BOOK THE FOURTH: ISABEL

CHAPTER THE FIRST ~~ LOVE AND SUCCESS

1

I come to the most evasive and difficult part of my story, which is to tell how Isabel and I have made a common wreck of our joint lives.

It is not the telling of one simple disastrous accident. There was a vein in our natures that led to this collapse, gradually and at this point and that it crept to the surface. One may indeed see our destruction--for indeed politically we could not be more extinct if we had been shot dead--in the form of a catastrophe as disconnected and conclusive as a meteoric stone falling out of heaven upon two friends and crushing them both. But I do not think that is true to our situation or ourselves. We were not taken by surprise. The thing was in us and not from without, it was akin to our way of thinking and our habitual attitudes; it had, for all its impulsive effect, a certain necessity. We might have escaped no doubt, as two men at a hundred yards may shoot at each other with pistols for a considerable time and escape. But it isn't

particularly reasonable to talk of the contrariety of fate if they both get hit.

Isabel and I were dangerous to each other for several years of friendship, and not quite unwittingly so.

In writing this, moreover, there is a very great difficulty in steering my way between two equally undesirable tones in the telling. In the first place I do not want to seem to confess my sins with a penitence I am very doubtful if I feel. Now that I have got Isabel we can no doubt count the cost of it and feel unquenchable regrets, but I am not sure whether, if we could be put back now into such circumstances as we were in a year ago, or two years ago, whether with my eyes fully open I should not do over again very much as I did. And on the other hand I do not want to justify the things we have done. We are two bad people--if there is to be any classification of good and bad at all, we have acted badly, and quite apart from any other considerations we've largely wasted our own very great possibilities. But it is part of a queer humour that underlies all this, that I find myself slipping again and again into a sentimental treatment of our case that is as unpremeditated as it is insincere. When I am a little tired after a morning's writing I find the faint suggestion getting into every other sentence that our blunders and misdeeds embodied, after the fashion of the prophet Hosea, profound moral truths. Indeed, I feel so little confidence in my ability to keep this altogether out of my book that I warn the reader here that in spite of anything he may read elsewhere in the story, intimating

however shyly an esoteric and exalted virtue in our proceedings, the plain truth of this business is that Isabel and I wanted each other with a want entirely formless, inconsiderate, and overwhelming. And though I could tell you countless delightful and beautiful things about Isabel, were this a book in her praise, I cannot either analyse that want or account for its extreme intensity.

I will confess that deep in my mind there is a belief in a sort of wild rightness about any love that is fraught with beauty, but that eludes me and vanishes again, and is not, I feel, to be put with the real veracities and righteousnesses and virtues in the paddocks and menageries of human reason....

We have already a child, and Margaret was childless, and I find myself prone to insist upon that, as if it was a justification. But, indeed, when we became lovers there was small thought of Eugenics between us. Ours was a mutual and not a philoprogenitive passion. Old Nature behind us may have had such purposes with us, but it is not for us to annex her intentions by a moralising afterthought. There isn't, in fact, any decent justification for us whatever--at that the story must stand.

But if there is no justification there is at least a very effective excuse in the mental confusedness of our time. The evasion of that passionately thorough exposition of belief and of the grounds of morality, which is the outcome of the mercenary religious compromises of the late Vatican period, the stupid suppression of anything but the most

timid discussion of sexual morality in our literature and drama, the pervading cultivated and protected muddle-headedness, leaves mentally vigorous people with relatively enormous possibilities of destruction and little effective help. They find themselves confronted by the habits and prejudices of manifestly commonplace people, and by that extraordinary patched-up Christianity, the cult of a "Bromsteadised" deity, diffused, scattered, and aimless, which hides from examination and any possibility of faith behind the plea of good taste. A god about whom there is delicacy is far worse than no god at all. We are FORCED to be laws unto ourselves and to live experimentally. It is inevitable that a considerable fraction of just that bolder, more initiatory section of the intellectual community, the section that can least be spared from the collective life in a period of trial and change, will drift into such emotional crises and such disaster as overtook us. Most perhaps will escape, but many will go down, many more than the world can spare. It is the unwritten law of all our public life, and the same holds true of America, that an honest open scandal ends a career. England in the last quarter of a century has wasted half a dozen statesmen on this score; she would, I believe, reject Nelson now if he sought to serve her. Is it wonderful that to us fretting here in exile this should seem the cruellest as well as the most foolish elimination of a necessary social element? It destroys no vice; for vice hides by nature. It not only rewards dullness as if it were positive virtue, but sets an enormous premium upon hypocrisy. That is my case, and that is why I am telling this side of my story with so much explicitness.

2

Ever since the Kinghamstead election I had maintained what seemed a desultory friendship with Isabel. At first it was rather Isabel kept it up than I. Whenever Margaret and I went down to that villa, with its three or four acres of garden and shrubbery about it, which fulfilled our election promise to live at Kinghamstead, Isabel would turn up in a state of frank cheerfulness, rejoicing at us, and talk all she was reading and thinking to me, and stay for all the rest of the day. In her shameless liking for me she was as natural as a savage. She would exercise me vigorously at tennis, while Margaret lay and rested her back in the afternoon, or guide me for some long ramble that dodged the suburban and congested patches of the constituency with amazing skill. She took possession of me in that unabashed, straight-minded way a girl will sometimes adopt with a man, chose my path or criticised my game with a motherly solicitude for my welfare that was absurd and delightful. And we talked. We discussed and criticised the stories of novels, scraps of history, pictures, social questions, socialism, the policy of the Government. She was young and most unevenly informed, but she was amazingly sharp and quick and good. Never before in my life had I known a girl of her age, or a woman of her quality. I had never dreamt there was such talk in the world. Kinghamstead became a lightless place when she went to Oxford. Heaven knows how much that may not have

precipitated my abandonment of the seat!

