

CHAPTER XII

ALLAYE ALSO IS ENGAGED

Alvina found it pleasant to be respected as she was respected in Lancaster. It is not only the prophet who hath honour save in his own country: it is every one with individuality. In this northern town Alvina found that her individuality really told. Already she belonged to the revered caste of medicine-men. And into the bargain she was a personality, a person.

Well and good. She was not going to cheapen herself. She felt that even in the eyes of the natives--the well-to-do part, at least--she lost a little of her distinction when she was engaged to Dr. Mitchell. The engagement had been announced in *The Times*, *The Morning Post*, *The Manchester Guardian*, and the local *News*. No fear about its being known. And it cast a slight slur of vulgar familiarity over her. In Woodhouse, she knew, it elevated her in the common esteem tremendously. But she was no longer in Woodhouse. She was in Lancaster. And in Lancaster her engagement pigeonholed her. Apart from Dr. Mitchell she had a magic potentiality. Connected with him, she was a known and labelled quantity.

This she gathered from her contact with the local gentry. The matron was a woman of family, who somehow managed, in her big, white,

frilled cap, to be distinguished like an abbess of old. The really toney women of the place came to take tea in her room, and these little teas in the hospital were like a little elegant female conspiracy. There was a slight flavour of art and literature about. The matron had known Walter Pater, in the somewhat remote past.

Alvina was admitted to these teas with the few women who formed the toney intellectual élite of this northern town. There was a certain freemasonry in the matron's room. The matron, a lady-doctor, a clergyman's daughter, and the wives of two industrial magnates of the place, these five, and then Alvina, formed the little group.

They did not meet a great deal outside the hospital. But they always met with that curious female freemasonry which can form a law unto itself even among most conventional women. They talked as they would never talk before men, or before feminine outsiders. They threw aside the whole vestment of convention. They discussed plainly the things they thought about--even the most secret--and they were quite calm about the things they did--even the most impossible. Alvina felt that her transgression was a very mild affair, and that her engagement was really *infra dig*.

"And are you going to marry him?" asked Mrs. Tuke, with a long, cool look.

"I can't imagine myself--" said Alvina.

"Oh, but so many things happen outside one's imagination. That's where your body has you. I can't imagine that I'm going to have a child--" She lowered her eyelids wearily and sardonically over her large eyes.

Mrs. Tuke was the wife of the son of a local manufacturer. She was about twenty-eight years old, pale, with great dark-grey eyes and an arched nose and black hair, very like a head on one of the lovely Syracusan coins. The odd look of a smile which wasn't a smile, at the corners of the mouth, the arched nose, and the slowness of the big, full, classic eyes gave her the dangerous Greek look of the Syracusan women of the past: the dangerous, heavily-civilized women of old Sicily: those who laughed about the latomia.

"But do you think you can have a child without wanting it at all?" asked Alvina.

"Oh, but there isn't one bit of me wants it, not one bit. My flesh doesn't want it. And my mind doesn't--yet there it is!" She spread her fine hands with a flicker of inevitability.

"Something must want it," said Alvina.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Tuke. "The universe is one big machine, and we're just part of it." She flicked out her grey silk handkerchief, and dabbed her nose, watching with big, black-grey eyes the fresh face

of Alvina.

"There's not one bit of me concerned in having this child," she persisted to Alvina. "My flesh isn't concerned, and my mind isn't. And yet!--le voilà!--I'm just planté. I can't imagine why I married Tommy. And yet--I did--!" She shook her head as if it was all just beyond her, and the pseudo-smile at the corners of her ageless mouth deepened.

Alvina was to nurse Mrs. Tuke. The baby was expected at the end of August. But already the middle of September was here, and the baby had not arrived.

The Tukes were not very rich--the young ones, that is. Tommy wanted to compose music, so he lived on what his father gave him. His father gave him a little house outside the town, a house furnished with expensive bits of old furniture, in a way that the townspeople thought insane. But there you are--Effie would insist on dabbing a rare bit of yellow brocade on the wall, instead of a picture, and in painting apple-green shelves in the recesses of the whitewashed wall of the dining-room. Then she enamelled the hall-furniture yellow, and decorated it with curious green and lavender lines and flowers, and had unearthly cushions and Sardinian pottery with unspeakable peaked griffins.

