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HEART AND CROSS

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Heart and Cross

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Heart and Cross:

Содержание

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CHAPTER I

I know no reason why I should begin my story of the fortunes of the Harleys by a description of my own son. Perhaps it is just because there is no reason whatever that I feel so much disposed to do it—also because the appearance of that son is the only difference that has come to my own life since last my unknown friends heard of me, and because there is quite an exhilaration in thinking that here is a new audience to whom I am at liberty to introduce the second Derwent Crofton. This story is not in the least about my boy, and, in consequence, it is quite an unusual delight to be able to drag him in head and shoulders. Women are not logical, as everybody knows.

My son, then, is, at the present writing, exactly seven years old. He is a little athlete—straight and strong. We have often explained to ourselves that it is in consequence of his having got over the baby period of existence sooner than most children do, that he is not quite so plump, as, for example, that red and white heir of the Sedgwicks, who has a succession of rosy cushions on all the points where there should be angles of his small frame. Derwent, I confess, has corners about him—but then what limbs!

what color! what hard, consistent stuff the little rogue is made of! And I am not quite sure that I entirely approve of these fat children—not when they are past the baby-age. I will not delude myself, nor anybody else, into the idea that the boy is very clever. Truth to speak, he has not taken very kindly as yet to book-learning; but then does not everybody remember that it is the dunces who grow into great men? Neither is he in the slightest degree meditative or thoughtful, nor what you would call an interesting child. He has as many scars upon him as a warrior, and has been bumped and bruised in all directions. At first the child's misfortunes somewhat alarmed me, but by this time I am hardened to their daily occurrence, and no longer grow pale when I am informed that Master Derwent has broken his head or got a bad fall. This peculiarity is one in which his father rather rejoices. I hear Mr. Crofton sometimes privately communicating to his especial friends the particulars of little Derwent's accidents: "He was certainly born to knock about the world, that boy of mine. Such a fellow was never intended to take peaceable possession of Hilfont, and settle down a calm country gentleman," says Derwent, with a chuckle. And even when once or twice in the child's life my husband's fears have been really excited about some misadventure greater than usual, there has always been visible to me a certain gleam of complacence and pride in his fear. For already he sees in the boy, whom I am half disposed to keep a baby as long as possible, a man—the heir of his own personal qualities as well as his land.

Little Derwent, however, has none of the sentimental qualities, which might be expected from an only child. He has indemnified himself in the oddest fashion for the want of those nursery friendships which sweeten the beginning of life. In the oddest fashion! I am almost ashamed to confess—I admit it with natural blushes and hesitation—that this little boy of ours is the most inveterate gossip that ever was born! Yes, there is no use disguising the fact, gossiping, plain, naked, and unsophisticated, is the special faculty of Derwent. He has all the natural childish thirst for a story, but he prefers to have his stories warm from the lips of the heroes and heroines of the same; and somehow everybody to whom he has access confides in the child. He goes through every corner of Hilfont, from cellar to attic, with his bold, quick step, and his bright, curious eyes, interested about every individual under the roof. Too young to feel any of those sentiments which detract from the value of a sympathizer —without either the condescension of a superior or the self-comparison of an equal—I find nobody who is not pleased and comforted by the child's warm interest in their concerns; pleased and half amused as well—till, by habit, housekeeper and nurse, kitchenmaid and groom—for any efforts I might once have made to keep Derwent a proper little boy, circulating only in an orthodox round between the drawing-room and the nursery, have proved so totally fruitless, that I have given up the endeavor —repose a flattered but perfectly sincere confidence in their master's little son. Nor is the village at all stoical to his attractions.

He drops in at all the cottages as if he were the curate or the parish doctor—asks questions about everything—never forgets any special circumstances which may happen to have been told him—knows all about the old women's marriages and the number of their children, and which one's son has been wild and 'listed, and which one's daughter is at service in Simonborough. He is ready for as many fairy tales as anybody will tell him; but nothing is so thoroughly interesting to Derwent as the people round about him and their homely lives. I began by being a little shocked at this propensity of his—then gradually grew amused at it—then tried my utmost to restrain that deep inquisitiveness which seemed inherent in him—and at last have come to accept it quietly as the child's peculiarity, a part of himself. If the best object for the study of mankind is man, Derwent will, perhaps, some day turn out a great philosopher. At present he is the most sincere and simple-minded of little gossips, pursuing his favorite branch of knowledge boldly, without any compunctions; such is the most distinct and remarkable characteristic of my son.

And only to imagine the difference which that pair of blue eyes has wrought in our great house and our calm life! My husband and I were, to be sure, "very happy," as people say, before; as happy as two people can make each other, by a hearty and sincere love and cordial union; the climax of happiness we would have thought it, each in our separate thoughts, when we lived lonely lives apart. But love, which makes labor sweet and life pleasant, does not answer for daily bread—never does, let

the romancers say what they will; no—not even to women. The heart within me was dissatisfied even with Derwent—I could not content myself with that life we lived—that calm, happy, tranquil life, which knew no burdens, and if it overflowed in courtesies and charities, which cost us nothing, was thought a model existence by our hard-working neighbors.

By dint of perpetual pin-pricks and unceasing agitation, I had managed to drive Derwent into Parliament, where he somewhat solaced me by his intense affliction and sufferings during the season of Parliamentary martyrdom, and was himself happier during the rest of the year in the relief of escaping that treadmill; but the content that had fluttered off from my heart, when I had only my husband and myself to think of, came with a flash of magic in the train of the little heir. All life glowed and brightened up with a different interest—there were no longer only ourselves who had attained all that was attainable in our own mature and settled existence; but this new living, loving creature, with all the possibilities of life burning upon his fresh horizon. The picture changed as if by enchantment; the master and mistress of that tranquil great house—lone, happy people set apart, none of the changes of life coming near them, living for themselves, changed into a father and mother, linked by sweet ties of succession to the other generations of the world; belonging not to ourselves, but to the past and the future—to the coming age, which *he* should influence—to the former age, which had hailed *our* entrance as we hailed *his*. One cannot be content with the foot-breadth of

human soil that supports one's own weight—one must thrust out one's hands before and behind. I felt that we fell into our due place in the world's generations, and laid hold upon the lineal chain of humanity when little Derwent went forth before us, trusted to our guidance—the next generation—the Future to us, as to the world.

