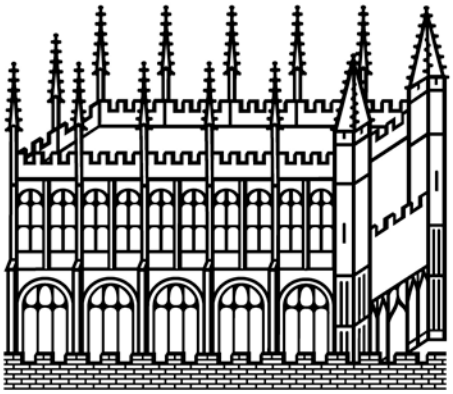

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THE HOUSE OF MENERDUE

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LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

THE HOUSE OF MENERDUE

by

A. C. BENSON

My prettiest Perdita! But oh, the thorns we stand upon!

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1925

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I

MORNING was coming in up Boscarnon Creek, and over the old house known as Menerdue. The sky was clear above, with a few great white sailing clouds that seemed almost the most solid things in the scene, so sharply cut were their mimic bluffs and hollows. There were faint streaks and swathes of mist upon the upper waters of the creek, where it wound softly into the enfolding hills. The low wolds which surrounded the estuary were mapped out by hedges into patches of orange stubble or green pasture, with here and there a dark stretch of woodland. The tide had just turned, and the ebb was gliding gently out seawards, the water an intense blue, with liquid golden discs and ovals of light from the newly-risen sun forming, dancing, and vanishing again ; only in the reflection of the woodland across the creek it lay clear and still, as green as emerald.

The house of Menerdue stood on the water's edge, just where the creek turned to the south, and about a mile from the open sea. The whole of the hill above it was covered with woods of oak and pine, brushed into a kind of soft solidity by the sea-winds, above which was dimly visible the high, grassy moorland known as Caer Brynon. The house itself was of a rough white, with a grey roof of old slate, lightly smeared with plaster—a long, low house, many-windowed, ending in a grim square granite tower, with a panel of dim stone heraldry high up on the seaward wall, the whole much weathered and lichen-streaked, designed in bygone years to guard the ferry. Behind it, a big walled garden ran up into the

wood, where everything grew luxuriantly in the sheltered sun-warmed air. In front of the house was a flagged terrace, with big bushes of hydrangea and purple veronica. Below that was a wharf which thrust boldly out into the creek, built of solid old stones, and with a granite stair descending to the water's edge, many of the steps being now covered by the tide. The road by which the house was approached skirted the shore just within the wood, and came out, between two granite pillars crowned with balls, on the little fishing hamlet of Polcrello.

The air blowing up from the sea was incredibly fresh, and full of the pure scent of brine and seaweed. Along the shore, which ran either way under small cliffs of soft, buff-coloured stone tufted with bushes, a flock of curlew ran peeping and picking, uttering at times a liquid tremolo. A heron or two stood at attention with head thrown back and wings folded, and further out a bevy of gulls floated like white boats on the water. Otherwise there was no sign of life, except a solitary boat working its way across the passage, the sound of the oars in the rowlocks coming hollow and rhythmical to the ear.

It was nearly seven o'clock when the door from the house opened quietly under its projecting over-sill of granite, and a girl of about nineteen or twenty came out briskly on to the terrace, in a dark blue bathing-dress and cap—a slim, strong young figure, almost more boyish than girlish in aspect. She flung down a towel on the terrace-wall, and went down the flight of steps from the end of the terrace to the little sea-pool, contrived behind the projecting end of the wharf, where a couple of white boats lay. Off the lowest step she plunged, and swam round the end of the wharf into the open water, displaying a good deal of unnecessary energy. As she turned to go back, a sedate old spaniel came to the edge of the wharf

and looked over. " Come on, Bryn," said the girl from the water, in a clear young voice. But Bryn contented himself with wagging his tail, looking lovingly at his mistress, and sitting down firmly on the step just above the water to wait for the prodigal's return. " Coward ! " said the nymph ; but Bryn only gazed more fondly than ever from his post. A few minutes later she was back at the wharf steps, up which she darted, all dripping, caught up her towel, seated herself on the wall, and while she made a few perfunctory flourishes with it before entering the house, she called up to an open window, " Mother, are you up ? " A rather low, rich voice from the window above said, " Yes, dear." " What are you doing ? " said the girl. " Well, if you want to know, I am saying my prayers." There was a moment's silence, and then " That's *most* unfair ! " said the girl, which was answered by a little laugh from above. The girl glanced up with an impatient air, which suddenly broke into a smile ; and, shrugging her shoulders, she sauntered into the house, after giving Bryn, who sat adoring her, a friendly flick with her towel.

Half an hour later, mother and daughter met in the dining-room, a long room with oak beams looking out on the terrace. The room had an old-fashioned red paper which gave it a comfortable air. It was sparsely furnished with a few old chairs and a sideboard, and some dusky portraits hung on the walls. By the fireplace was one big leather arm-chair.

Mrs. Davenant was a woman of about forty-five, comely, dark-haired and dark-skinned, with big, black, vivid-looking eyes, and a stately smiling air. Her daughter, indeed, in a provocative mood, used to tell her that she looked like a gipsy, and complained that her eyes gave her a most unjust advantage, " because mother always

looks as if she was deeply interested in everything and everybody, when she really is thinking about something quite different, and not attending to anyone at all."

Molly herself was very little like her mother, though with much of her mother's animation, at present quite unsubdued by experience. She was not exactly beautiful in her graver moments; her features were a little irregular; but her light-brown rippling hair, her liquid hazel eyes and her expressive slightly-parted lips gave her, when she smiled, an irresistibly friendly and charming aspect, took the sting out of her frank utterances and her direct unflinching gaze, and unknown to herself made her beloved and trusted by all who knew her. She spoke her mind and gave no offence; she laughed at everyone, but her warm heart told her exactly how far she might go. She was full, too, of active sympathy and helpfulness, with the result that her neighbours welcomed her like a ray of sunlight, the servants adored her, the people of the village would do anything to oblige her, and set a value, which would have been inconceivable to Molly herself, upon her breezy visits and lightest words.

But she was wholly unaware of all this as yet. She looked upon herself as rather stupid and commonplace. She had, indeed, little of her mother's ability and intellectual grip, and was frequently baffled by some of Mrs. Davenant's rather cryptic and epigrammatic sayings. Mrs. Davenant herself was greatly admired and even trusted by her neighbours; but she had a certain stateliness, and could be formidable on occasions. She could not gossip and jest like Molly, and, indeed, in her secret heart often envied Molly's gift of sweet and unaffected companionableness, recognizing it to be, perhaps, the very happiest quality, if backed by unselfishness, that a human being can possess.

II

MRS. DAVENANT had a local standing which gave her more prestige than wealth, but smoothed her path for her in many ways. The late Lord Helford, head of the Davenant family, who had owned most of the land thereabouts, a strange, solitary and caustic old man, had been childless. He had lived mostly at the ancient manor-house of Nan-Zephron, which lay hidden in the woods above Polcrello. He had another and larger estate in Somersetshire, Colearne Park, which he seldom visited. His nephew, Arthur Davenant, Mrs. Davenant's husband and Molly's father, had been brought up as his heir. Arthur had been a good-natured and active young man, very much like Molly in character and general sociability; and old Lord Helford, on his marriage, had given him Menerdue, on condition that he acted as agent for the Nan-Zephron estate, intimating at the same time that he did not desire too much of his company. But Lord Helford ended by forming a real affection for Mrs. Davenant, whose ironical wit pleased him. When Arthur died suddenly from pneumonia, after three years of married life, leaving only an infant daughter, Lord Helford was not so much distressed as furious at the disarrangement of his plans. However, he gave Mrs. Davenant the use of the house for her life, and allowed her an income of a thousand a year; but he never cared to see Molly, because he was so indignant that she was not a boy. However, on his death some ten years before, though the estate and title passed to a second cousin of Molly's, Robert Davenant, it was found that Lord

Helford had left the house of Menerdue with a few acres of land to Mrs. Davenant, and a sum of thirty thousand pounds, which was a great relief to her, because the old man had been so whimsical and resentful that she had been quite prepared to be punished for her inconsiderateness in not providing an heir for the family honours and wealth.

Robert Davenant was two-and-twenty when he succeeded, and found the rent-roll unexpectedly large. He was a young man of ability and ambition, who had done well at Oxford, and had just entered the Foreign Office. He tried to live at Colearne, but found it dull and unmanageable. He had let Nan-Zephron to a wealthy dilettante, Mr. Temperley, who had been ordered to reside in a mild climate, and he ended by letting Colearne, and migrating to London with his mother, Lady Ann Davenant, who had been an old friend of Mrs. Arthur Davenant's. He took up political work as a Liberal peer, and dabbled in music and literature. He spoke occasionally in the House of Lords with considerable effectiveness, and sat on many Committees ; and he then married, not altogether with his mother's approval. Lady Ann, who had hitherto kept house for her son, left London and settled in the country, and not very much later died suddenly. Soon afterwards, owing to the accession of a Liberal Government to power, Lord Helford had a real stroke of luck. He was made Under-Secretary for the Colonies, and had fully justified the appointment. Indeed, he was regarded at the age of thirty-three as a very rising young man ; he went a good deal into society, and was a welcome guest at many houses, though he had few intimate friends. But meanwhile, after a brief period of mutual bliss, Lord Helford's relations with his wife had become year by year more unsatisfactory. No breath of

scandal assailed them; but she had the reputation of being a frivolous and contemptuous woman, cold in temperament, and inconveniently outspoken. He, on the other hand, had literary and artistic tastes, was emotional and sensitive, needing intimate companionship and ready sympathy. The pair were indeed wholly incompatible in character and disposition, and after a few years of marriage, no child having been born to them, they separated by mutual consent, Lady Helford retiring to the Riviera, with a liberal allowance, while Robert remained in London, immersing himself with restless energy more and more closely in his political work.

III

AT nine o'clock, or soon after, Molly came into the dining-room, and found her mother already at breakfast, but absorbed in the perusal of letters. Mrs. Davenant was always very particular about strict punctuality. She said that it kept a household together, like the hem of a handkerchief, and that it was essential to the comfort of a circle entirely composed of women. She was always down to the minute herself. At a quarter to nine the maids came in, and Mrs. Davenant performed a very unconventional kind of family worship. She read a few verses of the Bible, often, indeed, but a single verse, and then offered up a short extempore prayer, which continued and amplified the leading thought of the Scripture passage. Molly was, however, incurably unpunctual. She rarely contrived to be at prayers, though whenever she was, she thought, and told her mother, that her prayers were beautiful—the only things, indeed, which she had ever heard which were like real prayers, adding that she could not conceive why she was herself not always down in time, except for the reason that cleanliness did, as a matter of fact, rank before godliness.

She was generally late for breakfast as well, which, as she said, at all events showed that she had no base motives. The grim but humorous parlour-maid, Richards, who was a privileged friend, cleared the table relentlessly at 9.30; and if Molly had not appeared by that time, she had to beg for breakfast and eat it in the kitchen, a ceremony which Mrs. Tregenna, the cook, infinitely preferred to the regular ritual, because of the opportunities of con-

versation which it gave her with Miss Molly. But so far as Molly was concerned, her mother allowed her to keep exactly what hours she pleased, with the one stipulation that she should be in time for dinner. Mrs. Davenant was neither resentful nor suspicious, and by no means inclined to fault-finding; but there were occasions when Molly, tempted by the evening light, would appear half-way through the meal with profuse apologies, and found her mother's quiet "You know I don't like it," accompanied with a certain sideways flash of the dark eyes, and a moment or two of silence, a decidedly humiliating ceremony. Mrs. Davenant, in fact, without ever troubling to assert herself, had a certain unanswerable quality about her, and a sense of strictly controlled possibilities of anger which the very few who had ever provoked her beyond endurance did not easily forget. And though a casual visitor might have supposed that the mother was an easy-going woman and her daughter entirely undisciplined, Molly would do almost anything to avoid giving her mother even a momentary shade of displeasure; and in the household, Mrs. Davenant, though she did not care whether she appeared to rule it or not, reigned paramount and unquestioned. If, for instance, Mrs. Davenant said to Molly, "Are you coming with me to-day to Nan-Zephron?" Molly knew that she had a free choice. But if her mother said "You are coming with me to-day, aren't you, to Nan-Zephron?" Molly meekly abandoned any private schemes that she might have formed.

But in ordinary talk, and in matters of opinion, Molly said exactly what she liked to her mother, with the freedom she might have used to a sister, and argued tenaciously, even vehemently. Mrs. Davenant seemed to have no surface prejudices to be shocked, and no traditions too sacred to be questioned, though down below there

were qualities—generosity, self-control, loyalty, honour—which Molly gradually had become aware that her mother passionately adored; while for treachery, meanness, cruelty, coldness, and self-righteousness, if consistently displayed and exulted in, her mother had a disdain that had more than once scared Molly to behold. But Mrs. Davenant did not talk about her deeper emotions, and only those who knew her best even suspected the volcanic forces which she kept so completely controlled. She was, as a matter of fact, an indolent woman, ambitious, but disliking responsibility, and without the perseverance necessary to attempt to realize her vague desires; and she set, moreover, an immense value on personal liberty, which made her tolerant to the verge of indifference, so long as her own freedom was not menaced. To her neighbours, Mrs. Davenant appeared a dignified, insouciant, self-contained woman, with a racy sort of irony that overflowed entertainingly into her talk. But Molly told her mother everything, and each year that she lived found herself more and more inclined to admire and depend upon the good sense and certainty of her mother's rapid and decisive judgments.

Mrs. Davenant was a great reader. Almost her only luxury was the constant flow of new books from a London library. She had a highly critical judgment, and wasted no time on volumes which, however famous, she found uncongenial. Her tastes were for history, memoirs, biographies, plays, lyrical poetry, and the best sort of fiction. She read many French books. Molly was rather a reluctant reader, though capable of becoming deeply interested in a book. But their talk was mostly of people; and Mrs. Davenant was well aware that, though she was herself interested in character and temperament and psychic forces, yet Molly had an infinitely finer instinct in such

matters, and was able to elicit the actual thoughts and feelings of others in a way which often astonished her mother and provoked an admiring wonder in her mind. Mrs. Davenant did not wholly trust her own judgment of people, and was quite aware that her own dominant personality was apt to affect them with the desire to say and to be what they fancied would please her. But Molly could open up direct and unashamed communication with almost anyone, and was not affected by any inconvenient reticence or reserve.

Molly began hostilities this morning by saying, " Why were you so down on me this morning ? I hardly require to be told that you say your prayers ! "

" I find them useful, or at any rate soothing," said Mrs. Davenant. " You asked me what I was doing, and I told you. I'm not ashamed of it—but let me finish this letter. You shall have it in a minute ; it will interest you ! "

" Don't keep me waiting," said Molly ; " I'm dying to see it."

The clock ticked on, and Molly bolted her food. But Mrs. Davenant sat thinking, the letter in her hand.

" Time's up ! " said Molly at last. " Do finish your breakfast, mother, and let me read it."

She jerked it delicately out of Mrs. Davenant's hand, and began to read.

" My goodness, how exciting ! " said Molly at last. " What are you going to do ? "

" What do you suppose ? "

" Of course, he must come. *Won't* Mrs. Tregenna and Richards be in a fuss !—but perhaps he will bring a man ? "

" We can't manage that," said Mrs. Davenant, musing.

" He must do with Richards—she's quite competent."

The letter which had caused these speculations was a

short and friendly one from Lord Helford. Molly read it aloud, for the sake of emphasis.

" *Dear Mary*," she began.

" I didn't know he called you Mary," said Molly.

" Neither did I," said Mrs. Davenant, " but he means it kindly."

" What am I to call him ? " said Molly, anxiously.

" Not one of your nicknames at first," said Mrs. Davenant. " Try ' Robert '—you are his second cousin."

" He mightn't like that."

" No, it will annoy him very much, no doubt. You can say ' your lordship ' if you like."

" That would be stiff," said Molly.

" Well, if you are determined to read my letter aloud, you must go on."

" One thing," said Molly, clasping the letter close, " I must have the fun of breaking it to Richards and Treggy."

" Certainly, if you like—do go on ! "

Molly read on. " *I have to come down to Nan-Zephron to see about some question concerning timber, next week. And also, I am very much in want of a quiet holiday. Can you possibly put me up for a week or two? I know it isn't a great compliment to propose myself like this on a business footing, when I have never been to see you all these years. But I am afraid that as a somewhat busy man I have got into the way of taking rather than making opportunities. Anyhow, I have many things to talk to you about, and I should like to revive what, I hope, may be called an old tie ; and I should like to make acquaintance with my younger cousin, whose name I must confess I have forgotten, if, indeed, I ever heard it.*"

" He shall learn it soon enough," interjected Molly, menacingly.

" *May I bring my car ? I would put it up in the village ;*

and if it is not being troublesome, could you find a lodging for my chauffeur—a very nice, quiet fellow?"

"I can arrange all that," said Molly. "Is he well off, by the way?"

"He's not a pauper," said Mrs. Davenant. Molly read on.

"*Of course, I shall fully understand if you can't manage it, and can easily arrange something else, but I shall hope to see you in any case.*

"*Your affectionate cousin,*
ROBERT."

"Not a bad letter," said Molly; "not sentimental, nor humbugging; and a good handwriting, and pretty good writing paper, better than it looks."

"In fact, you know all about him," said Mrs. Davenant.

"Well, enough to go on with."

"And you would like him to come?"

"Of course—something new for my collection. I think 'Robert' is likely to be rather exciting. I'm a little puzzled by his handwriting. Has he been having a bad time?"

"Why do you say that, Molly?"

"Oh, I don't know—it's a good hand, rather off colour."

"I think I had better tell you all about him; all that I know at any rate. I must have a word with Mrs. Tregenna and Richards.—No, I remember you wanted to do that. Well, come out to the shelter in half an hour, and you shall have the whole story. Meanwhile I will write to Robert. You are sure you can get a good room for the chauffeur?"

IV

"I HAVE told Richards and Mrs. Tregenna," said Molly. "They were in a dreadful state about it, but they bore up for my sake. I pretended to be frightened, too. I told them that a lord had only the right to be rather more displeased than other people. 'But he will be used to such grand ways!' said Mrs. Tregenna. 'It'll be worse for me, Miss,' said Richards, 'and I don't feel as if I should hardly dare to go into his room in the morning, and then it'll be so queer to say "his lordship" every other word.' But we talked it all over, and I think they are really frightfully excited about it all."

"Excitement?—yes," said Mrs. Davenant, "that is even better than comfort."

"It's rather fun *frightening* people," said Molly, "as long as one knows there's nothing to be really frightened about."

"Now, Molly, do sit down and let me tell you all about him."

"Why are you so solemn and serious about it all?" said Molly. "Don't tell me *you* are frightened."

"No, I'm not frightened—but it's a difficult business."

"Difficult?" said Molly, "I should have thought that Robert was like a prince out of a fairy story. Is there anything he hasn't got?"

"All the conveniences, yes," said Mrs. Davenant. "But the one thing which matters he hasn't got."

"What is that?" said Molly, interested in spite of herself.

"It has a good many names," said Mrs. Davenant,

" but I don't know that I can give it a name. You must find out for yourself, if you can."

" This is becoming like a game of clumps," said Molly.

" No, it isn't that. It comes of my being old and your being young. You would not understand me if I told you. Besides I don't mean to tell you. The point is that you should perceive it."

" Curiouser and curiouser ! " said Molly.

" But I want you to know the facts," said Mrs. Davenant. " Robert's mother was my dearest friend. We told each other everything. She was the best woman I have ever seen. Many people have sympathy and some people have imagination—they don't often go together—one is apt to kill the other. Dear Ann had both. She had a marvellous power of loving other people, but she didn't desire that the people she loved should do things in her way, but in their own. She never lost patience or courage. Do you understand all this ? "

" Yes, in a way, mother," said Molly ; " but I never quite feel sure about dividing people up into bits, like oranges. Aren't people pretty much themselves ? "

" Yes, that is true," said Mrs. Davenant, " but the only way you can understand people, if you want to, is to take them to bits. Often it isn't worth while ; and even when you can do it, you have to remember that there is something else beside the bits."

" Well, mother, what happened ? " said Molly.

Mrs. Davenant smiled. " Yes, that's the point ! " she said. " But I wanted you to understand what sort of a woman Ann was."

" I remember her," said Molly ; " she was a perfect old dear."

" Well, Robert was a queer boy—very ambitious, very

sensitive; very affectionate, and ashamed of being so, and extremely resentful. He was intensely devoted to his mother and she to him; but things were not easy—he had a temper and a sharp tongue. However, all went well while he was at school and Oxford; he hadn't many friends, and the fact that he told her everything made up for many little roughnesses. Then he came in for the estate and everything. He was clever and amusing, and he suddenly found the world a very pleasant place—he was flattered and indulged.

"Then he met Cynthia Stanley and fell in love with her—she was a very lovely girl, and almost as ambitious as Robert in a different sort of way. But Ann soon saw that it was a great mistake. They had very few tastes in common; and Robert had at the bottom of his heart a great need for affection, which Cynthia Stanley couldn't give him. And Cynthia was frankly bored by Ann, and very jealous of her influence with Robert, and never lost an opportunity of making her ridiculous in Robert's eyes. Cynthia had a dreadful talent for saying the sort of things that other people think but don't say. I don't know what the exact quarrel was, but it all ended in Ann leaving London, and Robert neither wrote to her, nor went to see her, and hardly even answered her letters. Ann was quite heart-broken about it; but she never showed it, and always believed that things would come right. It was one of those hateful tragedies that only look from outside like mean family squabbles. I heard all about it from Ann herself—she wrote to me constantly. But there was nothing to be done. Cynthia was impervious, and didn't even know that she was wrong. She only looked upon her mother-in-law as an inconvenient and sentimental encumbrance. And then my dearest Ann died, quite suddenly. I was not even in time to see her—you

will remember—and Robert was abroad, and did not even get back for the funeral."

"I wish you hadn't told me all this, mother," said Molly. "Robert seems to have behaved rather brutally. I don't feel as if I could endure the sight of him."

"He behaved badly," said Mrs. Davenant, "but he was still wildly in love with Cynthia. But then she got tired of Robert, and he of her; and eventually they separated—she went off abroad, where she now lives. However, Robert pulled himself together somehow; and then I suppose it began to dawn on him what he had done and what he had lost."

"And he consoled himself by becoming a politician and a diner-out?" said Molly, with an air of contempt.

"Yes," said Mrs. Davenant—"it was the best thing he could do. One has to live on. He might have taken to drink, or even put an end to himself. But, Molly, before you judge Robert, you must remember that he has *not* shirked his trouble. I believe he has been very unhappy ever since. He sees quite clearly what he did, he does not forgive himself; he repents—and very few people do that. He is egotistic, ambitious, selfish if you like. But he *cares*, and he takes his troubles hardly. He has made mistakes, he has been misled by passion; and he has made a mess of his life—of the life behind the scenes, that is—for politically he is a great success and works hard; but to despise or to hate him is ungenerous and absurd. I don't say that I admire him, but I am deeply sorry for him; this letter of his is really an appeal for sympathy, and I believe that you and I can help him, and that no one else can. I look to you to help—don't fail me, Molly."

Mrs. Davenant spoke with unusual emphasis. Molly stood and regarded her with silent astonishment.

" I can't promise to *like* him, mother," she said, " but I will be as nice to him as I can be, and I won't let you down."

" I know you won't, Molly—indeed, if I hadn't known I could depend upon you, I should not have told you all this. I don't believe in not facing facts, and there is no more wretched waste of time than that spent in dodging round corners rather than meet the truth. It would have been worse if you had begun by liking him, and then had found it out ; as it is, you know the worst, and yet I am sure you *will* like him. He can be very charming."

Molly did not answer, but shook her head.

V

MOLLY was to have gone to the village that afternoon to arrange for an ampler supply of fish, lobsters, cream, bread and other commodities during Robert's visit, and to secure the chauffeur's lodging, and she had looked forward to being the first teller of a pretty piece of news to some of her gossips; but what she had heard that morning from her mother had been rather a shock. Molly had no experience of life in its deeper and stronger cross-currents. Wrong-doing she had seen, in their quiet village, and grief, and tragedy—terrible and unintelligible enough, but simple and dominant emotions, not complicated by any intellectual conflict. Love and devotion she had seen, but not passion with all its dark shadows. Indeed, as she reflected about what her mother had told her, she could find little excuse for Robert—"ungrateful, cold, hard-hearted," were the words that rose in her mind. She almost dreaded meeting Robert; she doubted her power of even assuming any real cordiality. But she was bewildered by the passionate way in which her mother had spoken, hardly, indeed, condemning Robert, and having little but compassion for him. Her mother, whose anger seemed to be kindled by anything mean or cruel! Yet she remembered the look with which her mother had regarded her when she said that she knew she could depend on her!

They met again at luncheon—it was a silent meal. Mrs. Davenant seemed absorbed in thought, and Molly, though her mind was full of questionings, did not somehow venture to utter them. As soon as she was released,

she went down to the pool, pushed out the lighter of the two boats, and sculled herself far up the creek; she would do her errands on returning; at the moment she felt the need of being alone, between sea and sky and among the enfolding hills.

Every detail of the landscape was familiar to her; the valley filled to the brim with trees, where the river came down in the green shade; the lonely clump of red-stemmed firs, on the upland above, the gorse-patches sparkling with yellow points, the dark, close-grown, wind-moulded grove, more brown than green, over which looked out the high grey tower of Respurva Church, with its slate-set windows looking like half-shut, drowsy eyes. Below, on the stone-strewn mud under the thick-set copses, she could see plovers run and stop and run again. Gulls floated like little unballasted boats briskly among the ooze-channelled tussocks, or a brooding heron took life suddenly, and floated westward with audibly creaking wings. How she loved it all!

Yet all the time in her innermost thought she was aware of a road gently descending a hill, and the little figure of a man descending wearily and doubtfully, with downcast face and deprecating gestures.

The sun fell lower, the shadows lengthened and deepened. She was surprised to see how far she had gone against the ebb, and now she let herself drift down, the water murmuring and clucking under her keel, lost in thought, and trying half unconsciously to believe or to persuade herself that her mother's unexpected tolerance for Robert, which had troubled and perplexed her, was the shadow of coming age, so rich, as she had seen it among the village folk, in timid and sheepish excuses.

She had meant to think the problem out in solitude; but so far from leading her to any conclusion, the whole

situation seemed to bristle with impossibilities and stumbling-blocks,—how not to fail her mother, yet how to receive, even with civility, her ruthless cousin, with all his panoply of success and esteem and prosperity.

She had a sudden thrill—perhaps she might convert him from his morbid and despondent fatalism, not by extracting confession or shame, but by exhibiting—no, that would never do ! and she blushed at the complacency it revealed. . . . .

She came in late, begged a cup of tea in the kitchen, exhorted Mrs. Tregenna and Richards, who sat under the visible shadow of doom, to be valiant and indifferent, darted off to the village, where she made her arrangements, sowing the seeds of much excited discussion and anticipation, and got back just in time for dinner.

For a time she dissipated awkwardness by relating her experiences ; but when she and her mother went together to the drawing-room, and her mother suggested some reading, Molly said :

" No, mother dear, we mustn't read—we must practise talking—I feel very nervous about evenings with Robert. Let us hope he will sit over his wine, and retire early, like Cabinet Ministers in books, to smoke and read despatches."

Mrs. Davenant laughed, but then said, " Molly, I feel as if I had made rather a mess of my story this morning—at least it produced exactly the effect I didn't intend."

" I'm afraid I was stupid," said Molly, " but probably *I* didn't understand—it seemed so strange to me that you shouldn't—how can I say it ?—that you shouldn't take sides."

" I do," said Mrs. Davenant ; " only I take both sides."

" Yes, that's what I mean," said Molly. " You seemed to treat it all like a doctor, to think of it as *a case*."

" But that is just what it is," said Mrs. Davenant. " Many people—most people in fact—have got underneath their civilized and reasonable exterior something primitive and violent, which under certain circumstances comes to the surface. The only way you can do anything in such cases is by realizing that it is not wholly people's fault when they behave badly."

" Then he *did* behave badly ? "

" Certainly. But you see he was very much in love ; and Molly, you don't know what that means—how should you ? You have never dipped below the surface. The awful strength of it, the jealousy, the fury . . ."

" But decent people don't feel like that," said Molly, regarding her mother with astonishment. " You never felt that sort of thing yourself."

" Did I not ? " said Mrs. Davenant. " I will speak quite plainly—I cared for your father like that. If anything, anybody, had come in between us, I should have dashed it all aside. There is nothing I would not have done to keep him to myself. He died, and there was no depth of despair and rebellion to which I did not fall—the loss of him, the loss of my ambitions for him and for myself, my anger that I had not borne him a son . . . all my life and all my hopes seemed buried with him—there were times, Molly, when I could hardly bear to hold you in my arms."

Molly got up quickly from her chair, and knelt down by her mother. " *You*, mother darling ? You went through all this ? "

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " and without the smallest sense of sin or shame. And what is more, Molly, most people who are worth anything do go through something like that. At your age, I should have felt exactly as you do—that such things were impossibly coarse and detestable.

Yet the moment came, and the thing below, whatever it is, took the bit between its teeth."

" What did you do ? " said Molly.

" Nothing," said Mrs. Davenant, " I burned."

" But you are not like that now, mother ? " said Molly, taking a firmer hold of her mother's hand.

" Not at this moment, Molly," said Mrs. Davenant, with one of her quick, beautiful smiles. " But if certain things were to happen . . ."

" Hush," said Molly, putting her hand over her mother's lips. " But why have you let me go on all this time believing that you were an angel of light ? "

" I think sometimes I have worn my armour too much," said Mrs. Davenant, " but one must wear something !—one thing more ; when I was at my worst, I found Ann."

" Robert's mother," said Molly. " Had *she* been in the fire, too ? "

" Yes, far worse than I," said Mrs. Davenant, " that was what helped me. She didn't reason with me. You can't argue with people when they are feeling like that—you can only show them other and better things."

" How dreadful it all is," said Molly.

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " but if you can get through, it is worth while having suffered."

" But what if you don't get through ? "

" Almost everyone *does* get through," said Mrs. Davenant, " though it isn't a question of time and place. You suddenly find you are past it. But you will see what this all leads to. I must try if I can do for Robert what Ann did for me, and I want you to help me. You will be able to do and say many things that I cannot."

" I shall never be able to manage it."

" I don't expect you to begin by admiring Robert,"

said Mrs. Davenant, " and still less do I want you to end by adoring him. I want you to try and behave as a sister might to a brother who has got into trouble. You wouldn't care then very much what the trouble was. You can't begin by scolding a drowning man for being so rash, you must just throw him a rope. I'm not asking you to swim out and save him. Don't let your imagination range over what he has done. You don't know anything about the people concerned or the passions aroused. It must be enough for you that he is in trouble."

" It shall be enough," said Molly, " though just now I feel as if there had been an explosion or an earthquake, and is if everyone I meet may be on fire within."

VI

THE great day arrived at last. Molly awoke early in the morning with a sense half of excitement, half of despair. She did not like the prospect of a change in the placid, familiar, independent routine. She would have to dress more conventionally, she thought, and be in time for meals. Then she did not expect to like Robert, and she foresaw that it would largely fall to her lot to amuse him. Those who have grown to love solitude and the unchecked current of their own thoughts find the prospect of continual attention and prolonged conversation a burdensome affair. Her solitary morning bathes, her boating expeditions, her gossipy visits to the village, what would become of all these? But at the same time there was a sense of adventure about the whole business. She felt a very strong desire to be equal to the rôle which her mother expected her to play. Then there was the mysterious Robert himself. She could not connect the outward impression which she had formed of a successful, capable man of affairs, a social personage, with the man whose conduct appeared to have been heartless and even disloyal.

She got up and went out for a swim, and with the touch of the fresh ripple and the rising inner glow, the anxieties and tremors melted away and left her with an amused sense of confidence—after all, she had never yet found a human being with whom she had not been able to establish an almost sisterly relation, and why should she fail now? She went with sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks to prayers, and was more than amused to find that

her mother had selected for the text of the day the verse from the sixty-third chapter of Isaiah: "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength?" and added to it a prayer for quietness and preparedness of spirit, and for the power of never being surprised or overcome by outward appearances. It seemed at first to Molly that this was introducing almost too humorous an atmosphere into religious observance; but her views were modified later in the morning when Mrs. Tregenna, with the smiling, tearful glance of Cornish fervour, said to her: "Your Mamma is just a wonder, I always say, Miss, at asking for the right blessing—it came to me, so to say, like a telegram of good news; and as for the text, I could never have thought of that if I had searched the Scripture from end to end." Indeed, Molly felt that much as the good maids liked her own careless levity, the anchor by which they held was Mrs. Davenant's power of touching a commonplace situation with the beautiful light of spiritual significance.

At breakfast Mrs. Davenant was in her most cheerful and indulgent mood.

"I think, Molly," she said, "that we were altogether too melodramatic the other day about Robert. We don't really know the inside of the affair, and we took refuge in sentimentalizing. It is true that Robert is sad and adrift, and I hope we may have a chance of being of use—but one mustn't anoint people with help and compassion so that it runs down to the skirts of their clothing. That is the worst sort of impertinence! Besides, you and I are going to get a great deal from Robert's visit—he is a well-known man, and has played a public part and lived among interesting people. He will give us a

new idea of the world and a new stock of thoughts. I wouldn't live anywhere else, of course—but this *is* rather a backwater, and I sometimes feel like the skeleton of the old boat under Treworval point, all green and black and sunk in the mud."

"Yes, mother dear," said Molly, meekly, "that's a perfect description of you, which we should all recognize!"

Mrs. Davenant looked with a solemn mirthfulness at Molly, and then went on:—

"You know what I mean. It is Robert who is doing us a kindness, and he is to be an honoured guest in rather a dull little house—we must give him as good a time as we can, find out what he likes to do. We mustn't—

'Sit in a cloud and sing
Like pictured angels!'

unless he shows a preference for such performances, which from all I hear is extremely improbable. We are not good Samaritans—we are not called upon to behave improvingly, only with ordinary courtesy and charity. Whatever we do, don't let us be important about it."

"Will Robert be allowed to come to prayers, mother?" said Molly, inconsequently.

"He will be invited," said Mrs. Davenant, with a majestic air, "but it will not be compulsory. I have some *very pretty* parables for him."

VII

ROBERT was expected to tea. As the hour drew near, Molly ranged restlessly about, looking often out of the window, and even going out to listen for the car, while Mrs. Davenant read a book of French Memoirs, with an air of complete absorption. Mrs. Tregenna thumped and patted things in the kitchen, while Richards went up and downstairs with a small list in her hand, to see that nothing had been forgotten.

Suddenly, without a sound of warning, a big limousine ran out of the wood, and bowled up to the front door, with some modest luggage on the top. Mrs. Davenant put a marker in her book and rose from her chair. Molly clasped her hands together, and stood tremulous inside the drawing-room door. Richards had hurried out; the sound of luggage being hauled down, the slamming of the car door, faint questions and answers were audible, and a moment later Richards came totteringly in, and in a voice, which seemed to Molly to be hardly human, announced " 's Lordship, 'm."

A youthful-looking figure, slim and light, came briskly in. Mrs. Davenant, to Molly's surprise, took both his hands in her own and gave him a majestic kiss; confused greetings and inquiries arose. " Molly, where is Molly ? " said Mrs. Davenant in the manner of Lady Macbeth. Molly slipped shyly forwards. " This is Lord Helford." " *Robert*," said the young man, in a low but distinct voice; and Molly found her hand grasped in a strong somewhat cold hand, and her face firmly scrutinized by a friendly and direct eye. Indeed, poor Molly, in whom

the first emotion of dislike and contempt had been gradually merged in the vision of herself as a ministering angel, suddenly found herself in the position of the timid and sheepish recruit ushered into the presence of a remarkably efficient commanding officer, and conscious of how very small a part of his horizon she occupied.

There was not much that could be concluded from that first talk. It was a good many years since Mrs. Davenant had seen Lord Helford, and Molly's only recollection of him was a disagreeable one. Indeed, she sought in vain to connect her memory of the rather silent and unbending undergraduate, who had repelled her childish advances so decisively, with this amiable, self-possessed and thoroughly companionable young man, who had all the ease of an old friend, and no touch either of shyness or pomposity ; who glanced with so pleasantly interested an air about him, and smiled so encouragingly at her when she joined in the conversation. He had a clear, undimmed complexion, and a youthful, almost velvety, smoothness of skin, with the least touch of olive duskiness about it, his hair a soft dark brown. He was not exactly what would be called a handsome man, but his large, dark eyes and big, firm, mobile lips had a look of great cordiality and animation. He was clean-shaven, and his hands were finely-shaped and expressive. In repose, Molly decided rather to her satisfaction, there was a touch of melancholy about his expression ; but when he was pleased or amused, it all lit up with a dancing smile, ingenuous rather than self-conscious. He was carelessly dressed in a dark travelling suit. He was certainly all alert. He sat with one knee thrown over the other, and the neat, brown-shod dangling foot, strong and shapely, was seldom still. But there was no touch of inattention or inertness about him, and Molly liked the

way in which his eyes dwelt half seriously and half amusedly upon her mother as she talked.

" What a delicious corner of the world," he said, looking out towards the creek, " and what a quaint and solid old house this is ! I had forgotten how charming it all was."

" Ah, yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " you ought not to have kept away from us so long—you are little more than a dignified abstraction to your tenants."

" I know," said Robert, " it is disgraceful ! but one gets caught in the official net, you know, and one can't be everywhere ; and I shall do my best to make good with your help and Molly's. I mean to see every single one of my tenants ; and I am sure I *ought* to be a popular landlord, because everyone seems to get whatever they ask for in the way of improvements out of my agent."

" They are very well content, I believe," said Mrs. Davenant, " and *we* get all the prestige. But you must ask Molly about it ; she knows far more than I do."

" I shall love to go round with you," said Molly. " What fun it will be—they will be so terrified—and I shall feel like a princess for once."

" Molly is fond of observing her fellow-creatures under the influence of fear," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Only because I can never produce the effect by myself," said Molly.

" Well, I shall feel quite safe," said Robert. " They speak English, I suppose ? "

" Not a word," said Mrs. Davenant, " they speak a kind of debased Celtic."

Robert laughed, and glanced round him. " I suppose this is part of the old tower, isn't it ? " he said ; " what tremendously thick walls you have ! "

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " they keep everything out except the wind and the rain."

" Why not speak to the agent ? " said Robert.

" Because, my dear Robert," said Mrs. Davenant, " this is my house and not yours. Of course, I know that it ought never to have been cut out of the estate—but the distressing fact is that I might cut down half the wood, and build a bone-manure factory, if I chose."

" I had clean forgotten," said Robert, " but I remember now—it is the little green bit that just spoils the compact red outline on the estate map. You wouldn't like to buy some more ? I am told the pasture here is almost useless, and you can have it cheap."

" It would make a nice site for bungalows ! " said Mrs. Davenant, meditatively. " I have a great mind to take you at your word. I could double my income."

" How *horrible*, Mother ! " said Molly. " You oughtn't to say such things to Lord Helford, even in joke ! "

" Robert," said Lord Helford, " or else I shall feel like a visitor." He smiled across at Molly, who to her own dismay found a blush mounting to her cheeks.

" Well," said Mrs. Davenant, " after all this excitement, I must read my book a little, or I shall use up all my conversation. Molly, will you take Robert over the house, and show him his room, and the study, as we agreed this afternoon to call it, where he can write his despatches. I suppose you smoke, Robert ? You can smoke anywhere you please except in my bedroom. Molly has broken me in to that, and on wet days the house smells like a tap-room."

" I smoke about three cigarettes a day," said Molly, indignantly ; " mean little Turkish cigarettes, about the size of a ball-pencil ! And I could give up smoking any moment, if I chose."

" That proves your guilt," said Mrs. Davenant. " Now I don't pretend that I could give up any of my pleasant vices, even in Lent."

Robert and Molly went out into the hall.

" This is going to be fun," said Robert, " there's nothing in the world I enjoy so much as seeing over a house. Let me see *everything*. A friend of mine called Craven," he went on, " lives in a modest villa on the outskirts of Windsor. A lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria told me that she was out driving with the Queen one day, and the Queen, who was always very curious about all her neighbours, said ' Whose is that nice little house ? ' ' Mr. Craven's, Ma'am,' said the lady. ' He is a bachelor, isn't he ? ' ' Yes, Ma'am.' ' Then what in the world does he find to do in that great big place ? ' said the Queen.— That's exactly how I feel about other people's houses."

Molly bubbled over with laughter—" Come, quick ! " said Robert, " don't let us waste a moment." They explored the dining-room which looked out on the terrace, and the little panelled room next it, which had been known as Molly's room, but which she had only used as a sort of lumber-room. " This is simply delicious," said Robert, as they passed the door leading to the offices. " The kitchen is down there," said Molly. " Oh, I must see the kitchen," said Robert. They went down the passage and heard a pleasant sound of laughter. Molly peeped in, and found Mrs. Tregenna and Richards comfortably at tea, entertaining Parker the chauffeur, and evidently delighted by his affability. They went in, and the party rose hastily to their feet. " Here is Lord Helford, come to see your kitchen, Mrs. Tregenna," said Molly. Robert shook hands, and said with a smile, " Ah, it makes all the difference in the world, they say, to be on good terms with the housekeeper." Mrs. Tregenna beamed with delight, not least at being called the housekeeper. " Well, we shall spare no pains to make your lordship comfortable," she said. " I'm sure you won't,"

said Robert. Then turning to his chauffeur, he said: "Have you seen your lodgings yet, Parker?" "Not yet, my Lord," said Parker, "but I shall be running the car down presently, and Mr. Argall, the gardener, is coming down with me to show me the way." Robert nodded. "Ah, Mrs. Tregenna, you have been making other people comfortable already, I see!" He smiled and walked out, and Molly, delighted by the evident raptures of Richards and Mrs. Tregenna, followed him. They went up the balustraded staircase. "This is all quite perfect!" said Robert. "I begin to wish that my uncle had given you Nan-Zephron, and left me this. This is just the sort of house I could have lived in."

"Don't make us feel uncomfortable, Robert," said Molly. For answer he took her arm by the elbow and gave it a little shake. "For shame!" he said; "that you should have it, and let me stay here, suits me better still."

"My room," said Molly, disclosing a bare, white bedroom. "There's nothing to look at, because I hate being lumbered up with things! This is mother's room." "Your mother isn't of your mind, I see," said Robert, smiling—and indeed, Mrs. Davenant's room had a majestic and wealthy air, full of furniture and pictures. "This is *your* room, Robert." "My word, what a splendid place," said Robert. "I suppose this is in the tower?" "Yes, over the drawing-room." Robert admired the fine panelled chamber, with its big presses, its stately canopied bed, and the deep embrasured windows, and turned to Molly. "Look here, Molly," he said, "I am *certain*, by a look of guilt in your eyes, that you have given me up your own room downstairs—now I shall be *perfectly* happy writing up here."

"But *I* shouldn't be at all happy," said Molly. "I

only used the study to shove things into, shells and golf-clubs and fishing-lines. It was a disgrace to the house."

" Very well," said Robert. " You are going to spoil me, I can see."

" That's the bathroom," continued Molly, " and that's a little room you could have for a dressing-room, if you cared."

" Certainly not," said Robert. " I can't think of anything more improper than that I should rush backwards and forwards here across the landing in pyjamas."

" That's a little door with a corkscrew staircase that leads out on the leads," said Molly. " There's another big room over yours, full of lumber—bird-cages and tin things painted green, shaped like boots, and old trunks."

" I must see it the first thing in the morning," said Robert, " by daylight. I particularly want to see the tin things ; I can't think what you mean."

" Then this goes to the backstairs," said Molly, " and the maids sleep up there—they have the best view in the house."

" It's stupendous," said Robert, " if you miss me at any time, look for me in the lumber-room—that will take up a lot of my time."

" What fun it is to have you here, Robert ! " said Molly, with an outburst of laughter,—" it makes the house seem quite different." It astonished her to find how pleasant it was to say " Robert " to this lively young man, about whom there was no touch of pose. She would like to take his arm, she thought, and lead him downstairs. What had become of the spectre of the mournful, heart-broken, remorseful wretch, whom she had conjured up, and whom she meant to hate ? She did not believe he had ever done anything to be ashamed of.

" What will you do about having your things unpacked ? "

she said. " Richards is feeling the responsibility very much—but she is quite sensible."

" Thank God," said Robert, " I loathe unpacking—that was my one fear ! May she have these keys ? " He drew out his watch and chain, from the end of which a bunch of keys dangled, and thrust them all into Molly's hands. " She can put anything anywhere ; and will you tell me the times of things, and if there are any rules I ought to know and don't ? I'm slightly afraid of your mother, you know—but you'll keep an eye over me, won't you ? "

IX

THE talked flowed merrily at dinner. " Don't tell me too much about these people here, Mary," said Robert, " though it is all excruciatingly funny. Let me see if I can make out anything about them first, and fill up the outline for me afterwards. I seem to have got hold of a strange lot of cranks for tenants."

" They are not quite as absurd as mother makes out," said Molly, " but the pathetic thing is that they all regard her with deep devotion. They ask her advice about everything."

" They have faith," said Mrs. Davenant, solemnly, " but rather a poor show of works. Do you believe in justification by faith, Robert ? In Cornwall, it is important to know where you stand religiously. I should be afraid you are not a converted man ? You have assurance, I admit, but are you sanctified ? Much depends on your answer."

" I think we must pursue the inquiry in private, Mary," said Robert.

" Very good," said Mrs. Davenant, " but I am afraid of the effect you may produce upon your Bible Christian tenants. Pray hold no interviews with them until I have inquired a little into your state of mind."

A pleasant interruption occurred. Richards came in bearing a curious square, smooth leather pouch, with a metal hoop and padlock. " His Lordship's bag," she said.

" You have more luggage that that, I hope," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Yes, Richards knows all about that," said Robert.

" This is my official service bag from Whitehall. Who brought it ? "

" The postmistress, Mrs. Fardell," said Richards—" My lord, I mean."

" I'll go and speak to her," said Robert. " It will come most nights, I expect. Parker had better bring it up."

When he returned, Molly said, " Robert, what on earth is it ? It makes me feel quite nervous."

" Oh, it is only the bag they send to Ministers," said Robert, " they pursue us everywhere."

" Is it urgent ? " said Mrs. Davenant.

" No," said Robert, laughing.

" What is there in it ? " said Molly.

" Yes, I insist upon knowing," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Oh, some papers, perhaps," said Robert, " or some bills—perhaps a clean pocket-handkerchief."

" I see that I am right to mistrust the present Government," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Are you a Tory, Mary ? " said Robert.

" Of course," said Mrs. Davenant, " with a due regard for the honour and welfare of the country."

" Then we won't discuss politics," said Robert. " Are you a Tory, Molly ? "

" No, I'm a red Republican."

" Then *we* won't discuss politics."

" Yet my invitation to you was based on a hope of a little political enlightenment," said Mrs. Davenant.

" No," said Robert, " not even on grounds of chivalry can I submit to be torn to pieces by wild women."

" Enough ! " said Mrs. Davenant. " Robert, you have said enough."

X

WHEN Molly appeared at breakfast the next morning, she had been long up and about. Her room was uncurtained and open-windowed, and she had awakened to one of those serene dawns in which blue and gold are so subtly intermingled in a luminous haze, the blue of sea and sky and the scattered gold of the morning, that the human heart can hardly contain itself for joy.

The relief of Robert's arrival and the discovery that he was so accessible and indeed so companionable a guest was very great, so great, indeed, that it almost swallowed up the shame she felt for having made so ungenerous an estimate of him. Yes, she had been ungenerous! but Molly, like all forward-looking natures, had little leaning either to shame or remorse. She was not one of those who search their conscience diligently till they detect failure and culpability lurking in some dark corner. She had no touch of introspectiveness—indeed, her mother had sometimes told her that she was a mere pagan without principles. All she did by way of atonement for her unjust judgment was to determine that she would trust her mother's estimates more; and as for Robert,—it was pleasant to repeat the name and scrutinize it like a new toy—if lamentable things *had* occurred, she was sure that *he* was not to blame. He had made mistakes, perhaps; and while he was with them, she would show him that there was no shadow in her mind; she did not intend to bore him, or to be for ever dogging his footsteps, but whatever he desired in the way of service or companionship he should have it—it would all be pure delight.

She went out for her bathe with infinite precautions not to disturb the sleeping guest—sleeplessness she knew was a trouble of his ; and then to her unfeigned vexation she contrived, by dawdling over her toilet—a visitor demanded something a little more studied than the costume of daily use—to miss prayers ; and they were already at breakfast when she arrived, full of eager excitement.

Robert rose to greet her—she had wondered vaguely whether he would stand the daylight test ; middle-aged people—so she thought of him—were often a little dimmed and dinted by their night's rest ; but Robert seemed as fresh as herself, and as he took her hand, there was a touch of pleasant admiration in his eye which completed her satisfaction. She was not at all events going to bore him—she was sure of that.

" Yes, I slept like a top," said Robert, in answer to her questions, " the only thing I wanted to complete my satisfaction was a plunge in the sea—and I saw someone —perhaps Mrs. Tregenna—indulging in that. Mayn't I join you to-morrow ? "

" Why, of course," said Molly.

" Do you allow that, Mary ? " said Robert.

" It seems to me entirely improper," said Mrs. Davenant, " but I am old-fashioned ; I can't keep pace with modern flexible morality. I don't interfere. I shall only lock my door and try to think of early Christian modes of baptism. Personally I feel like Miss Mowcher—if anyone were to see my ankles, I should wish to go and destroy myself. What I really approve of in the way of feminine toilet is that women should look like angels in one of my little books of devotion—not an inch of foot visible, sleeves buttoned to the wrist, collar well up to the chin, and hair brushed down smoothly over the ends of the

eyebrows and covering the ears—that's as much of people as I want to see."

"I don't approach the question on moral grounds," said Robert. "Freedom of movement is always beautiful, and I hate to see movement hampered. What ought to be covered up is anything unshapely or corpulent. I should like to put some of my men friends into decent cassocks—long clothes ought to be the mark of age, not of youth and innocence—but what I object to even more is the high-heeled shoe, which makes the ankle insecure and throws all the weight of the body on the toes, and has a tendency to make holes in the lawn—*that* seems to me a violation of decency—but I hate *fashions* altogether. I would like to see free, individual taste."

"That's very dangerous, Robert. Fashion is one of the few bits of discipline left."

"Then it is all settled," said Molly, "and I'll call you to-morrow about seven."

"And if you would feel easier," said Robert, to Mrs. Davenant, "I will bathe in a suit of dittoes and a bowler hat."

"That would indeed be a solecism!" said Mrs. Davenant.

They discussed plans for the day, and it was decided that the first call that Lord Helford must pay should be to his tenant, Mr. Temperley, at Nan-Zephron.

"We mustn't use them up too fast," said Molly. "We have got some glorious specimens to show you. Mr. Cuthbert must have a day to himself. You needn't work very hard at your papers, Robert, need you?"

"Certainly not," said Robert; "what I should propose is to go out for a run in the car this morning to get a general idea of the place. Then in the afternoon we might take Nan-Zephron."

" Yes, that will do splendidly," said Molly, " but don't give Mr. Temperley a hint you are coming. I want you to burst upon him. I must be allowed to manage that. Then to-morrow we must give a morning to Cubby, because he will want to show you the Church."

" Who on earth is Cubby ? " said Robert.

" Oh, it's only my name for Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly.

" Yes, it's very dangerous having names," said Mrs. Davenant. " What would he feel if it slipped out to his face ? "

" He'd simply love it, mother," said Molly.

" I have a certain amount of estate business to do," said Robert, " but that can wait—how long will the personal interviews take ? "

" Well, there's Dr. Grimes, and then there are about fifteen families in the Port. If you will let me arrange it, Robert, it shall all be put through."

The morning drive was a great success. Molly sat in front as pilot, and made firm friends with Parker. They went up lanes of incredible steepness, threaded little valleys full of oak-copses with a downward glimpse of sea, by small farmsteads, built of irregular grey stones, with gardens in which great fuchsias and purple veronica grew luxuriantly, by bubbling streams, full of loosestrife and meadow-sweet and Osmunda fern, out upon uplands where the high turf hedges, overlaid with stones and with dense hazels at the top, screened the further views ; down at one place to a lonely ferry, with a small cluster of houses and a belt of sand under miniature cliffs.

" I am quite bewildered," said Robert on descending. " It's an enchanted land—I hardly feel as if the houses I have seen this morning are really there."

" Yet half of them belong to you," said Molly ; " but you are right. There is a mystery about Cornwall. No one really knows what is going on in the background."

XI

SOON after luncheon, Robert and Molly set off together to walk to Nan-Zephron. Mrs. Davenant declined to accompany them.

"I must warn you, Robert," she said, "that Molly is quite capable of disgracing you. She treats these worthy people, the Temperleys, as a sort of marionettes who must be made to dance for her pleasure."

"But they like it, mother," said Molly. "They are afraid of *you*, and when I go with you, it's always a sort of royal visit. When you leave the room, I am certain that Mrs. Temperley says 'Did it go all right?' and Mr. Temperley says, 'I think so—owing to your ready tact, my dear.' 'Oh, no, John,' says Mrs. Temperley, 'it's the intellectual turn you give to the talk that Mrs. Davenant enjoys'—and then they breathe more freely."

"But what about your poor cousin?" said Robert.

"Oh, you shall have your chance," said Molly. "They're not afraid of *me*."

They walked up slowly through the dark wood, talking and laughing. The sunlight slanted in among the grey trunks, and lit up the green mysterious depths of the coverts.

"You could tell this was a sea-wood," said Molly; "everything holds on tight—nothing dares to straggle up alone—and you see how all the trees lean one way? It is a perpetual struggle in there—it's a patient-looking place, isn't it?"

"Do you know," said Robert suddenly in the half-lit silence of the wood, "that I'm rather afraid of your mother myself."

" You too ? " said Molly, " I never heard of such a thing ! "

" I shouldn't be afraid of asking her anything," said Robert, " and the more serious the thing was, the easier it would be—and I would trust her through thick and thin, and I should have no doubt of her fairness—but in ordinary talk, she seems to me to be all sword and shield. Sometimes I think that she feels me a little priggish, and then suddenly that she thinks me a trifler. What is it exactly ? "

" I know what you mean," said Molly. " It's just that —she doesn't seem to have the same standards as anyone else—she dislikes anything conventional, and next moment she seems to be all convention. It isn't affected in the least—but she takes a curious pleasure in disconcerting people—it's just a manner, I think."

" It's always interesting because it is always unexpected," said Robert—" but I couldn't help wondering what ordinary people make of it ? "

" They are absolutely bewildered," said Molly, " and some of them hate it. Mother makes no distinction of persons, but she *can't* be persuaded she is terrifying. ' It's my only defence,' she says, ' against intrusion and insolence.' Yet the moment you have anything real to talk about, she is full of understanding and sympathy."

" It seems funny that we should already be discussing your mother, Molly," said Robert, smiling, " but she arouses my curiosity more than anyone I know. Why should she be so much on her defence ? "

" Because she is really so modest and diffident," said Molly, " and perhaps over-armed."

" That's a very clever definition," said Robert, " and perfectly true."

Molly's heart gave a leap of satisfaction, coupled with

a fear that she couldn't keep up to that level—she was very anxious already not to seem dull to Robert.

Presently they came out on an open space in the middle of the wood ; a little ahead of them was a substantial wall of stone, and in the centre a gate, between lofty granite gate-posts, with stone balls at the top, and two lesser portals, one on each side, guarded by strange, rude, couchant lions, roughly carved ; from the gate, which stood open, an avenue passed into the wood.

" What a very odd place ! " said Robert.

" Yes, the lions look like some sort of sweets, don't they ? " said Molly. " They used to frighten me abominably as a child. But you know all this, I suppose ? "

" I never set eyes on it in my life," said Robert. " My great-uncle hated the very idea of me ; and when I came into the property, it was settled that I should live at Colearne. Mr. Temperley made an offer for this, and we were only too glad to get a tenant. I had an idea it was all very neglected."

" So it was," said Molly ; " it was all grass-grown, this drive ; but fancy your never having seen it, even ! Well, you are going to have a surprise."

" What about Temperley himself ? " said Robert, " he's rather eccentric, isn't he ? "

" Oh, I won't spoil it by telling you," said Molly ; " he's deliciously absurd, but he's rather a darling ! "

They walked up the dark avenue. The road took a sudden turn. Opposite them, with a space of grass in front, surrounded by low walls, stood a long, grey, two-storied house, all built of granite, thickly covered by lichen. It was battlemented, and there were shallow projecting wings at each end. The windows were square-headed and mullioned. Between the wings was a deep cloister, supported by granite monoliths, in the centre

of which an archway appeared to lead to a courtyard within. Robert stood still, putting his hand in Molly's arm as he did so ; she liked the easy brotherly contact.

" I never saw such a place," said Robert. " Why didn't I come and live here, instead of at that atrocious mansion at Colearne ? This is like something in a fairy story." They went slowly on, and Molly led Robert inside the courtyard. A great oak door, clamped and full of nails, stood open. Within was a court, with Tudor buildings of a whiter stone on either hand. The fourth side, opposite them, was evidently the front of a building which had been demolished, with empty windows. Where the battlements had been, was a thick growth of plants, elders and ash-saplings and wallflowers densely fringing the wall.

" Good heavens," said Robert, " how incredibly romantic ! I feel quite faint ! "

Molly led him to a door in the corner of the court, and saying " I don't have to ring—I'll go in and find Mr. Temperley. Will you wait here ? "

There was a great flagged hall with a black and white pavement. One or two big oak presses stood against the panelled walls, and there were half a dozen chairs. Bare as it was, it had a noble dignity of its own. A row of round-headed stone arches, ran along the farther end of the hall. Molly disappeared through one of these, and left Robert gaping at his own house.

Molly went rapidly along a corridor to the right, and tapped at a door at the end. A voice cried " Come in." The room which she entered was low, and the walls were lined with bookcases. In the centre of the room was a large round table of oak covered with books and papers, and a high oak chair stood by it. There were several comfortable leather chairs, and a big open fireplace ; in one corner stood an old harpsichord, and several strange

musical instruments, of metal and wood, were on a shelf beside it. Three windows looked out on to a pleasant sunny terrace, with a garden beyond. By the central window, which opened down to the ground, stood a tall, thin, bronzed man, with a slight stoop ; he had a short beard and moustache ; but his cheeks were shaved, and grizzled curls escaped from the hat he wore, an old, grey sombrero; he turned upon Molly a handsome, deeply lined face, with large brown eyes, in which a touch of fretfulness was visible. He was dressed in dark clothes of a soft stuff, with knickerbockers and stockings and neat brown shoes ; his flannel shirt was cut low, and his tie was of a curious dappled green ; he carried a stick in his hand, but at the sight of Molly, he doffed his hat and came slowly forward, walking with a certain delicacy of gait.

" My dear Molly, how you startled me—but what a privilege ! What can I do for you ? Perhaps you will accompany me ?—my usual walk. You know what store I set on catching the low gleams of the afternoon sun on the creek. I dare not miss my sunset—we could talk as we go ? " He laid his hand paternally on her shoulder.

" I have brought you a visitor, Squire."

