange leap of something till then unknown, something that made her want to sob, that seemed to open to her a new room in the House of Life. Marcella had not kissed her since the day of their great scene; they had been "Lady Maxwell" and "Lady Tressady" to each other all the time, and Letty had but realised her own insolences and audacities the more, as gradually the spiritual dignity of the woman she had raved at came home to her. But sometimes when Marcella stood beside her, unconscious, talking pleasantly of London folk or Ancoats, or trying to inform herself as to Letty's life at Ferth, a half-desolate intuition would flash across the younger woman of what it might be to be admitted to the intimate friendship of such a nature, to feel those long, slender arms pressed about her once more, not in pity or remonstrance, as of one trying to exorcise an evil spirit, but in mere love, as of one asking as well as giving. The tender and adoring friendship of women for women, which has become so marked a feature of our self-realising generation, had passed Letty by. She had never known it. Now, in these unforeseen circumstances, she seemed to be trembling within reach of its emotion; divining it, desiring it, yet forced onward to the question, "What is there in me that may claim it?"

Marcella, indeed, after their first stormy interview, had once more returned to the subject of it. She

had told the story of her friendship with George Tressady, very gently and plainly, in a further conversation, held between them at the elder Lady Tressady's house during that odd lady's very odd convalescence; till, indeed, she reached the last scene. She could not bring herself to deliver the truth of that. Nor was it necessary. Letty's jealousy had guessed it near enough long ago. But when all else was told, Letty had been conscious at first of a half-sore resentment that there was so little to tell. In her secret soul she knew very well what had been the effect on George. Her husband's mind had been gradually absorbed by another ideal in which she had no part; nor could she deny that he had suffered miserably. The memory of his face as he asked her to "forgive him" when she fled past him on that last wretched night was enough. But suffered for what? A few talks about politics, a few visits to poor people, an office of kindness after a street accident that any stranger must have rendered, a few meetings in the House and elsewhere!

Letty's vanity was stabbed anew by the fact that Lady Maxwell's offence was so small. It gave her a kind of measure of her own hold upon her husband.

Once, indeed, Marcella's voice and colour had wavered when she made herself describe how, on the Mile End evening, she had been conscious of pressing the personal influence to gain the political end. But good heavens!—Letty hardly understood what the speaker's evident compunction was about. Why, it was all for Maxwell! What had she thought of all through but Maxwell? Letty's humiliation grew as she understood, and as in the quiet of Maxwell Court she saw the husband and wife together.

Her anger and resentment might very well only have transferred themselves the more hotly to George. But this new moral influence upon her had a kind of paralysing effect. The incidents of the weeks before the crisis excited in her now a sick, shamed feeling whenever she thought of them. For contact with people on a wholly different plane of conduct, if such persons as Letty can once be brought to submit to it, will often produce effects, especially on women, like those one sees produced every day by the clash of two standards of manners. It means simply the recognition that one is unfit to be of certain company, and perhaps there are few moral ferments more penetrating. Probably Letty would have gone to her grave knowing nothing of it, but for the accident which had opened to her the inmost heart of a woman with whom, once known, not even her vanity dared measure itself.

George and she had already met since the day when he had gone off to Paris in search of Ancoats. The telegram sent to him by Marcella on the night of his mother's violent illness had, indeed, been recalled next day. Lady Tressady, following the idiosyncrasies of her disease, sprang from death to life—and life of the sprightliest kind—in the course of a few hours. The battered, grey-haired woman—so old, do what she would, under the betraying hand of physical decay!—no sooner heard that George had been sent for than she at once and peremptorily telegraphed to him herself to stay away. "I'm not dead yet," she wrote to him afterwards, "in spite of all the fuss they've made with me. I was simply ashamed to own such a cadaverous-looking wretch as you were when you came here last, and if you take my advice you'll stay at Trouville with Lord Ancoats and amuse yourself. As to that young man, of course it's no good, and his mother's a great fool to suppose that you or anybody else can prevent his enjoying himself. But these High Church women are so extraordinary."

Letty, indeed, remembering her mother-in-law's old ways, and finding them little changed as far as she herself was concerned, was puzzled and astonished by the new relations between mother and son. On the smallest excuse or none, Lady Tressady, a year before, would have been ready to fetch him back from furthest land without the least scruple. Now, however, she thought of him, or for him, incessantly. And one day Letty actually found her crying over an official intimation from the lawyer concerned that another instalment of the Shapetsky debt would be due within a month. But she angrily dried her tears at sight of Letty, and Letty said nothing.

George, however, came back within about ten days of his departure, having apparently done what he was commissioned to do, though Letty took so little interest in the Ancoats affair that she barely read those portions of his letters in which he described the course of it. His letters, indeed, with the exception of a few ambiguous words here and there, dealt entirely with Trouville, Ancoats, or the ups and downs of public opinion on the subject of his action and speech in the House. Letty could only gather from a stray phrase or two that he enjoyed nothing; but evidently he could not yet bring himself to speak of what had happened.

When he did come back, the husband and wife saw very little of each other. It was more convenient that he should stay in Upper Brook Street while she remained at her mother-in-law's; and altogether he was hardly three days in London. He rushed up to Market Malford to deliver his promised speech to his constituents, and immediately afterwards, on the urgent advice of the doctors, he went off to Wildheim with his mother and the elderly cousin whose aid he had already invoked. Before he went, he formally thanked his wife—who hardly spoke to him unless she was obliged—for her attention to his mother, and then lingered a little, looking no less "cadaverous," certainly, than when he had gone away, and

apparently desiring to say more.

"I suppose I shall be away about a fortnight," he said at last, "if one is to settle her comfortably. You haven't told me yet what you would like to do. Couldn't you get Miss Tulloch to go down with you to Ferth, or would you go to your people for a fortnight?"

He was longing to ask her what had come of that promised visit of Lady Maxwell's. But neither by letter nor by word of mouth had Letty as yet said a word of it. And he did not know how to open the subject. During the time that he was with his wife and mother, nothing was seen of Marcella in Warwick Square, and an interview that he was to have had with Maxwell, by way of supplement to his numerous letters, had to be postponed because of overcrowded days on both sides. So that he was still in the dark.

Letty at first made no answer to his rather lame proposals for her benefit. But just as he was turning away with a look of added worry, she said:

"I don't want to go home, thank you, and I still less want to go to Ferth."

"But you can't stay in London. There isn't a soul in town; and it would be too dull for you."

He gazed at her in perplexity, praying, however, that he might not provoke a scene, for the carriage that was to take him and his mother to the station was almost at the door.

Letty rose slowly, and folded up some embroidery she had been playing with. Then she took a note from her work-basket, and laid it on the table.

"You may read that if you like. That's where I'm going."

And she quickly went out of the room.

George read the note. His face flushed, and he hurriedly busied himself with some of his preparations for departure. When his wife came into the room again he went up to her.

"You could have done nothing so likely to save us both," he said huskily, and then could think of nothing more to say. He drew her to him as though to kiss her, but a blind movement of the old rage with him or circumstance leapt in her, and she pulled herself away. The thought of that particular moment had done more perhaps than anything else to thin and whiten her since she had been at Maxwell Court.

And now he would be here to-night. She knew both from her host himself and from George's letters that Lord Maxwell had specially written to him begging him to come to the Court on his return, in order to join his wife and also to give that oral report of his mission for which there had been no time on his first reappearance. Maxwell had spoken to her of his wish to see her husband, without a tone or a word that could suggest anything but the natural friendliness and good-will of the man who has accepted a signal service from his junior. But Letty avoided Maxwell when she could; nor would he willingly have been left alone with this thin, sharp-faced girl whose letter to him had been like the drawing of an ugly veil from nameless and incredible things. He was sorry for her; but in his strong, deep nature he felt a repulsion for her he could not explain; and to watch Marcella with her amazed him.

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Immediately after tea, Lady Leven's complaints of her entertainment became absurd. Guests poured in from the afternoon train, and a variety of men, her husband foremost among them, were soon at her disposal, asking nothing better than to amuse her.

Letty Tressady meanwhile looked on for a time at the brilliant crowd about her on the terrace, with a dull sense of being forgotten and of no account. She said to herself sullenly that of course no one would want to talk to her; it was not her circle, and she had even few acquaintances among them.

Then, to her astonishment, she began to find herself the object of an evident curiosity and interest to many people among the throng. She divined that her name was being handed from one to the other, and she soon perceived that Marcella had been asked to introduce to her this person and that, several of them men and women whose kindness, a few weeks before, would have flattered her social ambitions to the highest point. Colour and nerve returned, and she found herself sitting up, forgetting her headache, and talking fast.

"I am delighted to have this opportunity of telling you, Lady Tressady, how much I admired your husband's great speech," said the deep and unctuous voice of the grey-haired Solicitor-General as he sank into a chair beside her. "It was not only that it gave us our Bill, it gave the House of Commons a

new speaker. Manner, voice, matter—all of it excellent! I hope there'll be no nonsense about his giving up his seat. Don't you let him! He will find his feet and his right place before long, and you'll be uncommonly proud of him before you've done."

"Lady Tressady, I'm afraid you've forgotten me," said a plaintive voice; and, on turning, Letty saw the red-haired Lady Madeleine asking with smiles to be remembered. "Do you know, I was lucky enough to get into the House on the great day? What a scene it was! You were there, of course?"

When Letty unwillingly said "No," there was a little chorus of astonishment.

"Well, take my advice, my dear lady," said the Solicitor-General, speaking with lazy patronage somewhere from the depths of comfort,—he was accustomed to use these paternal modes of speech to young women,—"don't you miss your husband's speeches. We can't do without our domestic critics. But for the bad quarters of an hour that lady over there has given me, I should be nowhere."

And he nodded complacently towards the wife as stout as himself, who was sitting a few yards away. She, hearing her name, nodded back, with smiles aside to the bystanders. Most of the spectators, however, were already acquainted with a conjugal pose which was generally believed to be not according to facts, and no one took the cue.

Then presently Mr. Bennett—the workmen's member from the North—was at Letty's elbow saying the most cordial things of the absent George. Bayle, too, the most immaculate and exclusive of private secretaries, who was at the Court on a wedding visit with a new wife, chose to remember Lady Tressady's existence for the first time for many months, and to bestow some of his carefully adapted conversation upon her. While, last of all, Edward Watton came up to her with a cousinly kindness she had scarcely yet received from him, and, drawing a chair beside her, overflowed with talk about George, and the Bill, and the state of things at Market Malford. In fact, it was soon clear even to Letty's bewildered sense that till her husband should arrive she was perhaps, for the moment, the person of most interest to this brilliant and representative gathering of a victorious party.

Meanwhile she was made constantly aware that her hostess remembered her. Once, as Marcella passed her, after introducing someone to her, Letty felt a hand gently laid on her shoulder and then withdrawn. Strange waves of emotion ran through the girl's senses. When would George be here? About seven, she thought, when they would all have gone up to dress. He would have arrived from Wildheim in the morning, and was to spend the day doing business in town.

CHAPTER XXII

Letty was lying on a sofa in her bedroom. Her maid was to come to her shortly, and she was impatiently listening to every sound that approached or passed her door. The great clock in the distant hall struck seven, and it seemed to her intolerably long before she heard movements in the passage, and then Maxwell's voice outside.

"Here is your room, Sir George. I hope you don't mind a few ghosts! It is one of the oldest bits of the house."

Letty sprang up. She heard the shutting of the passage door, then immediately afterwards the door from the dressing-room opened, and George came through.

"Well!" she said, staring at him, her face flushing; "surely you are very late?"

He came up to her, and put his arms round her, while she stood passive.

"Not so very," he said, and she could hear that his voice was unsteady.

"How are you? Give me a kiss, little woman—be a little glad to see me!"

He looked down upon her wistfully. On the journey he had been conscious of great weariness of mind and body, a longing to escape from struggle, to give and receive the balm of kind looks and soft words. He had come back full of repentance towards her, if she had only known, full too of a natural young longing for peace and good times.

She let him kiss her, but as he stooped to her it suddenly struck her that she had never seen him look so white and worn. Still; after all this holiday-making! Why? For love of a woman who never gave him a thought, except of pity. Bitterness possessed her. She turned away indifferently.

"Well, you'll only just have time to dress. Is someone unpacking for you?"

He looked at her.

"Is that all you have to say?"

She threw back her head and was silent.

"I was very glad to come back to you," he said, with a sigh, "though I—I wish it were anywhere else than here. But, all things considered, I did not see how to refuse. And you have been here the whole fortnight?"

"Yes."

"Have you"—he hesitated—"have you seen a great deal of Lady Maxwell?"

"Well, I suppose I have—in her own house." Then she broke out, her heart leaping visibly under her light dressing-gown. "I don't blame *her* any more, if you want to know that; she doesn't think of anyone in the world but him."

The gesture of her hand seemed to pursue the voice that had been just speaking in the corridor.

He smiled.

"Well, at least I'm glad you've come to see that!" he said quietly. "And is that all?"

He had walked away from her, but at his renewed question he turned back quickly, his hands in his pockets. Something in the look of him gave her a moment of pleasure, a throb of possession. But she showed nothing of it.

"No, it's not all"—her pale blue eyes pierced him. "Why did you go and see her that morning, and why have you never told me since?"

He started, and shrugged his shoulders.

"If you have been seeing much of her," he replied, after a pause, "you probably know as much as I could tell you."

"No," she said steadily; "she has told me much about everything—but that."

He walked restlessly about for a few seconds, then returned, holding out his hands.

"Well, my dear, I said some mad and miserable things. They are as dead now as if they had never been spoken. And they were not love-making—they were crying for the moon. Take me, and forget them. I am an unsatisfactory sort of fellow, but I will do the best I can."

"Wait a bit," she said, retreating, and speaking with a hard incisiveness. "There are plenty of things you don't know. Perhaps you don't know, for instance, that I wrote to Lord Maxwell? I sat up writing it that night—he got it the same morning you saw her."

"You wrote to Maxwell!" he said in amazement—then, under his breath—"to complain of her. My God!"

He walked away again, trying to control himself.