CHAPTER II

"I suppose, Clare," said Mr. Crofton to me one morning at breakfast, "that Alice Harley has made up her mind, like somebody I once knew, to live for other people, and on no account to permit herself to be married—is it so?"

"I really cannot undertake to say whether she is like that person you once knew," said I, somewhat demurely. I had some hopes that she was—I was much inclined to imagine that it was a youthful prepossession, of which, perhaps, she herself was unaware, that kept Alice Harley an unmarried woman; but of course I was not going to say so even to Derwent, who, with all his good qualities, was after all only a man. An unmarried woman!—that I should call my pretty Alice by that harsh, mature, commonplace name! But I am sorry to say the appellation was quite a just one. She was nearer eight and twenty than eighteen, now-a-days; she had no love, no engagement, no sentimental gossip at all to be made about her. I will not undertake to say that she had not some ideas of another kind, with which I had but a very limited sympathy—but an unmarried woman Alice Harley was, and called herself—with (I thought) a little quiet secret interest, which she deeply resented any suspicion of, in Indian military affairs.

"Because," said Derwent, with the old affectionate laugh, and glance of old love-triumph over his old wife, which he never

outgrew or exhausted, "there is that very good fellow, our new Rector, would give his ears for such a wife—and from all I can see, would suit her famously; which, by the way, Clare, now that her mother is so dependent on her, is not what every man would. You should say a good word for Reredos—it is your duty to look after your protégée's establishment in life."

I confess when Derwent said these words a great temptation came to me. It suddenly flashed upon my mind that Alice in the Rectory would be my nearest neighbor, and the most pleasant of possible companions. At the same moment, and in the light of that momentary selfish illumination, it also became suddenly visible to me that my dear girl had a great many notions which I rather disapproved of, and was rapidly confirming herself in that *rôle* of unmarried woman, which, having once rather taken to it myself, I knew the temptations of. Mr. Reredos was only about five years older than herself, good-looking, well-connected, with a tolerably good living, and a little fortune of his own. And how could I tell whether my private designs would ever come to anything? Derwent, simple-minded man, had not fallen on so potent an argument for many a day before.

"Mamma," said little Derwent, who heard everything without listening, "the housekeeper at the Rectory has a son in the Guards —like the men in the steel-coats that you showed me when we went to London; the other sons are all comfortable, she says; but this one, when she speaks of *him*, she puts up her apron to her eyes. Mamma, I want to know if it is wicked to go for a soldier

—Sally Yeoman's son 'listed last year, and *she* puts up her apron to her eyes. Now, my cousin Bertie is in India—was it wicked in him to go for a soldier?—or what's the good of people being sad when people 'list?—eh, mamma?"

"Did you ever see anybody sad about your cousin Bertie?" said I, with a sudden revulsion of feeling and the profoundest interest.

"N—no," said little Derwent. He applied himself after that devoutly to his bread and jam—there was something not altogether assured in the sound of that "N—no." Derwent could not help having quick eyes—but the child knew sometimes that it was best to hold his tongue.

"I should like to know," said Derwent the elder, laughing, "why Mr. Reredos's housekeeper's son in the Guards has been dragged headlong into this consultation. Suppose you go for a soldier yourself, Derwie. There's your drum in the corner. I have something to say to mamma."

Little Derwent marched off, obedient, if not very willing. His inquisitive tendencies did not carry him beyond that rule of obedience which was the only restraint I put upon the boy. Derwent, elder, followed him with happy looks. He only came back to his subject after an interval of pleased and silent observation when there suddenly fell into the stillness of our cheerful breakfast-room the first thunder of Derwie's drum.

"What an inquisitive little imp it is!" said Derwent; "but in spite of the housekeeper's son in the Guards, I don't think you could do a more charitable action, Clare, than to support

Reredos's suit to Alice Harley. Such a famous thing for both—and such an excellent neighbor for yourself."

"That is very true," said I; "but still I cannot help building something upon that son in the Guards."

Mr. Crofton looked up somewhat puzzled, with a smile upon his lips. I daresay he asked, "What on earth do you mean?" somewhat exasperated at the repetition; but Derwie's drum filled all the apartment at the moment, and of course I could not hear, much less answer him. We had some further talk on the subject later, when Derwent called me into the library to read over that speech of his, which he made a few evenings before at Simonborough, and which the Editor of the Simonborough Chronicle had sent over in proof to ask if my husband would kindly glance over it and see if it was correct. Mr. Reredos was coming to dinner to meet the Harleys, among other people—and Mr. Crofton, always good-humored, and disposed to aid and abet all honest love affairs, could not sufficiently point out the advantages of such a connection to me.

And I said no more to perplex him, of the son in the Guards; but for myself remembered that mythical personage, whatever was said to me on the subject; and appreciated with the highest admiration that singularly delicate line of association which suggested the reference to little Derwie's mind and thoughts. Yes, to be sure! the old women will put up their aprons to their eyes when they talk about the son who has 'listed; the young women will keep a shadowy corner in their hearts for

that unfortunate—and yet it is not wicked to go for a soldier. I felt Mr. Reredos's handsome figure quite blotted out by the suggestion conveyed in that of his housekeeper's son. When I had finished my housekeeping affairs, and given orders about the visitors we expected for Easter—this I should have said was the Easter recess, the glimpse of spring at Hilfont, which was all we could catch now that Derwent, to his great affliction, was a Parliament man—I took my seat in the great cheerful window of that room where we had breakfasted, and which overlooked half the country. Far away in the distance the sun caught the spires and roofs of Simonborough, with its cathedral faintly shining out from among the lower level of the housetops, and nearer at hand struck bright upon the slow and timid river which wound through the fields down below us, at the bottom of this great broad slope of country, which had no pretensions to be a hill, though its advantage of altitude in our level district was greater than that of many an elevation twice or three times as high. Spring was stealing into the long drooping branches of those willows which marked the irregular line of the stream. Spring brightened with doubtful, wavering dewy smiles over all the surface of the country. I remember when I should have been glad to turn my eyes indoors, away from the sweet suggestions of Nature conveyed by that sweetest and most suggestive season; but I took the fullest and freest enjoyment of it now; rather, I sat at the window calmly pleased and unconscious, as we are when we are happy, feeling no contrast to wound me between

the world without and the world within—and considered fully the circumstances of Alice Harley, and how I ought to forward, as Derwent said, my dear girl's establishment in life.

