GEORGE GISSING

THE WHIRLPOOL

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Содержание

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Part the First

CHAPTER 1

Harvey Rolfe was old enough to dine with deliberation, young and healthy enough to sauce with appetite the dishes he thoughtfully selected. You perceived in him the imperfect epicure. His club had no culinary fame; the dinner was merely tolerable; but Rolfe's unfinished palate flattered the second-rate cook. He knew nothing of vintages; it sufficed him to distinguish between Bordeaux and Burgundy; yet one saw him raise his glass and peer at the liquor with eye of connoisseur. All unaffectedly; for he was conscious of his shortcoming in the art of delicate living, and never vaunted his satisfactions. He had known the pasture of poverty, and the table as it is set by London landladies; to look back on these things was to congratulate himself that nowadays he dined.

Beyond the achievement of a vague personal distinction at the Metropolitan Club, he had done nothing to make himself a man of note, and it was doubtful whether more than two or three

of the members really liked him or regarded him with genuine interest. His introduction to this circle he owed to an old friend, Hugh Carnaby, whose social position was much more clearly defined: Hugh Carnaby, the rambler, the sportsman, and now for a twelvemonth the son-in-law of Mrs. Ascott Larkfield. Through Carnaby people learnt as much of his friend's history as it concerned anyone to know: that Harvey Rolfe had begun with the study of medicine, had given it up in disgust, subsequently was 'in business', and withdrew from it on inheriting a competency. They were natives of the same county, and learnt their Latin together at the Grammar School of Greystone, the midland town which was missed by the steam highroad, and so preserves much of the beauty and tranquillity of days gone by. Rolfe seldom spoke of his own affairs, but in talking of travel he had been heard to mention that his father had engineered certain lines of foreign railway. It seemed that Harvey had no purpose in life, save that of enjoying himself. Obviously he read a good deal, and Carnaby credited him with profound historical knowledge; but he neither wrote nor threatened to do so. Something of cynicism appeared in his talk of public matters; politics amused him, and his social views lacked consistency, tending, however, to an indolent conservatism. Despite his convivial qualities, he had traits of the reserved, even of the unsociable, man: a slight awkwardness in bearing, a mute shyness with strangers, a hesitancy in ordinary talk, and occasional bluntness of assertion or contradiction, suggesting a contempt which possibly he did

not intend. Hugh Carnaby declared that the true Rolfe only showed himself after a bottle of wine; maintained, moreover, that Harvey had vastly improved since he entered upon a substantial income. When Rolfe was five and twenty, Hugh being two years younger, they met after a long separation, and found each other intolerable; a decade later their meeting led to hearty friendship. Rolfe had become independent, and was tasting his freedom in a twelvemonth's travel. The men came face to face one day on the deck of a steamer at Port Said. Physically, Rolfe had changed so much that the other had a difficulty in recognising him; morally, the change was not less marked, as Carnaby very soon became aware. At thirty-seven this process of development was by no means arrested, but its slow and subtle working escaped observation unless it were that of Harvey Rolfe himself.

His guest this evening, in a quiet corner of the dining-room where he generally sat, was a man, ten years his junior, named Morphew: slim, narrow-shouldered, with sandy hair, and pale, delicate features of more sensibility than intelligence; restless, vivacious, talking incessantly in a low, rapid voice, with frequent nervous laughs which threw back his drooping head. A difference of costume—Rolfe wore morning dress, Morphew the suit of ceremony—accentuated the younger man's advantage in natural and acquired graces; otherwise, they presented the contrast of character and insignificance. Rolfe had a shaven chin, a weathered complexion, thick brown hair; the penumbra of middle-age had touched his countenance, softening here and

there a line which told of temperament in excess. At this moment his manner inclined to a bluff jocularity, due in some measure to the bottle of wine before him, as also was the tinge of colour upon his cheek; he spoke briefly, but listened with smiling interest to his guest's continuous talk. This ran on the subject of the money-market, with which the young man boasted some practical acquaintance.

'You don't speculate at all?' Morphew asked.

'Shouldn't know how to go about it,' replied the other in his deeper note.

'It seems to me to be the simplest thing in the world if one is content with moderate profits. I'm going in for it seriously—cautiously—as a matter of business. I've studied the thing—got it up as I used to work at something for an exam. And here, you see, I've made five pounds at a stroke—five pounds! Suppose I make that every now and then, it's worth the trouble, you know—it mounts up. And I shall never stand to lose much. You see, it's Tripcony's interest that I should make profits.'

'I'm not quite sure of that.'

'Oh, but it *is*! Let me explain—'

These two had come to know each other under peculiar circumstances a year ago. Rolfe was at Brussels, staying—his custom when abroad—at a hotel unfrequented by English folk. One evening on his return from the theatre, he learnt that a young man of his own nationality lay seriously ill in a room at the top of the house. Harvey, moved by compassion, visited the

unfortunate Englishman, listened to his ravings, and played the part of Good Samaritan. On recovery, the stranger made full disclosure of his position. Being at Brussels on a holiday, he had got into the company of gamblers, and, after winning a large sum (ten thousand francs, he declared), had lost not only that, but all else. that he possessed, including his jewellery. He had gambled deliberately; he wanted money, money, and saw no other way of obtaining it. In the expansive mood of convalescence, Cecil Morphew left no detail of his story unrevealed. He was of gentle birth, and had a private income of three hundred pounds, charged upon the estate of a distant relative; his profession (the bar) could not be remunerative for years, and other prospects he had none. The misery of his situation lay in the fact that he was desperately in love with the daughter of people who looked upon him as little better than a pauper. The girl had pledged herself to him, but would not marry without her parents' consent, of which there was no hope till he had at least trebled his means. His choice of a profession was absurd, dictated merely by social opinion; he should have been working hard in a commercial office, or at some open-air pursuit. Naturally he turned again to the thought of gambling, this time the great legalised game of hazard, wherein he was as little likely to prosper as among the blacklegs of Brussels. Rolfe liked him for his ingenuousness, and for the vein of poetry in his nature. The love affair still went on, but Morphew seldom alluded to it, and his seasoned friend thought of it as a youthful ailment which would pass and be

forgotten.

'I'm convinced,' said the young man presently, 'that any one who really gives his mind to it can speculate with moderate success. Look at the big men—the brokers and the company promoters, and so on; I've met some of them, and there's nothing in them—nothing! Now, there's Bennet Frothingham. You know him, I think?'

Rolfe nodded.

'Well, what do you think of him? Isn't he a very ordinary fellow? How has he got such a position? I'm told he began just in a small way—by chance. No doubt *he* found it so easy to make money he was surprised at his success. Tripcony has told me a lot about him. Why, the "Britannia" brings him fifteen thousand a year; and he must be in a score of other things.'

'I know nothing about the figures,' said Rolfe, 'and I shouldn't put much faith in Tripcony; but Frothingham, you may be sure, isn't quite an ordinary man.'

'Ah, well, of course there's a certain knack—and then, experience—'

Morphew emptied his glass, and refilled it. Nearly all the tables in the room were now occupied, and the general hum of talk gave security to intimate dialogue. Flushed and bright-eyed, the young man presently leaned forward.

'If I could count upon five hundred, she would take the step.'

'Indeed?'

'Yes, that's settled. What do you think? Plenty of people live

very well on less.'

'You want my serious opinion?'

'If you *can* be serious.'

'Then I think that the educated man who marries on less than a thousand is either mad or a criminal.'

'Bosh! We won't talk about it.'

They rose, and walked towards the smoking-room, Rolfe giving a nod here and there as he passed acquaintances. In the hall someone addressed him.

'How does Carnaby take this affair?'

'What affair?'

'Don't you know? Their house has been robbed—stripped. It's in the evening papers.'

Rolfe went on into the smoking-room, and read the report of his friend's misfortune. The Carnabys occupied a house in Hamilton Terrace. During their absence from home last night, there had been a clean sweep of all such things of value as could easily be removed. The disappearance of their housekeeper, and the fact that this woman had contrived the absence of the servants from nine o'clock till midnight, left no mystery in the matter. The clubmen talked of it with amusement. Hard lines, to be sure, for Carnaby, and yet harder for his wife, who had lost no end of jewellery; but the thing was so neatly and completely done, one must needs laugh. One or two husbands who enjoyed the luxury of a housekeeper betrayed their uneasiness. A discussion arose on the characteristics of housekeepers in general, and spread

over the vast subject of domestic management, not often debated at the Metropolitan Club. In general talk of this kind Rolfe never took part; smoking his pipe, he listened and laughed, and was at moments thoughtful. Cecil Morphew, rapidly consuming cigarettes as he lay back in a soft chair, pointed the moral of the story in favour of humble domesticity.

In half an hour, his guest having taken leave, Rolfe put on his overcoat, and stepped out into the cold, clammy November night. He was overtaken by a fellow Metropolitan—a grizzled, scraggy-throated, hollow-eyed man, who laid a tremulous hand upon his arm.

'Excuse me, Mr. Rolfe, have you seen Frothingham recently?'

'Not for a month.'

'Ah! I thought perhaps—I was wondering what he thought about the Colebrook smash. To tell you the truth, I've heard unpleasant rumours. Do you—should you think the Colebrook affair would affect the "Britannia" in any way?'

It was not the first time that this man had confided his doubts and timidities to Harvey Rolfe; he had a small, but to him important, interest in Bennet Frothingham's wide-reaching affairs, and seemed to spend most of his time in eliciting opinion on the financier's stability.

'Wouldn't you be much more comfortable,' said Rolfe, rather bluntly, 'if you had your money in some other kind of security?'

'Ah, but, my dear sir, twelve and a half per cent—twelve and a half! I hold preference shares of the original issue.'

'Then I'm afraid you must take your chance.'

'But,' piped the other in alarm, 'you don't mean that—'

'I mean nothing, and know nothing. I'm the last man to consult about such things.'

And Rolfe, with an abrupt 'Goodnight,' beckoned to a passing hansom. The address he gave was Hugh Carnaby's, in Hamilton Terrace.

Twice already the horse had slipped at slimy crossings, when, near the top of Regent Street, it fell full length, and the abrupt stoppage caused a collision of wheels with another hansom which was just passing at full speed in the same direction. Rolfe managed to alight in the ordinary way, and at once heard himself greeted by a familiar voice from the other cab. His acquaintance showed a pallid, drawn, all but cadaverous visage, with eyes which concealed pain or weariness under their friendly smile. Abbott was the man's name. Formerly a lecturer at a provincial college, he had resigned his post on marrying, and taken to journalism.

'I want to speak to you, Rolfe,' he said hurriedly, 'but I haven't a moment to spare. Going to Euston—could you come along for a few minutes?'

The vehicles were not damaged; Abbott's driver got quickly out of the crowd, and the two men continued their conversation.

'Do you know anything of Wager?' inquired the journalist, with a troubled look.

'He came to see me a few evenings ago—late.'

'Ha, he did! To borrow money, wasn't it?'

'Well, yes.'

'I thought so. He came to me for the same. Said he'd got a berth at Southampton. Lie, of course. The fellow has disappeared, and left his children—left them in a lodging-house at Hammersmith. How's that for cool brutality? The landlady found my wife's address, and came to see her. Address left out on purpose, I dare say. There was nothing for it but to take care of the poor little brats.—Oh, damn!'

'What's the matter?'

'Neuralgia—driving me mad. Teeth, I think. I'll have every one wrenched out of my head if this goes on. Never mind. What do you think of Wager?'

'I remember, when we were at Guy's, he used to advocate the nationalisation of offspring. Probably he had some personal interest in the matter, even then.'

'Hound! I don't know whether to set the police after him or not. It wouldn't benefit the children. I suppose it's no use hunting for his family?'

'Not much, I should say.'

'Well, lucky we have no children of our own. Worst of it is, I don't like the poor little wretches, and my wife doesn't either. We must find a home for them.'

'I say, Abbott, you must let me go halves at that.'

'Hang it, no! Why should you support Wager's children? They're relatives of ours, unfortunately. But I wanted to tell you

that I'm going down to Waterbury.' He looked at his watch. 'Thirteen minutes—shall I do it? There's a good local paper, the *Free Press*, and I have the offer of part-ownership. I shall buy, if possible, and live in the country for a year or two, to pick up my health. Can't say I love London. Might get into country journalism for good. Curse this torment!'

In Tottenham Court Road, Rolfe bade his friend goodbye, and the cab rushed on.

CHAPTER 2

It was half past ten when Rolfe knocked at the door in Hamilton Terrace. He learnt from the servant that Mr. Carnaby was at home, and had company. In the room known as the library, four men sat smoking; their voices pealed into the hall as the door opened, and a boisterous welcome greeted the newcomer's appearance.

'Come to condole?' cried Hugh, striding forward with his man-of-the-wide-world air, and holding out his big hand. 'No doubt they're having a high old time at the club. Does it please them? Does it tickle them?'

'Why, naturally. There's the compensation, my boy—you contribute to the gaiety of your friends.'

Carnaby was a fair example of the well-bred, well-fed Englishman—tall, brawny, limber, not uncomely, with a red neck, a powerful jaw, and a keen eye. Something more of repose, of self-possession, and a slightly more intellectual brow, would have made him the best type of conquering, civilising Briton. He came of good family, but had small inheritance; his tongue told of age-long domination; his physique and carriage showed the horseman, the game-stalker, the nomad. Hugh had never bent over books since the day when he declined the university and got leave to join Colonel Bosworth's exploring party in the Caucasus. After a boyhood of straitened circumstances, he

profited by a skilful stewardship which allowed him to hope for some seven hundred a year; his elder brother, Miles, a fine fellow, who went into the army, pinching himself to benefit Hugh and their sister Ruth. Miles was now Major Carnaby, active on the North-West Frontier. Ruth was wife of a missionary in some land of swamps; doomed by climate, but of spirit indomitable. It seemed strange that Hugh, at five and thirty, had done nothing particular. Perhaps his income explained it—too small for traditional purposes, just large enough to foster indolence. For Hugh had not even followed up his promise of becoming an explorer; he had merely rambled, mostly in pursuit of fowl or quadruped. When he married, all hope for him was at an end. The beautiful and brilliant daughter of a fashionable widow, her income a trifle more than Carnaby's own; devoted to the life of cities, wherein she shone; an enchantress whose spell would not easily be broken, before whom her husband bowed in delighted subservience—such a woman might flatter Hugh's pride, but could scarce be expected to draw out his latent energies and capabilities. This year, for the first time, he had visited no wild country; his journeying led only to Paris, to Vienna. In due season he shot his fifty brace on somebody's grouse-moor, but the sport did not exhilarate him.

An odd and improbable alliance, that between Hugh Carnaby and Harvey Rolfe. Yet in several ways they suited each other. Old-time memories had a little, not much, to do with it; more of the essence of the matter was their feeling of likeness in

difference. Ten years ago Carnaby felt inclined to call his old school-fellow a 'cad'; Harvey saw nothing in Hugh but robust snobbishness. Nowadays they had the pleasant sense of understanding each other on most points, and the result was a good deal of honest mutual admiration. The one's physical vigour and adroitness, the other's active mind, liberal thoughts, studious habits, proved reciprocally attractive. Though in unlike ways, both were impressively modern. Of late it had seemed as if the man of open air, checked in his natural courses, thrown back upon his meditations, turned to the student, with hope of guidance in new paths, of counsel amid unfamiliar obstacles. To the observant Rolfe, his friend's position abounded in speculative interest. With the course of years, each had lost many a harsher characteristic, whilst the inner man matured. That their former relations were gradually being reversed, neither perhaps had consciously noted; but even in the jests which passed between them on Harvey's arrival this evening, it appeared plainly enough that Hugh Carnaby no longer felt the slightest inclination to regard his friend as an inferior.

The room, called library, contained one small case of books, which dealt with travel and sport. Furniture of the ordinary kind, still new, told of easy circumstances and domestic comfort. Round about the walls hung a few paintings and photographs, intermingled with the stuffed heads of animals slain in the chase, notably that of a great ibex with magnificent horns.

'Come, now, tell me all about it,' said Rolfe, as he mixed

himself a glass of whisky and water. 'I don't see that anything has gone from this room.'

'Don't you?' cried his host, with a scornful laugh. 'Where are my silver-mounted pistols? Where's the ibex-hoof made into a paperweight? And'—he raised his voice to a shout of comical despair—'where's my cheque-book?'

'I see.'

'I wish *I* did. It must break the record for a neat house-robbery, don't you think? And they'll never be caught—I'll bet you anything you like they won't. The job was planned weeks ago; that woman came into the house with no other purpose.'

'But didn't your wife know anything about her?'

'What can one know about such people? There were references, I believe—as valuable as references usually are. She must be an old hand. But I'm sick of the subject; let's drop it.—You were interrupted, Hollings. What about that bustard?'

A very tall, spare man, who seemed to rouse himself from a nap, resumed his story of bustard-stalking in Spain last spring. Carnaby, who knew the country well, listened with lively interest, and followed with reminiscences of his own. He told of a certain boar, shot in the Sierras, which weighed something like four hundred pounds. He talked, too, of flamingoes on the 'marismas' of the Guadalquivir; of punting day after day across the tawny expanse of water; of cooking his meals on sandy islets at a fire made of tamarisk and thistle; of lying wakeful in the damp, chilly nights, listening to frogs and bitterns. Then again of his ibex-

hunting on the Cordilleras of Castile, when he brought down that fine fellow whose head adorned his room, the horns just thirty-eight inches long. And in the joy of these recollections there seemed to sound a regretful note, as if he spoke of things gone by and irrecoverable, no longer for him.

One of the men present had recently been in Cyprus, and mentioned it with disgust. Rolfe also had visited the island, and remembered it much more agreeably, his impressions seeming to be chiefly gastronomic; he recalled the exquisite flavour of Cyprian hares, the fat francolin, the delicious beccaficoes in commanderia wine; with merry banter from Carnaby, professing to despise a man who knew nothing of game but its taste. The conversation reverted to technicalities of sport, full of terms and phrases unintelligible to Harvey; recounting feats with 'Empress' and 'Paradox', the deadly results of a 'treble A', or of 'treble-nesting slugs', and boasting of a 'right and left with No. 6'. Hugh appeared to forget all about his domestic calamity; only when his guests rose did he recur to it, and with an air of contemptuous impatience. But he made a sign to Rolfe, requesting him to stay, and at midnight the two friends sat alone together.

'Sibyl has gone to her mother's,' began Hugh in a changed voice. 'The poor girl takes it pluckily. It's a damnable thing, you know, for a woman to lose her rings and bracelets and so on—even such a woman as Sibyl. She tried to laugh it off, but I could see—we must buy them again, that's all. And that reminds me—what's your real opinion of Frothingham?'

Harvey laughed.

'When such a lot of people go about asking that question, it would make *me* rather uneasy if I had anything at stake.'

'They do? So it struck me. The fact is, we have a good deal at stake. The dowager swears by Frothingham. I believe every penny she has is in the "Britannia", one way or another.'

'It's a wide net,' said Rolfe musingly. 'The Britannia Loan, Assurance, Investment, and Banking Company, Limited. Very good name, I've often thought.'

'Yes; but, look here, you don't seriously doubt—'

'My opinion is worthless. I know no more of finance than of the Cabala. Frothingham personally I rather like, and that's all I can say.'

'The fact is, I have been thinking of putting some of my own—yet I don't think I shall. We're going away for the winter. Sibyl wants to give up the house, and I think she's right. For people like us, it's mere foolery to worry with a house and a lot of servants. We're neither of us cut out for that kind of thing. Sibyl hates housekeeping. Well, you can't expect a woman like her to manage a pack of thieving, lying, lazy servants. The housekeeper idea hasn't been a conspicuous success, you see, and there's nothing for it but hotel or boarding-house.'

'If you remember,' said Rolfe, 'I hinted something of the kind a year ago.'

'Yes; but—well, you know, when people marry they generally look for a certain natural consequence. If we have no children,

it'll be all right.'

Rolfe meditated for a moment.

'You remember that fellow Wager—the man you met at Abbott's? His wife died a year ago, and now he has bolted, leaving his two children in a lodging-house.'

'What a damned scoundrel!' cried Hugh, with a note of honest indignation.

'Well, yes; but there's something to be said for him. It's a natural revolt against domestic bondage. Of course, as things are, someone else has to bear the bother and expense; but that's only our state of barbarism. A widower with two young children and no income—imagine the position. Of course, he ought to be able to get rid of them in some legitimate way—state institution—anything you like that answers to reason.'

'I don't know whether it would work.'

'Some day it will. People talk such sentimental rubbish about children. I would have the parents know nothing about them till they're ten or twelve years old. They're a burden, a hindrance, a perpetual source of worry and misery. Most wives are sacrificed to the next generation—an outrageous absurdity. People snivel over the deaths of babies; I see nothing to grieve about. If a child dies, why, the probabilities are it *ought* to die; if it lives, it lives, and you get survival of the fittest. We don't want to choke the world with people, most of them rickety and wheezing; let us be healthy, and have breathing space.'

'I believe in *that*,' said Carnaby.

'You're going away, then. Where to?'

'That's the point,' replied Hugh, moving uneasily. 'You see, with Sibyl—. I have suggested Davos. Some people she knows are there—girls who go in for tobogganing, and have a good time. But Sibyl's afraid of the cold. I can't convince her that it's nothing to what we endure here in the beastliness of a London winter. She hates the thought of ice and snow and mountains. A great pity; it would do her no end of good. I suppose we must go to the Riviera.'

He shrugged his shoulders, and for a moment there was silence.

'By-the-bye,' he resumed, 'I have a letter from Miles, and you'd like to see it.'

From a pile of letters on the table he selected one written on two sheets of thin paper, and handed it to Rolfe. The writing was bold, the style vigorous, the matter fresh and interesting. Major Carnaby had no graces of expression; but all the more engrossing was his brief narrative of mountain warfare, declaring its truthfulness in every stroke of the pen.

'Fine fellow!' exclaimed Rolfe, when he had read to the end. 'Splendid fellow!'

'Isn't he! And he's seeing life.'

'That's where you ought to be, my boy,' remarked Rolfe, between puffs of tobacco.

'I dare say. No use thinking about it. Too late.'

'If I had a son,' pursued Harvey, smiling at the hypothesis, 'I

think I'd make a fighting man of him, or try to. At all events, he should go out somewhere, and beat the big British drum, one way or another. I believe it's our only hope. We're rotting at home—some of us sunk in barbarism, some coddling themselves in over-refinement. What's the use of preaching peace and civilisation, when we know that England's just beginning her big fight—the fight that will put all history into the shade! We have to lead the world; it's our destiny; and we must do it by breaking heads. That's the nature of the human animal, and will be for ages to come.'

Carnaby nodded assent.

'If we were all like your brother,' Rolfe went on. 'I'm glad he's fighting in India, and not in Africa. I can't love the buccaneering shopkeeper, the whisky-distiller with a rifle—ugh!'