" A visitor ? " a cloud settled on his face. " This is not wholly welcome—this is a sacred time of day to me, like vespers to a monk."

" Oh, we might come another day," said Molly. " I thought you might have heard we had a visitor."

" I hear nothing," said Mr. Temperley, " but what my own heart and eye tell me. You know how I fence myself from the world. Who may it be ? "

" Lord Helford," said Molly with a demure look, " he came yesterday, and wished to call on you as soon as possible."

" Of course, I will see Lord Helford—where is he ? "

" He wouldn't like you to miss your sunset, Squire."

" My dear Molly—women have no idea of duty ! "

" I'll fetch him in then—he is in the hall. I will tell him you will see him from a sense of duty."

Molly fled like a bird, and a moment later returned with Robert.

" My dear Lord Helford," said the Squire, extending his hand with a slight bow, " this is indeed a privilege—most kind, I am sure. You should have allowed me to pay my respects to you at Menerdue."

" I only hope we are not interrupting you at an awkward hour."

" Interrupting me ? " said the Squire, " I am free as air. Pray be seated. My dear Molly, if you could find Mamma—she's in the rose-garden, I believe. She will be delighted."

Molly went off to the rose-garden, and presently pounced upon a dumpy, amiable-looking elderly lady in a large flapping hat and garden gloves, who bestowed on Molly a comfortable kiss, and betrayed much trepidation at the announcement.

" I'm afraid John will be upset by this," said Mrs. Temperley, pondering. " I suppose there isn't time for me to make myself respectable, Molly ? "

" Not a moment, darling," said Molly. " The enemy are upon you ; "—and as she spoke the figures of Robert and the Squire, hat in hand, were visible at the garden door.

" Here is Lord Helford, my dear," said the slow, melodious voice of the Squire ; " he is at Menerdue, and has done us the honour to call. We could have wished to receive him with more ceremony."

" I ought to have given you more notice," said Robert, " but it was a sudden resolution on my part to come down here, and Mary was good enough to take me in."

" How is Lady Helford ? " said the unfortunate Mrs. Temperley, and then became slowly crimson.

" She is in Florence," said Robert lightly, " I am all by myself at present." Then turning to the embarrassed Squire, he said, " Have you time to let me look round ? You know I have never seen the place, and it astonishes me to find how beautiful it is."

" It is a most beautiful place, Lord Helford," said the Squire. " I esteem it a privilege to live here ; a house like this has an ennobling effect upon the mind. I am a great believer in the effect of visible beauty—and here, where nature is subdued by the invisible hand of art, it is possible to drink daily and hourly draughts from the sacred spring."

No one felt quite equal to continuing the conversation in this strain. Robert made an obscurely sympathetic sound in his throat.

" A brief survey," said the Squire, " will be more conclusive than any words of mine. Mamma dear, may we hope for a cup of tea in half an hour ? "

Mrs. Temperley hurried away in a state of profound discomfiture across the lawn. Molly, filled with compassion, went with her, and assured her that she could not have asked a more diplomatic question ; " If you had said nothing, darling, you would have made Lord Helford uncomfortable—but you behaved exactly as he would wish—as if nothing had happened about his wife."

" Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Temperley. " May I tell John what you have said ? I am afraid it may have upset him. I'll just go and change my dress, and have everything comfortable ; go with them, dear—John will be more at his ease if you do."

Molly caught them up on the terrace. The Squire was pointing out the view. " It is a secluded spot, Lord

Helford," he said with a wave of the arm. " But that does not affect me. Indeed, a quiet, contemplative life, without the sound or fret of the envious world, is what I ask of life. I demand it, I need it. To this I have given my best years. I ask for no sympathy. Would it be believed," said the Squire, with a sweep of his arm, " that from this quiet upland I can see no roof which shelters a single human being with whom, spiritually speaking, it is possible to hold communion ? I see them, but their hearts are otherwhere. In Mrs. Davenant alone, and," with a little bow, " in her accomplished daughter, can I recognize even a touch of the higher wisdom. I scout the system," said the Squire, " that makes social activity and the fatuous process known as benevolence the test of a man's spiritual worth. It is in man's power of despising and abhorring the low-minded world, the sensual sty, that his greatness consists. How can I benefit the dull toilers of the world, the greedy commercialists, when at every moment I stand myself urgently in need of sustenance and consolation ? Only by example, by stubborn devotion to the claims of beauty can I effect anything. The truly purified and uplifted spirit effects more in the world than a crowd of grosser intelligences on whom civilized agencies are exerted in vain."

Lord Helford, who had by this time expended a whole artillery of nods and becks and grave diplomatic smiles of inquiry and sympathy, without being able to frame, and much less give utterance to, a single intelligible comment, was much relieved when Molly, with sparkling eyes, intervened, " I *must* interrupt—you would think, Robert, from what the Squire says, that he lived a life of solitary contemplation, and took no interest whatever in his neighbours—but it's just the opposite—Mrs. Temperley knows and visits everybody in the place, and the Squire

simply pours out money for every charitable object that is brought before him."

" Absurd," said the Squire, shaking his finger at Molly, " a mere scattering of dross. I live, and feel myself justified in living, a life absorbed in the patient apprehension of natural and artistic beauty. What Molly speaks of are mere neighbourly courtesies ; but all the time I feel myself to be severely isolated, and possibly even considerably misunderstood."

" *I* don't misunderstand you, Squire," said Lord Helford.

" Pardon me," said the Squire, " but in your presence I must resign all pretensions to that title. Our dear Molly is fond of familiar appellations—but it has no legal significance."

" But a very practical one," said Lord Helford, " and though I cannot as yet be sure that I fully understand the nuances of your philosophical position, yet I must take this opportunity of saying how much I value all your neighbourly labours and kindly influence in a place, which from the conscientious point of view I am aware with regret that I have decidedly neglected."

" You are too good," said the Squire ;—" as for your own enforced absence from your estate, the claims of public life and your political activities entirely absolve you from the least shadow of criticism. The other point that you raise, I should wish to discuss at leisure on some future occasion. My position is to some extent Wordsworthian, but I hope enriched by a less restricted and more definitely æsthetic culture."

Lord Helford, under the uninterrupted flow of the Squire's discourse, had yet been able to discern by flashes and glimpses the extraordinary beauty of the place. Behind the house ran a flagged terrace, with a deep bed

of annuals under the ruined wall of the courtyard, which was covered by magnolias and wisteria, the glossy leaves and waxen flowers of the former contrasting with the purple clusters of the latter, while at either end great bushes of unpruned cotoneaster spread their delicate fan-like traceries, lit up by the smouldering red of their berries. Below the terrace was a square formal garden bordered with yew-hedges, and with a circular stone-tipped pool in the centre. Beyond that again the slope dipped sharply, and gave a wide view of the creek as it folded into the quiet hills. The air was all full of the scent of sunwarmed flowers. On the right the wood began again, clothing the hillside. On the left lay a walled kitchen garden, and a quaint stable building in the classical style, crowned with a cupola. At the same time there was an air of settled simplicity about the scene, nothing ambitious or ostentatious, nor any uneasy sense of curious horticulture. The Squire descanted on this: "There is here, you will observe, neither pomp nor parade—nothing but the legitimate extension of a beauty-loving personality."

Tea in the long, low gallery, which occupied the greater part of the wings of the old house, was a pleasure. The room looked, not as if it had been professionally or even artistically created, but as if it had grown into its present state by long use and wont. The furniture was incongruous and unaffected, the china was stored and stacked rather than displayed; and the room had a sweet old fragrance of dainty cleanliness and mellow antiquity which seemed rich with leisure and recollection. Mrs. Temperley, reassured by Molly, was full of motherly goodwill; the Squire was in high good humour, conscious of refined impressiveness, while Molly's quick little wit, complimentary impertinence, and youthful freshness,

gave life to what would have been, Robert felt, had he been alone, a wearisome formality. He said little except by way of amiable rejoinder; he was content with watching her.

The twilight was coming on when they went away under a duet of obviously grateful regards and hospitable menaces. On both of them came the sense of exultant companionship at having shared a slightly grotesque experience, in which each had had to play a conscious and artificial part. They entered the gathering gloom of the wood, the green-rifted spaces of sky showing fitfully above the sombre foliage. Robert began by cannonading with some violence into a tree; "Here, this will never do," he said, "I can hardly see a yard—you know the path and will have to lead me"; he passed his hand inside Molly's elbow, and felt her arm tighten over it with a willing friendliness, as two schoolboys might walk together. "Well, that *was* a performance!" he went on. "Did you enjoy it?" said Molly; "I thought at one time it was rather too much for you. Isn't he gorgeous?" "Yes," said Robert, "he reminded me of a peacock screaming till its cheeks seem pale! I suppose he is a clever man with ideas, converted into a considerable bore by want of company. What makes him go on like that?"

"The same reason, I suppose," said Molly, "which makes mother talk as if everything was a joke, and makes me chatter to you as if I were a sprightly and intelligent creature, and makes you speak as if you hadn't a care in the world. It isn't ourselves—it's our chosen armour!"

"I not a care in the world?" said Robert, hastily. And Molly saw that she had said thoughtlessly one of the little sharp-pointed things that children say, and that it had touched a sore place. They walked on in silence for a moment, and a shadow of constraint passed over the talk.

" It isn't all humbug," said Molly, " by any means ; he really *does* care about his old views and sunsets and pictures and poetry—though, of course, he doesn't talk to *me* like that. It was his way of concealing how dreadfully pleased he was by your visit, and he will be thinking now how interesting and unusual an old man you will be thinking him."

" He is quite right about the unusual," said Robert.

" But you know, apart from all that nonsense, he is the kindest of creatures—he will spend any amount of money and trouble—real trouble, I mean, like writing letters and getting people jobs—though he makes a great fuss about being interrupted. Mother has told me that there was some row in his family about money, and he gave away about half his fortune in the course of an afternoon, for a brother of his who had got into trouble, just as anyone else might give away half a crown. The odd thing is that he isn't proud of that—you saw that he hated his gifts being mentioned—and yet is as proud as Punch of all his positions and reservations. I simply have no idea what he means. I recognize the words but they don't make any sense,"—and Molly suddenly struck into the flute-like tones of the Squire in admirable caricature. " ' Let me differentiate. I would have it understood that I am a recluse, but by no means a solitudinarian ! ' He actually said that to mother : and yet when we looked in the dictionary the dreadful word actually wasn't there."

Robert broke out into helpless laughter. " Do let me have some more of the Squire," he said.

" Oh dear, no," said Molly ; " I'm not a performer, that's only by way of illustration. Mother cured me of performing. She said that one mustn't have tricks, because other people felt obliged to ask you to do them, whether they wished it or not,"

" Well, there must be some more *illustration*," said Robert. " But how many more of these social performances have you got for me ? "

" Only one more best turn," said Molly. " We take Cubby to-morrow ; but he's rather a ticklish job, because it isn't always a pose with him ; and then you don't know where to look. The worst of it is that mother can't stand much of either Cubby or the Squire. She says it's an effort—now I'm so thankful for anyone who will be rather different from other people. The Squire is simply as good as a play, and then I love him into the bargain—I could listen to him for ever. But we must get a duet one of these days, between him and his wife. He bullies her, but does exactly what she tells him. She, old darling, was too much upset to-day by your arrival to do herself justice."

They came suddenly out of the wood and saw the pale burnished waters of the creek before them backed by the dark hills. The lights of the house were visible through the trees.

" Well, Molly," said Robert, releasing her arm, " you have given me a good time to-day. Do you know, I think it was the luckiest thing in the world that I suggested coming here. To think that all this was waiting for me all the time ! "

Molly smiled at him in the dusk. " It *is* nice having you here, Robert. And how dull it will be when you go away ; but we won't spoil the fun by thinking of that."

XII

THAT evening there was a pleasant sense of domesticity in the little circle, like a summer air. After tea Robert had withdrawn to write letters ; Molly had hurried off to the village, and Mrs. Davenant's proceedings were veiled in mystery, as they often were. She was fond of reading, partly for its own sake, for the exercise it gave to an acute and penetrating mind ; but she also loved it even more for its meditative value, for trains of thought which chance sentences started, which she followed with a certain serene eagerness, as one might follow a slender track through a close-grown leafy forest.

But she had also learned, by careful practice, a power of concentrated thought, of deliberately surveying the whole of a situation, its possibilities and contingencies, the blind alleys that led nowhere, and the specious tracks that led one further than one had intended.

This evening her thoughts were much concerned with Robert. She had previously been regarding him as a man suffering from frustrated passion and heartless ingratitude, as one who had broken with the old loyalties in order to follow a sensual impulse which had ended in the worst sort of disaster ; she had thought of him as obsessed by a morbid sort of self-accusation, and her aim in welcoming him to her house had been to restore, if she could, the wholesome balance of life.

But Robert had shown himself in an unexpected light ; his gaiety, his eager sympathy, his extraordinary attractiveness, the charm of openness and simplicity that he had displayed, baffled her. She could discern in him no

sign of deep-seated bitterness; was he, she wondered, one of those artistic natures, sensitive to the minutest impressions of beauty and delight, responsive and instantly intimate, without the inner power of caring with any faithfulness of devotion for the sterner and purer part of virtue and truth? She believed that she would soon penetrate what might be only a disguise. Mrs. Davenant was not a woman who valued the conventional forms of religion and morality. She not only did not care about the opinion of the world, but thought traditional values and principles contemptible and narrow. The fact that an opinion was held by a large number of ordinary people seemed to her a strong reason for mistrusting it. She saw the shallowness of the sentiment by which most people live. She did not feel bound to outrage it, but only abstained from open rebellion for reasons of convenience. But she did care passionately for the great and deep emotions of life, honour, purity, self-restraint, sympathy, moral beauty. People in whom she did not detect something that answered to the appeal of the deeper virtues did not shock her, they simply had no interest for her whatever.

But she was not a woman who loved easily; she was far too critical for that. She loved Molly with an affection so intense that she had deliberately dissembled it, because she had none of the selfishness of emotion which seeks by gentle insistence to mould the beloved to its own likeness. The more that Mrs. Davenant loved, the more did she desire that the object of her love should develop on spontaneous lines. Her jealousy took the form of an almost passionate abstention from interference. For her love for Molly had been a very gradual one. As a child her daughter had hardly even interested her; but as her mind and heart opened, she had slowly perceived that Molly was a finer nature than herself, more generous,

more simple, and with infinitely more instinctive self-sacrifice that she had herself ever been able to acquire. But the result was that she had hardly ever curbed Molly in any of her natural traits, her outspokenness, her swift impulses, her fearless self-abandonment. She had never taught her either caution or prudence.

And now she became aware that she had perhaps done a rash thing. She had brought Molly into close contact with a man whom she herself was half-inclined to mistrust. The two had evidently at first sight taken a fancy to each other. Robert was a man trained in social refinements, and with every stroke of the game consciously within his reach. The touch of tragedy about his life, the sense of his influence in public affairs, his apparent openness and childlike enthusiasm, all combined to make him dangerously attractive. The last thing in the world she desired was that Molly should fling her rich gifts and her unfathomable emotions into the gulf of a sterile and accomplished egotist. She had not yet by any means decided that this *was* Robert's temperament, but what she thought was levity in him made her suspect that he was incapable of feeling anything very deeply.

But there was no question now that the adventure must go forward. Robert could not be driven out, and Molly would submit to no dictation in the matter except for very sound proof of Robert's worthlessness.

Moreover she mistrusted her own power of resisting Robert's fascination. He appealed to all her own tastes and preferences even more strongly than he did to Molly's. She was interested in the movement of the world, and all the secret currents which ran beneath the surface. She longed to know how the great political machine was started and how it was controlled—of all these mysteries Robert held the key.

It was a complicated situation, she could see no way out; then she checked herself and smiled. As usual, she thought, her imagination had outrun her commonsense. This was in fact the secret of her sagacity and even her influence, though she did not know it, that she spoke and thought with the future, rather than with the past or even the present, in mind. Why should she anticipate complications? Why should not Robert and Molly form a brotherly and sisterly friendship, which was exactly what she desired? And anyhow she could trust Molly's common sense; she picked up lightly quite intimate relations with all sorts of people, and she had never done anything indiscreet.

She sent up a little prayer for wisdom and common sense, hardly putting it into words. Her days were full of these little unuttered prayers, which she framed more constantly when she felt confident and happy than when she had cause for anxiety and depression. It was in her self-confident moods, she knew, that her mistakes were most often committed.

When she had dressed and was waiting in the drawing-room a few minutes before dinner, Robert came in.

"I have had a perfect day," he said; "I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years. The whole place is lovely, to start with—I feel as if I had migrated into a different sphere altogether. Nan-Zephron! What a place! I really think I must try to buy the Squire out. But I couldn't part with him—he really is a man of incomparable absurdity."

"Oh, you have only seen him in full dress," said Mrs. Davenant. "He's quite a different man behind the scenes."

"So Molly told me," said Robert, "and I must say this, too, that Molly is quite enchanting. She knows these

people in and out, sees how funny they are, and loves them all the better for it. It's no good trying to like *fragments* of people."

"But *you* must meet hosts of interesting people."

"Hundreds," said Robert, "but I only see just what they choose to show me of themselves. The fun is to have someone who can interpret them as well as draw them out, like Molly. Society, as it is called, is a very conventional affair really."

"It used to be," said Mrs. Davenant, "but surely the world has thrown over all that? A man, I understand, at a dance, thinks nothing now of giving his partner a sound shaking and telling her to 'buck up.'"

"Oh, yes," said Robert, "but that's nothing—that's only the new way of playing the game; it means nothing. You don't get inside people's minds any the more by calling them 'old pet.'"

"I should trust not," said Mrs. Davenant, with a slight shudder.

"Oh, you know what I mean, Mary," said Robert. "I'm not very good at seeing into people and through them. I haven't got much imagination, and take people at their own valuation. That is what makes me a good party man. But I am apt to believe what people say, and it is a mistake, because people's opinions are often not a part of themselves at all, but a little bag they carry. It's like what we say of old Blackwater, that if you catch him off his guard he's a Tory; he's only a Liberal when he has time to remember."

"What a dreadful picture!" said Mrs. Davenant. "Molly and I live in a much less sophisticated world!"

"Yes, but without being in the least degree unsophisticated yourself! You, of course, ought to live more in the world—you are made for it. You bristle with

intelligence and perception. You would have a great following in London."

"Ah, Robert," said Mrs. Davenant, smiling, "it wouldn't be polite to ask you to get thee behind me, but you know what I mean. You mustn't unsettle my very hard-won philosophy."

Robert shook his head. "You and Molly will have to come up to town, and let me show you my bit of the world," he said, "and then Molly——"

But at that moment Molly darted into the room, and hearing her name, stood looking from one to the other.

"Eavesdropper!" said Robert, "I was on the point of saying something very interesting about you!"

"I think we had better go into dinner," said Mrs. Davenant, "this is the kind of situation I don't feel equal to dealing with. Robert has been explaining to me how little I know of the world, and I cannot persuade him that I know quite enough."

XIII

THE following morning Molly rapped at Robert's door, was answered by a drowsy voice, and announced that she would wait for him on the terrace. It was a fresh day with a decided nip in the air. Five minutes later he joined her. " I don't know where this costume comes from," he said, looking curiously at a strangely patterned bathing dress. " Parker procured it for me. I feel like a convict covered with broad arrows."

" Not a bit," said Molly. " You look just as neat without your clothes as with them."

" I woke half an hour ago," said Robert, " and I prayed with all my heart that you would forget, or oversleep yourself. It's dreadfully cold—too cold to bathe, I think. I shall get what Parker calls ' pumona.' "

" Go back to bed," said Molly, " and tell mother you were too much shocked to bathe, when it came to the point."

Robert made a face at her, dived neatly into the pool, and headed for the creek. They swam out together, calling to each other like children. They raced back, and Robert won with consummate ease. As Molly came lightly up the steps with parted lips and laughing eyes, Robert suddenly recognized with something of a shock that he was in the presence of a remarkably beautiful girl, with all the beauty of strength, health and supple movement; he wondered that he had not seen it before, and felt suddenly abashed. " Hurry in quick, Robert," said Molly, " your teeth are chattering—for goodness' sake don't catch cold."

" I saw your two heads far out in the creek," said Mrs. Davenant at breakfast, " and hid my face in my hands. What will be thought of us ? "

" We were a long way off ! " said Robert.

" Ah, but with my little telescope ! " said Mrs. Davenant.

The order of the day was soon arranged. The morning was to be devoted to the Vicar.

" You won't be so much amused by Mr. Cuthbert," said Mrs. Davenant. " He is much more in earnest about religion than Mr. Temperley is about beauty. He doesn't thrive on it, because it only tells him what not to do."

" Oh, don't take the bloom off Cubby, mother," said Molly. " Did you give him the living, Robert ? "

" I'm not sure," said Robert. " Yes, I believe I signed something or other. Did the Bishop recommend him ? I'm very vague about it."

" It was not the Bishop," said Mrs. Davenant. " Mr. Cuthbert embarrasses the Bishop dreadfully ; he kneels down whenever he sees him—in the street, on the platform of the station."

" I hope he won't kneel down to me," said Robert. " I don't think I quite like this business."

" Oh, he won't accept a blessing from you," said Mrs. Davenant.

" The only difficulty is," said Molly, meditatively, " that I believe he is in love with me."

" My dear Molly," said Mrs. Davenant, " that is hardly maidenly—you forget his sacred calling."

" He forgets it himself," said Molly, " when he is with me ; he has a dreadful smile, which he reserves for me ; he reminds me of the angels in the ' Blessed Damozel,' ' playing at holy games.' "

Robert burst out laughing. " What an amazing pair you are, to be sure ! " he said.

XIV

THEY walked briskly along the road to the village. On their left the wood climbed steeply, and at intervals narrow glades cut through the trees ran up towards the hill summit. Robert thought these glades, with the pale green of the grass intensified by the sombre shadows to the left and right, glimmering upwards into a thin sunlit mist, were the most romantic sight conceivable, in their secrecy, their abrupt ascent, their unseen goal; they seemed like ways from the known to the unknown. He said something of this in a fanciful way to Molly, and was surprised that it seemed to check her impulse to talk; he said something about her silence to her and she smiled at him.

"It isn't so easy to talk to you to-day as it was yesterday, Robert—I wonder why?"

"Oh, it is like the hush that often follows when two friends have shaken hands. Anything that can be said seems so commonplace."

"No, it is a sort of shyness," said Molly, "I'm finding new things in your mind."

"My harmless remark about the glades?" said Robert.

"Yes, it shows me that you have got so much imagination," said Molly. "I have seen them all my life and liked them—and you tell me *why* I like them. It is just what you described. I have very little imagination myself; I am matter-of-fact."

"Oh, I daresay," said Robert.

"Yes—I can't get much beyond what I hear and see; and now I am becoming more shy every moment."

"Take a long breath," said Robert. "Count your

footsteps! My imagination isn't a very serious affair." They came out beside the little port of Polcrello. There were a few old bulging quays of stone and a row of small white cottages, with the road between them and the water's edge. A few boats lay stranded on the mud, and a clear stream came tumbling down under a stone bridge. The pleasant litter of nets, lobster-pots, oars, lay comfortably about.

They passed a cottage lying a little back, with a garden full of flowers behing a low stone wall.

" One day we must go there," said Molly, " to see Mrs. Pelynt—she really rules the place. She turns us all inside out. Do you like having your soul inspected ? "

" It depends upon the time of day."

As he spoke, a big smiling woman with a very sanguine complexion, muffled up in a large apron, came out of the cottage door, and beaming with benevolence waved her hand to Molly. Molly waved back.

" Aunty Pel never interrupts," she said.

" That's the Vicarage up there ! " and Robert saw a rather lean-looking house of the sort of Gothic one sees in a bad dream, standing up on the hill-side, half concealed in trees. " There's the Church, by the water's edge—you can just see the gable."

They went up a steep little stony lane to the left, among the houses, and came presently to a green wicket-gate, which led up across an ill-kept lawn to the porch of the Vicarage. It looked at once pretentious and slatternly. But before they reached it, a tall, lean young clergyman of about thirty, habited in a cassock much the worse for wear, came out to meet them from a glass door at the end of the house. He had rather a tired, ascetic face, large features, his eyes staring bleakly from their slits, a shock of brown hair, and a loose, ill-jointed frame.

Robert thought he looked decidedly attractive. He came quickly up to Molly with a little bow, clasping his hands in an affected ingratiating way. " My dear Miss Molly," he said, in a soft, rather high-pitched voice. " How angelic of you to come at this empty hour ! " Molly nodded and smiled. " This is Lord Helford," she said. " He isn't quite sure if he appointed you or not. You must persuade him to take the credit of it."

" Lord Helford must take the responsibility, I fear," said Mr. Cuthbert with a pleasant smile, taking Lord Helford's outstretched hand, " under God—these poor incidents of our daily life are often over-ruled to our profit and His glory ? "

Lord Helford uttered a sound that appeared to resemble the words " I'm sure," and Molly stood observing the pair with a dancing light in her eyes.

" Might I see the Church ? " said Robert ; " I believe some of our Davenant forbears are buried there—can you give us the time ? "

" My time is at my patron's disposal," said Mr. Cuthbert with a little bow. " Yes, there are some Davenant tombs, the occupants of which, wherever they may be, can hardly be said to have done much to enhance the spiritual credit of the family."

" I am afraid they were great ruffians," said Robert, " wreckers and worse—less likely, as Matthew Arnold said, to be flying above us than to be frying beneath us."

A strong and unholy disposition to laugh made itself suddenly visible in Mr. Cuthbert's face, but he shook his head mournfully. " The late Matthew Arnold's statements were not, I fear, as a rule deeply based upon Christian reverence."

" I was only attempting," said Robert, " to interpret your phrase ' wherever they be.' "

" I am rebuked," said Mr. Cuthbert, " justly rebuked."

Molly broke out into a little liquid laugh, and Robert thought that the sudden glance which Mr. Cuthbert cast at her out of his mournful eyes, was extraordinarily pathetic.

He led the way to the Church ; and Robert thought he had never seen so picturesque a scene. They came down over a bit of rough grass with thickets of thorn ; below them lay a round sea-pool sheltered from the open creek by a bar of sand and shingle, covered with bright yellow flowers. Descending, they walked round the edge of the pool. At one point Mr. Cuthbert stopped before a little alcove in the hillside above the path, with a rude granite arch, all overgrown with fern. Within, in the cool darkness, a stream gurgled into a brimming stone basin, and leapt away by a little runnel.

" The well," said Mr. Cuthbert, " of the Blessed Saint Bybi, who arrived here, according to the story, floating in an upright posture on a stone butter-firkin. There is no reason to doubt the substantial accuracy of the story."

" It is self-evident," said Robert.

" I thank you," said Mr. Cuthbert, with a bow.

The scene before them seemed to Robert almost impossibly beautiful. The hillside, covered with trees, came down very steeply on all sides of the pool. The only sound was the voice of a stream falling, high up in the wood ; great burdocks and water-plants flourished luxuriantly in the warm air. Immediately in front of them stood a small Church of granite, covered thickly with green lichen. The windows were full of rough-hewn traceries, and among the stone tiles of the roof the ferns grew freely.

" What an exquisitely beautiful place ! " said Robert, " where all things come to an end."

" The Blessed Bybi admired the view, I have little doubt," said Mr. Cuthbert, " with a temperate joy inspired by his daily prayer, ' Turn away mine eyes lest they behold vanity.' He lived for fifty years in a crevice of the rock just above the Church. His food was roots, of what species I can form no conception. On windy days he sang hymns, we are assured, for forty-eight hours at a stretch ; and this no doubt averted destruction from numerous mariners."

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, struggling with her laughter, " do you really believe all this ? "

" I submit my rebellious mind," said Mr. Cuthbert, " to the faith once delivered to the saints ; though to be frank, I must admit that my one attempt to emulate the saint's melodious orisons met with little success. After three hours and three-quarters I was compelled to desist —such is our lamentable decadence."

Robert looked at Mr. Cuthbert, and a slow smile pervaded the Vicar's face ; " degenerate days, degenerate days, Lord Helford ! " he said, with a cheerful air. " But we must be thankful for any sign, however humble, of the concurrence of our faltering efforts with the Divine Will ! "

He led the way briskly to the Church. It was dark and solemn, the windows much obscured by foliage. A strange scent of incense, competing with infinite mouldiness, assailed them. The walls and some of the pew-fronts were adorned by pictures of quite indescribable feebleness—meek damsels curiously adorned, saints whose crimped beards and toupées only brought into ghastly relief their effeminate features, all bedizened with emblems,—infinitely inert persons, patently unfit to deal with even the mildest problems of life.

" My work," said Mr. Cuthbert, " my unaided work !

Miss Molly disdains all artistic accomplishments; and my own poor gifts are rather in the direction of meditative idealization than effective execution. But it is the spirit, is it not, Lord Helford, the spirit in which these tender personalities are conceived, that ennobles the work?"

"Undoubtedly much depends on that," said Robert, with an accent of conviction. "Without it, art is doomed to failure."

"Beautifully said," cried Mr. Cuthbert, crossing his hands in rapture—"finely felt and firmly expressed! Lord Helford, you encourage me to continue my humble efforts."

He then showed various altars—before St. Bybi's shrine a lamp burnt. He bowed profoundly, and Robert not to be outdone contrived a kind of lurch in the right direction. Tombs of Davenants—figures leaning awkwardly on ledges and supporting a drooping head by a cramped arm—rose in tiers along the little transept wall. Mr. Cuthbert surveyed the effigies somewhat ruefully, and shook his head. "I wish, for your sake, Lord Helford," he said, "that I could regard the spiritual prospects of some of your ancestors without a certain pastoral anxiety. That cadaverous personage there was one of the most enthusiastic of wreckers. You know that Carvedra Head is only half a mile from the mouth of the creek, a place fatal to ships. There is good evidence that on stormy nights Sir William used to extinguish the Perclet Light, which shows the passage in through the Narrows, and exhibit another light near the base of the Carvedra cliff. There is a ledge there, approached by rocky steps, which has a hole bored deep in it where the fire-basket, in my belief, was fixed. If there was a wreck by day—he always had scouts out in thick weather—he was the first to ride down with a posse. At all events, from a poor squire he

became a very wealthy man ; and there is a little room at Nan-Zephron panelled with some foreign wood, which seems to me to have the devil's trail all over it. I daresay some of your own revenues come from his depredations —he bought much land hereabouts. But you may be sure I do my best for him. In a sense I regard him as one of my flock, and I do not fail to say a regular mass in his intention at the little altar yonder, which is reserved for the benefit of the departed. But perhaps you would regard that as a mere sentiment ? "

" Not at all," said Lord Helford. " In the name of our common humanity, we must all be truly grateful to you."

He spoke with such dignified emotion that Molly looked at him with astonishment and silent wonder.

" I thank you," said Mr. Cuthbert, crossing his hands nervously across his cassock, " though I confess it makes my blood boil to entertain even a suspicion that a man should use his fellow-creatures so. Next, perhaps, to sorcery, and the profanation of the Holy Mysteries, I regard it as the most heinous sin that a human being could commit. Of one thing, Lord Helford, I am certain, that your miserable forefather's spirit lives, and lives in torment. There is a scent that I have sometimes discerned here, where the shadows gather darkly in this corner—his body rests in the vault below—which arises from no mortal putrescence. I spend many hours, I should say, in this Church, alone, wrestling with God for the sins of my fellowmen, both living and departed. I have but to dwell in thought upon your unhappy ancestor, when that scent rises in my nostrils so that I can scarcely continue my prayers. As the messengers of heaven come in light and fragrance, the messengers of Satan crawl upon us in disordered stenches and difficult horror. I am sure of it ! "

He raised his hands menacingly above his head ; and then

suddenly checking himself, he said : " But this is no sort of talk to entertain your lordship and Miss Molly with—you will forgive me—we solitary men grow used to thinking aloud."

He showed them the other arrangements of the Church, led them to the door, and then with a bow and an uneasy smile, added, " You will forgive me if I leave you to return alone. I must remain here for awhile and do battle with the hosts of darkness—I have been negligent of late —and they seem to have quickened and gathered force." He bowed to Robert, and shook hands lingeringly and with a somewhat pathetic smile with Molly, and closing the door softly, left them standing there.

" This way," said Molly in a subdued tone. " Let us get out of these shadows. This leads out to the headland," and she walked away rapidly through the trees.

When they came out on to the open ground Robert turned to her : " My dear Molly," he said, " you are quite pale ! What is the matter ? You are not minding what that strange creature said ? "

" I don't know," said Molly, " there seemed to me to be something awful about the whole place to-day. It was truly horrible. I felt—it is too absurd—but I felt as if something was peeping at us behind one of those pillars. And Mr. Cuthbert—I have never seen him like that before. I felt as if I was caught in a noose, and he was pulling me towards him. How can I be so silly."

" It's not silly at all," said Robert, angrily, " the man must be insane. I am afraid I only thought it all rather refreshingly picturesque ; but it won't do at all. I must write to the Bishop about him."

" No, don't do that," said Molly, " Cubby really is a good man. He lives on next to nothing, he gives everything away ; he starves day and night for the people, who

don't like him ; but when they are in real trouble, he is wonderful. He used to spend hours, week after week, in reading to poor old Mrs. Durlison, when she was dying of cancer, and other people could hardly stay in the room. He really *does* things. But Robert, tell me, you don't think what he said just now was true ? "

Robert put his arm inside hers, and walked on for a moment in silence. " I don't believe a word of it ! " he said " Mind, I think he's a perfectly honest man. But if you play tricks with your mind, it ends by your mind playing tricks with you. There are mysteries everywhere. Even you and I, though we talk so lightly, are a mystery to each other ; but these low Hobgoblin tricks—to put it plainly I don't think Satan, assuming that he exists, is such a fool as to give away his own game like that. No, he fights with very different weapons—charming, bright, attractive things—roses and songs and smiling eyes."

Molly gave a sigh of relief. " Yes, of *course*," she said. " How you cut the knot, Robert—though I'm not sure that your solution isn't even more alarming. Never mind, I can deal with the roses."

They walked on in silence, each pondering. Robert's face had a fixed and strained look, which seemed strange to Molly. She caught his eye and he smiled at her.

" Don't be vexed with Mr. Cuthbert, Robert," she said.

" Mr. Cuthbert ! " said Robert with a tone of scorn. " I was thinking about something quite different. Promise me you will put it all out of your head, Molly dear ! "

The little phrase sounded sweet to Molly. " Yes, indeed," she said, " on one condition, that you won't tell mother. She would be furious with Mr. Cuthbert, and say to him—I don't know what she wouldn't say, but he wouldn't forget it."

" Oh, well," said Robert. " I'm sure I don't care, if you are content."

The days went quickly past. In a week Molly felt as if she had known Robert forever ; his company, his quiet deference, his ever-ready humour, his unaffected delight in beautiful things, his serious matter-of-fact way of consulting her about everything connected with the place, were all deeply delightful to her. She felt him to be like an adorable brother whom she had discovered.

They were constant companions. Sometimes Robert went off with his agent, and Molly counted the minutes till he returned. She liked the sound of his voice in the house, and his step on the stair. She found that he preferred her silent company to sitting alone working on his letters in the little study ; and those seemed to her almost the most delightful hours of all, when Robert sat, wrinkling his brow over a document, or holding his pen suspended, or writing with swift, easy strokes, and looked up to find Molly's eye bent upon him, and answered her look by a wink or a smile—sometimes even waving his hands. " You've got the stares, Molly ; don't look at me like that ; I feel as if you were looking at my back-bone, not at me ! " She liked the way in which he pushed away his work, got up, and saying, " Come along—let's get a breath of air," walked off, leaving her to follow him. He paid her no compliments, used no endearments, but sometimes said a word of honest praise—" That's splendidly sensible—you hit the nail on the head," or " the wisest of women," which made her flush with pleasure.

" Oh, Robert," she said to him one day, as they strolled together, " where have you been all this time ? " He looked at her a little puzzled, " all the time I haven't known you, and might have known you," she added. " To

think that all I remember of you is a rather pompous and bored undergraduate, who looked at me as if he wished me at the ends of the earth."

" Was I such a brute ? " said Robert. " I'm really not sure that I remember you at all."

Once she said to him, " Do you ever talk to mother ? " " Not often enough," he said, smiling, " but my time is pretty full ! "

" I wish you would talk to her—she seems a little left out."

" I'm still a little frightened of her," said Robert. " What she says is so very final."

" She seems puzzled about something," said Molly. " Like a soldier at a loophole with a rifle, waiting for someone to come along."

" She doesn't take me for granted, as you do," said Robert. " I'm sometimes afraid that I take you too much for granted.—You're a perfect angel ! "

Molly thought of an old engraving which hung in the hall, of Tobit and the angel. Tobit shuffling heavily along, his eyes on the ground, and the angel a slim figure, stepping springily, looking about him with a smile of kindly wonder that anyone should move so heavily. Robert was like that, she thought, and she was like Tobit, her commonplace mind moving so slowly beside his.

" She took the kiss sedately," said Robert.

Molly shook her head : " That's one of your quotations, which make me feel such an owl."

" Yes, one shouldn't *quote*," said Robert—" it sounds superior."

" But do talk a little more to mother," said Molly, eagerly. " I seem to have rather drifted away from her, too."

" What time suits her best ? "

" The evening, I think, just before dinner. She says she can't *talk* in the morning—she can only hold out the bones of remarks."

Robert laughed. " I wish I had half her complaint," he said, adding, " No, that's another quotation ! I must stop that—but they are so convenient for filling gaps." He gave a great yawn as he spoke, and stretched his arms.

" I like to see you do that," said Molly. " It looks as if you didn't mind me ! " Robert's only answer was to pull a little rose from his buttonhole, which Molly had given him that morning, and throw it at her.

" Take back your treacherous gifts," he said.

" I gave a rose to Mr. Cuthbert once," said Molly, meditatively. " He came to tea, and I thought he would like one. The next day was Sunday, and he carried it about with him all the service in his hand."

" Oh, d——n Cuthbert," said Robert.

" You are rather hard on Cubby, Robert," said Molly. " You forget how he adores me."

" Yes, I feel sometimes as I should if I knew he had been using my hairbrushes," said Robert. " The man intrudes ! "

" Well, we've only seen him once, and then he shut us out of the church."

" Oh, leave Cubby alone," said Robert. " What are Bishops for ? "

XV

AN evening or two later Robert was talking at dinner about his work. Mrs. Davenant was intensely curious about the whole working of the political machine. Robert was an excellent talker, not overloading his descriptions with detail, and giving little thumbnail sketches as he went along, which seemed to Molly the perfection of word-portraiture. Mrs. Davenant plied Robert with questions, sometimes it seemed of almost a provocative kind; and Molly was glad that she did so, for it roused Robert to talk with energy. She, on the other hand, took fully as great a delight in his talk—but she knew and cared nothing about the administrative part of the affair, though she liked to hear Robert explain it all in so clear and animated a way. What she enjoyed was his description of the people about him. To-night he was speaking of his chief, Lord Picton. "He's a very effective man," he said, "almost a great one. He gets very good work out of his subordinates by inspiring them with a mixture of terror and affection. For three days together he is as dry as hot sand. 'I think, my Lord, we had better modify the Gregoroboulos dispatch,' says the chief clerk, Sir Andrew Macgregor, a venerable man with a grey beard. 'Oh, that's what you think!' says Picton, with infernal insolence, and looks at Macgregor as if he was looking at an earwig. Everyone who goes in gets snapped at. He will say to me, 'Helford, I think you exceeded your power in dealing with the Cabinet memorandum. Have the goodness to let me indicate the line first, instead of humbly making suggestions afterwards. After all, I'm responsible.'" "What

do you say in reply to that ? " said Mrs. Davenant. " Oh, I don't know," said Robert, laughing, " it depends. Perhaps I say, ' Very well, sir ! Perhaps you would like to redraft it now.' ' No, it will have to do,' he says. Then the next time I leave it all to him, and see him puzzling over his papers. Then he will look up and say, ' I wish you would take the initiative sometimes, Helford. It is so much more satisfactory to have something to criticize.' You can't get round him ! Then perhaps after half a week of this, he will take old Macgregor's arm and say, " I'm afraid you find me very exacting—never mind, I know how well and wisely I am advised,'—and old Macgregor goes away treading on air."

" How awful it must be," said Molly, " I feel as if I should shake my fist in his face ! "

" Oh, no, it's not a bad game," said Robert, " he's a sensible and kind-hearted old boy. If the Premier comes down on something, which occasionally happens, Picton never makes a scapegoat of anyone. He takes the whole blame on his own shoulders."

" That's a fine quality," said Mrs. Davenant, " I like that."

" Yes," said Robert, " so do we. But it's a benevolent despotism. His subordinates don't act with conviction and enthusiasm, only with energy and industry, just because the motive to please him is so strong. We obey, we wish to do his bidding, but we don't immolate ourselves."

" I'm sure you have never obeyed anyone," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Yes, Mary, that is exactly what I *have* done, and I owe any success I have won to it. I can't get my own way ; but I get a certain pleasure out of realizing, by the exercise of imagination, exactly what Picton desires. It is rather

fun working out another man's plan, which you don't believe in, as exactly as possible."

" Isn't that rather spiritless ? " said Mrs. Davenant.

" It may be," said Robert ; " but the only hope of civilization is that people should sacrifice their own ideas a little. The people who really block progress are the second-rate minds who are effective and self-righteous, and say they can only do what they believe to be right. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, they produce the worst disasters—worse than any of the effects of cynicism."

" I can't help thinking," said Mrs. Davenant, " that the biggest people of all come to the front by holding on to their ideals."

" Yes—but that is not because they are self-righteous, but because they are first-rate. You see, Mary, *you* are the rebellious genius. You are one of the children who won't play. You require to be convinced. That attitude is very beautiful and impressive in a play—like Hamlet, who doesn't care twopence what becomes of the State of Denmark. You and Hamlet are only interested in working out your own salvation. I am more interested in the State of Denmark. It's no use being disgusted with humanity—or at any rate it's no use showing your disgust."

" But you don't mean that you must sacrifice all your finest convictions for the sake of agreeing with the average mind ? " said Mrs. Davenant.

" I knew that you were driving me to the precipice ! " said Robert, laughing. " You force me to speak priggishly. Isn't that very much what the spirit behind the world seems to be doing ? Does God, do you think, despise the second-rate mind, and lose himself in admiration of the first-rate ? I always like the verse in the Psalm : ' neither delighteth He in any man's legs.' The difference in people which we think so wonderful, don't mean much to Him."

" But," said Molly who had been listening intently, "isn't that the one and only way we get on at all, by seeing and admiring and following the people who are miles ahead of us ? "

" I think," said Robert—" as you are both relentless—that we have also got to see and admire what is fine in the people infinitely below us, and reach out a friendly hand. That's what you are doing every day, Mary—isn't she, Molly ? "

" You mustn't turn my flank with compliments," said Mrs. Davenant, " I feel that there is something finer in the people who won't come down to a lower level, than in the people who are always looking to see which way the cat jumps."

" The cat often sees better which way to jump than we do," said Robert. " I admit that my scheme is not as idealistic as yours—but it is the way in which things get done. I care more for that than for contemplating my own beautiful nature."

There was a moment's silence. Molly could not help admiring Robert's dexterity, but she saw that he was a little nettled ; and there was a touch of cruelty about his words.

Mrs. Davenant smiled. " I shall have to take refuge in my womanliness, I see, Robert. Shall I tell you something interesting about your last remark ? That is the sort of remark that men admire and that women abhor. I don't know which is right. "

" My dear Mary," said Robert, " I bite the dust. I get so used to arguing with men that I forget my manners. It's as bad as Cromwell. Do you remember what he did to his royalist cousin, Mrs. Waller, when he was dining with her. She scolded him furiously for his revolutionary principles. He rolled up his napkin and threw it in her

face, and said he wouldn't bandy arguments with his aunt."

" Ah, but a woman would like *that*, Robert."

" I appeal to Molly," said Robert.

" Yes, I would rather you threw your napkin at me than speak to me as you did to mother," said Molly.

Robert covered his face with his hands and said " help me to my room ! "

XVI

THAT night when Mrs. Davenant had gone to bed, Robert and Molly looked out of the front door. It was a still night, and over the blackness of the wood, the dark blue sky was pierced with stars. " We must just look into this, Molly," he said. They walked out, and Robert took her hand lightly and drew it through his arm—but kept her hand in his own.

" Was I very odious to-night, Molly dear ? " he said. " Do you remember the nunnery where they looked after bed-ridden women, and one of the old ladies took her neighbour's pudding when the Sisters were not looking, ate it, and beat the rightful owner over the head with her spoon. In the evening, when the Sisters were talking over the events of the day, the Sister in charge of that particular ward said, ' Mrs. Ainslie was not quite as nice as usual to-day,'—Was I like that ? "

" Oh, no, Robert, of *course* not," said Molly, " it didn't matter in the least ! Mother enjoyed it thoroughly. She loves a little tussle. And I liked it, but for an absurd reason."

" What was that, Molly ? "

" Because it made me feel that you were entirely at home here," said Molly. " Your party manners broke down for a moment."

" Have I got party manners ? "

" No," said Molly, " how stupid I am to-night. They are just your manners, and that is why I like them. It's the town mouse and the country mouse, that's all ! "

" Well, I feel safe with *you* anyhow," said Robert, " but

I don't like the idea that I was rude to your mother. You must make the peace with her—Mollify her, in fact."

Molly gave his hand a little squeeze for answer. The wind came fresh and sweet out of the wood—they were almost in darkness now. Over the black woods a great grey mass loomed up. " There is Caer Brynon," said Molly, " how fierce and cold he looks ! " They walked in silence, and Robert could feel the warm pulse ticking in the strong little wrist he held in his hand. The small waves broke crisply on the shore, and they could hear the waters draw softly back with the oncoming tide. Strange sounds, whether near or far it was impossible to say, broke the stillness, creaking sounds, soft swooning melodious notes, broken sighs. Presently they were out in the open again, and saw the sky powdered with sawdust.

" The stars ! " said Robert, " how one forgets about them ! Yet they are there all the time. Have you any ideas about the stars, Molly ? "

" When I am listening to you as you talk," said Molly, " I feel I have no ideas about anything. Let me try to talk—don't laugh at me, Robert—I must practise talking—it seems to me just now the only thing worth doing."

" Go ahead," said Robert.

" Well," said Molly, " I am going to be very serious. I don't think I have much religion, Robert—there never seems time for it—but the stars make me able to believe in God. In the daytime, with everything full of shape and colour—and with the anxious faces and voices of people, it is somehow different. And there are so many little things to do which seem important. But now there is the silence first, and the far-off lights which are behind it all, and there all the time, as you said, when we are busiest.—No, I can't go on. Tell me what *you* feel."

" No, dear, I won't do that. I don't want to persuade you to feel anything but what you feel now."

" Oh, Robert, don't talk as if I were a silly child—as if you couldn't take the bloom off my pretty mind ! That's the old way of treating women ! "

" What an Amazon ! " said Robert. " Well, I will tell you. I feel almost exactly the opposite. In the business of the world, as you describe it, I can more or less believe in God, in something which is perhaps helping and guiding us, interested in our little dramas, concerned with our little virtues and vices. But then—— " and Robert relapsed into silence.

" Go on, go on," said Molly, tightening her arm in his.

" Well, when I see the stars like this—millions and billions of them, and know that even so we only see just a sprinkling of them, like a little pinch of dust—and that the cluster we see is probably only one of millions of such clusters—and then think that just as our sun has its set of planets, and then that every star I see has its own planets, with life going on in some of them like our own—and that our God, as we call Him, has had the making and has the care of all the lives lived on each—deeper and deeper, stars upon stars—then I can't frame any idea of any Being like that—the awful unsleeping weariness of it all, the horrible immensity of it ! "

" Well, and what next ? " said Molly, her face close to his.

" Then I go a step further ; and I see how wretched, on the whole, life in this planet is, how much mismanaged, how much misery, how few happy people ; and that we all have to die, and hate to die, and yet do not know if we live on—then I lose myself altogether, and feel that I know nothing about God at all—God is suddenly removed from me, further than the furthest star. I must know something definite about Him if I am to believe in Him. But I won't

go on, Molly. It all gets further and further off. The things I believe in are the things that come nearer to me—like you—and the feelings which I recognize, like love and hate, and partly understand."

There was a little silence, and then Molly said : " Yes, Robert, I see that, but I *don't* follow you. I can put aside all the part which lies beyond what I know, and believe in God from what I *do* know—what I don't know doesn't destroy my faith, when I have it, as I have now."

Suddenly they both of them seemed to feel that they could speak no more about it. They stood for a little to watch the sleeping creek, very dim and pale among the dark hills. They went slowly back to the house, which was dark and silent, suddenly looking up before them. They said good-night in the hall, feeling very close to each other, and Molly whispering, " don't sit up, Robert—think of your complexion," went lightly up the staircase. Robert watched her wave her hand as she passed out of sight.

It seemed to Molly in her room that it had been a very strange conversation. Neither of them had talked as they usually did. They had talked a strange language, and what appeared even more wonderful to her, they had talked the same language. It was as if one person had been speaking in both of them.

She said something of this to Robert in the morning, when the thought of their starlit ramble seemed remote and impossible to her. " We were both bewitched, I think."

" Oh, we are all very much like each other inside," said Robert, smiling. " It is only the outside that deceives us."

" But I don't want to be just like everybody else."

" You are the one person for me," said Robert, smiling, " and the more like you that other people are, the better I like them." He turned away and went off to the study. The little phrase sang in her mind all day long.

XVII

THE evening walk became a regular institution, except on evenings when it was really too bad to go out, and then Robert and Molly sat together in the study. But there was something in the darkness, the fresh moving air, the sweet breath and shrouding veil of night, which removed, they both felt, the last touch of embarrassment. They walked hand in hand as two children might; they spoke with entire directness of all that was in their mind. But Robert never mentioned his wife, and seldom, except incidentally, his mother, and Molly never had the heart to question him. Robert often spoke of his early days, of his tastes and pursuits, his likes and dislikes; Molly told him much about their neighbours, and he never wearied of hearing her describe them. He said once: "Molly, I believe that the only thing you care about in the world is people." "Yes, that is true," she said, after a moment's thought. "I am very ill-educated," she went on with a sigh. "I don't know any history, and very little in the way of language. I don't know anything about music or art, and I have no accomplishments. If I were thrown on the world to earn my living, I couldn't be a governess, because there is nothing I could teach, or a secretary, because I can't spell. I think I should go as a nurse—not a hospital nurse, because I don't really care about sick people—I like wide-awake people—but a children's nurse. I really don't think there is anything else I could do."

Robert was silent for some time after this. "I wonder what you are thinking about," said Molly. "I could tell if I could see your face, but in the dark I don't know."

" Can you read my thoughts ? " said Robert. " More or less," said Molly, and added, laughingly, " but like Bluebeard, you have got some closed rooms in your mind of which you keep the key."

" Do you think it is a good thing to talk about one's inner thoughts ? "

" I don't know," said Molly. " I can't conceive doing anything else."

" Women and men are very different about that," said Robert, " the men of my acquaintance who go in for being frank are the most reserved people I know. They welcome you into the hall and the sitting-rooms of their mind, but their frankness is really a shield, behind which they hide their real selves."

" Yes," said Molly, " men often seem to me to want to do by words what can only be done by a look. Women know that by instinct."

" I have never had a real talk with your mother," said Robert, " yet that is what I came here for ; and then I found you : you have drawn my fire ever since."

" I wish you *would* talk to mother," said Molly. " There is nothing that would please her more."

" My difficulty is this," said Robert. " There are some things in my life that I want to talk to her about ; it's the only way to get them off one's mind. But with me, the moment that a thing becomes so serious that it ought to be talked about, that moment I become incapable of saying a word. There are things that I can't even translate into thought, much less into speech. You will wonder why I don't talk to you about it all, Molly. I have never been able to talk to anyone in the world as easily as I can to you—but you don't know the things or the people concerned."

" I never thought of your consulting me," said Molly.

" Nothing has ever happened to me that I can't talk about —but I can quite imagine it happening."

Robert put his arm about her neck, and drew her close to him.

They had a sudden surprise. The moon shone coldly, like some silver liquid spirit, in the open spaces of the wood, and filtered greyly through the filmy woodland. A great white owl came flying swiftly out of the forest only a few paces from them. They could see its solid head turning from side to side, its solemn eyes, and hear the downy winnowing of its wings. But there were footsteps, too, high up in the wood, and a moving shadow seemed to flit among the moonlit trees. " Who could that be ? " said Molly, " it's somebody surely ? "

" Shall I pursue him ? " said Robert, " shall I smite with the sword ? "

" Certainly *not*," said Molly, seizing Robert by the arm. " It's a poacher, I expect—and it would be so embarrassing to *know*."

The wood was soon silent again, but for deep-drawn sighs every now and then, as the breeze ruffled the tree tops.

" There's one more thing, Molly dear," said Robert. " This is Wednesday—and I have to be off on Saturday. I have finished all my business, and I must get back to work. Do you realize that I shall have been here five whole weeks ? "

" Oh, Robert," said Molly. " Yes, I know you must go, but what shall I do without you ? No . . . " and Molly struggled not very successfully with a sudden sharp little gush of tears, that were somehow not wholly mournful. " No, I won't be silly, but of course they have been the very best and dearest weeks of my whole life ! "

Robert could not wholly restrain himself at the sound

of the little sob and the touch on his arm. He bent down and kissed her lightly on the cheek. " There," he said gaily, " the compact is made. We aren't going to be separated for ever. I am going to insist on your coming to town to my great dark house, and then there are letters. I love letter-writing ; and I shall come here again—perhaps to Nan-Zephron. I'm going to have a talk about that to Temperley. Do you think your mother would ever be induced to move up there and keep house for me ? "

" No, never," said Molly. " You must not think of that. Mother will never leave Menerdue."

" We shall see," said Robert, " but don't let us spoil the next two days by being mournful, Molly.—We have found each other out, and we must be brother and sister now."

" Yes, Robert," said Molly, meekly, and was surprised to find the arrangement rather flat.

" Like Wordsworth," said Robert.

" Thy second cousin I would be,
Thy uncle—anything to thee."

" A quotation," sighed Molly, " but it seems rather apt."

" I altered it to suit the case," said Robert, " but don't be alarmed, dear ; I won't perform that little ceremony again—at least not in public."

" Oh, that doesn't matter," said Molly, " everybody here seems to kiss me ! I'm common property."

" I don't wonder," said Robert, " but this is the point —how can I persuade your mother to come to town with you ? "

" Show her that you want her," said Molly, " that's the only way. You can't ever affect her by arguments. She has too many of her own ! "

XVIII

ON the last day of Robert's visit, he announced that he was going up to Nan-Zephron for a business interview with Mr. Temperley. " Don't suppose," said Mrs. Davenant, " that because the Squire's heart is set on things beyond, he is what the Bible calls slothful in business. He is that curious sort of man who will take infinitely more time and trouble to save a few shillings than he would take about giving away a hundred pounds. It's a common combination—the tax that generous people pay for their impulses ! "

" The last expiring kick of the Mammon of unrighteousness," said Robert. " I should like to hear you express your views on that subject at prayers."

" I have given you a varied programme," said Mrs. Davenant.

" My dear Mary, you have taken us through the whole Duty of Man."

" That particular subject would seem both presuming and indelicate," she said.

In the afternoon, Robert and Molly walked together. They seemed to have but little to say to each other. " I'm sorry to be so dull and sad, Robert," said Molly. " What shall I be when you are gone ? "

" Oh, you will soon go back to your old ways," said Robert, " and I shall become like a broken vessel. But you must think how dull life would be if there were not things to be sorry about."

" I could do without sorrow," said Molly.

" Yes—but no one who cares for other people at all can

escape it," said Robert. " They are ill, they die, they disappoint one."

" I'm not easily disappointed," said Molly. " But don't let us talk like this—let's make plans."

After tea, Molly slipped away: and when, twenty minutes before dinner, she looked into the drawing-room, she was surprised to find her mother and Robert still talking. Dinner was not a cheerful meal; both her mother and Robert, Molly thought, had the air of ruminants chewing the cud; her mother was inscrutable, but Robert, she fancied, had the manner of one who had talked candidly, and was now wishing that he had put things differently. After dinner it was much the same, in spite of Molly's efforts; the talk, whenever she ceased to provoke it, relapsed into reverie. The night was dark and chilly, and when they went out, the air seemed full of the murmur of winds and waters. The trees leant together with sighs, the tide in the creek seemed hurrying on some far-away business. The brooding cries and melodious noises of the summer nights were silent now. " We won't have any more farewells, Robert," she said, " it will become like Richards' lamentations over a broken plate. I don't believe in keeping fragments, do you? You had a very long talk with mother to-night, and I had a feeling that it wasn't a very satisfactory one."

" How did you guess that?" said Robert. " You can see in the dark like a cat. But it wasn't your mother's fault. She was wonderful. Why does she veil herself so? What is she guarding against?"

" Against *feeling*, I think," said Molly; " she hates being at the mercy of anything."

" Yet to-night," said Robert, " she stripped off her disguise. But I don't think I can take her advice—though it would be better for me, for everybody, if I could. What

made the talk unsatisfactory, as far as I am concerned, was not her reception of it, but simply the things I had to say. I felt like a lawyer with a good case, who was putting it badly."

" You like things to be artistic. I sometimes think I don't care enough about that."

" It's a fault rather than a virtue, Molly—the cleanness of the cup matters to me almost more than what is in it."

" I don't like my cup to be dirty, Robert—but I don't mind about the shape."

" Well, the point is," said Robert, " that I have told your mother all my story. You knew I had a story to tell, Molly dear ? Not a very happy one, I am afraid."

" Oh, yes, I knew that."

" I have been trying to tell it ever since I came here. I can do nothing really till I can get it off my mind ; but I could not find words to tell it. It all seemed to me too sad to be spoken of—I have sometimes tried to begin to tell you, but I could not do that. And now I have asked your mother to tell you. And when you have heard it, I want you to write to me about it. I want you to know the worst of me."

" I can tell you what my answer will be. I shan't mind anything that mother tells me. It isn't that I make a hero of you, Robert. I know you as you are, and that is better than being a hero, It is you yourself—that is what I want."

" Molly dear, do you know what you are saying ? "

" Yes, indeed. I could believe anything about you that you told me was true, but it would not make any difference. One doesn't care for people or not care for people because of what they have done—that is all in another region."

" But, Molly, if you knew I had been selfish, cold-hearted, cruel ? "

" I should not care about that, Robert—it is something beyond all that that I care about."

" But, Molly, what have I done to deserve all this that you say ? "

" You haven't *done* anything, Robert. You are you—that's enough."

" Is it safe to trust anyone like that, Molly ? "

" I don't know, I'm sure—it's the only way I know."

" But you don't care about everyone as much ? "

Molly laughed, a delicious mocking little laugh ; " No, indeed," she said, " but it's only a matter of degree. Some part of me goes to meet some part of them—but all of me runs out to meet you, Robert ! I don't expect to take up all your mind and heart—you needn't think I am going to be silly about it—a great deal of your life is hidden from me ; but I want to think I have a little corner of it for my own."

" My *dear* Molly," said Robert, looking mistily at the face beside him, just visible in the gloom, and moved at once to an extraordinary exultation by the girl's words, and yet with a struggling and baffled sadness, " I can't tell you what a priceless gift you have given me. I can't speak of it . . . and I want you to hear what your mother has got to say—what I told her—before you trust me like this. But I can say this—that it seems as if I had suddenly found what all my life I have been looking for. There's just one thing I want you to promise—that you will write to me immediately you have heard . . . and now I simply daren't say any more—you will soon understand why."