"You didn't suppose," she said huskily, "I was going to sit down calmly under your neglect of me? I might have been silly in not—not seeing what kind of a woman she was; that's different—besides, of course, she ought to have thought more about me. But *that's* not all!"

Her hand shook as she stood leaning on the sofa. George turned, and looked at her attentively.

"The day you left I went to Hampton Court with the Lucys. Cathedine was there. Of course I flirted with him all the time, and as we were going through a wood near the river he said abominable things to me, and kissed me."

Her brows were drawn defiantly. Her eyes seemed to be riveted to his. He was silent a moment, the colour dyeing his pale face deep. Then she heard his long breath.

"Well, we seem to be about quits," he said, in a bitter voice. "Have you seen him since?"

"No. That's Grier knocking—you'd better go and dress."

He paused irresolutely. But Letty said, "Come in," and he retreated into his dressing-room.

Husband and wife hurried down together, without another word to each other. When George at last found himself at table between Lady Leven and Mr. Bayle's new and lively wife, he had never been so grateful before to the ease of women's tongues. In his mental and physical fatigue, he could scarcely bear even to let himself feel the strangeness of his presence in this room—at her table, in Maxwell's splendid house. *Not* to feel!—somehow to recover his old balance and coolness—that was the cry of the inner man.

But the situation conquered him. *Why* was he here? It was barely a month since in her London drawing-room he had found words for an emotion, a confession it now burnt him to remember. And here he was, breaking bread with her and Maxwell, a few weeks afterwards, as though nothing lay between them but a political incident. Oh! the smallness, the triviality of our modern life!

Was it only four weeks, or nearly? What he had suffered in that time! An instant's shudder ran through him, during an interval, while Betty's unwilling occupation with her left-hand neighbour left memory its chance. All the flitting scenes of the past month, Ancoats's half-vicious absurdities, the humours of the Trouville beach, the waves of its grey sea, his mother's whims and complaints, the crowd and heat of the little German watering-place where he had left her—was it he, George Tressady, that had been really wrestling with these things and persons, walking among them, or beside them? It seemed hardly credible. What was real, what remained, was merely the thought of some hours of solitude, beside the Norman sea, or among the great beech-woods that swept down the hills about Bad Wildheim. Those hours—they only—had stung, had penetrated, had found the shrinking core of the soul.

What in truth was it that had happened to him? After weeks of a growing madness he had finally lost his self-command, had spoken passionately, as only love speaks, to a married woman, who had no thought for any man in the world but her husband, a woman who had immediately—so he had always read the riddle of Maxwell's behaviour—reported every incident of his conversation with her to the husband, and had then tried her best, with an exquisite kindness and compunction, to undo the mischief her own charm had caused. For that effort, in the first instance, George, under the shock of his act and her pain, had been, at intervals, speechlessly grateful to her; all his energies had gone into pitiful, eager response. Now, her attempt, and Maxwell's share in it, seemed to have laid him under a weight he could no longer bear. His acceptance of Maxwell's invitation had finally exhausted his power of playing the superhuman part to which she had invited him. He wished with all his heart he had not accepted it! From the moment of her greeting—with its mixture of shrinking and sweetness—he had realised the folly, the humiliation even, of his presence in her house. He could not rise—it was monstrous, ludicrous almost, that she should wish it—to what she seemed to ask of him.

What had he been in love with? He looked at her once or twice in bewilderment. Had not she herself, her dazzling, unconscious purity, debarred him always from the ordinary hopes and desires of the sensual man? His very thought had moved in awe of her, had knelt before her. Throughout there had been this half-bitter glorying in the strangeness of his own case. The common judgment in its common vileness mattered nothing to him. He had been in love with love, with grace, with tenderness, with delight. He had seen, too late, a vision of the *best*; had realised what things of enchantment life contains for the few, for the chosen—what woman at her richest can be to man. And there had been a cry of personal longing—personal anguish.

Well!—it was all done with. As for friendship, it was impossible, grotesque. Let him go home, appease Letty, and mend his life. He constantly realised now, with the same surprise, as on the night before his confession, the emergence within himself, independent as it were of his ordinary will, and parallel with the voice of passion or grief, of some new moral imperative. Half scornfully he discerned in his own nature the sort of paste that a man inherits from generations of decent dull forefathers who have kept the law as they understood it. He was conscious of the same "ought" vibrating through the moral sense as had governed their narrower lives and minds. It is the presence or the absence indeed of this dumb compelling power that in moments of crisis differentiates one man from another. He felt it; wondered perhaps that he should feel it; but knew, nevertheless, that he should obey it. Yes, let him go home, make his wife forgive him, rear his children—he trusted to God there would be children!—and tame his soul. How strange to feel this tempest sweeping through him, this iron stiffening of the whole being, amid this scene, in this room, within a few feet of that magic, that voice—

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"Thank goodness I have got rid of my man at last!" said Betty's laughing whisper in his ear. "Three successive packs of hounds have I followed from their cradles to their graves. Make it up to me, Sir George, at once! Tell me everything I want to know!"

George turned to her smiling.

"About Ancoats?"

"Of course. Now don't be discreet!—I know too much already. How did he receive you?"

George laughed—not noticing that instead of laughing with him, little Betty was staring at him open-eyed over her fan.

"To begin with, he invited me to fight—coffee and pistols before eight, on the following morning, in the garden of his chalet, which would not have been at all a bad place, for he is magnificently installed. I came from his enemies, he said. They had prevented the woman he loved from joining him, and covered him with ridicule. As their representative I ought to be prepared to face the consequences like a man. All this time he was storming up and down, in a marvellous blue embroidered smoking suit—"

"Of course, to go with the hair," put in Betty.

"I said I thought he'd better give me some dinner before we talked it out. Then he looked embarrassed and said there were friends coming. I replied, '*Tant mieux.*' He inquired fiercely whether it was the part of a gentleman to thrust himself where he wasn't wanted. I kept my temper, and said I was too famished to consider. Then he haughtily left the room, and presently a servant came and asked for my luggage, which I had left at the station, and showed me a bedroom. Ancoats, however, appeared again to invite me to withdraw, and to suggest the names of two seconds who would, he assured me, be delighted to act for me. I pointed out to him that I was unpacked, and that to turn me out dinnerless would be simply barbarous. Then, after fidgeting about a little, he burst out laughing in an odd way, and said, 'Very well—only, mind, I didn't ask you.' Sure enough, of course I found a party."

George paused.

"You needn't tell me much about the party," said Betty, nervously, "unless it's necessary."

"Well, it wasn't a very reputable affair, and two young women were present."

"No need to talk about the young women," said Betty, hastily.

George bowed submission.

"I only mentioned them because they are rather necessary to the story. Anyway, by the time the company was settled Ancoats suddenly threw off his embarrassment, and, with some defiant looks at me, behaved himself, I imagine, much as he would have done without me. When all the guests were gone, I asked him whether he was going to keep up the farce of a *grande passion* any more. He got in a rage and vowed that if 'she' had come, of course all those creatures, male and female, would be packed off. I didn't suppose that he would allow the woman he loved to come within a mile of them? I shrugged my shoulders and declined to suppose anything about his love affairs, which seemed to me too complicated. Then, of course, I had to come to plain speaking, and bring in his mother."

"That she should have produced such a being!" cried Betty; "that he should have any right in her at all!"

"That she should keep such a heart for him!" said George, raising his eyebrows. "He turned rather white, I was relieved to see, when I told him from her that she would leave his house if the London affair went on. Well, we walked up and down in his garden, smoking, the greater part of the night, till I could have dropped with fatigue. Every now and then Ancoats would make a dash for the brandy and soda on the verandah; and in between I had to listen to tirades against marriage, English prudery, and English women,—quotations from Gautier and Renan,—and Heaven knows what. At last, when we were both worn out, he suddenly stood still and delivered his ultimatum. 'Look here—if you think I've no grievances, you're much mistaken. Go back and tell my mother that if she'll marry Fontenoy straight away I'll give up Marguerite!' I said I would deliver no such impertinence. 'Very well,' he said; 'then I will. Tell her I shall be in Paris next week, and ask her to meet me there. When are you going?' 'Well,' I said, rather taken aback, 'there is such an institution as the post. Now I've come so far, suppose you show me Trouville for a few days?' He muttered something or other, and we went to bed. Afterwards, he behaved to me quite charmingly, would not let me go, and I ended by leaving him at the door of an hotel in Paris where he was to meet his mother. But on the subject of Fontenoy it is an *idée fixe*. He chafes under the whole position, and will yield nothing to a man who, as he conceives, has no *locus standi*. But if his pride were no longer annoyed by its being said that his mother had sacrificed her own happiness to him, and if the situation were defined, I *think* he might be more amenable. I think they might marry him."

"That's how the man puts it!" said Betty, tightening her lip. "Of course *any* marriage is desirable for *any* woman!"

"I was thinking of Mrs. Allison," said George, defensively. "One can't think of a Lady Ancoats till she exists."

"*Merci!* Never mind. Don't apologise for the masculine view. It has to be taken with the rest of you. Do you understand that matrimony is in the air here to-night? Have you been talking to Lady Madeleine?"

"No, not yet. But how handsome she's grown! I see Naseby's not far off."

George turned smiling to his companion. But, as he did so, again something cold and lifeless in his own face and in the expression underlying the smile pricked little Betty painfully. Marcella had made her no confidences, but there had been much gossip, and Letty Tressady's mere presence at the Court set the intimate friend guessing very near the truth.

She did her best to chatter on, so as to keep him at least superficially amused. But both became more and more conscious of two figures, and two figures only, at the crowded table—Letty Tressady, who was listening absently to Edward Watton with oppressed and indrawn eyes, and Lady Maxwell.

George, indeed, watched his wife constantly. He hungered to know more of that first scene between her and Lady Maxwell, or he thought with bitter repulsion of the letter she had confessed to him. Had he known of it,—in spite of that strange, that compelling letter of Maxwell's, so reticent, and yet in truth so plain,—he could hardly have come as a guest to Maxwell's house. As for her revelations about Cathedine, he felt little resentment or excitement. For the future a noxious brute had to be kept in order—that was all. It was his own fault, he supposed, much more than hers. The inward voice, as before, was clear enough. "I must just take her home and be good to her. *She* shirked nothing—now, no doubt, she expects me to do my part."

"Do you notice those jewels that Lady Maxwell is wearing to-night?" said Betty at last, unable to keep away from the name.

"I imagine they are a famous set?"

"They belonged to Marie Antoinette. At last Maxwell has made her have them cleaned and reset. What a pity to have such desperate scruples as she has about all your pretty things!"

"Must diamonds and rubies, then, perish out of the world?" he asked her, absently, letting his eyes rest again upon the beautiful head and neck.

Betty made some flippant rejoinder, but as she watched him, she was not gay.

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George had had but a few words with his hostess before dinner, and afterwards a short conversation was all that either claimed. She had hoped and planned so much! On the stage of imagination before he came—she had seen his coming so often. All was to be forgotten and forgiven, and this difficult visit was to lead naturally and without recall to another and happier relation. And now that he was here she felt herself tongue-tied, moving near him in a dumb distress. Both realised the pressure of the same necessities, the same ineluctable facts; and tacitly, they met and answered each other, in the common avoidance of a companionship which could after all avail nothing. Once or twice, as they stood together after dinner, he noticed amid her gracious kindness, her inquiries after Mrs. Allison or his mother, the search her eyes made for Letty, and presently she began to talk with nervous, almost appealing, emphasis—with a marked significance and intensity indeed—of Letty's fatigue after her nursing, and the need she had for complete change and rest. George found himself half resenting the implications of her manner, as the sentences flowed on. He felt her love of influence, and was not without a hidden sarcasm. In spite of his passionate gratitude to her, he must needs ask himself, did she suppose that a man or a marriage was to be remade in a month, even by her plastic fingers? Women envisaged these things so easily, so childishly, almost.

When he moved away, a number of men who had already been talking to him after dinner, and some of the most agreeable women of the party besides, closed about him, making him, as it were, the centre of a conversation which was concerned almost entirely with the personalities and chances of the political moment. He was scarcely less astonished than Letty had been by his own position amongst the guests gathered under Maxwell's roof. Never had he been treated with so much sympathy, so much deference even. Clearly, if he willed it so, what had seemed the dislocation might only be the better beginning of a career. Nonsense! He meant to throw it all up as soon as Parliament met again in

February. The state of his money affairs alone determined that. The strike was going from bad to worse. He must go home and look after his own business. It was a folly ever to have attempted political life. Meanwhile he felt the stimulus of his reception in a company which included some of the keenest brains in England. It appealed to his intelligence and virility, and they responded. Letty once, glancing at him, saw that he was talking briskly, and said to herself, with contradictory bitterness, that he was looking as well as ever, and was going, she supposed, to behave as if nothing had happened.

"What is the matter with you to-night, my lady?" said Naseby, taking a seat beside his hostess. "May I be impertinent and guess?—you don't like your gems? Lady Leven has been telling me tales about them. They are the most magnificent things I ever saw. I condole with you."

She turned rather listlessly to meet his bantering look.

"Come you in friendship, or come you in war?" she said, pointing to a seat beside her. "I have no fight in me. But I have a great many things to say to you."

He reddened for an instant, then recovered himself.

"So have I to you," he said briskly. "In the first place, I have some fresh news from Mile End."

She half laughed, as who should say, "You put me off," then surrendered herself with eagerness to the pleasure of his report. At the moment of his approach, under pretence of talking to an elderly cousin of Maxwell's, she had been lost in such an abstraction of powerless pity for George Tressady—whose fair head, somehow, never escaped her, wherever it moved—that she had hardly been able to bear with her guests or the burden of the evening.

But Naseby roused her. And, indeed, his story so far was one to set the blood throbbing in the veins of a creature who, on one side pure woman, was on the other half poet, half reformer. Since the passage of the Maxwell Bill, indeed, Naseby and a few friends of his, some "gilded youths" like himself, together with some trade-union officials of a long experience, had done wonders. They had been planning out the industrial reorganisation of a whole district, through its two staple trades, with the enthusiastic co-operation of the workpeople themselves; and the result so far struck the imagination. Everywhere the old workshops were to be bought up, improved, or closed; everywhere factories in which life might be decent, and work more than tolerable, were to be set up; everywhere the prospective shortening of hours, and the doing away with the most melancholy of the home trades was working already like the incoming of a great slowly surging tide, raising a whole population on its breast to another level of well-being and of hope.