Now I have to confess that many years before this I had formed my own plans for Alice—had quite made up my mind, indeed, to a secret scheme of match-making in which at the moment I had been grievously disappointed. At that time, when little Derwie was undreampt of, and I had prematurely made up my mind to a childless life, I had settled my inheritance of Estcourt upon my young cousin Bertie Nugent, with a strong hope that the boy, who had known her for so many years, would naturally prefer my pretty Alice to all strangers, when his good fortune and affectionate heart put marriage into his head. This did not turn out the case, however. Bertie made his choice otherwise, was disappointed, and went off to India, where for eight long years he had remained. Sometimes, when he wrote to me, I found a message of good wishes to his old playmates at the very end of the page; once or twice it had occurred to him to ask, "Is not Alice Harley married?" but the question seemed to proceed rather from surprise and curiosity than any tender interest. It is impossible to imagine a greater separation than there was between these two. Bertie, now Captain Herbert Nugent, at a remote station in the Bengal Presidency, where, scattered over that vast, arid country, he had friends, brothers, and cousins by the dozen; and Alice, with her new-fangled notions, and staid single-woman dignity, hid away in the depths of a quiet English home, where she

addressed herself to her duty and the education of her little sisters and eschewed society. Whether any secret thoughts of each other lingered in their minds nobody of course could tell; but they certainly had not, except in my persistent thoughts, a single bond of external connection. So long as they were both unmarried, I could not help putting them together with an imagination which longed for the power of giving efficacy to its dreams; but nobody else had ever done so—there were thousands of miles of land and water dividing them—many long years, and most likely a world of dissimilar dispositions, experiences and thoughts.

While on the other hand Mr. Reredos was actually present on the scene, in a pretty Rectory just half a mile from my own house, and not a dozen miles from Mrs. Harley's cottage. The young clergyman lost no opportunity of doing his duty towards that lady, though her dwelling was certainly in another parish—and showed himself so far disposed towards Alice's new-fangled notions as to preach a sermon upon the changed position and new duties of Woman, on the occasion of her last visit to Hilfont. I trust it edified Alice, for it had rather a contrary effect upon myself, and filled the parishioners generally with the wildest amazement. Most people are flattered by such an adoption of their own opinions—and a young woman aged twenty-seven, thinking herself very old, and trying hard to make every one else believe the same, is especially open to such a compliment. Besides, I could not say anything even to myself against Mr. Reredos. He was well-bred, well-looking, and well-dispositioned

—the match would be particularly suitable in every way. Dr. Harley's daughter, had her father and his fortune survived till the present day, would still have made quite a sensible marriage in accepting the Rector of Hilfont. And then the advantage of having her so near!

I sat in the great window of the breakfast-room, looking over half the county. If I had been a woman of elevated mind or enlightened views, I should have been thinking of all the human wishes and disappointments that lay beneath my eyes, each one under its own roof and its own retirement. But, on the contrary, I observed nothing but a small figure on a small pony ascending the road from the village. In the same way I ought to have been benevolently glad that our excellent young Rector had inclined his eyes and heart towards my own favorite and friend—the friend and favorite now of so many years—and that a home so suitable, at once to her origin and her tastes, awaited the acceptance of Alice. But I was not glad—I sent my thoughts ever so far away to Bertie's bungalow, and felt aggrieved and disappointed for the boy who, alas! was a boy no longer, and most likely, instead of feeling aggrieved on his own account, would have nothing but his warmest congratulations to send when he heard of his old playmate's marriage. Things are very perverse and unmanageable in this world. The right people will not draw together, let one wish it ever so strongly, whereas the wrong people are always approaching each other in eccentric circles, eluding every obstacle which one can place in their way. I could

not be very melancholy on the subject, because the pony and its little rider came every moment nearer, and brightened the face of the earth to my eyes—but still it was in the highest degree provoking. If it ever came to anything! There was still that escape from this perplexing matter; for whether I felt disposed to support his suit or not, it was still by no means certain, even when Mr. Reredos had finally declared himself, what Alice Harley might say.

CHAPTER III

"Who are we to have, Clare?—let us hear. You don't suppose that my mind, weighed down with the responsibilities of law-making, can remember everything, eh?—even my wife's guests?" said Derwent, rubbing his hands, as we sat after dinner near the fire in the warm crimson dining-room. When we were alone I gave Mr. Crofton's claret my benign countenance till he was ready to go with me to the drawing-room. There were not enough of us to separate at that genial hour, especially as little Derwent sat between us peeling his orange, and quite ready to give his opinion on any knotty point that might occur.

"Papa, please give Willie Sedgwick the little grey pony," said Derwie, "to ride when he's here; he says his papa will never let him take his horse anywhere with him—there's such a lot of children," added my boy, parenthetically, with some pity and contempt. "I like little Clary best—I like her because her name's the same as mamma's, and because she has blue eyes, and because she likes me, and she's good to that poor old nurse, too, who has her daughter in a fever, and daren't go to see her."

"How do you know about the nurse's daughter's fever, Derwie?" asked I.

"Mamma, they sent *me* to the nursery, when you were calling there," said Derwie, with some emphasis, "and she told me she has the scarlet fever, and Mrs. Sedgwick won't let her mamma

go to see her, for fear of the children taking it—isn't it a shame? Clary told me she said her prayers for her every night, to get her well; and so," said Derwent, coloring, and looking up with some apparent idea that this was not perfectly right, and the most manful intention to stand out the consequences, "and so do I."

His father and I looked at each other, and neither of us said anything just for that moment, which silence emboldened Derwie to believe that no harm was coming of his confession, and to go on with his story.

"And Mr. Sedgwick's man—he's such a funny fellow. I wish you'd ask him to tell you one of his stories, mamma," said Derwie, "for I know he's coming here with them. He has a brother like Johnny Harley—just as lame—and he got cured in Wales, at St. Winifred's Well. Why don't you ask Mrs. Harley to send Johnny to St. Winifred's Well, mamma?—she only laughed at me when I said so. I say, mamma," continued Derwie, with his mouth full of his orange, "I'll tell Russell he's to tell you one of his stories—I never knew a fellow that could tell such famous stories—I wish you had a man like Russell, papa. He's been all over the world, and he's got two children at home, and the name of one of them is John—John Russell—like the little gentleman in *Punch*."