She went to Ridout College, Oxford, and that certainly weighed with me when presently after my breach with the Liberals various little undergraduate societies began to ask for lectures and discussions. I favoured Oxford. I declared openly I did so because of her. At that time I think we neither of us suspected the possibility of passion that lay like a coiled snake in the path before us. It seemed to us that we had the quaintest, most delightful friendship in the world; she was my pupil, and I was her guide, philosopher, and friend. People smiled indulgently--even Margaret smiled indulgently--at our attraction for one another.

Such friendships are not uncommon nowadays--among easy-going, liberal-minded people. For the most part, there's no sort of harm, as people say, in them. The two persons concerned are never supposed to think of the passionate love that hovers so close to the friendship, or if they do, then they banish the thought. I think we kept the thought as permanently in exile as any one could do. If it did in odd moments come into our heads we pretended elaborately it wasn't there.

Only we were both very easily jealous of each other's attention, and tremendously insistent upon each other's preference.

I remember once during the Oxford days an intimation that should have set me thinking, and I suppose discreetly disentangling myself. It was

one Sunday afternoon, and it must have been about May, for the trees and shrubs of Ridout College were gay with blossom, and fresh with the new sharp greens of spring. I had walked talking with Isabel and a couple of other girls through the wide gardens of the place, seen and criticised the new brick pond, nodded to the daughter of this friend and that in the hammocks under the trees, and picked a way among the scattered tea-parties on the lawn to our own circle on the grass under a Siberian crab near the great bay window. There I sat and ate great quantities of cake, and discussed the tactics of the Suffragettes. I had made some comments upon the spirit of the movement in an address to the men in Pembroke, and it had got abroad, and a group of girls and women dons were now having it out with me.

I forget the drift of the conversation, or what it was made Isabel interrupt me. She did interrupt me. She had been lying prone on the ground at my right hand, chin on fists, listening thoughtfully, and I was sitting beside old Lady Evershead on a garden seat. I turned to Isabel's voice, and saw her face uplifted, and her dear cheeks and nose and forehead all splashed and barred with sunlight and the shadows of the twigs of the trees behind me. And something--an infinite tenderness, stabbed me. It was a keen physical feeling, like nothing I had ever felt before. It had a quality of tears in it. For the first time in my narrow and concentrated life another human being had really thrust into my being and gripped my very heart.

Our eyes met perplexed for an extraordinary moment. Then I turned

back and addressed myself a little stiffly to the substance of her intervention. For some time I couldn't look at her again.

From that time forth I knew I loved Isabel beyond measure.

Yet it is curious that it never occurred to me for a year or so that this was likely to be a matter of passion between us. I have told how definitely I put my imagination into harness in those matters at my marriage, and I was living now in a world of big interests, where there is neither much time nor inclination for deliberate love-making. I suppose there is a large class of men who never meet a girl or a woman without thinking of sex, who meet a friend's daughter and decide: "Mustn't get friendly with her--wouldn't DO," and set invisible bars between themselves and all the wives in the world. Perhaps that is the way to live. Perhaps there is no other method than this effectual annihilation of half--and the most sympathetic and attractive half--of the human beings in the world, so far as any frank intercourse is concerned. I am quite convinced anyhow that such a qualified intimacy as ours, such a drifting into the sense of possession, such untrammeled conversation with an invisible, implacable limit set just where the intimacy glows, it is no kind of tolerable compromise. If men and women are to go so far together, they must be free to go as far as they may want to go, without the vindictive destruction that has come upon us. On the basis of the accepted codes the jealous people are right, and the liberal-minded ones are playing with fire. If people are not to love, then they must be kept apart. If they are not to be kept apart, then we

must prepare for an unprecedented toleration of lovers.

Isabel was as unforeseeing as I to begin with, but sex marches into the life of an intelligent girl with demands and challenges far more urgent than the mere call of curiosity and satiable desire that comes to a young man. No woman yet has dared to tell the story of that unfolding. She attracted men, and she encouraged them, and watched them, and tested them, and dismissed them, and concealed the substance of her thoughts about them in the way that seems instinctive in a natural-minded girl. There was even an engagement--amidst the protests and disapproval of the college authorities. I never saw the man, though she gave me a long history of the affair, to which I listened with a forced and insincere sympathy. She struck me oddly as taking the relationship for a thing in itself, and regardless of its consequences. After a time she became silent about him, and then threw him over; and by that time, I think, for all that she was so much my junior, she knew more about herself and me than I was to know for several years to come.

We didn't see each other for some months after my resignation, but we kept up a frequent correspondence. She said twice over that she wanted to talk to me, that letters didn't convey what one wanted to say, and I went up to Oxford pretty definitely to see her--though I combined it with one or two other engagements--somewhere in February. Insensibly she had become important enough for me to make journeys for her.

But we didn't see very much of one another on that occasion. There was

something in the air between us that made a faint embarrassment; the mere fact, perhaps, that she had asked me to come up.

A year before she would have dashed off with me quite unscrupulously to talk alone, carried me off to her room for an hour with a minute of chaperonage to satisfy the rules. Now there was always some one or other near us that it seemed impossible to exorcise.

We went for a walk on the Sunday afternoon with old Fortescue, K. C., who'd come up to see his two daughters, both great friends of Isabel's, and some mute inglorious don whose name I forget, but who was in a state of marked admiration for her. The six of us played a game of conversational entanglements throughout, and mostly I was impressing the Fortescue girls with the want of mental concentration possible in a rising politician. We went down Carfex, I remember, to Folly Bridge, and inspected the Barges, and then back by way of Merton to the Botanic Gardens and Magdalen Bridge. And in the Botanic Gardens she got almost her only chance with me.

"Last months at Oxford," she said.

"And then?" I asked.

"I'm coming to London," she said.

"To write?"

She was silent for a moment. Then she said abruptly, with that quick flush of hers and a sudden boldness in her eyes: "I'm going to work with you. Why shouldn't I?"

3

Here, again, I suppose I had a fair warning of the drift of things. I seem to remember myself in the train to Paddington, sitting with a handful of papers--galley proofs for the BLUE WEEKLY, I suppose--on my lap, and thinking about her and that last sentence of hers, and all that it might mean to me.