" Don't let us say anything more at all," said Molly, drawing nearer to him, " let us just *be* together now." He clasped her close to him, and they went in silence through the overarching wood. The sound of the wind in the treetops, whispering of things unknown, and the

plaintive falling of the sea, brought a great peace to her mind.

They entered the house. The little lamp had burnt out in the hall, and all was darkness. Molly found a match and struck it, and in its pale illumination, Robert saw the face that had become so dear to him, touched with a sudden beauty of grace and purity; the face, under loosened tresses, chilled by the wind and wetted by the raindrops, but with all the strength of innocence and tenderness visible in wide opened eyes and parted lips. He took both her hands in his own—but they separated in silence, with just a smile and a nod from Molly. It seemed to Robert one of the hardest things he had ever done to leave her thus. He lay sleepless, her face again and again shaping itself upon the darkness, while the wind began to quicken and stir about the gables of the house; and woke at last in the sickly rain-streaked dawn to see the yellow light of morning gush from behind the cold and dark hill, and to hear the gale blustering in the tossing wood.

XIX

THE morning meal was a sad one. Only Mrs. Davenant preserved her mysterious calm. She talked in oracles of the effect of Robert's visit on the place. The village people, she declared, had exchanged a dim reverence for a sort of feudal glow—" most irrational, of course, to a well-balanced mind ! You are not nearly so *great*, Robert, as you were before you came, but you are far more adored. The primitive nature of these half-civilized emotions is distressing to a Whig who like myself depends on persuasive reason, and mistrusts all personal prestige." Molly and Robert smiled palely at each other ; and it was a relief to both of them, when the car grated softly over the gravel, and Robert ran out to say something scandalously personal to every member of the household. " What a pity he is a peer," said Mrs. Davenant, " what a candidate he would make ! "

In a moment all was over, and the car was engulfed in the wood. Molly felt a sudden collapse of her reasoning faculties, and determined to spend a day in the village, which she had sadly neglected, followed by a long solitary walk.

But her mother with an unusual gravity claimed her. " It isn't altogether a pleasant story I have to tell you," she said, " though very different from what I thought ; Robert wished you to hear it all, and I should like to get it over as soon as possible."

The outline of what had happened was this. Robert staying, together with his mother, at a big country house, after a spell of hard and unusually exacting work, had met

Cynthia Wykeham, who was now Lady Helford—well-born, well-bred, well-dressed, moderately well-endowed. She was, unfortunately for him, a very handsome girl and a rather silent one; and like many silent people, she did not understand the values of words, and spoke more emphatically and crudely than she intended. Robert, impetuous and imaginative, and finding her willing enough to listen and to smile, soon contrived to fall very much in love. He had told his mother, as indeed he told her everything. But Lady Ann, who had had more opportunities of seeing Miss Wykeham's real qualities, spoke not so much slightingly as despondently about her—she had thought her cold, ambitious, uninteresting, rough and conventional. This had awakened all Robert's perversity and hot-headedness. He had spoken, he admitted, with great vehemence to his mother, telling her that she had always suppressed and hedged him in, had encouraged him in all his weak sensibilities, and kept him from any contact with reality. " I knew as I spoke," Robert had said, " that I was behaving detestably, and that my words were both untrue and ungenerous." He had left his mother, gone in search of Miss Wykeham, and then and there declared himself. For the rest of his stay, he had hardly spoken a word to his mother. She had tried to raise the veil between them; had said that anyone whom he deliberately chose should be a daughter to her. " She made no claim upon me," Robert had said. " She did not remind me of any of the infinite love and patience she had showered upon me, she did not utter a single reproach—and again I repelled her."

Then the marriage had taken place; and soon Robert had made his discoveries. His wife had little imagination or sympathy, and seemed absorbed in a desire for a vulgar kind of prominence. There was not a single chord in her

that responded to any of his aims or hopes or fancies. She began by tolerating them, she went on to show her boredom, she ended by deriding them.

" My mother," he said, " wrote to me as usual—letters full of love and tenderness. She never said a single word about being slighted or displaced. She gave me every opportunity of coming back to her, she interested herself in my plans, she made the best of my wife. But when my wife said to me that my mother bored her even more than I did, a kind of hatred seized on me. And yet the whole thing was so tragic, my own idiocy was now so patent to me, that I could not endure the thought of telling my mother how right she had been."

For more than a year this silence and separation continued. He did not answer his mother's letters, he hardly read them. She fell ill. Robert was abroad and did not hurry back. When he got back, he found that his wife had not been to see his mother. Robert had gone at last, but he was not in time to see her alive. She had left a little hurried note for him to say that nothing that had happened had made the smallest difference in her love, and that she only blamed herself for the separation. Robert was not to feel, if she died, that she had anything in her mind for him but infinite trust and love.

An elderly friend of his mother's, who had been with her when she died, gave him this note—and told Robert with perfect directness that he had broken his mother's heart.

Robert had returned to find his wife indifferent to everything but the fact that one of her friends had found fault with her for not going to see her mother-in-law in her illness. It was not a question of not caring for her—everyone knew that there was little love lost between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law—but it was not

proper, and would be resented by certain foolish and sentimental people. Indeed, Lord Linton, said the friend, a cousin of Lady Ann's, had expressed open disgust at Lady Helford's conduct. This had seriously disturbed and even alarmed Lady Helford. When Robert returned, she reproached him for not advising her better ; " What is a husband for ? " she had asked. A violent quarrel had followed. Robert admitted he had lost all self-control.

Robert had then left his wife. A long legal correspondence had followed. Robert had absolutely refused to live with her, and Lady Helford's only preoccupation had been to secure an excellent allowance and to have no public breach.

Molly listened to this unpleasant recital in silence, occasionally asking a question.

Mrs. Davenant went on to say that she thought Robert's mind was in a very morbid state. He blamed himself for everything—for his behaviour to his mother, for his mother's death, for his conduct to Lady Helford, in not having tried to bring his mother and her more together, and for having himself, on discovering his wife's real disposition, abandoned all attempts to retain her affection. Robert had frankly confessed that for a long time he had meditated suicide. This had been succeeded by a helpless kind of apathy—the situation had seemed blankly irremediable. Then a certain interest in his work had returned, and latterly he had simply plunged into work and social distraction, to avoid the misery which settled down on him when unoccupied and alone.

" But," said Mrs. Davenant, fixing her eyes on Molly, " what is one to think of a man who with all this burden of thought—because though he torments himself unduly, he has ample reasons to blame himself—yet can behave as he has behaved here, as if he had hardly a care in the world ? "

" What do you think is the reason, mother ? " said Molly.

" I think he is a man of remarkable self-control, and with a power of dividing his life and thought into quite watertight compartments. I think he has felt all this deeply, and I don't think he consciously exaggerates—but I cannot believe that he suffers as much as he thinks."

" Do you want him to suffer, mother ? "

" I would never set eyes on him again if he did not."

" But you don't want him to cultivate his misery ? "

" No—I think he is doing right to throw himself into his work. He seems to me to have great manliness, together with much unmanly desperation. But it is a nature which I feel I cannot trust—I should never know to which of the two Roberts I was speaking."

" Not if you felt the better side was winning ? "

" You seem to have some idea of your own about it all, Molly ? Let me hear what you think."

" I think both sides are fine, mother. An unfeeling man would not blame himself so—an unmanly man would not try to cure himself."

" But what about his behaviour to his mother ? "

" It was cruel," said Molly, " but I could not throw him over because of that."

" You care for him, Molly ? "

" Yes, mother dear, I care for him very much indeed. I hardly know whether I love him or you the most."

" I ought never to have allowed him to come here," said Mrs. Davenant, " I thought that he might steal your heart away."

" From what, mother ? Steal it from what ? He has not stolen my heart away from you, or from anyone that I love."

" What has he done then ? "

" He has made me rich and glad," said Molly ; " I have found such joy in loving and pitying him as I never even dreamed of having."

" But what can it all come to, Molly ? I must speak plainly. You can never come nearer to him. Lady Helford is a very strong and healthy woman—there can be no separation between them, for neither of them has done anything to justify it. You can only be a sort of sister to him, and it may spoil your own life."

" I think I could bear that, mother. I could bear it as long as he wanted me as much as he does now. I am not even sure I am in love with him."

Mrs. Davenant, with a troubled air, scrutinized Molly's face : " I needn't say I trust you, Molly," she said, " but if you are not in love with him, you might be at any minute. You do not know what this all means. Has he made love to you ? "

" No," said Molly, " he has not, though he has made me love him. He kissed me once, but it was nothing."

" And all this I have told you doesn't set you against him ? "

" Set me against him ? " said Molly, " what an idea ! I love him twice as well as ever. At first I felt that there was nothing I could give him, no way in which I could help him—he seemed to be untouched by trouble. Then I saw that there was something very much the matter, very far down ; that he was frightened and lonely—now I know why, and perhaps I can do something. I don't want Robert to make love to me—he has not done so, and I see why he can't. But what I have I will keep—and it is quite enough for me."

Mrs. Davenant looked at her penetratingly. " But, Molly, I want you to think of this. I don't want to set you against Robert. It is just the other way. I want with all

my heart to make things easier for him—but one can give people a great deal without giving oneself . . . I am not going to interfere. I want you to do whatever you believe to be right—but I don't want you to act entirely out of pity or sentiment; be sure that you think it right! That's all I ask. You must remember this, that he has behaved—well, *unsuccessfully* to his wife, and I am bound to say heartlessly to his mother. Why should he not do that again?"

"But, mother, supposing that Lady Ann is somewhere, and has some idea of what Robert is doing, do you think she feels that about him—do you suppose that she is adding up things against him, and is on the look-out for him to treat other people so?"

"If I must answer the question," said Mrs. Davenant, "which is difficult to do, seeing how little one knows of the conditions of the other life, I should say 'No—she does not.'"

"She believes in him, in fact?" said Molly. "Oughtn't we to do the same?"

"Yes, undoubtedly," said Mrs. Davenant. "But you did not know and love Ann, the noblest, and most entirely unselfish heart I have ever known. I feel about Robert—I confess it—much as I should do if I had seen him *strike* his mother."

"It is dreadful, I know," said Molly. "But I can't think of Lady Ann as being grateful to you for hurting Robert for her sake."

"I can't discuss that," said Mrs. Davenant. "In fact I think we had better leave the matter alone for the present. What I am thinking of most of all, Molly, is yourself. Robert is a very sensitive and emotional man in spite of his finished exterior. The idea that he should make love to you *en passant* is intolerable to me."

" Please don't say that again, mother," said Molly. " He has not made love to me, nor has he even *made* me love him. Whatever has been done has been my doing. You don't mind my writing to him or him to me ? "

" No," said Mrs. Davenant. " I wish you to do as you think right—and I will say quite definitely that Robert has on the whole behaved well, though I wish he had behaved differently."

Molly went over to her mother, put her arm round her neck and kissed her. " You mustn't worry about this, mother," she said. " No harm has been done, unless it is harmful for me to be so happy. If you were to tell me not to see Robert or write to him, I should obey you. He is not going to come in between me and you. You will see how well we shall behave."

Molly spent the day among her village friends, full of a strange joy. The thought of Robert, the thought that she might ease his pain, give him the love he wanted, was enough to her. The thought rose in her heart like a song of a soaring bird. She did not look forward, and when she looked back she seemed to sweep out of her mind, like dust and dirt, the recollection of Robert's perversity and ingratitude. He had paid a heavy price for it, and he seemed almost more beautiful in her sight for having passed through the dark waters. His face, the tones of his voice, his little deft gestures came back to her.

Mrs. Pelynt gave her a warm welcome and a great hug. " Miss Molly, my darling," she said, " I seem to breathe more free now we have got you back all to ourselves. He's a nice young man, your Lord Helford, but he doesn't have much of the dear Lord's joy in his heart ! "

" But you feel just the same about me, Auntie Pel," said Molly. " You know you do ! "

" We don't talk the same tongue, you and I," said Mrs.

Pelynt, beaming, " but you are the Lord's dear child, for all that ! You aren't a converted saint, yet, Miss Molly, but you only need to be sealed with the Lord's grace—your heart is right in His sight. But your poor cousin has a long way to go yet. He is abiding in fear—that has to come first, Miss Molly—but he'll find his way to peace one day. To be gathered in, one and all—that's the end—but the dear Lord knows well that we must thirst after righteousness, before He gives us to drink of His pleasures as out of a river."

XX

MOLLY returned home for tea, delighting in the thought that as soon as she was alone she would sit down and write her promised letter to Robert, tell him that she knew all—and . . . what was she to say? To say that she *forgave* him was ridiculous. She would just say how much she missed him and longed to be with him. . . .

To her horror, there were voices in the drawing-room. She went in; there was Mr. Cuthbert, paying a solemn call, clasping a small volume, and Mrs. Davenant regarding him half thoughtfully, half amusedly. He rose at Molly's entrance, and shook hands awkwardly enough, bowing over her hand in a way she much disliked.

"I am venturing," he said, "dear Miss Molly, to intrude upon your quiet, now that your august visitor has gone. A highly accomplished man, Lord Helford, no doubt; though I felt, in talking with him, a certain disconcerting touch of worldliness, a tendency perhaps to rely on a political solution for our social problems, rather than on a spiritual solution."

"Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, pensively, "but you see that Lord Helford was brought up in an evangelical home, very weak in symbolic ritual, and you could not expect much spirituality from a mere Biblical training."

"I have a feeling," said Mr. Cuthbert, looking mournfully at Mrs. Davenant, "that you are speaking ironically. Principle might, of course, result from the training you indicate, but hardly imaginative sympathy."

Mr. Cuthbert went on to say that he had felt after

having had the advantage of some conversation with Lord Helford, that he himself had been losing sight, not so much of secular interests (to abstention from which he felt bound to adhere) as of lighter literature and ornamental art. " I have always held," he said, " that art and literature, if discreetly selected and applied, are the natural handmaids of religion. A priest's mind should be rich in sympathy for all innocent secular diversions. One must not be narrow or preoccupied." He, therefore, had come to request a list of attractive and improving books, which might serve to extend his sympathy and consequently his influence.

" But it's no good if you *begin* by mistrusting such things," said Molly.

" I shall endeavour to be just to them," said Mr. Cuthbert.

" What an inspiring frame of mind," said Molly. " Do you ever do anything you like, Mr. Cuthbert ? "

" The words," said Mr. Cuthbert, " ' turn away mine eyes lest they behold vanity,' are ever on my lips. But one has precedent for spoiling the Egyptians, I think ? "— Mr. Cuthbert smiled a melancholy and inquiring smile— " In that case one must have some sacred use clearly in mind, to which one proposes to apply the depredations."

" I see," said Mrs. Davenant, " that you are adhering to the Pauline precept, ' Not slothful in business.' "

Mr. Cuthbert smiled and shook his head. " I have here," he said, " a small volume given me some years ago by a friend whom I am compelled to describe as unregenerate. A French book, a book of poetry. In spite of my natural mistrust for the tendencies which such a volume represents, I have determined to give it an honest trial. I have a sonnet here which I should like to read to you, Mrs. Davenant, and ask your candid opinion."

He read in a stilted voice the famous sonnet which ends, " *Et O, ces voix d'enfants chantant sur le copole.*"

" How wise of you," said Mrs. Davenant, " not to attempt the French *accent !* "

Mr. Cuthbert flushed a little ; " I have never been rich enough to indulge in foreign travel," he said.

" Of course," said Molly, " You have had something better to do—and I know how you use your money—it is splendid ! "

Mr. Cuthbert bowed and smiled.

" I don't think there is much spirituality in it," said Mrs. Davenant, taking the book, " though it is beautiful enough—amazingly beautiful ! "

" Ah, then," said Mr. Cuthbert, " we may think of the writer as on the threshold ? "

Not long after, he took his leave. Molly went to the door with him. " Miss Molly," he said, fumbling clumsily with his book and his great shapeless wideawake, " I have a favour to ask. Now that your visitor has left you, may I have the comfort of coming here a little ? I ought not to presume—but I am strangely lonely in thought just now. Something seems to have come in between me and my flock."

" Why, of course," said Molly with a smile, " we are only too glad to be of use."

" One more word," said Mr. Cuthbert, nervously enfolding his book inside his hat. " You will forgive me if I say that with all my deep respect and regard for your mother, and her high spiritual instincts, she evokes in me a certain awe, which makes me feel not at my best with her. Would it be too much to ask that I might sometimes have a talk with *you ?* If I may say so, I think you understand me better."

" But I thought you mistrusted my spiritual instincts ? " said Molly, laughing.

" In a sense I do ! But I might even be of use to you in helping to enlarge them."

" Oh, well, we must see," said Molly, experiencing a sudden sense of stuffiness at the idea of spending much time tête-à-tête with Mr. Cuthbert.

" I will hope," said Mr. Cuthbert ; " as one of my flock, you know. The shepherd may claim the society occasionally of his little ewe lamb ? "

When Molly went back, she found her mother reading. " Poor Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " I can't think why I don't even pity him."

" He was singularly tedious to-day," said Mrs. Davenant, " but compared with Robert, how unsophisticated, how free from artificiality ! "

" I don't know," said Molly, " he was very artificial to-day. I believe he had rehearsed all his dialogue beforehand. Do you know, mother, I think that Cubby has done something of which he is ashamed, said something spiteful about us, or about Robert, and he is trying to forgive *us*, to salve his conscience. I thought him very sly to-day."

" He has no skill in diplomacy," said Mrs. Davenant. " I daresay you are right. Mr. Cuthbert's priestly instincts are so strong that he would always feel impelled to forgive his victims. He bores me dreadfully—and his French accent ! "

" You were a little cruel, mother."

" I felt I should die if I didn't say something," said Mrs. Davenant. " It was wrong—but he is really invulnerable. He is incapable of shame. I should not like to be at his mercy."

" He is more in love with me than ever," said Molly, " and he is horribly jealous. I believe he would do me any harm he could. That is what he means by love."

XXI

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Menerdue,
Thursday evening.

My dear Robert,

I have been looking forward to writing to you all day. Mother and I had a long talk this morning. Of course I won't pretend that I am not sorry that it did *happen so. About one part of it, of course, I can't well write or speak, or even think—that is your own affair, and I won't meddle. But about your mother, I can't fit that in with what I know of you, Robert dear. But again when I think about it, I can see* how *it happened, though I can't yet see* why *it happened ; but if I knew you better—it is strange, now that you are gone, to think how little after all I* do *know of you—I might even see that. If the same thing happened to me, I think I should behave very badly—even though I* knew *I was behaving badly—and with quite a peculiar badness of my own. There seem to me sometimes to be dark pits and wells in one's mind, where something dull and stagnant is lying, as if it had been left there by mistake—something dead and horrible, quite unlike the fresh springs which burst out for no reason in other parts of one's mind.*

I think you will wish me to speak of this once and for all. I don't intend ever to speak of it again. But I don't want you to think I have just put it all aside and not thought about it. Indeed, I must tell you that before you came I had heard something about it, and was prepared, in that stupid way that one does, to DISLIKE you. I write it

down, and sit looking at the word, wondering at my own folly. . . .

And, Robert dear, it doesn't of course make the slightest difference—how could it? In fact it increases what I feel about you, and I can't put that into words. What I am going to say next may sound priggish, but that is only because it is so difficult to talk of serious things that one can only think of stiff and worn-out words to say them in. But my idea of being friends is this—that the dark and ugly things in the back of one's mind do disappear when one is with a friend, because one wants to give a friend only the best one has got, and is ashamed and afraid of anything which may disappoint and hurt the friend. And just as I seem to lose the ugly things in my mind when I am with you, so the same may happen to you, and we may go on growing happier and better together. That is very clumsily said, but you will see what I mean.

Mother is, of course, very cautious about it all, and I love her all the better for it. She enjoys being free so much that she wants everyone to be the same, and she doesn't want me to bind myself in any way ; not, of course, knowing that to be bound is just the happiest and most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me, more than I ever dreamed of.

But, Robert, I don't want you *to feel bound in any way unless you like it, and still less do I want you to* pretend *to like it. It is much too serious for any considerateness or politeness. I know how full your life is of other things, and probably even fuller than I know. And don't think I have any romantic visions about the future. I know we can't, as things are, come any closer together. I don't expect or intend, as mother says, to upset any human arrangements. They have to be accepted. Of course, I would wish to be close to you and spend all my life near you. I should not get tired of that ; but you might ; and I shall not resent it—at least I think I*

shall not—if you find that I am different from what you think now, and not nearly so interesting. But as far as I am concerned, I will only say that I love you very much and miss you every moment, and that the happiest thing which could happen to me would be to hear your step and your voice in the hall—Oh, Robert, if you only knew!

I have read this all over, and I am ashamed of it—such a dull matter-of-fact judicious letter—such a mess of my comparisons, and "one," "one," "one," when I mean "I," and perhaps "I and you." But it all has got to be said. I don't want you to feel when you read it, "how awful to think that I have put myself in the power of that girl"—for indeed you haven't. Now that you are not here, I begin to doubt my power of ever pleasing you or having pleased you.

I could go on for ever, but I won't. Tell me anything you like and when you like. I don't mean to think about you too much, or to wish things were otherwise. I have got plenty to do and plenty of people to see. Cubby came to tea, and read a book aloud. I feel somehow that I shall have to have a scene with him shortly. He called me his "ewe lamb"—but perhaps that was only a quotation? My faithful love to you, dear Robert.

Yours to command (*that's a* temperate *ending*),

Molly.

The letter went off by the evening post; but at breakfast time on Friday morning she received a letter from Robert.

Lord Helford to Molly Davenant

Salisbury,
Thursday evening.

My own dear Molly,

I did not mean to write till I had heard from you, but I can't leave it alone. I was very sad as I went off, and all the morning I was unhappy at thinking that you were hearing about me things which I know must hurt you, if I can judge by the degree to which they hurt myself. But I won't talk about that, except to say that if you knew how utterly miserable and how bitterly ashamed I have been about it all, you wouldn't quite despair of me. I don't want your pity—that only makes things worse. I can't go down deeper than I have gone. I just want you to help me to be a better sort of man.

I'm not afraid of your thinking I am not serious about this, because *I behaved so cheerfully at Menerdue—at least I hope I did! I have a certain power—I think it is a dangerous power—of shutting doors in my mind. At all events it has saved me from death and worse than death. I was very wretched when I came down to you—I was afraid of your mother; and I am afraid, Molly dearest, I didn't think about you at all. I thought you might be a good-natured girl, interested in pigs and chickens, and fond of sailing a boat. Then I came in, and all of a sudden I felt as if I had opened a door and found what I have been wanting all my life—a home. My dearest mother was too good to me. I had got so used to saying anything and everything to her, so unashamed of my prickly moods, that I took her love for granted. I would give everything in the world (except, perhaps, one young person) if I could but see my mother once again, and tell her how I value now what I thought of so lightly then.*

But then you came and met me—and by the end of that first evening I seemed to have found someone before whom I needed

to have no pretences ; and after that my happiness was not assumed, for I was happier, in spite of everything that had happened and my own baseness, than I had ever been in my life.

I won't ask you to make allowances for me—I deserve none—but if you can write and say even that you will give me a trial, I hope I shall not disappoint you.

Your mother probably thinks I am a fickle and fanciful person, and that I have been making love to you to pass the time. You know better than that. But by this time you will know how I am situated—and we can't, even if you wished it, spend our lives together. At present I am too much taken up by having found you to make myself unhappy about that, though I daresay that unhappiness will come ; and I don't mean to bind you to anything. I am leaving unsaid a thousand things I want to say ; and if I could hear your quick step coming along the passage, and your voice calling me . . . No, I will leave all that alone.

Here I sit, in a dull and comfortable hotel. I have dined and even made myself civil to some very uninteresting people. I wonder if I had met you here like that, whether I should have thought you uninteresting?

I shall make an early start to-morrow, and shall hope to find your letter waiting for me. I would like to tell you something about the places I went through, but I really don't think I saw much. There were towns . . . fields . . . hills somewhere, I feel fairly sure. You see to what a condition I am reduced. I don't doubt what you will say, yet I am anxious. Let it be " sentence first, verdict afterwards "—that's the only rational way.

Dearest Molly, your ever devoted
Robert.

Together with Molly's letter, another letter went from Mrs. Davenant to Robert.

Menerdue.

My dear Robert,

I have told Molly, quite explicitly, all you told me. She argued with me with great acuteness. She is not fond of argument as a rule. I will not beat about the bush, and will only say that she cares for you more than I feared, and far more than I had any idea of.

You must not think I am the advocatus diaboli. *I feel that you were subjected three years ago to an almost intolerable strain. As to your marriage, I know that such things do happen ; and only you can judge whether you might have dealt with it better. As to the line you took with your mother, I can see* intellectually *how it happened, but I can't forget it—I don't believe in forgiving ; it is a thing which no one can do, and only prigs can pretend to do. I do entirely realize your distress about it, but I can't feel sure that something like it might not happen again. I feel Molly to be in one way inexperienced, though she is wiser than the aged : and I am confronted with a situation with which I can't cope. Molly has fallen in love with you, and far more deeply than she knows. She thinks it is just a perfect friendship. You, I think, have fallen in love with her. Now I don't for a moment think you will make love to her, and she certainly would not listen if you did. But can you really trust yourself? And if you can both be trusted, what can be made of a friendship like that? If Molly were married, it would be different ; and I think she ought to marry. Her interests are practical and maternal, and she would be the best mother I can conceive.*

Would it not be better, once and for all, to give up the whole affair? If your wife lives for twenty years—and I gather that she is not in the least likely to give you any cause to divorce her—what is to become of Molly and yourself? If Molly were to lose her interest in life and such charm as she possesses, what would your relations be? I am not afraid

for Molly, because she is both self-controlled and incredibly faithful—but for you—is it not partly, at all events, her charm and freshness that attract you?

I can't bear to think of Molly's life being perhaps spoiled by this "friendship." My creed is that people should taste the fulness of life; and tragically short as my own marriage was, it at least gave me a hold on life. If, on the other hand, you could not bear it, and persuaded Molly that your one chance of happiness was to join hands with her, it would be a ghastly business. You could not bear the loss of all your outside interests, and Molly would be wretched, with an ugly cloud between her and the world. She couldn't live so.

These are horrible things to say, but they must be faced. I don't feel that you are facing them.

You must not think I don't care for you, Robert. No one could live even for a little while with you and not care. You have a most compelling charm for people like myself and Molly.

You may think me straitlaced and conventional; but I am neither. I am only aware that one can't defy human arrangements, unless one is inordinately selfish or insolently stupid. Neither you nor Molly are either of these.

Altogether it seems to me a cruel dilemma, all the more cruel because Molly, wise as she is, does not understand what is ahead of her. I don't accuse you of behaving in any way dishonourably. It is clear that you have not done so. But you have drifted, in the imperative need that such men as you have for happiness, into an impossible situation. I don't see how it can be developed, and I don't see how it can be terminated. For Molly's sake and mine, as well as for your own, please consider carefully what I have said—I am too anxious to write impressively.

Affectionately yours,
Mary Davenant.

XXII

ROBERT was a good deal disconcerted by this last letter, particularly after his talk with Mrs. Davenant. He had told his whole story in some detail, without excusing himself in any way, and it had been a great relief to him. There is hardly any relief greater than that of forcing the worm that has been gnawing the mind to face the light. While it gnaws and nibbles, hidden and suppressed, it taints the imagination ; and Robert had come to believe himself a monster of selfishness and ingratitude. He had traced in memory the earlier years ; everything in his own favour he had tossed aside or overlooked. His industry, his tenacity of purpose, even his singularly pure and blameless life, had come to seem to him a mere cautious and calculating process pursued in order that he might realize ambitions in themselves base. He was, of course, an individualist. He cared little for movements or causes, he had few dreams of elevating and inspiring the human race ; on the other hand he had a very strong idea of duty, and an overwhelming desire to perform a thorough and useful piece of work in the world. What had really maimed his life had been in boyhood a certain timidity of other people, a dread of intimacy, a sensitive fear of criticism. This had kept him from making friends. He had loved his mother very deeply, but more as the recipient of his confidences and the aider of all his enterprizes than as one whom he could himself comfort and protect. Lady Ann's life had been a sad one ; she had lost her husband early and, until Robert succeeded to the estates, there had been a constant difficulty about ways

and means. This she had hidden from Robert, so that she had always stood between him and the world.

Then Robert had discovered, when he passed out of the diffidence of boyhood, that he could not only hold his own in talk and general intercourse, but that his manner and his quick-flowing wit won him many friends. Still he had never exchanged confidences with anyone; he had no superficial egotism, and he was interested in other people, though he did not sympathize with them.

In Molly he had suddenly recognized an extraordinarily frank and open nature, and a sweetness of temperament that was entirely free from any predatory designs. That was what Robert had always feared, the predatory motive. Boys had tried to make friends with him at school, not for his sake, he thought, but for purposes of their own. Women had pressed friendship upon him when he came out into the world, but there had always come a point when he felt that he was being tracked down. Indeed, the attraction which he had felt in his wife, when he first saw her, was a certain coldness, that seemed at all events to acquit her of any selfish designs. That illusion was soon expelled. She did not want either his caresses or his confidences; she only wanted a solid enviable success, a good establishment, and a well-thought-of husband. The dreary sterility of her desires had dawned upon him by degrees. Indeed, his anger with his mother had principally arisen from his conviction that her judgment had been perfectly right.

But with Molly he breathed a purer air. She was quick enough to appreciate and admire, she did not compete with him, she had no wish to be admired, or to gain anything by his friendship, while her intense interest in people, in all their subtle foibles and amusing differences, marched precisely with his own. The deeper strain in her,

her passionate desire to be of use, to take others with her, to increase their happiness, he did not really fathom, but he was vaguely comforted by it, and yielded himself entirely, without looking backwards or forwards, to the spell of her presence.

And now he was confronted, in Mrs. Davenant's letter, with this view of the situation in all its stark nudity. Was he going to annex this fine nature for his own purposes, to claim her life for his own pleasure without giving her any part of his own life in return ?

He was more afraid of Mrs. Davenant than ever. He had laid his experiences before her, and she had judged him severely though not unjustly. Molly's letter moved him profoundly by its simplicity, its bareness, its childlike confidence. To rebuff her affection, professing that he did so for her sake, seemed to him an intolerable treachery. Whatever happened he would not do that. Was it really impossible that a perfectly pure friendship, a brotherly and sisterly affection between a man and a woman should exist ? It seemed to him outrageous that the blind springs of passion, boiling underneath the serene intellect and the refined emotion, should inevitably overflow. What was it that he really felt for Molly ? The thought of how he had seen her that last night, the pale rain-sprinkled face, the fearless glance of her eye, the parted lips, the firm young hands, the supple motions of her body came suddenly into his mind with an irresistible appeal. How could he live without her ?

He had had a hard day ; a small political crisis had suddenly arisen, which involved his own department. He had had several urgent interviews, and had proffered advice to his chief which seemed to provide a possible solution. He foresaw, moreover, an anxious and busy time before him. But the two letters must somehow be answered.

He wrote to Mrs. Davenant first.

My dear Mary,

Your letter gave me a considerable shock. But are you not taking an over-anxious view of the whole affair? I will say quite frankly that I have a very great affection for Molly. I seem to have found in her the one friend for whom I have been looking all my life. Do you really think it impossible that such a friendship as this—for I am equally sure of Molly's affection—can exist between a man and a girl, who after all are cousins into the bargain? I have been of late a very lonely and demon-haunted man, and the door that you opened into a home *where I could be myself without any disguises, seemed to me one of the most blessed things that ever happened to me. I did not in any way "make love" to Molly, apart from the love that one's spirit, and perhaps unconsciously one's body, does make love to a beautiful, innocent, affectionate and entirely frank creature. I had no* arrière pensée *about it at all. She came to meet me half-way and I found in her an entirely congenial nature—a thing which had never happened to me before.*

But you show me very clearly the possibilities ahead. I cannot marry Molly or anyone else. I do not even know that I should wish to. I have none of the polygamous instincts. What should I feel, let us say, if I heard that Molly was going to be married? Well, I should hope that she would still be able to give me the sort of friendship she has given me already, and that we could be good comrades. I might envy her husband, but I should not be jealous of him. You say that if I keep hold of Molly—though I don't quite understand from your letter how *you think she cares for me—I may stunt and wither a life that ought to expand and grow. I should hate to do that. You say that her heart is free, and I would not fetter it. But I cannot believe that in the case*

of two people like Molly and myself, both reasonable and self-controlled, a friendship might not exist which might bring happiness to both. I can't see why I should try to stifle a strong and natural affection for the sake of a hypothesis. If you can persuade her that it is better that we should part company, I will concur. If you say frankly that I am not to write to her or see her, I will obey you, but in that case you must tell Molly that it is your decision and not mine.

Don't think this letter a base return for your kindness. I am candidly surprised at your taking the line you do. I thought you believed in instincts rather than in codes. I will write to Molly—she has written me a letter which makes me very happy—and I will do my best to put the case before her ; but apart from her consent, I cannot reject out of mere prudence the most blessed experience that has ever befallen me. If one believes in God—and I do in a dim way—one cannot think of him so basely as to believe that he gives one a happiness like this, merely in order that one may reject it and do violence to it.

Thank you for all your abundant kindness to me. You must not think of me as ungrateful, and still less as the hawk that pounces on your brood.

Affectionately yours,
Robert.

He was not satisfied with this letter : but he could not re-write it—something must be said at once. He added the words, " *This letter is written late at night and after a day of great pressure with a busy day ahead. You must forgive its crudities. I can't write diplomatically.*"

XXIII

ROBERT sat lost in thought before he began his letter to Molly. The clock ticked secretly on the chimney-piece, the distant roar of London died slowly down. At his elbow lay a mass of papers which had to be read and mastered. As a rule Robert deferred every other claim until his work had been done, but now his life seemed to turn on a hinge, and he felt that a word, the turn of a phrase, might prejudice the whole matter. He was ruffled, too, by Mrs. Davenant's letter. As he had said to Molly jestingly enough, her words had a finality about them. He felt that arguments were of no avail, and further he felt, though without resentment, that Mrs. Davenant had discerned the dangers of the position, and also that his happiness weighed very light in the scales of her mind beside Molly's future.

But on the other hand the danger was that in writing to Molly he might give her the idea that he wished in any degree to draw back. He felt that she might suspect that on returning to his normal interests and activities he had perceived that the past weeks were but an idyll of the by-way, a charming enough episode but still an episode, a kind of emotional flirtation, such as might refresh a wearied and worried man emerging from a period of anxiety and morbidity. But the bare idea of this was like poison to him. His love for Molly and the love that she seemed to give him in return seemed to him the one bright and secure thing in a prospect otherwise dark and unstable. His work was a serious preoccupation and would remain so, but that was more an intellectual affair ;

what had burst into flower was his soul, his inner spirit, starved, he thought, and repressed all his life by timidity and sensitiveness, and latterly ground between the upper and the nether millstone of an emotional tragedy.

At last, after many corrections and interlineations, it was done.

Lord Helford to Molly Davenant

My dearest Molly,

I can't tell you what happiness your letter gave me : to have someone to depend upon, to consult, to tell just what rises in my mind and heart is one part of my happiness. I have never had that, and all my worst mistakes have arisen from the lack of it ; but beyond and above that, to have one at hand in whose dear presence and regard I can forget the strange bundle of qualities and prejudices, of big ambitions and little performances which I recognize myself to be, is a gift which seems to come to me direct from love itself, and to be like the renewing of life to a dying man. It gives a sudden meaning to my life which it has never had.

Does this make you feel that I am still thinking of myself? You see my difficulty is that I seem to be getting everything and giving nothing ; but whatever happens to me, I shall know now that there are precious and beautiful things in life, and I shall bless you for what you have shown me to the day of my death.

But your mother's letter has made me feel that there is another side to all this. Don't suppose I think her unkind or unjust. If you, let me say, were my daughter, I should feel so about anyone who laid claim to you.

You know how I stand. I can't give you any of the things that a woman ought to have—a home, a common life. We must be reasonable about this—we are both tied to life in many ways. We can't cut adrift from the world—for we

have got to live on. People can't slip out of the stream of life into a dream of bliss.

What your mother seems to feel naturally enough is that our friendship may tend to keep you away from forming ties which happy and useful people ought to form. She thinks that as life went on you might regret this, if you felt that you had sacrificed to a friendship what was meant for something bigger and better. I care much too much about you and your happiness to let my own wishes keep you bound when you ought to be free. It might be best if you could talk about it with your mother. Or tell me exactly what you feel. There have been brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, who have sacrificed one sort of love to another sort of love. But heaven forbid that I should take advantage of your inexperience and take your own happiness to add to my own.

I am hard pressed by business, and this letter is written hurriedly and hatefully. But you will understand. I only want to do what is best. I care much too much for you to take from you what ought to remain your own.

Your loving Robert.

He slipped out and posted his two letters with something like a prayer that they should bear the message he intended them to bear.

In the morning he found a brief note from Molly in answer to his first letter.

Robert, dear, you make me very happy. I am not going to flood you with letters, though I feel just now as if I could write to you all day and every day. Tell me what you wish about this. You will write when you can, and I will write as often as you like. But I shall soon tire you. There is no news and I have only one thing to say.

Your loving Molly.

Robert kissed the little note and thrust it into his pocket as a sort of talisman. He was surprised to find that he could work all day with an almost increased concentration and clear-headedness. His sense of inner happiness helped him; and when after a hard day he found himself alone again, he abandoned himself to an ecstasy of memory. A hundred little vignettes floated before him.

The next morning came his answers. Mrs. Davenant merely wrote a grateful note and added, "*I must leave this all for a while and see what I can make of Molly. I am thankful that I can count on you to be reasonable, and I won't make any hurried or timid decisions.*"

Molly merely said:

"*Robert, dear, I have got your letter; everything that comes from yourself in it is precious to me, but I feel in one or two of your sentences as if someone else were dictating to you. Surely all this prudent forecasting is rather absurd? I don't think one's heart can be so far wrong. Let us settle it between ourselves for the present, dear. It doesn't hurt me in the least—I only feel that mother cares about me more than I had guessed. She is dreadfully torn between the wish that I should do as I like, and the wish to leave me free, and the feeling that I might be a little goose, and a dream of a fairy prince who might swoop down to seize upon me and find me otherwise engaged. It makes me think of the faithful servant Anne in the fairy story, who saw the axe stuck in the beam, and was so distressed at the idea that it might fall on someone's head that she let the beer overflow. Let us take it as it comes.*

I'm quite matter-of-fact again. I want just two things; a list of books which an ignorant schoolgirl ought to read, to understand a little what you are about. I don't want to be quite so vague about it all. I have begun to read the papers.

Then I want to know how often I may write—don't say " as much as you like "—I want to do what you think sensible.

I went up to Nan-Zephron to-day. The Squire talked about you all the time. He speaks of you as Helford. He thinks you want more beauty in your life. He says your æsthetic faculties are starved, and that you want a friend. I didn't tell him that I thought your hands were pretty full.

Your faithful Molly.

The weeks that followed were to Molly a time of unspeakable happiness, which overflowed upon all about her. Mrs. Davenant said no more, and when Molly tried one day to open up the subject, her mother said, " No, Molly, we won't talk about it yet. I admit that I was carried away by my imagination to such an extent that it became prudence—and prudence is the first infirmity of noble minds."

" But, mother, I don't want to leave it unsettled. I write to Robert, and I don't feel I am doing wrong—but I also feel that you don't wish it."

" I have come to the conclusion that I won't interfere," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Yes, but if you don't interfere and do disapprove, it makes me very uncomfortable."

" I think you may try the experiment, Molly—I really mean that. You see I don't really know how much you care for Robert."

" Mother, I would marry him to-morrow if he wished it and if it were possible. As it isn't, I mean to go on loving him. Nothing can prevent that. I should be very unhappy if I could not write to him and hear from him. It wouldn't cure me in the least. And at present the only difference it makes to me is that I seem able to love other people more and not less because I am so happy. It's really a

very simple thing, mother. Robert is as sensible about it as you could want, and even more sensible than I want."

" Well, that's plain enough," said Mrs. Davenant, " and I will leave it at that if you will make me one promise—that you will tell me if it begins to make you unhappy."

" I'll tell you at once, mother."

" He wants us to go and stay with him—could you stand that ? Or would it make you more wilful than ever."

" I'm not wilful, mother dear—I am as tame as a pussy-cat."

" Cats are only tame in the drawing-room," said Mrs. Davenant.

" Well, mother, I don't want to go out into the moonlight and scream."

" We might think of going to town, then ? I don't pretend that I shouldn't like it."

" Of course we will go, then ! "

" Well, write and tell your . . . I don't know what to call him . . . your cousin, that we will come. I expect to be conveyed there, like a haunch of vension. It is very imprudent."

" You mean it ? Mother, you are an angel."

" There are different sorts of angels, unfortunately." And Mrs. Davenant took up her book again. Molly loitered for a little, looking out of the window at the creek, which lay, a sheet of dull silver under the high roof of a grey cloud. The copse-woods on the further side were a belt of vivid brown tinted by the autumn, which seemed to lay its hand earlier than elsewhere on these sea-girt woodlands. The world seemed sedate, cool, calm, Molly thought, welcoming the end of the parching summer heats, and looking forward like a tired child to the long winter sleep. Her heart seemed almost too full of happiness. She was to see Robert, and see him not as a

lively, leisurely visitor, but in the middle of his work. Would he be different, she wondered, preoccupied and grave? That would matter little, if she could but see a little deeper into his real mind; for she had become aware in his absence how much of himself she was unacquainted with —his past, his habits of life, his interests—she longed to draw nearer to him imperceptibly, for she had observed that while women as a rule liked entering into detail with regard to personal concerns, and expanding with zest under minute inquiries, men preferred that all this should be taken for granted, and disliked being catechized. It troubled her that she could not in imagination see how Robert's life was hourly spent, while he knew from hour to hour what her own occupations would be.

Moreover Mrs. Davenant's consent to the idea seemed to Molly the strongest testimony she had yet received of her mother's confidence in Robert and herself. She had not at all resented her mother's cautious attitude—indeed it was a thrilling proof of her affection; but she had become impatient of battling with constant hypotheses. It reminded her of the old question "if you had a brother, would he have liked cheese?" It seemed that the urgent actual facts were pushed into a corner, and the scene filled with what lawyers call contingent remainders—algebraical formulæ, referring to suppositions not to facts. But in her new-found happiness all this was not fretting to her; it only surprised her to see that one as clear-sighted as her mother seemed willing to discard the great fact—that they loved each other and were loved in turn, in however a restrained way—in favour of intricate possibilities. Might not human beings be allowed to settle the problems of their own emotions, particularly if they could be depended upon to do nothing violent or disorderly? But on the whole it amused her more than

it vexed her to see all this childish by-play and complex fencing with facts.

She went out, hardly knowing where she went, in that strange and pleasant frame of mind when one observes with infinite minuteness and almost breathless exactness the smallest details, while all the time the central current of thought is moving steadily in quest of joy, without any definite expression, almost indeed without thought.

She went up among the woods to Nan-Zephron, but she hastened by the great granite pillars and the couchant beasts, whatever they were—caught a glimpse of the blinking windows and upstanding chimneys of the house, and passed on into the woods again. She saw how all the undergrowth was draggled now and dilapidated, streaked with yellow patches, the ferns drooping, the blackberry leaves acquiring a metallic tinge. There were few signs of life, and finally the road, which had gradually been growing more stony and grass-grown, vanished frankly in the woodland in a green oozy track. Here a steep footpath turned to the left, which took her down to the little-visited creek of Mornay, a place much beloved by Molly, ever since she got over her first childish fear of it, for its solitariness and grave regard. No house was visible from it, and it was surrounded on all sides by steeply shelving gorse-clad hills, except where at one point the old woods of Nan-Zephron ran down almost abruptly to the edge. The floor of the creek was of mud, but densely overgrown by a thick green slender grass as fine as silk. In the centre was a round sea-pool from which a narrow channel went its way to the sea. The whole place was much haunted by birds. Moreover, in the wood, which was here of gigantic old Scotch firs, velvet-tufted and red-limbed, was a heronry; and to-day, as Molly flitted swiftly past, she could see the great grey birds sitting like ghosts high in

the trees, and hear their harsh creaking cries. When she emerged from the wood, she took a path which skirted the creek, under a high grassy sea-wall, with a copse on the right hand; and to-day Molly saw with a thrill of pleasure that the pool was tenanted by more than a score of wild swans floating proudly in the still waters.

She spent a long time watching them, and occasionally another and another came flying across the marsh to join the company, with wings and neck extended, looking almost impossibly huge. At this moment she was aroused from her contemplation by a sound, and glancing to the right, saw the sinister figure of Mr. Cuthbert hurrying towards her along the path. Somehow there was hardly anyone whom she less wished to see at that moment than Mr. Cuthbert. She had the feeling that in his mind there lurked something both jealous and malignant toward her. She did not exactly fear him, but his presence was like a blight upon her happiness. She felt in him a mixture of admiration and disapproval, which was of all moods the least to her taste.

He came up with his head bared and his most ingratiating look. Taking her outstretched hand in his, he held it for a moment in his own and scrutinized her face. "Miss Molly," he said, "this is indeed delightful. I desired above all things to have a little talk with you, and some kindly angel has arranged our meeting. Think you not that we are justified, every now and then, in believing in angelic presences, guiding our steps into joy?"

There seemed, Molly thought, a touch of what was almost like impertinence in Mr. Cuthbert's regard.

"Oh," she said lightly, "I have quite enough to do to think about human beings—and one doesn't like the idea of being dogged anywhere, even by an angel—it seems almost like an intrusion."

" Miss Molly," said Mr. Cuthbert with a look of sternness, " it is not well to treat so lightly the sacred visions of others. The thought of angelic presences is above all thoughts dear and precious to me."

" You are quite welcome to them ! You asked me a question and I answered it for myself alone."

Mr. Cuthbert looked at her for a moment as if undecided. " Miss Molly," he said at last, " you are strangely beautiful to-day—fit to stand almost for one of the heavenly visitants of whom I spoke. But to-day I wish to speak to you not as an equal friend, but as your pastor and as a priest. I am here as the Heaven-appointed guide to my little flock—that gives me, think you not, a right, nay, a duty to speak ? "

Molly felt a sudden access of irritation at Mr. Cuthbert's solemn persistence. " Let me walk on, Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " I came out for a solitary ramble, and I must be getting back home."

But Mr. Cuthbert barred the way, " Think you not," he said, " that I have a Heaven-appointed call to speak ? "

" I thought you were appointed by Lord Helford," said Molly, irreverently, " and as for speaking, I should have thought that the pulpit was a more appropriate place."

Mr. Cuthbert's face darkened. " I will accompany you," he said. " It is of Lord Helford of whom I wish to speak to you. Since he came to Menerdue, a veil seems to have fallen between you and me. Is it kind to desert your old friends thus ? Is it wise, nay, is it right to rush into an almost unseemly intimacy with one who, but for his unhappy matrimonial differences, might be your lover ? I may not have a right to an answer, but I have a duty to beg you to reflect."

Molly was overwhelmed with a sudden anger, so great

that she felt the blood ebb violently from her cheeks to her heart.

" Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " you are an old friend, and I do not want to say disagreeable things to you. But I must ask you plainly not to interfere in a matter in which you are not concerned. You may, of course, speak to my mother if you wish—I should not advise you for your own sake to do so. But I may say for myself that I will not listen to any more words on this subject from you."

Mr. Cuthbert turned very pale ; " Not concerned ? " he said, in a voice that was at once shrill and hoarse with passion, " not concerned ? you *must* know, you *do* know how I regard you, and how my dearest hopes are built up with yourself. Alas that I should have to say it—that I should know you to be indiscreet—nay, *shameless* in the affection you bear this man, and yet that I should feel for you an affection which would make me face the pangs of hell for your smile and your embrace. It is not as an angel that you cross my path—but as something far different."

At these words Molly's anger seemed to leap away from her and leave her in a dangerous calm. " Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " I think you must be mad to speak like this—if you do not at once unsay all that you have said, I will never speak to you nor come willingly within sight of you again."

" You are conscience-stricken," said the wretched Mr. Cuthbert ; " I have seen you with my own eyes walk hand-in-hand with Lord Helford, like lovers, when you deemed that no eye could behold you. You are besotted by him ; and you would be vile in my sight, if you were not by some hideous entanglement of Satan, adorable beyond all others."

He advanced towards her with arms outstretched, and

a terrible smile upon his face. Molly did not stay to contend with him. She turned swiftly, and ran as fleetly as a young deer along the path by which she had come. In ten minutes she was on the road. Mr. Cuthbert, wiry as he was, was no match for her in speed. She heard his clumsy footsteps behind her, and his hoarse cries entreating her to stop. When she reached the top of the hill, she could see him like a great black spider, floundering heavily up the slope. In half an hour she was at Menerdue, and bursting in upon her mother, told her all her story.

Mrs. Davenant sat for a little in silence, tapping her paper-knife on her lips. Presently she said, " What do you feel about it all, Molly ? Are you very angry with him ? "

" I was," said Molly, thoughtfully, " very angry indeed. I have never been so angry in my life. If I had had a gun in my hand I think I might almost have shot him. But now it all seems to have oozed away. It all seems to me rather ridiculous—I think I am rather sorry for him. Is he mad, think you ? " said Molly, imitating Mr. Cuthbert's hollow tones.

" Oh, no, he isn't mad ! " said Mrs. Davenant. " He is only very much in love. That is the sort of way it may take a priest. It's a dangerous thing for a man with emotions like that to be a priest."

" What did he want with me ? " said Molly; " and if he was so much in love, why did he choose that minute for calling me such impertinent names ? "

" That is the way it takes censorious people," said Mrs. Davenant. " Fault-finding people are very uncivilized."

At this moment the door was opened, and Mr. Cuthbert was ushered into the room. He stood, the picture of misery, pale, streaming with sweat, his hair disordered, mud on his cassock and shoes.

Mrs. Davenant and Molly regarded him with silent wonder.

" I have come to cry for mercy," said Mr. Cuthbert in a loud lamentable voice. " I have done amiss, and dealt wickedly—of my fault, of my own fault, of my own great fault. . . ."

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Mrs. Davenant, " is this a friendly call, or have you come here to recite portions of the liturgy ? "

" I have done amiss," said Mr. Cuthbert, " I cry your mercy."

" Does that mean that you are begging Molly's pardon ? said Mrs. Davenant. " These venerable phrases seem to me to have no social meaning."

" Whatever you will," said Mr. Cuthbert, dolefully.

" It seems," said Mrs. Davenant, " that you have made a most unpleasant and ungentlemanly scene with Molly—Molly, would you like to leave Mr. Cuthbert with me ? No ? Very well—have you any observations to offer, Mr. Cuthbert ? "

" I have done amiss," said Mr. Cuthbert again.

" We are quite aware of that," said Mrs. Davenant, " and it need not be repeated."

" Mother," said Molly in a low tone, " he is crying, I believe."

" Let him cry," said Mrs. Davenant under her breath.

" I cry your mercy," said the unfortunate man once more.

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Mrs. Davenant, " if you continue to repeat these absurd phrases, I must ask you to leave the room. What do you propose ? "

" To cry your mercy," said Mr. Cuthbert again.

Mrs. Davenant made an impatient movement. Molly rose quickly to her feet, went across to Mr. Cuthbert and took him by his arm.

" Won't you sit down ? " she said. " Mr. Cuthbert, I will tell you exactly what I feel. I was very angry with you and I think you behaved abominably. But I am no longer angry—I am only sorry, sorry with all my heart—who could be anything else ? Won't you leave it all alone ? "

" And all will be as before ? " said Mr. Cuthbert fumbling with his hat.

" No, I can't say that," said Molly. " You can't expect me to say that."

" I acknowledge my fault," said Mr. Cuthbert.

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " but what I want to know is if you are here as a gentleman or as a priest ? "

" I have been unworthy of my priesthood," said Mr. Cuthbert, " and I come as a gentleman."

" Then you must talk like one," said Mrs. Davenant, " you seem to think absolution a very cheap affair."

" A woman cannot absolve," said Mr. Cuthbert, " she can but forgive."

" Oh, mother, don't torment him," said Molly, " let him go. Mr. Cuthbert, do go back home, and think no more of this wretched business."

" Blessed words ! " said Mr. Cuthbert, " I will tell the Bishop . . . I will seek absolution."

" That is your own affair," said Mrs. Davenant. " I will at all events ask you not to come to this house again until you are invited."

" I accept my humiliation," said Mr. Cuthbert. " I waive my pastoral rights."

" That is very considerate of you," said Mrs. Davenant.

Mr. Cuthbert turned to the door ; Molly opened it for him, and followed him out.

As he left the house, he turned to her and said, " I bless you, Miss Molly—not as a man, but in virtue of my office."

" Oh, never mind about that," said Molly. " Good-night, Mr. Cuthbert—forget all about it."

When Molly returned, Mrs. Davenant was standing by the open window. " I want a little fresh air," she said. " Oh, Molly, that man ! "

" I don't know whether to laugh or cry," said Molly. " He's rather tragic, and all the more so for being so supremely ridiculous."

" I cry your mercy," said Mrs. Davenant, with uplifted hands and eyes turned to the ceiling.

XXV

ROBERT was at his breakfast-table, opening his correspondence.

He took up the next letter carelessly, and then with a shock of surprise realized that it was in his wife's handwriting, and what was even more disconcerting, from England—the post-mark Bournemouth.

He could hardly bring himself to open it, it brought back to him with so irresistible a disgust the thought of that heart-sickening episode, the ugly quarrel, the base silence which he could not break.

Lady Helford to Lord Helford

Dear Robert,

Here I am, you see, in England again after all. Something was, I believe, said about my allowance from you being dependent on my remaining abroad, but I don't suppose you would be so churlish as to insist on this ; and even if you did it would not much matter.

The fact is that I have been frightfully bored in Italy. I quite thought I should like it, and Clare Mainwaring has proved an excellent travelling companion—but I don't care about views, and still less about ruins, and least of all about chattering and gesticulating foreigners.

What did we do ? We took a villa at Florence ; a certain number of people came to call, and there are always some of those good-looking unoccupied men who are quite prepared to fall in love with people like myself—but that sort of thing doesn't amuse me in the least. You cannot say, though no doubt you would like to be able to, that I ever gave you away.

I'm not that sort. I like a regular and straightforward kind of life. I like pleasant people and nice parties and country-house visits, as you know, and all the ordinary things. I can't ever quite understand why you quarrelled with me, particularly after all the ornamental things you had said. I was quite prepared to like your company ; when the first froth was off, I was much interested in your success, and was ready to play the hostess to any extent, and generally run the show so as to leave you free for politics. It might have been such a success !

I am quite ready to admit that I didn't act judiciously about your mother; but I don't care about vague ideas—they lead nowhere. I believe in keeping straight and doing your job. That's what the best people do. But I ought not to have said what I did about her, and I beg your pardon.

Now I want you to be reasonable and consider what I am going to say. I want you to try the experiment again. I believe that people would be very charitable, and think that our little difference had just blown over. It would help you too in your career, and I am quite keen about that. I would not intrude on you. We could have our own rooms and our own friends, and we should just appear in public together in the season, and have a few parties at Colearne. Between us, we are quite rich enough to do the thing well. As it is, I have more money than I can use, and you are rather crippled. The present state of things is very unsatisfactory for both of us, for we have neither of us done anything really to be ashamed of in any way.

Do think it over. I really am quite good-natured and easy to get on with, as long as I am not required to be clever or artistic. I like solid things. I shall hope to hear from you, or see you, if you prefer it ; I won't come to London at present, and I have tumbled into quite a decent set of people here.

Yours affectionately,

Cynthia.

Robert read the letter through, and sat staring dully out of the window. It brought back the familiar tones and the old complacent theories. He felt a sickening revulsion—it was as if a hardly-healed wound had been suddenly torn open. What was he to do? There was nothing in the letter to which he could actually take exception. It was in a way a reasonable letter. But the idea of taking up the old life with his wife, even on distant terms, was intolerable to him. It would be an end of his friendship with Mary Davenant and Molly. They, he was aware, were just the sort of people, unconventional, interested, open-minded, to whom his wife objected. He pushed away his plate and rose from the table.

He had a busy day before him. He could not well leave London, and yet he had a strong desire to talk over the letter with Mary Davenant. It seemed to him just the sort of situation with which she would deal decisively.

All day long he felt himself planning sentences and paragraphs; but he did not lose the thread of his work, and conducted several interviews, besides writing some dispatches, with conspicuous success. Finally he determined that he would rush down to Cornwall on Saturday afternoon, and return to London on the Sunday night.

But, meanwhile, something had to be said to his wife. Something simple and non-committal. He wrote:—

Dear Cynthia,

I can't pretend not to be surprised by your letter, and especially by your coming back to England without consulting me. I thought that everything had been definitely settled between us. I see certain objections to what you suggest, but your letter has come at a busy and anxious time—you may have seen what has been happening in the papers—and my

hands are very full. However, I will carefully consider what you say and I shall hope to write fully next week.

Yours,
Robert.

He made his arrangements. He wrote to Mrs. Davenant to say that something serious had occurred, and that he must see her, and scribbled a little note to Molly. He got a wire to say that they would expect him late on Saturday night. There came, too, a little note from Molly, written before they had received his telegram, to say that the thought that she would soon see him in London filled her days with delight, "*and best of all*," she added, "*my brain seems at last to have realized you mean something to me, so that I walk with you in my dreams and you say wonderful things to me, which I can't remember when I wake, but which make me go about as if some happy event had befallen me.*"

He ground his teeth over this note, even as he kissed it. Nothing, he swore to himself, should come in between him and his darling.

But on Saturday came another letter from Lady Helford.

Dear Robert,

I see through your game—you always put off making decisions, and you are only thinking what excuse you can find for refusing. So I will now say something that I held back in my letter, because I did not want to annoy you if there was a chance of your being reasonable.

I hear on excellent authority that you have been amusing yourself with your little cousin Molly, and with her mother, who is, I understand, a very affected busybody. I don't at present accuse you of anything irregular—I don't know enough about her—but I hear of midnight walks and cousinly embraces and mixed bathing——

I think you are capable of what seems to me the most ridiculous thing in the world—a philosophical flirtation; but most people won't believe that; and while I mind my p's and q's, I don't choose that you should be talked about. No doubt it is all brotherly and sisterly—I know the sort of stuff. I am not going to make any threats, or say how or when I shall use what I know, or even if I shall use it. But if you agree to my proposal, you may amuse yourself as much as you like, as long as there is no scandal. It is quite en règle *to go a good deal further with blood-relations than you can with other people. But you mustn't ask me to see them. What surprises me is that the girl, I am told, isn't spirituelle or artistic, but a sort of open-air creature who trots round the village with soup and coal-tickets, and kisses the fishermen's wives, and makes eyes at the clergyman.*

You see I am pretty well informed—and once more I ask you to be reasonable. You may do as you like then.

Yours,
Cynthia.

This letter almost drove Robert off his head. It gave, too, an almost loathsome parody of his friendship with Molly. He had seemed to himself so wise and discreet—and was this how it could be misrepresented? Someone had been gossipping, it was clear. He troubled little about that. But what if his detestable wife were to turn her envenomed arrows upon the house of Menerdue? Would Molly turn in abhorrence from the malicious lies suggested? He did not think that she would.