"Don't be personal, Derwie," said Mr. Crofton, laughing; "we are to have Mr. Sedgwick's Russell, and Mrs. Sedgwick's nurse—who else?"

"The Harleys," said I, "for we'll postpone for a little, if you

please, Derwie, your friends below-stairs; and Mr. Reredos and his sister, and Miss Polly Greenfield, and her little nieces. I fear the womankind will rather predominate in our Easter party—though Maurice Harley, to be sure"–

"Yes—Maurice Harley, to be sure," said Derwent, still with a smile, "is—what should you call him now, Clare—a host in himself?"

"Fellow of Exeter College, Cambridge," said I, demurely; "he has it on his card."

"Mamma, is Maurice Harley a clergyman?—shouldn't a clergyman care about people?" said little Derwent; "I don't think *he* does. He likes books."

"And what do you mean by people?—and don't you like books?" I asked.

"Oh! yes, sometimes," said my son; "when there's pictures in them. But *you* know what people mean, mamma—quite well! You talk to them, *you* do—but Maurice Harley puts up his shoulders like this, and looks more tired than Bob Dawkes does after his ploughing—so tired—just as if he could drop down with tiredness. Oh!" cried Derwent, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, "I would not give our Johnnie for a hundred of *him*."

"A hundred of *him*!" I confess the thought filled me with alarm. In my heart I doubted, with a little shudder of apprehension, whether the country, not to speak of Hilfont, could have survived the invasion of a hundred such accomplished men. "But, Derwie," said I, recovering from that shock, "if you do not

like books except when they have pictures in them, how do you think you are ever to learn all the things that Maurice Harley knows?"

"Mr. Sedgwick says he's a prig," says little Derwent, with great seriousness, "and I know more things now than he does—I know how to make rabbits' houses. If you were to get some little white rabbits, mamma, I could make a beautiful house for them. Will Morris taught me how. Oh! papa, don't you know Will Morris wants to marry little Susan at the shop?—he has her picture, and it's not the least like her, and I heard Maurice Harley say the photographs *must* be like, because the sun took them. Does the sun see better than other people? That one's like you with the paper in your hand; but Will Morris's picture, instead of being Susan, is anybody in a checked dress."

"I begin to think you will turn out a great critic, Derwie," said his admiring father, who desired no better than to spend his after-dinner hour listening to the wisdom of his son.

"What's a critic? is it anything like a prig?" asked Derwent, who was trying hard to set up the crooked stem of a bunch of raisins—now, alas, denuded of every vestige of its fruit—like a tree upon his plate; the endeavor was not very successful, although when propped up on each side by little mounds of orange-peel, the mimic tree managed to hold a very slippery and precarious footing, and for a few minutes kept itself upright. We two sat looking at this process in a hush of pleased and interested observation. Maurice Harley, with all his powers and pretensions,

could neither have done nor said anything which could thus have absorbed us, and I doubt whether we would have looked at the highest triumphs of art or genius with admiration as complete as that with which we regarded little Derwie setting up the stalk of the bunch of raisins between these little mounds of orange-peel.

"Clare, how old is he now?" said Mr. Crofton to me.

As if he did not know! but I answered with calm pride, "Seven on Monday, Derwent—and you remember it was Easter Monday too that year—and tall for his age, certainly—but he is not so stout as Willie Sedgwick."

"Ah, Monday's your birthday, is it, old fellow?" said Derwent; "what should you like on your birthday, Derwie—let us hear?"

"May I have anything I like, papa?" asked the child, throwing down immediately both the raisin-stalk and the orange-skin. His father nodded in assent. I, a little in terror of what "anything I like" at seven years old might happen to be, hastened to interpose.

"Anything in reason, Derwie, dear—not the moon, you know, nor the crown, nor an impossible thing. You are a very sensible little boy when you please; think of something in papa's power."

"It is only little babies that cry for the moon," said Derwie, contemptuously, "and I've got it in the stereoscope—and what's the good of it if one had it? nobody lives there; but, papa, I'll tell you what I should like—give me the key of the door of the House of Commons, where you go every day when we are in town. That's what I should like for my birthday; what makes you laugh?" continued my boy, coming to a sudden pause and

growing red, for he was deeply susceptible to ridicule, bold as he was.

"Why on earth do you want to go to the House of Commons?" cried his father, when his laughter permitted him to speak.

"It's in the Bible that the people used to come to tell everything to the king," said Derwie, a little peevishly; "and isn't the House of Commons instead of the king in this country? and doesn't everybody go to the House of Commons when they want anything? I should like to see them all coming and telling their stories—what fun it must be! That's why you go there, I suppose, every night? but I don't know why you never should take mamma or me."

"It would never do to let the ladies come in," said Derwent, with mock seriousness; "you know they would talk so much that we could never hear what the people had to say."

"Mamma does not talk very much," said Derwie, sharply; "nor Alice either. Old Mrs. Sedgwick, to be sure—but then it's some good when she talks; it isn't all about books or things I can't understand, it's about people—that's real talk, that is. Before I go to school—just till this session is over—oh, papa, will you give me that key?"

"My boy," said Derwent, with the love and the laughter rivalling each other in his eyes, "they don't give me any key, or you should have it—there's a turnkey at the door, who opens it to let the poor people out and in; but some day you and mamma shall go and be shut up in a cage we have for the ladies, and hear

all that's said. I'm afraid, Derwie, when you've once been there you won't want to go again."

"Yes, I shall!" cried Derwie, all his face glowing with eagerness; when there suddenly appeared a solemn and silent apparition at the door, namely Nurse, under whose iron rule the young gentleman, much resisting, was still held, so far at least as his toilette was concerned. That excellent woman said not a word. She opened the door with noiseless solemnity, came in, and stood smoothing down her spotless apron by the wall. No need for words to announce the presence of that messenger of fate; Derwie made some unavailing struggles with destiny, and at last resigned himself and marched off defiantly, followed by the mighty Nemesis. When the door closed upon the well-preserved skirts of that brown silk gown, in which, ever since little Derwie emerged from babyhood, nurse had presented herself in the dining-room to fetch him to bed, Mr. Crofton and I once more looked at each other with those looks of fondness and praise and mutual congratulation which our boy had brought to our eyes. We had already exhausted all the phrases of parental wonder and admiration; we only looked at each other with a mutual tender delight and congratulation. Nobody else, surely, since the beginning of the world, ever had such a boy!