What were you to make of such a woman! Alvina slept in her house

these days, instead of at the hospital. For Effie was a very bad sleeper. She would sit up in bed, the two glossy black plaits hanging beside her white, arch face, wrapping loosely round her her dressing-gown of a sort of plumbago-coloured, dark-grey silk lined with fine silk of metallic blue, and there, ivory and jet-black and grey like black-lead, she would sit in the white bedclothes flicking her handkerchief and revealing a flicker of kingfisher-blue silk and white silk night dress, complaining of her neuritis nerve and her own impossible condition, and begging Alvina to stay with her another half-hour, and suddenly studying the big, blood-red stone on her finger as if she was reading something in it.

"I believe I shall be like the woman in the Cent Nouvelles and carry my child for five years. Do you know that story? She said that eating a parsley leaf on which bits of snow were sticking started the child in her. It might just as well--"

Alvina would laugh and get tired. There was about her a kind of half bitter sanity and nonchalance which the nervous woman liked.

One night as they were sitting thus in the bedroom, at nearly eleven o'clock, they started and listened. Dogs in the distance had also started to yelp. A mandoline was wailing its vibration in the night outside, rapidly, delicately quivering. Alvina went pale. She knew it was Ciccio. She had seen him lurking in the streets of the town, but had never spoken to him.

"What's this?" cried Mrs. Tuke, cocking her head on one side.

"Music! A mandoline! How extraordinary! Do you think it's a serenade?--" And she lifted her brows archly.

"I should think it is," said Alvina.

"How extraordinary! What a moment to choose to serenade the lady! Isn't it like life--! I must look at it--"

She got out of bed with some difficulty, wrapped her dressing-gown round her, pushed her feet into slippers, and went to the window. She opened the sash. It was a lovely moonlight night of September. Below lay the little front garden, with its short drive and its iron gates that closed on the high-road. From the shadow of the high-road came the noise of the mandoline.

"Hello, Tommy!" called Mrs. Tuke to her husband, whom she saw on the drive below her. "How's your musical ear--?"

"All right. Doesn't it disturb you?" came the man's voice from the moonlight below.

"Not a bit. I like it. I'm waiting for the voice. 'O Richard, O mon roi!'"

But the music had stopped.

"There!" cried Mrs. Tuke. "You've frightened him off! And we're dying to be serenaded, aren't we, nurse?" She turned to Alvina. "Do give me my fur, will you? Thanks so much. Won't you open the other window and look out there--?"

Alvina went to the second window. She stood looking out.

"Do play again!" Mrs. Tuke called into the night. "Do sing something." And with her white arm she reached for a glory rose that hung in the moonlight from the wall, and with a flash of her white arm she flung it toward the garden wall--ineffectually, of course.

"Won't you play again?" she called into the night, to the unseen.

"Tommy, go indoors, the bird won't sing when you're about."

"It's an Italian by the sound of him. Nothing I hate more than emotional Italian music. Perfectly nauseating."

"Never mind, dear. I know it sounds as if all their insides were coming out of their mouth. But we want to be serenaded, don't we, nurse?--"

Alvina stood at her window, but did not answer.

"Ah-h?" came the odd query from Mrs. Tuke. "Don't you like it?"

"Yes," said Alvina. "Very much."

"And aren't you dying for the song?"

"Quite."

"There!" cried Mrs. Tuke, into the moonlight. "Una canzone bella-bella--molto bella--"

She pronounced her syllables one by one, calling into the night. It sounded comical. There came a rude laugh from the drive below.

"Go indoors, Tommy! He won't sing if you're there. Nothing will sing if you're there," called the young woman.

They heard a footstep on the gravel, and then the slam of the hall door.

"Now!" cried Mrs. Tuke.

They waited. And sure enough, came the fine tinkle of the mandoline, and after a few moments, the song. It was one of the well-known Neapolitan songs, and Ciccio sang it as it should be sung.

Mrs. Tuke went across to Alvina.

"Doesn't he put his bowels into it--?" she said, laying her hand on her own full figure, and rolling her eyes mockingly. "I'm sure it's more effective than senna-pods."

Then she returned to her own window, huddled her furs over her breast, and rested her white elbows in the moonlight.

"Torn' a Surrientu
Fammi campar--"

The song suddenly ended, in a clamorous, animal sort of yearning. Mrs. Tuke was quite still, resting her chin on her fingers. Alvina also was still. Then Mrs. Tuke slowly reached for the rose-buds on the old wall.