Most of what had been done or designed was of course already well known to Maxwell's wife; she had indeed given substantial help to Naseby throughout. But Naseby had some fresh advances to report since she was last in East London, and she drank them in with an eagerness, which somehow assuaged a hidden smart; while he wondered a little perhaps in his philosopher's soul at the woman of our English day, with her compunctions and altruisms, her entanglement with the old scheme of things, her pining for a new. It had often seemed to him that to be a Nihilist nurse among a Russian peasantry would be an infinitely easier task than to reconcile the social remorse and compassions that tore his companion's mind with the social pageant in which her life, do what she would, must needs be lived. He knew that, intellectually, she no more than Maxwell saw any way out of unequal place, unequal spending, unequal recompense, if civilisation were to be held together; but he perceived that morally she suffered. Why? Because she and not someone else had been chosen to rule the palace and wear the gems that yet must be? In the end, Naseby could but shrug his shoulders over it. Yet even his sceptical temper made no question of sincerity.

When all his budget was out, and her comments made, she leant back a little in her chair, studying him. A smile came to play about her lips.

"What do you want to say to me?" he asked her quickly.

She looked round her to see that they were not overheard.

"When did you see Madeleine last?"

"At her brother's house, a fortnight ago."

"Was she nice to you?"

He bit his lip, and drew his brows a little together, under her scrutiny.

"Do you imagine I am going to be cross-examined like this?"

"Yes—reply!"

"Well, I don't know what her conception of 'niceness' may be; it didn't fit mine. She had got it into her head that I 'pitied' her, which seemed to be a crime. I didn't see how to disprove it, so I came away."

He spoke with a dry lightness, but she perceived anxiety and unrest under his tone. She bent forward.

"Do you know where Madeleine is now?"

"Not in the least."

"In the Long Gallery. I sent her there."

"Upon my word!" he said, after a pause. "Do you want to rule us all?" His cheek had flushed again; his look was half rebellious.

A flash of pain struck through her brightness.

"No, no!" she said, protesting. "But I know—you don't!"

He rose deliberately, and bowed with the air of obeying her commands. Then suddenly he bent down to her.

"I knew perfectly well that she was in the Long Gallery! But I also knew that Mrs. Bayle had chosen to join her there. The coast, you may perceive, is now clear."

He walked away. Marcella looked round, and saw an elegant little bride, Mr. Bayle's new wife, rustling into the room again. She leant back in her chair, half laughing, yet her eyes were wet. The new joy brought a certain ease to old regrets. Only that word "rule" rankled a little.

Yet the old regrets were all sharp and active again. It seemed to be impossible now to talk with George Tressady, to make any real breach in the barrier between them; but how impossible also not to think of him!—of the young fellow, who had given Maxwell his reward, and said to herself such sad, such agitating things! She did think of him. Her heart ached to serve him. The situation made a new and a very troubling appeal to her womanhood.

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The night was warm, and still, and the windows were open to it as they had been on that May night at Castle Luton. Maxwell came to look for Tressady, and took him out upon a flagged terrace that ran the length of the house.

They talked first of the Ancoats incident, George supplementing his letters by some little verbal pictures of Ancoats's life and surroundings that made Maxwell laugh grimly from time to time. As to Mrs. Allison, Maxwell reported that Ancoats seemed to have gained his point. There was talk of the marriage coming off some time in the winter.

"Well, Fontenoy has earned his prize," said George.

"There are more than twelve years between them. But she seems to be one of the women who don't age. I have seen her go through griefs that would kill most women; and it has been like the passage of a storm over a flower."

"Religion, I suppose, carried to that point, protects one a good deal," said George, not, in truth, feeling much interest in the matter or in Mrs. Allison now that his task was done.

"And especially religion of the type that allows you to give your soul into someone else's keeping. There is no such anodyne," said Maxwell, musing. "I have often noticed how Catholic women keep their youth and softness. But now, do allow me a few words about yourself. Is what I hear about your withdrawal from Parliament irrevocable?"

George's reply led to a discussion in which Maxwell, without any attempt at party proselytism, endeavoured to combat all that he could understand of the young man's twofold disgust, disgust with his own random convictions no less than with the working of the party machine.

"Where do I belong?" he said. "I don't know myself. I ought never to have gone in. Anyway, I had better stand aside for a time."

"But evidently the Malford people want to keep you."

"Well, and of course I shall consult their convenience as much as I can," said George, unwillingly, but would say no more.

Nothing, indeed, could be more flattering, more healing, than all that was implied in Maxwell's earnestness, in the peculiar sympathy and kindness with which the elder man strove to win the younger's confidence; but George could not respond. His whole inner being was too sore; and his mind ran incomparably more upon the damnable letter that must be lying somewhere in the archives of the memory of the man talking to him, than upon his own political prospects. The conversation ended for Maxwell in mere awkwardness and disappointment,—deep disappointment if the truth were known. Once roused his idealism was little less stubborn, less wilful than Marcella's.

When the ladies withdrew, a brilliant group of them stood for a moment on the first landing of the great oak staircase, lighting candles and chattering. Madeleine Penley took her candle absently from Marcella's hand, saying nothing. The girl's curious face under its crown of gold-red hair was transformed somehow to an extraordinary beauty. The frightened parting of the lips and lifting of the brows had become rather a look of exquisite surprise, as of one who knows at last "the very heart of love."

"I am coming to you, presently," murmured Marcella, laying her cheek against the girl's.

"Oh, *do* come!" said Madeleine, with a great breath, and she walked away, unsteadily, by herself, into the darkness of the tapestried passage, her white dress floating behind her.

Marcella looked after her, then turned with shining eyes to Letty Tressady. Her expression changed.

"I am afraid your headache has been very bad all the evening," she said penitently. "Do let me come and look after you."

She went with Letty to her room, and put her into a chair beside the wood fire, that even on this warm night was not unwelcome in the huge place. Letty, indeed, shivered a little as she bent towards it.

"Must you go so early?" said Marcella, hanging over her. "I heard Sir George speak of the ten o'clock train."

"Oh, yes," said Letty, "that will be best."

She stared into the fire without speaking. Marcella knelt down beside her.

"You won't hate me any more?" she said, in a low, pleading voice, taking two cold hands in her own.

Letty looked up.

"I should like," she said, speaking with difficulty, "if you cared—to see you sometimes."

"Only tell me when," said Marcella, laying her lips lightly on the hands, "and I will come." Then she hesitated. "Oh, do believe," she broke out at last, but still in the same low voice, "that all can be healed! Only show him love,—forget everything else,—and happiness must come. Marriage is so difficult—such an art—even for the happiest people, one has to learn it afresh day by day."

Letty's tired eyes wavered under the other's look.

"I can't understand it like that," she said. Then she moved restlessly in her chair. "Ferth is a terrible place! I wonder how I shall bear it!"

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An hour later Marcella left Madeleine Penley and went back to her own room. The smile and flush with which she had received the girl's last happy kisses disappeared as she walked along the corridor. Her head drooped, her arms hung listlessly beside her.

Maxwell found her in her own little sitting-room almost in the dark. He sat down by her and took her hand.

"You couldn't make any impression on him as to Parliament?" she asked him, almost whispering.

"No. He persists that he must go. I think his private circumstances at Ferth have a great deal to do with it."

She shook her head. She turned away from him, took up a paper-knife, and let it fall on the table beside her. He thought that she must have been in tears, before he found her, and he saw that she could find no words in which to express herself. Lifting her hand to his lips, he held it there, silently, with a touch all tenderness.

"Oh, why am I so happy!" she broke out at last, with a sob, almost drawing her hand away. "Such a life as mine seems to absorb and batten upon other people's dues—to grow rich by robbing their joy, joy that should feed hundreds and comes all to me! And that besides I should actually bruise and hurt—"

Her voice failed her.

"Fate has a way of being tolerably even, at last," said Maxwell, slowly, after a pause. "As to Tressady, no one can say what will come of it. He has strange stuff in him—fine stuff I think. He will pull himself together. And for the wife—probably, already he owes you much! I saw her look at you to-night—once as you touched her shoulder. Dear!—what spells have you been using?"

"Oh! I will do all I can—all I can!" Marcella repeated in a low, passionate voice, as one who makes a vow to her own heart.

"But after to-morrow he will not willingly come across us again," said Maxwell, quietly. "That I saw."

She gave a sad and wordless assent.

CHAPTER XXIII

Letty Tressady sat beside the doorway of one of the small red-brick houses that make up the village of Ferth. It was a rainy October afternoon, and through the door she could see the black main street — houses and road alike bedabbled in wet and mire. At one point in the street her eye caught a small standing crowd of women and children, most of them with tattered shawls thrown over their heads to protect them from the weather. She knew what it meant. They were waiting for the daily opening of the soup kitchen, started in the third week of the great strike by the Baptist minister, who, in the language of the Tory paper, was "among the worst firebrands of the district." There was another soup kitchen further down, to which George had begun to subscribe immediately on his return to the place. She had thought it a foolish act on his part thus to help his own men to fight him the better. But—now, as she watched the miserable crowd outside the Baptist chapel, she felt the teasing pressure of those new puzzles of her married life which had so far done little else, it seemed, than take away her gaiety and her power of amusing herself.

Near her sat an oldish woman with an almost toothless mouth, who was chattering to her in a tone that Letty knew to be three parts hypocritical.

"Well, the treuth is the men is that fool 'ardy when they gets a thing into their yeds, there's no taakin wi un. There's plenty as done like the strike, my lady, but they dursent say so—they'd be afeard o' losin the skin off their backs, for soom o' them lads o' Burrows's is a routin rough lot as done keer what they doos to a mon, an yo canna exspeck a quiet body to stan up agen 'em. Now, my son, ee comes in at neet all slump and downcast, an I says to 'im, 'Is there noa news yet o' the Jint Committee, John?' I ses to un. 'Noa, mither,' ee says, 'they're just keepin ov it on.' An ee do seem so down'earted when ee sees the poor soart ov a supper as is aw I can gie un to 'is stomach. Now, *I'm* wun o' thoase as *wants* nuthin. The doctor ses, 'Yo've got no blude in yer, Missus 'Ammersley, what 'ull yer 'ave?' An I says, '*Nuthin!* it's sun cut, an it's sun cooked, *nuthin!*' Noa, I've niver bin on t' parish—an I *might*—times. An I don't 'old wi strikes. Lor, it is a poor pplace, is ours—ain't it?—an nobbut a bit o' bread an drippin for supper."

The old woman threw her eyes round her kitchen, bringing them back slyly to Letty's face. Letty ended by leaving some money with her, and walking away as dissatisfied with her own charity as she was with its recipient. Perhaps this old body was the only person in the village who would have begged of "Tressady's wife" at this particular moment. Letty, moreover, had some reason to believe that her son was one of the roughest of Burrows's bodyguard; while the old woman was certainly no worse off than any of her neighbours.

Outside, she was disturbed to find as she walked home, that the street was full of people, in spite of the rain—of gaunt men and pinched women, who threw her hostile and sidelong glances as she passed.

She hurried through them. How was it that she knew nothing of them—except, perhaps, of the few toadies and parasites among them? How was one to penetrate into this ugly, incomprehensible world of "the people"? The mere idea of trying to do so filled her with distaste and ennui. She was afraid of them. She wished she had not stayed so long with that old gossip, Mrs. Hammersley, and that there were not so many yards of dark road between her and her own gate. Where was George? She knew that he had gone up to the pits that afternoon to consult his manager about some defect in the pumping arrangements. She wished she had secured his escort for the walk home.

But before she left the village she paused irresolutely, then turned down a side street, and went to see Mary Batchelor, George's old nurse, the mother who had lost her only son in his prime.

When, a few minutes later, she came up the lane, she was flatly conscious of having done a virtuous thing—several virtuous things—that afternoon, but certainly without any pleasure in them. She did not get on with Mary, nor Mary with her. The tragic absorption of the mother—little abated since the spring—in her dead boy seemed somehow to strike Letty dumb. She felt pity, but yet the whole emotion was beyond her, and she shrank from it. As for Mary, she had so far received Lady Tressady's visits with a kind of dull surprise, always repeated and not flattering. Letty believed that, in her inmost heart, the broken woman was offended each time that it was not George who came. Moreover, though she never said a word of it to Tressady's wife, she was known to be passionately on the side of the strikers, and her manner gave the impression that she did not want to be talking with their oppressors. Perhaps it was this feeling that had reconciled her to the loutish lad who lived with her, and had been twice "run in" by the police for stone-throwing at non-union men since the beginning of the strike. At any rate, she took a great deal more notice of him than she had done.

No—they were not very satisfactory, these attempts of Letty's in the village. She thought of them with a kind of inner exasperation as she walked home. She had been going to a few old and sick people, and trying to ignore the strike. But at bottom she felt an angry resentment towards these loafing, troublesome fellows, who filled the village street when they ought to have been down in the pits—who were starving their own children no less than disturbing and curtailing the incomes of their betters. Did they suppose that people were going to run pits for them for nothing? Their drink and their religion seemed to her equally hideous. She hated the two Dissenting ministers of the place only less than Valentine Burrows himself, and delighted to pass their wives with her head high in air.

With these general feelings towards the population in her mind, why these efforts at consolation and almsgiving? Well, the poor old people were not responsible; but she did not see that any good had come of it. She had said nothing about her visits to George, nor did she suppose that he had noticed them. He had been so incessantly busy since their arrival with conferences and committees that she had seen very little of him. It was generally believed that the strike was nearing its end, and that the men were exhausted; but she did not think that George was very hopeful yet.

Presently, as she neared a dark slope of road, bordered with trees on one side and the high "bank" of the main pit on the other, her thoughts turned back to their natural and abiding subject—herself. Oh, the dulness of life at Ferth during the last three weeks! She thought of her amusements in town, of the country houses where they might now be staying but for George's pride, of Cathedine, even; and a rush of revolt and self-pity filled her mind. George always away, nothing to do in the ugly house, and Lady Tressady coming directly—she said to herself, suffocating, her small hands stiffening, that she felt fit to kill herself.