'I hate that kind of thing. The gold grubbers and diamond bagmen! But it's part of the march onward. We must have money, you know.'

The speaker's forehead wrinkled, and again he moved uneasily. Rolfe regarded him with a reflective air.

'That man you saw here tonight,' Carnaby went on, 'the short, thick fellow—his name is Dando—he's just come back from Queensland. I don't quite know what he's been doing, but he evidently knows a good deal about mines. He says he has invented a new process for getting gold out of ore—I don't know anything about it. In the early days of mining, he says, no end of valuable stuff was abandoned, because they couldn't smelt it. Something

about pyrites—I have a vague recollection of old chemistry lessons. Dando wants to start smelting works for his new process, somewhere in North Queensland.'

'And wants money, I dare say,' remarked the listener, with a twinkle of the eye.

'I suppose so. It was Carton that brought him here for the first time, a week ago. *Might* be worth thinking about, you know.'

'I have no opinion. My profound ignorance of everything keeps me in a state of perpetual scepticism. It has its advantages, I dare say.'

'You're very conservative, Rolfe, in your finance.'

'Very.'

'Quite right, no doubt. Could you join us at Nice or some such place?'

'Why, I rather thought of sticking to my books. But if the fogs are very bad—'

'And you would seriously advise us to give up the house?'

'My dear fellow, how can you hesitate? Your wife is quite right; there's not one good word to be said for the ordinary life of an English household. Flee from it! Live anywhere and anyhow, but don't keep house in England. Wherever I go, it's the same cry: domestic life is played out. There isn't a servant to be had—unless you're a Duke and breed them on your own estate. All ordinary housekeepers are at the mercy of the filth and insolence of a draggle-tailed, novelette-reading feminine democracy. Before very long we shall train an army of

menservants, and send the women to the devil.'

'Queer thing, Rolfe,' put in his friend, with a laugh; 'I've noticed it of late, you're getting to be a regular woman-hater.'

'Not a bit of it. I hate a dirty, lying, incapable creature, that's all, whether man or woman. No doubt they're more common in petticoats.'

'Been to the Frothinghams' lately?'

'No.'

'I used to think you were there rather often.'

Rolfe gave a sort of grunt, and kept silence.

'To my mind,' pursued the other, 'the best thing about Alma is that she appreciates my wife. She has really a great admiration for Sibyl; no sham about it, I'm sure. I don't pretend to know much about women, but I fancy that kind of thing isn't common —real friendship and admiration between them. People always say so, at all events.'

'I take refuge once more,' said Rolfe, 'in my fathomless ignorance.'

He rose from his chair, and sat down again on a corner of the table. Carnaby stood up, threw his arms above his head, and yawned with animal vehemence, the expression of an intolerable ennui.

'There's something damnably wrong with us all—that's the one thing certain.'

'Idleness, for one thing,' said Rolfe.

'Yes. And I'm too old to do anything. Why didn't I follow

Miles into the army? I think I was more cut out for that than for anything else. I often feel I should like to go to South Africa and get up a little war of my own.'

Rolfe shouted with laughter.

'Not half a bad idea, and the easiest thing in the world, no doubt.'

'Nigger-hunting; a superior big game.'

'There's more than that to do in South Africa,' said Harvey. 'I was looking at a map in Stanford's window the other day, and it amused me. Who believes for a moment that England will remain satisfied with bits here and there? We have to swallow the whole, of course. We shall go on fighting and annexing, until—until the decline and fall of the British Empire. That hasn't begun yet. Some of us are so over-civilised that it makes a reaction of wholesome barbarism in the rest. We shall fight like blazes in the twentieth century. It's the only thing that keeps Englishmen sound; commercialism is their curse. Happily, no sooner do they get fat than they kick, and somebody's shin suffers; then they fight off the excessive flesh. War is England's Banting.'

'You'd better not talk like that to Sibyl.'

'Why, frankly, old man, I think that's your mistake. But you'll tell me, and rightly enough, to mind my own business.'

'Nonsense. What do you mean exactly? You think I ought to —'

Hugh hesitated, with an air of uneasiness.

'Well,' pursued his friend cautiously, 'do you think it's right to

suppress your natural instincts? Mightn't it give her a new interest in life if she came round a little to your point of view?'

'Queer thing, how unlike we are, isn't it?' said Carnaby, with a sudden drop of his tone to amiable ingenuousness. 'But, you know; we get along together very well.'

'To be sure. Yet you are going to rust in the Riviera when you want to be on the Himalayas. Wouldn't it do your wife good to give up her books and her music for a while and taste fresh air?'

'I doubt if she's strong enough for it.'

'It would make her stronger. And here's a good opportunity. If you give up housekeeping (and housekeepers), why not reform your life altogether? Go and have a look at Australia.'

'Sibyl hates the sea.'

'She'd soon get over that. Seriously, you ought to think of it.'

Carnaby set his lips and for a moment hung his head.

'You're quite right. But—'

'A little pluck, old fellow.'

'I'll see what can be done. Have another whisky?'

They went out into the hall, where a dim light through coloured glass illumined a statue in terracotta, some huge engravings, the massive antlers of an elk, and furniture in carved oak.

'Queer feeling of emptiness,' said Carnaby, subduing his voice. 'I feel as if they'd carried off everything, and left bare walls. Sibyl couldn't stay in the place. Shall I whistle for a cab? By Jove! that reminds me, the whistle has gone; it happened to

be silver. A wedding present from that fool Benson, who broke his neck in a steeplechase three weeks after.' Harvey laughed, and stepped out into the watery fog.

CHAPTER 3

A cab crawling at the upper end of the terrace took him quickly home. He entered with his latch-key as a church clock tolled one.

It was a large house, within a few minutes' walk of Royal Oak Station. Having struck a match, and lit a candle which stood upon the hall table (indicating that he was the last who would enter tonight), Harvey put up the door-chain and turned the great key, then went quietly upstairs. His rooms were on the first floor. A tenancy of five years, with long absences, enabled him to regard this niche in a characterless suburb as in some sort his home; a familiar smell of books and tobacco welcomed him as he opened the door; remnants of a good fire kept the air warm, and dispersed a pleasant glow. On shelves which almost concealed the walls, stood a respectable collection of volumes, the lowest tier consisting largely of what secondhand booksellers, when invited to purchase, are wont to call 'tomb-stones' that is to say, old folios, of no great market value, though good brains and infinite labour went to the making of them. A great table, at one end of which was a tray with glasses and a water-bottle, occupied the middle of the floor; nearer the fireplace was a small writing-desk. For pictures little space could be found; but over the mantelpiece hung a fine water-colour, the flood of Tigris and the roofs of Bagdad burning in golden sunset. Harvey had bought it at the

gallery in Pall Mall not long ago; the work of a man of whom he knew nothing; it represented the farthest point of his own travels, and touched profoundly his vague historico-poetic sensibilities.

Three letters lay on the desk. As soon as he had lit his lamp, and exchanged his boots for slippers, he looked at the envelopes, and chose one addressed in a woman's hand. The writer was Mrs. Bennet Frothingham.

'We have only just heard, from Mrs. Carnaby, that you are back in town. *Could* you spare us tomorrow evening? It would be so nice of you. The quartet will give Beethoven's F minor, and Alma says it will be well done—the conceit of the child! We hope to have some interesting people What a shocking affair of poor Mrs. Carnaby's! I never knew anything *quite* so bad.—Our united kind regards.'

Harvey thrust out his lips, in an ambiguous expression, as he threw the sheet aside. He mused before opening the next letter. This proved to be of startling contents: a few lines scribbled informally, undated, without signature. A glance at the postmark discovered 'Liverpool'.

'The children are at my last address,—you know it. I can do no more for them. If the shabby Abbotts refuse—as I dare say they will—it wouldn't hurt you to keep them from the workhouse. But it's a devilish hard world, and they must take their chance.'

After a stare and a frown, Harvey woke the echoes with boisterous laughter. It was long since any passage in writing had so irresistibly tickled his sense of humour. Well, he must let

Abbott know of this. It might be as well, perhaps, if he called on Mrs. Abbott tomorrow, to remove any doubt that might remain in her mind. The fellow Wager being an old acquaintance of his, he could not get rid of a sense of far-off responsibility in this matter; though, happily, Wager's meeting with Mrs. Abbott's cousin, which led to marriage and misery, came about quite independently of him.

The last letter he opened without curiosity, but with quiet interest and pleasure. It was dated from Greystone; the writer, Basil Morton, had a place in his earliest memories, for, as neighbours' children, they had played together long before the grammar-school days which allied him with Hugh Carnaby.

'For aught I know,' began Morton, 'you may at this moment be drifting on the Euphrates, or pondering on the site of Alexandreia Eschate. It is you who owe me an account of yourself; nevertheless, I am prompted to write, if only to tell you that I have just got the complete set of the Byzantine Historians. A catalogue tempted me, and I did buy.'

And so on in the same strain, until, in speaking of nearer matters, his style grew simpler.

'Our elder boy begins to put me in a difficulty. As I told you, he has been brought up on the most orthodox lines of Anglicanism; his mother—best of mothers and best of wives, but in this respect atavistic—has had a free hand, and I don't see how it could have been otherwise. But now the lad begins to ask awkward questions, and to put me in a corner; the young

rascal is a vigorous dialectician and rationalist—odd result of such training. It becomes a serious question how I am to behave. I cannot bear to distress his mother, yet how can I tell him that I literally believe those quaint old fables? *Solvetur vivendo*, of course, like everything else, but just now it worries me a little. Generally I can see a pretty clear line of duty; here the duty is divided, with a vengeance. Have you any counsel?'

Harvey Rolfe mumbled impatiently; all domestic matters were a trial to his nerves. It seemed to him an act of unaccountable folly to marry a woman from whom one differed diametrically on subjects that lay at the root of life; and of children he could hardly bring himself to think at all, so exasperating the complication they introduced into social problems which defied common-sense. He disliked children; fled the sight and the sound of them in most cases, and, when this was not possible, regarded them with apprehension, anxiety, weariness, anything but interest. In the perplexity that had come upon him, Basil Morton seemed to have nothing more than his deserts. 'Best of mothers and of wives', forsooth! An excellent housekeeper, no doubt, but what shadow of qualification for wifehood and motherhood in this year 1886? The whole question was disgusting to a rational man—especially to that vigorous example of the class, by name Harvey Rolfe.

Late as it was, he did not care to go to bed. This morning he had brought home a batch of books from the London Library, and he began to turn them over, with the pleasure of anticipation.

Not seldom of late had Harvey flattered himself on the growth of intellectual gusto which proceeded in him together with a perceptible decline of baser appetites, so long his torment and his hindrance. His age was now seven and thirty; at forty he might hope to have utterly trodden under foot the instincts at war with mental calm. He saw before him long years of congenial fellowship, of bracing travel, of well-directed studiousness. Let problems of sex and society go hang! He had found a better way.

On looking back over his life, how improbable it seemed, this happy issue out of crudity, turbulence, lack of purpose, weakness, insincerity, ignorance. First and foremost he had to thank good old Dr Harvey, of Greystone; then, his sister, sleeping in her grave under the old chimes she loved; then, surely himself, that seed of good within him which had survived all adverse influences—watched, surely, by his unconscious self, guarded long, and now deliberately nurtured. Might he not think well of himself.

His library, though for the most part the purchase of late years, contained books which reminded him of every period of his life. Up yonder, on the top shelf, were two score volumes which had belonged to his father, the share that fell to him when he and his sister made the ordained division: scientific treatises out of date, an old magazine, old books of travel. Strange that, in his times of folly, he had not sold these as burdensome rubbish; he was very glad now, when love and reverence for things gone by began to take hold upon him. There, at the same height, stood

a rank of school-books preserved for him by his sister till she died; beside them, medical works, relics of his abortive study when he was neither boy nor man. Descending, the eye fell upon yellow and green covers, dozens of French novels, acquired at any time from the year of his majority up to the other day; in the mass, they reminded him of a frothy season, when he boasted a cheap Gallicism, and sneered at all things English. A sprinkling of miscellaneous literature accounted for ten years or more when he cared little to collect books, when the senses raged in him, and only by miracle failed to hurl him down many a steep place. Last came the serious acquisitions, the bulk of his library: solid and expensive works—historians, archaeologists, travellers, with noble volumes of engravings, and unwieldy tomes of antique lore. Little enough of all this had Rolfe digested, but more and more he loved to have erudition within his reach. He began to lack room for comely storage; already a large bookcase had intruded into his bedroom. If he continued to purchase, he must needs house himself more amply; yet he dreaded the thought of a removal.

He knew enough and to spare of life in lodgings. His experience began when he came up as a lad to Guy's Hospital, when all lodgings in London shone with the glorious light of liberty. It took a wider scope when, having grasped his little patrimony, he threw physic to the dogs, and lived as a gentleman at large. In those days he grew familiar with many kinds of 'apartments' and their nomadic denizens. Having wasted his substance, he found refuge in the office of an emigration agent,

where, by slow degrees, he proved himself worth a couple of hundred pounds per annum. This was the 'business' to which Hugh Carnaby vaguely referred when people questioned him concerning his friend's history.

Had he possessed the commercial spirit, Harvey might have made his position in this office much more lucrative. Entering nominally as a clerk, he undertook from the first a variety of duties which could only be discharged by a man of special abilities; for instance, the literary revision of seductive pamphlets and broadsheets issued by his employer to the public contemplating emigration. These advertisements he presently composed, and, from the point of view of effectiveness, did it remarkably well. How far such work might be worthy of an honest man, was another question, which for several years scarcely troubled his conscience. Before long a use was found for his slender medical attainments; it became one of his functions to answer persons who visited the office for information as to the climatic features of this or that new country, and their physical fitness for going out as colonists. Of course, there was demanded of him a radical unscrupulousness, and often enough he proved equal to the occasion; but as time went on, bringing slow development of brain and character, he found these personal interviews anything but agreeable. He had constantly before him the spectacle of human misery and defeat, now and then in such dread forms that his heart sank and his tongue refused to lie. When disgust made him contemplate the possibility of finding

more honourable employment, the manifest difficulties deterred him.

He held the place for nearly ten years, living in the end so soberly and frugally that his two hundred pounds seemed a considerable income; it enabled him to spend his annual month of holiday in continental travel, which now had a significance very different from that of his truancies in France or Belgium before he began to earn a livelihood. Two deaths, a year's interval between them, released him from his office. Upon these events and their issue he had not counted; independence came to him as a great surprise, and on the path of self-knowledge he had far to travel before the significance of that and many another turning-point grew clear to his backward gaze.

Seeking for a comfortable abode, he discovered these rooms in Bayswater. They were to let furnished, the house being occupied by a widow not quite of the ordinary type of landlady, who entertained only bachelors, and was fairly conscientious in the discharge of her obligations. Six months later, during Harvey's absence abroad, this woman died, and on his return the house had already been stripped of furniture. For a moment he inclined to take a house of his own, but from this perilous experiment he was saved by an intimation that, if he were willing to supply himself with furniture and service, an incoming tenant would let him occupy his old quarters. Harvey grasped at the offer. His landlord was a man named Buncombe, a truss manufacturer, who had two children, and seemingly no

wife. The topmost storey Buncombe assigned to relatives of his own—a middle-aged woman, Mrs. Handover, with a sickly grownup son, who took some part in the truss business. For a few weeks Rolfe was waited upon by a charwoman, whom he paid extravagantly for a maximum of dirt and discomfort; then the unsatisfactory person fell ill, and, whilst cursing his difficulties, Harvey was surprised by a visit from Mrs. Handover, who made an unexpected suggestion—would Mr. Rolfe accept her services in lieu of the charwoman's, paying her whatever he had been accustomed to give? The proposal startled him. Mrs. Handover seemed to belong pretty much to his own rank of life; he was appalled at the thought of bidding her scrub floors and wash plates; and indeed it had begun to dawn upon him that, for a man with more than nine hundred a year, he was living in a needlessly uncomfortable way. On his reply that he thought of removing, Mrs. Handover fell into profound depression, and began to disclose her history. Very early in life she had married a man much beneath her in station, with the natural result. After some years of quarrelling, which culminated in personal violence on her husband's part, she obtained a judicial separation. For a long time the man had ceased to send her money, and indeed he was become a vagabond pauper, from whom nothing could be obtained; she depended upon her son, and on the kindness of Buncombe, who asked no rent. If she could earn a little money by work, she would be much happier, and with tremulous hope she had taken this step of appealing to her neighbour in the house.

Harvey could not resist these representations. When the new arrangement had been in operation for a week or so, Harvey began to reflect upon Mrs. Handover's personal narrative, and in some respects to modify his first impulsive judgment thereon. It seemed to him not impossible that Mr. Handover's present condition of vagabond pauper might be traceable to his marriage with a woman who had never learnt the elements of domestic duty. Thoroughly well-meaning, Mrs. Handover was the most incompetent of housewives. Yet such was Harvey Rolfe's delicacy, and so intense his moral cowardice, that year after year he bore with Mrs. Handover's defects, and paid her with a smile the wages of two first-rate servants. Dust lay thick about him; he had grown accustomed to it, as to many another form of sluttishness. After all, he possessed a quiet retreat for studious hours, and a tolerable sleeping-place, with the advantage of having his correspondence forwarded to him when he chose to wander. To be sure, it was not final; one would not wish to grow old and die amid such surroundings; sooner or later, circumstance would prompt the desirable change. Circumstance, at this stage of his career, was Harvey's god; he waited upon its direction with an air of wisdom, of mature philosophy.

Of his landlord, Buncombe, he gradually learnt all that he cared to know. The moment came when Buncombe grew confidential, and he, too, had a matrimonial history to disclose. Poverty played no part in it; his business flourished, and Mrs. Buncombe, throughout a cohabitation of five years, made no

complaint of her lot. All at once—so asserted Buncombe—the lady began to talk of dullness; for a few months she moped, then of a sudden left home, and in a day or two announced by letter that she had taken a place as barmaid at a music-hall. There followed an interview between husband and wife, with the result, said Buncombe, that they parted the best of friends, but with an understanding that Mrs. Buncombe should be free to follow her own walk in life, with a moderate allowance to supplement what she could earn. That was five years ago. Mrs. Buncombe now sang at second-rate halls, and enjoyed a certain popularity, which seemed to her an ample justification of the independence she had claimed. She was just thirty, tolerably good-looking, and full of the enjoyment of life. Her children, originally left in the care of her mother, whom Buncombe supported, were now looked after by the two servants of the house, and Buncombe seemed to have no conscientious troubles on that score; to Harvey Rolfe's eye it was plain that the brother and sister were growing up as vicious little savages, but he permitted himself no remark on the subject.

After a few conversations, he gained an inkling of Buncombe's motive in taking a house so much larger than he needed. This magnificence was meant as an attraction to the roaming wife, whom, it was clear, Buncombe both wished and hoped to welcome back before very long. She did occasionally visit the house, though only for an hour or two; just to show, said Buncombe, that there was no ill-feeling. On his part, evidently, there was none whatever. An easy-going, simple-minded fellow,

aged about forty, with a boyish good temper and no will to speak of, he seemed never to entertain a doubt of his wife's honesty, and in any case would probably have agreed, on the least persuasion, to let bygones be bygones. He spoke rather proudly than otherwise of Mrs. Buncombe's artistic success.

'It isn't every woman could have done it, you know, Mr. Rolfe.'

'It is not,' Harvey assented.

Only those rooms were furnished which the little family used, five or six in all; two or three stood vacant, and served as playgrounds for the children in bad weather. Of his relatives at the top, Buncombe never spoke; he either did not know, or viewed with indifference, the fact that Mrs. Handover served his lodger in a menial capacity. About once a month he invited three or four male friends to a set dinner, and hilarity could be heard until long after midnight. Altogether it was a strange household, and, as he walked about the streets of the neighbourhood, Harvey often wondered what abnormalities even more striking might be concealed behind the meaningless uniformity of these heavily respectable housefronts. As a lodger he was content to dwell here; but sometimes by a freak of imagination he pictured himself a married man, imprisoned with wife and children amid these leagues of dreary, inhospitable brickwork, and a great horror fell upon him.

No. In his time he had run through follies innumerable, but from the supreme folly of hampering himself by marriage, a merciful fate had guarded him. It was probably the most

remarkable fact of his life; it heightened his self-esteem, and appeared to warrant him in the assurance that a destiny so protective would round the close of his days with tranquillity and content.

Upon this thought he lay down to rest. For half an hour Basil Morton's letter had occupied his mind: he had tried to think out the problem it set forth, not to leave his friend quite unanswered; but weariness prevailed, and with it the old mood of self-congratulation.

Next morning the weather was fine; that is to say, one could read without artificial light, and no rain fell, and far above the house-tops appeared a bluish glimmer, shot now and then with pale yellowness. Harvey decided to carry out his intention of calling upon Mrs. Abbott. She lived at Kilburn, and thither he drove shortly before twelve o'clock. He was admitted to a very cosy room, where, amid books and pictures, and by a large fire, the lady of the house sat reading. Whatever the cause, it seemed to him that his welcome fell short of cordiality, and he hastened to excuse himself for intruding at so early an hour.

'I received a letter last night which I thought you had better know of without delay.'

'From that man—Mr. Wager?' said Mrs. Abbott quickly and hopefully, her face brightening.

'Yes. But there's nothing satisfactory in it. He writes from Liverpool, and merely says that the children are at his lodgings, and he can do no more for them.'

Mrs. Abbott set her lips in an expression almost of sullenness. Rolfe had never seen her look thus, but it confirmed a suspicion which he had harboured concerning her. Why, he hardly knew—for she always presented a face of amiability, and talked in gentle, womanly tones—doubt as to Abbott's domestic felicity haunted his mind. Perhaps he now saw her, for the first time, as she commonly appeared to her husband—slightly peevish, unwilling to be disturbed, impatient when things did not run smoothly.

'You saw my husband yesterday?' was her next remark, not very graciously uttered.

'We met in the street last night—before I got Wager's letter. He was suffering horribly from neuralgia.'

Harvey could not forbear to add this detail, but he softened his voice and smiled.

'I don't wonder at it,' returned the lady; 'he takes no care of himself.'

Harvey glanced about the room. Its furnishing might be called luxurious, and the same standard of comfort prevailed through the house. Considering that Edgar Abbott, as Rolfe knew, married on small means, and that he had toiled unremittingly to support a home in which he could seldom enjoy an hour's leisure, there seemed no difficulty in explaining this neglect of his own health. It struck the visitor that Mrs. Abbott might have taken such considerations into account, and have spoken of the good fellow more sympathetically. In truth, Harvey did not quite like Mrs. Abbott. Her age was about seven and twenty. She came

of poor folk, and had been a high-school teacher; very clever and successful, it was said, and Harvey could believe it. Her features were regular, and did not lack sweetness; yet, unless an observer were mistaken, the last year or two had emphasised a certain air of conscious superiority, perchance originating in the schoolroom. She had had one child; it struggled through a few months of sickly life, and died of convulsions during its mother's absence at a garden-party. To all appearances, her grief at the loss betokened tenderest feeling. When, in half a year's time, she again came forth into the world, a change was noted; her character seemed to have developed a new energy, she exhibited wider interests, and stepped from the background to become a leader in the little circle of her acquaintances.