XXVI

HE did his business in the morning, inwardly raging ; but when he was once in the train, speeding through the Wiltshire downs, with the clear full-fed rivers brimming their winter channels, the thought that he was to see Molly began to steal into his mind. There was one day of happiness ahead ; and then, too, he had a hope that Mary would rise with all her forces and devise some effective strategy. At the moment he seemed to himself to be like a man in a boat, without sail or oar, speeding down a swiftly rushing stream to where a rocky gorge opened ahead of him in a cleft of the cruel hills.

He had arranged to drive from Truro, avoiding a wait and a stopping train ; the hills had darkened about him as the sickly sunset died away, and the lights had begun to sparkle mistily in the valleys ; when the train drew up at the station, it was with an almost furious leap of the heart that he saw a slim figure standing on the platform, and Molly's pale face scrutinizing the carriages. He just pressed her hand : " Why, Molly dear ! " " Oh, Robert ! " —this was all they said, but it was enough. His bag was carried out ; he wrapped her warmly in the rug in spite of her protestations ; and they glided away into the dark. " I thought you wouldn't mind my coming—and you needn't tell me about it, you know—you would like to talk to mother first—it's not anything very bad ? "

He had meant to be calm and discreet—the words " philosophical flirtation " rang in his ears. But he put his arm about her, drew her nearer to himself, and took her unresisting hand ; and Molly put her head on his shoulder

like a child. " Don't let us bother, dear," she said, " we have got you now for twenty-four hours, whatever happens," and they drove in silence—a silence that seemed to him to be better than any speech ; even while he thought this, Molly said, as if reading his mind, " What a comfort that we needn't even talk ! "

As they drove among the dark lanes, the wildest thoughts passed through Robert's mind, thoughts which a few months ago he would have believed himself incapable of even imagining. He could not live without Molly ; nothing in the world, his ambitions, his future, his work, his position—how futile and dreary they all seemed—were to be weighed in the scales beside her presence. It did not seem to him, this affection, to have anything that was sensual in it at all ; it was rather a dream of perfect beauty—her innocence, her trustfulness, her fine perceptions, her delicately balanced mind, her utter goodness. He worshipped it all as he might have worshipped God ; she was to him the symbol of all beauty and goodness, purity of life and thought, stainless honour, freedom from all that was base and unclean—all the things he most deeply and instinctively desired. Her all-embracing love for others, her understanding of their needs—things so alien to himself—into that perfection he might also grow, if he could have her example ever before him. Yet he knew that he could not offer her a clouded and a tainted life ; and behind all lay the fact of which he was more sure than anything, that with all her simplicity and trustfulness, she would put such a suggestion calmly aside ; and yet she loved him—but *how* did she love him ? That was the insoluble mystery ; so they glided on together among the darkness of dense woodlands, through the shadows of hazel-fringed lanes, over the bare wolds under spaces of evening sky.

At Menerdue Mrs. Davenant came out to meet them, kissed him in silence, led him away to a simple meal, with Richards in high good humour, welcoming his return. Molly was firmly dismissed to the other room. Robert handed Mary the letters, and watched her read them with darkening eyes and compressed lips. After a moment's silence, she raised her eyes and looked at him. " It's no use wasting words on *her*," she said, " and she is *not* a wicked woman. She is simply a cold-blooded woman without affection and without imagination—the strongest of all adversaries." Robert nodded. Then she said, " Robert, promise not to ask or even to attempt to find out who has been talking to her. That will only introduce a mean issue into the affair. Besides, I know. But we shall only weaken ourselves thus—we must keep our indignation untainted." After a pause she went on : " I must think this all over ; and if you were not so prejudiced, I should say I must pray about it."

" And what about Molly ? " said Robert.

" I will tell her all she need know."

" As little as possible, Mary. I cannot bear that such thoughts should even pass across her mind."

" She is stronger than you think," said Mrs. Davenant. " She is stronger than either you or me. It would not disturb her half as much as it disturbs you or me."

Presently Mrs. Davenant said, " You have not altered your mind about Molly ? "

" I love her to distraction," said Robert.

" No, no ! " said Mrs. Davenant, " that again will hamper you. This must be met coldly and clearly, as it was written. But go and talk to Molly. I shall go upstairs and do my best to think. In the morning I shall be ready to speak of it again. Do not be late in going to bed—you need sleep, I can see. Don't try to drive your body too hard."

XXVII

IT was very strange to Robert finding himself a few minutes later alone with the girl whom he knew only too well that he loved better than anything upon earth. The ugly frankness of his wife's letter, her coarse acceptance of the situation, the fact that she evidently had no kind of idea what the nature of their dissidence was, had brought his love for Molly to the surface, and had stripped it of all disguises. Yet he was surprised to find that he felt no impulse of hatred for his wife. There was nothing to hate—she was simply in a different region, and he no more felt a personal hatred for her than the climber feels for a cleft or rocky ridge which prevents him from reaching a summit. He did not even lament his fate. He was not given to self-pity. But he had become aware, in a sudden flash of perception, that Molly represented the best and most beautiful thing that the world could give him, the one human being in whose company and presence his spirit might really grow in grace and goodness and charity. It was not that he felt himself to be worthy of her love, or that he had anything to give her. He was essentially a modest man, and was far more conscious of his failures, weaknesses and deficiencies than he was of his good and attractive qualities—which indeed he wholly underrated. The amazing and astonishing fact was that Molly had found something in him to love, and this he could hardly credit, though at the moment of vision it had leapt to the front as the one central fact and hope of his life.

It was a cold night. The fire burned warm in the panelled room, and the breeze, laden with the sound of

the sea, stirred and moaned fitfully and uneasily round the corners of the house.

Molly sat opposite to him smiling, her head propped on her hand, her eyes softly illuminated by love and joy. He thought he had never seen anything in the world so beautiful as her glance and pose, full of rest and contentment, but yet as though it were ready to spring at a touch to life and passion. He would have given anything to take her in his arms and hold her close, but she made no attempt to attract him or to draw nearer to herself.

" Are you tired, Robert ? "

" I should be if you were not here, dearest Molly. ' I sleep, but my heart waketh.' "

" Another quotation—but I know that, and I could say other things to you out of that book, if . . ."

" If what, Molly ? "

" If things were otherwise."

" Do you know how things stand ? "

" No, but I can guess."

" You understand everything, dear. May I tell you what has happened ? "

" Of course. You have told mother everything ? "

" My wife wants to come back to me."

" I don't wonder at *that*, Robert."

" But she doesn't want *me*, Molly—not as I want you."

" What will you do ? "

" That is just what I don't know, dear. The thought of it is insupportable, and worse than ever now."

" What does she want of you ? "

" Nothing of *me*," said Robert—" my house, my name, my position, my success—all the things that matter so little."

" Then why should she not have them ? "

" Because it is like going into prison to live with her. You don't know her, Molly. All the things she cares about and adores, I hate—the world and the devil."

" Don't you care about the world ? "

" Yes, Molly. I like to take a hand in ruling it—and it is worth ruling. It has some conveniences ; but I despise its beliefs ; at least I think I do."

" You seem to have met the wrong people, Robert. The world is not as ugly a place as you think. It is full of people worth loving."

" Yes, if you can love them. But you have the key to their hearts, Molly dear. I have not. That is one of the things that I desire, that you should show me the way."

" Oh, Robert, you know the way better than I do. Everyone is charmed by you. They would love you if you would let them."

" Well, I love you well enough, Molly."

" Yes, that is what makes me so proud. You have given me a new life, Robert. Could you not give it to your wife perhaps ? "

" You think I ought to try again ? "

" I was wondering . . . what did you promise her at first ? "

" Oh, a great many things. She was silent and beautiful —I thought she understood."

" I haven't seen her letters, Robert."

" You mustn't see them. The first was bad enough, but it was good-natured. The second . . ."

" What about the second ? "

" I hardly know how to tell you, Molly. She had heard something. She thought I was amusing myself with you."

" But she wasn't jealous ? "

" No, not jealous. She threatened me—or perhaps she tried to bribe me."

" That's rather dreadful."

" It sickened me that she should even know of your existence," said Robert—" she degrades everything she touches."

Molly sat silent for a long time thinking.

" Someone told her ? "

" It seems so."

" We needn't trouble about that, Robert."

" No—but it infuriates me."

" We won't say anything more about it. She means you to give me up ? "

" Yes—but I won't do that—I can't. Molly dear, I can't live without you."

Molly raised her head and looked at him, a lovely, beautiful smiling look.

" We are in a fix, Robert. But I can't bother about that to-night. You are here and with me, and I can hardly believe my happiness. Nothing can spoil that."

" Molly, dearest, you don't know. I can hardly contain myself for love of you. I want you more than anything in the world."

" We must get used to loving each other like this."

" I can't, Molly, I can't."

" You have got your life, Robert, and I have mine. We can wait a little, now that we are so sure of each other."

They talked a little more, fitfully. Then Molly rose, smiling. " Robert, you are tired to death," she said. " I think your heart is going to sleep, too. Go to bed now and get a long sleep ; and I must sleep, too. We must be fresh to-morrow. Think, we have twelve good hours before us."

She came and stood beside him, put her arms round his neck, and stroked his hair. He caught her hand and kissed it. " No, Robert dear—we must leave all that

alone. It isn't that I should be ashamed of anything, but no one else must be ashamed of us. Come, dearest ! "

He rose from his chair, and they went together in silence through the silent house. She looked into his room to see that the fire was burning, and put another log on it. " Are your things all right ? You *won't* lie awake, Robert ? Nothing in earth or heaven ever keeps *me* awake, not even your being here—good-night, dearest of men."

She waved her hand and went lightly away down the passage.

XXVIII

THEY sat together a little after breakfast. The wind was sharp, and there were sudden sprinkles of rain. " I shall go to church," said Mrs. Davenant, " I feel the need of making a public appearance. Are either of you coming? "

" Do you wish me to go ? " said Robert.

" I wish you to wish to go," said Mrs. Davenant. " I don't wish you to go because *I* wish it."

" Yes, let us go, Robert," said Molly. " I have a reason. Do you know what Cubby has been doing ? " She told him the story in a few words.

" It's a scandal," said Robert, hotly. " The man isn't fit to be a clergyman."

" He thought he would like his turn," said Molly. " He is deeply in love with me, you see. Isn't his behaviour quite natural ? "

She looked laughingly at Robert, and his eyes fell.

" He only wishes to improve me," added Molly, " it is his sacred vocation. I am his ewe lamb."

" I think his apologies were worse than his offence," said Mrs. Davenant. " I never saw a man in a more abject condition."

" Don't trample on him, mother. He was very wretched."

" He holds very advanced views on post-baptismal sin," said Mrs. Davenant. " His sermons are very uncomfortable just now. This doesn't interest you, Robert ? "

" Not very much, I fear."

" It's a pity—his sermons are so logical. I never heard a bad case so ingeniously presented—I think he must get them out of a book."

" Don't you see that he is preaching against himself, mother ? He is dealing for once with his own experience."

" I will go," said Robert, " but it seems a waste of time."

" We can't talk all day," said Mrs. Davenant ; " people don't understand that one must get up an appetite for talk, just as one must for dinner. These snacks are what take the edge off one's mind. We will have our talk after luncheon. What time do you have to go, Robert ? "

Mrs. Davenant started for church much earlier than the other two. She preferred to walk to church alone, that she might go, as she said, at her own pace, sometimes a swift confused glide, with head outstretched, sometimes like the entry of a sovereign at a great gathering of her subjects. Then, too, she disliked being talked to or talking on her way to church, her reason, if pressed, being that she arranged in her mind the subject she proposed to meditate upon during the service. She went to church, as she frankly confessed, for meditation rather than for concerted prayer.

Molly and Robert started a few minutes later. Robert had thrown off his physical fatigue, and had the strange gaiety that often comes to people of highly-strung temperament in the interval before some momentous event or decision. Molly told him as lightly as she could the gossip of the place ; and this was a thing that Robert particularly enjoyed, for small as the dramas were, he told her, she put into them all dumb clash of human forces, and enlivened them by snaps of imitation. To find her walking beside him was in itself a deep delight ; he admired, as he always did, her quick and easy grace of motion, as of one borne on winged sandals, he had often thought.

But this mood of elation seemed to be suddenly withdrawn from him as he entered the dark church ; they sat in a seat just in front of the scowling, stiffened effigies of his sinister ancestors, and during the service Robert had an uneasy sense as though someone were peering grimly and sneeringly over his shoulder.

Mr. Cuthbert, Robert thought, was much altered for the worse : he was leaner, dustier, more angular than ever, while his voice sounded as though he were on fire within. Indeed, Robert could see that his own unexpected appearance had been a very disagreeable shock to Mr. Cuthbert ; but the Vicar kept his eyes down on his book, and never turned his head in their direction.

Mrs. Davenant sat remote and Sphinx-like at the far end of the pew. The congregation was a small one, and when Mr. Cuthbert uplifted his voice, after a prolonged and silent prayer, a sense of unutterable dreariness fell upon Robert. When the time came for the sermon, Mr. Cuthbert, leanly striding, went up to the pulpit and gave out his text, and then stood so long in silence that Robert began to wonder what conflict was going on behind those downcast eyes, thin lips, and worn face, which looked as if all love of life had ebbed from it. Then he began to speak in low hurried tones with many pauses. He spoke briefly of some of the worst of human sorrows and afflictions, and then after a painful pause, he said, " and then there is what is perhaps the worst trouble of all, when a man's heart is set on innocence and service, and just when the roads divide, beside the hill of Difficulty, there is withdrawn from the pilgrim soul, the one friend who could help, the one happy and tranquillizing influence, the one companionship which could make the upward journey possible. There is no sorrow like that sorrow, when the trembling spirit has to venture on alone. Then, if ever,

a man or woman is tempted to believe that God has forgotten or abandoned them. It is in such moments as these that even the righteous and just are tempted, as the unhappy Job was tempted, to break away from the grievous and ill-rewarded search for holiness, and to make terms with the evil power which, in its hideous knowledge of our human weakness, at least seems to promise us some comfort and contentment. Those are days when all our future welfare trembles in the balance ; but we must go forward in lonely bitterness, and struggle up the flinty climbing path, even though it passes into the mist and out of sight. In that hour let us pray to God to strengthen our weakness, and to enable us to forgive those who desert us in our hour of need."

At these words a faint but perceptible groan made itself audible from Mrs. Davenant's lips. Mr. Cuthbert for the first time since the service began, opened his eyes wide and glared balefully at the Davenant pew. Then he abruptly left the pulpit without the ascription. He stalked up to the altar, and presently kneeling down, said a nearly inaudible prayer ; then rising to his feet, he gave the blessing in a strained and almost ironical voice.

On Robert, in his dark mood, this only too obvious display of tense and acrimonious emotion produced a most disquieting effect. The sermon he could hardly interpret. Was it a menace, a warning, or a tortured confession ? The words seemed to contain a veiled and ominous reference to his own case. But on the other hand the suspicion that it might be a threat directed at Molly, filled him with an almost ungovernable anger. Some vital chord within him thrilled and throbbed with a more than physical anguish. The congregation drifted out of church. Mrs. Davenant swept out with an air of unscathed majesty, shook hands with half a dozen men and women, in a

funereal fashion, a ceremony only relieved by some friendly personal remarks from Molly, received with gratified smiles. Mrs. Davenant on getting clear of the churchyard gave vent to her indignation : " A monstrous performance ! " she said, " to forgive other people because one isn't strong enough to stand alone ! It is worthy of Mrs. Gummidge. When once you begin forgiving people, there is no end to it ! I feel as if I had been tarred and feathered—tarred with Mr. Cuthbert's venom, and feathered with his forgiveness."

At that moment Mr. Cuthbert appeared behind them, striding down the church path ; he wore an air of meek triumph.

He shook hands with the party. " I did not know that you were here, Lord Helford," he said. " You must forgive our homely worship."

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Mrs. Davenant with dignity, " your service was to my mind far from edifying."

" I deliver the message of the Lord without fear or favour," said Mr. Cuthbert. " I speak out the thoughts of my heart."

Robert was overcome by sudden anger. " That is to say you ventilate your private grievances without fear of contradiction," he said coldly and peremptorily.

Mr. Cuthbert stared at him with nostrils distended. " Lord Helford," he said, and made a dry-lipped pause, " it is true that you are the so-called patron of this living, but I know of no right that you have to address me on this subject."

" That is to say," said Robert, " that you may make what base innuendoes you like, and the duty of your congregation is to receive them in grateful submission ? "

" The Word of God," said Mr. Cuthbert, " in the apocalyptic vision, rides forth on a pale horse, and his

vesture drips with blood. If a conscience-stricken heart winces at the piercing breath of the spirit . . ."

" I am glad, at all events," said Robert, interrupting him, " that you distinguish so clearly between the office and the man."

The encounter, and the overwhelming passion displayed by Robert had taken the party by surprise. Molly in the depths of her mind had an unregenerate thrill of admiration at Robert's outbreak, and thought that anger sat finely upon him. But Mrs. Davenant intervened. " Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " if your words were meant to have a personal application, their *public* utterance is almost unpardonable ; in any case we will not discuss the matter, nor will we ask you to accompany us any further."

They walked away. Mr. Cuthbert put out his hand to the churchyard wall, as if in need of support. As they turned the corner, Robert looking back, in spite of his anger, could not restrain a pang of something like regret at seeing the unfortunate man raise his hands to his temples in a gesture of mute bewilderment and despair, and slowly retrace his steps through the churchyard.

" Oh, dear," said Molly at last, " what an absurd scene ! I feel as if I had been acting in a bad play. Cubby can't help being melodramatic."

" I don't know," said Robert, smiling at her ; " that is my idea of a man in hell."

" Yes, but he rather likes being there, poor dear," said Molly.

" It seems as if I had championed the family in vain," said Robert.

" No, not at all," said Molly. " I felt rather proud of you, Robert. But you wasted your thunders. Cubby is quite impervious. He will comfort himself with a text about the ungodly. Whatever happens, Cubby will always

have the awful sense of inner righteousness. I expect he is already praying for you."

"What insolence!" said Robert.

"You can't prevent him though," said Molly.

"I believe him to be entirely demented," said Mrs. Davenant.

XXIX

THEY were very silent at luncheon. Robert's ebullition had thrown him somewhat off his balance ; he had that strange sense of prostration that immoderate anger always leaves behind ; while the thought of what had soon to be said lay rather heavily upon them all.

They soon adjourned to the drawing-room, and Mrs. Davenant, with a sibylline air, holding up a fan to shield herself from the fire, said, " let us speak of this matter at once, Robert. I understand that you desire my advice—but have you any decisive opinion of your own ? "

" No," said Robert, " I have not. I will speak plainly—it is useless to beat about the bush. I seem to have at present only two anchors to life—my work, and my friendships here. My wife and I have not a thought or idea in common, except the memory of a long period of alienation and of a most humiliating and miserable quarrel. Perhaps some people could live on distant terms in the same house with one whom they neither love nor even respect. I could not. I confess my weakness—but to live close to anyone—a relation, a secretary, a servant—without an easy and friendly regard, is a torment to me ; a veiled hostility close at hand is simply insupportable. It would even prevent me from doing my work ; and then it would cut me off from what seemed, just when I needed it most, to be my home. There are some experiments that one could just try with a hundredth chance of success—this is foredoomed to certain and speedy failure. I *cannot* attempt it."

" Let us suppose then," said Mrs. Davenant, " that you

refuse. Will your wife acquiesce in your living freely with us ? "

" No," said Robert, " she will not. She will make what mischief she can—she is very tenacious."

" But if you consented to try her plan," said Mrs. Davenant, " what would your freedom in the matter of seeing us be ? "

" Oh, complete, I suppose," said Robert ; " that would have to be a condition—but even so, she might change her mind."

" I don't think so," said Mrs. Davenant. " Mind, I do not praise these letters—they are both hard and coarse—but I think—I may be wrong—that she has a certain sense of honour, and would stick to a bargain."

" Oh, dear," said Robert, yawning with despair, " what a mess I have made of my life already ! things ought not to be so irrevocable."

" I am not so sure," said Mrs. Davenant.

" I see where you are leading me," said Robert, mournfully. " What does Molly think ? "

Molly was sitting forward in her chair, looking at the fire. She looked at Robert with a look of infinite tenderness, and he smiled at her through his weariness and bewilderment.

" I wish you and I could take hands, Molly," he said, " and wander up there over those blue hills into the land of Avilion ! "

" We must not be romantic," said Mrs. Davenant, with a little gesture of her hand. " You would have to get dinner somewhere—and where do *I* come in ? "

Molly reached across to her mother, and took her hand.

" What I feel, Robert dear," she said, " is that it is probably the right thing to do—and the brave thing—and then we shouldn't lose you either. One doesn't know what

one can do. But could you not say you would try it for a time—six months—a year ? "

" You let me go very lightly, Molly."

" Ah, you don't mean that, Robert."

" No, dear, I don't—it was hateful of me to say it."

" We can say anything to each other, Robert—that doesn't matter—I know what makes you say it. But feeling as I do, I *can't* be surprised at her wanting you to come back."

" Isn't it possible to be *too* sensible ? "

" I am not pretending to be pleased, Robert. I'm just holding on—if I let myself go, I could be the most miserable girl alive."

" Come," said Mrs. Davenant, " let me get out my hoard of maxims. Here are three people all loving each other. And don't think I don't know what love means ! But we have a situation to face. The question is what is the least unhappy way out. We have got to be sensible and to behave decently. Other lovers have had to part before. It is tempting, but not necessary, to behave like the beasts that perish. If either of you did that, you would both be miserable, and I should be miserable, too. The point is, what can be rescued from the wreck ? "

" But you mustn't forget, mother," said Molly, " that it is Robert after all who has to do the hard thing—supposing that the best solution were that you or I should marry Mr. Cuthbert, the one selected would have to be considered."

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " I admit it. I have made my usual mistake of treating human problems as if they were a game of chess. But, of course, Robert has to decide."

There was a painful silence. Presently Robert, in a strained and subdued voice, said, " That is just what I don't want to do."

" Oh, Robert," said Molly, " don't speak like that—don't try to do what you *can't* do—this isn't a case of sacrificing yourself to somebody's *need*, but to somebody's convenience. The reasons for doing a duty must be simple reasons."

Robert smiled at her, rather a tragic smile. Then he said, " I behaved impatiently and fiercely to my wife; that must be admitted. If I thought that I could influence her in any way, change her ideas, make her understand, it would be different. But she has a much stronger will than I have, has no doubts or regrets. I think it much more likely that she would change me—she is absolutely tenacious and unbending. You see she begins by thinking me a fool."

" The strong doesn't always win," said Mrs. Davenant. " She might end by falling in love with you."

" And that," said Robert, " would be simple damnation."

" Oh, give it up, Robert," said Molly; " what right have we got to torture you so ? "

" Dearest Molly, it isn't that," said Robert, " but if I exclude her, I exclude you too."

" We could write," said Molly, " and there might be chances of meeting."

" Yes—but it would all be furtive and round the corner—you wouldn't like it, and neither should I. But I think I see a way out. If I arranged this hideous sort of life for London only, I think I might just get through. That would give me four or five months absolutely clear. Colearne I simply could not stand—nothing to do but a succession of house-parties. There is a smaller house down there, Wootton Davenant. She could have that as a country cottage. How horrible all this planning is—and how different it might be ! "

Robert sighed and leaned his head upon his hand.

" I am afraid I haven't been very successful in arraying my case," said Mrs. Davenant, " and yet it seemed so simple from an abstract point of view."

" Yes, Mary," said Robert, " you *have* been successful. You have shown me that something *can* be done, an experiment made—and somehow or other you have given me the feeling that it might be tried—that I have something to make up for. But I feel, for all that, as if I had fallen down a precipice."

The clock on the mantelpiece jarred and struck four o'clock, as if clinching a bargain.

" Ah," said Robert, " I have to leave this at six. Begone dull care ! May I take Molly out for a walk, and may she see me off ? I feel like a boy going to school, arranging his ' last day ' treat."

Molly hurried off to get her things. Robert stood up in front of the fire ; " Mary," he said, " I want to thank you. You have kept my nose to the ground. If Molly and I had tried to settle it, we should have been so unselfish, that we should have made a hash of it."

" Yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " I don't want to advise you on selfish lines. But one can't make a greater mistake than to exclude self from a decision."

He took her unresisting hand and kissed it. Mrs. Davenant paid no heed to the ceremony.

XXX

PRESENTLY the two were walking up the hill towards Nan-Zephron. " I am going to take you my sacred walk to-day," said Molly. " I only go there on supreme occasions, and I have never allowed anyone to go there with me yet. I found it out when I was about fourteen. I had had a real battle-royal with mother. The garden boy had been impertinent to me, and I had hit him in the face, and wouldn't beg his pardon. Mother took his side, and I was furious. In the middle of it, mother suddenly said that she thought she was wrong, and that she didn't think I should have done it without a good reason, and that *he* must beg *my* pardon. And I said that he shouldn't, and that it was just a fight, and that neither of us had done anything wrong—and she laughed and said, ' Well make it up in your own way.' Don't you think that was very sensible ? "

" I didn't know you were a fighter, Molly."

" Oh, yes—but I don't need to hit people now. I can be fearfully disagreeable."

" But what about the walk ? "

" Yes, I had forgotten. I went out alone, and I felt rather adventurous, and I turned into the wood. I pushed through the copses, and came at last to the wall—you know the park is all walled in ? "

" I didn't know it, Molly."

" Well, there was an old stone stepping-stile over the wall, and on the other side I found a tiny lane between walls winding along the side of the hill ; and near the end of the promontory there is an open space, and something that looks like a ruined house with a gable coming out of

the brambles—and there is a well there under a stone arch. That's the end of the sacred walk."

" Let's go there—have we time ? "

" Yes, just time. . . . Robert, I'm not trying to distract your attention by chattering on. But I don't want to talk about the other thing any more. We have talked ourselves into knots, I think. Don't think about it any more, Robert dearest. Just wait till the answer comes into your mind, to-morrow or the day after. You will suddenly find your mind has made itself up. And tell me what you settle to do. Whatever you settle will be right—for me at all events."

" Things can't part us now, Molly dear."

" I should like to see things try," said Molly ; " I am just going to say one word—and that is that I love you with all my heart and soul, Robert—simply that—and I would do anything to please you, help you, comfort you. I trust you, because I know you would not hurt me willingly."

" But I may hurt you *un*willingly."

" I don't mind that. Do you trust me, too ? "

" Yes, dearest, I love you as you love me, and I trust you as you trust me."

" We can't get nearer to each other than that, Robert."

" Not at present, dear."

" But we won't think about the future, will we ?—it must just remain ' the present ' for us."

They reached the top of the hill ; the wood was all around them, but not dense with the darkness of summer. The great firs stood up here and there, with smooth red boles and velvet tufts of green. The copses and the ancient ash trees were stripped of their leaves, and the ground was thickly matted with trailing and broken yellow-grey hemlock stems. Here Molly slipped into the wood, and glided

forward, now holding back a bough for Robert to pass, now indicating a sweetbriar tuft or a cluster of rose-pink spindle-wood berries. They were soon at the wall, piled high of mossy stones. Over it Molly flitted, and in a moment Robert joined her on the other side. The tiny lane appeared, half-filled with thorns and briars, but the sheep, going to and fro, had trodden a rough path and left many tufts of wool on the brambles. To their right the rough pastures rose gently. To their left they could see the creek, mudstained and stagnant now, and the further headland ; in front of them lay the misty pearly sea.

The path took a little turn downwards. " Here we are," said Molly.

It was a little dingle in the hill. The ruin was all overgrown and full of saplings ; but the gable, with a single window, built of massive and ancient stones, rose up above the brake. There was a little space of rough sward ; and opposite them, under a low arch of stones, a well of dark water, into which a tiny runnel ran.

" What a strange place ! " said Robert.

" Yes, it must be a ruined house—a shepherd's hut, perhaps."

" No, Molly, it is much older than that. It is a hermitage, more than a thousand years old. A friend of Bybi's, perhaps. Here he sat, ragged and dirty and hairy, day after day, and prayed—I wonder what he prayed about ? "

" Perhaps he had cared for someone, and wanted to forget her."

" Probably he thought it was a sin even to have cared ! "

" You would not make a good hermit, Robert."

Robert shook his head ; " I don't know that you would make a success of it either," he said.

They sat down for a moment on a grassy bank beside the spring, listening to the musical running of the rill. A

magpie flicked up out of the brake, and stood on the wall watching them, his head on one side. Then he gave a sudden tug at a thornbush laden with red haws, and swallowed a few berries like pills.

" Isn't he enchanting ? " said Molly. " He isn't a bit afraid."

" There seems so much to say to you, Molly dearest," said Robert, " that I can't say anything at all."

" There isn't much need, is there ? "

" Yet I feel that there ought to be vows and ceremonies —Yes—you shall do one thing, Molly. Make a cup with your hands, and give me a little draught of the holy water."

Molly laughed, knelt a moment by the well, and came back to Robert with her hands clasped, dripping. " Make haste," she said, " or it will be gone ! " He bent his head, and drank, and she did the same, and cast the water on the ground.

" Some day we will come here again," said Molly, " and all the mists will have cleared away. If I could but tell you how proud and glad I am, Robert, in spite of everything ! "

Robert put his hand to his eyes. " Good God," he said, " what does it all mean—to be so near and yet so far away ? "

" No, don't spoil it now," said Molly. " Look—isn't it all beautiful ? "

All was still, with an almost unearthly stillness on the hillside. The dark woods seemed to stand and watch them. The westering sun gathered colour, and tinged the edges of purple clouds with a rim of orange light, and the shadows fell, long and calm, across the pasture. They went back slowly together, hardly speaking, but looking often at each other as though trying to bridge some solemn

chasm. Too soon it seemed they were at Menerdue ; and a little later Robert in his car glided away alone, in the darkening twilight, watching the two figures that stood beside the gate, waving their hands, until the wood hid them from his aching sight.

XXXI

IT was a fortnight since Robert had left Menerdue. He had travelled up to London by night, in a tumult of emotion. The thought of Molly was at once an ecstasy and a torture to him. The sense of her entire and supreme devotion had come home to him in a way which he had never realised before, and his whole heart and mind went out to meet her in a passion of gratitude. In such a frame of mind anything and everything seemed possible. It was clear to him that both Molly and Mrs. Davenant thought that he ought to attempt to meet Lady Helford's wishes. The idea was intensely repugnant to himself; loving Molly as he did, the thought of being even nominally assigned to another was of the nature of horror, and then, too, his fertile imagination began to pile up remote and sinister possibilities. He had no intention of parting with his freedom altogether, and the thought that the arrangement would leave him to a certain extent free to spend some part of the year at Menerdue was the only part of the bargain that tempted him. But what would he do if his wife found material for jealousy in the relation? Worse still, what would happen if his wife were to begin to experience any sentiment towards himself? He was every month becoming a more notable man in the political world. He had played a very adroit part in the late crisis, and his inclusion in the Cabinet was beginning to be considered a practical certainty at the next shuffling of the cards of office. That he should be undeniably successful and prominent was the one thing, he felt, which might touch an admiring chord in his wife's chilly nature.

And then at the bottom of his mind—though he did not admit this to himself—he was really afraid of his wife's strength of will. He knew that he could confront her successfully at a crisis : she had neither argument nor persuasiveness at her command. But he himself suffered from reactions : and he knew that he was never so weak and impressible as just after he had won a momentary triumph. She on the other hand was coldly and quietly persistent. Defeat never for a moment made her abandon a purpose.

However, the wishes of Molly and Mrs. Davenant weighed very much with him—for Mrs. Davenant—though he felt in his inmost heart out of sympathy with her, and painfully conscious of her formidable qualities—was for the time being involved in the halo thrown by Molly, while he had a considerable respect for her moral judgment. And this, coupled with the fact that consent to his wife's suggestion would not shut the door on his relations with Menerdue, decided him.

He wrote a long letter to Lady Helford, saying that he felt that further correspondence would be a mistake, and suggesting an interview, in order to avoid lengthy explanations.

She had curtly consented ; and as it was not easy for him to leave London, it was arranged that she should call at Helford House on a certain Friday afternoon, and discuss the whole affair.

Helford House was a gloomy mansion in Cavendish Square. It was many years since it had been in real use, except for the brief period of Robert's married life.

Before that, he had lived there with his mother in picnic fashion ; the house within had a certain solid magnificence, and no attempt had been made to redecorate it, as expenses at Colearne had been heavy. After Lady Helford's departure, Robert had practically shut up the

house, retaining only a library for himself, a small dining-room, and a waiting-room on the ground floor. He had a bedroom above. An old married couple looked after his meals. Such friends as he entertained dined or lunched with him at a club or restaurant. He dined out a good deal, so that very few visitors ever entered the house.

One of the attractions of Helford House was a big entrance-hall, flagged with black and white marble, and panelled in mahogany, which had the effect more of a country house than of a town house. The library was a quiet room at the back almost lined with books. Altogether it was a place well suited for dignified and distinguished entertaining, and Robert, who loved its solid and spacious quiet even more than he had suspected, found himself sighing over the thought that it would soon, if matters were so arranged, be filled with what Lady Helford called the " right " people. It made no difference to Lady Helford whether the right people were dull, commonplace, noisy, or even vulgar, as long as they had a certain atmosphere of publicity or influence or high connections behind them. Robert himself was almost hermit-like in his tastes, and went into the world half reluctantly, clad in a social panoply ; but he was well aware that even the ease of manner which made him so many friends, and the light touch of his allusive talk were all part of his disguise ; indeed, his popularity was to a great extent won by his modesty ; before a large group he was diffident in conversation, and he never gave any impression of complacent or conscious brilliance ; his closer friends were mostly gained by quiet and apparently confidential talk, in which he gave himself away far less than he appeared to do. His real life, he knew, lay among ideas and books and quiet working hours. In these days of anxiety he found himself dwelling again and again on the thought of how different

all would be if it were Molly who was coming to share his life. In all his reveries, the thought of children had played no part. His ideal of life was one perfect companionship of sympathy and understanding, not even filled by talk—for talk soon wearied him—indeed, he thought on looking back to the days at Menerdue that the silent hours spent in Molly's companionship had brought him nearer to her and her to him than the hours when like children they had talked inconsequently of all that came into their minds.

He came in early on the momentous afternoon. Lady Helford was to arrive at four o'clock, and they were to talk matters out together. He dreaded the interview very much ; indeed, on the preceding day it had weighed so much on his mind, and his desire for relief had been so strong, that he thought that if it had not been for Molly in the background, he would almost have turned tail altogether. On the morning of the day itself, however, he felt some return of calmness. After all, it was only a *pour-parler*, and nothing had been inflexibly determined.

He had given orders that Lady Helford was to be shown into the library ; but he felt that he could not wait to receive her there. Just before four o'clock he went into the waiting-room and took up a book, trying to arrange and control his thoughts ; and it was with a sickening sense of anticipation that he heard his old butler cross the hall, open and presently close the door, and the footsteps cross the hall again. A moment later he was summoned. He ordered tea to be brought in half an hour, and then crossed the hall and entered the library.

In the subdued light he saw his wife, a tall and stately figure, attired with a rich but quiet magnificence, standing on the hearth-rug and surveying the room. She made no attempt to draw nearer to him, and for a moment they looked at each other in silence.

She was the first to break the silence: " Here I am, Robert," she said, in the slow, rich, rather deep-toned voice which had been the first thing about her that had originally charmed him. As he did not speak, but merely bowed his head, she went on. " I quite see that it is disagreeable to you to meet me, but I think as you do that it is no use trying to settle a matter like this by letters. In a letter I say what I don't mean, and you don't mean what you say."

" I can be quite frank if you wish it," he replied.

" Ah, well," she said carelessly, " don't let us begin by getting vexed. This is simply a business proposition."

He drew a chair for her to the fire, and sat down himself at the corner of a sofa close to the hearth.

" You look better than you did, Robert," she went on. " I hear you have been a great success of late. Don't be annoyed if I say that I think the time has come when I might help you. I always wanted you to come to the front."

Robert, confronted by her great beauty and her entire self-possession, seemed to be unable to disentangle a single thought or to frame a sentence.

" Cynthia," he said at last, " we need not make any pretences. I should greatly prefer things to remain as they are. I do not want any change, and should not have suggested it, though, of course, to a certain extent I am hampered by our arrangement. You must remember that you agreed to it, and now you wish to alter it. I am ready to hear your reasons, and what you propose."

Lady Helford looked at him in silence for a moment, and then said, " I suppose that is your parliamentary manner ? "

" If you mean that it is the simplest and plainest statement I can make, yes."

" Then I can only wonder how you have got on so well. Do you think that this sort of tone could persuade anyone to do anything ? "

" It is not meant to—persuading is *your* business. But it is useless to begin by quarrelling over words—let us say what we have to say. Your wish is that we should live together again. I am willing to try that here, in this house, during the sittings of Parliament and when work keeps me in London."

" And what about Colearne ? "

" I don't propose to occupy Colearne ; but you can have Wootton Davenant if you wish. When I am not here in London, I must be free."

" To go to your new relations, I suppose ? "

" To them and to anyone else that I like."

" You must dislike me very much, Robert."

" It isn't that, Cynthia. I see that you are beautiful—more beautiful than ever—I believe you to be perfectly honest and straight ; but we haven't an idea in common. You are blind to half the things that I see. You think my thoughts absurd and fanciful. Whenever I say what is in my mind, I feel that you are judging, despising, condemning it. I don't say that I am necessarily right or that you are wrong, but I simply cannot live in such an atmosphere."

" I don't understand it a bit," said Lady Helford. " I am as anxious as you are for your success."

" Much more," said Robert ; " I like success, but I am far more interested in my work."

" Is it that I am stupid ? "

" No ; you see what you see very clearly—more clearly than I do. Probably you see things that I do not see ; but what I value most you think nonsense."

" But many people are married and live happily together who are very different."

" Yes, but they must have *something* in common—something that they both admire and love."

" Each other, for instance ? "

" Yes, that would be enough."

" I shall never understand. It seems to me that I can give you most things that you require. I can entertain people, I know how to behave, I can manage a household."

" That's only the frame of the picture—not the picture."

" I suppose your young friend Molly can give you all you want."

" I would rather not speak about her—but I will say once and for all that she could—she is quick, generous, unselfish, interested in people, interested in ideas. She understands what I think and feel almost before I can say it. She is a perfect companion."

" I must make acquaintance with this paragon."

" I hope not, Cynthia—you would think her as absurd as you think me."

" Probably."

" Oh, do let us be sensible," said Robert, leaning forwards—" we are trying to come to terms, and yet ever since we began to talk you have been trying to provoke me."

" Yes—but I haven't succeeded—there is something in you to-day that won't be provoked. And you have *not* been trying to provoke me, and you *have* succeeded."

Robert did not answer. After a moment Lady Helford went on : " What should we do if I did live here with you ? "

" That is easy enough—I go out early to the office, lunch at my club or with a friend, go to the House. You could do as you liked about asking people in. I suppose we could give some dinners here, and go out sometimes together."

" You don't want to be left alone with me ? "

" Not if we are to talk as we have talked to-day."

" Well, it isn't a very priceless bargain," said Lady Helford, " but it is better than nothing. You don't know how bored I have been ! "

" Two things more," said Robert. " It must be an experiment only ; I will try it for a year—and when we are not here, we must both be absolutely free to do exactly as we like and go where we like. I shall ask no questions about you, and you must not ask questions about me."

" Would you mind if I took up with someone else ? "

" I thought that it was understood there was to be no scandal on either side. I am prepared to trust you about that. If there were to be any scandal, that would be worse than our present arrangement."

" I am not sure that your behaviour at the Davenants doesn't almost amount to a scandal."

" If we go into that at all, we must go into it thoroughly." said Robert, " and that I don't propose to do. You must take my word for it that there has been nothing of the kind. I have not made love to Molly in the only sense that you would understand the phrase."

Lady Helford's face darkened and she did not speak.

" In any case," Robert went on, " I am not going to explain anything. You may believe me or not as you like —but if you do not accept my statement, then we may consider the negotiation at an end."

" How impatient you are. I do believe you. Will that do ? "

" Yes," said Robert—" and I will say one thing more. I consent to this, not because I wish to, but because I think you have some cause of complaint. It was I who persuaded you to marry me ; it was a great mistake, as it turned out ; but I do not think that I tried long enough and hard enough to live at peace together."

" Lady Helford rose to her feet, and Robert thought how magnificent she looked. " Very well," she said, " I am glad you admit as much. I accept your terms. When shall the experiment begin ? "

" We shall have to get the house into shape," said Robert, " and I shall have some arrangements to make. I shall be free about the middle of December, and I shall be going away for Christmas."

" Very well," said Lady Helford. " I will see to the house. I shall enjoy that. As soon as things are ready, I will let you know. I will disturb your own rooms as little as possible. Before I go, I would like to say ' thank you.' You have been more reasonable than I expected. I see you hate it, but I believe I shall be able to prove that it will not be as bad as you expect—No, I won't have a taxi. I am at the Hallboroughs close by. It will be a relief to tell them we have made it all up."

" Don't arouse their emotions too much," said Robert, with a faint smile.

XXXII

WHEN Lady Helford left him, Robert became suddenly aware what a strain the interview had been, and was overcome by a violent reaction. He had intended to be as conciliatory as he could, but her tone had provoked him almost beyond endurance. Moreover, the sight of her, in the insolence of her beauty and her supreme assurance, had made him aware how much he dreaded the impact of her selfwill. He had often before realized that nothing but the furious indignation which he had felt at her treatment of his mother could have nerved him to insist on separation; for the last six months of their married life he had hated her, not malignantly, but with a dumb and tortured hatred. She seemed to destroy all that was best in him. And now he began to fear that he had undertaken a task which was beyond his strength. He tried to console himself with the thought of Molly. But the fiend which waits for moments of strained endurance in all sensitive people laid his chilly hand upon Robert's mind and heart. He felt a sense of grievance with Mrs. Davenant, and even with Molly, for overpersuading him; he even began to wonder whether Molly's puritanism, that instinctive pursuit of moral perfection, had not outweighed her tenderness. He had intended to write to Molly at once to tell her the result of the interview. But the minutes passed, and he felt a sickening revulsion of feeling; he was disgusted with the way he had conducted the interview, with a furtive mixture of timidity and boldness.

He bestirred himself at last, but could not bring himself

to write. He went down to his club, feeling that he could not spend the evening alone, delivered over to the assaults of the Evil One, and there fortunately met an old acquaintance, a comfortable *flâneur*, under whose easy genial talk his spirits revived. They dined together and talked politics, and Robert found substantial consolation in his friend's deferential assumption that he was destined at no great distance of time for a place in the Cabinet.

When he returned home, he felt able to write his letter.

Lord Helford to Molly Davenant

My dearest Molly,

I have done as you and your mother advised. I am not sure that I haven't undertaken a heavier load than I can carry. The interview was not a success, though I have got the exact terms I offered. It is to be merely a London arrangement, and will begin early in January—Cynthia is to get the house in order, and she is to have Wootton Davenant to do what she likes with.

I found Cynthia as beautiful as ever, and decidedly more aggressive. I will tell you more about this.

Meantime, I must have some corner of my own to go to, where I can instal my old couple. I wish you and your mother would consider that and advise me. I would like, of course, to be within reach of you, but perhaps that would not be wise, particularly if you are willing to let me come sometimes to Menerdue. Do you think I might come to you for Christmas? I want to do just what your mother would like. Find out and let me know. This is the dullest of dull letters, but I am rather cleaned out by my interview. Cynthia has a way of driving me into my last stronghold—you need not be told what that is.

Your loving Robert.

Robert woke the next morning with a blank sense of calamity upon him, and filled the grim hours of the dawn with one of those haunted and obsessed reveries that burn up the strongest vitality. A busy day followed, and it was with a sort of poisonous amusement that he discovered what good use Cynthia had made of her time. His official chief, the pragmatical Picton, had heard of the reconciliation. " Glad to hear, Helford, that you have put things straight with Lady Helford. It's no business of mine, but she has got the real *art de salon*, you know. She doesn't want to show off like some of these boring females ; and it will just make all the difference to you to do a bit of entertaining. You can do anything by *feeding*, from a Cabinet Minister down to a Pekinese ! "

It was not till the following morning that he got a letter from Molly.

Robert dearest,

I had a dreadful feeling all Thursday evening that you were going through the fire. It may have been only imagination of course, but I felt it like a wireless message from you to me ; and when I got your dear letter, I realized what a dreadful time you must have had. Of course, it would make me miserable if I felt that mother and I had baited you into trying to do something impossible. But I still don't doubt that you have done right, and I am sure it will now get easier every day. Of course *you will come to us for Christmas, if you can. I hadn't dared to ask you ; and the idea of seeing you then makes me so happy that I hardly know how to contain myself. I wish men and women were not so different ! I seem to know so well just what is in Cynthia's mind about this matter ; and much as I love you, I don't know quite what is in yours, though I think that makes me love you even better. However, I think you have done a* fine *thing, and I*

am more proud of you than ever. Come as soon as you can and stay as long as you can—your own Molly.

The same post brought him a letter from his wife.

Lady Helford to Lord Helford

Dear Robert,

I think I ought to write and tell you that I am perfectly satisfied by what we settled, and think you behaved well. We were not very pleasant to each other, though I am still in the dark as to why you ever took such a dislike to me. But I am not going back on the past, and I do not intend to speak of it again. You shall see that I can keep my bargain, and outside the limits we laid down you shall be perfectly free. I shall ask no questions, nor will I again listen to any malicious gossip. If you wish to know who told me about you, I will tell you. I am not expecting to get you to love *me ; and to be candid I don't want that ; but I hope I shall be able to make you tolerate me, and even like me. I am sure I can be useful to you, and I shall do my very best. May I set to work on Wootton Davenant at once? If you will tell me when you are leaving London, I will get things going. I won't make any alterations in Helford House to speak of, except in my own bedroom and sitting-room. You needn't bother about money. I have heaps, and we can settle up later. I shall not expect to receive the allowance you have made me after the end of this year.*

Yours,
Cynthia.

The last letter was a great relief to Robert. She was evidently inclined to keep the peace.

At the same time a sudden sense of the futility of the

whole affair came over him—he was going solemnly to dramatize the homely side of life, which meant nothing at all unless it was based on a real and inner partnership, to posture and grimace through ceremonious entertainments, side by side with a woman for whom he felt what almost amounted to an aversion, with a touch of dread—and all this because of a religious ceremony in the sanctity of which neither of them believed, and behind that again a legal contract made mainly for the sake of children who would never be born. What principle of either duty or honour was involved? His wife did value appearances; she had never loved him, but she had loved the state and circumstance that the marriage gave her, and the outward symbol satisfied the deepest needs of her soul.

To this statuesque drama Robert, looking drearily ahead, saw the rest of his life, perhaps, consecrated. He would at all events have his public career—but the background, which ought to be devoted to the beloved intimacies of sympathy and affection, was to be represented by a certain number of elaborate gatherings where people would meet to eat and drink, to chatter the surface gossip of the day, and under cover of that meaningless pretence, carry on no doubt some of those half-hidden emotional dramas, those intricate reverberations of passion, which permeated not their own stratum of society only, but every stratum, from top to bottom. Robert had no temptation whatever to promiscuous sensuality, or even promiscuous sentiment. What he longed for was hard and definite work, with an inner current of real and vivid emotions to return to, something to centralize his life—and though for the present his love for Molly thrilled and ennobled his spirit, he yet felt that the position was an unnatural one, if not for himself, at least for Molly, and might lead to the suppression of all her deepest and most

vital instincts. He had made a fatal mistake in his marriage; he had allowed a base passion to overcome him ; and now he was to pay the price of his error in a starved unreality of life, a hypocrisy which in his exacerbated mood seemed to him worse than death.

In the course of the next month he had several interviews with his wife, and found them easier than he had thought likely. She was quiet, friendly, matter-of-fact, as a partner in business might be, with whom one had just one single material concern in common. She was evidently doing her best to fulfil her side of the bargain ; she deferred to his wishes, consulted his tastes, made no attempt to involve him in any extra responsibilities, and took all trouble off his shoulders.

The day before he left London she came in to see him. She asked what his movements were to be if she wanted to communicate with him. He said that he was going to spend the time with the Davenants, and wrote down the address. She made no comment, but told him where she would be, and that he would find everything in order on his return. Only one word of private import did she say. " You shall see that I can behave squarely ; and I am determined, Robert, that you shall not hate all this as much as you expect to. If there is anything that I can do, anything to save you trouble, just let me know, and remember that I shall *enjoy* doing it." He was a little touched by this, said some words of thanks, and thus they parted.

XXXIII

ROBERT went off to Cornwall the next morning with rather mixed feelings. He had often heard from Molly, and he had written to her as often ; but on both sides the letters had been brief. He was unconsciously nursing a little grievance in the bottom of his mind. He felt that Molly and Mrs. Davenant had urged him rather too emphatically to the course which he had adopted. They had not apparently hesitated about it, or even treated it as a dilemma, only as a duty which he was bound in honour to undertake. They had not, he thought, quite realised his sacrifice. As often before in his life, he found himself bewildered by the workings of the feminine mind. It had no power of ratiocination ; it made as straight to its goal as a moth to a light. " If one argues about things, one ends by not doing them," Mrs. Davenant had once said to him. It was indeed Mrs. Davenant of whom he was really a little shy, and what he was shy about in the case of Molly was her devoted confidence in her mother's judgment—her own judgment was never at fault. Even while he reflected, the delight of thinking that he would see her, be near her, hear her clear voice, watch her kindling eyes, thrilled him with a sudden ecstasy, and the life of the spirit quickened in his languid brain.

He had sent his car on ahead of him to wait for him at Truro. He had explained this to Molly ; but to his delight, a delight so overwhelming as to be almost a physical shock, he saw, as the train drew in to the high lighted station, Molly and Parker standing side by side on the

platform. " My dear Molly," he said, taking her hand, " how *did* you get here ? "

" I ran," said Molly ; " No, I just walked into Penrhyn, took the train, found Parker, and had an excellent tea at the Red Lion—quite prosaic ! You didn't think I was going to lose the first sight of you ! "

They soon started ; and as they drove through the lighted streets of the little town, crisp and clear with frost, with the figures moving to and fro, his passion came upon him with an intensity that he could hardly resist ; she was close beside him in all the fresh fragrance of her youth ; he clasped her close to him, kissed her unresisting cheek and lips, murmured words of love into her ear. But Molly made no response, Robert grew calmer, and suddenly found that she was crying, shaken with sobs which she could not restrain. " What is it, dearest—what have I done to distress you ? " he said. " Nothing," she whispered faintly ; and at last, when he pressed her to speak, she said, " Robert dearest,we mustn't take happiness like this—I haven't the strength to refuse, but we mustn't lose hold of ourselves—I give you all the love I have got, but we mustn't be lovers—we must help each other—if we tempt each other like this, we must part ; and I can't let you go."

" Can't we trust each other ? " said Robert.

" I can trust you—I can't trust myself."

" But if we feel as we do, is there *anything* that ought to keep us separate ? "

" Yes, dearest—a hundred things ; and if we can put this one happiness aside, we can love each other without fear——"

" You need not fear me, Molly."

" I know—I know—You don't think me unkind ? There is nothing I would not give you, if I could."

" You are right, dearest. I will try not to fail you again."

" It isn't that, Robert. You understand that if I thought it was the only way for you to be happy, I would do anything, give you anything, give up everything—but it isn't the way, dearest—it only leads to quicksands and precipices, where even our love would be lost. Don't let us lose it thus."

" No, Molly—we won't lose it—but I *don't* acquiesce."

" Neither do I—but if we yield to the stream, it will carry us away."

" The cautious Molly ! " said Robert.

" No, Robert dear, I'm not cautious ! a moment ago I felt that there was nothing in the world so beautiful as to be thus in your arms. But we must do without that kind of love."

" Don't torment me, Molly ! "

" It mustn't even be torment, dearest. If so, we had better be apart. Can't we just love each other and be together, and leave the other way of love alone ? Anyone can love like *that !* "

" It is the old way of love—perhaps the only way. It is neither good nor evil in itself—it is the will of the soul that makes it holy or unholy."

" It isn't your soul that says that, Robert."

" Ah, dearest, we must leave it so. I shall take what love you can give me, and give you all I can. We belong to each other."

" Yes, indeed ! "

She took his hand in both of her own, and they sat silent in a strange happiness, shoulder by shoulder.

The moon had risen ; and a little later they passed the head of the creek, over the ancient bridge of Trenoweth. The tide was high, and the waters lay like pearly silver

among the dark hills. A moment later the lights of Boscarnon sparkled out beneath them.

" That is a better light even than the moonlight on the sea," said Robert—" the light of home."

" We are not condemned to the moonlight," said Molly, smiling ; " we have got the firelight waiting for us."

" And I wanted to set the house ablaze ? " said Robert.

" Perhaps a little," said Molly ; " but never mind—you are here, and that is enough for me."

" I will be good," said Robert ; and so they came to Menerdue.

XXXIV

IT was a happy evening, that first evening at Menerdue. They talked of local concerns, to which Mrs .Davenant contrived to communicate a breathless and august interest ; and afterwards Robert told them of his compact with Cynthia, and his last conversation with her. Mrs. Davenant heard him with astonishment, and said with the air of a judge pronouncing sentence—" Believe me, you have no cause for anxiety ! If there are no heights above, at all events there are no depths beneath. Cynthia is incapable alike of exaltation and deceit."

" I see what has taken place," said Molly. " Cynthia is coming round into the wind. I can see exactly what happened at your interview."

" I am thankful you *can't*," said Robert, smiling. " You would have thought I was possessed by a devil—I am not at all sure I was not."

" Oh, you are not as dreadful as you think, Robert—your speech betrays you."

" I wonder why one likes to be thought formidable," said Robert—" One detests it in other people—no one has any right to be feared."

" A primitive inheritance," said Mrs. Davenant. " It is what one falls back upon when one feels

' By none
Am I enough beloved.' "

" The only thing I can't bear to think of," said Molly, " is that when your guests go away, you two won't be able to take hands and pirouette. Will you really go off and sit alone in separate rooms ? "

" I hope so—in any case Cynthia wouldn't want to pirouette ; she would be sorry it was over."

" Talking of entertainments," said Mrs. Davenant, " I have an urgent invitation for all three of us to dine with the Temperleys on Friday. Shall we go ? It is about time for me to go like Wordsworth, and collect my little bits of tribute."

" Certainly," said Robert, " it would amuse me very much."

Robert and Molly sat on late that evening, and he told her more in detail about Cynthia. " It all seems such a waste—making solemn arrangements to do so many intolerable things. I'm a fairly good guest, I think ; but I'm not a good host. I'm too anxious for everyone to have a good time—not that I really care whether they have a good time—it's only a perverted sense of justice—I feel like a shopkeeper with wares to sell. And then the more people there are feeding together, the more barbarous it seems—a return to the farmyard ! "

" I suppose Cynthia doesn't care for small parties ? "

" No, she doesn't like the laying of minds together."

" But you don't feel as badly about it all as you did ? "

" No, dear, I don't—I feel a sort of excitement sometimes. It will be such a ticklish job—and so ridiculous, too, living day after day on such stiff terms with anyone."

" Oh, you will soon get the stiffness out of it."

" What would you say if I fell in love with Cynthia again, Molly ? "

" I should not care what you did as long as you did not fall out of love with me ! "

" You count on my constancy, Molly ? "

" Yes, Robert—strange to say I do ! "

They sat silent for some time, looking at the fire.

" Molly, I believe you are going to sleep."

" Yes, I'm too happy to keep awake."

" I think that to go to sleep in anyone's presence is the greatest sign of intimacy."

" Yes—it means perfect security."

" Oh, Molly, go on thinking that—think it as long as you can ! "

" But you wouldn't like it if I always yawned and drowsed when I was alone with you ? "

" I can always keep you awake. For instance, do you know how pretty you look to-night ? "

" Two little winking eyes, a useful nose, and a large earnest mouth, like a cod—that's what I see in the glass."

" That's not what *I* see, Molly ; but what do *you* see here ? "

" I thought we were coming to that ! Well, the first thing I see, is that you are yourself all over, not a head stuck on a post or a sack. Your hands and feet—they could belong to no one else ; they all speak together. I know just what you think when your left hand feels for the ring or drums on the table. You are never still, you know. Then I like the way your hair stands up stiff, like the edge of a new-cut copse. There's a little network on your forehead, which goes away when you have been here two or three days. I don't know much about the rest of your face, except your eyes—I can see a long way down in your eyes, Robert, far beyond the back of your head. Sometimes you come to the top, when you smile at me like that, but sometimes you dive far down, and I know you are tugging at something hidden. Then your lips—I don't know all the curves of them yet—there are one or two I don't like—or rather I shouldn't like them if they were anyone else's curves. But when you are kind or serious, they are beautiful."

" And this is the girl who would not let me make love to her in the car ! "

" One can't help *seeing* things, Robert."

" Then *I* shall see a thing or two, Molly. I like you best, when your eyes are cast down, as they were a moment ago—that gives me the sense of a quiet sunset, over a calm sea ; the wind silent, and the fire of day dying down. And then you open your eyes and look at me, and it is like the opening dawn in spring. You are always on the surface there, dearest Molly ; don't ever let me look at you and not see you are your post."

Presently Molly rose and stood before the fire looking down at him, and he saw the beautiful poise and balance of her figure, and the fine control of every limb.

" That was how Cynthia stood and looked a month ago, Molly, and I felt that she despised me."

" I am sure she did nothing of the sort ! She was measuring her chances of a fall, if she closed with you."

" Well, I wish Cynthia were further than I need repeat at present ! "

" You'll soon get used to her—like the figurehead of a ship."

" Molly, I believe you are actually not jealous."

" Not enough to disturb my rest, at all events."

" Yes, I am keeping you up. Go to bed, dear. I am wakeful, and shall read a book—or perhaps think about somebody."

Molly went off, and as she passed Robert, laid her hand for a moment lightly on his head. He caught it in his own and held it there.

" My blessing won't hurt you, Robert—it is more wholesome even than Cubby's."

" Don't speak his name," said Robert. " Good-night, precious one ! "

XXXV

THE two wandered half the next day by the upper waters of the creek, sometimes on the water's edge in the sea-wrack, discovering with almost childish delight the strange débris of the shore. Sometimes they threaded the oak-woods, hidden from everything but the birds that flew over, and listening to the soft sighing of the trees. Then they emerged on uplands with wide views of bare stretches of country, with its spare thin winter tints of buff and brown, and with low shadowy hills on the horizon.

Robert was charmed by the quick sight and recognition which Molly had for birds, her knowledge of their plaintive calls and cries, the muffled noises of the wood, the hedge-row plants and shrubs. He was naturally incurious of such things, and it amused him to be surprisedly instructed. "What have you been doing with your eyes all your life?" said Molly. "You seem to have seen nothing—no wonder you tie little knots in your brain!"

"Do these things help you, Molly?"

"Yes, the chatter and fault-finding all fade away when I get out into the fields and woods. I could spend my life happily strolling."

"It doesn't lead anywhere in particular, does it?"

"Oh, Robert, you have got the masculine business view. Isn't it enough to be busy and happy?"

"Is it happiness to forget that one exists?"

"One kind of happiness—there are so many."

"I'm afraid I am always thinking of the next milestone."

"It oughtn't to be like that, Robert, it ought to be a story without an end."