"Molto bella!" she cried, half ironically. "Molto bella! Je vous envoie une rose--" And she threw the roses out on to the drive. A man's figure was seen hovering outside the gate, on the high-road. "Entrez!" called Mrs. Tuke. "Entrez! Prenez votre rose. Come in and take your rose."

The man's voice called something from the distance.

"What?" cried Mrs. Tuke.

"Je ne peux pas entrer."

"Vous ne pouvez pas entrer? Pourquoi alors! La porte n'est pas fermée à clef. Entrez donc!"

"Non. On n'entre pas--" called the well-known voice of Ciccio.

"Quoi faire, alors! Alvina, take him the rose to the gate, will you?

Yes do! Their singing is horrible, I think. I can't go down to him.

But do take him the roses, and see what he looks like. Yes do!" Mrs.

Tuke's eyes were arched and excited. Alvina looked at her slowly.

Alvina also was smiling to herself.

She went slowly down the stairs and out of the front door. From a bush at the side she pulled two sweet-smelling roses. Then in the drive she picked up Effie's flowers. Ciccio was standing outside the gate.

"Allaye!" he said, in a soft, yearning voice.

"Mrs. Tuke sent you these roses," said Alvina, putting the flowers through the bars of the gate.

"Allaye!" he said, caressing her hand, kissing it with a soft,

passionate, yearning mouth. Alvina shivered. Quickly he opened the gate and drew her through. He drew her into the shadow of the wall, and put his arms round her, lifting her from her feet with passionate yearning.

"Allaye!" he said. "I love you, Allaye, my beautiful, Allaye. I love you, Allaye!" He held her fast to his breast and began to walk away with her. His throbbing, muscular power seemed completely to envelop her. He was just walking away with her down the road, clinging fast to her, enveloping her.

"Nurse! Nurse! I can't see you! Nurse!--" came the long call of Mrs. Tuke through the night. Dogs began to bark.

"Put me down," murmured Alvina. "Put me down, Ciccio."

"Come with me to Italy. Come with me to Italy, Allaye. I can't go to Italy by myself, Allaye. Come with me, be married to me--Allaye, Allaye--"

His voice was a strange, hoarse whisper just above her face, he still held her in his throbbing, heavy embrace.

"Yes--yes!" she whispered. "Yes--yes! But put me down, Ciccio. Put me down."

"Come to Italy with me, Allaye. Come with me," he still reiterated, in a voice hoarse with pain and yearning.

"Nurse! Nurse! Wherever are you? Nurse! I want you," sang the uneasy, querulous voice of Mrs. Tuke.

"Do put me down!" murmured Alvina, stirring in his arms.

He slowly relaxed his clasp, and she slid down like rain to earth. But still he clung to her.

"Come with me, Allaye! Come with me to Italy!" he said.

She saw his face, beautiful, non-human in the moonlight, and she shuddered slightly.

"Yes!" she said. "I will come. But let me go now. Where is your mandoline?"

He turned round and looked up the road.

"Nurse! You absolutely must come. I can't bear it," cried the strange voice of Mrs. Tuke.

Alvina slipped from the man, who was a little bewildered, and through the gate into the drive.

"You must come!" came the voice in pain from the upper window.

Alvina ran upstairs. She found Mrs. Tuke crouched in a chair, with a drawn, horrified, terrified face. As her pains suddenly gripped her, she uttered an exclamation, and pressed her clenched fists hard on her face.

"The pains have begun," said Alvina, hurrying to her.

"Oh, it's horrible! It's horrible! I don't want it!" cried the woman in travail. Alvina comforted her and reassured her as best she could. And from outside, once more, came the despairing howl of the Neapolitan song, animal and inhuman on the night.

"E tu dic' Io part', addio!
T'alluntare di sta core,
Nel paese del amore
Tien' o cor' di non turnar'
--Ma nun me lasciar'--"

It was almost unendurable. But suddenly Mrs. Tuke became quite still, and sat with her fists clenched on her knees, her two jet-black plaits dropping on either side of her ivory face, her big eyes fixed staring into space. At the line--

Ma nun me lasciar'--

she began to murmur softly to herself--"Yes, it's dreadful! It's horrible! I can't understand it. What does it mean, that noise? It's as bad as these pains. What does it mean? What does he say? I can understand a little Italian--" She paused. And again came the sudden complaint:

Ma nun me lasciar'--

"Ma nun me lasciar'--!" she murmured, repeating the music. "That means--Don't leave me! Don't leave me! But why? Why shouldn't one human being go away from another? What does it mean? That awful noise! Isn't love the most horrible thing! I think it's horrible. It just does one in, and turns one into a sort of howling animal. I'm howling with one sort of pain, he's howling with another. Two hellish animals howling through the night! I'm not myself, he's not himself. Oh, I think it's horrible. What does he look like, Nurse? Is he beautiful? Is he a great hefty brute?"