'Have you read this?' asked his hostess abruptly, holding up to him a French volume, Ribot's *L'Heredite Psychologique*.

'No. That kind of thing doesn't interest me much.'

'Indeed! I find it *intensely* interesting.'

Harvey rose; he was in no mood for this kind of small-talk. But no sooner had he quitted his chair, than Mrs. Abbott threw her book aside, and spoke in another tone, seriously, though still with a perceptible accent of annoyance.

'Of course that man's children are here, and I suppose it is our duty to provide for them till some other arrangement is made. But I think we ought to put the matter in the hands of the police. Don't you, Mr Rolfe?'

'I'm afraid there's small chance of making their father support

them. He is certainly out of England by now, and won't easily be caught.'

'The worst of it is, they are anything but *nice* children. What could one expect with such a father? Since their poor mother died, they have been in the hands of horrible people—low-class landladies, no doubt; their talk shocks me. The last amusement they had, was to be taken by somebody to Tussaud's, and now they can talk of nothing but "the hunted murderer"—one sees it on the walls, you know; and they play at being murderer and policeman, one trying to escape the other. Pretty play for children of five and seven, isn't it?'

Rolfe made a gesture of disgust.

'I know the poor things can't help it,' pursued Mrs. Abbott, with softer feeling, 'but it turns me against them. From seeing so little of their father, they have even come to talk with a vulgar pronunciation, like children out of the streets almost. It's dreadful! When I think of my cousin—such a sweet, good girl, and *these* her children—oh, it's horrible!'

'They are very young,' said Harvey, in a low voice, perturbed in spite of himself. 'With good training–'

'Yes, of course we must put them in good hands somewhere.'

Plainly it had never occurred to Mrs. Abbott that such a task as this might, even temporarily, be undertaken by herself; her one desire was to get rid of the luckless brats, that their vulgarity might not pain her, and the care of them encumber her polite leisure.

After again excusing himself for this call, and hearing his apology this time more graciously received, Harvey withdrew from the cosy study, and left Mrs. Abbott to her *Heredite Psychologique*. On his way to lunch in town, he thought of the overworn journalist groaning with neuralgia, and wondered how Mrs. Abbott would relish a removal to the town of Waterbury.

CHAPTER 4

Uncertain to the last moment, Harvey did at length hurry into his dress clothes, and start for Fitzjohn Avenue. He had little mind for the semi-fashionable crowd and the amateur music, but he could not answer Mrs. Bennet Frothingham with any valid excuse, and, after all, she meant kindly towards him. Why he enjoyed so much of this lady's favour it was not easy to understand; intellectual sympathy there could be none between them, and as for personal liking, on his side it did not go beyond that naturally excited by a good-natured, feather-brained, rather pretty woman, whose sprightliness never passed the limits of decorum, and who seemed to have better qualities than found scope in her butterfly existence. Perhaps he amused her, being so unlike the kind of man she was accustomed to see. His acquaintance with the family dated from their social palingenesis, when, after obscure prosperity in a southern suburb, they fluttered to the northern heights, and were observed of the paragraphists. Long before that, Bennet Frothingham had been known in the money-market; it was the 'Britannia'—Loan, Assurance, Investment, and Banking Company, Limited—that made him nationally prominent, and gave an opportunity to his wife (in second marriage) and his daughter (by the first). Three years ago, when Carnaby (already lured by the charms of Sibyl Larkfield) presented his friend Rolfe as 'the man who had been to

Bagdad', Alma Frothingham, not quite twenty-one, was studying at the Royal Academy of Music, and, according to her friends, promised to excel alike on the piano and the violin, having at the same time a 'really remarkable' contralto voice. Of late the young lady had abandoned singing, rarely used the pianoforte, and seemed satisfied to achieve distinction as a violinist. She had founded an Amateur Quartet Society, whose performances were frequently to be heard at the house in Fitzjohn Avenue.

Last winter Harvey had chanced to meet Alma and her stepmother at Leipzig, at a Gewandhaus concert. He was invited to go with them to hear the boys' motet at the Thomaskirche; and with this intercourse began the change in their relations from mere acquaintance to something like friendship. Through the following spring Rolfe was a familiar figure at the Frothinghams'; but this form of pleasure soon wearied him, and he was glad to escape from London in June. He knew the shadowy and intermittent temptation which beckoned him to that house; music had power over him, and he grew conscious of watching Alma Frothingham, her white little chin on the brown fiddle, with too exclusive an interest. When 'that fellow' Cyrus Redgrave, a millionaire, or something of the sort, began to attend these gatherings with a like assiduity, and to win more than his share of Miss Frothingham's conversation, Harvey felt a disquietude which happily took the form of disgust, and it was easy enough to pack his portmanteau.

Through the babble of many voices in many keys, talk

mingling with laughter more or less melodiously subdued, he made his way up the great staircase. As he neared the landing, there sounded the shrill squeak of a violin and a 'cello's deep harmonic growl. His hostess, small, slender, fair, and not yet forty, a jewel-flash upon her throat and in the tiara above her smooth low forehead, took a step forward to greet him.

'Really? How delightful! I shot at a venture, and it was a hit after all!'

'They are just beginning?'

'The quartet—yes. Herr Wilenski has promised to play afterwards.'

He moved on, crossed a small drawing-room, entered the larger room sacred to music, and reached a seat in the nick of time. Miss Frothingham, the violin against her shoulder, was casting a final glance at the assembly, the glance which could convey a noble severity when it did not forthwith impose silence. A moment's perfect stillness, and the quartet began. There were two ladies, two men. Miss Frothingham played the first violin, Mr. AEneas Piper the second; the 'cello was in the hands of Herr Gassner, and the viola yielded its tones to Miss Dora Leach. Harvey knew them all, but had eyes only for one; in truth, only one rewarded observation. Miss Leach was a meagre blonde, whose form, face, and attitude enhanced by contrast the graces of the First Violin. Alma's countenance shone—possibly with the joy of the artist, perhaps only with gratified vanity. As she grew warm, the rosy blood mantled in her cheeks and flushed

her neck. Every muscle and nerve tense as the strings from which she struck music, she presently swayed forward on the points of her feet, and seemed to gain in stature, to become a more commanding type. Her features suggested neither force of intellect or originality of character: but they had beauty, and something more. She stood a fascination, an allurement, to the masculine sense. Harvey Rolfe had never so responded to this quality in the girl; the smile died from his face as he regarded her. Of her skill as a musician, he could form no judgment; but it seemed to him that she played very well, and he had heard her praised by people who understood the matter; for instance, Herr Wilenski, the virtuoso, from whom—in itself a great compliment—Alma was having lessons.

He averted his eyes, and began to seek for known faces among the audience. His host he could not discover; Mr. Frothingham must be away from home this evening; it was seldom he failed to attend Alma's concerts. But near the front sat Mrs. Ascott Larkfield, a dazzling figure, and, at some distance, her daughter Mrs. Carnaby, no shadow of gloom upon her handsome features. Hugh was not in sight; probably he felt in no mood for parties. Next to Mrs. Carnaby sat 'that fellow', Cyrus Redgrave, smiling as always, and surveying the people near him from under drooping brows, his head slightly bent. Mr. Redgrave had thin hair, but a robust moustache and a short peaked beard; his complexion was a rifle sallow; he lolled upon the chair, so that, at moments, his head all but brushed Mrs. Carnaby's shoulder.

Long before the close of the piece, Rolfe had ceased to listen, his thoughts drifting hither and hither on a turbid flood of emotion. During the last passage—*Allegro molto leggieramente*—he felt a movement round about him as a general relief, and when, on the last note, there broke forth (familiar ambiguity) sounds of pleasure and of applause, he at once stood up. But he had no intention of pressing into the throng that rapidly surrounded the musicians. Seeing that Mr. Redgrave had vacated his place, whilst Mrs. Carnaby remained seated, he stepped forward to speak with his friend's wife. She smiled up at him, and lifted a gloved finger.

'No! Please don't!'

'Not sit down by you?'

'Oh, certainly. But I saw condolence in your face, and I'm tired of it. Besides, it would be mere hypocrisy in you.'

Harvey gave a silent laugh. He had tried to understand Sibyl Carnaby, and at different times had come to very different conclusions regarding her. All women puzzled, and often disconcerted, him; with Sibyl he could never talk freely, knowing not whether to dislike or to admire her. He was not made on the pattern of Cyrus Redgrave, who probably viewed womankind with instinctive contempt, yet pleased all with the flattery of his homage.

'Well, then, we won't talk of it,' he said, noticing, in the same moment, that her person did not lack the adornment of jewels. Perhaps she had happened to be wearing these things on the

evening of the robbery; but Rolfe felt a conviction that, under any circumstances, Sibyl would not be without rings and bracelets.

'They certainly improve,' she remarked, indicating the quartet with the tip of her fan.

Her opinions were uttered with calm assurance, whatever the subject. An infinite self-esteem, so placid that it never suggested the vulgarity of conceit, shone in her large eyes and dwelt upon the beautiful curve of her lips. No face could be of purer outline, of less sensual suggestiveness; it wore at times an air of cold abstraction which was all but austerity. Rolfe imagined her the most selfish of women, thought her incapable of sentiment; yet how was her marriage to be accounted for, save by supposing that she fell in love with Hugh Carnaby? Such a woman might surely have sold herself to great advantage; and yet—odd incongruity—she did not impress one as socially ambitious. Her mother, the ever-youthful widow, sped from assembly to assembly, unable to live save in the whirl of fashion; not so Sibyl. Was she too proud, too self-centred? And what ambition did she nourish?

Or was it all an illusion of the senses? Suppose her a mere graven image, hollow, void. Call her merely a handsome woman, with the face of some remarkable ancestress, with just enough of warmth to be subdued by the vigorous passion of such a fine fellow as Carnaby. On the whole, Rolfe preferred this hypothesis. He had never heard her say anything really bright, or witty, or significant. But Hugh spoke of her fine qualities of head and heart; Alma Frothingham made her an exemplar, and would not

one woman see through the vacuous pretentiousness of another?

Involuntarily, he was gazing at her, trying to read her face.

'So you think we ought to go to Australia,' said Sibyl quietly, returning his look.

Hugh had repeated the conversation of last night; indiscreet, but natural. One could not suppose that Hugh kept many secrets from his wife.

'I?' He was confused. 'Oh, we were talking about the miseries of housekeeping–'

'I hate the name of those new countries.'

It was said smilingly, but with what expression in the word 'hate'!

'Vigorous cuttings from the old tree,' said Rolfe. 'There is England's future.'

'Perhaps so. At present they are barbarous, and I have a decided preference for civilisation. So have you, I am quite sure.'

Rolfe murmured his assent; whereupon Sibyl rose, just bent her head to him, and moved with graceful indolence away.

'Now she hates *me*,' Harvey said in his mind; 'and much I care!'

As a matter of courtesy, he thought it well to move in Miss Frothingham's direction. The crowd was thinning; without difficulty he approached to within a few yards of her, and there exchanged a word or two with the player of the viola, Miss Leach —a good, ingenuous creature, he had always thought; dangerous to no man's peace, but rather sentimental, and on that account to be avoided. Whilst talking, he heard a man's voice behind him,

pretentious, coarse, laying down the law in a musical discussion.

'No, no; Beethoven is not *Klaviermaszig*. His thoughts ate symphonic—they need the orchestra.... A string quartet is to a symphony what a delicate water-colour is to an oil-painting.... Oh, I don't care for his playing at all! he has not—what shall I call it?—*Sehnsucht*.'

Rolfe turned at length to look. A glance showed him a tall, bony young man, with a great deal of disorderly hair, and shaven face; harsh-featured, sensual, utterly lacking refinement. He inquired of Miss Leach who this might be, and learnt that the man's name was Felix Dymes.

'Isn't he a humbug?'

The young lady was pained and shocked.

'Oh, he is very clever,' she whispered. 'He has composed a most beautiful song—don't you know it?—"Margot". It's very likely that Topham may sing it at one of the Ballad Concerts.'

'Now I've offended *her*,' said Rolfe to himself. 'No matter.'

Seeing his opportunity, he took a few steps, and stood before Alma Frothingham. She received him very graciously, looking him straight in the face, with that amused smile which he could never interpret. Did it mean that she thought him 'good fun'? Had she discussed him with Sibyl Carnaby, and heard things of him that moved her mirth? Or was it pure good nature, the overflowing spirits of a vivacious girl?

'So good of you to come, Mr. Rolfe. And what did you think of us?'

This was characteristic. Alma delighted in praise, and never hesitated to ask for it. She hung eagerly upon his unready words.

'I only show my ignorance when I talk of music. Of course, I liked it.'

'Ah! then you didn't think it very good. I see–'

'But I *did*! Only my opinion is worthless.'

Alma looked at him, seemed to hesitate, laughed; and Harvey felt the conviction that, by absurd sincerity, he had damaged himself in the girl's eyes. What did it matter?

'I've been practising five hours a day,' said Alma, in rapid, ardent tones. Her voice was as pleasant to the ear as her face to look upon; richly feminine, a call to the emotions. 'That isn't bad, is it?'

'Tremendous energy!'

'Oh, music is my religion, you know. I often feel sorry I haven't to get my living by it; it's rather wretched to be only an amateur, don't you think?'

'Religion shouldn't be marketable,' joked Harvey.

'Oh, but you know what I mean. You are so critical, Mr. Rolfe. I've a good mind to ask Father to turn me out of house and home, with just half-a-crown. Then I might really do something. It would be splendid!– Oh, what do you think of that shameful affair in Hamilton Terrace? Mrs Carnaby takes it like an angel. They're going to give up housekeeping. Very sensible, I say. Everybody will do it before long. Why should we be plagued with private houses?'

'There are difficulties–'

'Of course there are, and men seem to enjoy pointing them out. They think it a crime if women hate the bother and misery of housekeeping.'

'I am not so conservative.'

He tried to meet her eyes, which were gleaming fixedly upon him; but his look fell, and turned as quickly from the wonderful white shoulders, the throbbing throat, the neck that showed its colour against swan's-down. To his profound annoyance, someone intervened—a lady bringing someone else to be introduced. Rolfe turned on his heel, and was face to face with Cyrus Redgrave. Nothing could be suaver or more civil than Mr. Redgrave's accost; he spoke like a polished gentleman, and, for aught Harvey knew, did not misrepresent himself. But Rolfe had a prejudice; he said as little as possible, and moved on.

In the smaller drawing-room he presently conversed with his hostess. Mrs. Frothingham's sanguine and buoyant temper seemed proof against fatigue; at home or as a guest she wore the same look of enjoyment; vexations, rivalries, responsibilities, left no trace upon her beaming countenance. Her affections were numberless; her ignorance, as an observer easily discovered, was vast and profound; but the desire to please, the tact of a 'gentlewoman, and thorough goodness of heart, appeared in all her sayings and doings; she was never offensive, never wholly ridiculous. Small-talk flowed from her with astonishing volubility, tone and subject dictated by the characteristics of the

person with whom she gossiped; yet her preference was for talk on homely topics, reminiscences of a time when she knew not luxury. 'You may not believe it,' she said to him in a moment of confidence, 'but I assure you I am a very good cook.' Rolfe did not quite credit the assurance, but he felt it not improbable that Mrs. Frothingham would accept a reverse of fortune with much practical philosophy; he could imagine her brightening a small house with the sweetness of her disposition, and falling to humble duties with sprightly goodwill. In this point she was a noteworthy exception among the prosperous women of his acquaintance.

'And what have you been doing?' she asked, not as a mere phrase of civility, but in a voice and which a look of genuine interest.

'Wasting my time, for the most part.'

'So you always say; but it can't be true. I know the kind of man who wastes his time, and you're not a bit like him. Nothing would gratify my curiosity more than to be able to watch you through a whole day. What did you think of the quartet?'

'Capital!'

'I'm sure they would make wonderful progress, and Alma does work so hard! I'm only afraid she may injure her health.'

'I see no sign of it yet.'

'She's certainly looking very well,' said Mrs. Frothingham, with manifest pride and affection. Of Alma she always spoke thus; nothing of the step-mother was ever observable.

'Mr. Frothingham is not here this evening!'

'I really don't know why,' replied the hostess, casting her eyes round the room. 'I quite expected him. But he has been dreadfully busy the last few weeks. And people do worry him so. Somebody called whilst we were at dinner, and refused to believe that Mr. Frothingham was not at home, and made quite a disturbance at the door—so they told me afterwards. I'm really quite nervous sometimes; crazy people are always wanting to see him—people who really ought not to be at large. No doubt they have had their troubles, poor things; and everybody thinks my husband can make them rich if only he chooses.'

A stout, important-looking man paused before Mrs. Frothingham, and spoke familiarly.

'I'm looking for B. F. Hasn't he put in an appearance yet?'

'I really hope he's enjoying himself somewhere else,' replied the hostess, rising, with a laugh. 'You leave him no peace.'

The stout man did not smile, but looked gravely for a moment at Rolfe, a stranger to him, and turned away.

Herr Wilenski, the virtuoso, was about to play something; the guests moved to seat themselves. Rolfe, however, preferred to remain in this room, where he could hear the music sufficiently well. He had not quite recovered from his chagrin at the interruption of his talk with Alma—a foolishness which made him impatient with himself. At the same time, he kept thinking of the 'crazy people' of whom Mrs. Frothingham spoke so lightly. A man such as Bennet Frothingham must become familiar with many forms of 'craziness', must himself be responsible for a good

deal of folly such as leads to downright aberration. Recalling Mrs. Frothingham's innocent curiosity concerning his own life, Harvey wished, in turn, that it were possible for him to watch and comprehend the business of a great finance-gambler through one whole day. What monstrous cruelties and mendacities might underlie the surface of this gay and melodious existence! Why was the stout man looking for 'B. F.'? Why did he turn away with such a set countenance? Why was that old bore at the club in such a fidget about the 'Britannia'?

Ha! There indeed sounded the violin! It needed no technical intelligence to distinguish between the playing of Wilenski and that of Alma Frothingham. Her religion, forsooth! Herr Wilenski, one might be sure, talked little enough about his 'religion'. What did Alma think as she listened? Was she overcome by the despair of the artist-soul struggling in its immaturity? Or did she smile, as ever, and congratulate herself on the five hours a day, and tell herself how soon she would reach perfection if there were real necessity for it? Hopeless to comprehend a woman. The senses warred upon the wit; seized by calenture, one saw through radiant mists.

He did not like the name 'Alma'. It had a theatrical sound, a suggestion of unreality.

The *maestro* knew his audience; he played but for a quarter of an hour, and the babble of tongues began again. Rolfe, sauntering before the admirable pictures which hung here as a mere symbol of wealth, heard a voice at his shoulder.

'I'm very thirsty. Will you take me down?'

His heart leapt with pleasure; Alma must have seen it in his eyes as he turned.

'What did Wilenski play?' he asked confusedly, as they moved towards the staircase.

'Something of Grieg's Mr. Wilbraham is going to sing "Wie bist du, meine Koniginn"—Brahms, you know. But you don't really care for music.'

'What an astounding accusation!'

'You don't really care for it. I've known that since we were at Leipzig.'

'I have never pretended to appreciate music as you do. That needs education, and something more. Some music wearies me, there's no denying it.'

'You like the Melody in F?'

'Yes, I do.'

Alma laughed, with superiority, but not ill-naturedly.

'And I think it detestable—but of course that doesn't matter. When I talk about books you think me a nincompoop.—That word used to amuse me so when I was a child. I remember laughing wildly whenever I saw or heard it. It *is* a funny word, isn't it?'

'The last I should apply to you,' said Rolfe in an absent undertone, as he caught a glimpse of the white teeth between her laughing lips.

They entered the supper-room, where as yet only a few people

were refreshing themselves. Provisions for a regiment spread before the gaze; delicacies innumerable invited the palate: this house was famed for its hospitable abundance. Alma, having asked her companion to get her some lemonade, talked awhile with two ladies who had begun to eat and drink in a serious spirit; waiting for her, Rolfe swallowed two glasses of wine to counteract a certain dullness and literalness which were wont to possess him in such company.

'I won't sit down,' she said. 'No, thanks, nothing to eat. I wonder where Papa is? Now, *he* enjoys music, though he is no musician. I think Papa a wonderful man. For years he has never had more than six hours sleep; and the work he does! He *can't* take a holiday; idleness makes him ill. We were down in Hampshire in July with some relatives of Mamma's—the quietest, sleepiest village—and Papa tried to spend a few days with us, but he had to take to flight; he would have perished of ennui.'

'Life at high pressure,' remarked Rolfe, as the least offensive comment he could make.

'Yes; and isn't it better than life at low?' exclaimed the girl, with animation. 'Most people go through existence without once exerting all the powers that are in them. I should hate to die with the thought that I hadn't really lived myself *out*. A year ago Papa took me into the City to see the offices of *Stock and Share*, just after the paper started. It didn't interest me very much; but I pretended it did, because Papa always takes an interest in *my*

affairs. But I found there was something else. After we had seen the printing machinery, and so on, he took me up to the top of the building into a small room, where there was just a table and a chair and a bookshelf; and he told me it was his first office, the room in which he had begun business thirty years ago. He has always kept it for his own, and just as it was—a fancy of his. There's no harm in my telling you; he's very proud of it, and so am I. That's energy!'

'Very interesting indeed.'

'I must go up again,' she added quickly. 'Oh, there's miss Beaufoy; do let me introduce you to Miss Beaufoy.'

She did so, unaware of Rolfe's groaning reluctance, and at once disappeared.

The supper-room began to fill. As soon as he could escape from Miss Beaufoy, who had a cavalier of her own, Harvey ascended the stairs again, and found a quiet corner, where he sat for a quarter of an hour undisturbed. Couples and groups paused to talk near him, and whenever he caught a sentence it was the merest chatter, meaningless repetition of commonplaces which, but for habit, must have been an unutterable weariness to the least intelligent of mortals. He was resolved never to come here again; never again to upset his peace of mind and sully his self-respect by grimacing amid such a crowd. He enjoyed human fellowship, timely merry-making; but to throng one's house with people for whom, with one or two exceptions, one cared not a snap of the fingers, what was this but sheer vulgarism? As

for Alma Frothingham, long ago he had made up his mind about her. Naturally, inevitably, she absorbed the vulgarity of her atmosphere. All she did was for effect: it was her cue to pose as the artist; she would keep it up through life, and breathe her last, amid perfumes, declaring that she had 'lived herself out'.