It is very hard to recall even the main outline of anything so elusive as a meditation. I know that the idea of working with her gripped me, fascinated me. That my value in her life seemed growing filled me with pride and a kind of gratitude. I was already in no doubt that her value in my life was tremendous. It made it none the less, that in those days I was obsessed by the idea that she was transitory, and bound to go out of my life again. It is no good trying to set too fine a face upon this complex business, there is gold and clay and sunlight and savagery in every love story, and a multitude of elvish elements peeped out beneath the fine rich curtain of affection that masked our future. I've never properly weighed how immensely my vanity was gratified by her clear preference for me. Nor can I for a moment determine how much deliberate intention I hide from myself in this affair.

Certainly I think some part of me must have been saying in the train: "Leave go of her. Get away from her. End this now." I can't have been so stupid as not to have had that in my mind....

If she had been only a beautiful girl in love with me, I think I could have managed the situation. Once or twice since my marriage and before Isabel became of any significance in my life, there had been incidents with other people, flashes of temptation--no telling is possible of the thing resisted. I think that mere beauty and passion would not have taken me. But between myself and Isabel things were incurably complicated by the intellectual sympathy we had, the jolly march of our minds together. That has always mattered enormously. I should have wanted her company nearly as badly if she had been some crippled old lady; we would have hunted shoulder to shoulder, as two men. Only two men would never have had the patience and readiness for one another we two had. I had never for years met any one with whom I could be so carelessly sure of understanding or to whom I could listen so easily and fully. She gave me, with an extraordinary completeness, that rare, precious effect of always saying something fresh, and yet saying it so that it filled into and folded about all the little recesses and corners of my mind with an infinite, soft familiarity. It is impossible to explain that. It is like trying to explain why her voice, her voice heard speaking to any one--heard speaking in another room--pleased my ears.

She was the only Oxford woman who took a first that year. She spent the summer in Scotland and Yorkshire, writing to me continually of all she now meant to do, and stirring my imagination. She came to London for the autumn session. For a time she stayed with old Lady Colbeck, but she

fell out with her hostess when it became clear she wanted to write, not novels, but journalism, and then she set every one talking by taking a flat near Victoria and installing as her sole protector an elderly German governess she had engaged through a scholastic agency. She began writing, not in that copious flood the undisciplined young woman of gifts is apt to produce, but in exactly the manner of an able young man, experimenting with forms, developing the phrasing of opinions, taking a definite line. She was, of course, tremendously discussed. She was disapproved of, but she was invited out to dinner. She got rather a reputation for the management of elderly distinguished men. It was an odd experience to follow Margaret's soft rustle of silk into some big drawing-room and discover my snub-nosed girl in the blue sack transformed into a shining creature in the soft splendour of pearls and ivory-white and lace, and with a silver band about her dusky hair.

For a time we did not meet very frequently, though always she professed an unblushing preference for my company, and talked my views and sought me out. Then her usefulness upon the BLUE WEEKLY began to link us closelier. She would come up to the office, and sit by the window, and talk over the proofs of the next week's articles, going through my intentions with a keen investigatory scalpel. Her talk always puts me in mind of a steel blade. Her writing became rapidly very good; she had a wit and a turn of the phrase that was all her own. We seemed to have forgotten the little shadow of embarrassment that had fallen over our last meeting at Oxford. Everything seemed natural and easy between us in those days; a little unconventional, but that made it all the brighter.

We developed something like a custom of walks, about once a week or so, and letters and notes became frequent. I won't pretend things were not keenly personal between us, but they had an air of being innocently mental. She used to call me "Master" in our talks, a monstrous and engaging flattery, and I was inordinately proud to have her as my pupil. Who wouldn't have been? And we went on at that distance for a long time--until within a year of the Handitch election.

After Lady Colbeck threw her up as altogether too "intellectual" for comfortable control, Isabel was taken up by the Balfes in a less formal and compromising manner, and week-ended with them and their cousin Leonora Sparling, and spent large portions of her summer with them in Herefordshire. There was a lover or so in that time, men who came a little timidly at this brilliant young person with the frank manner and the Amazonian mind, and, she declared, received her kindly refusals with manifest relief. And Arnold Shoesmith struck up a sort of friendship that oddly imitated mine. She took a liking to him because he was clumsy and shy and inexpressive; she embarked upon the dangerous interest of helping him to find his soul. I had some twinges of jealousy about that. I didn't see the necessity of him. He invaded her time, and I thought that might interfere with her work. If their friendship stole some hours from Isabel's writing, it did not for a long while interfere with our walks or our talks, or the close intimacy we had together.

4

Then suddenly Isabel and I found ourselves passionately in love.

The change came so entirely without warning or intention that I find it impossible now to tell the order of its phases. What disturbed pebble started the avalanche I cannot trace. Perhaps it was simply that the barriers between us and this masked aspect of life had been wearing down unperceived.

And there came a change in Isabel. It was like some change in the cycle of nature, like the onset of spring--a sharp brightness, an uneasiness. She became restless with her work; little encounters with men began to happen, encounters not quite in the quality of the earlier proposals; and then came an odd incident of which she told me, but somehow, I felt, didn't tell me completely. She told me all she was able to tell me. She had been at a dance at the Ropers', and a man, rather well known in London, had kissed her. The thing amazed her beyond measure. It was the sort of thing immediately possible between any man and any woman, that one never expects to happen until it happens. It had the surprising effect of a judge generally known to be bald suddenly whipping off his wig in court. No absolutely unexpected revelation could have quite the same quality of shock. She went through the whole thing to me with a remarkable detachment, told me how she had felt--and the odd things it

seemed to open to her.

"I WANT to be kissed, and all that sort of thing," she avowed. "I suppose every woman does."

She added after a pause: "And I don't want any one to do it."

This struck me as queerly expressive of the woman's attitude to these things. "Some one presently will--solve that," I said.

"Some one will perhaps."