She looked with big, slow, enigmatic eyes at Alvina.

"He's a man I knew before," said Alvina.

Mrs. Tuke's face woke from its half-trance.

"Really! Oh! A man you knew before! Where?"

"It's a long story," said Alvina. "In a travelling music-hall troupe."

"In a travelling music-hall troupe! How extraordinary! Why, how did you come across such an individual--?"

Alvina explained as briefly as possible. Mrs. Tuke watched her.

"Really!" she said. "You've done all those things!" And she scrutinized Alvina's face. "You've had some effect on him, that's evident," she said. Then she shuddered, and dabbed her nose with her handkerchief. "Oh, the flesh is a beastly thing!" she cried. "To make a man howl outside there like that, because you're here. And to make me howl because I've got a child inside me. It's unbearable! What does he look like, really?"

"I don't know," said Alvina. "Not extraordinary. Rather a hefty brute--"

Mrs. Tuke glanced at her, to detect the irony.

"I should like to see him," she said. "Do you think I might?"

"I don't know," said Alvina, non-committal.

"Do you think he might come up? Ask him. Do let me see him."

"Do you really want to?" said Alvina.

"Of course--" Mrs. Tuke watched Alvina with big, dark, slow eyes. Then she dragged herself to her feet. Alvina helped her into bed.

"Do ask him to come up for a minute," Effie said. "We'll give him a glass of Tommy's famous port. Do let me see him. Yes do!" She stretched out her long white arm to Alvina, with sudden imploring.

Alvina laughed, and turned doubtfully away.

The night was silent outside. But she found Ciccio leaning against a gate-pillar. He started up.

"Allaye!" he said.

"Will you come in for a moment? I can't leave Mrs. Tuke."

Ciccio obediently followed Alvina into the house and up the stairs, without a word. He was ushered into the bedroom. He drew back when he saw Effie in the bed, sitting with her long plaits and her dark eyes, and the subtle-seeming smile at the corners of her mouth.

"Do come in!" she said. "I want to thank you for the music. Nurse says it was for her, but I enjoyed it also. Would you tell me the words? I think it's a wonderful song."

Ciccio hung back against the door, his head dropped, and the shy, suspicious, faintly malicious smile on his face.

"Have a glass of port, do!" said Effie. "Nurse, give us all one. I should like one too. And a biscuit." Again she stretched out her long white arm from the sudden blue lining of her wrap, suddenly, as if taken with the desire. Ciccio shifted on his feet, watching Alvina pour out the port.

He swallowed his in one swallow, and put aside his glass.

"Have some more!" said Effie, watching over the top of her glass.

He smiled faintly, stupidly, and shook his head.

"Won't you? Now tell me the words of the song--"

He looked at her from out of the dusky hollows of his brow, and did not answer. The faint, stupid half-smile, half-sneer was on his lips.

"Won't you tell them me? I understood one line--"

Ciccio smiled more pronouncedly as he watched her, but did not speak.

"I understood one line," said Effie, making big eyes at him. "Ma non me lasciare--Don't leave me! There, isn't that it?"

He smiled, stirred on his feet, and nodded.

"Don't leave me! There, I knew it was that. Why don't you want Nurse to leave you? Do you want her to be with you every minute?"

He smiled a little contemptuously, awkwardly, and turned aside his face, glancing at Alvina. Effie's watchful eyes caught the glance. It was swift, and full of the terrible yearning which so horrified her.

At the same moment a spasm crossed her face, her expression went blank.

"Shall we go down?" said Alvina to Ciccio.

He turned immediately, with his cap in his hand, and followed. In the hall he pricked up his ears as he took the mandoline from the chest. He could hear the stifled cries and exclamations from Mrs. Tuke. At the same moment the door of the study opened, and the

musician, a burly fellow with troubled hair, came out.

"Is that Mrs. Tuke?" he snapped anxiously.

"Yes. The pains have begun," said Alvina.

"Oh God! And have you left her!" He was quite irascible.

"Only for a minute," said Alvina.