Half-way down the slope she heard steps behind her in the gathering darkness, and at the same moment something struck her violently on the shoulder. She cried out, and clutched at some wooden railings along the road for support, as the lump of "dirt" from the bank which had been flung at her dropped beside her.

"Letty, is that you?" shouted a voice from the direction of the village—her husband's voice. She heard running. In a few seconds George had reached her and was holding her.

"What is it struck you? I see! Cowards! *damned* cowards! Has it broken your arm? Try and move it."

Sick with pain she tried to obey him. "No," she said faintly; "it is not broken—I think not."

"Good!" he cried, rejoicing; "probably only a bad bruise. The brute mercifully picked up nothing very hard"—and he pushed the lump with his foot. "Take my scarf, dear; let me sling it. Ah!—what was that? Letty! can you be brave—can you let me go one minute? I sha'n't be out of your sight."

And he pointed excitedly to a dark spot moving among the bushes along the lower edge of the "bank."

Letty nodded. "I can stay here."

George leapt the palings and ran. The dark spot ran too, but in queer leaps and bounds. There was the sound of a scuffle, then George returned, dragging something or someone behind him.

"I knew it," he said, panting, as he came within earshot of his wife; "it was that young ruffian, Mary Batchelor's grandson! Now you stand still, will you? I could hold two of the likes of you with one hand. Madan!"

He had but just parted from his manager on the path which led sideways up the "bank," and waited anxiously to see if his voice would reach the Scotchman's ears. But no one replied. He shouted again; then he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly towards the pit, holding the struggling lad all the time.

At the same moment a couple of heavily built men, evidently colliers, came down the road from the village. George at once called to them from across the palings.

"Here, you there! this young rascal has been throwing a lump of dirt at Lady Tressady, and has hit her badly on the arm. Will you two just walk him up to the police-station for me, while I take my wife home?"

The two men stopped and stared at the lady by the railings and at Sir George holding the boy, whose white but grinning face was just visible in the growing dusk.

"Noa," said one of them at last, "it's noa business ov ourn—is it, Bill?"

"Noa," said the other, stolidly; and on they tramped.

"Oh, you heroes!" George flung after them. "Attacking a woman in the dark is about what you understand!—Madan!"

He whistled again, and this time there was a hurrying from overhead.

"Sir George!"

"Come down here, will you, at once!"

In a few more minutes the boy was being marched up the road to the police-station in charge of the strong-wristed Scotch manager, and George was free to attend to Letty.

He adjusted a sling very fairly, then made her cling to him with her sound arm; and they were soon inside their own gates.

"You can't climb this hill," he said to her anxiously. "Rest at the lodge, and let me go for the brougham."

"I can walk perfectly well—and it will be much quicker."

Involuntarily, he was surprised to find her rather belittling than exaggerating the ill. As they climbed on in the dark, he helping her as much as he could, both could not but think of another accident and another victim. Letty found herself imagining again and again what the scene with Lady Maxwell, after the East End meeting, might have been like; while, as for him, a face drew itself upon the rainy dusk, which the will seemed powerless to blot out. It was a curious and unwelcome coincidence. His secret sense of it made him the more restlessly kind.

"What were you in the village for?" he asked, bending to her; "I did not know you had anything to do there!"

"I had been to see old Bessie Hammersley and Mrs. Batchelor," she said, in a tone that tried to be stiff or indifferent. "Bessie begged, as usual."

"That was very good of you. Have you been doing visiting, then, during all these days I have been away?"

"Yes—a few people."

George groaned.

"What's the use of it—or of anything? They hate us and we them. This strike begins to eat into my very being. And the men will be beaten soon, and the feeling towards the employers will be worse than ever."

"You are sure they will be beaten?"

"Before Christmas, anyway. I daresay there will be some bad times first. To think a woman even can't walk these roads without danger of ill-treatment! How is one to have any dealings with the brutes, or any peace with them?"

His rage and bitterness made her somehow feel her bruises less. She even looked up in protest.

"Well, it was only a boy, and you used to think he wasn't all there."

"Oh! all there!" said George, scornfully. "There'd be half of them in Bedlam if one had to make that excuse for them. There isn't a day passes without some devilry against the non-union men somewhere. It was only this morning I heard of two men being driven into a reservoir near Rilston, and stoned in the water."

"Perhaps we should do the same," she said unwillingly.

"Lean on me more heavily—we shall soon be there. You think we should be brutes too? Probably. We seem to be all brutes for each other—that's the charming way this competitive world is managed. So you have been looking after some of the old people, have you? You must have had a dull time of it this last three weeks—don't think I don't know that!"

He spoke with emotion. He thought he felt her grasp waver a little on his arm, but she did not speak.

"Suppose—when this business was over—I were to cut the whole concern—let the pits and the house, and go right away? I daresay I could."

"Could you?" she said eagerly.

"We shouldn't get so much money, you know, as in the best years. But then it would be certain. What would you say to a thousand a year less?" he asked her, trying to speak lightly.

"Well, it doesn't seem easy to get on with what we have—even if we had it," she said sharply.

He understood the reference to his mother's debts, and was silent.

But evidently the recollection, once introduced, generated the usual heat and irritation in her, for, as they neared the front door, she suddenly said, with an acerbity he had not heard for some weeks:

"Of course, to have a country house, and not to be able to spend a farthing upon it—to ask your friends, or have anything decent—is enough to make anyone sick of it. And, above all, when we needn't have been here at all this October—"

She stopped, shrinking from the rest of the sentence, but not before he had time to think, "She say *that!*—monstrous!"

Aloud he coldly replied:

"It is difficult to see where I could have been but here, this October."

Then the door opened, and the light showed her to him pale, with lips tight pressed from the pain of her injury. Instantly he forgot everything but his natural pity and chivalry towards women. He led her in, and half carried her upstairs. A little later she was resting on her bed, and he had done everything he could for her till the doctor should come. She seemed to have passed into an eclipse of temper or moodiness, and he got little gratitude.

The evening post brought her a letter which he took up to her himself. He knew the clear, rapid hand, and he knew, too, that Letty had received many such during the preceding month. He stood beside her a moment, almost on the point of asking her to let him see it. But the words died on his lips. And, perceiving that she would not read it while he was there, he went away again.

When he returned, carrying a new book and asking if he should read to her, he found her lying with her cheek on her hand, staring into the fire, and so white and miserable that his heart sank. Had he married her, a girl of twenty-four, only to destroy her chance of happiness altogether? A kind of terror seized him. He had been "good to her," so far as she and his business had allowed him, since their return; there had been very little outward jarring; but no one knew better than he that there had not been one truly frank or reconciling moment.

His own inner life during these weeks had passed in one obscure continuous struggle—a sort of dull fever of the soul. And she had simply held herself aloof from him.

He knelt down beside her, and laid his face against hers.

"Don't look so unhappy!" he said in a whisper, caressing her free hand. She did not answer or make any response till, as he got up again in a kind of despair as to what to do or say next, she hastily asked:

"Has the constable been up here to see you?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"Yes. It is all arranged. The lad will be brought up before the magistrates on Thursday."

She fidgeted, then said abruptly:

"I should like him to be let off."

He hesitated.

"That's very nice of you, but it wouldn't be very good for the district."

She did not press the matter, but as he moved away she said fretfully:

"I wish you'd read to me. The pain's horrid."

Thankful, in his remorse, to do anything for her, he tried to amuse and distract her as he best could. But in the middle of a magazine story she interrupted him:

"Isn't it the day after to-morrow your mother's coming?"

"According to her letter this morning." He put down the book. "But I don't think you'll be at all fit to look after her. Shall I write to-night and suggest that she stays in London a little?"

"No. I shall be all right, the doctor says. I want to tell Esther"—Esther was the housemaid—"not to get the Blue Room ready for her. I looked in to-day, and it seemed damp. The back room over the dining-room is smaller, but it's much warmer."

She turned to look at him with a rather flushed face.

"You know best," he said, smiling. "I am sure it will be all right. But I sha'n't let her come unless you are better."

He went on reading till it grew late, and it seemed to him she was dropping off to sleep. He was stealing off by way of the large dressing-room near by, where he had been installed since their return, when, she said faintly, "Good-night!"

He returned, and felt the drawing of her hot hand. He stooped and kissed her. Then she turned away from him, and seemed to go instantly to sleep.

He went downstairs to his library, and gathered about him some documents he had brought back from the last meeting of the masters' committee, which had to be read. But in reality he spent an hour of random thought. When would she herself tell him anything of her relations to Lady Maxwell, of the nature and causes of that strange subjection which, as he saw quite plainly, had been brought about? She must know that he pined to know; yet she held her secret only the more jealously, no doubt to punish him.

He thought of her visits to the village, half humorously, half sadly; then of her speech about the Blue Room and his mother. They seemed to him signs of some influence at work.

But at last he turned back to his papers with a long impatient sigh. The clear pessimism with which he was wont to see facts that concerned himself maintained that all the surrounding circumstance of the case was as untoward as it could be—this dull house, a troubled district, his money affairs, the perpetual burden of his mother, Letty's own thirst for pleasure, and the dying down in himself of the feelings that might once—possibly—have made up to her for a good deal. The feelings might be simulated. Was the woman likely to be deceived? That she was capable of the fiercest jealousy had been made abundantly plain; and such a temper once roused would find a hundred new provocations, day by day, in the acts and doings of a husband who had ceased to be a lover.

Two days later Lady Tressady arrived, with Justine, and her dogs, and all her paraphernalia. She declared herself better, but she was a mere shadow of the woman who had tormented George with her debts and affectations at Malford House a twelvemonth before. She took Ferth discontentedly, as usual, and was particularly cross with Letty's assignment to her of the back room, instead of the larger spare room to the front of the house.

"Damp?—nonsense!" she said to Justine, who was trying to soothe her on the night she arrived. "I suppose Lady Tressady has some friend of her own coming to stay—that's, of *course*, what it is. *C'est parfaitement clair, je te dis—parfaitement!*"

The French maid reminded her that her daughter-in-law had said, on showing her the room, she had only to express a wish to change, and the arrangements should be altered at once.

"I daresay," cried Lady Tressady. "But I shall ask *no* favours of her—and that, of course, she knew."

"But, miladi, I need only speak to the housemaid."

"Thank you! Then afterwards, whenever I had a pain or a finger-ache, it would be, 'I told you so!' No! she has managed it very cleverly—very cleverly indeed!—and I shall let it alone."

Thenceforward, however, there were constant complaints of everything provided for her—room, food, the dulness of the place, the manners of her daughter-in-law. Whether it was that her illness had now reached a stage when the will could no longer fight against it, and its only effect was demoralising; or whether the strange flash of courage and natural affection struck from the volatile nature by the first threat of death could not in any case have maintained itself, it is hard to say. At any rate, George also found it hard to keep up his new and better ways with her. The fact was, he suffered through Letty. In a few days his sympathies were all with her, and to his amazement he perceived before long that, in spite of occasional sharp speeches and sulky moments that only an angel could have forborne, she was really more patient under his mother's idiosyncrasies than he was. Yet Lady Tressady, even now, was rarely unmanageable in his presence, and could still restrain herself if it was a question of his comfort and repose; whereas, it was clear that she felt a cat-like impulse to torment Letty whenever she saw her.

One recent habit, however, bore with special heaviness on himself. Oddly enough, it was a habit of religious discussion. Lady Tressady in health had never troubled herself in the least as to what the doctors of the soul might have to say, and had generally gaily professed herself a sceptic in religious matters, mostly, as George had often thought, for the sake of escaping all inconvenient restrictions—such as family prayers, or keeping Sunday, or observing Lent—which might have got in the way of her amusements.

But, now, poor lady, she was all curiosity and anxiety about this strange other side of things, and inclined, too, to be rather proud of the originality of her inquiries on the subject. So that night after night she would keep George up, after an exhausting day, till the small hours, while she declared her own views "on God, on Nature, and on Human Life," and endeavoured to extract his. This latter part of the exercise was indeed particularly attractive to her; no doubt because of its difficulty. George had been a singularly reserved person in these respects all his life, and had no mind now to play the part of a coal-seam for his mother to "pike" at. But "pike" she would incessantly.

"Now, George, look here! what do you *really* think about a future life? Now don't try and get out of it! And don't just talk nonsense to me because you think I'm ill. I'm not a baby—I really am not. Tell me—seriously—what you think. Do you honestly expect there *is* a future life?"

"I've told you before, mother, that I have no particular thoughts on that subject. It isn't in my line," George would say, smiling profanely, but uneasily, and wondering how long this bout of it might be going to last.

"Don't be shocking, George! You *must* have some ideas about it. Now, don't hum and haw—just tell me what you think." And she would lean forward, all urgency and expectation.

A pause, during which George could think only of the ghastly figure on the sofa. She sat upright, generally, against a prop of cushions, dressed in a white French tea-gown, slim enough to begin, with, but far too large now for the shrunk form—a bright spot of rouge on either pinched cheek, and the dyed "fringe" and "coils" covering all the once shapely head. Meanwhile her hand would play impatiently on her knee. The hand was skin and bone; and the rings with which it was laden would often slip off from it to the floor—a diversion of which George was always prompt to avail himself.

"Why don't you talk to Mr. Fearon, mother?" he would say gently at last.
"It's his business to discuss these things."

"Talk to a clergyman! thank you! I hope I have more respect for my own intelligence. What can a priest do for you? What does he know more than anybody else? But I do want to know what my own son thinks. Now, George, just answer me. If there *is* a future life"—she spread out her hand slowly on her lap—"what do you suppose your father's doing at this moment? That's a thing I often think of, George. I don't think I want a future life if it's to be just like the past. You know—you remember how he used to be—poking about the house, and going down to the pits, and—and—swearing at the servants, and

having rows with me about the accounts—and all his dear dreadful little ways? Yet, what else in the world can you imagine him doing? As to singing hymns!"

She raised her hands expressively.

George laughed, and puffed away at his cigarette. But as he still said nothing Lady Tressady began to frown.