" It would be if I could spend my life with you, Molly."

" You would very soon be tired of me—you would soon come to the end of my interesting information."

" Not of the thing that makes it interesting."

He told her a good deal about his life as a boy and a young man, his discontent, his vexation with himself at being clumsy and awkward, his ambitions and activities. " It's a hard position for anyone," he said, " to be waiting for an inheritance. Ever since your father died, I knew that all these estates must be mine some day, and yet I was not allowed to learn how to deal with them." He talked a little about his mother, her incredible patience and sympathy. " But she stood too much between me and the world, Molly. It is a good thing to find that people will not take you at your own valuation, and to have to accommodate yourself to their valuation. My mother always believed in me, even when I did not deserve it."

" Do you think it is a bad thing to find that there is such a thing as a love that can bear anything and can't be disappointed ? " she said.

" I don't know, Molly dear. One has to learn sometime that the world isn't like that. One's only chance with the world is somehow to interest it."

" Is that worth doing ? "

" It is rather amusing. The world thinks itself so shrewd, and yet it is easily taken in."

" I don't think that is a happy game to play at."

" What do *you* find in the world, Molly ? "

" I think people are more grateful for being loved than for anything else."

" But you can't make yourself love people whom you dislike or despise ? "

" Isn't that beginning at the wrong end ? "

" Yes, that is what I want you to teach me—how to begin at the right end."

He told her also much about his present work, and the people he worked with. Molly listened breathlessly.

" It is all very wonderful and exciting," she said, " but it makes me feel a little timid—with all that going on, what do you find to interest you at Menerdue ? "

" The real thing, Molly ! Life, and not the puppet-show ; sincerity, and not the game of bluff—a hundred other beautiful things."

" Robert, you are very incomprehensible. Don't *any* of you politicians trust each other ? "

" I'm afraid we don't think much about each other. In a game of cricket, you think about other people's skill, not about their virtues and intellectual preferences."

They had sat down in a little hollow beside the road, sheltered from the road by a thorn-thicket, to eat a few sandwiches.

" I never saw anyone so indifferent to food as you are," Robert said.

" I like food so much," said Molly, " that I don't care what I eat—it is all so delicious. But I like its results still better. In the last half-hour I have been thinking that I shouldn't at all like to live the sort of life you live. Now I suddenly think it would be good fun."

" There," said Robert, " you see how hopeless it is to take anything for granted : eating makes me sad and haughty."

" And am I changed, too ? " said Molly.

" You are a little country miss," said Robert.

" Not an angel of light and love ? "

" I never said that."

" Oh, Robert, how can you use a poor maiden so ? "

They drank from a little well beside the thicket, Robert

lit a cigarette and stretched himself luxuriously upon the grass. " Now you must let me sleep, Molly," he said. " I'm not used to all this exercise and fresh air, and I shall wake up with all my illusions revived."

" Yes, do," said Molly." You know what I told you about the little network in your forehead. I have noticed that coming on this morning. Go to sleep and smooth it out, dear."

" I am getting to be rather afraid of your eyes," said Robert, " but now I shall be defenceless, and you can examine me at your leisure, and note all the ravages of time and trouble."

In a moment he was asleep ; and the next half-hour was a strange one for Molly. There he lay, the man whom in the world she loved the best, his spirit sealed within his closed eyelids, his hands relaxed. He looked so boyish as he lay that Molly felt him to be as young as herself—she could not believe that he was more than ten years older. She had only known him for a few weeks, and yet he was nearer to her than all the people she had known all her life. What was this wonderful power that drew two spirits together and so revealed them to each other ? As he lay there, all that was mysterious and unknown in him seemed to fade away, not to matter. It filled her with an almost terrifying sense of happiness to know that there was nothing that she would refuse him, not a thought of her heart she would not tell him. His deep unhappiness, which even in their talk had again and again peeped out uneasily from its lair, seemed to her infinitely pathetic. He seemed so blocked and thwarted and confined by life, compared with her own freedom ; and yet she realized that her freedom would be of little use to him, that he must live among politics and diplomacies, and that his life, so far as could be foreseen, must be devoted to spin-

ning this endless and weary web of affairs. Yet she would not have taken him out of that, even if she could ; though it gave her a startling sense of power to be sure, as she was, that a few words of hers, a few caresses, would cause him to fling aside everything that he might join his life to hers. That, however, she had no real temptation to do ; it was a desperate remedy, only to be used after many struggles, and if his unhappiness became too great to bear. Molly took a strange vow to herself in that hushed hour, while a robin sang his sad spirited song in the brake, and the sun went slowly down over the western shoulder of the wold. There was no sacrifice she would not make for him, and her immediate sacrifice was to let him love her with a quiet love, and not to let the tumultous rush of passion awake in his spirit.

Robert stirred in his sleep, opened bewildered eyes, closed them again, muttered something under his breath, and then opened them wide again with a dawning smile on Molly, who knelt on the grass beside him.

" Ah ! the watching angel ? " said Robert, " whom I would take and hug if I dared ! "

He held out his hands, and Molly caught them in her own and helped him to rise.

" Molly, you are as strong as a young tiger-cat," he said. " Heaven forbid that I should ever have a tussle with you ! "

" We *must* be off ! " said Molly. " Look at the sun ; and mother is to meet us at Brendon Bridge at four. It will take us half an hour to get there, and it is nearly four now."

" Bully ! " said Robert, yawning and stretching himself. " You don't expect a feudal proprietor to run on his own estate, like a common man ! "

They hurried down the steep path towards the creek.

" What will your mother be doing all this time ? " he said.

" She will say she has been meditating."

" And Parker," said Robert, " will be looking for mushrooms. That is a consuming passion of his."

Mrs. Davenant greeted them with a sedate relief. " I felt sure that one of you had broken a leg," she said. " It is my one weakness, to imagine accidents. But I determined to sit here, like Casabianca—is that a person or a place ?—or like the frog-footman, on and off, for days and days."

" We've had a splendid walk," said Molly.

" Don't tell me where you went," said Mrs. Davenant. " I can't bear listening to such things. What did you talk about ? "

" Everything, I think," said Molly, " till Robert fell asleep."

" Very gallant, no doubt," said Mrs. Davenant, " and did you sleep too ? "

" No, I wept, like a true woman."

When they got in, there were letters for Robert. " A dreadful world ! " he cried. " Here am I blowsed by wind and sun, dizzy with fresh air, and I have to write letters and go out to dinner. This is your idea of a holiday ! "

XXXVI

THEY arrived at Nan-Zephron in the calm of the evening; the sky down in the west showed a pure translucent green among the sombre trees, and the firelight glowing in the half-lit rooms was very comforting.

Mr. and Mrs. Temperley came to meet them in the hall, apologising for having no party,—" just a fusion of two family groups." Molly had been speculating on the way up if the Squire would address Robert as " Helford " to his face, but Robert assured her that in the presence of ladies he would not venture on such a liberty.

Mr. Temperley was audibly and visibly afraid of Mrs. Davenant, and his terror took the form of infinite periphrasis. " I must not," said Mrs. Davenant, " ask you to construct that beautiful sentence again, Squire, but I was so much engrossed in the texture that I am afraid I overlooked the design." Mr. Temperley shivered at the reproof, which was delivered in Mrs. Davenant's best Elizabethan manner, but good Mrs. Temperley cut the knot by saying, " All John means is that he is grateful to you for coming. I told him not to make it all too like an address."

" Ah," said Mrs. Davenant, " but that is just what I find so admirable and unusual in the Squire's conversation —that it has a finish about it which is denied to a mere improvisatore like myself."

The evening, Robert thought, excellent as the dinner was, and beautiful as was the great panelled room in which they were sitting, was lacking in spontaneity. Molly, he felt, was their salvation. Mr. Temperley thought fit to

indulge in long apologies to Robert for being found in possession of his guest's house. " I assure you, Squire," interposed Molly, " Robert is quite unworthy of it. He is just as happy in London ; he cannot tell the difference between a redshank and a ringed plover, and when I pointed out to him the beautiful curve of the Polcrello headland, which *you* showed me, he said it was all very well in its place."

Mr. Temperley was delighted. He offered personally to conduct Robert over the whole estate, and show him all the view-points—" a sadly commercial world ! The Germans are ahead of us there—they call them *Blicke*, I believe—an admirably emphatic word which expresses a certain swift finality of vision, as when one slips a bolt home."

" May I have a menu and a pencil," said Mrs. Davenant, " I really must make a note of that last expression."

" Oh, Mrs. Davenant," said the kindly Mrs. Temperley, laughing, " you mustn't turn John's head ! He has, a partial wife may confess, a great knack of nice phrases, but I am sure you could do quite as well yourself."

" I am neither a de Stael nor a Sibyl," said Mrs. Davenant, majestically.

Robert caught Molly's eye across the table, and flashed a silent congratulation to her on the way in which her marionettes were behaving.

When the ladies withdrew, Mr. Temperley proposed an adjournment to his library ; " the incense of our cigars is a more appropriate *parfum* for the backs of my books than for the portraits—forgive the coarseness of the allusion—of your ancestors."

" Oh," said Robert, looking round him with surprise—" are these *my* ancestors ? I had supposed them to be yours."

" You surprise me," said Mr. Temperley. " No, I am *bourgeois*—I have not the *point of honour*."

" That's a matter of temperament," said Robert, " not a question of inheritance. I am afraid that the Davenants in the church were not the most scrupulous of men."

When they were at last alone together, Mr. Temperley's manner underwent a marked change. It was with a painful hesitation that he said, " Lord Helford, there is a matter about which I think it is a duty—a friendly though painful office—to speak to you. Let me first say that I would gladly have avoided mentioning it, for it is a matter of extreme delicacy—and yet as an old friend of Mrs. Davenant and the dear Molly, and as one who feels to the full the privilege of occupying—on very generous terms—your family mansion, I conceive it to be a task which, in default of a better interpreter, falls to my lot to discharge. Have I your leave to speak ? "

" By all means," said Robert, wondering what the innermost kernel of this very elaborate nut would prove to be.

" In such a situation," said Mr. Temperley, " fewest words are best. I regret to say, Lord Helford, that my wife has become aware of some singularly distressing rumours affecting the fair fame of our beloved Molly and yourself. My affectionate interest in that dear young lady must be my excuse for approaching you on the subject."

" Please don't think it necessary to make excuses," said Robert, sitting up in his chair and looking at Mr. Temperley with a disconcerting sternness—" let me have the truth as plainly and directly as possible."

" Well, then," said Mr. Temperley, very uncomfortable and nervous, in words which were hardly up to his æsthetic standard, " considerable scandal seems to be afoot as to your own relations with our dear Molly—no doubt mere trivial indiscretions, mere cousinly endear-

ments—but in malicious hands, considering that you are a married man, capable of a somewhat sinister interpretation."

" You mean," said Robert, very sharply, " that I am supposed to be making love to Molly?"

" That is the gravamen," said Mr. Temperley, relieved of the duty of elaborate expression, " there is talk of midnight assignations and lover-like advances; it is all felt to be more invidious, as you are unhappily separated from your wife, for reasons that are no doubt capable of serious misconstruction."

" But I am *not* separated from my wife," said Robert. " She has returned from abroad, and I join her in London next month."

" You relieve me inexpressibly," said Mr. Temperley, rising from his chair. " I felt sure of it—the innocent privileges of blood-relations are not to be misapprehended as the guilty familiarities of illicit attachments."

" Squire," said Robert, " your intentions are obviously so good that I will pardon the very disagreeable suggestiveness of your remarks. Molly, I will say plainly, is very dear to me, as dear as a sister! I am a lonely man and not a very happy one. I have no home of my own, and Menerdue is a home to me. The insinuations you have made are so untrue and so offensive that I must ask you without delay to give me the name of Mrs. Temperley's informant, that I may confront him."

" You have every right to ask," said Mr. Temperley; " it was our friend Mr. Cuthbert—a worthy man, but in his anxiety for the pure morals of his flock, betrayed perhaps into an undue misinterpretation of trivial phenomena."

" This is too much," said Robert. " Mr. Cuthbert is in love with Molly himself, and has made the most odious advances to her."

" You shock me inexpressibly," said Mr. Temperley.

" I will not stand it for a moment," said Robert. " I will see Mr. Cuthbert to-morrow, and shall lay the matter before the Bishop."

" I hope," said Mr. Temperley, " that you will not be too hard on the unfortunate man. He has done a great deal of good work here, though on lines which, as a philosopher, I am bound to disapprove. He is not merely a back-biter. He has an undue anxiety about what he no doubt calls the cure of souls."

" Oblige me," said Robert, " by not mentioning this matter to anyone."

" Of course not," said Mr. Temperley, " I confess it has weighed much upon my mind. I trust I have not offended by my recital."

" You have behaved like a gentleman," said Robert, " and a very real friend. I feel nothing but gratitude to you for intervening in a matter which I can well understand must have been a revolting subject of contemplation."

" A thousand thanks," said Mr. Temperley, " and if I can be of any further assistance, pray command me."

" You can," said Robert; " I would rather not go alone to the wretched man's house. I am not sure I could control my temper. But if you could ask him to call on you, let us say to-morrow, at four o'clock, and allow me to see him in your presence, it would be a great favour."

" By all means," said Mr. Temperley, " and I regard your confidence as a real though distressing privilege."

They rejoined the ladies; and the good Squire imagining, not without some reason, that Robert might be disinclined to talk, monopolised the conversation to such an extent, that Mrs. Davenant, who preferred a little rapier practice with her host, was fairly nonplussed. Even Molly was unable to obtain a hearing.

They went off early. " The poor dear Squire ! " Mrs. Davenant said, settling herself comfortably into the fur rug, " you have really quite gone to his head, Robert ! I never heard him talk such interminable nonsense ! You must have paid him some very diplomatic compliments."

" No," said Robert, " we had a very rational conversation."

" And you told him so ? " said Mrs. Davenant. " No wonder he was intoxicated ! The word rational cannot often have been applied to him in public—and by the holder of an ancient barony ! He will be in bed to-morrow, and possibly delirious—it was coming on to-night."

Molly was very silent. When they reached home, Mrs. Davenant retired " worn out with intellectual paralysis."

Robert went off to the study ; a moment later Molly knocked at the door and came in. She said " Do you want to go to bed at once ? " and stood for a moment on the hearthrug facing Robert who was sitting smoking in a deep chair. He shook his head.

" I am afraid you had a trying talk to-night ? "

" Yes, Molly."

" May I know ? "

" Yes, you had better know. Mr. Cuthbert has been making mischief about us."

" Mischief ? "

" Yes. I am a heartless *roué*, who has driven my virtuous wife away by misdeeds—and now I have been making love to an innocent girl."

" Do you mind this, Robert ? "

" I am very angry."

" Don't go and have a scene with Cubby."

" I wish you wouldn't call him Cubby—the man is a dangerous brute."

" No, dear ! He is half-mad with jealousy ; he is

ashamed of the way he has behaved—and it takes the form of anxiety about his flock. He isn't a bad man—he is a good man whose mind is poisoned."

" You take it very calmly."

" He can't do any real harm, Robert. Now that I know about it, I can put it all right in the village."

" He has been telling tales all round."

" Yes, I expect so. It was stupid of me not to have seen it. Aunty Pel was very mysterious a few days ago, but I was thinking about something else, and didn't pay much heed."

" Oh, Molly, what a lot of trouble I seem to bring on everyone I have to do with."

" Robert, what nonsense ! You have opened the door of heaven to me, you have given mother plenty to think about. Mr. and Mrs. Temperley adore you, the people here all like you, you are going to make Cynthia happy. How can you talk as you do ? "

" It's about you that I was thinking."

" Dear Robert, I can take care of myself here—the only thing is *how* to do it. If I said exactly what I felt—because I quite admit that Mr. Cuthbert is very provoking—the men are quite capable of going up and breaking his windows. I don't want to smash him—I want to let him down easily."

" I am to see him to-morrow at Nan-Zephron."

Molly put her two hands on the two arms of Robert's chair and bent down towards him.

" Promise me you won't bully him, Robert."

Robert put his hands up and took her face in them. " Anything you like."

" Promise me, Robert."

" Well, I promise."

" One more thing—promise me you won't worry about

this : there's nothing in it. If I don't worry, why should you ? "

" Molly, I can't knuckle down to this brute."

" He isn't a brute."

" Isn't he to be punished ? "

" He will punish himself—if you won't promise, I shall go off to bed."

He caught her by the wrists and held her ; " Yes, I promise everything. I'll tell him how much I respect him, and what a charitable parish priest he is."

" That won't do."

" What may I do then ? "

" You may be just a little angry—but treat it as stupid nonsense. You know what to say better than I can tell you. If you make a fuss and take it seriously, he will think he was right."

" Molly, you are as wise as you are good. Of course ; I see perfectly. Now sit down, there's a dear,"—he pulled up a chair beside his own—" and let us talk about something else."

" Robert, you are adorable—I didn't know a man could be so sensible. It's no good beating Cubby—he is like an india-rubber ball—he rebounds ; the thing to do is to run a little pin in."

Robert laughed. Then he said, " How dare you behave to me, miss, as you have done to-night ? You have no respect for age or sex."

Molly laughed comfortably. " You did look rather formidable when I came in to-night ; you looked all crumpled up, and as if you were possessed by the devil ; but I knew it would be all right."

" The devil has gone out anyhow."

XXXVII

ROBERT presented himself at Nan-Zephron shortly before four o'clock on the following day and found Mr. Temperley in a mood of high solemnity. He had given much thought to what he called " the order of the proceedings." He had also drafted what he called a preparatory statement, but to this, Robert, after thanking him for his kind interest in the affair, respectfully demurred.

" It mustn't, I think, be too judicial," said Robert. " If you would kindly allow me to say to Mr. Cuthbert that I had asked you as a friend and an independent witness to be present while I asked him to substantiate certain statements affecting myself and Molly, which he had made, it would be the most natural opening."

" You do me too much honour," said Mr. Temperley, with a little bow.

" You need not be afraid," said Robert, " that I mean to begin by upbraiding him. I propose just to inquire exactly what he said, and on what grounds he based it."

" You are quite right," said Mr. Temperley, " I shall be present as an assessor ; while you will allow me to say that the only comfort I shall derive from this deplorable episode, is that it has secured to me from yourself the designation of ' friend '—of which privilege I shall endeavour to show myself worthy."

At this moment the culprit entered the room. Mr. Temperley advanced and shook hands with him. The presence, however, of Robert, standing in front of the fireplace in silence, produced an obviously unpleasant

effect on Mr. Cuthbert. He kept his eyes uneasily fixed upon Robert. Mr. Temperley made a magnificent gesture with his right hand in the direction of Robert, as though he were introducing him to a public meeting.

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Robert, in a tone the mildness of which surprised the Squire, " Mr. Temperley has kindly given me the opportunity of meeting you here to-day to inquire into some comments which you seem to have made to Mrs. Temperley and I believe in other quarters, about myself and my cousin, Miss Davenant. Would you mind telling me exactly what you did say ? "

Mr. Cuthbert took hold of the back of a chair beside him, and leaned heavily upon it. " I am afraid I cannot recollect the exact words, Lord Helford," he said.

" I don't mind about the exact words," said Robert ; " the substance of them will do."

Mr. Cuthbert glanced from Robert to Mr. Temperley and back again. Then in a husky tone, he said, " I hardly know by what precise right you interrogate me, Lord Helford ? "

" Oh, that will not do," said Robert, " I can quite understand that you are reluctant to repeat the words to me—but if you thought right to make such comments to Mrs. Temperley, you cannot maintain that I have not the right to ask you to repeat them—in fact, it seems to me that in your position, the natural course would have been to have spoken to me first on the subject."

Mr. Cuthbert put up one hand to his lips, and became very pale. " My communication," he said, " to Mrs. Temperley may have been indiscreet, but it was of a confidential character—it was not intended to be repeated."

" Come, sir," said Mr. Temperley, in unexpectedly truculent tones—" this is unpardonable ! You make certain statements to my wife prejudicial to my friend,

Lord Helford. On being informed of this, I at once felt it my painful duty to mention them to Lord Helford. If these statements were correct, you have only to justify yourself by repeating them to Lord Helford. I hardly know what your code of honour as a clergyman may be, but I imagine that your sacred character increases rather than diminishes your responsibility."

" I have a responsibility to my flock," said the unhappy Mr. Cuthbert, " which I cannot feel that I owe to Lord Helford."

" In fact," said Robert, smiling, " I am the wolf and you are the shepherd. The shepherd is not bound to repeat to the wolf the warnings which he gives to his flock ? "

" After all," said Mr. Temperley, " I may at least remind you of a fact which my friend Lord Helford has a natural delicacy about mentioning, that he at least is the owner of the entire parish."

" Yes, I am afraid I must be considered to be a member of your flock," said Robert, " however unworthy of the privilege I may be—can you not bring yourself to regard me as a lost sheep ? "

" Your irony is wasted on me, Lord Helford," said Mr. Cuthbert in a low voice, with a strange dry whistling sound about it. " My duty is to guard those whom I deem to be the lambs committed to my care."

" Then, with all due apologies to Mr. Temperley," said Robert, " you feared that my influence would prove demoralizing to Mrs. Temperley ? "

" I had other souls in view," said Mr. Cuthbert. " I plead my spiritual privileges."

" Very well," said Robert, " as you have not the courage or the decency to speak, I must assist you. I understand that you accused me, as a married man, of discreditable

and possibly immoral relations with my cousin, Miss Davenant. That at least was the impression you conveyed. These abominable insinuations I contemptuously repudiate. You plead your spiritual privileges to utter the most reckless and unfounded slanders, without a shred of evidence. The Bishop has at any rate the power to deprive you of these privileges ; and as you will neither justify your statement nor retract it, I shall put the case in his hands."

There was a silence, and Mr. Cuthbert in a voice hardly human, said, " Lord Helford, I cannot believe that you will do me this dishonour. Thus much will I say, that on a certain night in Nan-Zephron wood, when you thought yourself unobserved, I saw the demeanour of yourself and Miss Davenant, the demeanour, to my mind, of avowed lovers, and I could draw but one deduction."

Robert looked at Mr. Cuthbert with a cold disdain. "And if one of your flock had observed the demeanour of yourself to Miss Davenant on a certain afternoon by Mornay Creek, what deduction would he have been justified in drawing ? The word ' lover ' would, I think, have needed to be replaced by a plainer word."

" I do not defend myself," said Mr. Cuthbert, in a hollow voice, " for my behaviour on that occasion—though Miss Davenant misinterpreted my intentions. But that at least was the outcome of honest passion ; and further, I was free to plead with her without stain of sin—but you, Lord Helford "—and Mr. Cuthbert's face contracted horribly, while he raised his right hand in a denunciatory gesture—" you come here, a man bound by law and sacrament to another, you stole your young cousin's heart away from me—whose dearest hope it had been to claim her for a spiritual union, such as never even entered into your false and corrupt heart ; by blandishments and

incitements you won her love! You cannot deny it. I at least have repented of my momentary error—but your heart is black with unshriven sin. You have exiled your lawful wife from your home, and you seek to supply her place by the infamous corruption of a pure and innocent heart. Deny it if you can."

The demoniacal passion in Mr. Cuthbert's face was horrible to witness. Mr. Temperley turned away and went to the window. Robert remained outwardly calm.

" The most charitable opinion I can frame of you, Mr. Cuthbert," he said, " is that you are literally demented. I have not said one word or syllable of unlawful love to my cousin. There is much affection between us, and I do not disguise it. But consider what a tissue of falsehood you have woven about the affair. What if I tell you that through Miss Davenant's advice, I have become reconciled with my wife, and that Mrs. Davenant is aware of everything that has ever passed between Molly and myself."

Mr. Cuthbert gazed at him for a moment as white as ashes ; he groped his way to a sofa and sat down, covering his face with his hands.

Mr. Temperley hurried up. " Lord Helford," he said, " you have said enough. This is no place for you. Leave this unfortunate man to me—my wife and I will see him attended to. Pray leave us ; and if I can prevail with him, I will try to bring him to a better frame of mind."—He wrung Robert's hand and led him to the door.

XXXVIII

AS Robert came out from the great gates of Nan-Zephron, a figure in a dark cloak flitted out from the wood and came to him. " *You* here ? " he said, in a tone of delighted surprise. " Yes," said Molly. " I did not feel sure what sort of a time you would have with Cubby, and I felt too restless to sit and wonder, so I came up here—and I have been rewarded by a perfect concert of owls ! But I am afraid that things have not gone well."

" He was perfectly hopeless," said Robert. " He maintained that it was his sacred duty to warn his flock against backsliders, and an even more sacred duty not to tell the backsliders what he had said."

" It must be very confusing," said Molly, " to be two people inside one body—a priest and an ordinary man ! "

" Yes, but it has its conveniences," said Robert ; " because whichever of the two you refer to can always put the responsibility on the other. It's a case of Spenlow and Jorkins."

" If I only knew who they were ! " said Molly—" but I agree that the two ought to have more or less the same principles."

" Of course, it ends in the most infernal hypocrisy," said Robert. " When it becomes your sacred *duty* to behave like a cad and a sneak, there can be no further argument."

" Well, it doesn't matter," said Molly, " I can put things all right here. You aren't going to make a fuss with the Bishop, are you ? It seems to me that the more people you tell, and the more seriously you treat it, the worse it

is for everybody. I suppose it is partly our fault, too, for being so careless."

"It makes me rather wretched," said Robert, "to go about feeling that the people we meet may be thinking evil of us—it just takes the edge off one's pleasure."

"I suppose we were rather unconventional?"

"I don't think we were even that."

"Well, it's rather hard not to behave as you feel."

"It's all rather miserable, Molly; the joy of this place was the feeling of utter freedom—of being in Paradise."

"We ought to have remembered the serpent, Robert."

"He seemed so harmless and picturesque."

"I expect that is what Eve said."

"Anyhow, Molly, out they had to go."

"We are not going to be cast out, Robert—we have only got to be a little more discreet."

"I shall never feel at my ease here while that ruffian is sneaking about, and peeping round corners. The mischief is that he is infernally jealous, and the priest part of him thinks he has a *right* to you."

"Let me try what I can do with him, before you try to get him turned out."

"You are very careful of his feelings, Molly."

"You see, I know how much he has done for the whole place."

Robert shrugged his shoulders. He had been thoroughly upset by the interview. Mr. Cuthbert's tenacity and self-deception, and his evidently quite unchanged belief that it was his duty to make mischief, roused Robert's fury. His fertile imagination drew out a long perspective of Molly and himself walking cheerfully about Polcrello, and Mr. Cuthbert dodging from tree to tree to overhear what they said. He saw plainly enough that Mr. Cuthbert was of the fanatical type, a man who under no circumstances

could admit that he was wrong, but who would feel bound to attribute any misfortune of his own to the wicked and malignant intrigues of others. The cloud grew and blackened Robert's mind; he saw his innocent and delightful partnership with Molly tarnished with malignant spite and slimy defamation.

"Robert, do you *really* mind all this?"

"Yes, dear, I do. It's very silly, no doubt."

"But don't you *know* that you will wake up the day after to-morrow, and see it was all nonsense?"

"Probably—but at this moment I only feel that my doll is stuffed with sawdust."

"What can I do to chase it all away?"

"You can come and sit with me while I work, dearest Molly, and tell me some stories."

"I wish I had more accomplishments—what do men like when they are feeling depressed?"

"What does anyone like under such circumstances?"

"And all this about poor Cubby? If you only knew how little anyone here cares what he says."

"But, of course, it was he who put up Cynthia to the whole thing. There's no stopping these people; they are the worms that eat out the inside of beams. If you make matters public, you only increase gossip; if you don't, they think you are conscience-stricken. The way he behaved to you, for instance—it is all so vague and intangible."

"I think I could do something with him, Robert. But the best way of all is simply not to care."

"But I *do* care, Molly! These spontaneous feelings can't be argued with. You might as well try to argue me out of caring for you."

XXXIX

MOLLY sat with him while he worked at his letters. But he was impatient and ill-at-ease all the evening, and Molly felt remarkably helpless. It was inconceivable to her that anyone should really resent the idea of being discussed, or even misinterpreted. But in the next few days she became aware that some morbid little weakness in Robert had really been let loose. He would not walk through the village, he would not go to church ; and he lost to a certain extent the overflowing readiness of talk and interest which had been so delightful to her. She began to feel the lack of knowledge of Robert's background of life, the colleagues he worked with, the houses he frequented. She did not like to question him about it all, but she became aware, too, that her own little experiences of life lost their point and pungency with Robert in so unreceptive a mood.

And then, too, the shadow of the coming experiment began to creep over him.

" It seems so hard," he said once, suddenly, " to feel so harmless, and on the whole benevolent—to want things to be quiet and comfortable, and yet to find oneself the centre of disturbances, which one didn't intend to arouse, and yet is quite unable to allay."

" You are not as harmless as you think, Robert."

" I never start a squabble—I never interfere with anyone."

" No—but you make people want you to like them, you make them desire to please you. Don't you know that you make people jealous ? "

" Indeed, I don't know anything of the kind ! What shall I hear next ? "

" You are unaware of it all—and that is one of the things that make it so attractive—you have got *charm*, Robert—and that is a thing over which people will always fight."

" I'm afraid you are engaged in sugaring some pill for me."

" No, dearest Robert—it isn't anything of the kind. You talk about these ' disturbances ' as if everyone wanted to annoy you. The truth is that you are so quick and perceptive, and so much want people round you to be comfortable, as you call it, that you put out your charm without knowing it—and then the dullest people feel that you must be personally interested in them—and then the mischief begins."

" You mean that I say more than I feel ? "

" No, but you give a sovereign where a shilling would do—and the person who gets the sovereign feels that you *must* be interested."

" I give pledges that I can't redeem ? "

" Robert, you are wickedly ingenious to-day. Won't you see what I mean ? These last few days you have been anxious and troubled. Don't you know that I would do anything in the world to give you a moment's relief and pleasure ? Anything to get the sunshine back."

" Dear Molly, have I been so stupid ? "

" Not more stupid than the sun when it retires behind a cloud."

" I don't know what to say. May I say that I now find loving people the most delightful occupation in the world —I haven't given way often—but that I don't think I care much for simply being loved."

" It bores you ? "

" Yes, I think it bores me ; it means all sorts of exactions. I don't want people to fall in love with me at all."

" Haven't you any pity ? "

" Isn't that rather melodramatic ? When I am with people, I want them to enjoy it, I suppose because it makes me more at my ease ; but in nine cases out of ten, I don't want to see them again."

" I don't think you are really interested in people."

" But, Molly, you are much more enchanting, and you take far more trouble than I do to make people comfortable."

" Yes, but I only go to people's hearts," said Molly, " and they pity me—you go to their heads, and they admire you."

" Well, it all seems to me very uncomfortable," said Robert. " It fills the air with cobwebs, it makes everything stuffy. Can't one dance without treading on people's toes ? "

" They *want* you to tread on their toes, Robert ; and then they have the pleasure of forgiving you."

" How truly awful ! " said Robert.

" Don't tell me you are not pleased by what I have been saying."

" It interests me to hear it—but I don't like the thing when it happens. It is pleasant to be told that people fall in love with one, just as it is pleasant to be told that one is formidable—but when one finds oneself being lumberingly adored, or when one finds oneself being feared, it is very unpleasant indeed. Can't we do without all these peppery emotions ? "

" Poor old boy ! " said Molly.

" If the result of mild civility is that one instantly becomes everyone's private property, the world is indeed out of joint."

" Anyhow, I don't claim you, Robert—don't be afraid of that."

" And yet you are the only person whose right I don't dispute."

XL

IN these days Mrs. Davenant was more cryptic than ever. She sat at meals with her eyes fixed on infinity.

One evening after tea, Molly was going off to the study to which Robert had already retired to write, when her mother stopped her, and indicating a chair, said, " I see very little of you in these days, Molly."

" Yes," said Molly, " I'm sorry it is so—but Robert seems to like me to be with him—he is rather overshadowed with the idea of the new arrangement, I think."

" He depends very much on you—too much, I think, both for his own sake and for yours."

" What is one to do, mother ? I can't bear to see him so depressed."

" It's very difficult, Molly. What will you do when he goes away ? "

" Think about him, mother ; and wish I were with him."

" But what will *he* do, if things don't go well ? "

" I believe they *will* go quite smoothly—and if he finds that, he will revive again and be very happy. He is tremendously dependent on atmosphere."

" He doesn't seem to find this atmosphere very invigorating just now—I can't help thinking that you spoil him—what do you talk about ? "

" Oh, anything that turns up."

" I am afraid I have made a great mistake about all this business, Molly. I ought not to have allowed it—I ought to have taken you off somewhere."

" You could hardly have done that ! We should have

been bored to death abroad, you and I. Besides, the mischief was done ; and still less could we have turned Robert out into the cold."

" Do you wish things had turned out differently, Molly ? Have you any misgivings ? "

" None whatever, mother. It has been the best thing that ever happened to me in my life—it has opened a door for me into an entirely different region—my life is a wholly different thing ; and I have loved Robert better than ever in these few overshadowed days. Whatever happens I shall always be grateful for this time."

" But you aren't content with things as they are, Molly ? "

" Of course, I wish that Robert was free, mother ; but I don't think about that. And I believe that he is doing right in trying this experiment—though he is doing it mainly for your sake and mine."

" But look ahead a little, Molly ! What will come of it all ? "

" I haven't an idea, mother—and I don't really care. I don't ask to see the distant scene."

" Do you think he is as much attached to you as ever ? "

" It's hard to say. Robert is like a child—he can only think of one thing at a time. I am quite different, as you know. I have a little castle of my own into which I can retire—and I make a series of rushes in different directions. He isn't like that. One emotion is all he can manage—it possesses him. Just now I don't think he cares about anyone very much."

" But that is all rather hopeless, surely ? If he could spend his life with you, I think he would be very faithful. He would depend on you for everything ; but now if he leaves you, will he ever come back ? You can't accept the position of just being a pleasant change for him."

" Mother, it isn't like that. I don't pretend that Robert is perfect ; but I would do anything to help him. It isn't a question of argument, or of adding up his qualities—his happiness is mine ; my life is his."

" You make me very unhappy. I feel that your life may be sacrificed to his."

" He is welcome to it. It is useless to imagine what might have happened. I am sure you understand, mother. This has made me, I won't say *happy*, because that is altogether too feeble a word. It has given me something to live for, something I could gladly die for, if there were need. All the old life, with the dear funny little people, seems to me like a village far down in the plain seen from a hill through a telescope. I can't believe I was ever contented with that. The only thing it hasn't changed is what I feel about *you*, mother."

" I don't know what to say, Molly. I have had more experience than you, and very sad experience. One *can't* live at these heights."

" I don't know—it is worth trying."

Mrs. Davenant shook her head. Molly put her arms round her and kissed her cheek. " I'm not neglecting you, mother darling," she said ; " I'm just *busy*."

XLI

THE days crept on. Sometimes Robert had a letter from Cynthia; but they were mostly about small points. Robert showed the letters to Molly. "She keeps severely to business, you see!"

"I don't know what you want her to do."

"I want her to hold her tongue. Molly, this is going to be awful—a mirthless comedy!"

That day he and Molly motored out into the country. It was very still weather, and the night before there had been a sharp frost. They went across the bare uplands beyond Polcrello. There was a faint opalescent mist in the air, and the westering sun had turned the clouds to a pale gold; they passed beside a little marsh, with the dry sedges standing up stiffly out of the water, which was as still as a mirror, and all suffused with the same cold gleam. A low heathery hill, Caerwythenack, rose gently up to meet the mist. Presently they were passing through woods, ill-kept tangles of briars and thorns, with a few old grey-limbed spruces towering out of the undergrowth. Molly pointed out that there were many fallen trees lying in the coarse-grown grass, trees which had been blown down a year or two before. Then they dipped sharply into a small valley. Here there were many big leafless elms, all hung with a wonderful tracery of rime; and now the sinking sun began to redden and to flash with chilly fires.

Molly begged Robert to get out of the car. She wanted to show him a house here. Robert was listless and unwilling to stir; but they left Parker with the car, and walked along a lane, deeply sunk in the rising pastures,

with great tree-roots sprawled out from the sides of the cutting.

In a few minutes they came out into a small hamlet of grey stone houses, very old and crumbling ; and turning again into a wood, they presently were standing in front of the Manor. It was now a farm, Molly told Robert. But it had evidently been a house of considerable size, a long grey granite battlemented front, with gables and deep-set windows. The house stood so silent in the darkening air, the cornices and parapets just touched with rime, that it seemed to Robert one of the most ghostly sights he had ever seen. Very little of it was inhabited ; but on one side among the trees was a large old fishpond, covered with weed, and beyond that a very small and ancient church, the tower covered thickly with a pale green lichen.

" Is it seen with the eye ? " said Robert.

" Yes, Robert ; in the summer this is a very delicious place, full of singing-birds and humming bees."

" It looks like something frozen to death to-day."

" It is only waiting, Robert—it knows how to wait. I'm not sure it doesn't like waiting best."

" Oh, Molly dearest, how wretched you make me when you talk like this ! "

He put his hand through her arm and drew her close to him. " Don't say I mustn't do that," he said. " I'm not making love to you—I haven't got the heart even for that —I just want to hold hands."

" Oh, Robert dearest," said Molly, " don't let us lose hold.—There's no need to do that—we haven't come to the edge."

" I know how intolerable I have been," said Robert. " I don't seem to be able to lift up my head. I seem to be drifting away from you and everything into a sort of dark

cave—one by one the lights are put out ; and I haven't even the strength to enjoy the time with you that I might enjoy. What am I going back to ? Work which wearies me, the seeing of crowds of people I don't want to see, a statue of a wife at best at the other end of the table . . . it's very weak and self-indulgent, but I can't live, Molly, without interests and affection and hopes ;—and then here I see house after house where you and I could be so happy together ; here in this frozen place ; think what it would be to come in out of the dark and cold and to know that you were waiting for me."

" Robert darling, you know you couldn't go on like that. You need the stir of the world and big, difficult, delicate things to do ; bad as it is to go back, it is better than loitering here would be. Of course, I could find things to do ; I should want to know all about the people and the children and even the animals—pottering about and making friends ! But that isn't enough for you. You don't want to rest ; it is that quick imagination of yours which deceives you."

" It's rather a cruel place, this world of ours."

" Fear is a deadly thing, Robert—it is fear which is deceiving you. You won't break down. You are very tough and strong."

" But if everything were to go to pieces in my hands ? "

" Then I would come to help you, if I could. You need not be afraid of that. If you could not get on, and if you really summoned me, I would come to you. But I don't believe it would help either of us."

" Molly you give me courage—almost life : but it tortures me to leave you ; it tortures me to be with you and yet to be no nearer—and to behave as I have been doing. That is worse than all."

They walked slowly onwards, and as the dusk came on

the white-outlined tracery of the trees became more and more delicate and ethereal.

" The beauty of it all ! " said Robert, " yet to-day I can only see it—I cannot feel it." The smoke of the Manor chimney went up into the still air, and the firelight began to glow and twinkle behind a mullioned window. An old labourer with an axe on his shoulder and a bundle of wood came slowly out of the wood. He looked curiously at them and touched his hat, wishing them good-evening in his high thin voice.

" To stumble home," said Robert, " mindful of nothing but food and sleep—that would be the happiest thing in the world."

" And what am *I* to do meanwhile ? " said Molly : and then they dived into the darkness of the lane, where the tree-roots glimmered like writhing snakes, and were soon gliding away across the bare fields to Menerdue.

XLII

ROBERT had gone. The grey, gliding, softly-purring car was engulfed in the wood, and Molly turned back into the house with her mother to pick up life as she best could. The last few days had passed to no one's satisfaction. Robert had been more and more silent as the day approached, and there were times when nothing but his courtesy had saved him from an outburst of irritability. He had been more and more dependent upon Molly's company, but even so, she racked her brains in vain to find subjects of conversation.

The whole thing had been a strange revelation to Molly. She had never come in contact with anyone with such emphatic and disconcerting variations of mood. Robert's helpless and inextricable depression, face to face with the problem of taking up afresh his married life, had bewildered her. She herself had never met with anyone, except Mr. Cuthbert in his most aggressive mood, with whom she had found it impossible to establish some sort of friendly relations, and it seemed to her that Robert, with his astonishing readiness of resource and supreme adaptability, could not possibly find the accommodation of his problem so insuperable. After all, he had lived with Cynthia for three years in tolerable amity. She had said something of this kind to Robert, and he had moodily replied that he felt much as she would feel if she knew that she were to be married on the following day to Mr. Cuthbert, with the prospect of spending the remainder of her life in his company.

But if she had loved Robert well in the days of his gay

insouciance, she now had a deeper reason for loving him, in the depth of pity which his obvious misery evoked. She was not in the least degree jealous of Cynthia. She knew that Robert did not share either his mind or his heart with his wife, while the fact that in her own company Robert had made no attempt to conceal the dismay with which he faced the prospect before him, had only made her feel conscious that she enjoyed his fullest confidence.

But Molly, naturally hopeful and expansive as she was, was sustained by the belief that Robert would settle down with comparative content ; and miserable as it was to see him so overwhelmed by depression, she was truly desirous that he should take the plunge, and terminate the obsession of anticipation.

Robert's departure was a distinct relief to Mrs. Davenant. She had felt the strain of the situation far more than Molly, partly because she felt herself to blame, and partly because she was unable to divest herself of a certain degree of contempt for a man who seemed to her to be so abnormally sensitive, and to have so little superficial control.

As they turned into the house, she said to Molly, " I should be almost disposed to pity Cynthia, if I did not know how robust she is in anything connected with the emotions."

" Poor Cynthia," said Molly, smiling, and added, " but Robert will soon recover his spirits ; he will find it much easier than he thinks."

" Oh, I don't despair," said Mrs. Davenant ; " but for the time being I am glad that I am not in Cynthia's shoes."

" Don't let us think about it, mother," said Molly— " We shall hear soon enough ; and meantime I am going to be very busy. I have got a lot of arrears to make up."

Mrs. Davenant looked at her approvingly. " You were

very good to him," she said; "I envied you your patience."

"Oh, it wasn't that, whatever it was," said Molly. "I'm sure you understand, mother. Unhappy as Robert was, there was a sort of strange pleasure about it all."

"Someone says that the misfortunes of our best friends are not wholly unpleasing to us."

"You know I don't mean that, mother. What I meant was that I was glad to have something to give him."

"Well, we must be very busy," said Mrs. Davenant. "Don't let us indulge too much in the pleasures of reflection."

Two or three days passed before Molly had any news of Robert.

Lord Helford to Molly Davenant

My dearest Molly,

You will wonder why I haven't written. The first day or two I could not; it would only have been putting into words the dull and heavy thoughts which made me so intolerable a companion at Xmas. But now the cloud has lifted a little; and if Cynthia sticks as faithfully to her bargain as she seems to wish to do, and is as prompt and sensible as she has been hitherto, I think it will be workable.

How foolish you will think me! But the thought of a hostile presence, chilly and distant, hinting displeasure, which was what I feared, seemed to me quite unbearable. It has been just the reverse. When I got here, I found a note from Cynthia to say that I should find dinner, and that as there were many letters waiting for me, she would not bother me, and was herself going out. She would look in upon me the next morning, and see what my plans were—and this she did, very friendly, smiling, and straightforward. We settled about some luncheons and dinners, and talked a little business, and then she said

that she wished me to do exactly as I liked, and that she wouldn't expect any attentions, but that if I wanted anything done or arranged, she would be delighted to do it—" those are the things I enjoy," she said. She particularly said that she hoped I would accept any invitations for myself alone, and that she didn't expect always to accompany me. She gave me a list of houses where she proposed to leave cards, and, indeed, I must say that she seems ready to do a lot of small things which I was feeling rather conscience-stricken about having neglected.

Since then we have had a luncheon and a dinner, all old friends. She managed it all to perfection, said very little, but kept things going in a quiet way, and certainly looked very magnificent.

This morning she brought me some invitations, one to a week-end party, which she said she would like to accept for herself, but would say that I was too busy to get away ; and some dinner invitations we accepted.

I can't say yet that I am comfortable *about the whole business. That will depend upon how it all develops, but I am not disheartened about it so far. I want you to know all this, that you and your mother may feel that it has begun well.*

But apart from all that, I want my dear Molly more than ever, and at every moment. You must forgive me, dearest, for my selfish and faint-hearted behaviour. I feel now that I lost and wasted many precious hours ; but your patience and sweetness have been wonderful, and odious as I must have seemed, it has only made me love and prize my darling Molly more and more. I shall count the weeks till Easter, and you must make some plan for that. Cynthia says she has made the little manor-house at Wootton just what she wants, and she hopes I will use it if I want to see anyone quietly in the country. She certainly is not only very accommodating, but full of foresight.

You shall soon hear again. I have your dearest letters; but just at present I am frightfully busy clearing off arrears, and this is all I can write now. Bless you, dearest,

Your Robert.

Molly showed the letter to her mother, who read it very carefully and gravely.

" Cynthia is a very clever woman," she said. " I don't know that I should like her, but I can admire her as a strategist."

" Oh, mother, you must say something a little more generous than that."

" I will be generous when I see reason to be—she is playing her cards very well."

Molly picked up the letter and looked at it. " What an odd position for Robert," she said, " to live with a wife he doesn't love, and to have a sweetheart that he can't see."

" Is that what you are ? " said Mrs. Davenant; " I thought it was to be a brotherly and sisterly friendship."

" Oh, mother, you and I needn't make pretences—I *am* grateful to Cynthia—I just want Robert to be happy."

" Cynthia has a healthy mind, I believe," said Mrs. Davenant, " and that is far more effective than strength of will. Robert has a strong will, in a way, but his mind isn't a healthy one."

" I see what you mean, mother. But that makes it all the finer. It is like the mermaid in Hans Andersen dancing among the knives."

XLIII

THE same afternoon Molly went out for a walk, intending to go to the village; but she was suddenly seized with a disinclination to go there. She would make the old jokes, hear the same grumbles, pet the same children. Even the thought of Aunty Pel, sweeping away every hindrance or trial with a rich flood of mystical resignation, seemed to have no attractive power. She became aware that what she wanted was Robert, in whatever mood. Even at his gloomiest, there seemed to rise, between her heart and his, a constant stream of little fragrant tender messages; indeed, of late it had been a constant sweet surprise to her how they anticipated each other's thoughts. She wanted to see him, as he walked with downcast eyes and knitted brows, and to watch how, as he glanced at her, an irradiating smile cleared the trouble out of his face. She longed for his petulant questions, his quick exclamations, his rapid replies. She longed to feel his hand upon her arm—"What shall we do now, Molly?"

If she could not see him, she could at least think of him; it came upon her like a swift and fevered thirst.

She felt that she could not take one of their accustomed walks—that would bring him too insistently to her mind. She would see him in twenty different moods and whims—there never was anyone, she had often thought, whose expression and gestures, and indeed every curve and line of his body from head to foot, so interpreted and emphasized his thought.

She rowed herself across the creek, and beached her boat beside the little stone-built quay of Treverbyn. She

went swiftly up the little lane with its stone-lined fern-clad walls, and out along a path through rough pastures with clumps of gorse and bramble brakes to Treverbyn Head, where a steep cliff of crumbling weather-stained rock fronted the incoming sea. It was a bare wind-swept place, but to-day the sea-breeze was silent, and the leafless stunted trees held up their bare boughs in an expectant stillness. As she stood at last at the cliff-edge facing the open sea, listening to the sudden slap of little creamy waves upon the shore beneath her, and watching the great grey plain of waters spread out before her, with the smoke of hull-down steamers beyond the horizon, her memories of Robert beat upon her mind like wind-tossed spray against a stone. A deep nostalgia came upon her which she could neither disperse nor resist. Her heart went out in quest of her lover, like the sea-birds which hovered below the cliff-top turning their heads from side to side, and searching the waters with inquisitive eyes.

There, miles and miles beyond the furthest headland, he was sitting somewhere—she had a sudden vision of him looking up from his paper-covered table with that upward deliberating look that meant the quick weaving of his nimble brain. Had he a thought of her ?

She drew out his letter, and read it through once more, and a sudden chill crept and gathered round her heart. She had sent him away, she had delivered him over to his wife, she had denied him all the natural endearments of mutual affection. Would Cynthia perhaps win him back ?

The thought stung her like a venomed dart. What had she done ? from a sense of austere conventional duty she had rebuffed his passion, and flung him heedlessly back into the companionship of a beautiful and conventional woman, soulless certainly, and possibly heartless, who

had neither understanding of, or sympathy with, Robert's quick-glancing mind and delicate emotions.

So this was what was meant by jealousy, she thought to herself—not the vulgar spiteful grasping thing she had believed it to be, but a bitter and barren regret coupled with a desire full of flame and music, a longing to possess and be possessed, life clinging to life and spirit fused with spirit.

Close upon this terrible onrush followed a sudden sense of shame. She had been so gay, so confident, so self-satisfied—wise and prescient, knowing what was best for Robert, proud of her self-control, her tact, her grasp of the situation.

She had had her chance of a perfect love and trust, and she had allowed a narrow and conventional view of duty to stand in her way. And now she knew that the currents of her heart, like a great stream in spate, had burst their banks and overflowed. Had Robert been beside her, she would have cast herself into his arms, and only asked for his love on any terms. That was the one great gift which life and God had to give her, and she had meekly and demurely handed it back from a sense of prudish delicacy.

She stood there a long time in silence, trying to flash some message of her surrender into her lover's heart, across the sundering leagues—and then at last wearied out by the fruitless conflict, she came slowly and doubtfully, seeing and hearing nothing, back to the little hamlet, and the boat waiting for her.

That night she wrote to Robert.

Dearest, I try to be happy in your good start ; but I find it hard to live without you. Perhaps I did wrong to send you away. I miss you every moment, how much I cannot say. But you will not forget me ; you will let me love you, and serve you if I can.

I know that life can't be all love, and I want you to have the fullest life you can.

This was all too intense, she thought ; she added :—

Cynthia seems to be behaving like a brick ; and mother and I shall have our hands full here—so I shall just wait until we can meet, and I shall not expect to hear much, now that you are so busy, except a scrap every now and then. Don't think I want to keep you tethered to me, Robert. I want you to be as free as air ; and I shall be quite content if every now and then you had time for a thought of your Molly who loves you much better than she loves her silly self.

I want this to be just a message of my pride and love. Next time I write I shall begin to tell you of our sayings and doings —you need not be afraid of my being too romantic.

Your own Molly.

XLIV

BUT there were sadder and stranger weeks to come; it was not that Robert did not write; he wrote often, little notes full of tiny glimpses of his life, lightly-sketched visitors, sharply-cut moods; but it was clear that he was growing more and more to acquiesce in the arrangements so skilfully made for him by Cynthia, the quiet reliable way in which she took all the trouble off his shoulders, and guarded his freedom at the expense of her own. Thus he wrote one day :—

" *Cynthia is getting very clever in dealing with situations. We had an awful party the other night—we felt we must face it, and clear off some of the heaviest of our relations. We had my uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Manburgh. He is very much of a country gentleman, who breeds pigs, that red hairy speckled kind, and can talk of little else. Then we had some cousins of hers, Sir James and Lady Stanley—He is, or was, an M.P.—a man with large boiled eyes, upstanding hair, and a fallen lower jaw. She is a tall thin woman, with compressed lips, very badly dressed and interested in temperance ;—and half a dozen more old family friends of the solid staring type. I was bored to death—I thought I should have a seizure. After dinner, when we had been in the drawing-room about ten minutes, the butler brought in a note to me marked* immediate; *I opened it, and it was just this, " Robert, do say you are wanted, and go off to your study—don't appear again—I see you have had enough of it—leave it all to me ; it's perfectly safe—Cynthia." I was rather annoyed for a minute, but then I thought I would try and see what happened. I rose, and said*

I was afraid I was wanted, but hoped to be back immediately. " Those wretched Cabinet people," I heard Cynthia say to Lady Manburgh," Robert can hardly call his life his own ! "

Well, I went off, and settled down with a book and a cigar, and thought a little about Menerdue and those long winter evenings. In about an hour Cynthia looked in.

" Wasn't that a good idea, Robert ? They have all cleared off."

" How did *you do it ? " I said.*

" Oh, I knew you would be bored to death, and that you were tired—so I told Holmes to bring in the note, which I wrote beforehand, ten minutes after we went to the drawing-room."

" But how rude they will all think it," I said.

" Rude," said Cynthia ; " they are immensely impressed—they think you a quite indispensable man. They thought you were closeted with the Foreign Secretary, at least."

" It sounds like Bob Sawyer in Pickwick," I said.

" Very likely," said Cynthia, smiling. [I don't suppose, by the way, that she knows whether Pickwick is by Dickens or Thackeray.]

" Well, you can't try on that *dodge again," I said.*

" Oh, I have got plenty more," said Cynthia. " I hope you will go to bed soon—you look tired ! " so she sailed off.

Don't you think it was rather ingenious? or disingenuous ? You, *of course, would have got something exciting even out of Sir James—but Cynthia and I are not so catholic in our tastes.*

And again he wrote :—

I have been a good deal overdone lately, sleepless and nervous. What do you think Cynthia did ? She sat next the Prime Minister at a party. He is very amenable to a certain

kind of good looks, and Cynthia had the cheek to tell him that if he didn't take care, I should have a breakdown—I am rather useful just now, and the Prime Minister was quite solicitous—what could he do? She said boldly that she thought I wanted more help, and so they have sent me a young man from Downing Street, who saves me no end of trouble. "What a piece of good fortune," the old man said to me when we next met, shaking his forefinger at me, "to have a wife who won't sacrifice her husband's life to her own ambitions"; so now I am kept in cotton wool, and highly prized, like blue diamonds.

But oh, Molly, I weary for a talk with you. . . .

Mrs. Davenant read the letter with uplifted eyebrows. "That woman!" she said. "What is it that has given her these perceptions? Perhaps she has fallen in love with Robert again?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said poor Molly.

But the dreary days went on, and the plans for meeting Robert at Easter became more and more shadowy. Molly plunged into feverish activities. She read and marked books—how tiresome they seemed!—She took a picnic party of village girls to Falmouth by boat, and had a day of hilarious gaiety, followed by a sleepless night. She went over to Nan-Zephron, gossipped with Mrs. Temperley, accompanied the Squire on his quest for beauty, led him by ingenious devices to talk about Robert—the Squire did not think that Helford allowed beauty to play a sufficient part in his life. She even patched up a kind of reconciliation with Mr. Cuthbert, who had recovered from the shock of his interview, and was disposed to think he had acted for the best under heavenly guidance. But he went further than that, and though he never said a word of love to Molly, he drew her on to talk, in veiled

allusions, of the cloud of dejection that had settled down upon her. Mr. Cuthbert's trained technique as an expert in spiritual uneasiness stood him in good stead.

Mr. Cuthbert would join her in the village, and ask her humbly enough if he might accompany her. They would walk together on the waterside road to the upper creek. Mr. Cuthbert feigned or acquired an intense interest in natural history in those days, and Molly taught him the names and notes of birds.

" I feel I understand St. Francis better now," he said once. " I could almost preach a sermon to the birds now —the little messengers of God."

" I am afraid they think rather more of their own affairs than of God."

" Ah," said Mr. Cuthbert, " but that is how the knowledge of things divine come to us—by our sorrows and disappointments and the deep weariness of things."

" Yes, I am very weary of the old ways just now—nothing seems to happen."

" God makes a silence about us sometimes," said Mr. Cuthbert, with a quiet tenderness, " that we may hear the cries and songs of the radiant world beyond."

" I used to be quite content with the songs of earth," said Molly—" I don't know about the cries."

" We all have to suffer," said Mr. Cuthbert ; " love implies suffering—but the suffering is only a little shadow on the path—the light comes very quickly."

" You talk very sadly, Mr. Cuthbert—ought one to be so downcast ? It only seems to spoil life and to make one useless."

" I have not been a happy man," said Mr. Cuthbert, " mainly through my own fault. I have been impatient often, and God will not be hurried."

" But what good comes of it all ? "

" The will to suffer," said Mr. Cuthbert. " It is not enough to endure. The spirit is or can be much stronger than the frail life that begets it. When one is unhappy, there is still a tender and noble way of living."

At words like these a faint hope would dawn in Molly's mind ; but now her physical strength began to fail her. She soon tired of walking and used to creep back home, take a book, doze off in her chair, waking up to a sense of her anguish, which only gradually abated. She spent long hours sitting in a sheltered dingle in Nan-Zephron wood, watching the birds listlessly, or lost in a dream of baffled memory. Worst of all were the hours when, after a profound sleep of exhaustion, she woke in the dusk of dawn, and listened to the sighing of the wood, or the crisp plunging of the waves upon the wharf. She would force herself to rise, huddle on a cloak, and sit watching till the light came filtering up the creek, and touched the wavelets with liquid gold.

She could not in these days come nearer to her mother's mind. She was aware that she was watched attentively, and even tenderly ; but her mother seemed, she thought, to be waiting with patient expectancy for some door to open. Molly used to talk to her for hours about the village people and their little cares.

" But what about *yourself* all this time ? " said Mrs. Davenant. " One must eat to live—it's a coarse necessity —one can't remain happy by thinking about other people's happiness."

" No," said Molly, ruefully ; " and of course I want Robert—that is what is the matter with me."

" Doesn't he write ? "

" Yes, he's wonderfully good about writing—he tells me all he is doing."

" And you write, I suppose ? "

" Oh, I scribble something—but, of course, I have no news—two lakes must flow together. You can't do much by carrying water in a bucket from one to the other."

" Can I help you in any way ? "

" No, mother dear, you can't help me. One must walk alone."

" It will come back, Molly—the quiet pleasure of being oneself."

" But it all seems so stagnant."

" It moves, dear. It is always moving—you can't keep it fixed—but don't think I don't understand. If I don't speak, it isn't because I don't feel."

" Oh, mother, if there was only *one* thing I cared to do."

" Would you like to go and travel ? "

" No, I couldn't do that—and you would hate it so."

" It might do you good to try to comfort me."

" Just as you like, mother."

XLV

ONE day Molly felt a little fresher in mind and body—some old spring of delight seemed to well up within her. She went off soon after luncheon to the ruined chapel —the sacred walk. There was just a hint, a far-off beckoning of spring in the air, a few green-hooded arums pushing up in the copse, a touch of freshness among the tapestry of the covert, a cloudy lumpiness along the boughs of sheltered bushes. She was soon at the place ; the ruined gable looked leaner and more haggard, and the bramble-brake was thinner and more empurpled. The breeze came in soft and delicate pulses, and brought with it a message of something living, some personal contact, she almost thought.

She sat down where she had sat with Robert, and looked about her. Surely that was the friendly magpie on the wall ? He looked more sly than ever, and his bill was propped open by a great twig. He went off, hopping and grumbling to himself, into the holt. The spring gurgled companionably, and made haste along its stony channel. Gradually there fell on Molly a friendly drowsiness ; the sun emerged from parted clouds, and fell comfortably on her hands and cheek. She leaned back against the ash tree, and a confused scene passed swiftly before her brain ; a moment later she was awake again with a sense of alarm ; again she slept, this time profoundly, her eyes closed, her lips a little parted ; a little later she woke again with a sudden sense of fear—something had stirred in the brake beside her, a shadow came round from behind her—she opened her startled eyes wide with a little cry. Robert was standing, smiling, looking down at her.

Molly scrambled to her feet with a cry of wonder and delight, and was clasped unresisting in Robert's outstretched arms. But a moment later she drew herself away from his kiss, and clung like a child to his arm.