CHAPTER IV

The next day after, being the Saturday, our little Easter party assembled; first our neighbors the Sedgwicks, who were a party in themselves. Ten years before, Hugh Sedgwick had been the finest gentleman in our neighborhood, which he filled with amazement and consternation when he chose to fall in love with and marry little Clara Harley, whom, in the most literal sense of the word, he married out of the school-room, and who was just seventeen years old. But now that five children had followed this marriage, nobody could have supposed or believed in the existence of any such great original contrast between the husband and wife. Either Mr. Sedgwick had grown younger, or Clara older, than their years. He who now called Maurice Harley a prig, had been himself the prince of prigs—according to the estimate of the country gentlemen, his neighbors—in his day; but that day was long departed. Hugh Sedgwick, fastidious, dilettante fine gentleman, as he had been, was now the solicitous father of little children, and not above giving very sound advice upon measles and hooping-cough—while Clara, who had gradually blossomed out into fuller and fuller bloom, had scarcely yet attained the height of her soft beauty, despite the little flock of children round her. Nobody in the county made such a toilette as little Mrs. Sedgwick. I suspect she must have had *carte blanche* as to her milliner's bills; and when they entered the Hilfont drawing-room,

Clara, with her pretty matronly self-possession, her graceful little figure, round and full as one of her own babies, and her lovely little face, with all its cloudless lilies and roses—nobody could have believed in the time when his good neighbors shrugged their shoulders and laughed at Hugh Sedgwick's choice. She sat down, I remember, by Miss Polly Greenfield—dear old Miss Polly in her primeval drapery—that crimson satin gown which I had known all my life. Such a contrast they made in the bright youth and pale age of the two faces, which came together lovingly in a kiss of greeting! Since her brother, Sir Willoughby, had married, Miss Polly's habits had changed greatly. She had thrown aside her old brown riding-dress and the stiff man's hat she used to wear when she rode with Sir Willoughby. And when her old horse and her old groom were old enough to be pensioned off in their respective paddock and cottage, Miss Polly set up a pony-carriage, more suitable to her years. Her niece, a young widow of twenty, a poor, little, disconsolate soul, who was all the trouble in the world to Miss Polly, had made a second marriage, and left her two little children to the care of their grandaunt. They were little girls both, and the tender old woman was very happy in their society—happier a hundred times than when she had been mistress of Fenosier Hall. But to hear how little Clara, who once had stood somewhat in awe of Miss Polly, talked to her now!—advising her how to manage little Di and Emmy, telling how she regulated her own Clary, who, though a good deal younger, was very far on for her age—with what a sweet touch of superiority

and simplicity the dear little matron looked down from her wifely and motherly elevation upon pale old Miss Polly, who was neither mother nor wife! Clara was quite ready at the same moment to have bestowed her matronly counsels upon me.

After the Sedgwicks, Alice Harley, all by herself, as became one who felt herself at home, and was all but a daughter of the house, came into the room. Alice was plain in her dress to the extreme of plainness. That she assumed an evening dress at all was somewhat against her convictions, and in compassion to my weakness and prejudice; but the dress was of dark colored silk, made with a studied sobriety of cut, and lack of ornament. Instead of sharing Clara's round soft loveliness, Alice had grown slender and pale. Unimaginative people called her thin. Out of her girlish beauty had come a face full of thoughtfulness and expression, but not so pretty as some people expected—perhaps, because somehow or other, the ordinary roselight of youth had failed to Alice. Half by choice, half by necessity, she had settled down into the humdrum useful existence which the eldest daughter of a large family, if she does not elude her fate by an early marriage, so often falls into. Various "offers" had been made to her, one of which Mrs. Harley, divided between a mother's natural wish to see her daughter properly "settled," and a little reluctance, not less natural, to part with her own household counsellor and helper, had given a wavering support to. Alice, however, said No, coldly, and not, as I thought, without the minutest possible tinge of bitterness answered the

persuasions which were addressed to her. She was rather high and grandiloquent altogether on the subject of marriage, looking on with a half-comic, disapproving spectator observation at little Clara's loving tricks to her husband, whom that little matron had no awe of now-a-days, and discoursing more than seemed to me entirely necessary upon the subject. Alice was somewhat inclined to the views of those philosophers (chiefly feminine, it must be confessed) who see in the world around them, not a general crowd of human creatures, but two distinct rows of men and women; and she was a little condescending and superior, it must also be admitted, to that somewhat frivolous antagonistic creature, man. The ideal man, whom Alice had never—so she intimated—had the luck to light upon, was a demigod; but the real male representatives of the race were poor creatures —well enough, to be sure, but no more worthy of a woman's devotion than of any other superlative gift. With sentiments so distinct and *prononcés*, Alice had not lived all these years without feeling some yearning for an independent sway and place of her own, as one may well suppose—which tempted her into further speculations about women's work, and what one could do to make a place for one's self, who had positively determined not to be indebted for one's position to one's husband. Such was the peculiar atmosphere out of which Alice Harley revealed herself to the common world. She was deeply scornful of that talk about people which pleased my boy so much, and so severe upon gossip and gossips, that I had on more than one occasion seriously to

defend myself. There she stood in her dark-brown silk dress beside little Clara's flowing toilette and vivacious nursery talk, casting a shadow upon pale Miss Polly in her crimson satin. Alice was as much unlike that tender old soul, with her old maidenly restraints and preciseness, her unbounded old womanly indulgence and kindness, as she was unlike her matronly younger sister; and I confess that to myself, in all her perverseness, knowing as I did what a genuine heart lay below, there was quite a charm of her own about the unmarried woman. She was so conscious of her staid and sober age, so unconscious of her pleasant youth, and the simplicity which, all unknown to herself, lay in her wisdom. Such was my Alice; the same Alice who, keeping silent and keeping her brothers and sisters quiet in the nursery, while she knew her father lay dying many a long year ago, adjured me with unspeakable childish pathos—"Oh, don't be sorry for me! I mustn't cry!"