"That's the way you always get out of my questions," she said fretfully; "it's so provoking of you."

"I've recommended you to the professional," he said, patting her hand.
"What else could I do?"

Her thin cheek flamed.

"As if we couldn't be certain, anyway," she cried, "that the Christians don't know anything about it. As M. d'Estrelles used to say to me at Monte Carlo, if there's one thing clear, it is that we needn't bother ourselves with *their* doctrines!"

"Needn't we?" said George. Then he looked at her, smiling. "And you think M. d'Estrelles was an authority?"

Odd recollections began to run through his mind of this elderly French admirer of his mother's, whom he had seen occasionally flitting about their London lodgings when, as a boy, he came up from Eton for his *exeat*.

"Oh! don't you scoff, George," said his mother, angrily. "M. d'Estrelles was a very clever man, though he did gamble like a fool. Everybody said his memory was marvellous. He used to quote me pages out of Voltaire and the rest of them on the nights when we walked up and down the gardens at Monte Carlo, after he'd cleared himself out. He always said he didn't see why these things should be kept from women—why men shouldn't tell women exactly what they think. And I know he'd been a Catholic in his youth, so he'd had experience of both. However, I don't care about M. d'Estrelles. I want your opinions. Now, George!"—her voice would begin to break—"how can you be so unkind. You might really compose my mind a little, as the doctors say!"

And through her incorrigible levity he would see for a moment the terror which always possessed her raise its head. Then it would be time for him to go and put his arm round her, and try and coax her to bed.

One night, after he had taken her upstairs, he came down so wearied and irritable that he put all his letters aside, and tried to forget himself in some miscellaneous reading.

His knowledge of literature was no more complete than his character. Certain modern English poets—Rossetti, Morris, Keats, and Shelley—he knew almost by heart. And in travels and biography—mostly of men of action—he had, at one time or another, read voraciously. But "the classics he had not read," as with most of us, would have made a list of lamentable length.

Since his return to Ferth, however, he had browsed a good deal among the books collected by his grandfather, mostly by way of distracting himself at night from the troubles and worries of the day.

On this particular night there were two books lying on his table. One was a volume of Madame de Sévigné, the other St. Augustine's "Confessions." He turned over first one, then the other.

"Au reste, ma fille, une de mes grandes envies, ce serait d'être dévote; je ne suis ni an Dieu, ni an Diable; cet état m'ennuie, quoiqu' entre nous je le trouve le plus naturel du monde. On n'est point an Diable parce qu'on craint Dieu, et qu' an fond on a un principe de religion; on n'est point à Dieu aussi, parce que sa loi paroît dure, et qu' on n'aime point à se détruire soi-même."

"Admirable!" he thought to himself, "*admirable!* We are all there—my mother and I—three parts of mankind."

But on a page of the other book he had marked these lines—for the beauty of them:

"Beatus qui amat te, et amicum in te, et inimicum propter te. Solus enim nullum eorum amittit, cui omnes in illo cari sunt qui non amittitur."

He hung over the fire, pondering the two utterances.

"A marvellous music," he thought of the last. "But I know no more what it means than I know what a

symphony of Brahms' means. Yet some say they know. Perhaps of *her* it might be true."

The weeks ran on. Outside, the strike was at its worst, though George still believed the men would give in before Christmas. There was hideous distress, and some bad rioting in different parts of the country. Various attempts had been made by the employers to use and protect non-union labour, but the crop of outrage they had produced had been too threatening: in spite of the exasperation of the masters they had been perforce let drop. The Press and the public were now intervening in good earnest—"every fool thinks he can do our business for us," as George would put it bitterly to Letty. Burrows was speaking up and down the district with a superhuman energy, varied only by the drinking-bouts to which he occasionally succumbed; and George carried a revolver with him when he went abroad.

The struggle wore him to death; the melancholy of his temperament had never been so marked. At the same time Letty saw a doggedness in him, a toughness like Fontenoy's own, which astonished her. Two men seemed to be fighting in him. He would talk with perfect philosophy of the miners' point of view, and the physical-force sanction by which the lawless among them were determined to support it; but at the same time he belonged to the stiffest set among the masters.

Meanwhile, at home, friction and discomfort were constantly recurring. In the course of three or four weeks Lady Tressady had several attacks of illness, and it was evident that her weakness increased rapidly. And with the weakness, alas! the ugly incessant irritability, that dried up the tenderness of nurses, and made a battleground of the sick-room. Though, indeed, she could never be kept in her room; she resented being left a moment alone. She claimed, in spite of the anxieties of the moment, to be constantly amused; and though George could sometimes distract and quiet her, nothing that Letty did, or said, or wore was ever tolerable to a woman who merely saw in this youth beside her a bitter reminder of her own.

At last, one day early in November, came a worse turn than usual. The doctor was in the house most of the day, but George had gone off before the alarm to a place on the further side of the county, and could not be got at till the evening.

He came in to find Letty waiting for him in the hall. There had been a rally; the doctor had gone his way marvelling, and it was thought there was no immediate danger.

"But oh, the pain!" said Letty, under her breath, pressing her hands together, and shivering. Her eyes were red, her cheeks pale; he saw that she was on the point of exhaustion; and he guessed that she had never seen such a sight before.

He ran up to visit his mother, whom he found almost speechless from weakness, yet waiting, with evident signs of impatience and temper, for her evening food. And while he and Letty were at their melancholy dinner together, Justine came flying downstairs in tears. Miladi would not eat what had been taken to her. She was exciting herself; there would be another attack.

Husband and wife hurried from the room. In the hall they found the butler just receiving a parcel left by the railway delivery-cart.

George passed the box with an exclamation and a shudder. It bore a large label, "From Worth et Cie," and was addressed to Lady Tressady. But Letty stopped short, with a sudden look of pleasure.

"You go to her. I will have this unpacked."

He went up and coaxed his mother like a child to take her soup and champagne. And presently, just as she was revived enough to talk to him, Letty appeared. Her mother-in-law frowned, but Letty came gaily up to the bed.

"There is a parcel from Paris for you," she said, smiling. "I have had it opened. Would you like it brought in?"

Lady Tressady first whimpered, and said it should go back—what did a dying woman want with such things?—then demanded greedily to see it.

Letty brought it in herself. It was a new evening gown of the softest greens and shell-pinks, fit for a bride in her first season. To see the invalid, ashen-grey, stretching out her hand to finger it was almost more than George could stand. But Letty shook out the rustling thing, put on the skirt herself that Lady Tressady might see, and paraded up and down in it, praising every cut and turning with the most ingenious ardour.

"I sha'n't wear it, of course, till after Christmas," said Lady Tressady at last, still looking at it with

half-shut covetous eyes. "Isn't it *darling* the way the lace is put on! Put it away. George!—it's the *first* I've had from him this year."

She looked up at him appealingly. He stooped and kissed her.

"I am so glad you like it, mother dear. Can't you sleep now?"

"Yes, I think so. Good-night. And good-night, Letty."

Letty came, and Lady Tressady held her hand, while the blue eyes, still bearing the awful impress of suffering, stared at her oddly.

"It was nice of you to put it on, Letty. I didn't think you'd have done it. And I'm glad you think it's pretty. I wish you would have one made like it. Kiss me."

Letty kissed her. Then George slipped his wife's arm in his, and they left the room together. Outside Letty turned suddenly white, and nearly fell. George put his arms round her, and carried her down to his study. He put her on the sofa, and watched her tenderly, rubbing the cold hands.

"How you *could*," he said at last, in a low voice, when he saw that she was able to talk; "how you *could*! I shall never forget that little scene."

"You'd have done anything, if you'd seen her this morning," she said, with her eyes still closed.

He sat beside her, silent, thinking over the miseries of the last few weeks. The net result of them—he recognised it with a leap of surprise—seemed to have been the formation of a new and secret bond between himself and Letty. During all the time he had been preparing himself for the worst this strange thing had been going on. How had it been possible for her to be, comparatively, so forbearing? He could see nothing in his past knowledge of her to explain it.

He recalled the effort and gloom with which she had made her first preparations for Lady Tressady. Yet she had made them. Is there really some mystic power, as the Christians say, in every act of self-sacrifice, however imperfect,—a power that represents at once the impelling and the rewarding God,—that generates, moreover, from its own exercise, the force to repeat itself? Personally such a point of view meant little to him, nor did his mind dwell upon it long. All that he knew was that some angel had stirred the pool—that old wounds smarted less—that hope seemed more possible.

Letty knew quite well that he was watching her in a new way, that there was a new clinging in his touch. She, little more than he, understood what was happening to her. From time to time during these weeks of painful tension there had been hours of wild rebellion, when she had hated her surroundings, her mother-in-law, and her general ill-luck as fiercely as ever. Then there had followed strange appeasements, and inflowing calms—moments when she had been able somehow to express herself to one who cared to listen who poured upon her in return a sympathy which braced while it healed.

Suddenly she opened her eyes.

"Do you want to hear about that first time when she came to see me?" she whispered, her look wavering under his.

He flushed and hesitated. Then he kissed her hand.

"No, not now. You are worn out. Another time. But I love you for thinking of telling me."

A feeling of rest and well-being stole over her. Mercifully he made no protestations, and she asked for none, but there was a gentle moving of heart towards heart. And the memory of that hour, that night, made one of the chief barriers between her and despair in the time that followed.

Two days later a painless death, death in her sleep, overtook Lady Tressady. Her delicate face, restored to its true years, and framed in its natural grey hair, seemed for the first time beautiful to George when he saw her in her coffin. He could not remember admiring her, even when he was a boy, and she was reckoned among the handsomest women of her day. Parting with her was like the snapping of a strain that had pulled life out of its true bearings and proportions. An immense, inevitable relief followed. But after her death Letty never said a harsh word of her, and George had a queer, humble feeling that after all he might be found to owe her much.

For as November and December passed away the relation between the husband and wife steadily settled and improved. "We shall rub along," George said to himself in his frank, secret thoughts—"in the end it will be much better perhaps than either of us could have hoped." That no doubt was the utmost that could ever be said; but it was much.

The night after his mother's death, Letty abruptly, violently even, as though worked up to it by an inner excitement, told him the story of her wrestle with Marcella. Then, throwing some letters into his hand she broke into sobbing and ran away from him. When he went to look for her his own eyes were wet. "Who else could have done such a thing?" he said; and Letty made no protest.

The letters gave him food for thought for many a day afterwards. They were little less of a revelation to him than the motives and personality lying behind them had been to Letty. In spite of all that he had felt for the woman who had written them, they still roused in him a secret and abiding astonishment. We use the words "spiritual," "poetic" in relation to human conduct; we talk as though all that the words meant were familiarly understood by us; and yet when the spiritual or the poetic comes actually to walk among us, slips into the forms and functions of our common life, we find it amazing, almost inhuman. It gives us some trouble to take it simply, to believe in it simply.

Yet nothing in truth could be a more inevitable outcome of character and circumstance than these letters of Marcella Maxwell to George Tressady's wife. Marcella had suffered under a strong natural remorse, and to free her heart from the load of it she had thrown herself into an effort of reconciliation and atonement with all the passion, the subtlety, and the resource of her temperament. She had now been wooing Letty Tressady for weeks, nor had the eager contriving ability she had been giving to the process missed its reward. Letty fresh from the new impressions made upon her by Marcella at home, and Marcella as a wife, by a beauty she could no longer hate, and a charm to which she had been forced to yield, had found herself amid the loneliness and dulness of Perth gradually enveloped and possessed anew by the same influence, acting in ways that grew week by week more personal, and more subduing.

What to begin with could be more flattering either to heart or vanity than the persistence with which one of the most famous women of her time—watched, praised, copied, attacked, surrounded, as Letty knew her to be, from morning till night—had devoted herself first to the understanding, then to the capturing, of the smaller, narrower life. The reaction towards a natural reserve, a certain proud, instinctive self-defence, which had governed Marcella's manner during a great part of Letty's visit to the Court, had been in these letters deliberately broken down—at first with effort, then more and more frankly, more and more sweetly. Day after day, as Letty knew, Marcella had taken time from politics, from society, from her most cherished occupations, to write to this far-off girl, from whom she had nothing either to gain or to fear, who had no claims whatever on her friendship, had things gone normally, while thick about the opening of their relation to each other hung the memory of Letty's insults and Letty's violence.

And the letters were written with such abandonment! As a rule Marcella was a hasty or impatient correspondent. She thought letters a waste of time; life was full enough without them. But here, with Letty, she lingered, she took pains. The mistress of Les Rochers writing to her absent, her exacting Pauline, could hardly have been more eager to please. She talked—at leisure—of all that concerned her—husband, child, high politics, the persons she saw, the gaieties she bore with, the books she read, the schemes in which she was busied; then, with greater tenderness, greater minuteness, of the difficulties and tediums of Letty's life at Ferth, as they had been dismally drawn out for her in Letty's own letters. The animation, the eager kindness of it all went for much; the amazing self-surrender, self-offering, implied in every page for much more.

Strange!—as he read the letters George felt his own heart beating. Were they in some hidden way meant for him too?—he seemed to hear in them a secret message—a woman's yearning, a woman's response.

At any rate, the loving, reconciling effort had done its work. Letty could not be insensible to such a flattery, a compliment so unexpected, so bewildering—the heart of a Marcella Maxwell poured out to her for the taking. She neither felt it so profoundly, nor so delicately as hundreds of other women could have felt it. Nevertheless the excitement of it had thrilled and broken up the hardnesses of her own nature. And with each yielding on her part had come new capacity for yielding, new emotions that amazed herself; till she found herself, as it were, groping in a strange world, clinging to Marcella's hand, trying to express feelings that had never visited her before, one moment proud of her new friend with a pride half moral, half selfish, the next, ill at ease with her, and through it all catching dimly the light of new ideals.

One day, as George walked into Letty's sitting-room, to discuss some small business of the afternoon, he saw on her writing-table that same photograph of Lady Maxwell and her boy, whereof an earlier copy had come to such a tragic end in Letty's hands. He walked up to it with an exclamation; Letty was not in the room. Suddenly, however, she came in. He made no attempt whatever to disguise that he had been looking at the photograph; he bent over it indeed a moment longer, deliberately. Then, walking away to the window, he began speaking of the matter which had brought him to look for his wife. Letty

answered absently. The colour had rushed to her face. Her hands fidgeted with the books and papers on her table, and her mind was full of fevered remembrance.