I was silent.

"Some one will," she said, almost viciously. "And then we'll have to stop these walks and talks of ours, dear Master.... I'll be sorry to give them up."

"It's part of the requirements of the situation," I said, "that he should be--oh, very interesting! He'll start, no doubt, all sorts of new topics, and open no end of attractive vistas.... You can't, you know, always go about in a state of pupillage."

"I don't think I can," said Isabel. "But it's only just recently I've begun to doubt about it."

I remember these things being said, but just how much we saw and understood, and just how far we were really keeping opaque to each other then, I cannot remember. But it must have been quite soon after this that we spent nearly a whole day together at Kew Gardens, with the curtains up and the barriers down, and the thing that had happened plain before our eyes. I don't remember we ever made any declaration. We just assumed the new footing....

It was a day early in that year--I think in January, because there was thin, crisp snow on the grass, and we noted that only two other people had been to the Pagoda that day. I've a curious impression of greenish colour, hot, moist air and huge palm fronds about very much of our talk, as though we were nearly all the time in the Tropical House. But I also remember very vividly looking at certain orange and red spray-like flowers from Patagonia, which could not have been there. It is a curious thing that I do not remember we made any profession of passionate love for one another; we talked as though the fact of our intense love for each other had always been patent between us. There was so long and frank an intimacy between us that we talked far more like brother and sister or husband and wife than two people engaged in the war of the sexes. We wanted to know what we were going to do, and whatever we did we meant to do in the most perfect concert. We both felt an extraordinary accession of friendship and tenderness then, and, what again is curious, very little passion. But there was also, in spite of the perplexities we faced, an immense satisfaction about that day. It was as if we had taken off something that had hindered our view of each

other, like people who unvizored to talk more easily at a masked ball.

I've had since to view our relations from the standpoint of the ordinary observer. I find that vision in the most preposterous contrast with all that really went on between us. I suppose there I should figure as a wicked seducer, while an unprotected girl succumbed to my fascinations. As a matter of fact, it didn't occur to us that there was any personal inequality between us. I knew her for my equal mentally; in so many things she was beyond comparison cleverer than I; her courage outwent mine. The quick leap of her mind evoked a flash of joy in mine like the response of an induction wire; her way of thinking was like watching sunlight reflected from little waves upon the side of a boat, it was so bright, so mobile, so variously and easily true to its law. In the back of our minds we both had a very definite belief that making love is full of joyous, splendid, tender, and exciting possibilities, and we had to discuss why we shouldn't be to the last degree lovers.

Now, what I should like to print here, if it were possible, in all the screaming emphasis of red ink, is this: that the circumstances of my upbringing and the circumstances of Isabel's upbringing had left not a shadow of belief or feeling that the utmost passionate love between us was in itself intrinsically WRONG. I've told with the fullest particularity just all that I was taught or found out for myself in these matters, and Isabel's reading and thinking, and the fierce silences of her governesses and the breathless warnings of teachers, and all the social and religious influences that had been brought to bear

upon her, had worked out to the same void of conviction. The code had failed with us altogether. We didn't for a moment consider anything but the expediency of what we both, for all our quiet faces and steady eyes, wanted most passionately to do.

Well, here you have the state of mind of whole brigades of people, and particularly of young people, nowadays. The current morality hasn't gripped them; they don't really believe in it at all. They may render it lip-service, but that is quite another thing. There are scarcely any tolerable novels to justify its prohibitions; its prohibitions do, in fact, remain unjustified amongst these ugly suppressions. You may, if you choose, silence the admission of this in literature and current discussion; you will not prevent it working out in lives. People come up to the great moments of passion crudely unaware, astoundingly unprepared as no really civilised and intelligently planned community would let any one be unprepared. They find themselves hedged about with customs that have no organic hold upon them, and mere discretions all generous spirits are disposed to despise.

Consider the infinite absurdities of it! Multitudes of us are trying to run this complex modern community on a basis of "Hush" without explaining to our children or discussing with them anything about love and marriage at all. Doubt and knowledge creep about in enforced darknesses and silences. We are living upon an ancient tradition which everybody doubts and nobody has ever analysed. We affect a tremendous and cultivated shyness and delicacy about imperatives of the most

arbitrary appearance. What ensues? What did ensue with us, for example? On the one hand was a great desire, robbed of any appearance of shame and grossness by the power of love, and on the other hand, the possible jealousy of so and so, the disapproval of so and so, material risks and dangers. It is only in the retrospect that we have been able to grasp something of the effectual case against us. The social prohibition lit by the intense glow of our passion, presented itself as preposterous, irrational, arbitrary, and ugly, a monster fit only for mockery. We might be ruined! Well, there is a phase in every love affair, a sort of heroic hysteria, when death and ruin are agreeable additions to the prospect. It gives the business a gravity, a solemnity. Timid people may hesitate and draw back with a vague instinctive terror of the immensity of the oppositions they challenge, but neither Isabel nor I are timid people.

We weighed what was against us. We decided just exactly as scores of thousands of people have decided in this very matter, that if it were possible to keep this thing to ourselves, there was nothing against it. And so we took our first step. With the hunger of love in us, it was easy to conclude we might be lovers, and still keep everything to ourselves. That cleared our minds of the one persistent obstacle that mattered to us--the haunting presence of Margaret.

And then we found, as all those scores of thousands of people scattered about us have found, that we could not keep it to ourselves. Love will out. All the rest of this story is the chronicle of that. Love with

sustained secrecy cannot be love. It is just exactly the point people do not understand.

5

But before things came to that pass, some months and many phases and a sudden journey to America intervened.

"This thing spells disaster," I said. "You are too big and I am too big to attempt this secrecy. Think of the intolerable possibility of being found out! At any cost we have to stop--even at the cost of parting."

"Just because we may be found out!"

"Just because we may be found out."

"Master, I shouldn't in the least mind being found out with you. I'm afraid--I'd be proud."

"Wait till it happens."

There followed a struggle of immense insincerity between us. It is hard to tell who urged and who resisted.