I do not know how it was that, while I contemplated Alice on her first appearance with a kind of retrospective glance at her history, there suddenly appeared above her the head of Mr. Reredos. He was a middle-sized, handsome man, with a pale complexion and dark hair—very gentlemanly, people said—a man who preached well, talked well, and looked well, and who, even to my eyes, which were no way partial, had no particular defect worth noticing, if it were not the soft, large, white hands without any bones in them, which held your fingers in a warm, velvety clasp when you shook hands with the new rector. I don't

know how he had managed to come in without my perceiving him. And strong must have been the attraction which beguiled Mr. Reredos to neglect the duty of paying his respects to his hostess, even for five minutes. It was not five minutes, however, before he recollected himself, and came with his soft white hand and his sister on his arm. His sister was so far like himself that she was very pale, with very black hair, and an "interesting" look. She did not interest me very much; but I could not help hoping that perhaps in this sentimental heroine Maurice Harley, for the time being, might meet his fate. I thought that would be rather a comfortable way of shelving those members of our party; for Maurice, though he was a very fine gentleman, not to say Fellow of his College, afflicted my soul with a constant inclination to commit a personal assault upon him, and have him whipped and sent to bed.

However, to be sure, we had all the elements of a very pleasant party about us—people who belonged to us, as one may say. Derwent, who liked to see a number of cheerful faces about him, was in the lightest spirits; he paid Clara Sedgwick compliments on her toilette, and "chaffed" (as he called it—I am not responsible for the word) Alice, whom he had the sincerest affection for, but loved to tease, and took Miss Polly in to dinner, while little Derwie did the honors of the nursery to a party almost as large, and quite as various. I fear we made rather a night of feasting than a penitential vigil of that Easter Eve.

CHAPTER V

When we returned to the drawing-room after dinner, we found, hidden in a distant corner, with books and portfolios, and stereoscopes blocking up the table near him, Johnnie Harley. I have said little of this boy. He was the proxy which the handsome, healthy family had given for their singular exemption from disease and weakness—the one sufferer, among many strong, who is so often found in households unexceptionably healthful, as if all the minor afflictions which might have been divided among them had concentrated on one and left the rest free. When Johnnie was a child he had only been moved in the little wheeled chair, got for him in his father's lifetime, when they were rich. Now he was better, and able to move about with the help of a crutch, but even now was a hopeless cripple, with only his vigorous mind and unconquerable spirits to maintain him through private hours of suffering. Partly from his infirmities —partly from his natural temperament—the lad had a certain superficial shyness, which, though it was easily got over, made it rather difficult to form acquaintance with him. He could not be induced to dine with us that first night—but he was in the drawing-room, showing the stereoscope to Miss Polly's little nieces, Di and Emmy, when we came back from dinner; the other little creatures were playing at some recondite childish game in another part of the room; but Emmy and Di were very

proper little maidens, trained to take judicious care of their white India muslin frocks, the spare dimensions of which contrasted oddly enough with Clary's voluminous little skirts and flush of ribbons. Clary was like a little rose, with lovely rounded cheeks and limbs like her mother, dimpled to the very finger-points, while Di and Emmy, though by no means deficient in good looks, were made up quite after Miss Polly's own model, in a taste which was somewhat severe for their years. Johnnie Harley veiled himself behind these little maidens till we were safely settled in the room. He was twenty, poor fellow, and did not know what was to become of him. He was sometimes very melancholy, and sometimes very gay; he was in rather a doubtful mood to-night.

"Look here, Mrs. Crofton," he said, drawing me shyly aside. "I've put this one in a famous light—do tell me if you like it. I did it myself."

I looked, of course, to please him. It was a pretty view of my own house at Estcourt, with the orphan children who lived there playing on the terrace—very pretty, and very minute—so clear that I fancied I could recognize the children. It pleased me mightily.

"*You* did it, Johnnie," cried I, much gratified. "I am very much pleased; but I never knew you were a 'photographic artist' before."

"No more I was," said Johnnie, who rather affected a little roughness of speech, "till they got me a camera the other day. Of course I know it was Alice, and that somehow or other she's

spared it off herself. Do you know whether there's anything she ought to have had that she hasn't, Mrs. Crofton? One can never find Alice out. She doesn't go when she's made a sacrifice for you and keep hinting and hinting to let you know, as some people do; but look here—isn't it horrible to think I'm grown up and yet have to stay at home like a girl, and can't do anything. Now that I'm able to do these slides, I'd give my ears if I could sell them. I'd go and stand in the market at Simonborough. But of course it's no use speaking. Don't you think, Mrs. Crofton, that there's surely something in the world that could be done by a cripple like me?"

"I have no doubt a dozen things," said I, boldly; "but have a little patience, Johnnie. Maurice is ten years older than you are, and he does nothing that I can see. Besides, it is holiday time—I forbid you to think of anything but the new camera to-night. Is it a good one? What a pleasure it must be for all of you," I continued, looking once more into the stereoscope, where, most singular of optical delusions, I certainly saw a pretty new winter bonnet, the back of which, in the wardrobe of Alice, I had already made a memorandum of, floating over the picture of my old house.

"Ah," said Johnnie, with a sigh, "if I were a fellow like Maurice!—but here, Di, you have not seen this," he added, transferring another slide into that wooden box. Grave little Di looked at it, and summoned her sister with a little scream of delight.

"It's Miss Harley and Baby Sedgwick," said Di, "and I do believe if any one was little enough they could go round behind

her in the picture. Oh! let me tell Derwent and Clara, Mr. John!"

Mr. John was very graciously pleased to exhibit his handiwork to any number of spectators, and shortly we all gathered round the stereoscope. Alice stood looking on very demurely, while we were examining her in that pretty peep-show; she listened to all the usual observations with due calm, while Johnnie, quite in a flush of pleasure, produced the pictures, at which I understood afterwards the poor youth had been working all day long, one by one out of the box.

"My love," said Miss Polly, in a mild aside, "I'd like to see you just so in a house of your own, my dear."

Alice colored slightly; very slightly—it was against her principles to blush—and made no answer, except a slight shake of her head.

"Such a sweet baby," said Miss Reredos, "I think one might bear anything for such a darling! Oh, don't you think so, Miss Harley? I think it's so unnatural for a lady not to love children. I think if dear Clement had but a family I should be so happy."

"But, dear, shouldn't you be happier," said Clara, opening her bright eyes a little wider, with a laughing humor which now-a-days that young lady permitted herself to exercise pretty freely, "if you had a family of your own?"

"Oh! Mrs. Sedgwick, how can you speak so? I am so glad the gentlemen are not here," said the Rector's sister. Alice stood looking at her with a half vexed, half amused expression. Alice was a little afraid for the honor of (most frightful of phrases!)

her sex.