" My Molly," he said tenderly, looking at her,—" but you have been ill, dearest—you are pale and thin."

" Oh, just a little—more sad than ill—the kind of illness that is quickly cured. But you are well, Robert—I never saw you look so well—but how did you come here ? Is it really you ? "

Robert explained ; he had been sent for the day before to see his chief on urgent business. Lord Picton was ill, at his house near Plymouth. He had meant to go back to London, but at the station, finding there was a train for Cornwall, he had changed his mind, and wired to Mrs. Davenant : " You had gone out, Molly—I had a talk with your mother, and then went out to find you."

" But what made you come *here ?* I have never been here since I was here with you."

" Oh, a spirit in my feet, I suppose—I somehow guessed."

" Robert, it is all too wonderful," and Molly burst into tears—" Oh ! I have missed you so—every day, every hour."

" But, Molly, you have been ill—I can't have that—what has become of our tranquil alliance ? "

" I don't know, indeed."

" What can I do to comfort you ? "

" Just be with me—that's all I want."

" I can't bear to think of you like this—lonely and sad."

" Never mind about me, Robert—how have things gone with you—are you happy ? "

" Well, I have been interested—my work has been ex-

citing and difficult, but now that I see you, I feel I have awakened from a dream."

" And Cynthia ? "

" She is very good to me—she takes all the trouble off my shoulders—I have been kept in cotton-wool, as I told you—but I seldom see her, except when people are there ; she has stuck to her bargain splendidly."

" Is she happy ? "

" She seems so—she is always rather magnificent."

" I expect so—oh dear ! "

" What does that mysterious remark mean ? "

" I suppose I am a little jealous."

What an idea ! why, Molly, you are never out of my mind. I save up all my little adventures to tell you—' that will amuse Molly,' I say to myself."

They stood for a moment in silence, looking at each other.

" I like that look in your eyes, Robert—it *is* the old Robert after all."

" Let us sit down here a few minutes, Molly dear, where we sat before—it's springtime isn't it—or something like it ? It was the feeling of spring in the air that made me feel I must see you."

" I know that feeling—I hardly know any other feeling." They sat down on the turf beside the well, Robert leaning back against the old wall, Molly on the turf beside him, her hands clasped round her knees.

" Look at me, Molly—don't gaze into nothingness." Molly smiled and looked at him.

" Molly, dear, you are prettier than ever—what has happened to you ? "

" I feel like a ghost—I feel as if the wind could blow through me."

" Too ethereal," said Robert ; " but I would rather see my boyish-looking Molly back again."

" Did I look like a boy ? Perhaps I *was* like a boy—I feel much more of a girl than I did—full of fancies. I have lost my old interests, Robert—you have stolen them all away."

" Molly ! "

" It's this, Robert—I can't share your life, really. You are tremendously good about telling me everything—but it's like sitting at a play. I can't step on and interrupt and explain ; and then there is nothing left but to sit and wonder. It isn't that I haven't tried—but now even the people here, whom I thought I knew and loved, have all become like funny little creatures miles away, seen through a telescope. It's all unreal somehow."

" That isn't like my Molly."

" Not like *your* Molly—but like *my* Molly."

" But, *my* Molly, it won't do. I shall begin to feel I am spoiling your life after all. I can't bear to think that. Can't I set you free ? "

" I don't want to be free."

" What can we do then ? "

" We must wait and see."

" It's horrible ! I am to sit enjoying my work, and think of you as being tortured."

" Robert, I won't be silly—I oughtn't to have said all that. It is only a little part of myself that cries out after you like this."

Robert put his hand on hers, and she clasped it in both her own. " If we could only stay here like this for ever," she said.

They sat long in silence, Robert musing with a troubled air, and Molly with wide open eyes and parted lips looking at his face.

" I could give it all up, if I knew you couldn't do without me, Molly," he said at last.

" Robert—it isn't to be *thought* of. I must find the way out, and you will help me—it would soon be over, *that* kind of happiness."

" I'm afraid so, Molly."

" I must get away from this—I must do something—but I'm afraid I am too wild a bird to be put into a cage."

The dusk had begun to creep upon them as they talked ; the bare gable over their heads stood out bleakly menacing against the sky ; across the rough field the wood of Nan-Zephron looked black and stern, and the creek lay, grey and colourless, among the darkening hills. A breeze came shivering up from the sea, and Molly in spite of herself gave a shudder of cold. Robert sprang to his feet and helped her up.

" What am I thinking of ? " he said. " We must go back at once, or your mother will suppose we have fled together."

He put his arm about her and urged her to a brisk pace. He clambered swiftly over the stone steps, and held her hand to help her down. Together they threaded the woodland brakes in the gathering gloom.

It was all so unlike their old companionship, when Robert used to stride on heedless, but all these little cares were dear to Molly's heart. She was soon warm, but she realised now how much weaker she had grown—she could hardly keep pace with him.

It was nearly six when they returned and found Mrs. Davenant in a seemingly grim mood. " I had given up all hopes of seeing you again," she said. " I was half expecting a telegram from Plymouth to apologize for having broken my heart."

" You see," said Robert, looking round at Molly ; " what did I tell you ? "

" I don't deny that it is very nice to have you here, Robert," said Mrs. Davenant, " but have Ministers

nothing to do ? Tell me a few State secrets—I can't understand the papers now, without you to dot the i's."

Robert plunged into talk, and gave Mrs. Davenant a swift résumé of events. Molly was glad to be silent—she sat adoring his clear low voice and the expressive gestures of his hands. Presently she slipped away.

Mrs. Davenant's face changed, " How do you find her ? " she said.

" I don't think she is at all well—but she is full of spirit."

" Yes, that is so. I wish for some reasons that you had not come ; but it may do her good. She has been under a great strain. This was what I was afraid of. You are good about writing—but she thinks of nothing but you."

" Yes, I feel very unhappy about it—but what can be done ? Can you take her away somewhere ? "

" I don't think I'm very good for her now. She wants simple affection—just what I haven't got. I can give her critical sympathy, or violent affection. I have no intermediate planes—did you ever think I had the tigress element in me ? "

" I knew there was a great deal I did not see."

" If I were to say what I feel just now, Robert, you would hardly forgive me ; but it would be unjust. Half of this trouble is my fault. I should have sent you away at the beginning. Her love for you is dangerous."

" What exactly do you mean ? " said Robert, looking fixedly at her.

" There is a dreadful struggle going on inside her, poor darling, nature against what I should call grace—I don't know what you would call it. It has all awakened suddenly. She wants a home, a husband, a child. She wants to expend all her pent-up affections—and she has only got an indolent and affected mother, and all these oddly dressed people

here. She has fallen so low as to get comfort from Mr. Cuthbert.

" But what can *I* do ? " said Robert.

" Look on till the fire burns itself out," said Mrs. Davenant. " It won't kill her, but of course she is very miserable. It is useless to be either sentimental or stern. Good heavens, what a world ! Here is poor Molly made to pattern, one might say, for a wife and a mother, and you're just the right sort of husband for her—with just the faults which she could correct—and yet the only remedy is worse than the cure."

" I would do anything in the world to help," said Robert leaning forward with clasped hands.

" Of course ! but there is nothing you *can* do ! You must just hold yourself in. You mustn't pity her and you mustn't shun her. You are looking very well—how do you get on with Cynthia ? I can see she makes you very comfortable."

" She is very competent and straightforward. I couldn't have believed she could behave so well."

" It would be almost better, I believe, if you could fall in love with her again."

" Mary, how can you talk like this ? "

" I am wretched, Robert. I ought to have known better. You and Molly have defied custom and experience—these friendships can't be managed ; one or other of the two people concerned gets wounded. You don't love as she loves—and if you did there would be a disaster."

" Why do you not come to London, and let her meet a few people ? "

"What, with you there, invisible, and Cynthia glowering?"

" Cynthia never glowers."

" Cynthia will do her best to keep you and Molly apart. Does she know you are here ? "

" No—she is away till Friday, and I have wired to say I am detained."

" Will you dare to tell her ? "

" Certainly I shall tell her."

" She will be very angry," said Mrs. Davenant, " but she won't show it."

" Can I come to you for Easter ? "

" Robert, you had better not—I think I must get Molly away—but *imagine* the two of us in Italy, going to see churches and interesting towns ! "

" I want her to see *people*," said Robert, " even if she came to care for someone else. Bad as it would be to lose her, it is far worse seeing her in torment."

" Well, I must think," said Mrs. Davenant—" and now we shall be late for dinner—that must go on, however hearts may ache ! "

XLVI

DINNER was not a very happy affair. Molly at first displayed an unusual animation, and related in much detail some of her discussions with Mr. Temperley on the claims of beauty upon daily life, interspersing it with imitations ; but it was not quite in her old vein, for there was a touch of satire and impatience about the whole, and a certain critical gravamen against his views as being the diversions of an elderly man of culture—a pose with no real relation to life. " Why," she asked, " if the Squire is so conscious of the narrow and bigoted views of his neighbours, does he not try to extend them a little, instead of reserving all his powers to increase his own enjoyment ? "

Mrs. Davenant reminded her of the Squire's liberality and kindness. " Yes," said Molly, " but isn't he paying a price for the luxury of being let alone ? "

Robert, indeed, in the course of the evening, saw that for the contented tolerance with which Molly had tasted the experience of life there was substituted a considerable impatience of life's leisurely delays and barren intervals. There was, he recognized, an added touch of brilliance in her talk—but this was gained at the expense of her charm. She had charmed him, he reflected, by the naïve tranquillity of her heart and mind, the surprised delight with which she had met inconsistencies and subtle manifestations of character, a childlike and unaffected relish for the funninesses and peculiarities of her neighbours. She had seemed to move among them, observing and loving them ; but now she seemed to regard them critically from

a distance; she was one of them no longer; she was treading the path of her own experience in solitude and dejection.

This all reacted upon Robert, who felt that he was in a sense responsible. He had abandoned himself, he saw, to an emotional friendship, which had ripened in Molly's fine and eager mind into a deep and passionate regard. He had declined to consider the practical aspects of the case or to foresee its possibilities. He had yielded to the temptation of believing, contrary to the experience of the ages, that a friendship between a young man and a young woman could be formed without any fear of sexual complications. He himself had found in his work and active interests a counterbalancing relief; but for Molly the natural consequences had ensued. She had formed the passionate attachment to which her age and her temperament were naturally adapted. He had trifled with old primitive forces, with the elementary facts of human nature, and they had turned against him with their unrelenting and monstrous strength.

Mrs. Davenant, too, found deep cause to blame herself; she had yielded to a natural tolerance, an emotional indolence, and a mystical kind of fatalism, in allowing a romance to ripen before her eyes; and now the one being for whom she cared passionately was involved in the tragedy of suppressed love and affections which were bound to be unrequited.

It was indeed a miserable evening; and worse still, as the excitement of seeing Robert face to face ebbed away, and her own impaired vitality asserted itself, Molly gave way to an extreme and profound exhaustion. After dinner she sat silent and haggard in her chair, while her mother and Robert kept up a fitful conversation.

At last her mother rose; it transpired that Robert

could spend the next day with them, but would have to travel up to town by night.

Molly had been longing for a quiet talk to Robert after her mother had retired ; but by this time her fatigue and prostration were so painfully evident that her mother firmly intervened. " You mustn't sit up talking with Robert to-night, Molly—you must have a good night and be fresh to-morrow."

Molly looked from her mother to Robert in a silent despair. " Yes, Molly," said Robert, " you must do as you are bid—and, indeed," he added, " I am extraordinarily tired myself, and feel as if I could hardly keep my eyes open—we will have a good long morning together to-morrow, dear."

Robert, after an hour or two of unhappy reflection dropped off to sleep—and was aware at some time of the night of soft movements on the landing without, and of the opening and shutting of doors ; but he dropped off to sleep again. When he came down to breakfast, he found Mrs. Davenant alone, with a look of some anxiety.

" Molly can't come down," she said. " She felt very unwell in the night—I hope we didn't disturb you ?—I don't think it is anything very serious, though I have sent for Dr. Grimes. She is better this morning, but I can't let her get up. But she is so disappointed at the idea of not seeing you that I thought you would perhaps go and sit with her a little this morning. Otherwise I think she will really make herself ill. In the afternoon she may, I hope, get up—but she has not been well of late."

" No," said Robert, " she was *not* well last night—she was excited—I have never seen her like that before."

" There is one more thing," said Mrs. Davenant. " she blames herself very much for talking so much about herself and making you unhappy. I want you just to be

as simple and quiet with her as you can. I don't want you to express contrition or regret, but to talk about yourself and your occupations as directly as you are able. You understand, I know."

" It's a horrible dilemma," said Robert. " I can't go backwards or forwards. I can't begin writing and talking in a mild paternal way—yet if I write and talk as I have been doing, it only feeds the fire."

" It's useless to waste time over what has happened," said Mrs. Davenant. " You and I have got to accept the facts and go quietly forward. But you rather puzzle me—I don't know *how* you care for her—forgive my asking."

" I care for Molly more than I care for anything in the world," said Robert, " and I would do anything and give up anything to make her happy—but I think I must add one thing. I don't think—it is very crude, but I can't express it otherwise—that I am physically inflammable, like some of my friends. Companionship and tranquil relations are what I desire."

He blushed as he spoke, and added in a low tone, " It is true that I fell helplessly in love with Cynthia—but I have lived a very restrained life ; a certain fastidiousness, I think—not a matter of principle ; it has always been a secret pleasure to me to cut short all bodily claims—anything that clogged or weakened the mind. It isn't a real asceticism. I recognized that one could not have both, and I chose what I preferred."

Mrs. Davenant listened gravely and said, " I am grateful to you for speaking plainly, Robert. It must have been difficult."

A little later Dr. Grimes arrived in some perturbation—a small sturdy man with stiff upstanding hair. Robert had met him, but had only exchanged a few words with him.

Robert spoke cordially to him, but was aware of a

certain shade of disapprobation in Dr. Grimes manner. Mrs. Davenant led the doctor away.

Robert went out and paced up and down the terrace, hearing the sound of low talking in Molly's open-windowed room. He tried to interest himself in the view and the romantic surroundings. It was a fresh morning and the tide was out. The sandy mudflat looked coarse and ugly—like the underlying material facts of life, Robert thought, with the graceful screening crystalline surface rudely withdrawn. Yet in field and woodland there was a subtle sense of reawakening life ; and the gulls were busy poising and screaming over a shallow pool in the mudflat. But there was a shadow over it all ; and the thought of Molly withdrawn from her beautiful and eager activities by what almost seemed to Robert in his rueful mood like a vague mental disease, and that this should be to some extent his doing, made him miserable. Deep down in his mind there was a certain dumb resentment that the fresh and ingenuous Molly, who seemed so free and independent, should have been touched with what seemed to him like a subtle contagion. He thrust the ungenerous thought away, but it returned.

Robert, had, like many highly-strung people, a horror of illness, which seemed to him almost like a taint, a weakness which could be defeated by the will. The signs of ill-health, weariness—did not naturally evoke his sympathy, but seemed like an insult to health and life. Whichever way one turned, there seemed something treacherous and malignant lying in wait, plotting against joy and vigour, shooting poisoned darts out of some secret ambush at every brave and beautiful creature. The powers of good seemed lamentably weak, well-meaning, enthusiastic, quick to mould what was fresh and lovely, but unable to defend it—fitful, faint-hearted, eager, but with none of

the deadly patience and persistency of evil—what was the meaning of it all ?

He was summoned to the house. Mrs. Davenant met him and asked him if he would see the doctor.

" How is she ? " he said, anxiously.

" Oh, not much amiss, nothing definite, but run down ! "

He went into the little study which he had not entered, and saw how scrupulously it had been kept just as he had used it.

" Lord Helford," said Dr. Grimes, bluntly, " I ventured to ask for a word with you. You know, of course, what is the matter with our young friend ? "

" I am not aware of anything definite," said Robert.

Dr. Grimes smiled, " I'm an elderly man, Lord Helford, and have seen a great deal of the inside of human minds. And then I am very much attached to dear Miss Molly—one of the sweetest natures I have ever met. So I can't forbear to speak, even at the risk of giving offence."

" Please don't think of that," said Robert, " I am only too anxious to be of use."

" Well," said Dr. Grimes, wrinkling up his forehead, " Miss Molly has an attachment, let us say to some person unknown. Such things will happen. But she is a perfectly sound, healthy, clean-minded straight girl, without a touch of morbidity or curiosity to listen to the things that beckon, I won't say out of the dark, but out of the inner corners of the mind. It's absolutely natural and right that she should feel as she does. But I gather that there are obstacles, insurmountable obstacles. If so, her one chance is to forget it somehow."

" What do you mean by her one chance."

" I mean that she may become an ailing and hysterical creature—it isn't that her mind or her body need give

way—but she may become fretful, selfish, fanciful, afraid of company, afraid of solitude. What she wants is an outlet for emotion and energy—a home, a husband, a child. She must get out of this familiar corner, where everything seems to her, poor girl, to have become different. Mrs. Davenant will see to that. But I understand that you know all their affairs, and that you might give the unknown one a hint, which, of course, neither of the ladies can do. There must not,"—and Dr. Grimes raised his finger and bent his brows,—" there must not be any playing about with emotions, any exciting of feelings ; and yet it mustn't be stiffly and coldly done—that might mean worse disaster still. That's all I can say at present ; but I am told you may be able to help, and that is the way to help." He held out his hand.

" Thank you, Dr. Grimes," said Robert. " I will see what I can do ;—and one thing more. You will be seeing Miss Davenant, I suppose ? Can you send me a brief line from time to time. It may help me to make the right suggestion, and you will be able to tell me if the advice I shall try to give is of use."

" Why, certainly," said Dr. Grimes, adding, " don't think I don't understand that you are put in a delicate and difficult position. But plenty of people have been in a worse plight than this." He nodded, smiled, and went briskly out.

XLVII

A LITTLE later Mrs. Davenant came and beckoned Robert out. " You have seen our old friend Dr. Grimes ? " she said. " He wished to have a word with you —it was his wish, not mine. He is a worthy man, an old ally of Molly's, but a little *au naturel*—without the conventional varnish. Now Molly wants to see you. It must remind you of your mornings at the Foreign Office. It is curious," she went on, " that it should seem to betoken a certain degree of intimacy to see a member of the opposite sex in bed—the only difference being that less is seen of them than at any other time ! "

They went into Molly's bare and austere little room : " A dreadful place to be ill in, I tell her," said Mrs. Davenant. " Nothing to meet the eye or to divert the mind." Molly was sitting propped up in bed, a fur scarf thrown loosely round her neck, her arms bare. " She won't even wear any clothes to speak of ! " said Mrs. Davenant. Molly looked up at Robert who went and stood by her and took her hand. " It really is too tiresome," said Molly, " that I should be stuck away here just at this moment ! " " Well, I will leave you," said Mrs. Davenant, " though it offends my sense of propriety—but I am very Early Victorian."

She hurried from the room, Molly still holding Robert's hand clasped in both her own. " And it's all my fault, dearest Molly, for keeping you sitting out in the dusk up on the hill." Molly smiled and unclasped her hands, and pointed to a chair by the bed. " Sit down there, Robert dear," she said, " I know how men hate *scenes*—but sit

where I can see your face." Robert sat down smiling, but noticed with a sense of pain, even more than he had perceived the day before, how frail, thin, and young Molly looked; her arms and hands looked wasted, and her cheek framed against the fur had lost the old sunburnt glow, and was of a porcelain clearness, while her eyes were large and pathetic. He felt an immense desire to gather her into his arms and comfort her. " I'm not going to keep you long," she said, " I expect, like most men, you don't like ill people—but I'm not in the least ill, old Grim says, only somehow tired out—but you know all about that, Robert; and I am so ashamed of having talked so much about myself yesterday——"

" My dearest Molly, why shouldn't you talk to me about yourself? "

" The thing is this, Robert, that everything seems suddenly to be standing still."

" But it isn't, Molly dear. Everything is always rushing past—that's the worst of it. The one thing one can't do, however happy one is, is to make anything wait a little for us to enjoy it."

" Ah, you have your work; but down here, I can't be of use to you, and that makes me miserable, and then I can't be of use to anyone else."

" What a little Puritan you are—why should you be always useful? Why shouldn't you be quietly yourself? Besides, you *are* of immense use to me."

" What do you mean? "

" Why, my dearest Molly, to have you there, even in the background, even if I can't see you, always loving me and making the best of me, to whom I can scribble off anything that comes into my head, and whom I can think of and hope to see—is that not being useful? I don't say this just to please you—but what could I do without you?

" Is that true, Robert ? "

" Every word of it."

" Then I may really think I can help you ? "

" Why, dearest Molly, nobody else can."

" Then I shall go on my way rejoicing."

" I wish you would, dearest. Can't you get well again, and be the old sunburnt, laughing, active Molly ? "

" I think I might—I think I shall."

" It makes me wretched to see you like this—I feel as if you would be all right again, if I could spend a month here."

" I should, I think."

" Well, what are you going to do ? "

" Mother talks of travelling."

" It's only three weeks to Easter. I could come and spend a fortnight here, and you could go off later."

" That sounds lovely—but I think mother wants to go off at once. Robert, why need I pretend ? What is the matter with me is that I don't see you, and I can't live without you."

" Shall we fly together ? "

" Don't be absurd, Robert—you know that is all settled—you might as well suggest that mother should fly with Mr. Temperley."

" It seems an idiotic arrangement, as it is."

" Yes, but, Robert, we are too civilized, too tame, both of us, to take to the woods."

" It is very tame indeed—I suppose the well-regulated people must suffer ! "

" It isn't a question of rules, Robert. There is something very real behind it all."

" There is, indeed, if two well-meaning people like you and me may not be happy."

" Yes, but if we snatched at it, Robert, we shouldn't be happy."

" I suppose not. . . . But Molly, dearest, get well again. Don't think about anything else. Then, when you are well again we will make plans."

" But what will Cynthia say to all this ? "

" Cynthia may go to the devil . . . no, that isn't fair. She is really behaving like a trump under the circumstances."

" She won't mind your having been here ? "

" I don't care if she does."

" And you don't mind going back ? "

" Not more than I mind going back to the office—in fact, Helford House has become my Home Office."

" Robert, I like to hear you talk like that—and I am thankful I have seen you. You are not fretting over it, and I won't fret."

" That's my dearest Molly ! We can wait a little, dear. I'm not very old and you are ridiculously young."

They talked a little more about indifferent things. Robert found fault with the dreadful bareness of her room. " I hate *things*," said Molly. " At least I hate feeling responsible for them."

Presently she said, " I think you must go, Robert. I promised mother you shouldn't stay too long. I shall try to get down before you go ; but you have made me ever so much more happy."

Robert sat down on the bed for a moment, and put his arms round her : " I shan't be happy," he said, " until I have a better account of you. Bless you, dearest." He kissed her lightly on the cheek. " I know you don't approve of that," he added, " but it is because you are an invalid. I believe they have to be *cossetted*, whatever that may mean ! "

He waved his hand and went lightly away. Molly surrendered herself to happy thoughts. A burden seemed to

have fallen off her mind. He was just as he had been, and she was ashamed of all her anxious forebodings.

" I've been very judicious, Mary," he said to Mrs. Davenant, " with my little hoard of maxims, preaching down your daughter's heart. What are your plans ? I could get down here for a fortnight at Easter. Or I could join you somewhere. You could pass for my sister, and Molly might be my little niece."

" I see you want to get me into disrepute, too ! " said Mrs. Davenant.

" Well, arrange what you like—I don't think there is anything more that I can say."

" No, we will let it all alone now. I warn you that I shall do all I can to secure an eligible young man, and throw Molly and him together.

" A worldly mother ! " said Robert, " or perhaps a ministering angel ? I can't spare Molly, but you may do what you can. I will play the game fair."

" There is no one hereabouts unfortunately."

" Couldn't something temporary be done with Cuthbert ? "

" I sometimes wonder if you have any heart at all, Robert ? "

" So do I, dear Mary. But I'm not cold, though I seem so."

XLVIII

AS a matter of fact, Molly's leave-taking was brief enough. She got up and dressed, but was not well enough to get down to luncheon. After which meal, Mrs. Davenant said that she would go up and sit with her for a little. She added, " I think we have had out talk out, Robert, and we shall do well to leave the matter alone for the present. You had better go out for a stroll. If we sit together, we shall feel obliged to go on discussing this business, and we shall only end by tying more and more knots in it. We know what the situation is, and it won't improve it to talk about it. There is nothing so bad as to have to go on turning a trouble over and over—it becomes more and more terrifying."

Robert accordingly went out in a very unhappy frame of mind. He could not disguise from himself that much as he loved Molly, enough indeed to have married her with true devotion and a trustful certainty of happiness, yet he had become aware within the last twenty-four hours that her love for him was of a very different kind. He felt, indeed, the kind of dizziness that might arise from coming suddenly to the edge of a cliff and seeing a strange new land spread out at one's feet. He delighted in her companionship ; her charm and her freshness captivated him ; better still, he found himself in the presence of a perfectly frank and ingenuous nature, full of humour and overflowing kindness and an eager relish for life. But there was little that was mystical and passionate about his own love ; it was more like a perfect comradeship ; and the depth and intensity of her emotion amazed and almost frightened

him. Then, too, the extent to which her affection for himself had changed her was a perplexity to him. The Molly that he knew—the lively, perceptive, laughter-loving Molly—seemed to have been submerged, and to have become an anxious, unhappy, morbid girl—in such an atmosphere he felt ill-at-ease. He had friends to whom feminine deviations and vagaries were in themselves interesting and absorbing, as being feminine. But this was not so with Robert. He was altogether averse from emotional intimacies, and liked women precisely in so far as they had a boyish ease and simplicity. He liked impulsive and uncalculating openness—anything of the nature of intrigue or emotional pressure suffocated him.

He did not see how he was going to run his friendship on complex and self-conscious lines; diplomacies, scrupulosities, anxieties, suppressions, cross-references had no interest for him.

He walked along the road by the creek, through and beyond Polcrello. Even the landscape seemed to have lost its charm. The racing pulse of Spring which he had encountered everywhere the day before, the sudden languors and longings, the faint hopes for one knew not what, the wistful reveries that seemed to lead into the hidden places of the earth, were all gone. The spring seemed to have flourished and flaunted its banner of delights too suddenly and prematurely in the face of an incurious winter-worn world, and to have withdrawn again, withered by the uninterested contempt of the old for the young, of the inflexibly patient for the impulsively eager.

It was a dry and bitter afternoon. The fowls in the little poultry yard that he passed stood moping and puffed up, with sidelong flickering eyes and brooding noises. The old countryman who met him and wished him good

afternoon in his high reedy Cornish voice seemed like a symbol of weary disillusionment. The dry oak copse rustled drearily, and the brown mudflats of the creek seemed like the gathered filth of ages. He turned a corner, and there, not a dozen yards away, plodding dejectedly along in heavy boots, a cassock, green about the shoulders with age, clumsily looped up, and a black flapping hat, came Mr. Cuthbert—the one man of all others whom he did not wish to see.

But there was no escape. Mr. Cuthbert bared his head and stood sullenly out of the way for Robert to pass. Robert went up to him and held out his hand.

Mr. Cuthbert shook it rather dubiously, and then said, " You put me to shame, Lord Helford—I should have been the first to do that."

" Ah, well," said Robert, " we had a bad turn-up at Nan-Zephron, and I don't know that I can say that I have forgiven you for your action—but I don't think you did me or Miss Davenant much harm. And we can begin again."

" Neither can I admit," said Mr. Cuthbert, in a low voice, " that I acted unadvisedly. I did what I thought my pastoral office demanded of me. Neither affection nor respect can deter me from attempting to do my duty."

" It seems to me that you ought first to have spoken to me," said Robert, " not even a priest may condemn unheard. But I have no wish to discuss it further."

" Lord Helford," said Mr. Cuthbert, in great agitation, " you may be right—but consider the fearful situation in which I was placed. You have everything behind you—rank, wealth, influence, charm of manner, a ready wit—everything but, I fear, the love of Christ crucified. For years I had tried to mould the character and direct the faith of Miss Davenant. I had seen her grow in grace and

charity—she, too, wanted but the final operation of the Redeeming Blood—so abounding in love, so true-hearted, but unsaved—alas that I should say it. To compass her salvation I had devoted hours of intense prayer and pastoral tendance. Is that nothing, think you ?"

"I cannot understand," said Robert, "what all this is meant to lead up to. You seem to have some grudge against me. I should have thought you had already repaid it with interest."

"I do not think I deserve that," said Mr. Cuthbert. "Whatever I did, I did it in the interests of my flock."

"Are you so sure of that ?" said Robert; "even a priest may, I imagine, be deceived, may even deceive himself."

"Lord Helford, hear me out; do not provoke me thus !" said Mr. Cuthbert entreatingly, clasping his hands together.

"Very well," said Robert, "but I seem to have heard most of this before. Remember, my position is this—that you have made infamous and malicious charges for which you have neither evidence nor justification."

"Let me continue," said Mr. Cuthbert. "Not only have I given my worthiest prayers and the deepest purposes of my heart to Miss Davenant's conversion, but——"

"Her conversion ?" said Robert, in a tone of rising anger. "Her conversion from what and to what ? From the innocent and heavenly goodness, which is the goal of all the saints, to a miserable system of dogmas and ceremonies, to the stifling of natural impulses, to cramping inhibitions and superstitious pieties."

"I do not deny," said Mr. Cuthbert, "the natural beauty of Miss Davenant's character—I only say there is a higher wisdom and a purer life."

"Of which you, I suppose," said Robert, "are a striking instance and a worthy pattern."

"No, Lord Helford," said Mr. Cuthbert, "no one

knows better than myself how far short I fall of all this—but when I think what I should have been without it, I shudder at the doom I have escaped. But that is not all. Year after year the image of Miss Davenant has grown more dear and desirable to me. I had hoped, I had dared to hope, that she might come at least to pity me, that she would have given me some nearer and closer kinship with humanity, and that I might have helped her, too, to perceive whence, unknown to herself, she derives the purity and charity of her heart."

Lord Helford surveyed the unhappy man with astonishment. Mr. Cuthbert hurriedly continued.

" You came here—what your purpose was, or what arts you used I know not—but in a day almost all was changed. You were not entitled to claim a maiden's love. You were bound to another, though you had trampled underfoot the claims of human affection. You made her love you—do not dare to say to me that you did not ! Was it done to while away an idle hour, or was it to claim for your own passing amusement the service of a life free and beautiful beyond all others ? You have spoilt her life, Lord Helford. You have put the wild bird of the wood in a gilded cage far from our solace. Are you not ashamed of this ? Do you realize what you have done ? "

" I must decline," said Robert, " to answer any of these insolent questions. What has happened is no concern of yours. You talk to me as if I were kneeling in your confessional. You have had, it seems to me, full and ample opportunity to win Miss Davenant's affection, and you have not succeeded. Your diseased jealousy has led you to translate your own vile and contemptible suspicions into the most preposterous slanders. It is in vain that I deny your cruel falsehoods. You are a despicable scoundrel. If it had not been for Miss Davenant's interposition, I

should have denounced you to your Bishop. Even now, after all your traitorous detraction, you are trying to worm your way into her heart. Go home, and try to see yourself in the light in which others regard you. Until you come to me with a complete withdrawal of your baseless charges, I will have nothing to do with you. You have tried to make all the mischief you could. Be thankful, if you can, that you could do so little."

"Can you not find it in your heart, Lord Helford, to say a gentler word than that to a broken-hearted man?"

"Not one word," said Robert.

"Then God forgive you!" and Mr. Cuthbert, with bowed head and uncertain steps, went on his homeward way.

Robert, left alone, tasted all the bitter and heady exultation of anger abundantly and recklessly satisfied. But this soon died down; and then gradually the slender residue of unpleasant truth that lay behind Mr. Cuthbert's words began to stir and writhe like a torpid worm revived by the sun.

Reason as he would, he did not love Molly with the white-hot passion which had flickered from the depths of Mr. Cuthbert's strained and bloodshot eyes. He had lightly twitched away by a deft touch or two what had been the one hope of an unhappy life. Yet he could not blame himself for this. Molly he was sure would never have yielded herself to Mr. Cuthbert's pious and uncouth importunities—and in any case he would have done anything to save her from such a fate.

No, the fault lay deeper than that. He had won a great gift lightly—what was he going to do with it? Was it his duty at all hazards to shut the light of Molly's love out of his life, on the chance that she would be able to illuminate

some other heart. Such a suggestion would be, he knew, more odious and more ridiculous to Molly even than to himself. And yet their pleasant compact had had this disabling effect on Molly herself.

He did not desire to deceive himself, nor did he for an instant suppose that he was not facing the situation ; and in any case who was to decide ?

His heart went back with a sudden sense of relief to his full London life, and Cynthia's unemotional guardianship. These emotional affairs, so delightful when all went well, that so heightened the beauty and joy of living, gave such a thrill to the humdrum pulse of things, brought with them, it seemed, a strange crop of disturbances and agitations, and diverted the serene current of life into swift eddies and broken torrents. One could never enjoy them—there was always some anxiety, some needless renunciation, some unappeasable appetite to deal with.

He turned at last and went humbly plodding back to Menerdue. His little descent,

" like Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,"

so romantically planned, had brought nothing but confusion and entanglement.

He found Mrs. Davenant and Molly in the drawing-room. Molly was pale and wan, and pathetically disappointed that the visit had been so dismally laid waste. This did indeed rouse Robert out of his melancholy reveries. He sat down beside her, talked lightly and gently, sketched a humorous picture of Mr. Cuthbert, torn between a human desire to apologize and a priestly incapacity for being in the wrong. He implored Molly not to apply to Mr. Cuthbert for any species of comfort. " He is devoted to you, of course—but he doesn't think of how much he

could learn from you, but of how much he could teach you. I had a sight of his dusty apparatus of casuistry and tradition, hanging up in his stronghold—he was itching to take an instrument of torture down, a thumbscrew or a scourge, and try it on you for your good. It would pain him, but he would harden his heart."

" Poor Cubby," said Molly, " I think he is very artificial —a sense of duty struggling with a thoroughly rebellious mind. But he has a heart, Robert—not a large one, but a very fiery one."

Robert smiled, not pleasantly. " He has a thoroughly insincere temperament," he said. " Molly dearest, don't have anything to do with him."

" Not even for his good ? "

" No—everything turns to poison that he touches."

As they sat with the day beginning to darken, the car with its two blazing eyes came suddenly out of the wood. Mrs. Davenant, seized with an inconsequent tolerance, withdrew. Robert caught Molly in his arms, and kissed her in more lover-like fashion than ever.

" You *must* get well, and soon, Molly."

" And I *can* help you, Robert ? "

" Of course ! But don't trouble about that—just be my own dear Molly." She nestled a moment in his arms, and then rose up with a sudden gaiety of courage. They went out together ; and in a moment he was gone. Molly stood at the window till the turn of the road near Polcrello hid the gleam from her sight.

The day darkened with a sudden flush above the shadowy hills and the pale waters of the creek. " Now I shall just flop back into bed again, mother dear ; this has done me good—I shan't be faithless or despondent any more."

XLIX

ROBERT arrived in town early the next morning, after a very broken night in the train. He felt not only tired, but depressed. His affection for Molly, revived by the sight of her, seemed to himself to be stronger than ever ; but he had at the same time an uneasy sense of strain. It had not been part of his original idea that the friendship, the close companionship which he had intended it to be, should ripen into so intense and absorbing a passion. Robert had an overmastering desire for individual freedom. He hated all constraint, all emotional responsibility, all exacting ties. He had fallen completely under the spell of Molly's freshness and charm ; but he now dimly perceived that the extraordinary appeal it had made to him was to a great extent dependent on the fact that there was an almost boyish quality about it, nothing sexual, entangling, engrossing. The arch and provocative tendency of feminine advances, which he had often come within the range of, not only had no attraction for him, but positively repelled him, as seeming to menace his liberty. He had been deeply distressed by Molly's illness, and still more by the tender dependance on him which she had shown. He was not going to fail her ; but he realized that what he had expected was that Molly should be always well, healthy, joyful with a pagan joyousness. He would have married her if he had been free, for her sweet and fragrant attributes, her lively observation, her refreshingly humorous view. But now that something transcendental, mystical, intangible began to mingle with the affair, some sense of an eternal and esoteric relation far

deeper and stranger than any delicious companionship, he experienced a sense of terror, almost disenchantment. It all began to wear a serious aspect which he had not contemplated.

Lady Helford was expected in the course of the day, and he busied himself somewhat wearily with correspondence. But in the course of the morning he received an urgent summons from the Premier. He went off to Downing Street. The Premier received him with great cordiality, and told him that he had received a very bad report of Lord Picton's health—a change had taken place after Robert had left him. The Premier said that he expected that it must end in Lord Picton's resignation. In that case it had been discussed among the heads of the Government who should succeed him. " We agreed," said the Premier, " that within a few years you would probably be the obvious man for the post, but at present we hold that you have not sufficient Cabinet experience, and this we desire to remedy. We shall therefore propose to nominate Thornhill (the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) to succeed Lord Picton, if it becomes unhappily necessary, and to offer you the Duchy with a seat in the Cabinet, on the understanding that you will give Thornhill your co-operation and the benefit of your experience."

Robert expressed his gratitude and assent. It was not exactly unexpected, in the sense that no secret had been made of the fact that he was to enter the Cabinet as soon as possible ; but now that the offer had actually been made, Robert felt all the elation natural to an ambitious and serious-minded man at stepping decisively into the front rank of the political arena.

There followed a short technical discussion on some matters of detail, and Robert was dismissed with a few cordial expressions of confidence and goodwill. He went

to lunch at his club, exultant and gratified beyond the power of words to express. It was just what he would have wished. The new arrangement saddled him with no additional responsibilities, and yet admitted him to the central machine of politics.

When he returned home after going to his office, he was told that Lady Helford had arrived. He went in to see her. She was sitting writing at her table, looking very self-contained and magnificent, but with a shade of severity about her. They exchanged greetings.

" You altered your plans, I hear, Robert. How did you find Lord Picton ? "

" Very ill, I thought ; and I heard this morning from the Premier that he was worse."

" You went to the Davenants ? "

" Yes. I found I could just manage it ; and I am glad I went, because Molly was ill and Mary very anxious."

Cynthia nodded. " Have you any plans for the next day or two ? "

" No, but I have something to tell you."

Robert related his conversation with the Premier. Cynthia dropped her pen and sat listening, her eyes wide open. When he had finished the recital, she rose up quickly and came to him.

" So you are practically in the Cabinet ? "

" If Lord Picton resigns."

" I am sure he will—Robert, it is splendid news ! I have not been so much pleased for years—never in my life, in fact."

Robert smiled. " You have done a great deal to bring it about," he said ; " all this entertaining and seeing people has consolidated my position."

Cynthia smiled delightedly, " I would work my fingers to the bone to help you, Robert."

Robert, deeply touched at her air and expression, stepped to her side, and put his arm through hers. " You have been a good friend to me, Cynthia—it's more than I deserve."

She raised her head, and kissed him lightly on the cheek, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

" You are glad then ? " he said.

" *Glad ?* " she said, " more glad than I can say."

" Well, we must make some plans." He drew her to the table, brought up a chair, and they sketched out some parties and gatherings.

" Of course," he said at last, rising up, " there mustn't be a whisper of this to anyone."

Cynthia smiled and nodded. Robert went to the door, hesitated, and then turning round said :

" You didn't mind my going to Menerdue ? "

" You are free to do as you like, you know ! "

" Yes, but does it vex you ? "

" Why do you want to know ? "

" Because I don't wish to vex you."

" Well," said Cynthia, turning towards him with a smile, " I *was* a little hurt when I heard—I thought we were getting on better. But now, after what you have told me, and after what you have said about not wishing to vex me, I don't mind in the least."

" You need not be vexed. I am very much attached to the Davenants, but that is all."

" Would you like them to come here ? I would be very nice to them."

Robert gave her a quick smile. " Later on, perhaps ; —but Molly is so unwell, that I think they will have to go abroad—thank you, all the same."

" Are you doing anything to-night ? "

" Will *you* be alone ? If so, I would dine here—we

must talk over plans. I haven't any real doubt that I shall be gazetted within the next few days."

"Very well," said Cynthia; "at eight, I suppose?"

Robert went off to his room; he had a great mass of papers to deal with; but he found time to write to Molly. He first told her his news, enjoining secrecy, and giving no names. Then he went on:

This has, of course, made me very happy, and Cynthia, who has just come back, is very much delighted. She suggested, by the way, that you and your mother should come here, and you might consider it. But my dearest Molly, I can't pretend that the thought that you are ill and unhappy does not keep on coming back to my mind, like a little cloud gathering over the sun. I shall not be comfortable till you are well again. I would have given much to have stayed on with you, and to have persuaded you to be well. I shall be furiously busy, but I shall feel all the time, as I used to do at Menerdue, that I have only to look up and find you smiling at me. What would I not give to talk this all over with you. It won't, of course, make much difference to my work, except for the interest of hearing with my own ears how things get settled—and having a say in them myself. Ought one to be so pleased as I am? The proper thing would be to pretend that the only pleasure of it is that it shows I have done my work well. But I should have been just as pleased—perhaps even more so—if I felt that my work had been done badly! Yet how impossible I should have thought it, if nearly twenty years ago, when I left Oxford, a vain and dissatisfied young man, lonely and self-absorbed, I had been told that this *was ahead of me.*

The one thing now needed is that you should be well again. You will let me know your plans; and if you do *go abroad, won't you think of coming here on the way? I don't think you would dislike Cynthia. Your devoted Robert.*

Robert was not pleased with this letter. It seemed to him all through to be insincere and priggish, with a self-satisfied glee for ever breaking in. But he could not rewrite it.

He dined alone with Cynthia, and it did not seem strange. She was a partner and comrade, he felt, in his adventure, and by no means an idle one. Cynthia had many plans and suggestions, including some week-end parties at Wootton Davenant. " You would like the house," she said. " I have really made it very comfortable. I have slept in every bedroom, to see that a guest has everything that can be required. It justs wants a masculine eye ! "

The time passed quickly. She came with him to the library at his request, smoked a cigarette, and made to his surprise and pleasure a curious admission. " I used to think you too clever to succeed—I thought my way was more sensible and better. Now I see that all these undercurrents—I don't profess to understand them—are really needed, and that your way of doing them is right."

" What do you mean by undercurrents ? "

" Oh, books and fancies and things," said Cynthia, waving her hand vaguely. " I am afraid I am very practical, and that isn't enough."

" It's quite enough for me," said Robert.

At which she got up, came over to him, bent down and kissed him—and then went swiftly away. Robert sat long silent, pondering the strange character of women.

L

THE day after Robert's departure, Dr. Grimes came to see Molly, and found her happier, but very far from well. He tried to extract from her some sort of preference. Would she not like to go away ?

" No," said Molly, quite firmly, " I don't in the least want to go away. It makes me shiver to think of it. I don't know what is wrong with me. I used to like doing the same things, but now I always wish I were doing something else. If I go out for a walk, I feel suddenly tired and want to sit down ; and if I go back home, I am restless and want to go out. Whatever I do, I feel bored. It's a case of ' Mary, Mary, quite contrary,' dear Grim. Can't you give me some medicine ? And then I am sure that mother would be even more bored than me by travelling. She likes settled ways and being by herself and reading her book. What *is* the matter with me, Grim ? I hate being a nuisance."

" I'll tell you exactly what is the matter, Molly. Now don't look scared, for if you went to insure your life, you would be classed A1. You are as sound as a bell. But you know the pool at Polcrello under the fir-wood, which only gets filled by a high tide ? It gets staler and duller every day, till the tide comes up again. That is what has happened to you."

" But why should this come on me now ? I used to be perfectly content."

" Well, Molly, the human mind is a curious thing, and you are growing up ; everything went well till your brilliant cousin came down here, and gave you an idea of

the big world, and all the lively things going on. That's the tide, you see. And though you don't know it, the wish to get out for a little into the bigger world is working at the bottom of your mind like yeast. Of course it is more comfortable being here—but you ought to have some adventures. And it is much worse for your mother to sit and see you moping here, than it is even for you to mope."

"I, moping!" said Molly, indignantly. "How dare you, Grim."

"Yes, Miss," said Dr. Grimes, "that is what is happening."

"Well, of course, I'll do *anything*."

"Then tell your mother you would *like* to go—and that will settle it."

Molly put her arm round her old friend's neck and kissed him. "Of course I will," she said; "it isn't often I get such a scolding from you, dear old Grim."

Dr. Grimes, whose eyes were glistening suspiciously, shook his finger at Molly, and said, "No, it is generally the other way—I have a lot of old scores to pay off!"

Matters were soon arranged. Mrs. Davenant had an old friend living in Rome, and suggested that they should go out there, stay with her for a few days, and then go into rooms for a time. It was arranged that Richards should go with them.

Mrs. Davenant was on the whole relieved by the decision. She hated all change, and was much attached to the routine of her life. But she had an adventurous strain in her mind, and she was somewhat seriously alarmed about Molly. Action, she felt, was infinitely preferable to remaining at Menerdue, dallying with an impossible situation. It was a relief, too, to find that Richards received the news with positive glee. That hard-featured woman, who

was devotedly attached to both Mrs. Davenant and Molly, positively thirsted for the fray. " It isn't," she said to Mrs. Tregenna, " that I want to see all the silly things out there that they talk so much of. I've no opinion of foreigners nor of their doings. But Missis for all her fine ways is like a child, and as for Miss Molly, the poor dear does want a change. His lordship is as nice a young man as ever I saw, but he has upset them both—and I shouldn't feel comfortable if I wasn't with them ; I feel equal to any number of them foreigners."

" It would have to be a many people as you weren't equal to," said Mrs. Tregenna, admiringly. " You've that spirit ! As for me, I can mind the house, and wish for your happy return. Give me England and wholesome food."

Molly began to feel the better for the preparations that had to be made ; and the farewell visits she had to pay were not without the consolation of perceiving that she would at least be missed. Aunty Pel begged her on no account to attend any Roman Catholic services ; " I'm told by them that know that the poison of asps is under their feet, Miss Molly, and enters in by the ear and the eye. If only my lamb had a deeper-laid foundation and a more blessed hope, I should have no fears—if I could but see my lamb within the fold ! "

" You needn't be afraid, Aunty," said Molly ; " you know I don't care about being shepherded ! "

" Ah, but my lamb doesn't know that the dear Lord's commandments are exceeding broad."

Mrs. Davenant and Molly debated whether they should go to Helford House. Molly was very much against it, but Mrs. Davenant thought it would regularize matters. They told Robert of their plans, and a day or two later came a very cordial little note from Cynthia begging that they would spend a couple of nights with them in London, and

saying that they could do exactly as much or as little as they liked.

" My respect for Cynthia grows," said Mrs. Davenant. " She has no nerves, of course, and I daresay her feelings lack delicacy ; but she is a fine tactician. I am afraid of Cynthia, I don't quite know why."

" We had better go," said Molly rather wearily ; " it will put us in the wrong, if we don't ! "

They accepted ; and Molly had her reward in a note from Robert.

I am so thankful, darling Molly, that you are coming to us. I know how trying you must have found it to say " yes," but I couldn't bear to think of your being in a hotel ; and really you will find Cynthia truly friendly. She has said to me how much she desires it. She says it is absurd that she shouldn't even be allowed to know you. She is really and truly a good-natured woman. There have been some opportunities for both her and myself to lose our tempers of late—people speculating rather impertinently on my political prospects. They think me a brilliant amateur. But Cynthia's good sense is marvellous. It isn't that she knows what to say, but she knows exactly when to say nothing, and is imperturbably good-humoured. It is very unsettling living on the brink of changes ; but that doesn't matter. I couldn't let my dear Molly go off to Italy without a sight of her. I shall try to be as free as I can, and we will find something pleasant to do for the one day we shall have together. I am glad it is to be Rome. Rome is unlike any other place in the world, and has something to say to one in any and every mood. Bless you, dearest Molly. I can't tell you how much you are in my mind.

LI

ALL was at last arranged, and boxes packed with infinite precision and precaution for a three months' stay in Italy. Molly had paid many farewell visits. She had never been away for so long from home, and it seemed like a deep trench cut across her life. Mrs. Davenant had received farewell visits, but had not paid them. Her line of reply, in return for compliments and regrets, was that human beings owed it to themselves, if they could afford it, not to think worse of other inhabited regions of the globe than they were compelled to do ; though in casting a backward glance upon the receding coasts of Britain she would feel that she was saying a long farewell to even the phantom of freedom. But these utterances were more reverenced than understood.

The last afternoon Molly determined to consecrate to one more visit to the sacred well. It was a cool and fresh day, still and tranquil, but with nothing languorous about it. The sun warmed without burning the chilled soil ; but the spring had been delayed by cold dry weather, and Molly had a sense of the earth being crowded with innumerable folded spires of bud and leaf, waiting for the command to enter upon the air of heaven, as a child might awake before the dawn, and think contentedly of the coming day. Robert's letters, which were frequent, and a cordial note from Cynthia, and the affection which her departure had evoked in her neighbours, and perhaps, too, the bustle of preparation, had for the time banished her depression, and she felt a little ashamed of her descent into darkness. She went slowly up the woodland road to a

point at which she could still see the roofs of Menerdue below her, with the smoke going up from the chimneys, and beyond, the terrace and the boats at anchor in their pool—rarely used of late—and the brimming creek beyond.

It seemed infinitely pathetic to her to survey the little place which had so faithfully and quietly sheltered her youth, and had been so equable and patient, however joyful and sad she had been. She thought of Robert, how wonderful his advent had been, and of all the ecstatic delights and opening visions that his presence had given her—whatever might happen, she felt she could be grateful for that! But looking ahead through the years, the path of her life seemed to run into the mist. It seemed to lead nowhere in particular. Must she, she wondered, make up her mind to a long and uneventful life at Menerdue with the same familiar cares and occupations stretching out easily and comfortably before her? Her heart gave a rebellious thrill at the thought. She could not acquiesce in all the strong impulses and energies which she felt within her being thus dedicated to inactivity and solitude. She could not philosophize about it like her mother; she could not pursue the idea of beauty like Mr. Temperley—beauty seemed to her to be only the last happy relish of contentment, not a thing which could be independently adored.

The woods were still and silent to-day, regarding her, she thought, with an amused and elderly air, as a kindly nurse might watch the urgent childish dramas of her young charges; and though she could not put it into words, she felt that her own intense claims for fulness of life might seem both hectic and pretentious to the brooding serried ranks of the ancient woodland.

Bryn the spaniel was her only companion. But instead of being animated to-day, as he generally was, by provocative scents and anxious forebodings, he was dull and

servile, and his one preoccupation seemed to be to avoid entanglements and to keep his feet dry. He followed droopingly at her heels.

She was soon at the well, and drank of it for love and fond remembrance; but the water of it to-day seemed both cold and bitter, and as she drank, the little window-slit in the ruined gable seemed to peer at her like an eye through the shrouding fingers of a hand.

But the place evoked a poignant memory of Robert, his quick gestures, his petulant replies, his gentle eyes which always seemed to her to entreat for both patience and sympathy. How much, she thought, of either she could have given him! She did not hope to share his intellectual visions, his political dreams; but how much she could have done to cheer him, what a joy it would have been to interpose her hopeful self between him and the gathering pressure of the world. It came upon her with a sudden agony, the thought of Cynthia doing for the sake of her own narrow ambitions, the very tasks which she herself would have done for pure love and service. Were life and love and worship only given that they might be frustrated?

If only, she felt, she could have done something of the same kind for her mother! But her mother seemed so armed against any assault, so contemptuous of weakness, so mysteriously majestic, that there was nothing that she could even offer for sacrifice.

A sudden fear came down upon her mind, a curtain of blankness. Could there be really any truth in the dreary theories of God and humanity, as expounded by Mr. Cuthbert, an impersonal, unreasonable tryanny, as it had seemed to her, surrounded by a network of doctrine and ceremony, discipline applied not by a reluctant hand, but with an ugly mechanical precision, without any touch of intimacy or recognition?

No, there was to be no comfort to-day by the sacred spring; perhaps the dirty, hairy hermit, with his vigils and orisons was right after all, and that was the way to the whimsical heart of God?

She came softly and slowly across the hillside through the wood, vexed with herself that she should feel so little love after all for the place where she had made her home. And it seemed like the culmination of her dismay when on emerging into the road, where the tracks divided to Boscarnon and Menerdue, to see the bleak figure of Mr. Cuthbert standing like a dusky sentinel at the edge of the covert. He had seen her, she saw, or she would have dived again into the wood; moreover Bryn, who viewed Mr. Cuthbert with undisguised aversion, uttered a low subterranean growl, more reflective than combative.

Mr. Cuthbert, however, to-day, looked so worn and woebegone that Molly was melted with pity at the spectacle of so unsightly a man. He came forwards with a petitioning air. "I guessed, Miss Molly," he said in his most ingratiating tones, "that you had gone on a pilgrimage. Think you not that the blessed Bybi's cell, what remains of it, has a strangely tranquillizing effect. I have often stood bareheaded, where the sacred altar must have stood! Indeed, I have sometimes framed a hope that there under the open sky in that consecrated space so wild with wood I might have celebrated the Holy Mysteries, with us two the sole recipients—a priest's dream!"

Molly shook her head, not unkindly. The fancy seemed to her at once extravagant and dull.

"Fain would I," said Mr. Cuthbert, "pay one last visit to your mother and yourself, ere you embark. I would not have the thought that I had failed in my pastoral care to linger in your mind by alien shores."

"Oh, Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, "let us talk plain

English now. You would feel more secure if I escorted you, and so you waited for me here—is not that it? So come along."

Mr. Cuthbert lingered; "But Mrs. Davenant's last words to me at Menerdue were that I was not to come uninvited?"

"Oh, that was only a rapier-thrust," said Molly, "mother's way of fighting, you know. She will have forgotten all about that long ago."

They walked together in silence, and Molly was aware that Mr. Cuthbert's hands were clasped together, and that he was struggling to give utterance to something. In a moment he broke out:—

"Miss Molly, let me say but one word. The last few months have been the saddest time of my whole life—whether I acted or remained inactive, I seemed to myself to be doing wrong. I need not rehearse the whole sad catalogue. I have felt myself at times to be racked and distraught with anguish, and I have yielded to many unworthy schemes and subterfuges. But can you not have a little pity on me? Our own friendship, if I may dare use the word, which seemed to me to be quietly maturing, was the dearest thing in my life; in the space of a short week it was torn away from me: I was made contemptible in my sight and yours, an object of ridicule, a grotesque simulacrum. My ministries became as dust and ashes to me. I was eaten up with a zeal, which I now fear to have been misguided, to cleanse and defend my fold. Doubts of my own sanity, almost of my own identity, doubts of Holy Church, of God himself assailed me. Oh, Miss Molly, I have suffered as I pray that neither you nor anyone dear to you may ever suffer—and the stripes laid upon me had no healing power for myself or others. Can you not in your blessed innocence forgive me?"

" Of course I can," said Molly, extending her hand. " I am truly and deeply sorry that you have had so much to bear. I mustn't pretend that you have not caused us distress, too—but when anyone speaks as you have done, of course it is all at an end—and I only hope that I have not unconsciously made things worse. But let us put it all aside and never think of it again."

" Dear Miss Molly," said Mr. Cuthbert, at length releasing her hand, " I thank you a thousand times for your gracious and noble goodness. But shame and contrition must be mine for many a long day. I must eat ashes as it were bread and mingle my drink with weeping."

" Oh, Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, " please don't talk like that—it doesn't mean anything real—it only makes a real thing seem absurd."

" I am rebuked," said Mr. Cuthbert ; " what I should rather say is that though you forgive me, I cannot forgive myself."

" But don't you think," said Molly, " that what we have got to do is to *get on* somehow—we can't go about with all our old mistakes hanging round our necks, and for ever going into corners to count them. Can't one do something new? "

Mr. Cuthbert shook his head ; " Think you not that patience must have her perfect work ? " he said.

" Oh, but there isn't *time*," said Molly ; " one would have to live to be three hundred years old, to do all this repenting."

They were now at the door of Menerdue. Mr. Cuthbert showed signs of meditating flight. But this Molly would not permit ; he was conducted into the drawing-room, with Bryn uttering sounds like an organ pedal. " I have brought Mr. Cuthbert to tea," said Molly, " to say good-bye. He has made so many apologies to me that I can't repeat them. But it is all right mother, isn't it ? "

" I consider Mr. Cuthbert's coming an act of high courtesy," said Mrs. Davenant, who was reading, flanked by the tea-table. " He will break bread with us, I trust ; and if I mention salt in the same connection, it has a purely symbolic significance."

Mr. Cuthbert sat awkwardly down, and a conversation of infinite complexity followed. Nothing, so far as Molly could see of any intelligible substance was said at all. Mr. Cuthbert related stories of Saint Macarius and the Abbot Turgesius of infinite absurdity. It seemed that the cheeks of Turgesius had never been free from tears for the space of six calendar months, while Macarius had subsisted, in consequence of some peccadillo, for the better part of a year, on boiled hyssop—though, as Mr. Cuthbert smilingly said, it was impossible to conjecture what the precise plant was, hyssop being a generic term for herbage of a rueful character.

Mrs. Davenant, not to be outdone, assured Mr. Cuthbert that one of her subordinate reasons for going to Rome was to be able to study the Legends of the Saints with the right admixture of local colour, which Mr. Cuthbert said was very wise.

It struck Molly as so inconceivably ludicrous that two people should conduct a parting interview on these lines, that she was seized by hidden mirth, the signs of which were interpreted by Mrs. Davenant as testifying to some physical disorder.—So Mr. Cuthbert beat a retreat, with many low bows, accompanied, as Mrs. Davenant said, by several hesitating attempts to pronounce a benediction.

" How *could* you go on like that, mother dear ? " said Molly, " the poor man was dying to find out if you had forgiven him ? "

" Communication on that and all other points with Mr. Cuthbert is out of the question, Molly."

" But it needn't have been a sort of farce."

" It was enough for him to be here—the words matter little—he was assured, I could not say of our goodwill, but of our tolerance—it is more than he deserves."

" Does anyone deserve anything, Mother ? "

" Yes, a good whipping sometimes ! "

LII

THEY had determined that they would not stay more than three nights in town, and they arrived in the evening.

The journey had been for Molly a time of strange visions and memories. She was not much used to travelling, and if she had been well and happy, the view of the changing countryside would have been an engrossing delight. But now it was full of confused pain. Her book lay unopened on her knee, and the scenes through which they passed—the downs, the woodlands, the river valleys, the quiet pastoral country, all seemed to mock her as a succession of beautiful places where happiness was possible and even inevitable for all but herself; and the dark house-fronts of London, the forest of chimneys crowding into the smoke-stained sky, and cutting with sharp shadows the glimmering pools of light far down in the west, oppressed her with a sense of darkened and labour-driven humanity, accustomed as she was to the sea-flooded creek, the lonely wolds, the leisurely village life.