Presently George, having settled the little point he came to speak of, fell silent. But he still stood by the window, looking out through the rain-splashed glass to the wintry valley below with its chimneys and straggling village. Letty, who was pretending to write a note, raised her head, looked at him—the quick breath beating through the parted lips, the blue eyes half wild, half miserable. She was not nearly so pretty as she had been a year before. George had often noticed it; it made part of his remorse. But the face was more troubling, infinitely more human; and, in truth, he knew it much better, was more sensitively alive to it, so to speak, than he ever had been in the days of their courtship.

Before he left the room he came back to her, put his arm round her shoulders and kissed her hair. She did not raise her head or say anything. But when he had gone she looked up with a sudden fierce sob, took the photograph from its place, and thrust it angrily into the drawer in front of her. Afterwards she sat for some minutes, motionless, with her handkerchief at her lips, trying to choke down the tears that had seized her. And last of all, with trembling fingers, she took out the picture again, wrapped it in some soft tissue paper that lay near, as though propitiating it, and once more put it out of sight.

What had made her first ask Marcella for it, and then place it on her table where George might, nay, must see it? Some vague wish, no doubt, to "make up"; to punish herself, while touching him. But the recollection of him, bending over the picture, tortured her, gripped her at the heart for many a day afterwards. She let it be seen no more. Yet that week she wrote more fully, more incoherently, more piteously to Marcella than ever before. She talked, not without bitterness and injustice, of her bringing up, asked what she should read, spread out her puzzles with the poor, or with her household—half angrily, as though she were accusing someone. For the first time, as it were, she was seeking a teacher in the art of living. And though the tone was still querulous, she knew, and Marcella presently dared to guess, that the ugly house on the hill had in truth ceased to be in the least dull or burdensome to her. George went in and out of it. And for the woman that has come to hunger for her husband's step, there is no more ennui.

* * * * *

Letty indeed hardly knew the strength of her own position. The reading of Lady Maxwell's letters to his wife had cleared a number of relics and fragments from George's mind. The day of passion was done. Yes!—but to see her frequently, to be brought back into any of the old social or political relations to her and Maxwell, from this his pride shrank no less than his conscience. Yet there was a large party in his constituency, and belonging to it some of the men whose probity and intelligence he had come to rate most highly, who were pressing him hard not to resign in February, and, indeed, not to resign at all. The few public meetings he had so far addressed had been stormy indeed, but on the whole decidedly friendly to him, and it was urged that he must at least present himself for re-election, in which case his expenses should be borne, and he should be left as unpledged as possible. Since the passage of the Bill Fontenoy's reactionary movement had lost ground largely in the constituency; and the position of independent member with a general leaning to the Government was no doubt easily open to George Tressady.

But his whole soul shrank from such a renewal of the effort of politics—probably because of that something in him, that enfeebling, paralysing something, which in all directions made him really prefer the half to the whole, and see barriers in the way of all enthusiasms. Nevertheless, the arguments he had to meet, and the kind persuasions he had to rebut, made these weeks all the more trying to him.

The second week of December came, the beginning of the end so far as the strike was concerned. The men's resources were exhausted; the masters stood unbroken. They had met the men in a joint committee; but they had steadily refused arbitration from outside. At the beginning of this week, rioting broke out in a district where the Union had least strength, caused, no doubt, by the rage of impending failure. By the middle of the following week, men were going in here and there, and the stampede of defeat had begun.

George, passing through the pinched and lowering faces that lined the village, hated the triumph of his class. On the 21st, he rode over to a neighbouring town, where local committees, both of masters and men, were sitting, to see if there was any final news as to the pits of his own valley.

About eight o'clock in the evening Letty heard his horse's hoofs returning. She knew that he was accustomed to ride in the dark, but the rumours of violence and excitement that filled the air had unnerved her, and she had been listening to every sound for some time past.

When the door was open she ran out.

"Yes, I'm late," said George, in answer to her remonstrances; "but it is all right—it was worth waiting for. The thing's over. Some of the men go down to-morrow week, and the rest as we can find room for them."

"On the masters' terms?"

"Of course—or all but."

She clapped her hands.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't!" he said, as he hung up his hat, and she, supposing that he was irritable from over-fatigue, managed to overlook the sharpness of his tone.

Their Christmas passed in solitude. George, more and more painfully alive to the disadvantages of Ferth as the home of a young woman with a natural love of gaiety, had tried, in spite of their mourning, to persuade Letty to ask some friends to spend Christmas week with them. She had refused, however, and they were still alone when the end of the strike arrived.

The day before the men were to go back to work, George returned late from a last meeting of the employers. Letty had begun dinner, and when he walked into the dining-room she saw at once that some unusual excitement or strain had befallen him.

"Let me have some food!" was all he would say in answer to her first questions, and she let him alone. When the servants were gone he looked up.

"I have had a shindy with Burrows, dear—rather a bad one. But that's all. I walked down to the station with Ashton"—Ashton was a neighbouring magistrate and coal-owner—"and there we found Valentine Burrows. Two or three friends were in charge of him, and it has been given out lately that he has been suffering from nervous breakdown, owing to his exertions. All that I could see was that he was drunker than usual—no doubt to drown defeat. Anyway, directly he saw me he made a scene—foamed and shouted. According to him, I am at the bottom of the men's defeat. It is all my wild-beast delight in the sight of suffering,—my love of 'fattening on the misery of the collier,'—my charming villanies of all sorts—that are responsible for everything. Altogether he reached a fine flight! Then he got violent—tried to get at me with his knobbed stick. Ashton and I, and the men with him, succeeded in quelling him without bothering the police.—I don't think anything more will come of it."

And he stretched out his hand to some salted almonds, helping himself with particular deliberation.

After dinner, however, he lay down on a sofa in Letty's sitting-room, obliged to confess himself worn out. She made him comfortable, and after she had given him a cushion, she suddenly bent over him from behind and kissed him.

"Come here!" he said, with a smile, throwing up his hand to catch her. But with an odd blush and conscious look, she eluded him.

When, a little later, she came to sit by him with some needle-work she found him restless and inclined to talk.

"I wonder if we are always to live in this state of war for one's bread and butter!" he said, impatiently throwing down a newspaper he had been reading. "It doesn't tend to make life agreeable—does it? Yet what on earth—"

He threw back his head, with a stiff protesting air, staring across the room.

Letty had the sudden impression that he was not talking to her at all, but to some third person, unseen.

"*Either* capital gets its fair remuneration"—he went on in an argumentative voice—"and ability its fair wages—*or* the Marxian state, labour-notes, and the rest of it. There is no half-way house—absolutely none. As for me, I am not going to lend my capital for nothing—nor to give my superintendence for nothing. And I don't ask exorbitant pay for either. It is quite simple. My conscience is quite clear."

"I should think so!" said Letty, resentfully. "I wonder whether Marcella—is all for the men? She has never mentioned the strike in her letters."

As the Christian name slipped out, she flushed, and he was conscious of a curious start. But the breaking through of a long reticence was deliberate on Letty's part.

"Very likely she is all for the men," he said drily, after a pause. "She never could take a strike calmly. Her instinct always was to catch hold of any stick that could beat the employers—Watton and I used

often to tease her about it."

He threw himself back against the sofa, with a little laugh that was musical in Letty's ear. It was the first time that Lady Maxwell's name had been mentioned between them in this trivial, ordinary way. The young wife sat alert and straight at her work, her cheek still pink, her eyes bright.

But after a silence, George suddenly sprang up to pace the little room, and she heard him say, under his breath, "*But who am I, that I should be coercing them and trampling on them!—men old enough to be my father—driving them down to-morrow—while I sleep—for a dog's wage!*"

"George, what is the matter with you?" she cried, looking at him in real anxiety.

"Nothing! *nothing!*—Darling, who's ill? I saw the old doctor on the road home, and he threw me a word as he passed about having been here—looked quite jolly over it. What's wrong—one of the servants?"

Letty put down her work upon her knee and her hands upon it. She grew red and pale; then she turned away from him, pressing her face into the back of her chair.

He flew to her, and she murmured in his ear.

* * * * *

What she said was by no means all sweetness. There was mingled with it much terror and some anger. Letty was not one of the women who take maternity as a matter of course.

But emotion and natural feeling had their way. George was dissolved in joy. He threw himself at her feet, resting his head against her knee.

"If he doesn't have your eyes and hair I'll disinherit him," he said, with a gaiety which seemed to have effaced all his fatigue.

"I don't want him," was her pettish reply; "but if *she* has your chin, I'll put her out to nurse. Oh! how I hate the thought of it!" and she shuddered.

He caught her hand, comforting her. Then, putting up both his own, he drew her down to him.

"After all, little woman, it hasn't turned out so badly?" he said in her ear, with sad appeal. Their lips met, trembling. Suddenly Letty broke into passionate weeping. George sprang up, gathered her upon his knee, and they sat for long, in silence, clinging to each other.

At last Letty drew back from him, pushing a hand against his shoulder.

"You know—you didn't care a bit for me—when you married me," she said, half bitter, half crying.

"Didn't I? And you?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh! I don't remember!" she said hurriedly, and dropped her face on his coat again.

"Well, we are going to care for each other," he said in a low voice, after a pause. "That's what matters now, isn't it?"

She made no reply, but she put up a hand, and touched his face. He turned his lips to the hand and kissed it tenderly. There was a sore, sad spot in each heart; and neither dared to look forward. But tonight there was a sense of belonging to each other in a new and sacred way, of being drawn apart, separated from the world, husband and wife, together. Through George's mind there wandered half-astonished thoughts about this strange compelling power of marriage,—the deep grip it makes on life—the almost mechanical way in which it bears down resistance, provided only that certain compunctions, certain scruples still remain for it to work on.

George slept lightly, being over-tired. All through the night the vision of the beaten men going down sullenly to their first shift seemed to hold him as though in a nightmare.

Between seven and eight o'clock a sound startled him. He found himself standing by his bed, struggling to wake and collect himself.

A sound that had shaken the house, passing like a dull thud through the valley? A horror seized him. He looked at Letty, who was fast asleep; then he walked noiselessly into his dressing-room, and began to hurry on his clothes.

Five minutes later he was running down the hill at his full speed. It was bitterly cold and still; the

first snow lay on the grass, and a raw grey veil hung over the hills. As he came in sight of the distant pit-bank he saw a crowd of women swarming up it; a confused and hideous sound of crying and shrieking came to his ears; and at the same moment a boy, panting and dead-white, ran through the lodge-gates to meet him.

"Where is it, Sprowston?"

"Oh, sir, it's No. 2 pit. The damp's comin up the upcast, and the cage is blown to pieces. But the down shaft's all right, and Mr. Madan and Mr. Macgregor were starting down as I come away. There was eighty-six men and boys went down first shift."

George groaned, and rushed on.

CHAPTER XXIV

England knows these scenes too well!

When Tressady, out of breath with running, reached the top of the bank, and threw a hurried look in front of him, his feeling was that he had seen everything before—the wintry dawn, the crowds of pale men and weeping women ranged on either hand, the police keeping the ground round the shafts clear for the mine officials—even the set white face of his manager, who, with Macgregor the fireman and two hewers, had just emerged from the cage that was waiting at the mouth of the downcast shaft.

As soon as Madan saw Tressady rounding the corner of the engine-house he hurried towards his employer.

"Have you been down yet?" Tressady cried to him.

"Just come up, sir. We got about fifty yards—air fairly good—then we found falls along the main intake. We got over three or four, till the damp rose on us too bad—we had a rough bit getting back. I thought you'd be here by now. Macgregor thinks from the direction in which things were lying that the blast had come from Holford's Heading or thereabouts."

And the manager hastily opened a map of the colliery he was carrying in his hand against the wall of the engine-house, and pointed to the spot.

"How many men there?"

"About thirty-two in the workings round about—as near as I can reckon it."

"Any sign of the rest? How many went down?"

"Eighty-six. A cageful of men and lads—just them from the shaft-bottom—got up immediately after the explosion. Since then, not a sound from anyone! The uptake shaft is chock-full of damp. Mitchell, in the fan-room, had to run for it at first, it was coming up so fast."

"Good God!" said George, under his breath; and the two men eyed each other painfully.

"Have you sent for the inspector?" said Tressady, after a moment.

"He ought to be here in five minutes now, sir."

"Got some baulks together?"

"The men are piling them by the shaft at this moment."

"Fan uninjured?"

"Yes, sir—and speed increased."

Followed by Madan, Tressady walked up to the shaft, and himself questioned Macgregor and the two hewers.

Then he beckoned to Madan, and the two walked in close converse towards the lamphouse, discussing a plan of action. As they passed slowly along the bank the eyes of the miserable terror-

stricken throught to either side followed every movement. But there was not a sound from anyone. Once Tressady looked up and caught the faces of some men near him—dark faces, charged with a meaning that seemed instantly to stiffen his own nerve for what he had to do.

"I give Dixon three more minutes," he said, impatiently looking at his watch; "then we go down without him."

Dixon was the inspector. He was well known throughout the district, a plucky, wiry fellow, who was generally at the pit's mouth immediately after an accident, ready and keen to go with any rescue party on any errand, however dangerous—purely, as he himself declared, for professional and scientific reasons. In this case, he lived only a mile away, on the further side of the village, so that Madan's messenger had not far to go.

As he spoke, George felt his arm clutched from behind. He turned, and saw Mary Batchelor, who had come forward from a group of women.

"Sir George! Listen 'ere, Sir George." Her lined face and tear-blurred eyes worked with a passion of entreaty. "The boy went down at five with the rest. Don't yer bear 'im no malice. Ee's a poor sickly creetur, an the Lord an't give 'im the full use of his wits."

George smiled at the poor thing's madness, and touched her kindly on the shoulder.