"As for Alice," said Clara, laughing, "do you know she thinks it rather improper to be married? She would not allow she cared for anybody, not for the world."

"I think women ought to be very careful," said Alice, responding instantly to the challenge with a little flush and start; "I think there are very few men in the world worthy of being loved. Yes, I do think so, whatever you choose to say. They're well enough for their trades, but they're not good enough to have a woman's heart for a plaything. Of course there may be some —I do not deny that; but I never"–

Here Alice paused—perhaps she was going to tell a fib—perhaps conscience stopped her—I will not guess; but Clara clapped her hands in triumph.

"Ah, but if you did ever," said Clara, laughing, "would you marry *him*, Alice?"

"If he asked me it is very likely I should," said Alice, with great composure; "but not for a house of my own, as Miss Polly says—nor for fun, like some other people."

"My love, it's very natural to like a house of one's own," said Miss Polly, with a little sigh. "I don't mind saying it now that I am so old: once in my life I almost think I would have married for a home—not for a living, remember, Alice—but for a place and people that should belong to me, and not to another—that's what one wishes for, you know; but I never talked about it either now or then; my dear, I wouldn't if I were you."

At this address Alice blushed crimson—blushed up to the hair, and patted her foot upon the ground in a very impatient, not to say angry, way. She cast a somewhat indignant side-look at me, to express her conviction that I was at the bottom of this, and had suggested the mild condemnation of Miss Polly—which, so far as agreeing thoroughly in her sentiments went, I confess I might have done. Then Alice went off abruptly to the piano, and began playing to the children, who gathered round her; before long her voice was pleasantly audible in one of those immemorial songs with a fox or a robin for a hero, which always delight children; and when the song was finished there ensued as pretty a scene as I have ever looked at. Clara gathered the children in a ring, which danced round and round, with a dazzle of little rosebud faces, flying white frocks and ribbons, to Alice's accompaniment. Such scenes I have no doubt were of nightly occurrence in the big, grand drawing-room at Waterflag Hall; and little Derwie took his part so heartily, and joined in the chant with which they went round with lungs and will so unmistakable, that, for my part, I was quite captivated. Miss Polly and I sat down to watch them. Little Di, too shy and too big to join them, being twelve years old and a grandmother among these babes, stood wistfully behind us, envying Emmy, who was only ten and a half, and "not too old for such a game." Di, a long way older and graver than Mrs. Clare, stood nodding and smiling to encourage her little sister every time she whisked past. Miss Reredos behind us was examining Johnnie's pictures and talking sentiment in a soft half-whisper to

that defenceless boy, while Miss Polly and I sat on a sofa together, looking on.

"It is strange," said Miss Polly, "but yet I'm sure I am very glad. I thought of asking you, Clare, whether anything had occurred to disturb that dear girl? I don't like when I hear young women talk like that, my dear—it looks to me as if they had something on their mind, you know. Once I thought there might perhaps be something between Bertie Nugent and Alice—that would have been a very nice match; but somehow these nice matches never come about—at least, not without a deal of trouble; and I suppose it was nothing but an old woman's fancy, Clare."

"I suppose not, indeed," said I, rather ruefully, looking at that prettiest spectacle before me, and recognizing, as by intuition, that Mr. Reredos had just come in, and was standing at the door in a glow of delight and approbation, looking at Alice, and deciding not to delay his proposal for an hour longer than it should be absolutely necessary to keep silent. Ah, me! there was some hope for us in Alice's philosophical moods; but when she played to her little nieces and nephews in that shockingly happy, careless, and easy manner, I was in despair.

"It's very sad when people won't see what's most for their advantage," said Miss Polly, with a ghost of humor in her pale old face. "I daresay, Clare, my dear, Bertie's just as happy. I heard from Lady Greenfield the other day—one of *her letters*, you know—that the dear boy was getting on very well, but breaking

his heart to get home that he might go to the Crimea to the war."

"So he tells me," said I, "but I rather think I am very glad he has not the chance of dying on that dreadful hill."

"My dear, that's very true," said Miss Polly; "one faints at the thought of it, to be sure, for one's own; but if I could be philosophical—which—dear, dear, it isn't to be expected from an old woman! I'd say it was wrong to be sorry for the dear young creatures, God bless them! Think what they're spared, my dear child. I don't know but what it's a great saving of the labor and the sorrow when they die young."

"Miss Polly, this is not like you," I cried in surprise.

"Perhaps it isn't; but, dear, we're always learning something," said Miss Polly; "there's Elinor now, and poor Emmy, the unfortunate little soul! but hush, here's your new rector coming —I'll tell you another time."

CHAPTER VI

"I am surprised," said Mr. Reredos, as he drank his coffee beside me, "to hear from Mr. Maurice Harley that he's not in orders. I really felt so sure that he must be that I did not think of asking. He's had his fellowship this long time, has not he? and really a clergyman's son, and with the excellent connections he has—I am surprised!"

"Ah, so is everybody," said Miss Polly, significantly. Miss Polly was an old-fashioned woman, and had little sympathy with those delicate conscientious scruples which kept our friend Maurice out of the Church.

"My dear," continued Miss Polly, turning aside to me, with some energy, as Mr. Reredos, always polite, took her empty cup from her, "I could believe in it if he were doing anything or thinking of doing anything; but if you'll believe me, Clare, it's nothing but idleness—that's what it is. When a young man's idle, if he doesn't fall in love with the first girl he meets, he falls in love with himself, which is a deal worse. The Rector here will be trying to help Maurice out of his doubts, I shouldn't wonder. His doubts, indeed! If he lost his fellowship and had to work hard for his living, I shouldn't be afraid of his doubts, for my part."

"Well," said I, "but if the loss of his fellowship dispersed poor Maurice's dilettante scepticism, and forced him into orders, it might be better for himself, Miss Polly, but I doubt if it would be

better for the Church. When his conscience keeps him outside, we have no reason to find fault, but if he came in against his conscience–"

"Conscience! stuff!" said Miss Polly, with some heat. "Child, that's not what I meant. I meant—for being his father's and mother's son I can't think he's a bad boy at the bottom—I meant a little trouble and fighting would soon put those idle vagaries out of his head. Now, Mr. Reredos, mind you don't go and argue with Maurice Harley. I'm an old woman, and I've seen such before, many's the time. Wait till he's got something to do and something to bear in this world, as he's sure to have, sooner or later. Ah, Life's a wonderful teacher! When a man sits among his books, or a woman at her needle—and there isn't such a great difference as you might suppose—they get mazing themselves with all kinds of foolish questions, and think themselves very grand too for doing it; but only wait till they find out what God means them to do and to put up with in this world—it makes a deal of difference, Clare."