But with a Pfl of angry indignation, he was climbing the stairs.

"She is going to have a child," said Alvina to Ciccio. "I shall have to go back to her." And she held out her hand.

He did not take her hand, but looked down into her face with the same slightly distorted look of overwhelming yearning, yearning heavy and unbearable, in which he was carried towards her as on a flood.

"Allaye!" he said, with a faint lift of the lip that showed his teeth, like a pained animal: a curious sort of smile. He could not go away.

"I shall have to go back to her," she said.

"Shall you come with me to Italy, Allaye?"

"Yes. Where is Madame?"

"Gone! Gigi--all gone."

"Gone where?"

"Gone back to France--called up."

"And Madame and Louis and Max?"

"Switzerland."

He stood helplessly looking at her.

"Well, I must go," she said.

He watched her with his yellow eyes, from under his long black lashes, like some chained animal, haunted by doom. She turned and left him standing.

She found Mrs. Tuke wildly clutching the edge of the sheets, and crying: "No, Tommy dear. I'm awfully fond of you, you know I am. But go away. Oh God, go away. And put a space between us. Put a space between us!" she almost shrieked.

He pushed up his hair. He had been working on a big choral work which he was composing, and by this time he was almost demented.

"Can't you stand my presence!" he shouted, and dashed downstairs.

"Nurse!" cried Effie. "It's no use trying to get a grip on life. You're just at the mercy of Forces," she shrieked angrily.

"Why not?" said Alvina. "There are good life-forces. Even the will of God is a life-force."

"You don't understand! I want to be myself. And I'm not myself. I'm just torn to pieces by Forces. It's horrible--"

"Well, it's not my fault. I didn't make the universe," said Alvina. "If you have to be torn to pieces by forces, well, you have. Other forces will put you together again."

"I don't want them to. I want to be myself. I don't want to be nailed together like a chair, with a hammer. I want to be myself."

"You won't be nailed together like a chair. You should have faith in life."

"But I hate life. It's nothing but a mass of forces. I am

intelligent. Life isn't intelligent. Look at it at this moment. Do you call this intelligent? Oh--Oh! It's horrible! Oh--!" She was wild and sweating with her pains. Tommy flounced out downstairs, beside himself. He was heard talking to some one in the moonlight outside. To Ciccio. He had already telephoned wildly for the doctor. But the doctor had replied that Nurse would ring him up.

The moment Mrs. Tuke recovered her breath she began again.

"I hate life, and faith, and such things. Faith is only fear. And life is a mass of unintelligent forces to which intelligent beings are submitted. Prostituted. Oh--oh!--prostituted--"

"Perhaps life itself is something bigger than intelligence," said Alvina.

"Bigger than intelligence!" shrieked Effie. "Nothing is bigger than intelligence. Your man is a hefty brute. His yellow eyes aren't intelligent. They're animal--"

"No," said Alvina. "Something else. I wish he didn't attract me--"

"There! Because you're not content to be at the mercy of Forces!" cried Effie. "I'm not. I'm not. I want to be myself. And so forces tear me to pieces! Tear me to pie--eee--Oh-h-h! No!--"

Downstairs Tommy had walked Ciccio back into the house again, and the two men were drinking port in the study, discussing Italy, for which Tommy had a great sentimental affection, though he hated all Italian music after the younger Scarlatti. They drank port all through the night, Tommy being strictly forbidden to interfere upstairs, or even to fetch the doctor. They drank three and a half bottles of port, and were discovered in the morning by Alvina fast asleep in the study, with the electric light still burning. Tommy slept with his fair and ruffled head hanging over the edge of the couch like some great loose fruit, Ciccio was on the floor, face downwards, his face in his folded arms.

Alvina had a great difficulty in waking the inert Ciccio. In the end, she had to leave him and rouse Tommy first: who in rousing fell off the sofa with a crash which woke him disagreeably. So that he turned on Alvina in a fury, and asked her what the hell she thought she was doing. In answer to which Alvina held up a finger warningly, and Tommy, suddenly remembering, fell back as if he had been struck.

"She is sleeping now," said Alvina.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" he cried.

"It isn't born yet," she said.

"Oh God, it's an accursed fugue!" cried the bemused Tommy. After

which they proceeded to wake Ciccio, who was like the dead doll in Petrushka, all loose and floppy. When he was awake, however, he smiled at Alvina, and said: "Allaye!"

The dark, waking smile upset her badly.