"Don't you trouble yourself, Mary; all that can be done will be done—for everybody. We are only giving Mr. Dixon another minute; then we go down. Look here"—he drew her inside the door of the lamproom, which happened to be close by, for an open-mouthed group, eager to hear whatever he might be saying, had begun to press about them. "Can you take this message from me up to the house? There'll be no news here, you know, for a long time, and I left Lady Tressady asleep."

He tore a half-sheet from the letter in his pocket, scribbled a few words upon it, and put it into Mary's hand.

The woman, with her shawl over her head, ran past the lamphouse towards the entrance-gate as fast as her age would let her, while George rejoined Madan.

"Ah, there he is!"

For the small, lean figure of the inspector was already passing the gate.

Tressady hurried to meet him.

By the time the first questions and answers were over, Tressady, looking round for Madan, saw that the manager was speaking angrily to a tall man in a rough coat and corduroy trousers who had entered the pit premises in the wake of Mr. Dixon.

"You take yourself off, Mr. Burrows! You're not wanted here."

"Madan!" called Tressady, "attend to Mr. Dixon, please. I'll see to that man."

And he walked up to Burrows, while the men standing near crowded over the line they had been told to keep.

"What do you want?" he said, as he reached the newcomer.

"I have come to offer myself for the rescue party. I've been a working miner for years. I've had special experience in accidents before. I can beat anybody here in physical strength."

As he spoke the great heavily built fellow looked round him, and a murmur of assenting applause came from the bystanders.

Tressady studied him.

"Are you fit?" he said shortly.

Burrows flushed. Tressady's penetrating look forced his own to meet it.

"As fit as you are," was his haughty reply.

"Well"—said Tressady, slowly, "we don't want to be refusing strong men. If Madan'll have you, you shall come. Mind, we're all under his orders."

He went to the manager, and said a word in his ear. Madan, in response, vouchsafed neither look nor

remark to the man, whom he hated apparently more bitterly than his employer did. But he made no further objection to his joining the search party.

Presently all preparations were made. Picked bands of firemen and timbermen descended first, with Madan at their head. Then George, Mr. Dixon, a couple of local doctors who had hurried up to offer their services, and Burrows.

As they shot down into the darkness George was conscious of a strange exhilaration. Working on the indications given him by the first exploring party, his mind was alive with conjectures as to the cause of the accident, and with plans for dealing with the various obstacles that might occur. Never during these weeks of struggle and noise and objurgation had he felt so fit, so strenuous. At the bottom of the shaft he had even to remind himself, with a shudder, of the dead men who must be waiting for them in these blank depths.

For some little distance from the shaft nothing was to be seen that spoke of an explosion. Some lamps in the porch of the shaft and along the main roadway were burning as usual, and the "journey" of trucks, from which the "hookers-on" and engine-men had escaped at the first sign of danger, was standing laden in the entrance of the mine. The door of the under-manager's cabin, near the base of the shaft, was open. Madan looked into the little den, where the lamp was still burning on the wall, and groaned. The young fellow who was generally to be found there was a great friend of his, and they attended the same chapel together. A little farther an open cupboard was noticed with a wisp of spun yarn hanging out from it—inflammable stuff, quite untouched. But about thirty yards farther they came upon the first signs of mischief. A heavy fall of roof had to be scrambled over, and beyond it afterdamp was clearly perceptible.

Here there was an exclamation from Burrows, who was to the front, and the first victim showed out of the dark in the pale glow-worm light of the lamps turned upon him. A man lay on his side, close against the wall, with an unlocked lamp in his hands, which were badly burnt. But no other part of him was burnt, and it was clear that he had died of afterdamp in trying to escape. He had evidently come from one of the nearer work-places, and fallen within a few yards of safety. The inspector pounced upon the lamp at once, while the doctors knelt by the body. But in itself the lamp told little. If it were the illegal unlocking of a lamp that caused the disaster, neither this lamp nor this man could be at fault; for he had died clearly on the verge of the explosion area, and from the after-effects of the calamity. But the inspector, who had barely looked at the dead man, turned the lamp round in his hands, dissatisfied.

"Bad pattern! bad pattern! If I had my way I'd fine every manager whose lamps *could* be unlocked," he said to himself, but quite audibly.

"The fireman may have unlocked it, sir, to re-light his own or someone else's," said Madan, stiffly, put at once on his defence.

"Oh! I know you're within your legal right, Mr. Madan," said the inspector, briskly. "*I* haven't the making of the laws."

And he sat down on the floor, taking the lamp to pieces, and bending his shrewd, black-eyed face over it, all the time that the doctors were examining its owner. He was, perhaps, one of the most humane men in his profession, but a long experience had led him to the conclusion that in these emergencies the fragments of a lamp, or a "tamping," or a "shot," matter more to the community than dead men.

Meanwhile George crouched beside the doctors, watching them. The owner of the lamp was a strong, fair-haired young man, without a mark on him except for the burning of the hands, the eyes quietly shut, the face at peace. One of the colliers in the search party had burst out crying when he saw him. The lad was his nephew, and had been a favourite in the pit, partly because of his prowess as a football player. But the young life had gone out irrevocably. The doctor shook his head as he lifted himself, and they left him there, in order not to waste any chance of getting out the living first.

Twenty yards farther on three more bodies were found, two oldish men and a boy, very little burnt. They also had been killed in escaping, dragged down by the inexorable afterdamp.

A little beyond this group a fall of mingled stone and coal from the roof blocked the way so heavily that the hewers and timbermen had to be set to work to open out and shore up before a passage could be made. Meanwhile the air in the haulage road was clearing fast, and George could sit on a lump of stone and watch the dim light playing on the figures of the men at work. The blows struck echoed from floor to roof; the work of the bare arms and backs, as they swayed and jerked, woke a clamour in the mine. Were there any ears still to listen for them beyond that mass? He could scarcely keep a limb quiet, as he sat looking on, for impatience and excitement. Burrows meanwhile was wielding a pick with the rest, and George envied him the bodily skill and strength that, in spite of his irregular ways of

life, were still left to him.

To restore the ventilation-current was their first object, and the foremost pick had no sooner gained the roadway on the other side than a strong movement of the air was perceptible. Madan's face cleared. The ventilation circuit between the downcast and upcast shafts must be already in some sort re-established. Let them only get a few more "stoppings" and brattices put temporarily to rights, and the fan, working at its increased speed, would soon drive the renewed air-currents forward again, and make it possible to get all over the mine. The hole made was quickly enlarged, and the rescuers scrambled through.

But still fall after fall on the further side delayed their progress, and the work of repairing the blown-out stoppings by such wood brattice as could be got at, was long and tedious. The rescuers toiled and sweated, pausing every now and then to draw upon the food and drink sent up from behind; and the hours flew unheeded. At last, upon the further side of one of the worst of these falls—a loose mingled mass of rock and coal—they came on indications that showed them they had reached the centre and heart of the disaster. A door leading on the right to one of the side-roads of the pit known as Holford's Heading was blown outwards, and some trucks from the heading had been dashed across the main intake, and piled up in a huddled and broken mass against the farther wall. Just inside that door lay victim after victim, mostly on their faces, poor fellows! as they had come running out from their stalls at the noise of the explosion, only to meet the fiery blast that killed them. Two or three had been flung violently against the sides of the heading, and were left torn, with still bleeding wounds, as well as charred and blackened by the flame. Of sixteen men and boys that lay in this place of death, not one had survived to hear the stifled words—half groans, half sobs, of the comrades who had found them.

"But, thank God! no torture, no *thought*," said George to himself as he went from face to face; "an instant—a flash—then nothingness."

Many of the men were well known to him. He had seen them last hanging about the village street, pale with famine—the hatred in their eyes pursuing him.

He knelt down an instant beside an elderly man whom he could remember since he was quite a boy—a weak-eyed, sallow fellow, much given to preaching—much given, too, it was said, to beating his wife and children, as the waves of excitement took him. Anyway, a fellow who could feel, whose nerves stung and tormented him, even in the courses of ordinary life. He lay with his eyes half open, the face terribly scorched, the hands clenched, as though he still fought with the death that had overcome him.

George covered the man's face with a handkerchief as the doctor left the body. "*He suffered*," he said, under his breath. The doctor heard him, and nodded sadly.

Hark! What was that? A cry—a faint cry!

"They're some of them alive in the end workings," cried Madan, with a sob of joy. "Come on, my lads! come on!"

And the party—all but Mr. Dixon—leaving the dead, pushed on through the foul atmosphere, over heaps of fallen stone and coal, in quest of the living.

"Leave me a man," said Mr. Dixon, detaining the manager a moment. "I stay here. You have enough with you. If I judge right, it all began here."

A collier stayed with him, unwillingly, panting all the time under the emotion of the rescue the man imagined but was not to see.

For while the inspector measured and sketched, far up the heading, in some disused workings off a side-dip or roadway, Burrows was the first to come upon twenty-five men, eighteen of whom were conscious and uninjured. Two of them had strength enough, as they heard the footsteps and shouts approaching, to stagger out into the heading to meet their rescuers. One, a long, thin lad, came forward with leaps and gambols, in spite of his weakness, and fell almost at Tressady's feet. As he recognised the tall man standing above him, his bloodless mouth twitched into a broad grin.

"I say, give us a chance. Take me out—won't you?"

It was Mary Batchelor's grandson. In retribution for the assault on Letty the lad had been sentenced to three weeks' imprisonment, and George had not seen him since. He stooped now, and poured some brandy down the boy's throat. "We'll get you out directly," he said, "as soon as we've looked to the others."

"There's some on 'em not worth takin out," said the boy, clinging to George's leg. "They're dead. Take

me out first." Then, with another grin, as George disengaged himself, "Some on em's prayin."

Indeed, the first sight of that little group was a strange and touching one. About a dozen men sat huddled round one of their number, a Wesleyan class-leader, who had been praying with them and reciting passages from St. John. All of them, young or old, were dazed and bent from the effects of afterdamp, and scarcely one of them had strength to rise till they were helped to their feet. Nevertheless, the cry which had been heard by their rescuers had not been a cry for help, but the voices of the little prayer-meeting raised feebly through the darkness in the Old Hundredth.

A little distance from the prayer-meeting, the sceptics of the party leant against the wall or lay along the floor, unheeding; while seven men were unconscious, and possibly dying. Two or three young fellows meanwhile, who had been least touched by the afterdamp, had "amused themselves," as they said, by riding up and down the neighbouring level on the "jummer" or coal-truck of one of them.

"Weren't you afraid?" Tressady asked one of these, turning a curious look at him, while the doctors were examining the worst cases, and rough men were sobbing and shaking each other's hands off.

"Noa," said the young hewer, his face, like something cut out in yellowish wax, returning the light from Tressady's lamp. "Noa, theer was cumpany. Old Moses, there—ee saved us."

Old Moses was the leader of the prayer-meeting. He was a fireman besides, who had been for twenty-six years in the mine. At the time of the explosion, it appeared, he had been in a working close to that door on the heading where death had done so ghastly and complete a work. But the flame in its caprice had passed him by, and he and another man had been able to struggle through the afterdamp back along the heading, just in time to stem the rush of men and boys from the workings at the farther end. These men were at the moment in a madness of terror, and ready even to plunge into the white death-mist advancing to meet them, obeying only the instinct of the trapped animal to "get out." But Moses was able to control them, to draw them back by degrees along the heading till, in the distant workings where they were found, the air was more tolerable, and they could wait for rescue.

George was the first to help the old fireman to his feet. But instead of listening to any praises of his own conduct, he was no sooner clinging to Tressady's arm than he called to Madan:

"Mr. Madan, sir!"

"Aye, Moses."

"Have ye heard aught of them in the West Heading yet?"

"No, Moses; we must get these fellows out first. We'll go there next."

"I left thirty men and boys there this morning at half-past six. It was fair thronged up with them." The old man's voice shook.

Meanwhile Madan and the doctors were busy with the transport of the seven unconscious men, some of whom were already dying. Each of them had to be carried on his back by two men, and as soon as the sick procession was organised it was seen that only three of the search party were left free—Tressady, Burrows, and the Scotch fireman, Macgregor.

Up the level and along the heading, past the point where Dixon was still at work, over the minor falls that everywhere attested the range of the explosion, and through the pools of water that here and there gathered the drippings of the mine, the seven men were tenderly dragged or carried, till at last the party regained the main intake or roadway.

George turned to Madan.

"You will have your hands full with these poor fellows. Macgregor and I—Mr. Burrows, if he likes—will push on to the West Heading."

Madan looked uneasy.

"You'd better go up, Sir George," he said, in a low voice, "and let me go on. You don't know the signs of the roof as I do. Eight or nine hours after an explosion is the worst time for falls. Send down another shift, sir, as quick as you can."

"Why should you risk more than I?" said George, quietly. "Stop! What time is it?" He looked at his watch. Five o'clock—nearly nine hours since they descended! He might have guessed it at three, if he had been asked. Time in the midst of such an experience contracts to a pin's point. But the sight of the watch stirred a pang in him.

"Send word at once to Lady Tressady," he said, in Madan's ear, drawing the manager to one side. "Tell her I have gone on a little farther, and may be another hour or two in getting back. If she is down at the bank, beg her from me to go home. Tell her the chances are that we may find the other men as safe as these."

Madan acquiesced reluctantly. George then plundered him of some dry biscuits—of some keys, moreover, that might be useful in opening one or two locked doors farther up the workings.

"Macgregor, you'll come?"

"Aye, Sir George."

"You, Mr. Burrows?"

"Of course," said Burrows, carelessly, throwing back his handsome head.

Some of the rescued men turned and looked hard at their agent and leader with their sunken eyes. Others took no notice. His prestige had been lost in defeat; and George had noticed that they avoided speech with him. No doubt this rescue party had presented itself to the agent as an opening he dare not neglect.

"Come on, then," said George; and the three men turned back towards the interior of the pit.

Old Moses, from whose clutch George had just freed himself, stopped short and looked after them. Then he raised a hoarse voice:

"Be you going to the West Heading, Sir George?"

"Yes," George flung back over his shoulder, already far away.

"The Lord go with yer, Sir George!"

No answer. The old man, breathing hard, caught hold of one of his stronger comrades and tottered on towards the shaft. Two or three of his fellows gathered round him. "Aye," said one of them, out of Madan's hearing, "ee's been a-squeezing of us through the ground, ee ave, but ee's a plucky lot, is the boss."