"Miss Polly, you are a philosopher, and we never knew it!" said I, while Mr. Reredos stood looking on, much annoyed, and in no small degree contemptuous of the pale old woman who took upon her to direct so perfect a person as himself—for Mr. Reredos was not unlike Maurice Harley, though after his different fashion; he thought he could do a great deal with his wisdom and his words.

"I am not a philosopher; but I have been alone with the dear

children since my niece Emmy left me," said Miss Polly, "and not so able to stir about as I once was; and you know, my dear, one can't say out everything in one's mind to children at their age; so, somehow the thoughts come up as if I had been gathering them all my life, and never had time to look at them before."

"I suspect that is how most of the thoughts that are worth remembering do come," said I. Mr. Reredos did not say anything. He stood, with a faint smile on his lip, which he did not mean us to suspect, much less understand—and while he bent his handsome head towards the mistress of the house, gravely attentive, as it was his duty to be, his eyes turned towards Maurice and Alice Harley. Did not I know well enough what was in his mind? He thought we were a couple of old women dozing over our slow experiences. He was still in the world where words and looks produce unspeakable results, and where the chance of a moment determines a life. His eyes turned to those other young people who, like himself, were speculating upon all manner of questions—he would not laugh at us, but a faint gleam of criticism and superiority just brightened upon his lip. I liked him none the worse, for my own part.

"This reads like a Newdigate," said Maurice Harley. "I suppose Sedgwick brought the book to you, Clara, for a sugar-plum. Listen, how sweetly pretty! These prize poets are really too delicious for anything."

"You had better write a poem yourself, Maurice, and show what you can do," cried the indignant Clara; "it is so grand to be

a critic, and so easy! Nobody can write to please you, nobody can speak to please you—I should just like to see you do something yourself, Maurice, that we could criticise as well."

Maurice laughed, poising in his hand the pretty new poetry-book which Mr. Sedgwick had brought down from London to his wife. He looked so superior and so triumphant, that even his grave brother-in-law was provoked.

"Maurice is not so foolish," said Mr. Sedgwick, "as long as he doesn't *do* anything he may be a Shakespeare for anything we know. You girls may worship him as such now, if you please—there he sits quite ready to receive your homage; but if he really ventured into print, Maurice would be only Maurice Harley—just himself, like the rest of us—might even find a critic in his turn, as such is the fate of mortals. No, no, you may be sure Maurice won't commit himself; he's a great deal too wise for that."

Maurice laughed a somewhat constrained laugh, and coloured slightly. Perhaps a touch of conscience made Mr. Sedgwick's sarcasm tell—he threw down the book with a little petulance.

"Far be it from me to object to Clara's tastes. Thanks to my sisters, I know pretty well what young ladies like in the shape of poetry," said Maurice; "they all admire the Newdigates. There was a time when I found Alice in tears over one of these distinguished poems—and that not so very many years ago."

"Oh! don't be so dreadfully satirical!" said Miss Reredos, who was beginning to tire of Johnnie and his stereoscope. "I

am sure that year that mamma and I went to Commemoration with Clement there was the sweetest thing imaginable—and so charmingly read too—and I have a copy of it now; but, oh! I know why Mr. Harley does not like the Newdigate," cried the Rector's sister, clasping her soft hands, "he's a Cambridge man!"

"Exactly," said Maurice, recovering himself at once, for he was quite disposed to take Miss Reredos for his antagonist; "you know the jealousy which exists between us. Your brother and I preserve an outside appearance of civility, out of respect to Mrs. Crofton and the presence of the ladies, but nobody can doubt for a moment how we hate each other in our hearts."

"I say, do you though?" cried the small voice, down at Maurice Harley's elbow, of my son Derwie, who was, unluckily, at that moment advancing with the rest of the little troop to say good-night. "Do you hate the Rector, Maurice?—he's the clergyman, you know—he can't do anything wrong; so *he* can't hate *you*—why do you hate him?—is he cleverer than you are? Stand up a moment, please—I don't think he's quite as tall."

This interruption Derwent made with the most perfect sincerity and earnestness, unconsciously guessing at the only reasons which could make a person so accomplished as Maurice Harley hate anybody. Everybody laughed except the individual questioned, who shot a glance of wrath at my boy, and eyed Mr. Reredos with a sort of contemptuous inquiry. Could any one, even a child, imagine the new rector to be cleverer than the ineffable Maurice? He sank down again in the chair from which

Derwie had dragged him, laughing with a very bad grace. Then all the broken currents of talk going on in the room, suffered a little ebb and pause. Little rosy faces clustered close about Clara Sedgwick, about Alice and myself, and old Miss Polly, holding up rose-lips full of kisses. Mr. Crofton shook hands with Derwie, and turned him off with an affectionate grasp upon his shoulders, declaring, with a fondness beyond caresses, that he was too old to be kissed. Then we all paused, looking after them as they trooped out of the room. Miss Reredos, full of something clever to say in the way of an attack upon Maurice—Maurice himself too self-conscious to be diverted by that pretty procession, and Johnnie, who was hanging over his stereoscope, and following the Rector's sister with his eyes, were the only persons in the room who did not watch with a smile and an increased warmth at heart these beautiful children disappearing, one by one, from the door. Mr. Reredos's face shone, and he cast sidelong glances at Alice. He was young, in his first romance of love, not yet spoken. His heart was moved in him with an unconscious blessing to the children; visions of a house of his own, musical with such voices, stole into the Rector's soul—I could see it in his face.

And was it to be so? There was no side glance from the eyes of Alice, reciprocating those of Mr. Reredos—no consciousness, as she stood by the table watching the children, of any future such as that which sparkled in the young Rector's eyes. She stood calmly watching them, nodding and smiling to Derwent, and her little niece Clary, who, hand in hand, were the last to leave the

room—the maiden aunt, only a little more independent of the children than their mother—almost as much beloved by them—the young, unmarried woman, gravely cogitating the necessities of her class of age, and feeling much superior to the vanities of love-making, without a single palpitation in her of the future bride, the possible mother. So, at least, it seemed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.