In his peevishness he noticed that women came up from supper with flushed cheeks and eyes unnaturally lustrous. What a grossly sensual life was masked by their airs and graces! He had half a mind to start tomorrow for the Syrian deserts.

'Do let us see you again soon,' said his hostess, as he took leave of her. 'Come in at five o'clock on Wednesday, that's our quiet day; only a few of our *real* friends. We shall be in town till Christmas, for certain.'

On the stairs he passed Mr. Felix Dymes, the composer of 'Margot'.

'Oh, it's the easiest thing in the world,' Mr. Dymes was saying, 'to compose a song that will be popular. I'll give you the recipe, and charge nothing You must have a sudden change to the minor, and a waltz refrain—that's all. Oh yes, there's money in it. I know a man who–'

Rolfe had never left the house in such a bad temper.

CHAPTER 5

When he awoke next morning, the weather was so gloomy that he seriously resumed his thought of getting away from London. Why, indeed, did he make London his home, when it would be easy to live in places vastly more interesting, and under a pure sky? He was a citizen of no city at all, and had less desire than ever to bind himself to a permanent habitation. All very well so long as he kept among his male friends, at the club and elsewhere; but this 'society' played the deuce with him, and he had not the common-sense, the force of resolve, to keep out of it altogether.

Well, he must go to his bank this morning, to draw cash.

It was about twelve o'clock when he stood at the counter, waiting with his cheque. The man before him talked with the teller.

'Do you know that the "Britannia" has shut up?'

'The bank? No!'

'But it has. I passed just now, and there were a lot of people standing about. Closed at half-past eleven, they say.

Harvey had a singular sensation, a tremor at his heart, a flutter of the pulses, a turning cold and hot; then he was quite calm again, and said to himself, 'Of course.' For a minute or two the quiet routine of the bank was suspended; the news passed from mouth to mouth; newcomers swelled a gossiping group in front of the counter, and Harvey listened. The general tone was

cynical; there sounded scarcely a note of indignation; no one present seemed to be personally affected by the disaster. The name of Bennet Frothingham was frequently pronounced, with unflattering comments.

'Somebody'll get it hot,' remarked one of the speakers; and the others laughed.

Rolfe, having transacted his business, walked away. It struck him that he would go and look at the closed bank, but he did not remember the address; a policeman directed him, and he walked on, the distance not being very great. At the end of the street in which the building stood, signs of the unusual became observable —the outskirts of a crowd, hanging loose in animated talk, as after some exciting occurrence; and before the bank itself was gathered a throng of men, respectability's silk hats mingling with the felts and caps of lower strata. Here and there a voice could be heard raised in anger, but the prevailing emotion seemed to be mere curiosity. The people who would suffer most from the collapse of this high-sounding enterprise could not reach the scene of calamity at half an hour's notice; they were dwellers in many parts of the British Isles, strangers most of them to London city, with but a vague mental picture of the local habitation of the Britannia Loan, Assurance, Investment, and Banking Company, Limited.

His arm was seized, and a voice said hoarsely in his ear—

'By God! too late.'

Hugh Carnaby had tumbled out of a cab, and saw his friend

in the same moment that he got near enough to perceive that the doors of the bank were shut.

'The thieves have lost no time,' he added, pale with fury.

'You had warning of it?'

Hugh pulled him a few yards away, and whispered–

'Bennet Frothingham shot himself last night.'

Again Harvey experienced that disagreeable heart-shock, with the alternation of hot and cold.

'Where? At home?'

'At the office of *Stock and Share*. Come farther away. It'll be in the evening papers directly, but I don't want those blackguards to hear me. I got up late this morning, and as I was having breakfast, Sibyl rushed in. She brought the news; had it from some friend of her mother's, a man connected somehow with *Stock and Share*. I thought they would shut up shop, and came to try and save Sibyl's balance—a couple of hundred, that's all—but they've swallowed it with the rest.'

'With the rest?'

Hugh laughed mockingly.

'Of hers. Devilish bad luck Sibyl has. It was just a toss-up that a good deal of my own wasn't in, one way or another.'

'Do you know any more about Frothingham?'

'No. Only the fact. Don't know when it was, or when it got known. We shall have it from the papers presently. I think every penny Mrs Larkfield had was in.'

'But it may not mean absolute ruin,' urged Harvey.

'I know what to think when B. F. commits suicide. We shall hear that some of the others have bolted. It'll be as clean a sweep as our housekeeper's little job.'

'I've had queer presentiments,' Harvey murmured.

'Why, damn it, so have I! So had lots of people. But nobody ever does anything till it's too late. I must get home again with my agreeable news. You'll be going to the club, I dare say? They'll have plenty to talk about for the next month or two.'

'Try to come round tonight to my place.'

'Perhaps. It depends on fifty chances. There's only one thing I know for certain—that I shall get out of this cursed country as soon as possible.'

They parted, and Harvey walked westward. He had no reason for hurry; as usual, the tumult of the world's business passed him by; he was merely a looker-on. It occurred to him that it might be a refreshing and a salutary change if for once he found himself involved in the anxieties to which other men were subject; this long exemption and security fostered a too exclusive regard of self, an inaptitude for sympathetic emotion, which he recognised as the defect of his character. This morning's events had startled him, and given a shock to his imagination; but already he viewed them and their consequences with a self-possession which differed little from unconcern. Bennet Frothingham, no doubt, had played a rascally game, foreseeing all along the issues of defeat. As to his wife and daughter, it would be strange if they were not provided for; suffer who might, they

would probably live on in material comfort, and nowadays that was the first consideration. He was surprised that their calamity left him so unmoved; it showed conclusively how artificial were his relations with these persons; in no sense did he belong to their world; for all his foolish flutterings, Alma Frothingham remained a stranger to him, alien from every point of view, personal, intellectual, social. And how many of the people who crowded to her concert last night would hear the news this morning with genuine distress on her account? Gratified envy would be the prevailing mood, with rancorous hostility in the minds of those who were losers by Bennet Frothingham's knavery or ill-fortune. Hugh Carnaby's position called for no lament; he had a sufficient income of his own, and would now easily overcome his wife's pernicious influence; with or without her, he would break away from a life of corrupting indolence, and somewhere beyond seas 'beat the British drum'—use his superabundant vitality as nature prompted.

After all, it promised to clear the air. These explosions were periodic, inevitable, wholesome. The Britannia Loan, &c, &c, &c, had run its pestilent course; exciting avarice, perturbing quiet industry with the passion of the gamester, inflating vulgar ambition, now at length scattering wreck and ruin. This is how mankind progresses. Harvey Rolfe felt glad that no theological or scientific dogma constrained him to a justification of the laws of life.

At lunchtime, newspaper boys began to yell. The earliest

placards roared in immense typography. In the Metropolitan Club, sheets moist from the press suddenly descended like a fall of snow. Rolfe stood by a window and read quietly. This first report told him little that he had not already learnt, but there were a few details of the suicide. Frothingham, it appeared, always visited the office of *Stock and Share* on the day before publication. Yesterday, as usual, he had looked in for half an hour at three o'clock; but unexpectedly he came again at seven in the evening, and for a third time at about eleven, when the printing of the paper was in full swing. 'It was supposed by the persons whom he then saw that Mr. Frothingham finally quitted the office; whether he actually left the building or not seems to remain uncertain. If so, he re-entered without being observed, which does not seem likely. Between two and three o'clock this morning, when *Stock and Share* was practically ready for distribution, a man employed on the premises is said, for some unexplained reason, to have ascended to the top floor of the building, and to have entered a room ordinarily unused. A gas-jet was burning, and the man was horrified to discover the dead body of Mr. Frothingham, at full length on the floor, in his hand a pistol. On the alarm being given, medical aid was at once summoned, and it became evident that death had taken place more than an hour previously. That no one heard the report of a pistol can be easily explained by the noise of the machinery below. The dead man's face was placid. Very little blood had issued from the wound, and the shot must have been fired with

a remarkably steady hand.'

'A room on the top floor of the building, ordinarily unused–' What story was it that Alma Frothingham told last night, of her visit to the office of *Stock and Share*? Rolfe had not paid much attention to it at the time; now he recalled the anecdote, and was more impressed by its significance. That room, his first place of business, the scene of poor beginnings, Bennet Frothingham had chosen for his place of death. Perhaps he had long foreseen this possibility, had mused upon the dramatic fitness of such an end; for there was a strain of melancholy in the man, legible on his countenance, perceptible in his private conversation. Just about the time when Alma laughingly told the story, her father must have been sitting in that upper room, thinking his last thoughts; or it might be that he lay already dead.

Later issues contained much fuller reports. The man who found the body had explained his behaviour in going up to the unused room, and it relieved the dark affair with a touch of comedy. Before coming to work, he had quarrelled with his wife, and, rather than go home in the early hours of the morning, he hit upon the idea of finding a sleeping-place here on the premises, to which he could slink unnoticed. 'It's little enough sleep I get in my own house,' was his remark to the reporter who won his confidence. Clubmen were hilarious over this incident, speculating as to the result of its publication on the indiscreet man's domestic troubles.

It was not unremarked that a long time elapsed between the

discovery of the suicide and its being heard of by anyone who had an interest in making it generally known. With the exception of two persons, all who were engaged upon the production of the newspaper went home in complete ignorance of what had happened, so cautiously and successfully was the situation dealt with by the sub-editor and his informant. When, after an examination by the doctor, who had been summoned in all secrecy, it became necessary to communicate with the police, the employees had all gone away, and the printed sheets had been conveyed to the distributing agents. Naturally, the subeditor of *Stock and Share*' preserved a certain reticence in the matter; but one could hardly be mistaken in assuming that the directors of the Britannia Company—two or three of them, at all events—had an opportunity of surveying their position long before the hour when this momentous news got abroad.

With regard to the company's affairs, only conjecture could be as yet indulged in. In view of the immediate stoppage of business, it was pretty safe to surmise that alarming disclosures awaited the public. No one, of course, would be justified in prejudging the case against the unhappy man who, amid seemingly brilliant circumstances, had been driven to so desperate an act.

And so on, and so on, in one journal after another, in edition upon edition. Harvey Rolfe read them till he was weary, listened to the gossip of the club till he was nauseated. He went home at length with a headache, and, having carefully avoided contact with Buncombe or Mrs Handover, made an effort to absorb

himself in a volume of Gregorovius, which was at present his study. The attempt was futile. Talk still seemed to buzz about him; his temples throbbed; his thoughts wandered far and wide. Driven to bed long before his accustomed hour, he heard raucous voices rending the night, bellowing in hideous antiphony from this side of the street and the other, as the vendors of a halfpenny paper made the most of what Providence had sent them.

The first thing after breakfast next morning, he posted a line to Hugh Carnaby. 'Is there any way in which I can be of use to you? If you think not, I shall be off tomorrow to Greystone for a few days. I feel as if we were all being swept into a ghastly whirlpool which roars over the bottomless pit. Of course, I will stay if I can do anything, no matter what. Otherwise, address for a week to Basil Morton's.'

This he dropped into the nearest pillar-box, and, as the sun was endeavouring to shine, he walked the length of the street, a pretence of exercise. On his way back he was preceded by a telegraph boy, who stopped at Buncombe's front door, and awoke the echoes with a twofold double knock. Before the servant could open, Harvey was on the steps.

'What name?'

'Rolfe.'

'For me, then.'

He tore open the envelope.

'Could you come at once? Something has happened.—Abbott.'

The boy wished to know if there would be a reply. Harvey shook his head, and stepped into the hall, where he stood reflecting. What could have happened that Edgar Abbott should summon him? Had his wife run away?– Ah, to be sure, it must have something to do with Wager's children—an accident, a death. But why send for *him*?

He made a little change in his dress, and drove forthwith to Kilburn. As his cab stopped, he saw that all the blinds in the front of the Abbotts' house were drawn down. Death, then, obviously. It was with a painful shaking of the nerves that he knocked for admission.

'Mr. Abbott–?'

The servant girl, who had a long-drawn face, said nothing, but left him where he stood, returning in a moment with a mumbled 'Will you please to come in, sir?' He followed her to the room in which he had talked with Mrs. Abbott two days ago; and she it was who again received him. Her back to the light, she stood motionless.

'Your husband has telegraphed for me–'

A voice that struggled with a sob made thick reply–

'No—I—he is dead!'

The accent of that last monosyllable was heart-piercing. It seemed to Harvey as though the word were new-minted, so full it sounded of dreadful meaning.

'Dead?'

Mrs. Abbott moved, and he could see her face better. She must

have wept for hours.

'He has been taking morphia—he couldn't sleep well—and then his neuralgia. The girl found him this morning, at seven o'clock—there.'

She pointed to the couch.

'You mean that he had taken an overdose—by accident–'

'It *must* have been so. He had to work late—and then he must have lain down to sleep.'

'Why here?'

'A flood of anguish whelmed her. She uttered a long moan, all the more terrible for its subdual to a sound that could not pass beyond the room. Her struggle for self-command made her suffering only the more impressive, the more grievous to behold.'

'Mr. Rolfe, I sent for you because you are his old friend. I meant to tell you all the truth, as I know it. I *can't* tell it before strangers—in public! I *can't* let them know—the shame—the shame!'

Harvey's sympathy gave way to astonishment and strange surmise. Hurriedly he besought her not to reveal anything in her present distress; to wait till she could reflect calmly, see things in truer proportion. His embarrassment was heightened by an inability to identify this woman with the Mrs. Abbott he had known; the change in her self-presentment seemed as great and sudden as that in her circumstances. Face and voice, though scarce recognisable, had changed less than the soul of her—as Harvey imaged it. This entreaty she replied to with a steadiness,

a resolve, which left him no choice but to listen.

'I cannot, dare not, think that he did this knowingly. No! He was too brave for that. He would never have left me in that way—to my despair. But it was my fault that made him angry—no, not angry; he was never that with me, or never showed it. But I had behaved with such utter selfishness–'

Her misery refused to word itself. She sank down upon a chair and sobbed and moaned.

'Your grief exaggerates every little fault,' said Harvey.

'No—you must hear it all—then perhaps I can hide my shame from strangers. What use would it be if they knew? It alters nothing—it's only in my own heart. I have no right to pain you like this. I will tell you quietly. You know that he went to Waterbury, on business. Did he tell you?—it was to buy a share in a local newspaper. I, in my blindness and selfishness, disliked that. I wanted to live here; the thought of going to live in the country seemed unbearable. That Edgar was overworked and ill, seemed to me a trifle. Don't you remember how I spoke of it when you came here the other morning?—I can't understand myself. How could I think so, speak so!'

The listener said nothing.

'He did what he purposed—made a bargain, and came back to conclude the purchase by correspondence. But his money—the small capital he counted upon—was in "Britannia" shares; and you know what happened yesterday—yesterday, the very day when he went to sell the shares, thinking to do so without the

least difficulty.'

Harvey gave a grim nod.

'He came home, and I showed that I was glad–'

'No! You accuse yourself unreasonably.'

'I tell you the truth, as my miserable conscience knows it. I was crazy with selfishness and conceit. Rightly, he left me to my cowardly temper, and went out again, and was away for a long time. He came back to dinner, and then the suffering in his face all but taught me what I was doing. I wanted to ask him to forgive me—to comfort him for his loss; but pride kept me from it. I couldn't speak—I couldn't! After dinner he said he had a lot of work to do, and came into this room. At ten o'clock I sent him coffee. I wished to take it myself—O God! if only I had done so! I *wished* to take it, and speak to him, but still I couldn't. And I knew he was in torture; I saw at dinner that pain was racking him. But I kept away, and went to my own bed, and slept—whilst he was lying here.'

A rush of tears relieved her. Harvey felt his own eyes grow moist.

'It was only that he felt so worn out,' she pursued. 'I know how it was. The pain grew intolerable, and he went upstairs for his draught, and then—not having finished his work—he thought he would lie down on the sofa for a little; and so sleep overcame him. He never meant *this*. If I thought it, I couldn't live!'

'Undoubtedly you are right,' said Harvey, summoning an accent of conviction. 'I knew him very well, and he was not the

man to do that.'

'No? You are sure of it? You feel it impossible, Mr. Rolfe?'

'Quite impossible. There are men—oh, you may assure yourself that it was pure accident. Unfortunately, it happens so often.'

She hung on his words, leaning towards him, her eyes wide and lips parted.

'So often! I have seen so many cases, in the papers. And he was absent-minded. But what right have I to seek comfort for myself? Was I any less the cause of his death? But must I tell all this in public? Do you think I ought to?'

With comfortable sincerity Rolfe was able to maintain the needlessness of divulging anything beyond the state of Abbott's health and his pecuniary troubles.

'It isn't as if we had lived on ill terms with each other,' said the widow, with a sigh of gratitude. 'Anything but that. Until of late we never knew a difference, and the change that came was wholly my fault. I hadn't the honesty to speak out and say what was in my mind. I never openly opposed his wish to leave London. I pretended to agree to everything, pretended. He showed me all his reasons, put everything simply and plainly and kindly before me, and if I had said what I thought, I feel sure he would have given it up at once. It was in my own hands to decide one way or the other.'

'Why should you reproach yourself so with mere thoughts, of which he never became aware?'

'Oh, it was yesterday, when he came back from the City. He knew then that I was glad he couldn't carry out his purpose. He looked at me as he never had done before—a look of surprise and estrangement. I shall always see that look on his face.'

Harvey talked in the strain of solace, feeling how extraordinary was his position, and that of all men he had least fitness for such an office. It relieved him when, without undue abruptness, he could pass to the practical urgencies of the case. Were Wager's children still in the house? Alas! they were, and Mrs. Abbott knew not what to do about them.

'You can't think of anyone who would take them—for a day or two, even?'

Among her acquaintances there was not one of whom she could venture to ask such a service. 'People have such a dread of children.' Her sister was a governess in Ireland; other near relatives she had none. Edgar Abbott's mother, old and in feeble health, lived near Waterbury; how was the dreadful news to be conveyed to her?

Harvey bestirred himself. Here, at all events, was a call to active usefulness; he felt the privilege of money and leisure.

'Can you give me the name of any one at Waterbury who would be a fit person to break the news to Mrs. Abbott?'

Two names were mentioned, and he noted them.

'I will send telegrams at once to both.'

'You will say it was an accident–'

'That shall be made clear. As for the children, I think I can

have them taken away this morning. In the house where I live there is a decent woman who I dare say would be willing to look after them for the present. Will you leave this entirely in my hands?'

'I am ashamed—I don't know how to thank you.'

'No time shall be lost.' He rose. 'If Mrs. Handover will help us, I will bring her here; then I shall see you again. In any case, of course, I will come back—there will be other business. But you ought to have some friend—some lady.'

'There's *no* one I can ask.'

'Oh, but of all the people you know in London—surely!'

'They are not friends in that sense. I understand it now—fifty acquaintances; no friend.'

'But let me think—let me think. What was the name of that lady I met here, whose children you used to teach?'

'Mrs. Langland. She is very kind and friendly, but she lives at Gunnersbury—so far—and I couldn't trouble her.'

Upon one meeting and a short conversation, with subsequent remarks from Edgar Abbott, Rolfe had grounded a very favourable opinion of Mrs Langland. She dwelt clearly in his mind as 'a woman with no nonsense about her', likely to be of much helpfulness at a crisis such as the present. With difficulty he persuaded Mrs. Abbott to sit down and write a few lines, to be posted at once to Gunnersbury.

'I haven't dared to ask her to come. But I have said that I am alone.'

'Quite enough, I think, if she is at home.'

He took his leave, and drove back to Bayswater, posting the letter and despatching two telegrams on the way.

Of course, his visit to Greystone was given up.

CHAPTER 6

Hugh Carnaby was gratified by the verdict of *felo de se*. He applauded the jury for their most unexpected honesty. One had taken for granted the foolish tag about temporary madness, which would have been an insult to everybody's common-sense.

'It's a pity they no longer bury at four cross-roads, with a stake in his inside. (Where's that from? I remember it somehow.) The example wouldn't be bad.'

'You're rather early-Victorian,' replied Sibyl, who by this term was wont to signify barbarism or crudity in art, letters, morality, or social feeling. 'Besides, there's no merit in the verdict. It only means that the City jury is in a rage. Yet every one of them would be dishonest on as great a scale if they dared, or had the chance.'

'Something in that, I dare say,' conceded Hugh.

He admired his wife more than ever. Calm when she lost her trinkets, Sibyl exhibited no less self-command now that she was suddenly deprived of her whole fortune, about eight hundred a year. She had once remarked on the pleasantness and fitness of a wife's possessing in her own name an income equal to that of her husband; yet she resigned it without fuss. Indeed, Sibyl never made a fuss about anything. She intimated her wishes, and, as they were always possible of gratification, obtained them as a matter of course. Naturally, since their marriage, she and Hugh had lived to the full extent of their means. Carnaby

had reduced his capital by a couple of thousand pounds in preliminary expenses, and debt to the amount of two or three hundred was outstanding at the end of the first twelvemonth; but Sibyl manifested no alarm.

'We have been great fools,' she said, alluding to their faith in Bennet Frothingham.

'It's certain that *I* have,' replied her husband. 'I oughtn't to have let your mother have her way about that money. If there had been a proper settlement, you would have run no risk. Trustees couldn't have allowed such an investment.'

The same day Sibyl bought a fur for her neck which cost fifteen guineas. The weather was turning cold, and she had an account at the shop.

That afternoon, too, she went to see her mother, and on returning at six o'clock looked into the library, where Hugh sat by the fire, a book in his hand. Carnaby found the days very long just now. He shunned his clubs, the Metropolitan and the Ramblers', because of a fear that his connection with the 'Britannia' was generally known; to hear talk on the subject would make him savage. He was grievously perturbed in mind by his position and prospects; and want of exercise had begun to affect his health. As always, he greeted his wife's entrance with a smile, and rose to place a chair for her.

'Thanks, I won't sit down,' said Sibyl. 'You look comfortable.'

'Well?'

She looked at him reflectively, and said in balanced tones–

'I really think I can boast of having the most selfish mother in England.'

Hugh had his own opinion concerning Mrs. Ascott Larkfield, but would not have ventured to phrase it.

'How's that?'

'I never knew anyone who succeeded so well in thinking steadily and exclusively of herself. It irritates me to see her since this affair; I shan't go again. I really didn't know what a detestable temper she has. Her talk is outrageous. She doesn't behave like a lady. Could you believe that she has written a violent letter to Mrs. Frothingham—"speaking her mind", as she says? It's disgraceful!'

'I'm sorry she has done that. But it isn't every one that can bear injury as you do, Sibyl.'

'I supposed she could behave herself. She raises her voice, and uses outrageous words, and shows temper with the servants. I wouldn't spend a day in that house now on any account. And, after all, I find she hasn't lost much more than I have. She will be able to count on six hundred a year at least.'

Carnaby received the news with a brightened visage.