"They do say as Burrers slanged 'im fine at the station yesterday," said another, hoarsely. "Called 'im the devil untied, one man told me."

The first speaker, still haggard and bowed from the poison in his blood, made no reply, and the movement of old Moses' lips, as he staggered forward, helped on by the two others, his head hanging on his breast, showed that he was praying.

* * * * *

Meanwhile George and his two companions pushed cautiously on, Macgregor trying the roof with his lamp from time to time for signs of fire-damp. Two seams of coal were worked in the mine, one of which was "fiery." No naked lights, therefore, were allowed, and all "shots" or charges for loosening the coal were electrically fired.

As they walked, they spoke now and then of the possible cause of the disaster: whereof Dixon, as they passed him, had bluntly declined to say a word till his task was done. George, with the characteristic contempt of intelligence for the blunderer, threw out a few caustic remarks as to the obstinate disobedience or carelessness of a certain type of miner—disobedience which, in his own experience even, had already led to a score of fatal accidents. Burrows, irritated apparently by his tone, took up a provoking line of reply. Suppose a miner, set to choose between the risk of bringing the coal-roof down on his head for lack of a proper light to work by, and the risk of "being blown to hell" by the opening of his lamp, did a mad thing sometimes, who were other people that they should blame him? His large, ox-like eyes, clear in the light of his lamp, turned a scornful defiance on his companion. "Try it yourself, my fine gentleman"—that was what the expression of them meant.

"He doesn't only risk his own life," said George, shortly. "That's the answer.—I say, Macgregor, isn't this the door to the Meadows Pit? If anything cut us off from the shaft, and supposing we couldn't get round yet by the return, we might have to try it, mightn't we?"

Macgregor assented, and George as he passed stepped up to the heavy wooden door, and tried one of the keys he held, that he might be sure of opening it in case of need.

The door had been unopened for long, and he shook it backwards and forwards to make the key bite.

Meanwhile Macgregor had lingered a little behind, while Burrows had walked on. Suddenly, above the rattle of the door a cracking noise was heard. A voice of agony rang through the roadway.

"Run, Sir George! run!"

A rattle like thunder roared through the mine. It was heard at the pithead, and the people crowded there ran hither and thither in dismay, thinking it was another explosion.

* * * * *

Hours passed. At last in George's numbed brain there was a faint stir of consciousness. He opened his eyes slowly.

Oh, horror! oh, cruelty! to come back from merciful nothingness and peace to this burning anguish, not to be borne, of body and mind. "I had died," he thought—"it was done with," and a wild, impotent rage, as against some brutality done him, surged through him.

A little later he made a first slight movement, which was answered at once by another movement on the part of a man sitting near him. The man bent over him in the darkness and felt for his pulse.

"Burrows!" The whisper was just perceptible.

"Yes, Sir George."

"What has happened? Where is Macgregor? Give me some brandy—there, in my inner pocket."

"No; I have it. Can you swallow it? I have tried several times before, but your mouth was set—it ran down my fingers."

"Give it me."

Their fingers met, George feeling for the flask. As he moved his arm a groan of anguish broke from him.

"Drink it—if you possibly can."

George put all the power of his being into the effort to swallow a few drops. Still the anguish! "O God, my back! and the legs—paralysed!"

The words were only spoken in the brain, but it seemed to him that he cried them aloud. For a moment or two the mind swam again; then the brandy began to sting.

He slid down a hand slowly, defying the pain it caused him, to feel his right leg. The trouser round the thigh hung in ribbons, but the fragments lying on the flesh were caked and hard; and beneath him was a pool. His reason worked with difficulty, but clearly. "Some bad injury to the thigh," he thought. "Much bleeding—probably the bleeding has dulled the worst pain. The back and shoulders burnt—"

Then, in the same hesitating, difficult way he managed to lift his hand to his head, which ached intolerably. The right temple and the hair upon it were also caked and wet.

He let his hand drop. "How long have I—?" he thought. For already his revived consciousness could hardly maintain itself; something from the black tunnels of the mine seemed to be perpetually pressing out upon it, threatening to drown it like a flood.

"Burrows!"—he felt again with his hand—"where's Macgregor?"

A sob broke from the darkness beside him.

"Crushed in an instant. I heard one cry. Why not we, too?"

"It was such a bad fall?"

"The whole mine seemed to come down." George felt the shudder of the huge frame. "I escaped; you must have been caught by some of it. Macgregor was right underneath it. But there was an explosion besides."

"Macgregor's lamp? Broken?" whispered George, after a pause.

"Possibly. It couldn't have been much, or we should have been killed instantly. I was only stunned—a bit scorched, too—not badly. You're the lucky one. I shall die by inches."

"Cheer up!" said George, faintly. "I can't last—but they'll find you."

"What chance for either of us," said Burrows, groaning. "The return must be blocked, too, or they'd have got round to us by now."

"How long—"

"God knows! To judge by the time I've been sitting—since I got you here—it's night long ago."

"Since you got me here?" repeated George, with feeble interrogation.

"When I came to I was lying with my face in a dampish sort of hollow, and I suppose the afterdamp had lifted a bit, for I could raise my head. I felt you close by. Then I dragged myself on a bit, till I felt some brattice. I got past that, found a dip where the air was better, came back for you, and dragged you here. I thought you were dead at first; then I felt your heart. And since we got here I've found an air-pipe up here along the wall, and broken it."

George was silent. But the better atmosphere was affecting him somewhat, and consciousness was becoming clearer. Only, what seemed to him a loud noise disturbed him—tortured the wound in his head. Then, gradually, as he bent his mind upon it, he made out what it was—a slow drip or trickle of water from the face of the wall. The contrast between his imagination and the reality supplied him with a kind of measure of the silence that enwrapped them—silence that seemed in itself a living thing, charged with the brooding vengeance of the earth upon the creatures that had been delving at her heart.

"Burrows!—that water—maddens me." He moved his head miserably. "Could you get some? The brandy-flask has a cup."

"There is a little pool by the brattice. I put my cap in as we got there, and dashed it over you. I'll go again."

George heard the long limbs drag themselves painfully along. Then he lost count again of time, and all impressions on the ear, till he was roused by the water at his lips and a hand dashing some on his brow.

He drank greedily.

"Thanks! Put it by me—there; that's safe. Now, Burrows, I'm dying. Leave me. You can't do anything—and you—you might still try for it. There are one or two ways that might be worth trying. Take these keys. I could explain—"

But the little thread of life wavered terribly as he spoke. Burrows had to put his ear close to the scorched lips.

"No," he said gloomily, "I don't leave a man while there's any life in him. Besides, there's no chance—I don't know the mine."

Suddenly, as though answering to the other's despair, a throb of such agony rose in George it seemed to rive body and soul asunder. His poor Letty!—his child that was to be!—his own energy of life, he had been so conscious of at the very moment of descending to this hideous death—all gone, all done!—his little moment of being torn from him by the inexorable force that restores nothing and explains nothing.

A picture flashed into his mind, an etching that he had seen in Paris in a shop window—had seen and pondered over. "Entombed" was written underneath it, and it showed a solitary miner, on whom the awful trap has fallen, lifting his arms to his face in a last cry against the universe that has brought him into being, that has given him nerve and brain—for this!

Wherever he turned his eyes in the blackness he saw it—the lifted arms, the bare torso of the man, writhing under the agony of realisation—the tools, symbols of a life's toil, lying as they had dropped for ever from the hands that should work no more. It had sent a shudder through him, even amid the gaiety of a Paris street.

Then this first image was swept away by a second. It seemed to him that he was on the pit bank again. It was night, but the crowd was still there, and big fires lighted for warmth threw a glow upon the faces. There were stars, and a pale light of snow upon the hills. He looked into the engine-house. There she was—his poor Letty! O God! He tried to get through to her, to speak to her. Impossible!

A sound disturbed his dream.

His ear and brain struggled with it—trying to give it a name. A man's long, painful breaths—half sobs.

Burrows, no doubt—thinking of the woman he loved—of the poor emaciated soul George had seen him tending in the cottage garden on that April day.

He put out his hand and touched his companion.

"Don't despair," he whispered; "you will see her again. How strange—we two—we enemies—but this is the end. Tell me about her."

"I took her from a ruffian who had nearly murdered her and the child," said the hoarse voice after a pause. "She was happy—in spite of the drink, in spite of everything—she would have been happy, till she died. To think of her alone is too cruel. If people turned their backs on her, I made up."

"You will see her again," George repeated, but hardly knowing what the words were he said.

When he next spoke it was with an added strength that astonished his companion.

"Burrows, promise me something. Take a message from me to my wife. Come nearer."

Then, as he felt his companion's breath on his cheek, he roused himself to speak plainly:

"Tell her—I sent her my dear love—that I thanked her with all my heart and soul for her love—that it was very hard to leave her—and our child. Write the words for her, Burrows. Tell her it was impossible for me to write, but I dictated this." He paused for a long time, then resumed: "And tell her, too—my last wish was—that she should ask Lord and Lady Maxwell—can you hear plainly?"—he repeated the names—"to be her friends and guardians. And bid her ask them—from me—not to forsake her. Have you understood? Will you repeat it?"

Burrows, in the mood of one humouring the whim of the dying, repeated what had been said to him word by word, his own sensuous nature swept the while by the terrors of a death which seemed but one little step further from himself than from Tressady. Yet he did his best to understand, and recollect; and to the message so printed on his shrinking brain a woman's misery owed its only comfort in the days that followed.

"Thank you," said Tressady, painfully listening for the last word. "Give me your hand. Good-bye. You and I—The world's a queer place—I wish I'd turned you back at the pit's mouth. I wanted to show I bore no malice. Well—at least I know—"

The words broke off incoherently. Burrows caught the word "suffering," and some phrase about "the men," then Tressady's head slipped back against the wall, and he spoke no more.

But the mind was active long afterwards. Again and again he seemed to himself standing in a bright light, alive and free. Innumerable illusions played about him. In one of the most persistent he was climbing the slope of a Swiss meadow in May. Oh! the scent of the narcissus, heavy still with the morning dew—the brush of the wet grass against his ankles—those yellow anemones shining there beneath the pines—the roar of the river in the gorge below—and beyond, far above, the grey peak, sharp and tall against that unmatched brilliance of the blue. In another he was riding alone in a gorge aflame with rhododendrons, and far down in the plain—the burnt-up Indian plain—some great fortified town, grave on its hill-top, broke the level lines—"A rose-red city, half as old as time." Or, again, it was the sea in some glow of sunset, the white reflections of the sails slipping down and down through the translucent pinks and blues, till the eye lost itself in the infinity of shades and tints, which the breeze—oh, the freshness of it!—was painting each moment anew at its caprice—painting and blotting, over and over again, as the water swung under the ship.

But all through these freaks of memory some strange thing seemed to have happened to him. He carried something in his arms—on his breast. The anguish of his inner pity for Letty, piercing through all else, expressed itself so.

But sometimes, as the brain grew momentarily clearer, he would wonder, almost in his old cynical way, at his own pity. She seemed to have come to love him. But was it not altogether for her good that his flawed, contradictory life should be cut violently from hers? Could their marriage, ill-planted, ill-grown, have come in the end to any tolerable fruit? His mind passed back, with bitterness, over the nine months of it; not bitterness towards her—he seemed to be talking to her all the time, as she lay hidden on his shoulder—bitterness towards himself, towards the futility of his own life and efforts and desires.

But why his more than any other? The futility, the insignificance of all that man desires, all that waits on him—that old self-scorn, which began with the race, tormented him none the less, in dying, for the

myriads it had haunted so before. An image of human fate, which had struck him in some book, recurred to him now—an image of daisied grass, alive one moment in the evening light—a quivering world of blades and dew, insects and petals, a forest of innumerable lines, crossed by the innumerable movements of living things—the next withdrawn into the night, all silenced, all effaced.

So life. Except, perhaps, for pain! His own pain never ceased. The only eternity that seemed conceivable, therefore, was an eternity of pain. It had become to him the last reality. What a horrible quickening had come to him of that sense for misery, that intolerable compassion, which in life he had always held to be the death of a man's natural energy! Again and again, as consciousness still fought against the last surrender, it seemed to him that he heard voices and hammerings in the mine. And while he painfully listened, from the eternal darkness about him, dim tragic forms would break in a faltering procession—men or young boys, burnt and marred and slain like himself—turning to him faces he remembered. It was as though the scorn for pity he had once flung at Marcella Maxwell had been but the fruit of some obscure and shrinking foresight that he himself should die drowned and lost in pity; for as he waited for death his soul seemed to sink into the suffering of the world, as a spent swimmer sinks into the wave.

One perception, indeed, that was not a perception of pain, this piteous submission to the human lot brought with it. The accusing looks of hungry men, the puzzles of his own wavering heart, all social qualms and compunctions—these things troubled him no more. In the wanderings of death he was not without the solemn sense that, after all, he, George Tressady, a man of no professions, and no enthusiasms, had yet paid his share and done his part.

Was there something in this thought that softened the dolorous way?
Once—nearly at the last—he opened his eyes with a start.

"What is it? Something watches me. There is a sense of something that supports—that reconciles. If —*if*—how little would it all matter! *Oh! what is this that knows the road I came—the flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame—the lifted, shifted steeps, and all the way!*" His dying thought clung to words long familiar, as that of other men might have clung to a prayer. There was a momentary sense of ecstasy, of something ineffable.

And with that sense came a rending of all barriers, a breaking of long tension, a flooding of the soul with joy. Was it a passing under new laws, into a new spiritual polity? He knew not; but as he lifted his sightless eyes he saw the dark roadway of the mine expand, and a woman, stepping with an exquisite lightness and freedom, came towards him. Neither shrank nor hesitated. She came to him, knelt by him, and took his hands. He saw the pity in her dark eyes. "*Is it so bad, my friend? Have courage—the end is near.*" "*Care for her—and keep me, too, in your heart,*" he cried to her, piteously. She smiled. Then light—blinding, featureless light—poured over the vision, and George Tressady had ceased to live.

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