She came to me one night to the editorial room of the BLUE WEEKLY, and argued and kissed me with wet salt lips, and wept in my arms; she told me that now passionate longing for me and my intimate life possessed her, so that she could not work, could not think, could not endure other

people for the love of me….

I fled absurdly. That is the secret of the futile journey to America that puzzled all my friends.

I ran away from Isabel. I took hold of the situation with all my strength, put in Britten with sketchy, hasty instructions to edit the paper, and started headlong and with luggage, from which, among other things, my shaving things were omitted, upon a tour round the world.

Preposterous flight that was! I remember as a thing almost farcical my explanations to Margaret, and how frantically anxious I was to prevent the remote possibility of her coming with me, and how I crossed in the TUSCAN, a bad, wet boat, and mixed seasickness with ungovernable sorrow. I wept--tears. It was inexpressibly queer and ridiculous--and, good God! how I hated my fellow-passengers!

New York inflamed and excited me for a time, and when things slackened, I whirled westward to Chicago--eating and drinking, I remember, in the train from shoals of little dishes, with a sort of desperate voracity. I did the queerest things to distract myself--no novelist would dare to invent my mental and emotional muddle. Chicago also held me at first, amazing lapse from civilisation that the place is! and then abruptly, with hosts expecting me, and everything settled for some days in Denver, I found myself at the end of my renunciations, and turned and came back headlong to London.

Let me confess it wasn't any sense of perfect and incurable trust and confidence that brought me back, or any idea that now I had strength to refrain. It was a sudden realisation that after all the separation might succeed; some careless phrasing in one of her jealously read letters set that idea going in my mind--the haunting perception that I might return to London and find it empty of the Isabel who had pervaded it. Honour, discretion, the careers of both of us, became nothing at the thought. I couldn't conceive my life resuming there without Isabel. I couldn't, in short, stand it.

I don't even excuse my return. It is inexcusable. I ought to have kept upon my way westward--and held out. I couldn't. I wanted Isabel, and I wanted her so badly now that everything else in the world was phantom-like until that want was satisfied. Perhaps you have never wanted anything like that. I went straight to her.

But here I come to untellable things. There is no describing the reality of love. The shapes of things are nothing, the actual happenings are nothing, except that somehow there falls a light upon them and a wonder. Of how we met, and the thrill of the adventure, the curious bright sense of defiance, the joy of having dared, I can't tell--I can but hint of just one aspect, of what an amazing LARK--it's the only word--it seemed to us. The beauty which was the essence of it, which justifies it so far as it will bear justification, eludes statement.

What can a record of contrived meetings, of sundering difficulties evaded and overcome, signify here? Or what can it convey to say that one looked deep into two dear, steadfast eyes, or felt a heart throb and beat, or gripped soft hair softly in a trembling hand? Robbed of encompassing love, these things are of no more value than the taste of good wine or the sight of good pictures, or the hearing of music,--just sensuality and no more. No one can tell love--we can only tell the gross facts of love and its consequences. Given love--given mutuality, and one has effected a supreme synthesis and come to a new level of life--but only those who know can know. This business has brought me more bitterness and sorrow than I had ever expected to bear, but even now I will not say that I regret that wilful home-coming altogether. We loved--to the uttermost. Neither of us could have loved any one else as we did and do love one another. It was ours, that beauty; it existed only between us when we were close together, for no one in the world ever to know save ourselves.

My return to the office sticks out in my memory with an extreme vividness, because of the wild eagle of pride that screamed within me. It was Tuesday morning, and though not a soul in London knew of it yet except Isabel, I had been back in England a week. I came in upon Britten and stood in the doorway.

"GOD!" he said at the sight of me.

"I'm back," I said.

He looked at my excited face with those red-brown eyes of his. Silently I defied him to speak his mind.

"Where did you turn back?" he said at last.

6

I had to tell what were, so far as I can remember my first positive lies to Margaret in explaining that return. I had written to her from Chicago and again from New York, saying that I felt I ought to be on the spot in England for the new session, and that I was coming back--presently. I concealed the name of my boat from her, and made a calculated prevarication when I announced my presence in London. I telephoned before I went back for my rooms to be prepared. She was, I knew, with the Bunting Harblows in Durham, and when she came back to Radnor Square I had been at home a day.

I remember her return so well.

My going away and the vivid secret of the present had wiped out from my mind much of our long estrangement. Something, too, had changed in her. I had had some hint of it in her letters, but now I saw it plainly. I came out of my study upon the landing when I heard the turmoil of her arrival below, and she came upstairs with a quickened gladness. It was a cold March, and she was dressed in unfamiliar dark furs that suited her extremely and reinforced the delicate flush of her sweet face. She held out both her hands to me, and drew me to her unhesitatingly and kissed me.

"So glad you are back, dear," she said. "Oh! so very glad you are back."

I returned her kiss with a queer feeling at my heart, too undifferentiated to be even a definite sense of guilt or meanness. I think it was chiefly amazement--at the universe--at myself.

"I never knew what it was to be away from you," she said.

I perceived suddenly that she had resolved to end our estrangement. She put herself so that my arm came caressingly about her.

"These are jolly furs," I said.

"I got them for you."

The parlourmaid appeared below dealing with the maid and the luggage cab.

"Tell me all about America," said Margaret. "I feel as though you'd been away six year's."

We went arm in arm into our little sitting-room, and I took off the fur's for her and sat down upon the chintz-covered sofa by the fire. She had ordered tea, and came and sat by me. I don't know what I had expected, but of all things I had certainly not expected this sudden abolition of our distances.

"I want to know all about America," she repeated, with her eyes scrutinising me. "Why did you come back?"

I repeated the substance of my letters rather lamely, and she sat listening.

"But why did you turn back--without going to Denver?"

"I wanted to come back. I was restless."

"Restlessness," she said, and thought. "You were restless in Venice. You said it was restlessness took you to America."