'Oh come! That's something.'

'She took very good care, you see, not to risk everything herself.'

'It's possible,' said Hugh, 'that she hadn't control of all her money.'

'Oh yes, she had. She let that fact escape in her fury—

congratulated herself on being so far prudent. Really, I never knew a more hateful woman.'

It was said without vehemence, with none of that raising of the voice which so offended her: a deliberate judgment, in carefully chosen words. Hugh tried to smile, but could not quite command his features; they expressed an uneasy thoughtfulness.

'Do you go out this evening?' he asked, after a pause.

'No; I'm rather tired and out of sorts. Dinner is at seven. I shall go to bed early.'

The police had as yet failed to get upon the track of the felonious housekeeper, known as Mrs. Maskell. Mrs. Carnaby's other servants still kept their places, protesting innocence, and doubtless afraid to leave lest they should incur suspicion. Domestic management was now In the hands of the cook. Sibyl always declared that she could not eat a dinner she had had the trouble of ordering, and she seemed unaffectedly to shrink from persons of the menial class, as though with physical repulsion. Perforce she submitted to having her hair done by her maid, but she found the necessity disagreeable.

The dinner was simple, but well cooked. Sibyl never ate with hearty appetite, and declined everything not of excellent quality; unlike women in general, she was fastidious about wine, yet took of it sparingly; liqueurs, too, she enjoyed, and very strong coffee. To a cigarette in the mouth of a woman she utterly objected; it offended her sense of the becoming, her delicate perception of propriety. When dining alone or with Hugh, she

dressed as carefully as for a ceremonious occasion. Any approach to personal disorder or neglect was inconceivable in Sibyl. Her husband had, by accident, heard her called 'the best-groomed woman in London'; he thought the praise well merited, and it flattered him.

At table they talked of things as remote as possible from their immediate concerns, and with the usual good humour. When he rose to open the door, Hugh said–

'Drawing-room or library?'

'Library. You would like to smoke.'

For ten minutes he sat with his arms on the table, his great well-shapen hands loosely clenched before him. He drank nothing. His gaze was fixed on a dish of fruit, and widened as if in a growing perplexity. Then he recovered himself, gave a snort, and went to join his wife.

Sibyl was reading a newspaper. Hugh lit his pipe in silence, and sat down opposite to her. Presently the newspaper dropped, and Sibyl's eyes were turned upon her husband with a smile.

'Well?'

'Well?'

They smiled at each other amiably.

'What do you suggest, Birdie?'

The fondling name was not very appropriate, and had not been used of late; Carnaby hit upon it in the honeymoon days, when he said that his wife was like some little lovely bird, which he, great coarse fellow, had captured and almost feared to touch lest

he should hurt it. Hugh had not much originality of thought, and less of expression.

'There are places, you know, where one lives very comfortably on very little,' said Sibyl.

'Yes; but it leads to nothing.'

'What *would* lead to anything?'

'Well, you see, I have capital, and some use ought to be made of it. Everybody nowadays goes in for some kind of business.'

She listened with interest, smiling, meditative.

'And a great many people come out of it—wishing they had done so before.'

'True,' said Carnaby; 'there's the difficulty. I had a letter from Dando this morning. He has got somebody to believe in his new smelting process—somebody in the City; talks of going out to Queensland shortly. Really—if I could be on the spot–'

He hesitated, timidly indicating his thoughts. Sibyl mused, and slowly shook her head.

'No; wait for reports.'

'Yes; but it's those who are in it first, you see.'

Sibyl seemed to forget the immediate subject, and to let her thoughts wander in pleasant directions. She spoke as if on a happy impulse.

'There's one place I think I should like—though I dread the voyage.'

'Where's that?'

'Honolulu.'

'What has put that into your head?'

'Oh, I have read about it. The climate is absolute perfection, and the life exquisite. How do you get there?'

'Across America, and then from San Francisco. It's anything but a cheap place, I believe.'

'Still, for a time. The thing is to get away, don't you think?'

'No doubt of that.—Honolulu—by Jove! it's an idea. I should like to see those islands myself.'

'And it isn't commonplace,' remarked Sibyl. 'One would go off with a certain eclat. Very different from starting for the Continent in the humdrum way.'

The more Carnaby thought of it, the better he liked this suggestion. That Sibyl should voluntarily propose so long a journey surprised and delighted him. The tropics were not his favourite region, and those islands of the Pacific offered no scope for profitable energy; he did not want to climb volcanoes, still less to lounge beneath bananas and breadfruit-trees, however pleasant such an escape from civilisation might seem at the first glance. A year of marriage, of idleness amid amusements, luxuries, extravagances, for which he had no taste, was bearing its natural result in masculine restiveness. His robust physique and temper, essentially combative, demanded liberty under conditions of rude or violent life. He was not likely to find a satisfying range in any mode of existence that would be shared by Sibyl. But he clutched at any chance of extensive travel. It might be necessary —it certainly would be—to make further incision into his capital,

and so diminish the annual return upon which he could count for the future; but when his income had already become ludicrously inadequate, what did that matter? The years of independence were past; somehow or other, he must make money. Everybody did it nowadays, and an 'opening' would of course present itself, something would of course 'turn up'.

He stretched his limbs in a sudden vast relief.

'Bravo! The idea is excellent. Shall we sell all this stuff?' waving a hand to indicate the furniture.

'Oh, I think not. Warehouse it.'

Hugh would have rejoiced to turn every chair and table into hard cash, not only for the money's sake, but for the sense of freedom that would follow; but he agreed, as always, to whatever his wife preferred. They talked with unwonted animation. A great atlas was opened, routes were fingered; half the earth's circumference vanished in a twinkling. Sibyl, hitherto mewed within the circle of European gaieties and relaxations, all at once let her fancy fly—tasted a new luxury in experiences from which she had shrunk.

'I'll order my outfit tomorrow. Very light things, I suppose? Who could advise me about that?'

Among a number of notes and letters which she wrote next day was one to Miss Frothingham. 'Dear Alma,' it began, and it ended with 'Yours affectionately'—just as usual.

'Could you possibly come here some day this week? I haven't written before, and haven't tried to see you, because I felt sure

you would rather be left alone. At the same time I feel sure that what has happened, though for a time it will sadden us both, cannot affect our friendship. I want to see you, as we are going away very soon, first of all to *Honolulu*. Appoint your own time; I will be here.'

By return of post came the black-edged answer, which began with 'Dearest Sibyl,' and closed with 'Ever affectionately'.

'I cannot tell you how relieved I am to get your kind letter. These dreadful days have made me ill, and one thing that increased my misery was the fear that I should never hear from you again. I should not have dared to write. How noble you are!—but then I always knew that. I cannot come tomorrow—you know why—but the next day I will be with you at three o'clock, if you don't tell me that the hour is inconvenient.'

They met at the appointed time. Mrs. Carnaby's fine sense of the becoming declared itself in dark array; her voice was tenderly subdued; the pressure of her hand, the softly lingering touch of her lips, conveyed a sympathy which perfect taste would not allow to become demonstrative. Alma could at first say nothing. The faint rose upon her cheek had vanished; her eyes were heavy, and lacked their vital gleam; her mouth, no longer mobile and provocative, trembled on the verge of sobs, pathetic, childlike. She hung her head, moved with a languid, diffident step, looked smaller and slighter, a fashionable garb of woe aiding the unhappy transformation.

'I oughtn't to have given you this trouble,' said Sibyl. 'But

perhaps you would rather see me here–'

'Yes—oh yes—it was much better–'

'Sit down, dear. We won't talk of wretched things, will we? If I could have been of any use to you–'

'I was so afraid you would never–'

'Oh, you know me better than that,' broke in Mrs. Carnaby, almost with cheerfulness, her countenance already throwing off the decorous shadow, like a cloak that had served its turn. 'I hope I am neither foolish nor worldly-minded.'

'Indeed, indeed not! You are goodness itself.'

'How is Mrs. Frothingham?'

The question was asked with infinite delicacy, head and body bent forward, eyes floatingly averted.

'Really ill, I'm afraid. She has fainted several times—yesterday was unconscious for nearly half an hour.'

Sibyl flinched. Mention of physical suffering affected her most disagreeably; she always shunned the proximity of people in ill health, and a possibility of infection struck her with panic.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. But it will pass over.'

'I hope so. I have done what I could.'

'I'm sure you have.'

'But it's so hard—when every word of comfort sounds heartless—when it's kindest to say nothing–'

'We won't talk about it, dear. You yourself—I can see what you have gone through. You must get away as soon as possible; this gloomy weather makes everything worse.'

She paused, and with an air of discreet interest awaited Alma's reply.

'Yes, I hope to get away. I shall see if it's possible.'

The girl's look strayed with a tired uncertainty; her hands never ceased to move and fidget; only the habits of good breeding kept her body still.

'Of course, it is too soon for you to have made plans.'

'It's so difficult,' replied Alma, her features more naturally expressive, her eyes a little brighter. 'You see, I am utterly dependent upon Mamma. I had better tell you at once—Mamma will have enough to live upon, however things turn out. She has money of her own; but of course I have nothing—nothing whatever. I think, most likely, Mamma will go to live with her sister, in the country, for a time. She couldn't bear to go on living in London, and she doesn't like life abroad. If only I could do as I wish!'

'I guess what that would be,' said the other, smiling gently.

'To take up music as a profession—yes. But I'm not ready for it.'

'Oh, half a year of serious study; with your decided talent, I should think you couldn't hesitate. You are a born musician.'

The words acted as a cordial. Alma roused herself, lifted her drooping head and smiled.

'That's the praise of a friend.'

'And the serious opinion of one not quite unfit to judge,' rejoined Sibyl, with her air of tranquil self-assertion. 'Besides,

we have agreed—haven't we?—that the impulse is everything. What you wish for, try for. Just now you have lost courage; you are not yourself. Wait till you recover your balance.'

'It isn't that I want to make a name, or anything of that sort,' said Alma, in a voice that was recovering its ordinary pitch and melody. 'I dare say I never should; I might just support myself, and that would be all. But I want to be free—I want to break away.'

'Of course!'

'I have been thinking that I shall beg Mamma to let me have just a small allowance, and go off by myself. I know people at Leipzig—the Gassners, you remember. I could live there on little enough, and work, and feel free. Of course, there's really no reason why I shouldn't. I have been feeling so bound and helpless; and now that nobody has any right to hinder me, you think it would be the wise thing?'

Alma had occasionally complained to her friend, as she did the other evening to Harvey Rolfe, that easy circumstances were not favourable to artistic ambition, but no very serious disquiet had ever declared itself in her ordinary talk. The phrases she now used, and the look that accompanied them, caused Sibyl some amusement. Only two years older than Alma, Mrs. Carnaby enjoyed a more than proportionate superiority in knowledge of the world; her education had been more steadily directed to that end, and her natural aptitude for the study was more pronounced. That she really liked Alma seemed as certain as that she felt

neither affection nor esteem for any other person of her own sex. Herself not much inclined to feminine friendship, Alma had from the first paid voluntary homage to Sibyl's intellectual claims, and thought it a privilege to be admitted to her intimacy; being persuaded, moreover, that in Sibyl, and in Sibyl alone, she found genuine appreciation of her musical talent. Sibyl's choice of a husband had secretly surprised and disappointed her, for Hugh Carnaby was not the type of man in whom she felt an interest, and he seemed to her totally unworthy of his good fortune; but this perplexity passed and was forgotten. She saw that Sibyl underwent no subjugation; nay, that the married woman did but perfect herself in those qualities of mind and mood whereby she had shone as a maiden. It was a combination of powers and virtues which appeared to Alma little short of the ideal in womanhood. The example influenced her developing character in ways she recognised, and in others of which she remained quite unconscious.

'I think you couldn't do better,' Mrs. Carnaby replied to the last question; 'provided that–'

She paused intentionally, with an air of soft solicitude, of bland wisdom.

'That's just what I wanted,' said Alma eagerly. 'Advise me—tell me just what you think.'

'You want to live alone, and to have done with all the silly conventionalities and proprieties—our old friend Mrs. Grundy, in fact.'

'That's it! You understand me perfectly, as you always do.'

'If it had been possible, we would have lived together.'

'Ah! how delightful! Don't speak of what can't be.'

'I was going to say,' pursued Sibyl thoughtfully, 'that you will meet with all sorts of little troubles and worries, which you have never had any experience of. For one thing, you know'—she leaned back, smiling, at ease—'people won't behave to you quite as you have been accustomed to expect. Money is very important even to a man; but to a woman it means more than you can imagine.'

'Oh, but I shan't be living among the kind of people–'

'No, no. Perhaps you don't quite understand me yet. It isn't the people you seek who matter, but the people that will seek *you*; and some of them will have very strange ideas—very strange indeed.'

Alma looked self-conscious, kept her eyes down, and at length nodded.

'Yes. I think I understand.'

'That's why I said "provided". You are not the ordinary girl, and you won't imagine that I feared for you; I know you too well. It's a question of being informed and on one's guard. I don't think there's anyone else who would talk to you like this. It doesn't offend you?'

'Sibyl!'

'Well, then, that's all right. Go into the world by all means, but go prepared—armed; the word isn't a bit too strong, as I know

perfectly. Some day, perhaps—but there's no need to talk about such things now.'

Alma kept a short silence, breaking it at length with note of exultation.

'I'm quite decided now. I wanted just to hear what you would say. I shan't wait a day longer than I can help. The old life is over for me. If only it had come about in some other way, I should be singing with rapture. I'm going to begin to live!'

She quivered with intensity of feeling, or with that excitement of the nerves which simulates intense feeling in certain natures. A flush stole to her cheek; her eyes were once more full of light. Sibyl regarded her observantly and with admiration.

'You never thought of the stage, Alma?'

'The stage? Acting?'

'No; I see you never did. And it wouldn't do—of course it wouldn't do. Something in your look—it just crossed my mind—but of course you have much greater things before you. It means hard work, and I'm only afraid you'll work yourself all but to death.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' replied the girl, with a little laugh of pride in this possibility.

'Well, I too am going away, you know.'

Alma's countenance fell, shame again crept over it, and she murmured, 'O Sibyl–!'

'Don't distress yourself the least on my account. That's an understood thing; no mention, no allusion, ever between us. And

the truth is that my position is just a little like yours: on the whole, I'm rather glad. Hugh wants desperately to get to the other end of the world, and I dare say it's the best thing I could do to go with him. No roughing it, of course; that isn't in my way.'

'I should think not, indeed!'

'Oh, I may rise to those heights, who knows! If the new sensation ever seemed worth the trouble.—In a year or two, we shall meet and compare notes. Don't expect long descriptive letters; I don't care to do indifferently what other people have done well and put into print—it's a waste of energy. But you are sure to have far more interesting and original things to tell about; it will read so piquantly, I'm sure, at Honolulu.'

They drank tea together, and talked, in all, for a couple of hours. When she rose to leave, Alma, but for her sombre drapings, was totally changed from the limp, woebegone, shrinking girl who had at first presented herself.

'There's no one else,' she said, 'who would have behaved to me so kindly and so nobly.'

'Nonsense! But *that's* nonsense, too. Let us admire each other; it does us good, and is so very pleasant.'

'I shall say goodbye to no one but you. Let people think and say of me what they like; I don't care a snap of the fingers. In deed, I *hate* people.'

'Both sexes impartially?'

It was a peculiarity of their intimate converse that they never talked of men, and a jest of this kind had novelty sufficient to

affect Alma with a slight confusion.

'Impartially—quite,' she answered.

'Do make an exception in favour of Hugh's friend, Mr. Rolfe. I abandon all the rest.'

Alma betrayed surprise.

'Strange! I really thought you didn't much like Mr. Rolfe,' she said, without any show of embarrassment.

'I didn't when I first knew him; but he grows upon one. I think him interesting; he isn't quite easy to understand.'

'Indeed he isn't.'

They smiled with the confidence of women fancy-free, and said no more on the subject.

Carnaby came home to dinner brisk and cheerful; he felt better than for many a day. Brightly responsive, Sibyl welcomed his appearance in the drawing-room.

'Saw old Rolfe for a minute at the club. In a vile temper. I wonder whether he really has lost money, and won't confess? Yet I don't think so. Queer old stick.'

'By-the-bye, what *is* his age?' asked Alma unconcernedly.

'Thirty-seven or eight. But I always think of him as fifty.'

'I suppose he'll never marry?'

'Rolfe? Good heavens, no! Too much sense—hang it, you know what I mean! It would never suit *him*. Can't imagine such a thing. He gets more and more booky. Has his open-air moods, too, and amuses me with his Jingoism. So different from his old ways of talking; but I didn't care much about him in those days.

Well, now, look here, I've had a talk with a man I know, about Honolulu, and I've got all sorts of things to tell you.—Dinner? Very glad; I'm precious hungry.'

CHAPTER 7

About the middle of December, Alma Frothingham left England, burning with a fever of impatience, resenting all inquiry and counsel, making pretence of settled plans, really indifferent to everything but the prospect of emancipation. The disaster that had befallen her life, the dishonour darkening upon her name, seemed for the moment merely a price paid for liberty. The shock of sorrow and dismay had broken innumerable bonds, overthrown all manner of obstacles to growth of character, of power. She gloried in a new, intoxicating sense of irresponsibility. She saw the ideal life in a release from all duty and obligation—save to herself.

Travellers on that winter day from Antwerp into Germany noticed the English girl, well dressed, and of attractive features, whose excited countenance and restless manner told of a journey in haste, with something most important, and assuredly not disagreeable, at the end of it. She was alone, and evidently quite able to take care of herself. Unlike the representative English *Fraulein*, she did not reject friendly overtures from strangers; her German was lame, but she spoke it with enjoyment, laughing at her stumbles and mistakes. With her in the railway carriage she kept a violin-case. A professional musician? 'Noch nicht' was her answer, with a laugh. She knew Leipzig? Oh dear, yes, and many other parts of Germany; had travelled a good deal; was

an entirely free and independent person, quite without national prejudice, indeed without prejudice of any kind. And in the same breath she spoke slightingly, if not contemptuously, of England and everything English.

At Leipzig she stayed until the end of April, living with a family named Gassner, people whom she had known for some years. Only on condition that she would take up her abode with this household had Mrs. Frothingham consented to make her an allowance and let her go abroad. Alma fretted at the restriction; she wished to have a room of her own in a lodging-house; but the family life improved her command of German—something gained. To music, meanwhile, she gave very little attention, putting off with one excuse after another the beginning of her serious studies. She seemed to have quite forgotten that music was her 'religion', and, for the matter of that, appeared to have no religion at all. 'Life' was her interest, her study. She made acquaintances, attended concerts and the theatre, read multitudes of French and German novels. But her habits were economical. All the pleasures she desired could be enjoyed at very small expense, and she found her stepmother's remittances more than sufficient.

In April she gained Mrs. Frothingham's consent to her removal from Leipzig to Munich. A German girl with whom she had made friends was going to Munich to study art. For reasons, vague even to herself (so ran her letters to Mrs. Frothingham), she could not 'settle' at Leipzig. The climate did not seem to

suit her. She had suffered from bad colds, and, in short, was doing no good. At Munich lived an admirable violinist, a friend of Herr Wilenski's, who would be of great use to her. 'In short, dear Mamma, doesn't it seem to you rather humiliating that at the age of four-and-twenty I should be begging for permission to go here and there, do this or that? I know all your anxieties about me, and I am very grateful, and I feel ashamed to be living at your expense, but really I must go about making a career for myself in my own way.' Mrs. Frothingham yielded, and Alma took lodgings in Munich together with her German friend.

English newspapers were now reporting the trial of the directors of the Britannia Company, for to this pass had things come. The revelations of the law-court satisfied public curiosity, and excited indignant clamour. Alma read, and tried to view the proceedings as one for whom they had no personal concern; but her sky darkened, her heart grew heavy. The name of Bennet Frothingham stood for criminal recklessness, for huge rascality; it would be so for years to come. She had no courage to take up her violin; the sound of music grew hateful to her, as if mocking at her ruined ambition.

Three months had passed since she received her one and only letter from Honolulu; two months since she had written to Sibyl. On a blue day of spring, when despondency lowered upon her, and all occupation, all amusements seemed a burden, she was driven to address her friend on the other side of the world, to send a cry of pain and hopelessness to the dream-island of the Pacific.

'What is the use of working at music? The simple truth is, that since I left England I have given it up. I am living here on false pretences; I shall never care to play the violin again. What sort of a reception could I expect from an English audience? If I took another name, of course it would get known who I was, and people would just come to stare at me—pleasant thought! And I have utterly lost confidence in myself. The difficulties are great, even where there is great talent, and I feel I have nothing of the kind. I might toil for years, and should do no good. I feel I am not an artist—I am beaten and disgraced. There's nothing left but to cry and be miserable, like any other girl who has lost her money, her hopes, everything. Why don't you write to me? If you wait till you get this, it will be six or seven weeks before I could possibly hear. And a letter from you would do me so much good.'

Some one knocked at her door. She called '*Herein*!' and there appeared a little boy, the child of her landlady, who sometimes ran errands for her. He said that a gentleman was asking to see her.

'*Ein Deutscher*?'

'*Nein. Ein Englander, glaub'ich, und ein schnurriges Deutsch ist's, das er verbricht*!'

Alma started up, shut her unfinished letter in the blotting-case, and looked anxiously about the room.

'What is his name? Ask him to give you his name.'

The youngster came back with a card, and Alma was astonished to read the name of 'Mr. Felix Dymes'. Why, she

had all but forgotten the man's existence. How came he here? What right had he to call? And yet she was glad—nay, delighted. Happily, she had the sitting-room (shared with her art-studying friend) to herself this morning.

'Bring him up here,' she said to the boy hurriedly, 'and ask him to wait a minute for me.'

And she escaped to make a rapid change of dress. For Alma was not like Sibyl Carnaby in perpetual regard for personal finish; she dressed carelessly, save when the occasion demanded pains; she liked the ease of gowns and slippers, of loose hair and free throat; and this taste had grown upon her during the past months. But she did not keep Mr. Dymes waiting very long, and on her entrance he gazed at her with very frank admiration. Frank, too, was his greeting—that of a very old and intimate friend, rather than of a drawing-room acquaintance. He came straight from England, he said; a spring holiday, warranted by the success of his song 'Margot', which the tenor, Topham, had sung at St James's Hall. A few days ago he had happened to see Miss Leach, who gave him Miss Frothingham's address, and he could not deny himself the pleasure of calling. Chatting thus, he made himself comfortable in a chair, and Alma sat over against him. The man was loud, conceited, vulgar; but, after all, he composed very sweet music, which promised to take the public ear; and he brought with him a waft from the happiness of old days; and how could one expect small proprieties of a bohemian, an artist? Alma began to talk eagerly, joyously.

'And what are you doing, Miss Frothingham?'

'Oh, fiddling a little. But I haven't been very well.'