Cynthia received them in a very kindly and unembarrassed way, and it was clear to Molly that her mother's hostility to Cynthia, never very pronounced, was fading into an admiring respect. Mrs. Davenant had, in fact, a great regard for technique, and felt that, barren and in a sense shallow as Cynthia's rôle was, it was being performed with a masterly nicety. Robert was at the House, but was expected back for dinner. Molly, however, had overtaxed her scanty energies, and retired ruefully and apologetically to bed, where dinner was brought her. However, all was

well. Mrs. Davenant was clearly thirsting for a taste of social life of a richer kind than she had been used to, and Richards, reviving the memory of far-away country-house-visits, was full of dignity. Just before eight, there came a little tap at the door, where Molly lay in a half-indolent content, too tired even to think. It was Cynthia, attired with a quiet magnificance. She came and stood beside the bed and smiled down at Molly. " Don't be afraid of incursions," she said, " it is only that Robert has arrived and sends you his love, and would just like to peep in for five minutes if you care to receive callers."

" Why, of course ! " said Molly, adding rather inconsequently, " you are very good to me."

" And I shall say, ' Why, of course,' too ! " said Cynthia. " My dear Molly, what kind of a dragon did you think me ? "

Molly murmured something, and Cynthia bent down and kissed her cheek, saying, " You don't know how old you make me feel ! "

" I don't make you *look* old, at all events," said Molly.

A minute or two later Robert came in. Molly sat up in bed. He laid his arm round her shoulders, and she clasped his hand in both her own.

" You seem fated only to see me in bed now, Robert."

" Well, you are *here*, at all events, dearest Molly."

" Yes, I hope I shall be more in my right mind to-morrow."

" To-morrow I am very busy, dear ; but we have got Lord Percival dining here to-morrow to amuse your mother ; and Friday I have kept free—we'll go somewhere, you and I."

" Oh, Robert, it *is* good to see you—and Cynthia has been so good and kind."

" She is nicer than you thought ? "

" She could not have been nicer."

" She really wants to know you, Molly. She knows what you are to me."

" But not what you are to me."

" Yes, I think so ! "

They sat in silence for a minute. A solemn gong hummed through the big house.

" There, I must go, Molly. Sleep well, my comfort." He kissed her gently on the hair, and waved his hand.

At dinner Mrs. Davenant was in a mood of high and gracious solemnity. She questioned Robert closely on politics and made trenchant criticisms. When the servants left the room, Cynthia said to Mrs. Davenant, " I envy you your knowledge of affairs—it is marvellous; I cannot carry these party measures in my head ! I wish I could talk to Robert like that. And I must say one more thing—you are a great diplomatist. I know that you know all about Robert's prospects, and yet you haven't said a single word that would betray it. I was hoping to catch you out."

Mrs. Davenant smiled in high good humour : " Ah, I have nothing to do down in Cornwall but to sharpen my wits."

After dinner Cynthia made Robert carry off Mrs. Davenant for a talk. " For half an hour perhaps ? " Mrs. Davenant said. " I know that your time here is worth much more than down at Menerdue."

Robert inquired anxiously about Molly. Mrs. Davenant assured him she was better. " She went quite cheerfully through all the little partings."

" And she seems to approve of Cynthia."

" My dear Robert, Cynthia is marvellous. She has made me feel at home in a moment."

" Tell her that," said Robert ; " Cynthia does a great deal for me, and gets very little praise for it."

" Women don't expect praise ! They are sustained by their sense of duty. Besides they *see* things, about which men have to hold cross-examinations."

" You think Cynthia is satisfied ? "

" I think she is a very happy woman—she seems to me to be able to wait. That is the best gift in the world."

Mrs. Davenant went back to the drawing-room. She pleaded fatigue. Cynthia went with her to her room. " You have made this place very magnificent," Mrs. Davenant said.

" It's a comfortable house, certainly. I suppose you remember it well ? "

" Yes, at one time, when I first married. No one could have called it comfortable then."

" I don't forget that you might be mistress here," said Cynthia, " and Robert and myself poor relations."

" Ah," said Mrs. Davenant, " Molly and I are much more suited for the latter rôle than you and Robert."

Cynthia winced a little at this, and Mrs. Davenant said, " Forgive me for saying that—it was ungenerous, after all your kindness. I was telling Robert that you had made me feel at home at once."

" How do you think he is ? "

" I never saw him look better—or happier."

" He feels Molly's illness a good deal."

" In his own way, yes," said Mrs. Davenant, " but he doesn't indulge his regrets. He values serenity above all things."

Cynthia looked at her, but did not speak.

" I shall just peep in on Molly," said Mrs. Davenant. " Good-night, my dear Cynthia,—I see I'm going to have two very agreeable days," and Mrs. Davenant bestowed on her a kiss in the manner of the Queen of Sheba.

The next day was a quiet one. Molly awoke feeling

singularly well and cheerful. Her big comfortable room, looking out on a strange flagged courtyard, with vases in blackened alcoves, seemed to her romantic, and not less the muffled roar of London in the air. But what made her happy was the demeanour of Cynthia. She had expected something cautious, indifferent, even hostile, and found instead an apparently simple-minded and kindly woman. Richards was full to the brim of the comfort of the house and the genial magnificence of Cynthia's rule. " His lordship does nothing, Miss, about the house."

" You would hardly expect to find him dusting."

Richards laughed, pleased at Molly's improved spirits.

" No, miss, not that—but he doesn't even see about the wine. But if his lordship does give an order or ask for anything, it has to be done then and there. Nothing makes her ladyship angry except his lordship's orders not being attended to immediate."

" And they like her ? "

" Yes, miss, they like her, though she keeps an eye on everything. They say she's as fine as a queen. What do you think, miss, of her ladyship stopping me in the passage, and asking me if I'd got *everything* I wanted. ' Miss Richards, you have only to say the word, and it's brought you straight,' she says, or words to that effect."

Cynthia looked in upon Molly in the course of the morning. " Why, Molly, how fresh and bright you look ! It's only about plans. I have sent your mother out to do some shopping. I thought this afternoon we might take a drive, and if you are not tired, go down to the House. Robert will give us some tea there, and we may hear him make a statement. Lord Percival is coming to dinner—quite an amusing man."

Molly eagerly concurred. Then Cynthia rather diffi-

dently came and sat down beside her and took her hand. "I don't want to have an explanation, Molly dear," she said, "I have no gift of speech—I get on all right with words of one syllable. But I do want you to know how glad I am of your friendship with Robert. It makes all the difference to him to be understood and replied to—I can't do that. And even if we disagree about other things, you and I can clasp hands on that, can't we?—to make him happy. He is highly strung, of course, and easily put off by small things; and we must keep him free from worries, each in our own way. I didn't understand that at first, and I was myself very wilful and headstrong, and behaved badly about his mother, and hurt Robert in many ways. He isn't one of those men who makes a row and then forgets. He hates a row, and has himself very well in hand, and things add up, till there is an explosion—but you know all this better than I do. But now I am very proud of him; and then I can never thank you enough for having given him back to me—Robert told me—and I am very grateful to you, dear Molly."

Molly's eyes filled with tears. It was such a simple statement. She drew Cynthia down to her, and something in their hearts seemed suddenly to clasp hands.

"You know how fond I am of him, Cynthia?" she said.

"Yes, dear, and I am very sorry—you know what I mean—I'm not sorry that he is fond of you, nor surprised—he loves you very much. But I see how hard it must be."

The day passed happily. The House of Lords seemed very august and appalling to Molly. The apparent absence among the peers not only of all interest in the proceedings, but of all knowledge as to what was going on, impressed her with a sense of cruelty. A dull speaker discoursed, striving in vain not against interruption, but loud indifferent conversation. Robert rose, and there was a hush.

He made his little statement in clear tones, seemingly quite unembarrassed, and with a pleasant touch of humour. There was no applause, but a murmur of satisfaction.

In the evening, Lord Percival turned out to be an unexpectedly entertaining man. Mrs. Davenant required several explanations from him and criticized them trenchantly. "Why, Mrs. Davenant," he said good-humouredly, " you seem to know more about these things than I do. I suspect you of being a Whig."

" I study public questions," said Mrs. Davenant, " with a disgustful kind of curiosity. I hardly dare venture near the rim of the crater. The sulphurous smells, the whizzing stones appal me. It seems a polite kind of Inferno ! "

" Ah, well, yes, to people like myself," said Lord Percival, " who have had to struggle up aloft—but not to our friend Helford, who walks in upon the scene like one of Milton's angels, serene and inviolable."

" Save for the honour of the family," said Mrs. Davenant, " I should feel bound to question that statement. But you have me at your mercy ! "

" That's more dignified than the way you had me, as they say, upon toast."

" A farinacious doom is preferable ! "

After dinner, Lord Percival continued his stately tournament with Mrs. Davenant. Robert drew his chair close up to Molly's and they talked together in low tones. " Your mother is in colossal form," he said. " Surely it is not right that she should be buried in the country ? You will have to come and keep house with us for the season, when you get back from Rome."

Molly smiled ; " How would Cynthia like that ? " she said.

" She would be enchanted—she has fallen head over ears in love with you, Molly—nor am I in the least surprised. Things have turned out twice as well as I had hoped—a thing that seldom happens to me."

" Oh, Robert, you seem to be in Paradise ! "

LIII

THE next day Robert contrived to be free after lunch. Cynthia took Mrs. Davenant off to pay some calls, Mrs. Davenant, in the character of the rustic *ingénue*, having expressed a desire to penetrate, however superficially, a corner of what she persisted in calling " the social machine."

Mrs. Davenant was enjoying herself greatly. Never had Molly seen her so artificial, so majestic, so ironical—and yet seldom had her mother been so completely herself. " Your mother is a *dramatist*, Molly," Robert said to her. " I never realized before that her deepest and strongest instinct is to dramatize life, to act up to her ideal."

" That curious desire inside one," said Molly, " which keeps on nagging at one to behave like something one knows one is not—I wonder what it is ? "

" It is the power by which we live," said Robert ; " it is responsible for all pretentiousness and priggishness, for a good deal of kindness and geniality—it is the thought of what we might be."

" It's a sign of health," said Molly ; " since I have been ill I have realized what it is not to care how one behaves ; not to think it worth while to be anything but the cross and ugly thing that one is."

They went off together to Richmond Park, and leaving the car strolled about the open glades, with a far-off view of rich woodlands and waters. The trees were in a mist of green, and the ferns were thrusting up hundreds of little clenched fists on the edges of the clumps. " How determined and rebellious they all look ! " said Robert.

They walked in silence listening to the chirping of the birds and the loud mirthless laugh of a woodpecker hidden in the trees.

" Robert, dear," said Molly, at last, " I have been thinking a great deal about you in the last twenty-four hours—don't you know how *fast* one thinks on some days ? But I have found Cynthia so very different from anything I ever expected—so kind and good-humoured and strong—that I feel very happy about you. I have learnt a great deal in this last year—I have made some dreadful blunders, and I have found out that life is a much bigger affair than I ever dreamed. I feel as if I had spent all my time looking down into the turf, and thinking the world was all like that —and then I lift up my head and see the trees and the sky."

" And Cynthia ? "

" Cynthia is a bigger person than I thought—something, I feel, has made her bigger. She doesn't fuss and worry about trifles as I do. She just *does* things."

" Yes, she is very practical."

" And now it seems to me so childish and absurd that I should have fancied, as I did—you don't mind my talking like this—that I was sheltering and guarding you from Cynthia, and making up to you for her—it makes me feel such a little fool. But I don't mind that ; because though I should never have behaved as I did if I had known what she was, it at all events has given *you* to me, and me to you. And we *can* remain friends, can't we ? I don't think *you* knew what Cynthia was like, did you ? I am not sure that you know even now."

" Yes, Molly, I have some idea—but it is you who have shown me ; and as to remaining friends, I can't do without you, dear Molly. There's a big part of me that stifles in the atmosphere of politics and society in which I live. I don't mean that in a superior way at all, because politics

have got a very big side to them, and many of the people I live with have very fine qualities. But these people don't see my real self—even Cynthia doesn't—and I love you, Molly, in a way that I don't love anyone else, and never shall. I have no secrets from you, no pose for you, no reserve. I shouldn't mind telling you the meanest and basest things I have done and thought—you would have no use for them, and I should know I was forgiven beforehand. I think that Cynthia would be as ready to forgive me—but she wouldn't understand, and I should have to explain and argue. I feel as if the world was made just for us two, and that whatever happened, I should never lose you. It isn't a question of being worthy of it or unworthy of it—nothing of that sort matters when the knowledge is there."

Molly put her arm gently in his and said, " Don't say any more, Robert, dearest. It is just what I feel myself though I couldn't have put it into words. But knowing it, I can go forwards, and you won't be surprised at anything I do."

" What are you thinking of doing, Molly ? "

" Oh, nothing particular so far ! But don't you see, Robert, that we have somehow given each other the freedom we both needed ? "

" It all sounds rather bigamous," said Robert, after a little silence ; " rather like the Shelleys."

" What did they do ? "

" Oh, when Shelley went off with his second wife, he asked his first wife to come and travel with them."

Presently he said, " What do you feel about going abroad ? "

" I don't think I need it any more ; but I mean to enjoy it, and it will be good for mother. Our roots had got a little tangled."

" I expect you will go on making discoveries."

" I don't feel as if there could be any more ! " They walked on talking inconsequently of many things.

" With all due regard for Cynthia's noble qualities," said Robert, smiling, " I wish I had met you first."

" You can't expect me to disagree—but I am not sure that we aren't really too much alike, Robert. I should have been so anxious for you to do exactly what you liked, that I shouldn't have known what was best for you, like Cynthia. You want a good, solid alcove round you, to show off your proportions, not a trailing clematis."

" You're a very picturesque talker, Molly, at times."

" I see likenesses—there's something very statuesque about you, you know."

" Well, beloved, we must be getting back to the alcove."

" What would you say, Robert, if I were to become religious in Rome ? "

Robert made a little grimace. " Do you feel like that ? "

" Yes, I think there is something behind all this, which I don't understand. Mother knows, Cubby in his way knows."

" It doesn't do Cubby much good."

" Yes, Robert, it makes him very unhappy."

" Serve him right."

" No, Robert—there *is* something that waits and watches and doesn't interfere much. Cubby sees it—he would be torn in pieces by his demons, if he didn't ! You and I don't see it. Do you remember the night we talked about the stars ? "

" How long ago it seems, Molly ! I was just beginning to see what a darling you were."

" I won't bother about it now—but I shall write to you."

" Yes, write every day if you can."

" But you mustn't write to me—just a scribble every now and then."

They drove back almost in silence, happy in each other's proximity. " Our best day, I think," said Molly, as they neared the house, " I don't feel that you are stolen goods any more."

They went off early the next morning. Cynthia and Robert saw them off. " Mind, Molly dear," said Cynthia, just as they were parting, " the moment you are ready to come back, you must come and spend a long time with us."

" You two propose to hold up the hands of Robert, like Aaron and Hur ? " said Mrs. Davenant, severely. " It seems to me rather a scandal. Never mind—you have given me a splendid time, Cynthia, and I shall soon be found adhering to the walls of Helford House like a limpet. And now we are going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, to fall among thieves."

The train rolled out of the station, the steam thundering and volleying up to the glass roof.

" Robert, I like your taste in relations," said Cynthia. " I wish they were going to stay with all my heart. Molly is a darling, and Mary is as good as a play."

" She knows her Bible well," said Robert, smiling, " but I must say, Cynthia, *you* have done us all a good turn. How is it that everything prospers so in your hands ? "

" I'm not in the way then ? " said Cynthia with a smile.

" You *are* the way ! " said Robert. " Look here, don't let anyone come to tea this evening—I want to have a talk with you. Now I must fly to the office. We are getting very full up there with Picton away."

" No news, I suppose ? "

" He is said to be a little better—but it's only a question of a week or two." He saw her into the car, waved his hand and dived into the crowd.

LIV

Mrs. Davenant to Lady Helford

Rome.

My dear Cynthia,

You were very good to us both in town, and I enjoyed my visit more than I can well express : the only thing that has since caused me some regret is the reflection that I should have been considerably better and happier if I had come more often to London and seen some interesting people, instead of idling at Menerdue and trying to believe I was a philosopher. That is a very poor substitute for the real thing.

Not only did I like your company, but you made me feel I could trust you. So I am going to write to you plainly about what I can only call this unhappy affair. I was surprised to find that you did not seem in the least degree jealous of Molly, as you might well have been, and I admired you for this; and indeed, you made Molly love and trust you.

I think you may be glad to know that I am sure that Robert never deliberately made love to Molly, though he did so without intending it : neither did he fall in love with Molly in a serious way. When he came to us he was very sad and lonely ; and he found in Molly an extremely charming, guileless and affectionate companion, gay, sympathetic and quite unusually unreserved. I thought at first that a friendship might be good for them both ; but I blame myself for not seeing how it would end. And it ended by Molly falling entirely in love with Robert—and no wonder—he is extraordinarily charming.

Then there was nothing to be done. I might have taken her away, of course, but I think it would almost have broken her

heart. But I was indolent—I called it to myself trusting in God, but that was only a base excuse. Robert was very good to her. But I could see that he was bewildered by the turn things had taken. You see Molly was to him like a delightful younger sister, whom he could pet to his heart's content ; and then they are very much alike in mind, and care about the same things ; and I want you to know that they have both behaved well, much better than I could have behaved under the same circumstances.

But now what is to happen ? I think it would make Robert very unhappy to be cut off from seeing Molly. But I naturally think more about Molly ; and I think it might kill her to be deprived of Robert. She is much happier now that she has seen you ; but I don't think she is likely to find anyone just at present to occupy the first place in her heart, though she might do a Quixotic thing out of pity ; pity is almost stronger in Molly than love.

I want you to realize how much I care about Molly. I don't care at all easily for people, and if I do care, I care with a fierceness of which I am almost ashamed.

I write all this because I want you really to understand how things are. I feel that you have been hardly used, and I don't want you to have any shadow in your mind about this business. There is no one else who knows the facts but myself, and I look upon it as a duty, and now that I know you as something more than a duty, to tell you how unbelievably well they have both behaved. If either of them had appealed to the other's pity, or tried to set fire to the fuel, anything might have happened. But there has been nothing of the kind.

And all this leads up to the one thing I feel I must also say —and this is that Robert loves you. I am certain of it. He depends on you, he could not do without you, and you have won from him a much deeper affection than he ever gave you at first. I can't tell you how much I admire the way you have

handled it all. You have gone quietly ahead, claimed nothing, asked for nothing, and you will very soon have your reward. But he must find it all out for himself. You are a better wife for Robert than ever Molly would have been. Molly would have spoiled him and effaced herself too much, and I doubt if they would have been happy together—there are difficult traits in Robert ; he is sensitive and self-absorbed, and needs to be made to think about other people.

If he does *find out, or rather* when *he does, Molly will not be jealous. She is the most reasonable creature I know, and has a really extraordinary power of seeing other people's point of view and of acquiescing in it. I do not see what is going to come out of it all. The road goes down into the valley. I know, of course, that what my Molly wants is a home of her own ; but this can't be done by taking thought. I know that you will be kind and gentle about it all ; and I am only thankful that you have won her heart already.*

We are very comfortably settled here with my old friend, Lady Carver. She seems quite disposed to keep us, so we shall be here for the present, and Molly seems interested. My love to Robert and yourself.

Your affectionate,
Mary Davenant.

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Dearest Robert,

We are safely established here and Lady Carver is an old darling. She has got a flat rather high up in a house near the Pincian (?) (I'm not good at picking up names)—a place you see in pictures with two ilex trees over a fountain. There's a wide view over the whole city. I like the big rather bare rooms very much ; and I have got a huge bedroom, which is also a sitting-room, and a little room out of it where Richards sleeps.

I spend most of my time with opera-glasses, and I am afraid I am more interested in the funny things that go on on the house-roofs down below, the odd people who bob out and put strange objects out to dry, than I am in the buildings ; and I like the warm narrow streets and the clattering cobbles and the prodigious smells which can't be disentangled. But I am not going to make a guide-book letter.

You mustn't think of me, dearest Robert, as being unhappy. Indeed, since I have seen you and Cynthia in your great house—I love Cynthia, by the way, and can't think why I was ever afraid of her—but having seen you, I begin to feel two things ; one, that supposing everything had been different, I could never have been much use to you in the way you live. I don't think a big house like yours could be lived in at all, unless one could take it all for granted and live without thinking much about it. It seemed to me like a fairy palace with unseen machinery. I should be in a perpetual panic. Of course, I didn't meet a crowd of people there ; but I feel that they come and go and take everything for granted, and let you see just as much of their real selves as they choose, and no more. But I can't know people like that—I want to know everything about them down to the smallest details. I don't say or suppose that it is as artificial as it seems, but I think I should die of curiosity to know what all the people were really *doing, and I should ask all sorts of terrible questions which would make you wince. I'm a country mouse, in fact, and you are a town mouse.*

Well, then, dearest Robert, I think that Cynthia is really splendid. I felt her to be a friend at once ; and I think there is something big and patient about her. She seems to me to have learnt something by experience, and I don't ever do that. But she isn't as happy as she deserves to be.

Don't think that this means that I don't love you as well as ever ; I do ; but I also feel you to be a kind of prince

(though you don't know it) when I am nothing but a beggar-maid. You were just your dear self to me, and you gave me the sense that I could give you something, though you can and do give me far more than I can ever give you.

It hasn't altered my love, but there is a change in the quality of it. I am prouder than ever of being your friend ; but I have lost the silly sense that I had of being so important to you.

I am going to be more sensible. I want you just as much as ever and at every moment ; but I do now see that your life couldn't be mine ; and I am only thankful that I did see dimly that this was so, and that you couldn't be separated from your life for my pleasure.

I won't write more now, but I shall soon have more to tell you : what I now do rejoice in is that nothing has yet separated us, and that Cynthia, who might have the right to do so if she chose, doesn't seem to want to annihilate me at all !

Your more than loving Molly.

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Robert, dearest,

I must just tell you about to-day. We went out all three of us by tram to Frascati. The plain through which we went was beautiful, as if it had been washed with colour made of melted jewels ; and we dawdled up a hill among chestnut woods, and here and there a ruin, and came out by a little copse, all full of wild cyclamens—how sweet they smelt—like little rose-tipped butterflies to look at, perched at all sorts of whimsical angles—there we sat down in the sun, and over the high plain a little town far away climbed up a rock like a sort of horn. I wished you had been with us, if only that I might have told you how happy I was, how endlessly grateful for the astonishing fact that you find something in me to love. I felt

for the first time for months that all would come well somehow, that you would find happiness and that I should not lose you.

Mother is very happy out here. She questions Lady Carver incessantly about the dogmas of the Church of Rome—Lady C. is a Catholic, or calls herself one, and gives very unsatisfactory answers. " I cannot understand why you became a Catholic, Sylvie," said mother, " you seem to be totally unacquainted with your own creed." " You don't become *a Catholic, dear Mary. You only find you* are *one." " A sort of white magic ! " says mother. Then mother asks about politics and social questions, and Lady Carver says she will ask Monsignor Burt to dinner to be catechized. " It's no good coming to* me *for information, Mary ! You might have known that ! " " I fear you have little intellectual curiosity, Sylvie. I don't ask for your conclusions—I want facts." " Ah, then you must ask Monsignor—I can't get farther than conclusions." And then a pretty boy half in rags, drives goats past, tinkling and whinnying, and comes and asks us shrilly for money, as if we were withholding something of his own from him. Nor does he look at us while he is begging, but at some imaginary person in his mind.*

When we came back home, the sunset on the plain was unlike anything I have ever seen ; it wasn't like a far-off light, being drawn down away from one, over the dark rim of the world, but like a flowing purple tide . . . the worst of it is that I want to see everything with *you, dear . . . but I'm* not *unhappy.* *Your own Molly.*

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Dearest Robert,

I'm beginning to have such a queer feeling here, as if there was something very great and tired and old watching me, not with any particular interest, but as I might watch a butterfly.

In the old ruins, and on the road, I forget its name, which goes out for miles over the turf, with strange humpy grass-grown tombs on either side, in the weedy deserted little court-yards of monasteries, I feel its tiredness most. In the churches, which I am getting very fond of, it is different. There it seems tender and nearer, as though it were aware of me.

Mother doesn't like the churches—she feels, she says, as if she were at a school-feast being compelled to drink weak, sugary tea ! But then she has her own religion, which suits her very well, though when she tries to explain it to me, it always seems to me to be a religion which would only suit a few very clever and humorous people.

I don't want you to feel impatient with me, Robert, and to think my mind is weakening or (as you once said about Mr. Cuthbert) that I am worshipping a graven image of the things that I should like to have and can't get ; but something is happening to me that I don't understand.

How shall I express it ? It is as if someone (I say someone, because it is before all things a personal thing) were walking with me, making signals to me, beckoning to me, helping me along, telling me not to be sad, not to make up my mind about life, saying that life is or may be worth having, though I have missed the one thing that would be worth while. I won't pretend to you that I have not been very unhappy ; but this feeling, whatever it is, doesn't in the least interfere with my caring as much as ever about you and everyone else ; in fact, it seems to persuade and advise me that caring is the one way out, whether one gets the things for which one cares or not.

I have put all this very badly, but it is very real to me—more real than anything which has ever happened to me except my love for you. More real, a great deal, than the old pleasant days at home, pleasant but rather pointless, like the sort of talk one has while waiting for dinner.

The difficulty is that I feel I ought to be doing something,

not just loitering in these old sunny places. There is nothing I can do for mother except get well ; and as for Lady Carver, one might as well try to help a vegetable marrow, though she overflows with kindness to mother and me.

It can't be exactly religion. The ceremonies in the churches seem to be pretty but slightly absurd. But when that is all over, and the incense smoke is curling up in the sunbeams, and the clattering feet have all gone out, and while I sit there, a young woman with a little girl slips in and says a swift prayer, or an old man strolls in, bobs at the altar and sits vaguely smiling ; and then I feel that there is something there which is kind and near to all weak and broken things, and is trying to make up for a world which after all is not very real, when you come to have a tussle with it.

Mother and I walked in the chestnut woods to-day beside a great round blue lake at Albano ; and mother told me something about the old days when my father was alive. I don't think she has ever quite forgiven life for his death ; though for my part I am quite sure that one doesn't get much out of life by quarrelling with it ; not that I mean to say we ought to be meek. I don't quite know what I do mean.

Your own Molly.

Lord Helford to Molly Davenant

Helford House, S.W.

Dearest Molly,

This is from Cynthia and myself to tell you that what we were expecting has happened, and that I am in the Cabinet. You will see it in the papers very shortly. It seems odd that it should be so exciting, because it makes very little difference to my work—and yet it seems to make all the difference.

We shall have to entertain more—solid, sedate, not very interesting people ; people of influence, who are much too

important to care whether anyone knows how important they are—people who have got to be consulted. This will be both dull and satisfactory.

I never expected to be among the Cherubim ; but so it is. The whole thing, however, has brought me somehow much closer to Cynthia ; perhaps it is only honour among thieves?

But it makes no difference between me and you, Molly. How often have I wished that you were sitting near me, ready to talk, ready to smile and be silent ; or that we were walking by the creek, or up the Nan-Zephron wood. Strange to say, Cynthia wishes it, too. She has often said that she makes a good partner for me, but she can't be a companion. "If you and I were at Rome together," she said to me yesterday, "I can't conceive what we should talk about."

As to the strange feelings you write about, how can you think I should be impatient. I think it is beautiful and true. Because I take rather a compact view of life, and find it crammed with many definite interests, I don't for a moment say that there are not plenty of very real and noble things quite outside of my horizon. The worship of art (a thing quite beyond a luxurious and intelligent enyoyment of it), the ecstasies called spiritual, they exist, no doubt ; no one who reads certain books could dream of denying them. I only say that they don't exist for me ; but I love your visions, Molly —be sure that you tell me more about them.

Have you any plans about coming home? Do you meet any people? You seem to be leading much the same sort *of life as at Menerdue, except that I suppose you have to dress more conventionally, and then there is the care of Lady Carver ; but I thought the idea was to mix with the world? As soon as you have had enough of Rome, come and mix with the world a little* here. *That is what we should both of us love.*

Your own Robert.

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Yes, Robert dear, there are some people—"Grooms, clowns, servers and others," as you said to me once. I can't make out very much about them. There is rather a dear old boy, a Marchese di Riviglio, who talks perfect English, a diplomat, I think, though the idea of entrusting him with a secret of any sort is too absurd. He is curiously festooned and tasselled with hair, and he is incredibly polite. I will tell you the sort of thing. We were sitting talking after dinner. Lady Carver had mooned off into the next room, as she often does, and had left a collection of objects in her chair—she is always dropping what she calls her jetsom everywhere. Ronnie Carr, a nice boy from the embassy, was just going to pick them up, when the Marchese swooped upon them : "No you don't, mon vieux," he said, "this is my *job !" then he went tripping off in his little pumps, carrying the things on high like a boy carrying fruit in a Titian picture ; and I could see through the door the amazing bow with which he presented them to Lady Carver. But he isn't by any means a fool. Then there's Ronnie Carr, whom I should like more if he didn't seem rather sorry for me. Then there are two Monsignors, and two nice mild people, husband and wife, called Donkin. But I can't touch them off ; and they are all a little ghostlike. . . .*

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Robert,

I am a little anxious about mother ; she has got a sort of chill, and she is very provoking about it. I went in to see her this morning and she said, "My dear Molly, one can't stay in bed except in England. Look at this room (it is a great big vaulted place with a painted ceiling)—it is only just possible to sleep here, and as to lying awake here, among trays and

medicine bottles—No, indeed!" She comes down, and shivers in a corner; and when she is asked how she feels, she says "One doesn't tell people how one is—they don't want to know!"

Telegram. Lady Carver to Lady Helford.

Mrs. Davenant died this morning at two o'clock very little suffering funeral to-morrow

Telegram. Lady Helford to Miss Davenant.

Molly shall I come shall Robert come Cynthia

Telegram, Miss Davenant to Lady Helford.

No no no dear neither of you am writing Molly

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Robert, she is gone. Richards, who slept in a little room between hers and mine, heard her cry out, went in and found her unconscious. She fetched me at once; and I think she knew me, but I am not sure; there seemed to me to be the old ironical look in her eyes, with which I believe she used to hide so much tenderness. I sat beside her for an hour or two. I did not even take her hand, knowing how much she disliked "fondling." The doctor came, but he shook his head, and she died an hour or two later after what seemed a long struggle for breath, which was terrible. I do not know when she died. I try to remember that it was just the death she wished for herself. She used to say that she couldn't bear to think that people would take advantage of her weakness. Lady Carver was there at the end, and she has been wonderfully good to

me. She is to be buried to-day. Please thank Cynthia with my dearest love for her wire—but there is nothing that you can do for me just now.

Your devoted Molly.

Molly Davenant to Lady Helford

Rome.

Dear Cynthia, this is only to say how grateful I am and how much I love you for your message. But indeed I would rather be alone just now. I should not have hesitated to say " Yes." But I can only sit and think of how endlessly and wonderfully good she was to me, and how little I could or did give her in return. I just took it all, her love and kindness, as part of the order of nature, and because she made no claim on anyone, and never wanted anyone to pretend anything, I did not ever seem able to tell her what I did feel. And now, where and what is she? Lady Carver seems to have no doubt, and speaks of her as saintly and serene, full of joy and peace. But if she is like that, then she is not the mother I know. . . .

I shall stay here a few days till I am more fit to travel. Lady C. takes me out for long drives, and I seem to be living two lives in one.

My love to both of you, Molly.

Molly Davenant to Lord Helford

Rome.

Dearest Robert,

Who do you think has come here of all people in the world? Cubby himself. He seems to have come off as soon as he heard, without asking me or anyone. I can't help being touched by this, especially as he was afraid of mother, and on the whole she could not bear him. He won't come and stay here, and I am thankful for that ; he is at a hotel close by, but he comes in to see me, and if I don't want to see him, just

goes away. But to-day I wanted a walk, and we drove out into the country and there strolled for a long time. He is the first person who has been of any use to me. Richards is full of affection and care, but she and Lady C. will talk of mother as at rest, *and as having escaped the miseries of this sinful world. But mother loved life, and took great pleasure in criticizing it and in disapproving of people : and if she is being shepherded and petted like a tired invalid in company with many meek and unintelligent people, for ever and ever then all I can say is that she is utterly miserable. And as to her meeting people that she knew and loved—my father, for instance. She had a fierce love for him, of which she was almost ashamed, but she had become a very different woman from what she was when he died twenty years ago ; and then there was your mother ? Surely it is all very unreal ? Do they know everything that has happened ? or would mother have to tell them all that has been going on, up to date ? And if mother is still aware of what is going on here, how can she exist without being able to lift a finger to interfere ? She loved to try and mould everything to her fancy. I don't want to be irreverent about it all ; but the kind of consolation which people give me is not consolation, it is only making a bad business infinitely worse.*

Cubby is better than that. He thinks, believes, knows—I don't know which it is or how he arrives at it—that life goes on, and progress, and complicated interests, just as here. " Death, perhaps, shakes us out of our bodily and mental habits," he says, " and allows us to put into practice what we have gained by our experience." He points out to me that mother had many things in her own life and character with which she was dissatisfied, even perhaps ashamed, and that now she may be having a chance to get rid of these things. I suppose this is what Lady Carver calls purgatory, which seems to me from her description to be very little different

from what I should call hell—fancy having to concentrate the whole of one's thoughts on one's moral imperfections—no humour, no beauty, no interest.

But Cubby uses no technical words, and says that he believes that all that is eager and wholesome and strong goes on.

The worst time is the early mornings. In the evenings I get simply worn out ; but then as sleep draws off like a mist, the horror of the thought that it is all over, all the old life and happiness, leaps upon me like a cruel beast.

How horrible it is, Robert, if one believes in God, to think that we are led on and encouraged to care for people as we do, and that they are suddenly swept away and can't even send the faintest message through. That silence must either conceal something very strange and beautiful, or else something too tragic to think of. Sometimes I feel that I may lose my senses ; but the town begins to wake up, and the carts to rumble past, and then there are footsteps and sounds in the house, and the day begins again.

I think I shall come back in a few days with Cubby, and go to Menerdue. There is not doubt business to be done, and I must arrange how I am going to live, and where. Would there be a chance of my seeing you and Cynthia at any time?

Your most loving Molly.

LV

IT was late on a Saturday night, almost six weeks after she had left Menerdue with her mother, that Molly returned. Mr. Cuthbert had proved a pathetically zealous and extraordinarily inefficient courier, and the detection and silent amendment of his blunders gave Molly and Richards some perhaps salutary occupation on the journey. It culminated at Basle when, safely ensconced in the Paris train, they saw Mr. Cuthbert vociferating and gesticulating from the window of a train bound for Munich, which was fortunately only drawing up at the further end of the station. " I never saw such an unhandy man, Miss," said Richards, with grim contempt ; " not but what he means well." Molly spent most of the journey in a strange dream, living in endless vague reveries and old memories, and waking up again and again to the sense that her mother had been to an extent that she had hardly known, the centre and mainstay of her life. It was not that they had not lived very independently, each following their own avocations—but her mother had been, so to speak, both the soul and mind of the Menerdue life—all else seemed now to have been external and trivial.

Molly, indeed, began to see in those miserable hours how much she had deceived herself as to her own independence. She had believed that she had tastes, duties, predilections and a routine of her own ; and now they seemed all to have lost their central energy, like leaves that wither on a stricken tree ; and she became aware, too, how deeply and utterly she needed something to centralize her life upon. Her own pursuits were little more, she

thought, than kindly pastimes, and afforded her no vocation, no renunciation.

Even Robert! Molly in these bleak hours of realistic illumination saw clearly that Robert and Cynthia were falling every month into deeper inter-dependence and partnership, and foresaw that the end was inevitable. And then her own position as a sort of sisterly Egeria would become a business so dilettante as to be positively ridiculous. Whatever happened, Molly determined that the graceful fiction of her inspiring and sympathetic influence should not be allowed to be protracted, out of a romantic sense of loyalty. She knew that she had two friends there, whatever happened. But they had, or were just about to have, a full and rounded life of their own, a rich and exciting life which would claim much ingenuity and energy. To what extent it would become an idealism, Molly could hardly conjecture. Cynthia was, of course, painfully aware of her deficiency in this respect, while as for Robert, his idealism was not of an ardour too passionate to dissemble.

The train raced onward now through limestone mountain ranges, with glimpses up valleys of hamlets, perched on convenient knolls, clustered round a church with a gilded cupola; then they were in level lands, with brightly coloured houses seeming to glance almost coquettishly at the speeding train, the flush of flowering trees, the greenery of the groves. Now a manufacturing town would hold up its crowded chimneys, with an eastward drift of smoke, and with a castle or a cathedral dimly presiding on a rocky citadel. But all this was pageant and panorama.

Mr. Cuthbert only appeared at stated intervals, sometimes with a proffer of fruit or an English newspaper. But it became clear as the hours went on that he was less and less capable of being entrusted with the smallest commis-

sion ; yet his presence was in a way a certain strength and safeguard to the two women.

Though they had been two nights in the train, Molly declined to stay in town. Robert and Cynthia met her at the station, gave her food, took her across London for the night train from Paddington. But there was very little that they could say to her. Molly had a feeling of being as it were enfolded by Cynthia's steadfast love and care. She was grave and quiet ; but Robert seemed to her like a Troubadour—the old story of Richard and Blondel came into her mind—wandering round about the towers of a dungeon, and trying strain after strain to see if he could evoke a reply from the anxious heart within. But pathetic as Molly's patient desperation and desolate sweetness seemed to Robert—she was like a tired child—it may be doubted if he was not almost a more pathetic figure to her, in his desire to find and give comfort, and his entire helplessness as to where or how to begin.

Mr. Cuthbert could not be persuaded on any account to join them. He took Richards to a restaurant, and gave her dinner with an awkward gallantry that did more to conciliate her goodwill than many Sundays of fantastic sermons.

The train rolled thundering across the viaducts of Truro a little while before the dawn. Molly, looking out, saw the dark gables of the town, the pale glimmer of street fronts, and the three spires of the cathedral rising silvery grey from the mist-hung hollow below ; to the south, the pale waters of the estuary lay wan and cold among dark hills. A moment later they descended from the train, and the faithful Mr. Cuthbert, pale and pinched from a sleepless night, joined them ; but resisted all persuasion to join them in the car which was waiting, preferring to sit with the driver. Molly faintly acquiesced ;

she was worn out by the journey and by the prospect, which now loomed up before her in all its speechless bitterness, of returning to the lonely house.

At the village Mr. Cuthbert got down, and disentangling his little shabby portmanteau, came bareheaded to the door. Molly leaned forward and took his hand in both of her own. " Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " I can't say how utterly grateful I am to you for all your wonderful kindness. To-day I must keep quiet—but may I see you to-morrow—I will send you a message—and you, too, will need rest." Mr. Cuthbert frankly broke down and sobbed ; " It is nothing at all, Miss Molly, nothing but a privilege to have been of any use—if I could but have spared you these first hours——" but at this point he could say no more, but with uplifted hand bade her farewell and stumbled away. " That's a good man, miss," said Richards ; " he may not have been all we could wish on the journey, but he's kindness itself, I'm sure."

A minute later they were at Menerdue, and Mrs. Tregenna, who had been waiting at the front door for the last hour, came forward in tears, clasped her beloved young mistress to her faithful bosom, and led her in.

LVI

SHE slept worn out till noon: and then waking from confused dreams, Molly, sitting up haggard and dry-lipped in her little bare bed, tasted the very bitterness of loss and death. She seemed to herself to have lost everything, all desire for life, all hope and joy. Her tortured mind strove to recover in memory one of those swift glances, that were rare indeed, but had rewarded her for many a silent hour, when her mother used to turn her dark eyes upon her, and look all the love that she found it so impossible to put into words; but all that she could now see was the more familiar smile, half defiant half ironical, with which her mother had so often met her petulant and combative little outbursts. Her brain reeled and quivered with the misery of it—would she always, she thought, carry about with her this half-mocking image? She rose and dressed herself; and then partly with the self-torturing instinct of hopeless sorrow, partly to face what she felt was the worst of the many moments of anguish which seemed ahead of her, she went quickly to her mother's room and entered.

It had been left just as it was. The dignified furniture, the crowded pictures, the incongruous ornaments, all the little objects which for the sake of some remote association her mother had delighted to keep about her, and which Molly had so often laughingly begged her to disperse, stood in their wonted order. Nothing in the world was so characteristic of Mrs. Davenant as this room, her secret loyalties, her half-disguised contempt for the vulgarities and commonnesses of life, her respect for

the ritual of convention, her aloofness, her deep-seated inconsistency, her love of magnificence. Of all these qualities the room was the visible symbol ; and Molly was suddenly overwhelmed by an assault of that terrible pathos, which in moments of bereavement flashes like a devastating lightning out of the most trivial and paltry details.

The sense of her loneliness, her weakness, her practical inefficiency, her dependence burned her to the quick. How could she pick up any thread of wholesome life out of these weltering ruins ? She caught a sight of her scared and ashen face in a mirror, and it seemed to her for a moment that it was the face of one whose very mind had given way.

A sudden sense of the folly of encouraging this shocking onset of grief came upon her, and she left the room hastily, wondering what she could do to still the anguish of thought that seemed to be draining her life away.

She went downstairs and turned for a moment into the study, the room that was so closely connected with all the glowing happiness of her friendship with Robert.

But here again was a new pitfall. It came into her mind with a dazzling sort of horror, the cold light of which seemed to bring with it almost a heavy corroding scent of misery, how during those happy weeks she and Robert, intent on their own selfish delight, and afraid perhaps of her mother's half disdainful observation of the sentiment that pervaded every moment of their intercourse, had kept her at arm's length, excluded her from their intimacy. How sullen, thought poor Molly, how chilly had her own admissions been ; how contemptuous had she been of any practical warnings, any conclusions of her mother's ripe experience.

It was useless to remind herself that as a matter of fact

at no time had her mother seemed slighted or distressed, or suspicious of confidences withheld. The fact remained that her allegiance had been divided, and in her morbid mood she began to view the whole affair with Robert as though it had been some base and almost sensual abandonment to passion, some tampering with the essential purity of life.

She began to feel as though, if she were to preserve any balance of mind, she must find some kind of human counsel. But the thought of Mrs. Temperley, whose sympathy would, she felt sure assume the form of close and tearful embraces, or of Aunty Pel, who would but chant a triumph song of the glory awaiting the saints in light, seemed alike intolerable to her.

She wandered up through the wood, but there the gnarled trees and wind-twisted boughs seemed full of a sombre writhing horror ; she could not turn aside to the ruined chapel which seemed to her almost like the scene of her reckless surrender to passion ; but she went over the hill, and down through the now sunlit glades and spaces of the wood to the pool of Mornay, the scene of her encounter with Mr. Cuthbert.

The place was incredibly beautiful on this afternoon of early summer. The pool brimmed with an opalescent cloudy-blue flood of sea-water, the rushes on the higher banks were of an intense green, and all the strip between was covered by a thick milky-grey growth of an aromatic sea-herb. Higher up, she could see in the narrows of the creek the swans floating, while all the hill-side opposite was clothed in the tender-green foliage of beeches and ashes, with here and there a solitary fir or dusky-gleaming sprawling ilex.

There came into her mind the feeling that had long haunted her, of some attendant presence, neither indifferent nor intrusive, but endowed with a patience so in-

timate and so embracingly wise as to be almost more precious than the sharp thrills and swift ecstasies of passion. A thing which neither praised nor blamed, neither made haste nor delayed, and did not abridge or quicken the slowly-wrought trust that it seemed to inspire, because, after all, the very waiting was of the essence of its inmost nature.

And then again with a sudden surprise that had nothing painful or revolting about it, she saw that a few paces ahead of her was Mr. Cuthbert. He was dressed in his oldest and most weather-worn cassock, and his hat was flung upon the ground beside him. He sat in the sunlight leaning back against a great fir-tree near the water's edge ; and she saw that he was asleep. She stole nearer to him, and thus, with a sudden warmth of pity so deep that the tears rose to her eyes, saw how worn and haggard were the lines of his face, like a rock rudely chiselled by furious storms, how thin the grey hair on his brow and temples, how lean and knotted his outstretched hands, and how neglected and penurious was his ill-looped, torn and stained cassock. He looked like a man at the very end of his strength, and his expression was that of shame, disappointment, frustration and despair, as though everything had failed him.

While she looked wondering if in his expression she could detect any smallest trace of any contentment or dignity, any line that was not the work of suffering, he awoke, gazed at her wildly for a moment, and then scrambled hastily to his feet.

" Miss Molly, I am ashamed . . . I was aweary of the wilderness . . . sleep sealed my eyes. But you ? Alas, it would seem as though repose had but given you the strength to suffer."

" Yes, it is so," said Molly—" I did not know it was possible to suffer so much ! " Her lips quivered, and a sob which she could not restrain burst from her parted lips.

" You are tired," said Mr. Cuthbert, in gentle tones—" will you not sit and repose yourself ?—I will leave you."

" I must speak," said Molly ; " I must speak to someone or I shall go mad."

She seated herself at the foot of the tree : " Will you not sit here beside me, Mr. Cuthbert, and let me speak to you for a few minutes ? "

" Speak on," said Mr. Cuthbert, " it will ease your pain ; but I will stand beside you ; it were better so."

" Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, her wide dark eyes, enhanced by the ivory pallor of her skin, searching his face, " it is worse than I could have imagined. The silence of our house kills me—it is like a body that has lost its soul : and my mother, who, I now see, guarded and surrounded me on every side, what is she now, where is she ? Is she gone utterly, like a blown-out flame ? Can no tidings come from her to me ? "

" Tidings—no," said Mr. Cuthbert, in a grave and weary voice. " But even though you unhappily cannot rely on the revelation of the divine word, it were, in my belief, the extreme of human folly and triviality to think that the life of the spirit suffered any diminution by the death of the body that so cramped and bound it. Think for a moment of your dear and honoured mother's mind, how it could overleap the centuries and disdain the flight of time. Was it her body, that through those dark eyes of hers, read the weakness of one's heart and will, and kindled by her very contempt the desire to be more strong ? Was it with her body that she loved you above all living things ? No, it was her soul, that noble and untamed spirit of hers, that has gone leaping and triumphing into what seems to

us the darkness, but is a night that is as clear as the day—has gone hungering and thirsting for further experience, and yet carrying with it all the passionate interest in human things that made her so inspiring a presence here. It is not *I* that say these things with faltering lips—it is *you*, Miss Molly, who are as sure of them as I myself—surer, indeed, for you were knit to her by joy and love, while I quailed in her presence like a man convicted of grievous baseness. In the name of God, dear Miss Molly, in the name of love and life, dare to confess to yourself that you know all this, and thrust aside the base and diseased fictions of the troubled flesh."

Mr. Cuthbert clasped his hands, and his voice had assumed a piercing emphasis. " It is as traitorous," he said, " for us to think of her as dead, as it would be for you, if she had journeyed from you for a short space of days, to believe that she had forgotten you."

Molly's eyes were brimmed with tears, but a little colour had come back into the pale cheek.

" Yes," she said, slowly, " I can believe *that !* Yes, she is alive ; but how can I know that she has any thought of me in the world to which you speak of her as going ? "

" Because," said Mr. Cuthbert, " your heart tells you that she remembers, just as your mind tells you that she lives. I will not say that she is not, maybe, freed and delivered from some of the weary doubts and fretful irritations of the body—yes, she is calmer, greater, more serene, more untroubled ; but she bears you, and every friend whom she has loved, and every small concern in mind."

" I see that, too," said Molly, after a moment's silence ; " and I shall perhaps come to *feel* that, though I cannot feel it yet. But, Mr. Cuthbert, all my selfishnesses and coldnesses, my hateful angers and mistrusts come in

between me and her ; if I could but tell her how much I loved her, if I could but know that I was forgiven ! "

" Dear Miss Molly," said Mr. Cuthbert, tenderly, leaning forward, " this is an unworthy thought—tread it beneath your feet. Do you, can you really for a moment believe that your mother taken from your side will spend the first hours of her release and joy in searching her memory for causes of offence, when she knows all the love you bear her, and would give anything, I doubt not, to reassure you ? "

" But why may she not reassure me ? " said Molly.

" There," said Mr. Cuthbert, " our knowledge fails—only our faith goes forward. But can you not believe that the Father of all living, who has prepared such sights of beauty, such tender affections, such passionate nearnesses for his frail creatures, may be trusted to fulfil the desires that he has made, and to increase our blessedness, even if it must be wrought by suffering and pain ? "

Molly leaned back with something like a smile on her face. " I cannot bear more to-day," she said, " but I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have shown me how to climb up a little out of the darkness—I can go forward." She stretched out her hand to Mr. Cuthbert, who held it for a moment in his own.

" I will leave you now, Miss Molly," he said ; " I will not intrude further upon hours which must in any case be full of grief and aching—but your faith will not desert you now ; bless you, dear child, now and for ever."

Mr. Cuthbert walked wearily away, turning his back upon her and not looking round ; every now and then he leaned heavily upon his stick, halting with bowed head. Molly watched the dark-robed figure until the trees hid him from her sight.

LVII

A SAD time followed. Molly had business to transact and went through her mother's papers, which, however, were not numerous, for Mrs. Davenant had been always a prompt burner of letters ; " these fragments of moods, hinted at, bungled over, seldom expressed," Molly could hear her saying, " ought not to be kept, any more than one should keep the leg-bone of a pheasant to remind you of a good dinner." One thing that wrung her heart was to find that her mother seemed to have kept every scrap of her own, Molly's, writing—many things, indeed, which Molly had herself forgotten. There were some diaries, spasmodically kept, dissections of character, not, Molly thought, very perceptive ; her mother's imagination, her dramatic instinct seemed to have quite outrun her observation. Her father's love letters were there, and Molly read a few, but consigned them hastily to the fire with a guilty sense of having been eavesdropping. One thing surprised her; her mother had never said a single definite word about money ; but Molly found that she had saved a good deal, and had invested it with singular acuteness.

But since her talk with Mr. Cuthbert, Molly found that her grief had somehow lost the quality of hopelessness. Something had passed into her inmost mind, some seed of hope in the indestructibility of human love and character which day after day grew in strength. There were bad times when she felt her loneliness acutely, and missed her mother with a sort of envenomed anguish, but she did not seclude herself, she went out among her village friends and her few neighbours.

She wrote a good deal to Robert, and though he did not write her long letters, he wrote constantly. But as the first pain of grief wore off, Molly began to feel that she must somehow find some settled plan of life. She was not much of a reader, and she had few hobbies. But she could not bring herself to leave Menerdue.

She did not see much of Mr. Cuthbert. He had no trivial conversation, he disapproved of personal gossip, he knew and cared nothing for what was going on in the world; and Molly had a wholesome dislike of plunging into discussions of deep emotional and religious matters. Theology, doctrine, church tradition, ritual, which appeared to play so large a part in Mr. Cuthbert's life, meant really nothing to her. One Sunday he had preached one of his curious sermons—Molly always felt a certain thrill about his discourses, they seemed to hold so much strong feeling in reserve, and his quaint and delicate phrasing, so inappropriate to the ordinary affairs of life, had a charm when uttered from the pulpit, and with the romantic background of the ancient church.

On that particular Sunday, Molly, walking idly by the creek, was joined by Mr. Cuthbert. She had mentioned his sermon, which she said had pleased her, and he had replied very earnestly that he hoped that she had found something to her taste in the substance of the sermon, and not only in the method of utterance. The sermon had been about symbols, and Mr. Cuthbert's line had been that vague emotions, whether natural or religious, never took shape or emphasis till they had been crystallized into symbols. He had instanced the gifts of lovers, and the ordinary courtesies of life, as symbols of a secular kind.

"No," said Molly, smiling, "the ceremonies you speak of, the Catholic traditions you sometimes explain to us, do not seem to me important at all. I think them quaint

and interesting; they please me like the minuets and pavanes which Mr. Temperley got the children to dance. Perhaps it is stupidity, or original sin, but I can't feel them to be serious."

"Not in themselves, perhaps," said Mr. Cuthbert; "but isn't it a great thing to have a certain order, going on unchanged through the centuries, consecrated and penetrated by association with the highest hopes of the human heart? It is not the symbols themselves, but what they lead to, what they suggest, what they sum up, that seem to me so beautiful."

"No," said Molly, "they seem to me to destroy naturalness, like very formal and stately manners—like Mr. Temperley in certain moods—which draw a veil between oneself and reality."

"But," said Mr. Cuthbert, "if I may be so bold, what then does religion mean to you?"

"I know when you don't ask me," said Molly; "it is like this valley and the hillsides and the creek—something kind and beautiful, trying to make itself known."

"A vague sentiment," said Mr. Cuthbert; "too vague to live by."

"But may not your idea of it be too precise to live by?"

"Do we not need discipline in our worship?" said Mr. Cuthbert; "worship is at once the deepest and the highest privilege of the soul. The soul speaks to God so, and it must enter His presence with reverence and godly fear. If I were summoned to the presence of an earthly monarch, I should not claim to stroll in with my hat on, and talk lightly about my own concerns."

"But if God is all about us and knows all that passes in our hearts," said Molly, "surely formality is out of the question? If you kept anything back as too trivial to tell

God, God would know it all the same. The King is not my Maker and my Judge."

" But even earthly love demands a due decorum."

Unfortunately there darted into Molly's mind the recollection of the scene by Mornay Pool, and her flight from Mr. Cuthbert's advances, and by some subtle telepathy the same thought passed through Mr. Cuthbert's mind.

He averted his eyes from her, and said in a low voice : " I know what is right, Miss Molly, though I do not always practise it. You have little or no need of discipline. You are pure and good ; but for me and other rebellious children of God, life is a sharp and often a losing battle " —and then raising his hands with an infinite solemnity, Mr. Cuthbert added, " I have need to be baptized by Thee, and comest Thou to me ? "

They walked on a little in silence, and then Molly turning to him said, " Mr. Cuthbert, you mustn't talk like this. I feel every day how ignorant and useless I am. I drift along doing nothing, knowing that I ought to find something to do. But your wonderful kindness to me makes me dare to speak. I believe you to be a very good man, though you have done things once I could hardly forgive. But the difference is that I have never had to struggle, and I see that you have to struggle every day, not only with things of which I know nothing, but with an overflowing dissatisfaction and unhappiness. It is all very mysterious to me, but I do pity you with all my heart."

" Blessed words ! " said Mr. Cuthbert, gazing at her with a solemn tenderness under his great hat ; " a gracious dew of healing ! "

" And then—oh, dear me," said Molly, with a sudden access of intense irritation, " you talk like that, and spoil it all, and make it feel like a story in a magazine."

Mr. Cuthbert shook his head mournfully; "Yes," he said, "I know it—when I feel most deeply, then I must needs talk like a crazy playwright let loose. It springs from my solitude. Alone, I am for ever rehearsing my priestly part. But when you are tempted to feel useless, Miss Molly, remember this, that you are the one and only human being who has ever, since the days of my ugly boyhood, held out a helping hand to me, and met me with an unguarded smile; and I in return have done my best to vilify and traduce you and to destroy your happiness . . . and I am tormented in this flame."

They turned the corner of the road by Polcrello; and seldom had Molly been so thankful, feeling as she did the entire impossibility of continuing the talk on this level, as she was to see Mr. Temperley, hat in hand, and savouring, with an infinite relish, the aspect of the creek and the hills beyond in the solemn light of the western sun.

Mr. Temperley begged Molly to come up with him to Nan-Zephron, and he good-naturedly included Mr. Cuthbert in the invitation; but Mr. Cuthbert hurriedly excused himself.

The good old man confided to Molly that "Mamma" was much concerned about Molly's loneliness, and asked her with much involution whether she would not settle for a while at Nan-Zephron. "Not for your sake, but for ours, Molly—a ray of sunlight into our very demure and isolated home. Come over and help us."

"No, dear Squire, I couldn't do that yet—but I love your asking."

The Squire deserted the subject with such obvious alacrity, that Molly felt he had no real desire to vary his leisurely routine.

"Our friends the Helfords?" said the Squire. "Still keeping close to the stilted intricacies of political life? I

admire Helford, I respect his accomplished wife, though personally unknown to me, for so dutifully leading a life so lacking in the gracious elements."

Molly said that they were very busy and gave many parties.

" The mere thought of social distinction," said the Squire, " is like poison to my mind ! "

He then, being the most relentlessly inquisitive of men, proceeded to inquire into the relations between Molly and Mr. Cuthbert. " To find you in such close proximity —well, I confess it surprised me—though I observed that your conversation had languished, which, considering poor Cuthbert's shaky grasp of realities, did not surprise me at all."

Molly told him of all Mr. Cuthbert's kindness on the journey.

" I forgive him much for that," said the Squire. " But my dear Molly, mamma tells me—I am incurious about these things—that the Cuthbert resources are at a low ebb —that there is a decided lack of money, in fact—unpaid bills are indicated—his housekeeper, a woman of forbidding aspect, made no secret of the fact that Cuthbert had seldom enough to eat."

" How awful ! " said Molly—and then suddenly, " I wonder," she said, " and how dreadful it would be, if he spent too much in going to Rome—I never gave it a thought—I am afraid he may even have paid some things for me—I shall never forgive myself, if it is so."

" That could be easily arranged," said the Squire, " I could suggest to him that you felt you must be in his debt —I would approach the subject with entire delicacy—you would trust me, I do not doubt—these little diplomacies," said the Squire complacently, " interest me. I should enjoy it, I frankly admit."

" Let it be *soon* done," said Molly ; " dear Squire, I shall be miserable till all is straightened out."

" I am free, it happens," said the Squire, " in the interval of some important work which I have on hand. It shall be done to-morrow, Molly, and a succinct report made."

LVIII

A DAY or two later Molly was surprised by receiving an urgent letter from Cynthia to say that Robert had three or four days free in the following week. Might they come down and stay at Menerdue? If there was the least difficulty about taking them in, they would propose themselves to the Temperleys. With this was enclosed a little note from Robert. *Molly dearest, I can't go on like this, tethered to my work here, never getting a glimpse of you. Don't think that I don't know how in a bad time one shrinks more from seeing intimates than from seeing strangers. Letters bridge things over, but one can't live on letters.*

Your own Robert.

She saw at once that something had happened, and what could it be but one thing? Then she laughed at herself for reading meanings into what after all was a simple request. She wrote back to say at once that she would be delighted to take them in, and that she hoped they would stay as long as they could.

She was surprised to find on consulting Richards and Mrs. Tregenna that they were delighted at the idea. Mrs. Tregenna, indeed, went so far as to say that the one thing Molly needed was more company; "Not that all company is pleasant, miss, but it's like a mustard plaster—it makes you think more about the outside of your chest than about the inside." "Then we will consider Lord and Lady Helford to be mustard plasters," said Molly.

On the next day Mr. Temperley came in to tea, wearing a very solemn air. He had had a talk with Mr. Cuthbert

and was shocked to find that his finances were in a very bad way. " My dear Molly," said the Squire, " the man is like a rat caught in a trap ; he flew at me, so to speak, even though the questions I asked were of the most innocent nature, tactfully composed to spare him any embarrassment. Far be it from me to extol my own imperturbability ; but once convinced of the *duty* of serenity, I involve myself in my philosophy, and observe my assailant as phlegmatically as I should do from the interior of a feudal fortress. I put his accusations of impertinence gently aside. I even went so far as to say that a priest had good authority for making no concessions to Mammon, and by a few deft compliments, I succeeded in evoking a confused but substantially accurate statement. He owes money," said Mr. Temperley, with high relish, checking off the figures on his fingers, " to the village shop, to the Truro tradesmen, to ' a city firm '—which I take to mean a money-lender of a low order. I doubt if he has even paid the very inadequate wages he professes to be responsible for. So unacquainted is he with any practical matters that I discovered that one cause of his acute distress was that he imagined that he might be arrested at any moment and placed in the Fleet prison—an anxiety suggested I believe by a very imperfect recollection of Pickwick ! I was able to reassure him on this point, but told him that he would have to face what would be a very indelicate public examination as a bankrupt, at Truro or Plymouth. And eventually, my dear Molly, under the pretence of consulting my solicitor, I got from him a list of the names of his creditors. What further steps would you wish me to take ? "

" What a wretched affair ! " said Molly, " and I suppose I am partly to blame about his visit to Rome."