Again she studied me. She turned a little awkwardly to her tea things, and poured needless water from the silver kettle into the teapot. Then she sat still for some moments looking at the equipage with expressionless eyes. I saw her hand upon the edge of the table tremble slightly. I watched her closely. A vague uneasiness possessed me. What might she not know or guess?

She spoke at last with an effort. "I wish you were in Parliament again," she said. "Life doesn't give you events enough."

"If I was in Parliament again, I should be on the Conservative side."

"I know," she said, and was still more thoughtful.

"Lately," she began, and paused. "Lately I've been reading--you."

I didn't help her out with what she had to say. I waited.

"I didn't understand what you were after. I had misjudged. I didn't know. I think perhaps I was rather stupid." Her eyes were suddenly shining with tears. "You didn't give me much chance to understand."

She turned upon me suddenly with a voice full of tears.

"Husband," she said abruptly, holding her two hands out to me, "I want to begin over again!"

I took her hands, perplexed beyond measure. "My dear!" I said.

"I want to begin over again."

I bowed my head to hide my face, and found her hand in mine and kissed it.

"Ah!" she said, and slowly withdrew her hand. She leant forward with her arm on the sofa-back, and looked very intently into my face. I felt the most damnable scoundrel in the world as I returned her gaze. The thought of Isabel's darkly shining eyes seemed like a physical presence between us....

"Tell me," I said presently, to break the intolerable tension, "tell me plainly what you mean by this."

I sat a little away from her, and then took my teacup in hand, with an odd effect of defending myself. "Have you been reading that old book of mine?" I asked.

"That and the paper. I took a complete set from the beginning down to Durham with me. I have read it over, thought it over. I didn't understand--what you were teaching."

There was a little pause.

"It all seems so plain to me now," she said, "and so true."

I was profoundly disconcerted. I put down my teacup, stood up in the middle of the hearthrug, and began talking. "I'm tremendously glad, Margaret, that you've come to see I'm not altogether perverse," I began. I launched out into a rather trite and windy exposition of my views, and she sat close to me on the sofa, looking up into my face, hanging on my words, a deliberate and invincible convert.

"Yes," she said, "yes."...

I had never doubted my new conceptions before; now I doubted them

profoundly. But I went on talking. It's the grim irony in the lives of all politicians, writers, public teachers, that once the audience is at their feet, a new loyalty has gripped them. It isn't their business to admit doubt and imperfections. They have to go on talking. And I was now so accustomed to Isabel's vivid interruptions, qualifications, restatements, and confirmations....

Margaret and I dined together at home. She made me open out my political projects to her. "I have been foolish," she said. "I want to help."

And by some excuse I have forgotten she made me come to her room. I think it was some book I had to take her, some American book I had brought back with me, and mentioned in our talk. I walked in with it, and put it down on the table and turned to go.

"Husband!" she cried, and held out her slender arms to me. I was compelled to go to her and kiss her, and she twined them softly about my neck and drew me to her and kissed me. I disentangled them very gently, and took each wrist and kissed it, and the backs of her hands.

"Good-night," I said. There came a little pause. "Good-night, Margaret," I repeated, and walked very deliberately and with a kind of sham preoccupation to the door.

I did not look at her, but I could feel her standing, watching me. If I had looked up, she would, I knew, have held out her arms to me....

At the very outset that secret, which was to touch no one but Isabel and myself, had reached out to stab another human being.

7

The whole world had changed for Isabel and me; and we tried to pretend that nothing had changed except a small matter between us. We believed quite honestly at that time that it was possible to keep this thing that had happened from any reaction at all, save perhaps through some magically enhanced vigour in our work, upon the world about us! Seen in retrospect, one can realise the absurdity of this belief; within a week I realised it; but that does not alter the fact that we did believe as much, and that people who are deeply in love and unable to marry will continue to believe so to the very end of time. They will continue to believe out of existence every consideration that separates them until they have come together. Then they will count the cost, as we two had to do.

I am telling a story, and not propounding theories in this book; and chiefly I am telling of the ideas and influences and emotions that have happened to me--me as a sort of sounding board for my world. The moralist is at liberty to go over my conduct with his measure and say, "At this point or at that you went wrong, and you ought to have done"--so-and-so. The point of interest to the statesman is that it didn't for a moment occur to us to do so-and-so when the time for doing it came. It amazes me now to think how little either of us troubled about the established rights or wrongs of the situation. We hadn't an atom of respect for them, innate or acquired. The guardians of public

morals will say we were very bad people; I submit in defence that they are very bad guardians--provocative guardians.... And when at last there came a claim against us that had an effective validity for us, we were in the full tide of passionate intimacy.

I had a night of nearly sleepless perplexity after Margaret's return. She had suddenly presented herself to me like something dramatically recalled, fine, generous, infinitely capable of feeling. I was amazed how much I had forgotten her. In my contempt for vulgarised and conventionalised honour I had forgotten that for me there was such a reality as honour. And here it was, warm and near to me, living, breathing, unsuspecting. Margaret's pride was my honour, that I had had no right even to imperil.

I do not now remember if I thought at that time of going to Isabel and putting this new aspect of the case before her. Perhaps I did. Perhaps I may have considered even then the possibility of ending what had so freshly and passionately begun. If I did, it vanished next day at the sight of her. Whatever regrets came in the darkness, the daylight brought an obstinate confidence in our resolution again. We would, we declared, "pull the thing off." Margaret must not know. Margaret should not know. If Margaret did not know, then no harm whatever would be done. We tried to sustain that....

For a brief time we had been like two people in a magic cell, magically cut off from the world and full of a light of its own, and then we began

to realise that we were not in the least cut off, that the world was all about us and pressing in upon us, limiting us, threatening us, resuming possession of us. I tried to ignore the injury to Margaret of her unreciprocated advances. I tried to maintain to myself that this hidden love made no difference to the now irreparable breach between husband and wife. But I never spoke of it to Isabel or let her see that aspect of our case. How could I? The time for that had gone....