'I can see that. Yet in another sense you look a better than ever.'

He began to hum an air, glancing round the room.

'You haven't a piano. Just listen to this; how do you think it will do?' He hummed through a complete melody. 'Came into my head last night. Wants rather sentimental words—the kind of thing that goes down with the British public. Rather a good air, don't you think?'

Felix Dymes had two manners of conversation. In a company at all ceremonious, and when it behoved him to make an impression, he talked as the artist and the expert in music, with many German phrases, which he pronounced badly, to fill up the gaps in his knowledge. His familiar stream of talk was very different: it discarded affectation, and had a directness, a vigour, which never left one in doubt as to his actual views of life. How melody of any kind could issue from a nature so manifestly ignoble might puzzle the idealist. Alma, who had known a good many musical people, was not troubled by this difficulty; in her present mood, she submitted to the arrogance of success, and felt a pleasure, an encouragement, in Dymes's bluff *camaraderie*.

'Let me try to catch it on the violin,' she said when, with nodding head and waving arm, he had hummed again through his composition.

She succeeded in doing so, and Dymes raised his humming to

a sentimental roar, and was vastly pleased with himself.

'I like to see you in a place like this,' he said. 'Looks more business-like—as if you really meant to do something. Do you live here alone?'

'With a friend.'

Something peculiar in Dymes's glance caused her to add, 'A German girl, an art student.' Whereat the musician nodded and smiled.

'And what's your idea? Come now, let's talk about it. I wonder whether I could be of any use to you—awfully glad if I could.'

Alma was abashed, stammered her vague projects, and reddened under the man's observant eye.

'Look here,' he cried, with his charming informality, 'didn't you use to sing? Somebody told me you had a pretty good voice.'

'Oh, that was long ago.'

'I wish you'd let me hear you.'

'No, no! I don't sing at all.'

'Pity, if it's true. I want to write a serio-comic opera, a new sort of thing, and it struck me you were just cut out for that kind of singing. You have the face and the—you know—the refinement; sort of thing not easy to find. It's a poor chance, I'm afraid, coming out as a violinist.'

Half inclined to resent his impertinence, yet subdued by the practical tone and air of superior knowledge, Alma kept a grave face. Dymes, crossing his legs, went on with talk of projects he had in view, all intended to be lucrative. He had capital; nothing

great, just a comfortable sum which he was bent on using to the best advantage. His songs would presently be bringing him in a few hundreds a year—so he declared—and his idea of life was to get as much enjoyment as possible without working over-hard for it. The conversation lasted for a couple of hours, Dymes growing even more genial and confidential, his eyes seldom moving from Alma's face.

'Well,' he said at length, rising, 'it's very jolly to see you again, after all this time. I shall be staying here for a few days. You'll let me call tomorrow?'

At once glad and sorry to see him go, Alma laughingly gave the desired permission. When, that evening, she looked at her unfinished letter, it seemed such a miserable whine that she tore it up in annoyance. Dymes's visit had done her good; she felt, if not a renewal of hope, at all events the courage which comes of revived spirits.

The next day she awaited his arrival with a pleasant expectation. He entered humming an air—another new composition—which again she caught from him and played on the violin.

'Good, don't you think? I'm in great vein just now—always am in the spring, and when the weather's fine. I say, you're looking much better today—decidedly more fit. What do you do here for exercise? Do you go to the Englische Garten? Come now, will you? Let's have a drive.'

With sudden coldness Alma excused herself. The musician

scrutinised her rapidly, bit his lip, and looked round to the window; but in a moment he had recovered his loud good humour.

'You'll hardly believe it, but it's the plain truth, that I came all this way just to see you. I hadn't thought of coming to Germany till I met Miss Leach and heard about you. Now I'm so far, I might as well go on into Italy, and make a round of it. I wish you were coming too.'

Alma made no reply. He scrutinised her as before, and his features worked as if with some emotion. Then, abruptly, he put a blunt question.

'Do you think people who go in for music, art, and that kind of thing, ought to marry?'

'I never thought about it at all,' Alma replied, with a careless laugh, striking a finger across the strings of the violin which she held on her lap.

'We're generally told they shouldn't,' pursued Dymes, in a voice which had lost its noisy confidence, and was a little uncertain. 'But it all depends, you know. If people mean by marriage the ordinary kind of thing—of course, that's the deuce. But it needn't be. Lots of people marry nowadays and live in a rational way—no house, or bother of that kind; just going about as they like, and having a pleasant, reasonable life. It's easy enough with a little money. Sometimes they're a good deal of help to each other; I know people who manage to be.'

'Oh, I dare say,' said Alma when he paused. 'It all depends, as

you say. You're going on to Italy at once?'

Her half-veiled eyes seemed to conceal amusement, and there was good-humoured disdain in the setting of her lips. With audacity so incredible that it all but made her laugh, Dymes, not heeding her inquiry, jerked out the personal application of his abstract remarks. Yes, it was a proposal of marriage—marriage on the new plan, without cares or encumbrance; a suggestion rather than a petition; off-hand, unsentimental, yet perfectly serious, as look and tone proclaimed.

'There's much to be said for your views,' Alma replied, with humorous gravity, 'but I haven't the least intention of marrying.'

'Well, I've mentioned it.' He waved his hand as if to overcome an unwonted embarrassment. 'You don't mind?'

'Not a bit.'

'I hope we shall meet again before long, and—some day, you know—you may see the thing in another light. You mustn't think I'm joking.'

'But it *is* rather a joke.'

'No; I never was more in earnest about anything, believe me. And I'm convinced it's a good idea. However, you know one thing—if I can be of use to you, I shall. I'll think it over—your chances and so on; something may suggest itself. You're not cut out for everyday things.'

'I try to hope not.'

'Ah, but you can take my word for it.'

With this comforting assurance, Felix Dymes departed. No

melodrama; a hand-grip, a significant nod, a loud humming as he went downstairs.

Alma presently began a new letter to Sibyl Carnaby. It was written in a cheery humour, though touched by the shadow of distressful circumstance. She told the story of Mr. Dymes's visit, and made merry over it. 'I am sure this is the very newest thing in "proposals". Though I live in such a dull, lonely way, it has made me feel that I am still in touch with civilisation. And really, if the worst come to the worst—but it's dangerous to joke about such things.' She touched lightly on the facts of her position. 'I'm afraid I have not been doing very much. Perhaps this is a fallow time with me; I may be gaining strength for great achievements. Unfortunately, I have a lazy companion. Miss Steinfeld (you know her from my last letter, if you got it) only pretends to work. I like her for her thorough goodness and her intelligence; but she is just a little *melancholisch*, and so not exactly the companion I need. Her idea just now is that we both need "change" and she wants me to go with her to Bregenz, on the Bodensee. Perhaps I shall when the weather gets hot.'

It had surprised her to be told by Felix Dymes that he obtained her address at Munich from Miss Leach, for the only person in England to whom she had yet made known her departure from Leipzig was her step-mother. Speak of her how they might, her acquaintances in London still took trouble to inform themselves of her movements. Perhaps the very completeness of the catastrophe in which she was involved told in her favour;

possibly she excited much more interest than could ever have attached to her whilst her name was respected. There was new life in the thought. She wrote briefly to Dora Leach, giving an account of herself, which, though essentially misleading, was not composed in a spirit of conscious falsehood. For all her vanity, Alma had never aimed at effect by practice of deliberate insincerities. Miss Leach was informed that her friend could not find much time for correspondence. 'I am living in the atmosphere of art, and striving patiently. Some day you shall hear of me.' And when the letter was posted, Alma mused long on the effect it would produce.

With the distinguished violinist; the friend of Herr Wilenski, spoken of to Mrs. Frothingham, she had as yet held no communication, and through the days of early summer she continued to neglect her music. Indolence grew upon her; sometimes she spent the whole day in a dressing-gown, seated or reclining, with a book in her hand, or totally unoccupied. Sometimes the military bands in the public gardens tempted her to walk a little, or she strolled with Miss Steinfeld through the picture galleries; occasionally they made short excursions into the country. The art student had acquaintances in Munich, but did not see much of them, and they were not the kind of people with whom Alma cared to associate.

In July it was decided that they should go for a few weeks to Bregenz; their health called for the change, which, as Miss Steinfeld knew of a homely *pension*, could be had at small

expense. Before their departure the art student was away for a few days, and, to relieve the dreariness of an existence which was becoming burdensome, Alma went out alone one afternoon, purposing a trip by steam-tram to the gardens at Nymphenburg. She walked to the Stiglmeyerplatz, where the tram starts, and there stood waiting. A carriage drove past, with a sound of English voices, which drew her attention. She saw three children, a lady, and a gentleman. The last-mentioned looked at her, and she recognised Cyrus Redgrave. Whether he knew her face seemed uncertain. Hoping to escape unobserved, she turned quickly, and walked a few yards. Before she faced round again, a quick footstep approached her, and the next moment Mr. Redgrave stood, hat in hand, courteously claiming her acquaintance.

'I thought I could not possibly be mistaken!'

The carriage, having stopped for him to alight, was driving away.

'That is my sister and her children,' said Redgrave, when he had warmly shaken hands and expressed his pleasure at the meeting. 'You never met her. Her husband is in India, and you see me in full domesticity. This morning I posted a note to you; of course, you haven't received it yet.'

Alma did her best to behave with dignity. In any case it would have been trying to encounter such a man as Redgrave—wealthy, elegant, a figure in society, who must necessarily regard her as banished from polite circles; and in her careless costume she felt

more than abashed. For the first time a sense of degradation, of social inferiority, threatened to overwhelm her self-respect.

'How did you know my address?' she asked, with an involuntary imitation of hauteur, made pathetic by the flush on her face and the lingering half-smile.

'Mrs. Frothingham kindly gave it me.—You were walking this way, I think?—My sister is living at Stuttgart, and I happened to come over just in time to act as her courier on a journey to Salzburg. We got here yesterday, and go on tomorrow, or the day after. I dropped you a note, asking if I might call.'

'Where have you seen Mamma lately?' asked Alma, barely attentive to the explanations he was giving her.

'In London, quite by chance. In fact, it was at Waterloo Station. Mrs Frothingham was starting for the country, and I happened to be going to Wimbledon. I told her I might possibly see you on my way through Munich.'

Alma began to recover herself. That Cyrus Redgrave should still take an interest in her was decidedly more gratifying than the eccentric compliment of Felix Dymes. She strove to forget the humiliation of having been found standing in a public place, waiting for a tram-car. In Redgrave's manner no change was perceptible, unless, indeed, he spoke with more cordiality, which must be prompted by kind feeling. Their acquaintance covered only a year or two, and had scarcely amounted to what passes for friendship, but Redgrave seemed oblivious of late unpleasant events.

'I'm glad you didn't call unexpectedly,' she said, trying to strike a light note. 'I'm a student now—no longer an amateur—and live as a student must.'

'So much the better. I'm a natural bohemian myself, and like nothing so well as to disregard ceremony. And, by-the-bye, that's the very reason why I ran away from my sister to speak to you; I knew you would dislike formalities. I'm afraid I was rather glad than otherwise to escape. We have been taking the children for a drive—charming little rascals, but for the moment my domestic instincts are satisfied. Mrs. Frothingham mentioned that you were living with a friend—an art student.'

'We go away for a holiday in a day or two,' said Alma, more at her ease. 'To Bregenz—do you know it?'

'By name only. You go in a day or two? I wish you would let me know your address there,' he added, with frank friendliness. 'I go on with my sister to Salzburg, and then turn off on my own account; I might be able to pass your way, and I should so much like to have a talk with you—a real talk, about music and all sorts of things. Did I ever tell you of my little place at Riva, head of Lake Garda? Cosy little nook, but I'm not there very often; I half thought of going for a week or two's quietness. Quite cool there by the lake. But I really must try to see you at Bregenz—do let me.'

He begged it as a favour, a privilege, and Alma without hesitation told him where she would be living.

'For a few weeks? Oh, then, I shall make a point of coming that

way. You're not working too hard, I hope? I know you don't do things by halves. When I first heard you were going in seriously for music, I said to myself, "*Tant mieux*, another great violinist!"'

The listener reddened with delight; her step became elastic; she carried her head gallantly, and feared not the glances Redgrave cast at her.

'I have learnt not to talk about myself,' she said, bestowing a smile upon him. 'That's the first bad habit to be overcome by the amateur converted.'

'Capital! An axiom worth putting into print, for the benefit of all and sundry. Now I must say goodbye; that fellow yonder will take me back to the domesticities.' He hailed an empty carriage. 'We shall meet again among the mountains. *Auf Wiedersehen*!'

Alma continued to walk along the Nymphenburg road, unconscious of external things. The tram for which she had been waiting passed by; she no longer cared to go out into the country. It was enough to keep moving in the bright sunshine, and to think her thoughts.

No; people had by no means forgotten her. Whilst she was allowing herself to fall into gloom and indolence, her acquaintances, it was evident, made her a constant subject of talk, of speculation; just what she had desired, but had lost courage to believe. They expected great things of her; her personal popularity and her talents had prevailed against the most prejudicial circumstance; people did not think of her as the daughter of Bennet Frothingham,—unless to contrast the

hopefulness of her future with the black calamity that lay behind.

She waxed philosophical. How everything in this world tends to good! At her father's death she had mourned bitterly; it had struck her to the heart; his imprudence (she could never use, even in thought, a harsher word) pained more than it shamed her, and not a day passed but she sorrowed over the dishonour that darkened his memory. Yet were not these woes and disasters the beginning of a new life for *her*! In prosperity, what would she ever have become? Nothing less than being thrown out into the world could have given her the impulse needed to realise a high ambition. '*Tant mieux*, another great violinist!' How sincerely, how inspiringly, it was said!

And Alma's feet had brought her home again before she paused to reflect that, for all purposes of ambition, the past half-year had been utterly wasted. Never mind; after her return from Bregenz!

On her table lay Redgrave's note; a very civil line or two, requesting permission to call. There was another letter, black-bordered, which came from her step-mother. Mrs. Frothingham said that she had been about to write for several days, but all sorts of disagreeable business had hindered her; even now, she could only write hurriedly. In the last fortnight she had had to go twice to London. 'And really I think I shall be obliged to go and live there again, for a time; so many things have to be seen to. It might be best, perhaps, if I took a small flat. I was going to say, however, that the last time I went up, I met Mr. Redgrave,

and we had quite a long talk—about *you*. He was most sincerely interested in your future; indeed it quite surprised me, for I will confess that I had never had a very high opinion of him. I fancy he suffered *no loss*. His behaviour to me was that of a gentleman, very different from that of some people I could name. But it was *you* he spoke of most. He said he was shortly going to Germany, and begged me to let him have your address, and really I saw no harm in it. He may call upon you. If so, let me hear all about it, for it will interest me very much.'

Alma had half a mind to reply at once, but on reflection decided to wait. After all, Mr. Redgrave might not keep his promise of coming to see her at Bregenz, and in that event a very brief report of what had happened would suffice. But she felt sure that he meant to come.

And decidedly she hoped it; why, she was content to leave a rosy vagueness.

CHAPTER 8

Alma and her German friend silently agreed in foreseeing that they would not live together much longer. Miss Steinfeld, eager at first to talk English, was relapsing into her native tongue, and as Alma lazily avoided German, they conversed in different languages, each with a sprinkling of foreign phrase. The English girl might have allied herself with a far worse companion; for, in spite of defects which resembled Alma's own, vagueness of purpose, infirmity of will, Miss Steinfeld had a fund of moral principle which made her talk wholesome and her aspirations an influence for good. She imagined herself in love with an artist whom she had seen only two or three times, and no strain could have been more exalted than that in which she confided her romance to the sympathetic Alma. Sympathetic, that is, within her limits; for Miss Frothingham had never been in love, and rarely indulged a mood of sentiment. Her characteristic emotions she of course did not reveal, save unconsciously, and Miss Steinfeld knew nothing of the tragic circumstances which explained her friend's solitude.

In the first days at Bregenz they felt a renewal of pleasure in each other's society; Alma's spirits were much improved; she enjoyed the scenery, and lived in the open air. There was climbing of mountains, the Pfander with its reward of noble outlook, and the easier Gebhardsberg, with its hanging woods;

there was boating on the lake, and rambling along its shores, with rest and refreshment at some Gartenwithschaft. Miss Steinfeld, whose reading and intelligence were superior to Alma's, liked to explore the Roman ruins and linger in the museum. Alma could not long keep up a pretence of interest in the relics of Brigantium; but she said one day, with a smile–

'I know someone who would enjoy this kind of thing—an Englishman—very learned–'

'Old?' inquired her friend significantly.

'Yes—no. Neither old nor young. A strange man; rather interesting. I've a good mind,' she added mischievously, 'to send him a photograph.'

'Of yourself?'

'Oh dear, no! He wouldn't care for that. A view of the Alt-Stadt.'

And in her mood of frolic she acted upon the thought. She purchased two or three views, had them done up for post, and addressed them to Harvey Rolfe, Esq, at the Metropolitan Club; for his private address she could not remember, but the club remained in her mind from Sibyl's talk of it. When the packet was gone, of course she regretted having sent it. More likely than not, Mr. Rolfe considered himself to have ended all acquaintance with the disgraced family, and, if he recognised her handwriting, would just throw the photographs aside. Let him; it mattered nothing, one way or the other.

When a week had passed, the novelty of things wore

off; the friends began to wander apart; Miss Steinfeld made acquaintances in the *pension*, and Alma drifted into solitude. At the end of a fortnight she was tired of everything, wished to go away, thought longingly of England. It was plain that Mr. Redgrave would not come; he had never seriously meant it; his *Auf Wiedersehen* was a mere civility to get rid of her in the street. Why had he troubled to inquire about her at all? Of course it didn't matter—nothing mattered—but if ever she met him again! Alma tried her features in expression of cold scornfulness.

On the next day, as she was returning from an idle walk with her friend along the Lindau road, Mr. Redgrave met them. He was dressed as she had never seen him, in flannels, with a white necktie loosely knotted and a straw hat. Not till he had come near enough to salute did she recognise him; he looked ten years younger.

They talked as if the meeting were of daily occurrence. Redgrave addressed himself to Miss Steinfeld as often as to Alma, and showed a graceful command of decorous commonplace. He had arrived early this morning, had put up at the Oesterreichischer Hof, was already delighted with Brogenz. Did Miss Steinfeld devote herself to landscape? Had she done anything here? Had Miss Frothingham brought her violin? They strolled pleasantly to the Hafen promenade, and parted at length with assurances of meeting again, as if definite appointment were needless.

'That is my idea of the English gentleman,' said Miss Steinfeld

afterwards. 'I think I should have taken him for a lord. No doubt he is very rich?'

'Oh, pretty well off,' Alma replied, with assumed indifference. 'Ten thousand pounds a year, I dare say.'

'Ten thousand! *Lieber Himmel*! And married?'

'No.'

'In Parliament, I suppose?'

'No.'

'Then, what does he do?'

'Oh, amuses himself.'

Each became occupied with her thoughts. Alma's were so agreeable, that Miss Steinfeld, observing her, naturally fell into romantic speculation.

Redgrave easily contrived that his next walk should be with Miss Frothingham alone. He overtook her next morning, soon after she had left the house, and they rambled in the Gebhardsberg direction.

'Now let us have the promised talk,' he began at a favourable moment. 'I've been thinking about you all the time.'

'Did you go to your place on Lake Garda?'

'Yes; just to look at it, and get it put in order. I hope to be there again before long. You didn't doubt I should come?'

'You left it uncertain.'

'To be sure. Life is uncertain. But I should have been desperately disappointed if I hadn't found you here. There are so many things to be said about going in for music as a profession.

You have the talent, you have the physical strength, I think.' His eye flattered her from head to foot. 'But, to be a great artist, one must have more than technical qualifications. It's the soul that must be developed.'

Alma laughed.

'I know it. And what is your receipt for developing the soul?'

Redgrave paused in his walk. Smiling, he gave a twist to his moustache, and appeared to meditate profoundly.

'The soul—well, it has a priggish sound. Let us say the character; and that is developed through experience of life.'

'I'm getting it.'

'Are you? In the company of Miss Steinfeld? I'm afraid that won't carry you very far. Experience means emotion; certainly, for a woman. Believe me, you haven't begun to live yet. You may practise on your violin day and night, and it won't profit you—until you have *lived*.'

Alma was growing serious. These phrases harmonised well enough with her own insubstantial thoughts and idly-gathered notions. When preparing to escape from England, she had used much the same language. But, after all, what did it mean? What, in particular, did Cyrus Redgrave mean, with his expressive eyes, and languid, earnest tone?

'You will say that a girl has few opportunities. True, thanks to her enslavement by society.'

'I care nothing for society,' Alma interposed.

'Good! I like the sound of that defiance; it has the right ring.

A man hasn't often the pleasure of hearing that from a woman he can respect. It's easy, of course, to defy the laws of a world one doesn't belong to; but you, who are a queen in your circle, and may throne, at any moment, in a wider sphere—it means much when you refuse to bow down before the vulgar idols, to be fettered by superstitions.'

His aim was dark to her, but she tasted the compliment which ignored her social eclipse. Redgrave's conversation generally kept on the prosaic levels—studiously polite, or suavely cynical. It was a new experience to see him borne on a wave of rhetoric; yet not borne away, for he spoke with an ease, a self-command, which to older ears would have suggested skill rather than feeling. He had nothing of the ardour of youth; his poise and deliberation were quite in keeping with the two score years that subtly graved his visage; the passions in him were sportive, half-fantastical, as though, together with his brain, they had grown to a ripe worldliness. He inspired no distrust; his good nature seemed all-pervading; he had the air of one who lavishes disinterested counsel, and ever so little exalts himself with his facile exuberance of speech.

'I have seen much of artists; known them intimately, and studied their lives. One and all, they date their success from some passionate experience. From a cold and conventional existence can come nothing but cold and conventional art. You left England, broke away from the common routine, from the artificial and the respectable. That was an indispensable first

step, and I have told you how I applauded it. But you cannot stop at this. I begin to fear for you. There is a convention of unconventionality: poor quarters, hard life, stinted pleasures—all that kind of thing. I fear its effect upon you.'

'What choice have I?' exclaimed Alma, moved to familiar frankness. 'If I *am* poor, I must live poorly.'

He smiled graciously upon her, and raised his hand almost as though he would touch her with reassuring kindness; but it was only to stroke his trimmed beard.

'Oh, you have a choice, believe me,' came his airy answer. 'There's no harm in poverty that doesn't last too long. You may have profited by it; it is an experience. But now—Don't let us walk so far as to tire you. Yes, we will turn. Variety of life, travel, all sorts of joys and satisfactions—these are the things you need.'

'And if they are not within my reach?' she asked, without looking at him.

'By-the-bye'—he disregarded her question—'your friend, Mrs. Carnaby, has taken a long flight.'

'Yes.'