" On that point he was unapproachable ! "

" Well," said Molly, " could your lawyers find out

the amounts and settle them, and I will send you a cheque."

" Pardon me," said Mr. Temperley, " but I consider that this enterprise belongs to me as well as to you. The only reward I ask for such small trouble I shall take will be the privilege of at all events sharing in the exonerating process."

" No, dear Squire, you must let me do this—it is really my affair—he has been so kind to me."

" Forgive me, dear Molly, I share with you in the affliction of Mr. Cuthbert's ministrations—though I admit that I minimize this by resolute abstention from the Sabbath services. And, indeed, I could not conduct the business further unless you consented."

" Very well, dear Squire,"—and Molly, rising from her chair, gave him an effusive embrace, " but he must have something to go on with ? "

" Admirable perspicacity ! " said the Squire, " and I conceive that Mr. Cuthbert, to do him justice, is so incredibly guileless in these matters, that if an occasional payment, not too large, is made by my lawyers into his banking account, he is extremely unlikely to become aware of it."

" Squire, you are a perfect darling ! " said Molly.

" You overwhelm me ! " said Mr. Temperley. " But now that all is arranged, I will tell you a little thing which touched me. He seemed to care very little for the possibility of personal discredit—he was only anxious that nothing should come to *your* ears—' Miss Davenant,' he said, ' is the only human being who has ever reposed any real confidence in me, and I should break my heart if she were to be alienated.' A singular nature," mused the Squire, " passionately affectionate, dangerously egotistical, destitute alike of reason and morality, and, what I regard as

even more inexplicable, wholly without artistic sensibilities ! Seldom, indeed, have I met a human being who so little satisfied my sense of beauty ! "

" But that, you know, is *your* danger, Squire."

" It may be so," said Mr. Temperley, complacently. " But my dear Molly, if the sight of this unhappy creature, struggling, like Laocoon, with infinitely dingy entanglements makes sore inroads on my belief in human nature, the contemplation of yourself and the part you have played in this squalid business not only restores my tranquillity, but leaves a large balance to my credit,"—and the Squire withdrew with the dignity of a Velasquez.

LIX

IT was on the Friday that Molly was expecting Robert and Cynthia; but in the afternoon she received a wire to say that Robert was delayed, and would arrive on the Saturday, and that Cynthia was arriving alone.

It was a warm and bright afternoon, and Molly strolled rather listlessly by the pathway that led to the headland. She felt painfully excited by the arrival of Robert and Cynthia, and his alteration of plan had given her a disagreeable little shock. She was deeply vexed with herself to find that she felt a trivial thing so deeply, and so exaggerated the significance of unimportant things; but without being aware of it, she was getting a little more used to her solitary life, and she had not so often the sickening sense of helplessness about her mother's absence.

Still, her reflections to-day were sad enough. Robert was constant to her, and there was a strong and silent regard about Cynthia which gave her a deep-seated sense of comfort. Cynthia, she felt, in a childish fashion, would not see her wronged. She knew of no desire to wrong her; still Cynthia was there, like a militant champion, who would not look too closely into the reasons of things. Both her mother and Robert had been and were too complex to be depended upon in this perfectly simple and direct way.

Still, her life seemed to stretch before her as a very arid affair. Robert and Cynthia were too busy, too much involved in all their intricate social and political problems for her to have any practical share in their lives. She knew that she might live with them if she chose, but the world of policy and intrigue, of courteous finesse and diplomatic

innuendo, had no charm for her. It was a game that demanded many fine qualities and powers, and also some unscrupulous and insouciant faculties—and it was a game that she had not the slightest interest in playing.

But then neither did her life at Menerdue fulfil any of her deeper instincts. Molly had a real need of self-sacrifice, of vicarious suffering, of giving herself away, of the discipline which comes of serving others ; but she could not transfer this power to a fortuitous and impersonal philanthropy ; the tasks she needed were inevitable ties, instinctive duties, not artificial creations and flimsy make-believe. Not that she reflected thus ; the form her depression took was a sense that she was somehow left out of the frame of things, helplessly stranded, lacking any compelling motives ; she wanted to obey, not to find elegant reasons for obeying. The light and fitful whisper of the breezes, the changing ripple over the woodland, the little waves breaking quickly at the feet of sunwarmed rocks, the purple plain of the sea, seemed all enviably intent upon themselves ; and Molly hated her freedom and longed for mechanical compulsion.

To beguile the time while waiting for Cynthia, Molly took up a little parchment-bound volume of her mother's that always lay on the table beside her bed. Her mother had used it for the purpose of meditation, and the little book was full of aphorisms and maxims collected from all kinds of sources, inscribed in Mrs. Davenant's small and concise hand. Mrs. Davenant believed greatly in meditation, which she compared to the focussing of thought upon experience and held to be a highly renovating process.

Maxims had always seemed to Molly to be the dreariest of mental provender, like dried figs or dates, only serving to remind her painfully of the rich vitality of the world

out of which they were wearily isolated and then desiccated. She turned the pages listlessly. Was it possible, she thought, that this was all that philosophers could find to say about the joyful and tragic experiences of life—these cautious logical summaries, the hard defiant kernels of pulpy summer-scented fruit? These people, she thought, had neither lived nor rejoiced, they had only suffered and feared; their aim had been to strip life of its emotion, and to deduce principles which could only produce a stupefied indifference. She wondered how her mother had used these sayings—as Jacob, perhaps, in Bethel, using the stones of the place for pillows, in default of any other sustaining softness: Molly herself was not in need of *consolation;* it was not life that she mistrusted, but only her power of battling with it, as when she used with an ecstasy of delight to swim out against the inward-flooding tide. . . .

The car suddenly passed like a shadow before the window. Molly hurried out. Cynthia descended in her stateliest fashion, her fine features all merged in one enfolding smile, clasped Molly in a close embrace, and then holding her at arm's length regarded her with majestic approval. This was what Molly called Cynthia's royal manner, the essence of which was an entire and almost insolent unconsciousness of the presence of any bystander. Cynthia then swept Molly into the house; she never paid the least attention to any of the arrangements affecting her belongings—that was not her business—which possibly accounted for the extreme punctiliousness with which she was served.

"You are better, dearest Molly—I am sure you are better?"

"Oh, there's very little amiss with my body—it's my mind that droops. I want something to do."

" Why do you not come to us ? You would give us all such a lift. Robert is getting quite prosaic. He says he is getting to look like a statue of himself in a public park."

" No, Cynthia, dear—all I could ever do for Robert was to give him a breath of country air."

They talked long about Robert and all his successes. " He is becoming the indispensable man, Molly. He knows his own mind and speaks it—but he is modest, claims nothing, does not quarrel, never has a grievance. If he can't get what he wants by one road, he takes another ; and though he is ambitious in a way, he cares more about carrying a thing through than about his own credit."

" You know more about him than you used to do, Cynthia."

" Who could help it ?—he is a marvellous creature. I feel I could tear my eyes and tongue out sometimes, when I think of the things I didn't see, and the things I did say."

" Cynthia, I am sure something has happened."

" Yes, dear," said Cynthia, smiling half shamefacedly. " Robert said you would see ; if you didn't, I was to leave it to him to explain—we have found each other again."

" Oh, Cynthia, I'm so thankful, for you both."

" Molly, darling, can you *really* feel that ? "

" Feel that ? What, find that the two people I love best in the world are happy again, and not be pleased ? "

" But, Molly, it won't exclude you. It is to you we owe it. When I, by my folly, had driven Robert out, he found you. Dear, I know that he would have done anything in the world for you then ; and you claimed nothing—you sent him back to me."

" I could never have helped Robert to live his real life. I always knew that—and you not only make it possible, but it would be impossible without you."

Cynthia drew Molly to herself. After a silence, she said, " But Molly, you mustn't be too good to be true. We have both robbed you of something—we both feel that."

" I shall find it Cynthia—you will both of you help me."

" You must come to us, Molly—you want a real life of your own ; let me help my darling to find it. Because we both love Robert, don't let us be so absurd as to think that he is the only man in the world worth loving. Men make those mistakes—we know better."

" Yes, dear, that is so. Marriage is a big thing, but it isn't an unusual thing—it isn't all rapture and glory ! "

" Sometimes, Molly, for a bit ! "

" Yes, but even so it isn't only a thing for saints and angels."

" We will find you a Galahad, Molly—I have several in training."

" No, dear, I shall find one for myself."

" Don't let my darling tell me that there is some dreadful person here in view. Robert says that the thought of that parson—what is his name ?—makes his blood run cold. You haven't become a devotee—early services and Browning guilds ? "

" Oh, Cynthia, you must leave me to find my level."

" Molly, if you speak like that, I shall feel you are vexed with us."

" Cynthia, dearest—don't let that even be said or thought again."

" It shall not be, I promise ! But that is what we have come down about, to see that you have your share."

They dined and sat together late into the night talking. Suddenly Molly drooped and gave out. Cynthia, reproaching herself for her stupidity, carried Molly off, saw her to bed, as a nurse might undress a child, cried out

against the bareness and austerity of her room, and finally sat by her until she slept.

" It's very nice to be mothered, Cynthia, once in a way, but *you* will be tired."

" Don't you know that I am *never* tired—Robert says I haven't enough imagination for that."

Once or twice Molly woke, and found Cynthia still beside her. " Do go to bed now, dear " ; she said at last— " I feel all surrounded by your strength and affection."

" They won't fail *you*, Molly ! " And then the light was quietly extinguished, and Cynthia went smiling and radiant away ; only to return undimmed by fatigue in the dawn, and to insist that Molly should not get up for breakfast. " You are not spoiling yourself half enough—and I am going to do it for you for a little. Robert will be here by eleven. He is to get a few hours of sleep at Truro ; and if it were not for the shameful bleakness of your room, we would hold our little parliament here. No wonder you have been ill, Molly—this room is enough to wreck the health of the strongest man."

LX

THE two were sitting on the little terrace in the middle of the morning ; it was a still and sunny day, and the air beyond the creek over the hot furze-patches winked and quivered.

" I'm afraid I have got very little in the way of general conversation," said Cynthia—" my rôle at what Robert calls the ' beard-wagging ' entertainments is that of the sympathetic listener. It is wonderful what a very long way a very little talk goes, if it is said with the right glance."

" But you don't despise the people who talk ? "

" No, dear, I made that mistake once, and I shall never make it again—I simply don't understand them."

" And yet I think you see right down to the very bottom of things."

Cynthia laughed : " Deep, but not wide," as Robert tells me," she said. " But Molly, dear, you will have to find out many disgraceful things about me—my ignorance, my entire lack of appreciation of all artistic things. Robert tells me I'm an entire Philistine ; he often compares me very unfavourably with you ; he says your instinct about people is perfect."

" But you understand people, Cynthia—all these people who come to your house—you understand them."

" Not a bit ! The only thing in which all men and women are alike is in their desire for admiration—large draughts of unqualified admiration—that is what they want—it gives them a restful feeling."

" But then you are very beautiful, Cynthia—that goes for a good deal."

" I see you are trying my own prescription on me, Molly."

" I expect other people do that, too."

" Yes they do—and it would be absurd of me not to pretend that I am unaware of it, though it isn't the kind of beauty I admire. But, Molly dear, it's the one thing, I think, that really frightens me, the idea of losing my good looks—where should I be then ? "

" You would always be magnificent, whatever happened."

" I know," said Cynthia, " like a great sleek, staring cow—like the stout smiling women painted by Raphael ; what they call queenly. . . . No, Molly, if it comes to compliments, yours is the kind of face I call beautiful, and not only on the surface ; you look as if something kind and beautiful, but rather mysterious, was going on deep-down inside. People admire me and become, some of them, idiotic about me ; but you will always be the kind of person with whom the people who are really worth something will fall wildly and deeply in love with. They will want to know what your secret is ; they know that I have none."

" Oh, Cynthia !—but I have become so faded and draggled since my illness."

" What nonsense ! Besides you are the sort of girl who looks even more beautiful when she is tired—men want to comfort you. Now when I am tired I become like the figurehead of a ship in a dockyard."

" This is a very curious conversation, Cynthia."

" Don't you like it, dear ? Let us try something else. I suppose this "—and Cynthia waved her hand towards the creek—" is the kind of scenery that is called lovely ? "

" Mr. Temperley has a good many more words for it than that—but don't you think it lovely ? "

" I don't think anything of this sort lovely," said

Cynthia, smiling, " I like the big, comfortable, well-kept places—a nice flat park with clumps of elms and a stream. You don't know how matter-of-fact I am ! I used to make all sorts of mistakes with Robert about these sort of things. He used to look pained, but now he only laughs. By the way, he ought to be here by now."

" You didn't think of going to meet him ? "

" No, indeed ! Men like to be left alone. That's a real difference between men and women."

A few minutes later they heard the car approaching. They walked to the end of the terrace, and waved as the car whisked past behind the house. A moment later Robert joined them. Molly was ashamed to realize how much fortitude and affection it required to see with equanimity the swift little glance which passed between Robert and Cynthia ; but he came straight to Molly, and crying out " Molly, dearest," in a tone which showed him to be deeply moved, clasped her in his arms. He asked her many questions, as if embarrassed ; but Cynthia would not let Molly stand, seeing that the arrival had been a great strain to her. They sat and talked awhile, Cynthia hardly intervening, but sitting back in her chair and surveying Robert and Molly by turns with a pleasant maternal air, pleased that the young people should have so much to say to each other.

Luncheon over, Cynthia announced her intention of going to see the Temperleys. " The fact is," she said, " that I mustn't talk any more to Molly for a little. I feel irresistibly impelled to confide in her, and I have told her so many fatal secrets about myself that she must have time to recover. Wasn't there some old ruin, Molly, that you used to walk to with Robert—Could you get as far as that ? "

" Oh, yes," said Molly, " I can walk nearly as well as ever now."

" Why not take Robert there ? It is no good taking me —I should be quite unworthy of it. I'm very bad about ruins. I want them either to be repaired, or taken down. It always seems to me like leaving a skeleton about, because it is so picturesque."

" Isn't she a barbarian ? " said Robert.

" I have an idea," said Cynthia, laughing, " that Mr. Temperley might coach me up a little in the sort of things I am expected to say here. Besides, I want to see if he keeps the place in decent order. Robert never notices any of those things. To be candid, I think Mr. Temperley ought to pay more rent. Do you pay Robert rent, Molly ? "

" My dear Cynthia," said Robert, " that is a very unfortunate remark. This is Molly's house. My great-uncle cut it out of the estate, and according to Curtis, ruined Nan-Zephron. Curtis has never quite got over it."

" Would you like to have it back, Robert ? " said Molly. " Certainly not," said Robert ; " it's nice to have a little grievance."

The three set off together through the wood. When they reached the footpath, Cynthia left them, waving her hand, stepping on lightly up the steep road, and was soon out of sight.

" I have had *such* a happy time with Cynthia," said Molly. " Robert, she's a perfect darling. Tell me one thing. Has she changed so much since . . . since you first met her ? "

" Not very much," said Robert. " I don't think Cynthia does change much. I have changed a good deal more, I am thankful to say. It was mostly the fault of my own stupidity. I didn't see what a fine creature she really was, and I mistook her frankness for—for all kinds of things."

Then he added, in a low voice, " Has she told you, dear Molly ? "

" Yes, and I am so thankful, Robert. You make her so happy."

" She is very unselfish," said Robert, " and she has more courage than anyone I have ever known—and yet one overlooked all that ! "

" And you are happy ? "

" I have every reason to be. I am very much interested in my work—and all the tiresome and worrying things which I either did badly or not at all—why, Cynthia does them. Perhaps I ought to be ashamed of that ? "

" My dear Robert, what an idea ! She loves doing them."

Presently they strolled on through the wood. The sunlight darted softly in through the tender leafage, and the mossy stones and draggled grass were all concealed by a tapestry of low-growing plants and brambles. " What different *moods* a wood has," said Molly. " It isn't all imagination. Last time I came here it was sinister and harsh—it seemed to say ' Pass on and leave me to myself.' But to-day it is good-tempered and indulgent. I got that from you, Robert—interpreting such things, I mean ; and then being ill makes one afraid that there are hostile creatures lurking in shadowy places."

They were soon at the chapel. " Now this is different again," said Molly. " The gable has a personal interest—the sort of interest that an elderly lady takes in lovers—winks and roguish glances ! ' Well, how has it all been settled ? ' it seems to say."

" Oh, Molly, how you spoil it ! Making it out to be a sort of Mrs. Gamp. I was just going to say that I ought to restore it in memory of our visits, and then our friend Cuthbert might try on some of his games here."

" Robert, don't talk about Mr. Cuthbert like that—it really distresses me. You remember that he came out to Rome and helped me to get home, and he has been very good to me since."

Robert looked at her, half smiling, half vexed, " No, I don't forget, dear Molly, and I don't forget that I ought to have done it myself. But I would have come like a shot if you had wanted me."

" I know you would, Robert. You offered to. But Mr. Cuthbert just came—I couldn't send him away, though I didn't want anyone."

" I observe you don't call him Cubby now."

" No, that belongs to the old days."

" Of course you realize how much he is in love with you, Molly ? To my mind in rather a dreadful way."

" Is it a very unusual way ? "

" It's very uncivilized, I think—there's not much of the desire of the moth for the star about it."

" Don't let us talk about it, Robert dear. You see he has told me a great deal about himself, and I am very sorry for him."

" That's a very old trick."

" It's not a trick at all. He has got far beyond that. He's a very unhappy man—men don't like that."

" And women do, for some strange reason. Why is it, Molly ? All my closest friends have been women, and yet I don't understand them one bit."

" Mother used to say that men were interested in the moment—the day, the hour, the bit of work ; and that women were interested, perhaps not consciously, in something much further off."

" What is that, Molly ? "

" The hope of the race."

Robert looked at her for a moment, and then looked

away over the creek in silence. Molly looked at him anxiously. She had a sudden feeling that in those words they had come, in the course of their friendship, to a wall, with a gateway and a door in it. Could they go on together, she wondered, or must she go on alone?"

"Well," said Robert, lightly, a moment later, "there are some other things I want to ask you about. What are your plans going to be, Molly? You can't drift on here alone. Cynthia and I have been talking about it—won't you come and live with us, dear? That is what we should like. And you need not feel bound to be always with us, of course. You could keep this house to fly to, or we might fly to it with you sometimes. Then you would be quite independent in London, and have a sitting-room of your own, so that you would not feel that you were always bound to appear. I wouldn't say this, Molly, if I thought there would be any difficulty. But I am sure you would get on with Cynthia—she would love to have you and so would I. Do think of it—it does seem such a perfect plan. At all events don't say 'no' at once!" And Robert caught Molly's clasped hands in his own. A great wave of emotion surged up in his heart—she looked so young and lovable, and yet with such a look of loneliness and bewilderment and sorrow in her large clear eyes.

"Oh, Robert, what can I say?" and Molly's eyes brimmed with tears.

He drew her to him: "Come and be taken care of a little, dearest," he said; "you have had a heart-breaking time of it, when you deserved something so different. And I have hurt you, my own Molly, without intending it. Can't I do anything to make up for it—can't we bring you back to happiness?" and Robert's voice broke and quivered in an unexpected sob. Molly put her arms round his neck and kissed his cheek, "Robert, dearest," she said,

" don't ever speak or think of that again. You never meant to make me love you like this—I did not mean to myself ; but it came so, and I can't be sorry for that. That is one precious thing that life has given me. And then your wanting to have me, and Cynthia's own goodness, goes to my heart. But it can't be, Robert. There are some parts of life that we can't share ; and now that you have found Cynthia again, and she you, your life must be there. But your goodness and hers I shall never forget."

" Molly, Molly," said Robert, " don't sweep it all away like that—come to us for a time, at least, and see what happens. I'm afraid for you, dearest."

" Afraid ? There's no need for that, Robert. I am tough enough. I have not broken down and I am getting better —what can you be afraid of ? "

" I'll tell you exactly, Molly—I think if you stay here in this lonely way, with nothing very real to do, and with these sad thoughts always with you, you will do something —well, quixotic ; sacrifice yourself in some irrevocable way, and repent it all your life long."

" I see," said Molly, with a half-smile, " you are afraid of poor Mr. Cuthbert ? But you are right in one way, Robert—I must have something real to do ; and I will very gratefully and thankfully, if you and Cynthia really wish it, come to you for a little—though I shall be dreadfully in the way."

" Oh, what a relief ! " said Robert, sighing, " you make me very happy, dear Molly. We will plan it all out—in fact, I think Cynthia has drawn it all up like a treaty."

" But mind, I won't just come as your guest ! "

" You must settle that with Cynthia. You shall do *exactly* what you like, come as a guest or a paying guest, or be my secretary or Cynthia's, with four or five hundred a year. I don't care what you do as long as you will come."

A moment later they heard a view-halloo in the edge of the wood. Robert replied, and in a minute Cynthia appeared walking rapidly ; they went to join her.

" I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, " but what are you thinking of, Robert ? I have paid my call—great heavens, what a man !—I got back home—no sign of you. Molly, you look tired to death ! I don't suppose you even let her sit down ? "

" It's all right, Cynthia—she is coming to us."

" Oh, I am glad "—and Cynthia enveloped Molly in a robust hug.—" I thought there would be more what you call *pour parler*, Robert. You have been very adroit ! Dearest Molly, I can't tell you how glad I am—and I shall begin my duties at once. You must come straight home and rest. I ought never to have trusted Robert ! " And Cynthia enlaced her arm with Molly's and led her protesting away. " I suppose he has been telling you how little he understands women ? "

" I won't have this," said Robert. " I put my foot down. If you had got here ten minutes earlier, you would have spoilt it all—it was just my last little argument, wasn't it Molly ? "

" Disgraceful ! " said Cynthia, " we all know what a man's last little argument is—and before your devoted wife, too ! "

LXI

ROBERT and Cynthia settled to stay for ten days at Menerdue. They were then to go for a little to Wootton Davenant. Molly was to go with them and afterwards accompany them to London. It did not take long for Molly to realize what good comrades the two had become. Robert depended upon Cynthia for everything. She had taken all estate and other business off his hands, and Robert would hand over letters to her without even troubling to read them through. She made all domestic and social arrangements for him. The consequence was that he was left wholly free for his political work, and was also able to do a good deal of reading and writing. Molly was indeed astonished at the freshness and fertility of his mind. In earlier days she remembered how there had seemed, except when Robert was in holiday mood and high spirits, to be an undercurrent of worry, a sense that he was not fulfilling his duty to his tenants and farmers. Molly learned that Cynthia had made herself closely acquainted with all the detailed business of the estate at Colearne, and had effected considerable economies. Here at Menerdue she went off day after day, sometimes with Molly, but more often with the Nan-Zephron agent, visited the farms and cottages, inspected the woodlands, and made easy acquaintance with most of the people. Her handsome presence and her easy direct unembarrassed manner, Molly felt, were those of the *grande dame* of the best kind. She never condescended or stood on her dignity; she was natural and humorous, and listened patiently to the most long-winded explanations. She never

seemed to forget a face or a name ; but she took it all very lightly, never fussed over it or talked about it, though she asked Molly a great many questions about the people and their ways.

Molly was thrown very much into Robert's company. Cynthia occasionally asked him to accompany her, that he might say a few civil words to an aggrieved farmer, or announce a generous decision to a tenant. Indeed, Molly was touched at seeing how, whenever there was to be an interview which would redound to Robert's credit, Cynthia always contrived that Robert should have the comfortable message to deliver, while if there was an unpleasant or difficult matter to disentangle, she carried it through herself with entire imperturbability and good-natured firmness.

Cynthia said to Molly on the morning after Robert's arrival," Molly, I want you to see a good deal of Robert the next few days. There is a lot here that wants looking into, and it would fret him very much to have to do it. But it isn't only that I want to be free. He has a great many things in his mind apart from politics,—ideas, you know, and feelings—I can't even describe them, because I haven't a notion what they mean. I try to ask in interesting people in town ; but Robert, I expect you know, isn't much good at talking with men about these things ; he argues and gets vexed. What he likes is talking to people who like listening, and who understand enough to draw him on."

Molly smiled ; " I didn't know it," she said, " but I can see that it must be so."

" Well," said Cynthia, with one of her frank and engaging smiles, " it is no good his coming to me about such things. Such a hash as I make of it when I try to talk about ideas to him you could hardly imagine. I will make

a confession. I got hold of some books which Robert was interested in, read them, and even marked them—and Robert was much amused. He said I marked the things that might come in any book, and missed all the real points."

" Oh, Cynthia dear," said Molly, " how good-natured you are ! "

" That doesn't help us, however," said Cynthia, " though it is very nice of you to think it. And I want you to let him talk to you about everything. He has earned it, and he needs it—he has been sticking rather too close to his work."

" Of course I shall like it," said Molly.

" Yes, but I mean that I hope you will go on just as you used to—he has often told me about his talks with you."

" How wonderful it is that you don't want to keep him to yourself."

" But I do," said Cynthia, " though it can't be done by tying him up like a dog in a kennel. I know no one who wants more liberty than Robert."

The result was that day after day the two went out together, sat talking after tea, sat up talking, just as they had been used to do ; and Molly found Robert not only extraordinarily lively and entertaining, but full of whimsical fancies and little outbursts of charm and emotion.

But all this time—and this, which at first seemed a disloyalty, began to be of solid comfort to her—she found herself more critical of Robert, of his prejudices, his petulance, his little ferocities, his impatience of anything commonplace. She was not carried away quite as she had been ; in a sense she loved him more for his weaknesses, the unevennesses and thin patches in his mind ; his attitude towards religious things, indeed, seemed to her both narrow and impatient. His faults seemed to her

essentially childlike faults—he had no malice or spitefulness or sullenness about him ; but a failure in sympathy, a suspicion that he was ridiculous, a sense of disapproval would take the wind strangely out of his sails ; till Molly began to think of Cynthia's love as being more maternal than wifely, and of her own as being that of the sisterly companion and playfellow. They certainly did their best to spoil him ; and as Cynthia said, it was after all only an interlude in hard and serious political work, and that it would be quite time enough to begin a course of domestic discipline, when he found himself in opposition and out of harness.

Among other official interviews conducted by Cynthia was one with Mr. Cuthbert. She said she was curious to know why Robert disliked him so much, and why Molly didn't dislike him more. She told Molly about Mr. Cuthbert's letters to herself, " which," she said, " were so vehement that he must either have had a very good reason or a very bad one for writing as he did."

Molly looked a little abashed ; " It was rather compromising," she said.

" Nonsense," said Cynthia.

" But it vexed you ? " said Molly ; " it made you indignant ? "

" Indignant ? " said Cynthia, " I knew it was all the man's spite—it was the most natural thing in the world. But it came in rather conveniently, and I used it disgracefully. I behaved very badly, Molly dear, I don't deny that ; but I was at my wit's end. I knew I could make it all right with Robert if only I could see him ; and I knew it was no good appealing to his compassion—besides, that isn't my way. No, I was in a bad fix ; but I didn't know you then, Molly darling ; and I am thankful now I didn't,

because then I should have left the whole thing alone; and I didn't understand your mother. I couldn't make out why she didn't put her foot down."

"Nor can I," said Molly; "but I think that was mostly my fault. You see she had always let me go my own way, and was ashamed to behave as if she didn't trust me."

"Yes, that's about it," said Cynthia; "but I am going to have it out with Cuthbert—I think he is worth a tussle. The way he flew out to Rome to help you shows he has got some stuff in him."

"He is a very unhappy man," said Molly.

"I expect he rather enjoys being unhappy. But anyhow, we shall see."

"Don't be too much down on him, Cynthia."

"Oh, he can look after himself. I gather he is the biggest man hereabouts. Anyhow, there is nothing mild about him."

Cynthia returned from her tussle with Cuthbert, whatever it was, for she did not indicate what had passed between them, in an impenetrable frame of mind. Once or twice Molly felt Cynthia's eye bent upon her, as if inwardly debating if she should say something which was evidently lurking in her mind. After several attempts to elicit incidentally Cynthia's opinion, Molly said to her, "I do so wonder what you think of Cuthbert, Cynthia. You have never told me."

Cynthia looked steadily at Molly for a moment. "He's a very determined man, and that can always be dangerous."

"Of course," said Molly, apologetically, "I know his opinions are wild and his manners are eccentric—but those are not really a part of him—only his mental uniform, I think."

"He is a great deal more dangerous than his opinions,"

said Cynthia, and then, leaning forward, " Molly dear," she said, " you know the man is horribly in love with you ? "

" Why ' horribly ' ? " said Molly, a little pale.

" I said horribly, because I meant horribly," said Cynthia. " It possesses him like a devil."

" I think . . ." faltered Molly, " I rather imagined . . . No, it's no good beating about the bush. Yes, Cynthia, I know he is, but I don't think you ought to say ' horribly.' "

" But, Molly dear, this is very serious. Something will have to be done about it, unless, of course . . ." and Cynthia stopped with her eyes fixed on Molly.

" Unless what ? "

" Unless you care for him. Of course, I don't want you to care for him. I don't like the man and I don't trust him, and Robert detests him—and to live with—good heavens, it would be like living with a tiger. If you dislike him, he ought to go—or you ought. But one can't dictate to people about these things. I have learnt that, if I have learnt nothing else. What do you feel about him ? "

" I really don't know," said Molly ; " I am not afraid of him, and I am very grateful to him, and very sorry for him. There *is* something fine about him—inside at all events. He is the only person who has really helped me to understand about mother's death."

" Well, Molly, if you feel that, there's nothing to be done. If you had wanted him to be routed, I would have done my best ; but I see you don't."

Molly leant forward, covered her face with her hands, and burst into sobs. In a moment Cynthia was beside her. " Molly, dear, don't feel like that ! I simply can't bear it ! Here I am, as hard as nails, ready to fight anyone for you. You and Robert are the only two people in the world I care for. You gave me Robert, when you might have kept

him for yourself, and much as I love Robert, I love you even more, dearest, because it goes further down. What I am afraid of is this, dear—you have had some heavy blows—don't think I don't know how heavy ; and you are not yourself. I see it all clearly—you want someone who is strong and big to care for you in a particular way. Mr. Cuthbert is both ; but he has all sorts of faults and evil passions—cruelty of a kind, and jealousy, and revenge, which would make life with him a torture. I don't blame him—he finds them there within him, and I think he fights against them. But I don't want you in a moment of weakness and with your generous heart to do something rash which you might regret all your life. You have been deprived of everything, dearest, I know that ; and neither Robert nor I can make it up to you, try as we will. But if you really felt it was going to give you any sort of happiness —lasting happiness—I would help you all I could."

Molly had ceased to sob, and sat looking at Cynthia open-eyed.

" Cynthia, darling," she said, " you are wonderful—you see it all far better than I do. I will try to tell you what I feel. It is this—I won't say I have lost everything, because I have Robert and you. But then you have each other, and Robert has his work, and I can't really be of use to you—I can't be *inside* your lives. I want a real life, of my own ; and what I feel about Mr. Cuthbert is this. I don't love him as—well, as I used to love Robert. But I feel that he wants me ; and though I know what his faults are, I trust him and want to help him, and believe that I *could* help him. You don't know how fearfully pathetic it is to me to think of him eating his heart out, with no real life of his own either, without friends, without work—because nobody here ever goes to him unless they are in trouble. I believe that I could make him happy—and it isn't a

merely unselfish wish, nor anything to do with generosity —it is merely the misery of seeing someone who wants to do good and great things, wound up in this tangle of miseries and difficulties. To see him striding about in his old clothes, and going back to that dismal house, with his face all pulled to pieces by his wretchedness—he is like a man being burnt alive—well, it cuts my heart to pieces. You think it would be sacrificing myself. But if I said you sacrificed yourself to Robert, you would laugh in my face. You make Robert one of the happiest of men ; and all this time I have been beginning to see that I might do something like that for Mr. Cuthbert—and when I say I am not afraid of him, I mean that I know he loves me so much that he would do anything to please me—why should I fear him ? "

She turned and clasped Cynthia in her arms and kissed her. Cynthia was very grave, but there was a look in her eyes which showed Molly that she had prevailed.

LXII

BEFORE they parted, Cynthia asked Molly if Robert might be told something of what was in her mind. She said that she was afraid it would come to him as a great shock, and that the question was whether she or Molly had better speak to Robert about it. Cynthia admitted frankly that she did not think that she would do it well, and indeed Molly owned to herself that Cynthia's easy frankness was not the best medium through which so delicate a communication should be made. Molly thought, after a little reflection, that she would on the whole prefer to speak or write to Robert herself. " But," she added, " we need not arrange matters as if the whole thing were already settled. I cannot take the first step, and Mr. Cuthbert shows no signs of doing it. The only thing is for me to be prepared for the possibility of his speaking, and to know more or less what line to take if he does so speak." To this Cynthia replied that she thought that Robert was anxious about what might happen, and that he might feel deeply hurt if he realized that he had not been taken into their confidence. And they ended by agreeing that either of them might feel free to speak if an opportunity offered.

That day at luncheon it so happened that Robert was in one of his most delightful moods. He had received a note in the morning from a prominent member of the Cabinet, thanking him for the tact with which he had dealt with a delicate piece of political business. Then, too, the little rest had done him good ; he was reassured about Molly, and he had expanded in her company into easy and familiar

talk of an intimate kind, which was the one kind of relief from strain which his London life did not often afford him. " What a comfort," he had said to Molly, " to talk like this with someone who understands and who has no axe to grind ; someone who will not use what I say for his own purposes, nor convey the opinions I express to the ears of my opponents. The vigilance one has to use," he added, " has a certain interest about it—the interest of playing a game well—but caution, dear Molly, is a wearisome thing ! "

That afternoon Cynthia went off to pay a visit to one of the Nan-Zephron farmers, who was giving trouble : and Robert went out with Molly up the valley, diverging from the high road up a track, that came down a steep little valley where a stream flowed, tumbling from the wolds in a tangle of verdure. The air was still and warm in the deep-cleft glen ; on one side there were steep sloping pastures, on the other a great tract of oak-copse, just breaking into leaf, with a few ancient trees emerging above the brush-wood. There were open spaces here and there, covered with tall spikes of willow-herb, the scent of which came very sweetly upon the air ; and down by the stream the lilac cuckoo-flower rose high and straight. Here and there were big clumps of ancient hollies, their pale snake-like stems curiously intertwined. At one point they met and talked with an old labourer, who gossiped about the place, which had the gentle name of Idless ; and the old man's voice rose and fell like the piping of some woodland bird.

Robert began to talk of his London life, and the dulness of so much of the talk—either about sport or games—or personal gossip, malicious without being amusing, dealing, he said, with either money or love affairs, but ill-informed and mainly imaginary—" the imagination of dull people," he added, " what a muddy tide ! " And then he went on

to say how insolent the talk of well-bred and highly-placed people was, " not intentionally so, but just the careless overflowings of minds that are perfectly self-satisfied, the minds of men and women who have got without earning all the things which most human beings desire—power, influence, wealth, social credit. There is much good nature among such people," he said, " and a sort of breezy equality, but they have never had to make any effort; they are proud rather than ashamed of their ignorance, because it shows that they have never had to make themselves competent. They have no curiosity, no ambition, no discipline, because they have by birth what other people have by merit."

" But at all events they are not vulgar," said Molly.

" They are not ostentatious," said Robert; " but that is because they are so sure of their position that it isn't worth their while to make any claims—but I am not sure that the good-humoured contempt with which they regard everyone outside the charmed circle isn't the most vulgar thing in the world. You see," he added, " I don't really belong to my class; I was brought up on much more bourgeois lines. I was just a poor man with expectations. I was quite unheeded till old Lord Helford died, and then I was at once allowed to behave as I liked. It amused me at first; but I soon became aware what an odious freedom it all was."

They went up the valley and soon passed a little farm, with a curiously carved shield bearing the Davenant arms, and with a mouldering inscription beneath it, above the door.

" The Davenant badge! " said Robert, with an air of scorn, " my power, such as it is, my money, all the comforts I possess are based upon these quiet honest lives of daily work; and the margin of these workers' toil, instead

of bringing them leisure and convenience, gives me luxury and influence."

" But, Robert," said Molly, " you ought not to talk like this. You have a great position which you have made for yourself—no one has earned it better ! "

" Yes, in a way," said Robert ; " I have a certain knack and some industry ; but if I had never succeeded to the title, what should I have been—a journalist, I expect, a writer of little books ? There are hundreds of men more able than myself who would have done as well and better if they had had my advantages."

The path they were following passed out of the wood, and they found themselves near the top of the wold. Robert suddenly discovered that Molly was a little tired, and was tenderly apologetic ; he made her sit down in a sheltered corner, where there was a view over the wooded glen and the treetops, down to the shining creek and the low hills beyond.

" How thoughtless I am," he said, and sitting down beside her he took her hand in his own, and played with it as a child might, interlacing his fingers with hers and encircling her wrist. " It's a stronger hand than it was a little while ago, Molly." His gentle touch sent a strange thrill through Molly's veins ; she longed to rest in his arms, and feel his cheek by hers. The thought crossed her mind how easy it would be to tell him, in this tender mood, what was in her mind.

" There isn't anyone, dearest Molly," he said, " not *anyone* to whom I can talk as I can to you. I am so thankful you are to come to us—you don't know what a blessing it will be to both."

Molly took her courage in both her hands with a terror of seeming to rebuff him, but urged by an irresistible force. " Robert," she said, " I want to talk to you about that."

He look at her a little bewildered and a little mournfully : " Oh, we have settled it all, dear," he said. " Cynthia is full of plans. You are going to give us just the one thing we want, and we are going to make you happy."

" But, Robert dear," she said, " don't think for a moment that I am not more grateful than I can say—you and Cynthia are dearer to me than all the world. But I am afraid I can't help you as you say. It will be like transplanting a little weed into a great garden."

" Molly dear, your incurable modesty ! Can't we persuade you to believe what an extraordinary charm you have got. Won't you use it for us ? "

Molly clasped his hand in both her own ; " It is so clear to me," she said, " and yet I can't find words to say it. I think my real life is *here*, Robert. Can one live except where one's real life is ? "

" Molly dear, isn't your real life with the people who love you best ? "

" I can't explain—it makes me wretched to say it. I can come to you for a little ; but it is here that my real life lies."

" Your friends count for nothing ? "

" Robert dearest, do not be vexed with me. If I had married you, I could have followed you anywhere. But Cynthia can help you better than I. That is *her* real life."

" But there is no one else that claims you ? " and then, turning to her suddenly and sharply, in a tone of dismay, he cried, " Don't tell me, Molly, that a certain person, whose name I won't even mention, has entrapped you. I see he has an influence over you ? A man who has done his best to ruin both of us, who has shown himself utterly false and unscrupulous. Yet in spite of all, you listen to him. What is this awful enchantment he possesses ? I have feared him for you ever since that horrible day—do you

remember—in the church, when he frightened you so ? Has he frightened my Molly again ? "

" No, Robert, he has done nothing of the kind. Since mother died, he has been nothing but good and tender with me. He has helped me to believe in her as living—but he has said no word to me about himself. He has asked for nothing. But I feel that my life is given me, not for myself. We can do nothing with our lives, unless we give them. I might have given it to my mother, but I did not. Mr. Cuthbert is a good man, with many grievous faults which poison his life. He believes that I could save him, and I believe it too. I can't turn my back upon him. I have missed one great chance, I cannot miss another."

" But Molly," said Robert, now deadly pale, " do you know what you are doing ? Be his sister, be his confidante —be anything ; but to give yourself thus to a man, without love, just because he calls to you to save him, is there any law in heaven or earth that calls for this ? Isn't it, forgive me for saying this—but isn't it the most terrible profanation of the most beautiful and noble thing in the world ? "

" Dearest, I must speak," said Molly ; " the love of the body goes very far down into life ; but I feel now as if there were something—the love of the spirit—that goes farther down. This is a call of spirit to spirit—and there in that other world, wherever it is, I have neither fear nor dread of him. I have no more a horror of him than I should have for you, dear Robert, if you were afflicted with some frightful and disfiguring disease. I should only love you all the more."

Robert covered his face with his hands for a moment, while Molly watched him with intense agony of mind. Then he looked at her in a dumb and blind distress. " Molly, I cannot believe it, I cannot understand it. We seem to be separated by a wall of glass. It is as if I saw

you going to the edge of a cliff to throw yourself over, and could not raise a hand to avert it. It is as if you were bewitched—Will you not speak to Cynthia ? "

" Yes," said Molly, in the clutch of what seemed a botomless fear. " It is a thing of which a man and a woman, however much they love each other, can hardly speak. That is where they are divided. I have spoken to Cynthia."

" What does she feel ? "

" She has not said—but I believe she thinks as I do."

" What can I say ? " said Robert. " This seems to me the most dreadful thing that has ever happened in my life. Tell me it isn't true, Molly ! "

" I cannot. You must trust me, you must love me not less but more, for I need it more."

They returned home almost in silence, though each in turn made attempts to talk ; and Molly's resolution almost gave way when just before they reached the house, Robert turned to her, and in his gentlest manner—though his voice, as Molly had noticed, seemed unstrung by depression—said in a low tone, " You can't do this, dearest Molly—tell me it is all a dreadful mistake." At which she shook her head and turned away ; and as she went up the stairs, with a crushing sense of fatigue, she was aware that he stood, looking imploringly at her from the hall. At tea Cynthia recounted her adventures of the afternoon ; and presently Robert made an excuse and slipped out. The two sat on together.

" I see you have told him," said Cynthia. " Perhaps it was best. Was it very bad ? "

" Yes," said Molly, and after a pause added, " it was worse than anything I could possibly have imagined."

" Dearest Molly," said Cynthia, sitting down beside her, and putting an arm round her, " I am so sorry. I

understand. But there are three things to remember, dearest. With Robert, when he does speak, you always get the worst first; he doesn't begin quietly and lash himself into a rage as some people do: it all comes out at once. And then, dear, he is so used to expressing himself, and he is so quick with words that you don't always get his feelings, but a picture of what he thinks his feelings are or ought to be. And then, dearest, he isn't sullen or vindictive—he hates the atmosphere of anything strained or painful; he always tries to make things right."

"How well you know him, Cynthia!"

"So do you, Molly dear. I wouldn't give him away to anyone else; but the really fine thing about Robert is that he hates strife and anger; he doesn't know how much what he says can hurt, but he does try to make amends."

"I feel I have lost him, Cynthia—how hard it is to do what one thinks right! I believe this to be my one chance of usefulness and happiness, but must I throw over Robert for it?"

"You need not be afraid of losing him—he's very faithful; but he must make himself felt. I believe that is the artist in him. You have got to get past the artist before you can love him."

"And yet what you call the artist side—his beautiful fancy, his sympathy, his quickness, his need of sympathy and comfort—this was what made me love him."

"But *I* love him, Molly—and for none of these things—the attractive side is really the weakest and least reliable thing about him."

"Oh, Cynthia, you are wise;—I see that this is all true."

"Be comforted, dear. You have not lost Robert; he loves courage and firmness, if they are gentle."

"Cynthia, dear, I am worn out. How can I live if life

brings days like these—if one is stripped of joy after joy ; if one's best purposes and endeavours bring despair and bitterness with them ? "

" You are sure they are your best purposes ? You are sure you don't hold to them out of pride ? "

" Are you against me, too, Cynthia ? "

" No, darling—but I want you to be sure of yourself."

" I'm sure of nothing ! I am the most indolent and easy-going person. I hate sacrificing myself. I hate losing all hope and joy. And then nothing may happen after all, and I shall be left hating myself, like a burnt-out flame."

" Hush, Molly darling. I shall hold on to you. The worst of it is that I can only knock down things, I can't build them up. If only your troubles were solid stupid things, like most people's, I would make short work of them—but these are like ghosts, which frighten one all the more because one can see the real things through them."

LXIII

BUT when Molly awoke next day in a cloudy dawn, the ghosts crowded thick about her, and each in turn took up the tale of woe. She could not believe that a year ago she had been carelessly and radiantly happy, with all her village friends and neighbours about her, each so distinctly and eagerly enjoyed. Had she ever loved any of them, said the hollow voice—had they not been a puppet-show for her private merriment? Her mother, of whose love and strength she had felt so sure that she had never troubled to show her own love in return; a hundred talks, in which she had flouted and contradicted her mother came before her—how pert and odious she had been, how confident in her own superior reasonableness! Then there was Robert—how shamelessly, she felt, she had abandoned herself to his charm, how childishly she had enjoyed the sense of her power over him. Cynthia—she had despised and disliked her as a coarse intruding influence. Mr. Cuthbert himself—how she had laughed at his love for her, made fun of his eccentric ways. She had done nothing, she thought, but tear up the flowers of life by handfuls, to strew her own path with them—selfish, wilful, heartless mocking—this had been her handling of life. And now she was risking the loss of the two hearts that really loved her, for the sake of a quest which she had neither the strength nor the patience to perform—it was the fatal self-confidence again that had uprooted all her protecting influences, one by one. She lacerated herself with self-contempt and bitter reproaches. Where was the all-wise, all-tender Fatherly Heart behind all this—the Heart

that she had been trying to discern in and beyond nature ? She had been loaded with blessings, it seemed to her, just that she might carelessly misuse them, and then be stripped to a shameful nakedness of one after another.

She could bear the torture no longer. Could she not die and escape from all into some shrouding darkness ? She began to fancy herself how she could slip down to the quay, row down seaward with the tide, attach to her feet some of the big iron weights which held the boats at their anchorage in the pool. How easy to slip them overboard, and fling herself after them. A few deep breaths of the brine, and the dizziness would creep in upon her.

She broke out of the sickening dream which she had been following out, detail after detail, with a sort of childish eagerness—had it come to this, that she was planning to take her own life ? No, she was not made that way ; she knew at least that she would never do that—but how low to have fallen !

She slipped out of bed at last. She could not lie to be racked thus. It was not yet six, and the air, as she leant from her window had a divine sweetness and freshness about it. She would go down to the headland. She thought with a thrill of hopefulness of the dawn over the sea, the shadowy ships, the crisp plunge of seething waves—this would help her to a clearer and braver mind.

She took the lower path beside the creek, and as soon as she came to the rough turf of the down-land, she wound upwards through the gorse thickets, the little clumps of juniper and gnarled blackthorn ; she was surprised to find how much alive and wide awake the whole world seemed to be. The gulls sailed serenely up the wind and she heard the liquid piping of the curlews down in the creek ; rabbits flicked out of the turf, and scampered white-scutted into the brake ; finches twittered unseen ; black-

birds rushed with rebellious entry into the dingles ; she was soon near the top of the little sea-cliff ; and the great plain of the sea, a dim opalescent blue with soft fiery flakes of orange from the newly-risen sun, burst upon her gaze. Was it possible, thought poor Molly, that in a world where *that* could happen day after day, that miracle of light and colour, poor human hearts should writhe and agonise in the shuttered rooms of little houses ?

Her quick eye caught sight of a figure some little way down the slope. Was it . . . could it be . . . yes, it was Mr. Cuthbert himself, bending down over something on the ground. His girt-up cassock, his long black legs, his flapping hat, made him look like some great ominous hooded crow. He straightened himself, looked at something which he held in his hands, threw something away with a disgusted gesture, and remained gazing at what he was still holding. He had not seen her ? Should she dip over the shoulder of the down and retrace her steps ? No —she would see him, speak to him ; and at worst he might perhaps restore some strength and sanity to her tortured mind—his words had done that before. She descended the grass slope towards him. When she was a few paces from him he suddenly looked up, stared as if amazed, then bared his head and smiled at her. She came up to him. In his hands he held a young rabbit, very carefully and tenderly. It was in pain, she thought, for every moment a film seemed to close over its eyes. " Mr. Cuthbert," she said, " are you, too, out so early ? Isn't it a perfect morning ? . . . What is that which you have found ? "

" A poor child of God," said Mr. Cuthbert, in his stateliest manner—" a little snared rabbit—its leg was caught in the noose, but I have disentangled it, and

nothing is injured, I think. I detest these cruel snares which keep a poor creature in torture, waiting for death! But it is only tired and frightened, and would sleep. They fear me not, these pretty woodland things. They know I have no ill-will to them. Is it not strange, Miss Molly? If this little creature had been caught and slain and offered for sale at my door, I should doubtless have crunched its bones in a pasty, and given God thanks. But I find it in affliction, and my heart is moved with tenderness and compassion!"

He put the little creature, which showed no fear of him, very carefully into the long grass at the edge of a gorse-patch. "It will soon be well," he said; "its anxious parents will find it, and tend it better than I or you could do—and it will live to be snared again another day! Strange again! Well, it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves. Think you we should have done better? It is easy to believe so. The Father is little concerned at being misunderstood; and yet I would fain believe that man is more dear to God than he is even to himself."

"Oh, if one could but believe that!" said Molly, moved half to tears by the strangeness of the little scene.

"Miss Molly, it matters little what we think of God. It is what God thinks of us that matters. He is beyond our praise or blame. But if He blames us, it is not willingly; and He is swift to commend us, if He can. One little grain of faith, and His compassions flow forth to meet it—a great river of love, clear as crystal!"

"But if you can feel and believe all these things, Mr. Cuthbert, how can you ever be sad or troubled?"

Mr. Cuthbert's brow clouded over. "Dear Miss Molly, you ask a hard question. In these fresh hours of dawn, I feel very near to God; and then the chatter of mankind, the fretful questions, the little weary business

of the day flows in between, and Satan takes hold upon us—but his is not the victory."

"Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, "you have helped me before—can you help me again? Can you disentangle me from the snare as you did just now with a little harmless creature? It grows upon me, my despair! I think of all I might have done for all those who have loved me, and one by one they are all torn from me. Lord and Lady Helford want me to go and make my home with them, and they are the two people who love me best in the world. I cannot go with them—I cannot leave Menerdue—and I shall lose their love if I refuse—and yet I stay on, I hardly know why, as if some one last chance were being offered me. This morning I was so utterly miserable that I was tempted to think of how I could end my wretched life, which a year ago seemed full of every sort of happiness. Oh! I am caught in the snare. I cannot escape."

Mr. Cuthbert stood in silence, regarding her with a heavy look. "Dear Miss Molly," he said at last, "you must throw these cares from you. You have lived a very pure, fragrant and beautiful life. You cannot say it of yourself, but I say it of you. These thoughts of yours are the very works of darkness, the clouds which the Father allows to be drawn about you, that you may win from Him the strength and joy to pierce them. Let me speak to you for a moment of my own troubles. It is often a relief to the heart—strange that it should be so—to hear that another can suffer. A week ago I was myself sorely troubled over so base a thing as the Mammon of Unrighteousness. Mr. Temperley has discerned my need, and has both relieved and supplied it—I know not whence—I dare not even ask whence. But just when the net was closing round me, and when I had received all the purging that this sore trial could give

me—for I should have departed hence a ruined and dishonourable man—the strain is lifted ;—and it is ever so. God uses what we call evil to cleanse away the base desires, that we may cleave to what is good."

" Oh ! " said Molly, comforted even in spite of herself by the solemn and triumphant sound of Mr. Cuthbert's words, " but that is not quite my case. He takes from me the best things I have, the only little gifts I have to offer—my power of help and sympathy, my usefulness, my power even of loving others."

" There is something within most of us," said Mr. Cuthbert, "that must be broken down before we can submit joyfully to God's will—some pride, some false contentment. Whatever life means, it does not mean an easy thing."

" But we cannot live without joy ? "

" There are different kinds of joy, dear child."

" But this better joy that you speak of, can you tell me what it is—have you it yourself ? "

" No," said Mr. Cuthbert, " I have not attained to it."

" But—forgive my saying this," said Molly, moved to a depth of pity by this admission ; " perhaps you have turned your back on it ? I have thought so sometimes. We cannot get the joy of life if we turn our back on life itself."

" I will tell you something, Miss Molly," said Mr. Cuthbert, now very pale, " that I have hardly dared to utter to God or my own heart. I had thought in old days, before these sorrows came upon us, that you might have taught me this joy of which I speak. But then, when you seemed withdrawn from me by what appeared to be a forbidden love, I laid unclean and spoiling hands upon it. I obeyed evil and called it good. Your beauty, your dear converse, your sweet companionship—I turned them all

to evil. It has been one long losing fight. But you will prevail, for you have not sinned ; joy will return to you, full measure pressed down and running over."

" But, Mr. Cuthbert," said Molly, " I sinned, though in a different way. I held back from my mother the love I should have given ; I took the love that was forbidden. I am punished, too. We are punished together—can we not try to find it together ? "

She held out both her hands to him, smiling like a child.

Mr. Cuthbert looked at her, and a great awe came into his face, smoothing out for a moment the puckered lines of pain and wretchedness. He knelt down solemnly at her feet, took her hands in his and kissed them.

" Dear Miss Molly," he said, the tears gathering in his eyes, " this is a precious gift you give me—your affection, your forgiveness. But you know not what you say. You are yielding to the heavenly pity in your heart. I will take no advantage of you ; even as it is, you send me on my way rejoicing. It is as though an angel blessed me."

" It is not that," said Molly, bending down to him. " I can give you trust and affection. I could help you, I think, to see the joy of life. But I want help, too. I want to depend on something that is strong and kind, so that I may do something worth doing, something which I can do myself, something which will not be easy, but full of difficulty and pain, if need be. I don't want to have everything given me, but to give something of my own up, something which is dear and pleasant to me. My cousins, who love me better than they love anyone except each other—and I love them, too—they want me to join in their life. It is real to them, but it would not be real to me."

" I understand you," said Mr. Cuthbert, " you desire

to sacrifice yourself—that in itself is blessed—the need for sacrifice and for forgiveness, these are the beginning of wisdom. But you cannot give your life to me, dear child, for this reason, that I repel and disgust you. You cannot give to duty what can only be claimed by love. It is noble, but it is against nature."

" But you have said you love me."

" I love you better than all created things, beloved, better than myself. I have sinned in loving you better than my Saviour."

" Then it is because I do not love you, that you draw back ? "

" It were madness to tempt me thus, my heart's desire."

" Try to persuade me—it will not take long."

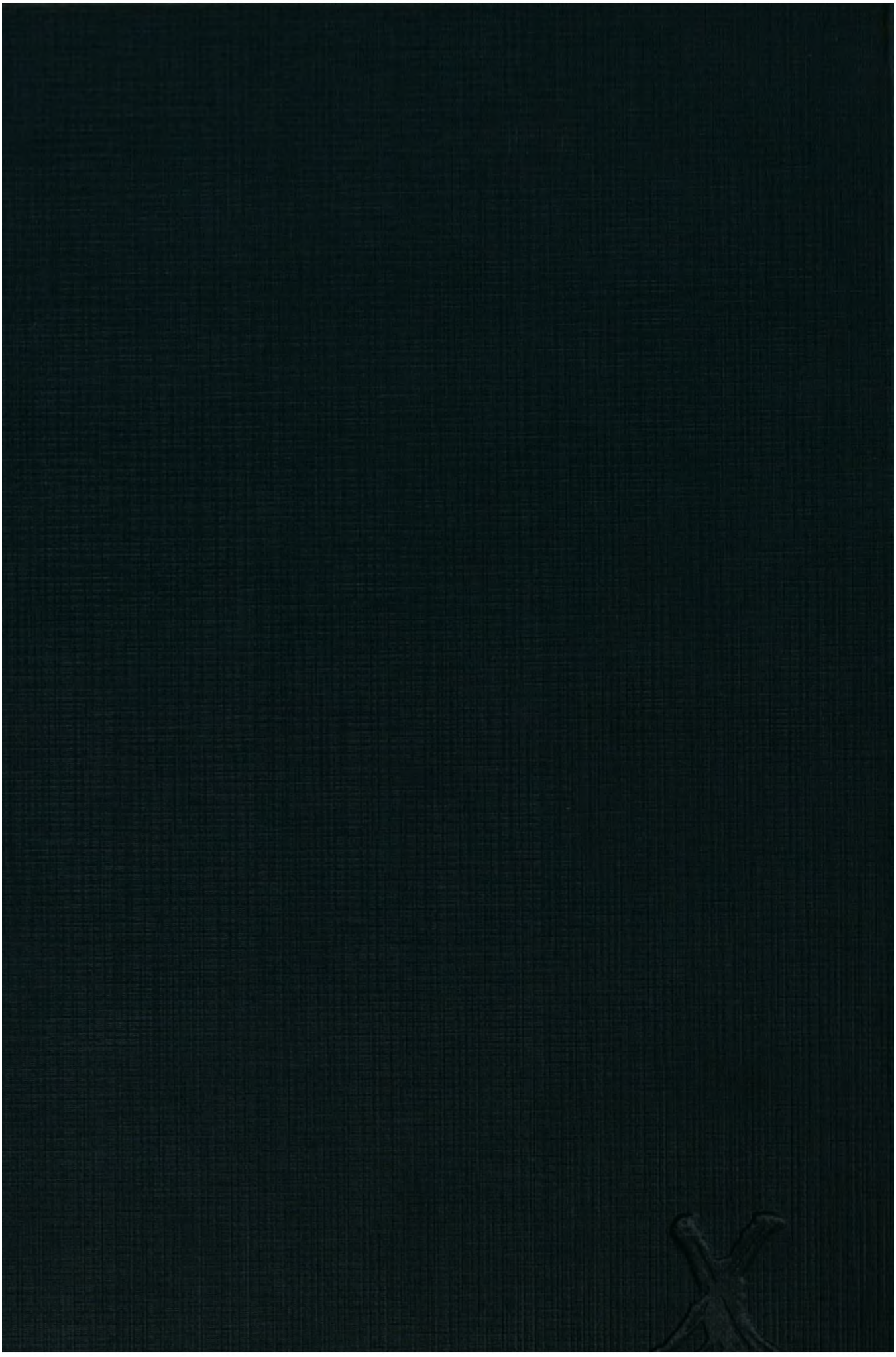
" I may try ! you will listen to me ? You do not hate me then ? "

" Mr. Cuthbert, I trust you, I pity you, I think you good and true—I do not know if I love you—but I could serve you faithfully. But I can give no reasons ; we do not care for one another for the sake of reasons, but because we need one another."

" I am not fit even to kiss your feet," said Mr. Cuthbert. " I will ask nothing of you yet—no nearness, no words of love. How often have I glowed to think what I would say to you, what I would write to you ; and now that I may, I have no words to utter."

" You will soon find words," said Molly, smiling. " Come, dear friend, do not kneel before me thus—let us go together."

" Glory to God ! " said Mr. Cuthbert in an exultant chant, raising his arms to the sky. They looked out, side by side, over the sea, for a moment. Mr. Cuthbert, half-crazed with joy, murmured fragments of Psalms and drew largely upon the Song of Solomon. " No, no," said Molly

at last, laying her hand upon his arm. " Don't make love to me out of the Bible—say something for yourself ! "

Mr. Cuthbert shook his head and looked fondly at her ; and then they turned and walked in silence, with a strange peace in their hearts, and came softly down through the wood, to where the smoke from the chimneys of Menerdue went up quietly upon the morning air.