Then in new shapes and relations came trouble. Distressful elements crept in by reason of our unavoidable furtiveness; we ignored them, hid them from each other, and attempted to hide them from ourselves. Successful love is a thing of abounding pride, and we had to be secret. It was delightful at first to be secret, a whispering, warm conspiracy; then presently it became irksome and a little shameful. Her essential frankness of soul was all against the masks and falsehoods that many women would have enjoyed. Together in our secrecy we relaxed, then in the presence of other people again it was tiresome to have to watch for the careless, too easy phrase, to snatch back one's hand from the limitless betrayal of a light, familiar touch.

Love becomes a poor thing, at best a poor beautiful thing, if it develops no continuing and habitual intimacy. We were always meeting, and most gloriously loving and beginning--and then we had to snatch at remorseless ticking watches, hurry to catch trains, and go back to this or that. That is all very well for the intrigues of idle people perhaps, but not for an intense personal relationship. It is like lighting a

candle for the sake of lighting it, over and over again, and each time blowing it out. That, no doubt, must be very amusing to children playing with the matches, but not to people who love warm light, and want it in order to do fine and honourable things together. We had achieved--I give the ugly phrase that expresses the increasing discolouration in my mind--"illicit intercourse." To end at that, we now perceived, wasn't in our style. But where were we to end?...

Perhaps we might at this stage have given it up. I think if we could have seen ahead and around us we might have done so. But the glow of our cell blinded us.... I wonder what might have happened if at that time we had given it up.... We propounded it, we met again in secret to discuss it, and our overpowering passion for one another reduced that meeting to absurdity....

Presently the idea of children crept between us. It came in from all our conceptions of life and public service; it was, we found, in the quality of our minds that physical love without children is a little weak, timorous, more than a little shameful. With imaginative people there very speedily comes a time when that realisation is inevitable. We hadn't thought of that before--it isn't natural to think of that before. We hadn't known. There is no literature in English dealing with such things.

There is a necessary sequence of phases in love. These came in their order, and with them, unanticipated tarnishings on the first bright

perfection of our relations. For a time these developing phases were no more than a secret and private trouble between us, little shadows spreading by imperceptible degrees across that vivid and luminous cell.

8

The Handitch election flung me suddenly into prominence.

It is still only two years since that struggle, and I will not trouble the reader with a detailed history of events that must be quite sufficiently present in his mind for my purpose already. Huge stacks of journalism have dealt with Handitch and its significance. For the reader very probably, as for most people outside a comparatively small circle, it meant my emergence from obscurity. We obtruded no editor's name in the BLUE WEEKLY; I had never as yet been on the London hoardings. Before Handitch I was a journalist and writer of no great public standing; after Handitch, I was definitely a person, in the little group of persons who stood for the Young Imperialist movement. Handitch was, to a very large extent, my affair. I realised then, as a man comes to do, how much one can still grow after seven and twenty. In the second election I was a man taking hold of things; at Kinghamstead I had been simply a young candidate, a party unit, led about the constituency, told to do this and that, and finally washed in by the great Anti-Imperialist flood, like a starfish rolling up a beach.

My feminist views had earnt the mistrust of the party, and I do not think I should have got the chance of Handitch or indeed any chance at all of Parliament for a long time, if it had not been that the seat with its long record of Liberal victories and its Liberal majority of 3642 at

the last election, offered a hopeless contest. The Liberal dissensions and the belated but by no means contemptible Socialist candidate were providential interpositions. I think, however, the conduct of Gane, Crupp, and Tarvrille in coming down to fight for me, did count tremendously in my favour. "We aren't going to win, perhaps," said Crupp, "but we are going to talk." And until the very eve of victory, we treated Handitch not so much as a battlefield as a hoarding. And so it was the Endowment of Motherhood as a practical form of Eugenics got into English politics.

Plutus, our agent, was scared out of his wits when the thing began.

"They're ascribing all sorts of queer ideas to you about the Family," he said.

"I think the Family exists for the good of the children," I said; "is that queer?"

"Not when you explain it--but they won't let you explain it. And about marriage--?"

"I'm all right about marriage--trust me."

"Of course, if YOU had children," said Plutus, rather inconsiderately....

They opened fire upon me in a little electioneering rag call the HANDITCH SENTINEL, with a string of garbled quotations and misrepresentations that gave me an admirable text for a speech. I spoke for an hour and ten minutes with a more and more crumpled copy of the SENTINEL in my hand, and I made the fullest and completest exposition of the idea of endowing motherhood that I think had ever been made up to that time in England. Its effect on the press was extraordinary. The Liberal papers gave me quite unprecedented space under the impression that I had only to be given rope to hang myself; the Conservatives cut me down or tried to justify me; the whole country was talking. I had had a pamphlet in type upon the subject, and I revised this carefully and put it on the book-stalls within three days. It sold enormously and brought me bushels of letters. We issued over three thousand in Handitch alone. At meeting after meeting I was heckled upon nothing else. Long before polling day Plutus was converted.

"It's catching on like old age pensions," he said. "We've dished the Liberals! To think that such a project should come from our side!"

But it was only with the declaration of the poll that my battle was won. No one expected more than a snatch victory, and I was in by over fifteen hundred. At one bound Cossington's papers passed from apologetics varied by repudiation to triumphant praise. "A renascent England, breeding men," said the leader in his chief daily on the morning after the polling, and claimed that the Conservatives had been ever the pioneers in sanely bold constructive projects.

I came up to London with a weary but rejoicing Margaret by the night train.

CHAPTER THE SECOND ~~ THE IMPOSSIBLE POSITION

1

To any one who did not know of that glowing secret between Isabel and myself, I might well have appeared at that time the most successful and enviable of men. I had recovered rapidly from an uncongenial start in political life; I had become a considerable force through the BLUE WEEKLY, and was shaping an increasingly influential body of opinion; I had re-entered Parliament with quite dramatic distinction, and in spite of a certain faltering on the part of the orthodox Conservatives towards the bolder elements in our propaganda, I had loyal and unenvious associates who were making me a power in the party. People were coming to our group, understandings were developing. It was clear we should play a prominent part in the next general election, and that, given a Conservative victory, I should be assured of office. The world opened out to me brightly and invitingly. Great schemes took shape in my mind, always more concrete, always more practicable; the years ahead seemed falling into order, shining with the credible promise of immense achievement.