The monosyllable was dropped. Alma walked with her eyes on the ground, trailing her sunshade.

'I didn't think she had much taste for travel. But you know her so much better than I do.'

'She is enjoying herself,' said Alma.

'No need for *you* to go so far. Down yonder'—he nodded southward—'I was thinking, the other day, of the different kinds

of pleasure one gets from scenery in different parts of the world. I have seen the tropics; they left me very much where I was, intellectually. It's the human associations of natural beauty that count. You have no desire to go to the islands of the Pacific?'

'I can't say that I have.'

'Of course not. The springs of art are in the old world. Among the vines and the olives one hears a voice. I must really try to give you some idea of my little place at Riva.'

He began a playful description—long, but never tedious; alluring, yet without enthusiasm—a dreamy suggestion of refined delights and luxuries.

'I have another place in the Pyrenees, to suit another mood; and not long ago I was sorely tempted by the offer of a house not far from Antioch, in the valley of the Orontes—a house built by an Englishman. Charming place, and so entirely off the beaten track. Isn't there a fascination in the thought of living near Antioch? Well away from bores and philistines. No Mrs. Grundy with her clinking tea-cups. I dare say the house is still to be had. —Oh, do tell me something about your friend, Fraulein Steinfeld. Is she in earnest? Will she do anything?'

His eloquence was at an end. Thenceforward he talked of common things in unemotional language; and when Alma parted from him, it was with a sense of being tired and disappointed.

On the following day she did not see him at all. He could not have left Bregenz, for, of course, he would have let her know. She thought of him incessantly, reviewing all his talk, turning

over this and that ambiguous phrase, asking herself whether he meant much or little. It was natural that she should compare and contrast his behaviour with that of Felix Dymes. If his motive were not the same, why did he seek her society? And if it were? If at length he spoke out, summing his hints in the plain offer of all those opportunities she lacked?

A brilliant temptation. To leave the world as Alma Frothingham, and to return to it as Mrs. Cyrus Redgrave!

But, in that event, what of her musical ambitions? He spoke of her art as the supreme concern, to which all else must be subordinate. And surely that was his meaning when he threw scorn upon 'bores and philistines'. Why should the fact of his wealth interfere with her progress as an artist? Possibly, on the other hand, he did not intend that she should follow a professional career. Cannot one be a great artist without standing on public platforms? Was it his lordly thought to foster her talents for his own delectation and that of the few privileged?

Her brain grew confused with interpreting and picturing. But once more she had made an advance in self-esteem. She could await the next meeting with a confidence and pride very unlike her sensations in the Stiglmeyerplatz at Munich.

It took place on the second day. This time Redgrave did not wait upon accident; he sent a note, begging that he might have the pleasure of another talk with her. He would call at a certain hour, and take his chance of finding her at home. When he presented himself, Alma was sitting in the common room of the *pension*

with two German ladies; they in a few minutes withdrew, and familiar conversation became possible. As the windows stood open, and there were chairs upon the balcony, Redgrave shortly proposed a move in that direction. They sat together for half an hour.

When Redgrave took his leave, it was without shaking of hands—with no *Auf Wiedersehen*. He smiled, he murmured civilities; Alma neither smiled nor spoke. She was pale, and profoundly agitated.

So this was his meaning?—made plain enough at last, though with the most graceful phrasing. Childish vanity and ignorance had forbidden her to dream of such an issue. She had not for a moment grasped the significance to a man of the world of the ruin and disgrace fallen upon her family. In theory she might call herself an exile from the polite world; none the less did she imagine herself still illumined by the social halo, guarded by the divinity which doth hedge a member of the upper-middle class. Was she not a lady? And who had ever dared to offer a lady an insult such as this? Shop-girls, minor actresses, the inferior sort of governess, must naturally be on their guard; their insecurity was traditional; novel and drama represented their moral vicissitudes. But a lady, who had lived in a great house with many servants, who had founded an Amateur Quartet Society, the hem of whose garment had never been touched with irreverent finger—could *she* stand in peril of such indignity?

Not till now had she called to mind the forewarnings of Sibyl

Carnaby, which, at the time of hearing them, she did not at all understand. 'People,' said Sibyl, 'would approach her with strange ideas.' This she might have applied to the grotesque proposal (as it seemed to her) of Felix Dymes, or to the risk of being tempted into premature publicity by a business offer from some not very respectable impresario. What Sibyl meant was now only too clear; but how little could Mrs. Carnaby have imagined that her warning would be justified by one of her own friends—by a man of wealth and consideration.

She durst not leave the house for fear of encountering Redgrave, who, if they crossed by chance, might fancy she invited another meeting. She dreaded the observation of women, especially of Miss Steinfeld. The only retreat was her bedroom, and here she secluded herself till dinner-time. At this meal she must needs face the company or incur remark. She tried to return her friend's smile with the ordinary unconcern. After dinner there was no avoiding Miss Steinfeld, whose air of extreme discretion showed that she had an inkling of events, and awaited confidences.

'Mr. Redgrave has gone—he called to say goodbye.'

'*So*?'

Irritated by self-consciousness, revolting against a misinterpretation which would injure her vanity, though it was not likely to aim at her honour, Alma had recourse to fiction.

'I daresay you guess?—Yes, and I refused.'

Miss Steinfeld was puzzled. It did not astonish her that a

girl should reject ten thousand pounds per annum, for that she was too high-minded; but she had thought it beyond doubt that Alma's heart was engaged. Here, it had seemed to her, was the explanation of a mystery attaching to this original young Englishwoman; unhoped, the brilliant lover, the secretly beloved, had sought her in her retirement. And after all, it was a mistake.

'I don't care for him a bit,' Alma went on. 'It had to be got over and done with, that was all.'

She felt ashamed of herself. In childhood she had told falsehoods freely, but with the necessity for that kind of thing the habit had fallen away. Solace, however, was at hand, for the German girl looked at her with a new interest, a new sympathy, which Alma readily construed as wonder and admiration, if not gentle envy. To have refused an offer of marriage from a handsome man of great wealth might be counted for glory. And Alma's momentary shame yielded to a gratification which put her outwardly at ease.

The restless night brought torment of the mind and harassed spirits. Redgrave's proposal echoed in the vacant chambers of her life, sounding no longer an affront, but an allurement. Why, indeed, had she repelled it so unthinkingly? It did not necessarily mean scandal. He had not invited her to open defiance of the world. 'You can absolutely trust me; I am discretion itself. All resources are at my command.' Why had she rejected with scorn and horror what was, perhaps, her great opportunity, the one hope of her struggling and sinking ambition? She had lost faith

in herself; in her power to overcome circumstances, not yet in her talent, in her artistic birthright. Redgrave would have made her path smooth. 'I promise you a great reputation in two or three years' time.' And without disgrace, without shadow of suspicion, it would all be managed, he declared, so very easily. For what alternative had she rebuffed him?

Redgrave's sagacity had guided him well up to a certain point, but it had lost sight of one thing essential to the success of his scheme. Perhaps because he was forty years of age, perhaps because he had so often come and seen and conquered, perhaps because he made too low an estimate of Bennet Frothingham's daughter,—he simply overlooked sentimental considerations. It was a great and a fatal oversight. He went far in his calculated appeal to Alma's vanity; had he but credited her with softer passions, and given himself the trouble to play upon them, he would not, at all events, have suffered so sudden a defeat. Men of Redgrave's stamp grow careless, and just at the time of life when, for various causes, the art which conceals art has become indispensable. He did not flatter himself that Alma was ready to fall in love with him; and here his calm maturity served him ill. To his own defect of ardour he was blinded by habit. After all, the affair had little consequence. It had only suggested itself after the meeting in Munich, and perhaps—he said to himself—all things considered, the event was just as well.

But Alma felt the double insult, to her worldly honour, to her womanhood. The man had not even made pretence of loving her;

and this, whilst it embittered her disappointment, strengthened her to cast from her mind the baser temptation. Marriage she would have accepted, though doubtless with becoming hesitancy; the offer could not have been made without one word of tenderness (for Cyrus Redgrave was another than Felix Dymes), and she had not felt it impossible to wed this polished capitalist. Out of the tumult of her feelings, as another day went by, issued at length that one simple and avowable sense of disappointment. She had grasped the prize, and heated her imagination in regarding it; had overcome natural reluctances, objections personal and moral; was ready to sit down and write to Mrs. Frothingham the splendid, startling announcement. And here she idled in her bedroom, desolate, hopeless, wishing she had courage to steal down at night to the waters of the Bodensee, and end it all.

On the third day she returned to Munich, having said farewell to her friend, who was quite prepared for the parting. From Munich she proceeded to Leipzig, and there entered again the family circle of the Gassners. She had no intention of staying for very long; the pretence of musical study could not be kept up; but her next step was quite uncertain.

A fortnight later, Mrs. Frothingham wrote thus:–

'I am sending you on a letter which, if I am not mistaken, comes from Mr. Rolfe. Do tell me if I am right. Odd that he should write to you, if it is he. You have not told me yet whether you saw Mr. Redgrave again. But I see that you don't care much,

and perhaps it is as well.'

The forwarded letter had been originally addressed to the care of Mrs Frothingham, and Alma, at a glance, recognised Harvey Rolfe's writing. He dated from London. Was he mistaken, he began, in thinking that certain photographs from Bregenz had come to him by Miss Frothingham's kindness? For his part, he had spent June in a ramble in South-west France, chiefly by the Dordogne, and through a strange, interesting bit of marsh-country, called La Double. 'I hardly know how I got there, and I shall not worry you by writing any account of the expedition. But at a miserable village called La Roche Chalais, where I had a most indigestible supper and a bed unworthy of the name, I managed to fall ill, and quite seriously thought, "Ah, here is the end!" It has to come somewhere, and why not on a *grabat* at La Roche Chalais? A mistake; I am here again, wasting life as strenuously as ever. Would you let me hear from you? I should think it a great addition to your kindness in sending the views. And so, with every good wish, he remained, &c.

Having nothing better to do, Alma got out a map of France, and searched for La Roche Chalais; but the place was too insignificant to be marked. On the morrow, being still without occupation, she answered Rolfe's letter, and in quite a playful vein. She had no time to correspond with people who 'wasted their lives'. To her, life was a serious matter enough. But he knew nothing of the laborious side of a musician's existence, and probably doubted its reality. As an afterthought, she thanked

him gravely for his letter, and hoped that some day, when she had really 'done something', they might meet and renew their friendship.

CHAPTER 9

On an afternoon in September, Harvey Rolfe spent half an hour at a certain London bookseller's, turning over books that dealt with the theory and practice of elementary education. Two or three of them he selected, and ordered to be sent to a lady at Gunnersbury. On his way out he came upon an acquaintance making a purchase in another department of the shop. It was some months since he had seen Cecil Morphew, who looked in indifferent health, and in his dress came near to shabbiness. They passed out together, Morphew carrying an enwrapped volume, which he gave Rolfe to understand was a birthday present—for *her*. The elder man resisted his inclination to joke, and asked how things were going on.

'Much the same as usual, except that her father is in very bad health. It's brutal, but I wish he would die.'

'Naturally.'

'That's what one's driven to, you see. And anyone but you, who know me, would set me down as a selfish, calculating beast. Can't help it. I had rather have her penniless.—Will you come in here with me? I want to buy some pyrogallic acid.'

In the street again, Morphew mentioned that he had taken up photography.

'It gives me something to do, and it takes me out into the open air. This beastly town is the ruin of me, in every way.—Come

to my rooms for an hour, will you? I'll show you some attempts; I've only just tried my hand at developing. And it's a long time since we had a talk.'

They made for a Chelsea omnibus and mounted.

'I thought you were never in town at this time,' Morphew resumed. 'I want to get away, but can't afford it; devilish low-water with me. I must have a bicycle. With that and the camera I may just manage to live; often there seems little enough to live for.—Tripcony? Oh, Tripcony's a damned swindler; I've given him up. Speculation isn't quite so simple as I imagined. I made a couple of hundred, though—yes, and lost nearly three.'

The young man's laugh was less pleasant to hear than formerly. Altogether, Rolfe observed in him a decline, a loss of refinement as well as of vitality.

'Why don't you go into the country?' he said. 'Take a cottage and grow cabbages; dig for three hours a day. It would do you no end of good.'

'Of course it would. I wish I had the courage.'

'I'm going to spend the winter in Wales,' said Harvey. 'An out-of-the-world place in Carnarvonshire—mountains and sea. Come along with me, and get the mephitis blown out of you. You've got town disease, street-malaria, lodging-house fever.'

'By Jove, I'll think of it,' replied the other, with a strange look of eagerness. 'But I don't know whether I can. No, I can't be sure. But I'll try.'

'What holds you?'

'Well, I like to be near, you know, to *her*. And then—all sorts of difficulties–'

Morphew had his lodgings at present in a street near Chelsea Hospital, a poor-looking place, much inferior to those in which Rolfe had formerly seen him. His two rooms were at the top, and he had converted a garret into a dark chamber for his photographic amusement. Dirt and disorder made the sitting-room very uninviting; Rolfe looked about him, and wondered what principle of corruption was at work in the young man's life.

Morphew showed a new portrait of his betrothed, Henrietta Winter; a comely face, shadowed with pensiveness. 'Taken at Torquay; she sent it a day or two ago.—I've been thinking of giving her up. If I do, I shall do it brutally and savagely, to make it easy for her. I've spoilt her life, and I'm pretty sure I've ruined my own.'

He brought out a bottle of whisky and half filled two tumblers. His own measure he very slightly diluted, and drank it off at once.

'You're at a bad pass, my boy,' remarked Rolfe. 'What's wrong? Something more than usual, I know. Make a clean breast of it.'

Morphew continued to declare that he was only low-spirited from the longstanding causes, and, though Rolfe did not believe him, nothing more could at present be elicited. The talk turned to photography, but still had no life in it.

'I think you had better dine with me this evening,' said Harvey.

'Impossible. I wish I could. An engagement.'

The young man shuffled about, and after a struggle with embarrassment, aided by another tumbler of whisky, threw out something he wished to say.

'It's deuced hard to ask you, but—could you lend me some money?'

'Of course. How much? Why do you make such a sputter about it?'

'I've been making a fool of myself—got into difficulties. Will you let me have fifty pounds?'

'Yes, if you'll promise to clear at once out of this dust-bin, and in a month or so come into Wales.'

'You're an awfully good fellow, Rolfe,—and I'm a damned fool. I promise! I will! I'll get out of it, and then I'll think about breaking with that girl. Better for both of us—but you shall advise me.– I'll tell you everything some day. I can't now. I'm too ashamed of myself.'

When he got home, Harvey wrote a cheque for fifty pounds, and posted it at once.

Not many days after, there came to him a letter from Mrs. Frothingham. With this lady he had held no communication since the catastrophe of last November; knowing not how to address her without giving more pain than his sympathy could counterbalance, he remained silent. She wrote from the neighbourhood of Swiss Cottage, where she had taken a flat; it was her wish, if possible, to see him 'on a matter of business', and she requested that he would make an appointment. Much

wondering in what business of Mrs. Frothingham's he could be concerned, Harvey named his time, and went to pay the call. He ascended many stairs, and was conducted by a neat servant-maid into a pleasant little drawing-room, where Mrs. Frothingham rose to receive him. She searched his face, as if to discern the feeling with which he regarded her, and her timid smile of reassurance did not lack its pathos.

'Mr. Rolfe, it seems years since I saw you.'

She was aged a little, and her voice fell in broken notes, an unhappy contrast to the gay, confident chirping of less than twelve months ago.

'I have only been settled here for a week. I thought of leaving London altogether, but, after all, I had to come backwards and forwards so often,—it was better to have a home here, and this little flat will just suit me, I think.'

She seemed desirous of drawing attention to its modest proportions.

'I really don't need a house, and lodgings are so wretched. These flats are a great blessing—don't you think? I shall manage here with one servant, only one.'

Rolfe struggled with the difficulty of not knowing what to say. There was nothing for it but to discourse as innocently as might be on the advantages of flats, their increasing popularity, and the special charms of this particular situation. Mrs. Frothingham eagerly agreed with everything, and did her best to allow no moment of silence.

'You have heard from Miss Frothingham, I think?' she presently let fall, with a return of anxiety.

'Not very long ago. From Leipzig.'

'Yes. Yes.—I don't know whether she will stay there. You know she is thinking of taking up music professionally?—Yes. Yes.—I do so hope she will find it possible, but of course that kind of career is so very uncertain. I'm not sure that I shouldn't be glad if she turned to something else.'

The widow was growing nervous and self-contradictory. With a quick movement of her hands, she suddenly resumed in another tone.

'Mr. Rolfe, I do so wish you would let me speak to you in confidence. I want to ask your help in a most delicate matter. Not, of course, about my step-daughter, though I shall have to mention her. It is something quite personal to myself. If I could hope that you wouldn't think it tiresome—I have a special reason for appealing to you.'

He would gladly, said Harvey, be of any use he could.

'I want to speak to you about painful things,' pursued his hostess, with an animation and emphasis which made her more like the lady of Fitzjohn Avenue. 'You know everything—except my own position, and that is what I wish to explain to you. I won't go into details. I will only say that a few years ago my husband made over to me a large sum of money—I had none of my own—and that it still belongs to me. I say belongs to me; but there is my trouble. I fear I have no right whatever to call it mine. And

there are people who have suffered such dreadful losses. Some of them you know. There was a family named Abbott. I wanted to ask you about them. Poor Mr. Abbott—I remember reading–'

She closed her eyes for an instant, and the look upon her face told that this was no affectation of an anguished memory.

'It was accident,' Rolfe hastened to say. 'The jury found it accidental death.'

'But there was the loss—I read it all. He had lost everything. Do tell me what became of his family. Someone told me they were friends of yours.'

'Happily they had no children. There was a small life-insurance. Mrs Abbott used to be a teacher, and she is going to take that up again.'

'Poor thing! Is she quite young?'

'Oh, about thirty, I should say.'

'Will she go into a school?'

'No. Private pupils at her own house. She has plenty of courage, and will do fairly well, I think.'

'Still, it is shocking that she should have lost all—her husband, too, just at that dreadful time. This is what I wanted to say, Mr. Rolfe. Do you think it would be possible to ask her to accept something–? I do so feel,' she hurried on, 'that I ought to make some sort of restitution—what I can—to those who lost everything. I am told that things are not quite hopeless; something may be recovered out of the wreck some day. But it will be such a long time, and meanwhile people are suffering

so. And here am I left in comfort—more than comfort. It isn't right; I couldn't rest till I did something. I am glad to say that I have been able to help a little here and there, but only the kind of people whom it's easy to help. A case like Mrs. Abbott's is far worse, yet there's such a difficulty in doing anything; one might only give offence. I'm sure my name must be hateful to her—as it is to so many.'

Rolfe listened with a secret surprise. He had never thought ill of Mrs Frothingham; but, on the other hand, had never attributed to her any save superficial qualities, a lightsome temper, pleasure in hospitality, an easy good nature towards all the people of her acquaintance. He would not have supposed her capable of substantial sacrifices; least of all, on behalf of strangers and inspired by a principle. She spoke with the simplest sincerity; it was impossible to suspect her motives. The careless liking with which he had always regarded her was now infused with respect; he became gravely attentive, and answered in a softer voice.

'She was embittered at first, but is overcoming it. To tell you the truth, I think she will benefit by this trial. I don't like the words that are so often used in cant; I don't believe that misery does any good to most people—indeed, I know very well that it generally does harm. But Mrs. Abbott seems to be an exception; she has a good deal of character; and there were circumstances —well, I will only say that she faces the change in her life very bravely.'

'I do wish I knew her. But I daren't ask that. It's too much to

expect that she could bear to see me and listen to what I have to say.'

'The less she's reminded of the past the better, I think.'

'But would it not be possible to do something? I am told that the sum was about fifteen hundred pounds. The whole of that I couldn't restore; but half of it—I could afford so much. Could I offer to do so—not directly, in my own name, but through you?'

Harvey reflected, his head and body bent forward, his hands folded together. In the flat beneath, someone was jingling operetta on a piano not quite in tune; the pertinacious vivacity of the airs interfered with Harvey's desire to view things seriously. He had begun to wonder how large a capital Mrs. Frothingham had at her command. Was it not probable that she could as easily bestow fifteen hundred pounds as the half of that sum? But the question was unworthy. If in truth she had set herself to undo as much as possible of the wrong perpetrated by her husband, Mrs. Frothingham might well limit her benefactions, be her fortune what it might.

'I will do whatever you desire,' he said, with deliberation. 'I cannot answer for Mrs. Abbott, but, if you wish it, she shall know what you have in mind.'

'I do wish it,' replied the lady earnestly. 'I beg you to put this before her, and with all the persuasion you can use. I should be very, very glad if she would allow me to free my conscience from a little of this burden. Only that I dare not speak of it, I would try to convince you that I am doing what my dear husband himself

would have wished. You can't believe it; no one will ever believe it; even Alma, I am afraid—and that is so cruel, so dreadful; but he did not mean to wrong people in this way. It wasn't in his nature. Who knew him better than I, or so well? I know—if he could come back to us–'

Her voice broke. The piano below jingled more vivaciously than ever, and a sound of shrill laughter pierced through the notes. Afraid to sit silent, lest he should seem unsympathetic and sceptical, Rolfe murmured a few harmless phrases, tending to nervous incoherence.

'I am thinking so much about Alma,' pursued the widow, recovering self-command. 'I am so uncertain about my duty to her. Of her own, she has nothing; but I know, of course, that her father wished her to share in what he gave me. It is strange, Mr. Rolfe, that I should be talking to you as if you were a relative —as if I had a right to trouble you with these things. But if you knew how few people I dare speak to. Wasn't it so much better for her to lead a very quiet life? And so I gave her only a little money, only enough to live upon in the simplest way. I hoped she would get tired of being among strangers, and come back. And now I fear she thinks I have behaved meanly and selfishly. And we were always so kindly disposed to each other, such thorough friends; never a word that mightn't have passed between a mother and her own child.'

'I gathered from her letter,' interposed Harvey, 'that she was well contented and working hard at her music.'

'Do you think so? I began to doubt—she wrote in low spirits. Of course, one can't say whether she would succeed as a violinist. Oh, I don't like to think of it! I must tell you that I haven't said a word to her yet of what I am doing; I mean, about the money. I know I ought to consider *her* as much as other people. Poor girl, who has suffered more, and in so many ways? But I think of what I keep for myself as hers. I was not brought up in luxury, Mr. Rolfe. It wouldn't seem to me hard to live on a very little. But in this, too, I must consider Alma. I daren't lose all my acquaintances. I must keep a home for Alma, and a home she wouldn't feel ashamed of. Here, you see, she could have her friends. I have thought of going to Leipzig; but I had so much rather she came to London—if only for us just to talk and understand each other.'

Harvey preserved the gravest demeanour. Of Alma he would not permit himself to speak, save in answer to a direct question; and that was not long in coming.

'I am sure you think I should be quite open with her?'

'That would seem to me the best.'

'Yes; she shall know all my thoughts. But with regard to Mrs. Abbott, I know so well what she would say. I beg you to do me that kindness, Mr Rolfe.'

'I will write to Mrs. Abbott at once.'

The interview was at an end; neither had anything more to say. They parted with looks of much mutual kindliness, Harvey having promised to make another call when Mrs. Abbott's reply

had reached him.

After exchanging letters with Mrs. Abbott, Harvey went over to see her; for the sake of both persons concerned, he resolved to leave no possibility of misunderstanding. A few days passed in discussions and reflections, then, at the customary hour for paying calls, he again ascended the many stairs to Mrs. Frothingham's flat. It had rained all day, and in this weather there seemed a certainty that the lady would be at home. But, as he approached the door, Harvey heard a sound from within which discomposed him. Who, save one person, was likely to be playing on the violin in these rooms? He paused, cast about him a glance of indecision, and finally pressed the electric bell.

Mrs. Frothingham was not at home. She might return very shortly.

'Is—Miss Frothingham at home?'

The servant did not straightway admit him, but took his name. On his entering the drawing-room, three figures appeared before him. He saw Alma; he recognised Miss Leach; the third lady was named to him as Miss Leach's sister.

'You knew I was in London?' Alma remarked rather than inquired.

'I had no idea of it—until I heard your violin.'

'My violin, but not my playing. It was Miss Leach.'

From the first word—her 'Ah, how d'you do' as he entered—Alma's tone and manner appeared to him forced, odd, unlike anything he remembered of her. In correcting him, she gave

a hard, short laugh, glancing at Dora Leach in a way verging upon the ill-bred. Her look had nothing amiable, though she continuously smiled, and when she invited the visitor to be seated, it was with off-hand familiarity very unflattering to his ear.

'You came to see Mamma, of course. I dare say she won't be long. She had to go through the rain on business with someone or other—perhaps you know. Have you been in London all the summer? Oh no, I remember you told me you had been somewhere in France; on the Loire, wasn't it?'

Rolfe dropped a careless affirmative. His temper prompted him to ask whether Miss Frothingham knew the difference between the Loire and the Garonne; but on the whole he was more puzzled than offended. What had come over this young woman? Outwardly she was not much altered—a little thinner in the face, perhaps; her eyes seeming a trifle darker and deeper set; but in the point of demeanour she had appreciably suffered. Her bearing and mode of speech were of that kind which, in a man, would be called devil-may-care. Was it a result of student-life? If her stinted allowance had already produced effects such as this, Mrs Frothingham was justified in uneasiness.

He turned to Miss Leach, and with her talked exclusively for some minutes. As soon as civility permitted, he would rise and make his escape. Alma, the while, chatted with the younger sister, whom she addressed as 'Gerda'. Then the door opened, and Mrs. Frothingham came in, wearing her out-of-doors and

gave him cordial welcome, though in few and nervous costume; she fixed her eyes on Rolfe with a peculiar intensity, words.

'I am no longer alone, you see.' She threw a swift side-glance at Alma. 'It is a great pleasure.'

'Does it rain still, Mamma?' asked Alma in a high voice.

'Not just now, my dear; but it's very disagreeable.'

'Then I'll walk with you to the station.' She addressed the sisters. 'Dora and Gerda can't stay; they have an appointment at five o'clock. They'll come again in a day or two.'

After the leave-takings, and when Alma, with a remark that she would not be long, had closed the door behind her, Mrs. Frothingham seated herself and began to draw off her gloves. The bonnet and cloak she was wearing, though handsome and in the mode, made her look older than at Rolfe's last visit. She was now a middle-aged woman, with emphasis on the qualifying term; in home dress she still asserted her sex, grace of figure and freshness of complexion prevailing over years and sorrows. At this moment, moreover, weariness, and perhaps worry, appeared in her countenance.

'Thank you so much for coming,' she said quietly. 'You must have been surprised when you saw–'

'I was, indeed.'

'And my surprise was still greater, when, without any warning, Alma walked into the room two days ago. But I was so glad, so very glad.'

She breathed a little sigh, looking round.

'Hasn't Alma given her friends any tea? I must ring—Thank you.—Oh, the wretched, wretched day! I seem to notice the weather so much more than I used to. Does it affect you at all?'

Not till the tea-tray was brought in, and she had sipped from her cup, did Mrs. Frothingham lay aside these commonplaces. With abrupt gravity, and in a subdued voice, she at length inquired the result of Rolfe's delicate mission.

'I think,' he replied, 'that I made known your wish as clearly and urgently as possible. I have seen Mrs. Abbott, and written to her twice. It will be best, perhaps, if I ask you to read her final letter. I have her permission to show it to you.'

He drew the letter from its envelope, and with a nervous hand Mrs Frothingham took it for perusal. Whilst she was thus occupied, Rolfe averted his eyes; when he knew that she had read to the end, he looked at her. She had again sighed, and Harvey could not help imagining it an involuntary signal of relief.

'I am very glad to have read this, Mr. Rolfe. If you had merely told me that Mrs. Abbott refused, I should have felt nothing but pain. As it is, I understand that she *could* only refuse, and I am most grateful for all she says about me. I regret more than ever that I don't know her.'

As she handed the letter back, it shook like a blown leaf. She was pale, and spoke with effort. But in a few moments, when conversation was resumed, her tone took a lightness and freedom which confirmed Rolfe's impression that she had escaped from a great embarrassment; and this surmise he inevitably connected

with Alma's display of strange ill-humour.

Not another word passed on the subject. With frequent glances towards the door, Mrs. Frothingham again talked commonplace. Harvey, eager to get away, soon rose.

'Oh, you are not going? Alma will be back in a moment.'

And as her step-mother spoke, the young lady reappeared.

'Why didn't you give your friends tea, dear?'

'I forgot all about it. That comes of living alone. Dora has composed a gavotte, Mamma. She was playing it when Mr. Rolfe came. It's capital! Is Mr. Rolfe going?'

Harvey murmured his peremptory resolve. Mrs. Frothingham, rising, said that she was almost always at home in the afternoon; that it would always give her so much pleasure–

'You remain in England?' asked Harvey, barely touching the hand which Alma cavalierly offered.

'I really don't know. Perhaps I ought to, just to look after Mamma.'

Mrs. Frothingham uttered a little exclamation, and tried to laugh. On the instant, Harvey withdrew.

By the evening's post on the following day he was surprised to receive a letter addressed in Alma's unmistakable hand. The contents did not allay his wonder.

> DEAR MR ROLFE,
>
> I am sure you will not mind if I use the privilege of a fairly long acquaintance and speak plainly about something that I regard as important. I wish to say that I am quite

old enough, and feel quite competent, to direct the course of my own life. It is very kind of you, indeed, to take an interest in what I do and what I hope to do, and I am sure Mamma will be fittingly grateful for any advice you may have offered with regard to me. But I feel obliged to say quite distinctly that I must manage my own affairs. Pray excuse this freedom, and believe me, yours truly,

He gasped, and with wide eyes read the missive again and again. As soon as his nerves were quieted, he sat down and replied thus:–

DEAR MISS FROTHINGHAM,

Your frankness can only be deemed a compliment. It is perhaps a triviality on my part, but I feel prompted to say that I have at no time discussed your position or prospects with Mrs. Frothingham, and that I have neither offered advice on the subject nor have been requested to do so. If this statement should appear to you at all germane to the matter, I beg you will take it into consideration.—And I am, yours truly,

HARVEY RADCLIFFE ROLFE

CHAPTER 10

This reply despatched, Harvey congratulated himself on being quits with Miss Frothingham. Her letter, however amusing, was deliberate impertinence; to have answered it in a serious tone would have been to encourage ill-mannered conceit which merited nothing but a snub.

But what had excited her anger? Had Mrs. Frothingham been guilty of some indiscretion, or was it merely the result of hotheaded surmises and suspicions on the girl's part? Plainly, Alma had returned to England in no amiable mood; in all probability she resented her step-mother's behaviour, now that it had been explained to her; there had arisen 'unpleasantness' on the old, the eternal subject—money. Ignoble enough; but was it a new thing for him to discern ignoble possibilities in Alma's nature?

Nevertheless, his thoughts were constantly occupied with the girl. Her image haunted him; all his manhood was subdued and mocked by her scornful witchery. From the infinitudes of reverie, her eyes drew near and gazed upon him—eyes gleaming with mischief, keen with curiosity; a look now supercilious, now softly submissive; all the varieties of expression caught in susceptible moments, and stored by a too faithful memory. Her hair, her lips, her neck, grew present to him, and lured his fancy with a wanton seduction. In self-defence—pathetic

stratagem of intellectual man at issue with the flesh—he fell back upon the idealism which ever strives to endow a fair woman with a beautiful soul; he endeavoured to forget her body in contemplation of the spiritual excellencies that might lurk behind it. To depreciate her was simpler, and had generally been his wont; but subjugation had reached another stage in him. He summoned all possible pleadings on the girl's behalf: her talents, her youth, her grievous trials. Devotion to classical music cannot but argue a certain loftiness of mind; it might, in truth, be somehow akin to 'religion'. Remembering his own follies and vices at the age of four-and-twenty, was it not reason, no less than charity, to see in Alma the hope of future good? Nay, if it came to that, did she not embody infinitely more virtue, in every sense of the word, than he at the same age?

One must be just to women, and, however paltry the causes, do honour to the cleanliness of their life. Nothing had suggested to him that Alma was unworthy of everyday respect. Even when ill-mannered, she did not lose her sexual dignity. And after all she had undergone, there would have been excuse enough for decline of character, to say nothing of a lapse from the articles of good breeding. This letter of hers, what did it signify but the revolt of a spirit of independence, irritated by all manner of sufferings, great and small? Ought he not to have replied in other terms? Was it worthy of him—man of the world, with passions, combats, experience multiform, assimilated in his long, slow growth—to set his sarcasm against a girl's unhappiness?

He was vexed with himself. He had not behaved as a gentleman. And how many a time, in how many situations, had he incurred this form of self-reproach!

When a week went by without anything more from Alma, Harvey ceased to trouble. As the fates directed, so be it. He began to pack the books which he would take with him into Wales.

One day he found himself at Kensington High Street, waiting for a City train. In idleness, he watched the people who alighted from carriages on the opposite side of the platform, and among them he saw Alma. On her way towards the stairs she was obliged to pass him; he kept his position, and only looked into her face when she came quite near. She bent her head with a half-smile, stopped, and spoke in a low voice, without sign of embarrassment.

'I was quite wrong. I found it out soon after I had written, and I have wanted to beg your pardon.'

'It is my part to do that,' Harvey replied. 'I ought not to have answered as I did.'

'Perhaps not—all things considered. I'm rather in a hurry. Good-morning!'

As a second thought, she offered her hand. Harvey watched her trip up the stairs.

Next morning he had a letter from her. 'Dear Mr. Rolfe,' she wrote, 'did you let Mamma know of my hasty and foolish behaviour? If not—and I very much hope you didn't—please not to reply to this, but let us see you on Wednesday afternoon, just

in the ordinary way. If Mamma *has* been told, still don't trouble to write, and in that case I dare say you will not care to come. If you are engaged this Wednesday, perhaps you could come next.' And she signed herself his sincerely.

He did not reply, and Wednesday saw him climbing once more to the little flat; ashamed of being here, yet unable to see how he could have avoided it, except by leaving London. For that escape he had no longer much mind. Quite consciously, and with uneasiness which was now taking a new form, he had yielded to Alma's fascination. However contemptible and unaccountable, this was the state of things with him, and, as he waited for the door to be opened, it made him feel more awkward, more foolish, than for many a long year.

Mrs. Frothingham and her step-daughter were sitting alone, the elder lady occupied with fancy-work, at her feet a basket of many-coloured silks, and the younger holding a book; nothing could have been quieter or more home-like. No sooner had he entered than he overcame all restraint, all misgiving; there was nothing here today but peace and good feeling, gentle voices and quiet amiability. Whatever shadow had arisen between the two ladies must have passed utterly away; they spoke to each other with natural kindness, and each had a tranquil countenance.

Alma began at once to talk of their common friends, the Carnabys, asking whether Rolfe knew that they were in Australia.

'I knew they had decided to go,' he answered. 'But I haven't heard for at least two months.'

'Oh, then I can give you all the news; I had a letter yesterday. When Mrs. Carnaby wrote, they had spent a fortnight at Melbourne, and were going on to Brisbane. Mr. Carnaby is going to do something in Queensland—something about mines. I'll read you that part.'

The letter lay in the book she was holding. Sibyl wrote indefinitely, but Harvey was able to gather that the mining engineer, Dando, had persuaded Carnaby to take an active interest in his projects. Discussion on speculative enterprises did not recommend itself to the present company, and Rolfe could only express a hope that his friend had at last found a pursuit in which he could interest himself.

'But fancy Sibyl at such places!' exclaimed Alma, with amusement. 'How curious I shall be to see her when she comes back! Before she left England, I'm sure she hadn't the least idea in what part of Australia Brisbane was, or Melbourne either. I didn't know myself; had to look at a map. You'll think that a shameful confession, Mr. Rolfe.'

'My own ideas of Australian geography are vague enough.'

'Oh, but haven't you been there?'

'Not to any of the new countries; I don't care about them. A defect, I admit. The future of England is beyond seas. I would have children taught all about the Colonies before bothering them with histories of Greece and Rome. I wish I had gone out there myself as a boy, and grown up a sheep-farmer.'

Alma laughed.

'That's one of the things you say just to puzzle people. It contradicts all sorts of things I've heard you say at other times.—Do *you* think, Mamma, that Mr. Rolfe missed his vocation when he didn't become a sheep-farmer?'

Mrs. Frothingham gently shook her head. No trace of nervousness appeared in her today; manipulating the coloured silks, she only now and then put in a quiet word, but followed the talk with interest.

'But I quite thought you had been to Australia,' Alma resumed. 'You see, it's very theoretical, your admiration of the new countries. And I believe you would rather die at once in England than go to live in any such part of the world.'

'Weakness of mind, that's all.'

'Still, you admit it. That's something gained. You always smile at other people's confessions, and keep your own mind mysterious.'

'Mysterious? I always thought one of my faults was over-frankness.'

'That only shows how little we know ourselves.'

Harvey was reflecting on the incompleteness of his knowledge of Alma. Intentionally or not, she appeared to him at this moment in a perfectly new light; he could not have pictured her so simple of manner, so direct, so placid. Trouble seemed to have given her a holiday, and at the same time to have released her from self-consciousness.

'But you have never told us,' she went on, 'about your

wanderings in France this summer. English people don't go much to that part, do they?'

'No. I happened to read a book about it. It's the old fighting-ground of French and English—interesting to any one pedantic enough to care for such things.'

'But not to people born to be sheep-farmers. And you had a serious illness.—Did Mr. Rolfe tell you, Mamma dear, that he nearly died at some miserable roadside inn?'

Mrs. Frothingham looked startled, and declared she knew nothing of it. Harvey, obliged to narrate, did so in the fewest possible words, and dismissed the matter.

'I suppose you have had many such experiences,' said Alma. 'And when do you start on your next travels?'

'I have nothing in view. I half thought of going for the winter to a place in North Wales—Carnarvonshire, on the outer sea.'

The ladies begged for more information, and he related how, on a ramble with a friend last spring (it was Basil Morton), he had come upon this still little town between the mountains and the shore, amid a country shining with yellow gorse, hills clothed with larch, heathery moorland, ferny lanes, and wild heights where the wind roars on crag or cairn.

'No railway within seven miles. Just the place for a pedant to escape to, and live there through the winter with his musty books.'

'But it must be equally delightful for people who are not pedants!' exclaimed Alma.

'In spring or summer, no doubt, though even then the civilised person would probably find it dull.'

'That's your favourite affectation again. I'm sure it's nothing but affectation when you speak scornfully of civilised people.'

'Scornfully I hope I never do.'

'Really, Mamma,' said Alma, with a laugh, 'Mr. Rolfe is in his very mildest humour today. We mustn't expect any reproofs for our good. He will tell us presently that we are patterns of all the virtues.'

Mrs. Frothingham spoke in a graver strain.

'But I'm sure it is possible to be too civilised—to want too many comforts, and become a slave to them. Since I have been living here, Mr Rolfe, you can't think how I have got to enjoy the simplicity of this kind of life. Everything is so easy; things go so smoothly. Just one servant, who can't make mistakes, because there's next to nothing to do. No wonder people are taking to flats.'

'And is that what you mean by over-civilisation?' Alma asked of Rolfe.

'I didn't say anything about it. But I should think many people in large and troublesome houses would agree with Mrs. Frothingham. It's easy to imagine a time when such burdens won't be tolerated. Our misfortune is, of course, that we are not civilised enough.'

'Not enough to give up fashionable nonsense. I agree with that. We're wretched slaves, most of us.'

It was the first sentence Alma had spoken in a tone that Rolfe recognised. For a moment her face lost its placid smile, and Harvey hoped that she would say more to the same purpose; but she was silent.

'I'm sure,' remarked Mrs. Frothingham, with feeling, 'that most happiness is found in simple homes.'

'Can we be simple by wishing it?' asked Alma. 'Don't you think we have to be born to simplicity?'

'I'm not sure that I know what you mean by the word,' said Harvey.

'I'm not sure that I know myself. Mamma meant poverty, I think. But there may be a simple life without poverty, I should say. I'm thinking of disregard for other people's foolish opinions; living just as you feel most at ease—not torturing yourself because it's the custom.'

'That's just what requires courage,' Rolfe remarked.

'Yes; I suppose it does. One knows people who live in misery just because they daren't be comfortable; keeping up houses and things they can't afford, when, if they only considered themselves, their income would be quite enough for everything they really want. If you come to think of it, that's too foolish for belief.'

Harvey felt that the topic was growing dangerous. He said nothing, but wished to have more of Alma's views in this direction. They seemed to strike her freshly; perhaps she had never thought of the matter in this way before.

'That's what I meant,' she continued, 'when I said you must be born to simplicity. I should think no one ever gave up fashionable extravagance just because they saw it to be foolish. People haven't the strength of mind. I dare say,' she added, with a bright look, 'anyone who *was* strong enough to do that kind of thing would be admired and envied.'

'By whom?' Rolfe asked.

'Oh, by their acquaintances who were still slaves.'

'I don't know. Admiration and envy are not commonly excited by merely reasonable behaviour.'

'But this would be something more than merely reasonable. It would be the beginning of a revolution.'

'My dear,' remarked Mrs. Frothingham, smiling sadly, 'people would never believe that it didn't mean loss of money.'

'They might be made to believe it. It would depend entirely on the persons, of course.'

Alma seemed to weary of the speculation, and to throw it aside. Harvey noticed a shadow on her face again, which this time did not pass quickly.

He was so comfortable in his chair, the ladies seemed so entirely at leisure, such a noiseless calm brooded about them, unbroken by any new arrival, that two hours went by insensibly, and with lingering reluctance the visitor found it time to take his leave. On reviewing the afternoon, Harvey concluded that it was probably as void of meaning as of event. Alma, on friendly terms once more with her step-mother, felt for the moment

amiably disposed towards everyone, himself included; this idle good humour and insignificant talk was meant, no doubt, for an apology, all he had to expect. It implied, of course, thorough indifference towards him as an individual. As a member of their shrunken circle, he was worth retaining. Having convinced herself of his innocence of undue pretensions, Alma would, as the children say, be friends again, and everything should go smoothly.

He lived through a week of the wretchedest indecision, and at the end of it, when Wednesday afternoon came round, was again climbing the many stairs to the Frothinghams' flat; even more nervous than last time, much more ashamed of himself, and utterly doubtful as to his reception. The maid admitted him without remark, and showed him into an empty room. When he had waited for five minutes, staring at objects he did not see, Alma entered.

'Mamma went out to lunch,' she said, languidly shaking hands with him, 'and hasn't come back yet.'

No greeting could have conveyed less encouragement. She seated herself with a lifeless movement, looked at him, and smiled as if discharging a duty.

'I thought'—he blundered into speech—'that Wednesday was probably your regular afternoon.'

'There is nothing regular yet. We haven't arranged our life. We are glad to see our friends whenever they come.—Pray sit down.'

He did so, resolving to stay for a few minutes only. In the

silence that followed, their eyes met, and, as though it were too much trouble to avert her look, Alma continued to regard him. She smiled again, and with more meaning.

'So you have quite forgiven me?' fell from her lips, just when Harvey was about to speak.

'As I told you at the station, I feel that there is more fault on my side. You wrote under such a strange misconception, and I ought to have patiently explained myself.'

'Oh no! You were quite right in treating me sharply. I don't quite remember what I said, but I know it must have been outrageous. After that, I did what I ought to have done before, just had a talk with Mamma.'

'Then you took it for granted, without any evidence, that I came here as a meddler or busybody?'

His voice was perfectly good-humoured, and Alma answered in the same tone.

'I *thought* there was evidence. Mamma had been talking about her affairs, and mentioned that she had consulted you about something—Oh, about Mrs. Abbott.'

'Very logical, I must say,' remarked Rolfe, laughing.

'I don't think logic is my strong point.'

She sat far back in the easy chair, her head supported, her hands resting upon the chair arms. The languor which she hardly made an effort to overcome began to invade her companion, like an influence from the air; he gazed at her, perceiving a new beauty in the half-upturned face, a new seductiveness in the

slim, abandoned body. A dress of grey silk, trimmed with black, refined the ivory whiteness of her flesh; its faint rustling when she moved affected Harvey with a delicious thrill.

'There's no reason, now,' she continued, 'why we shouldn't talk about it—I mean, the things you discussed with Mamma. You imagine, I dare say, that I selfishly objected to what she was doing. Nothing of the kind. I didn't quite see why she had kept it from me, that was all. It was as if she felt afraid of my greediness. But I'm not greedy; I don't think I'm more selfish than ordinary people. And I think Mamma is doing exactly what she ought; I'm very glad she felt about things in that way.'

Harvey nodded, and spoke in a subdued voice.

'I was only consulted about one person, whom I happened to know.'

'Yes—Mrs. Abbott.'

Her eyes were again fixed upon him, and he read their curiosity. Just as he was about to speak, the servant appeared with tea. Alma slowly raised herself, and, whilst she plied the office of hostess, Harvey got rid of the foolish hat and stick that encumbered him. He had now no intention of hurrying away.

As if by natural necessity, they talked of nothing in particular whilst tea was sipped. Harvey still held his cup, when at the outer door sounded a rat-tat-tat, causing him silently to execrate the intruder, whoever it might be. Unheeding, and as if she had not heard, Alma chatted of trifles. Harvey's ear detected movements without, but no one entered; in a minute or two, he again breathed

freely.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.