And at the heart of it all, unseen and unsuspected, was the secret of my relations with Isabel--like a seed that germinates and thrusts, thrusts

relentlessly.

From the onset of the Handitch contest onward, my meetings with her had been more and more pervaded by the discussion of our situation. It had innumerable aspects. It was very present to us that we wanted to be together as much as possible--we were beginning to long very much for actual living together in the same house, so that one could come as it were carelessly--unawares--upon the other, busy perhaps about some trivial thing. We wanted to feel each other in the daily atmosphere. Preceding our imperatively sterile passion, you must remember, outside it, altogether greater than it so far as our individual lives were concerned, there had grown and still grew an enormous affection and intellectual sympathy between us. We brought all our impressions and all our ideas to each other, to see them in each other's light. It is hard to convey that quality of intellectual unison to any one who has not experienced it. I thought more and more in terms of conversation with Isabel; her possible comments upon things would flash into my mind, oh!--with the very sound of her voice.

I remember, too, the odd effect of seeing her in the distance going about Handitch, like any stranger canvasser; the queer emotion of her approach along the street, the greeting as she passed. The morning of the polling she vanished from the constituency. I saw her for an instant in the passage behind our Committee rooms.

"Going?" said I.

She nodded.

"Stay it out. I want you to see the fun. I remember--the other time."

She didn't answer for a moment or so, and stood with face averted.

"It's Margaret's show," she said abruptly. "If I see her smiling there like a queen by your side--! She did--last time. I remember." She caught at a sob and dashed her hand across her face impatiently. "Jealous fool, mean and petty, jealous fool!... Good luck, old man, to you! You're going to win. But I don't want to see the end of it all the same...."

"Good-bye!" said I, clasping her hand as some supporter appeared in the passage....

I came back to London victorious, and a little flushed and coarse with victory; and so soon as I could break away I went to Isabel's flat and found her white and worn, with the stain of secret weeping about her eyes. I came into the room to her and shut the door.

"You said I'd win," I said, and held out my arms.

She hugged me closely for a moment.

"My dear," I whispered, "it's nothing--without you--nothing!"

We didn't speak for some seconds. Then she slipped from my hold. "Look!" she said, smiling like winter sunshine. "I've had in all the morning papers--the pile of them, and you--resounding."

"It's more than I dared hope."

"Or I."

She stood for a moment still smiling bravely, and then she was sobbing in my arms. "The bigger you are--the more you show," she said--"the more we are parted. I know, I know--"

I held her close to me, making no answer.

Presently she became still. "Oh, well," she said, and wiped her eyes and sat down on the little sofa by the fire; and I sat down beside her.

"I didn't know all there was in love," she said, staring at the coals, "when we went love-making."

I put my arm behind her and took a handful of her dear soft hair in my hand and kissed it.

"You've done a great thing this time," she said. "Handitch will make you."

"It opens big chances," I said. "But why are you weeping, dear one?"

"Envy," she said, "and love."

"You're not lonely?"

"I've plenty to do--and lots of people."

"Well?"

"I want you."

"You've got me."

She put her arm about me and kissed me. "I want you," she said, "just as if I had nothing of you. You don't understand--how a woman wants a man. I thought once if I just gave myself to you it would be enough. It was nothing--it was just a step across the threshold. My dear, every moment you are away I ache for you--ache! I want to be about when it isn't love-making or talk. I want to be doing things for you, and watching you when you're not thinking of me. All those safe, careless, intimate things. And something else--" She stopped. "Dear, I don't want to bother you. I just want you to know I love you...."

She caught my head in her hands and kissed it, then stood up abruptly.

I looked up at her, a little perplexed.

"Dear heart," said I, "isn't this enough? You're my councillor, my colleague, my right hand, the secret soul of my life--"

"And I want to darn your socks," she said, smiling back at me.

"You're insatiable."

She smiled "No," she said. "I'm not insatiable, Master. But I'm a woman in love. And I'm finding out what I want, and what is necessary to me--and what I can't have. That's all."

"We get a lot."

"We want a lot. You and I are greedy people for the things we like, Master. It's very evident we've got nearly all we can ever have of one another--and I'm not satisfied."

"What more is there?

"For you--very little. I wonder. For me--every thing. Yes--everything. You didn't mean it, Master; you didn't know any more than I did when I began, but love between a man and a woman is sometimes very one-sided. Fearfully one-sided! That's all...."

"Don't YOU ever want children?" she said abruptly.

"I suppose I do."

"You don't!"

"I haven't thought of them."

"A man doesn't, perhaps. But I have.... I want them--like hunger. YOUR children, and home with you. Really, continually you! That's the trouble.... I can't have 'em, Master, and I can't have you."

She was crying, and through her tears she laughed.

"I'm going to make a scene," she said, "and get this over. I'm so discontented and miserable; I've got to tell you. It would come between us if I didn't. I'm in love with you, with everything--with all my brains. I'll pull through all right. I'll be good, Master, never you fear. But to-day I'm crying out with all my being. This election--You're going up; you're going on. In these papers--you're a great big fact. It's suddenly come home to me. At the back of my mind I've always had the idea I was going to have you somehow presently for myself--I mean to have you to go long tramps with, to keep house for, to get meals for, to watch for of an evening. It's a sort of habitual background to my thought of you. And it's nonsense--utter nonsense!" She stopped. She was

crying and choking. "And the child, you know--the child!"

I was troubled beyond measure, but Handitch and its intimations were clear and strong.

"We can't have that," I said.

"No," she said, "we can't have that."

"We've got our own things to do."

"YOUR things," she said.

"Aren't they yours too?"

"Because of you," she said.

"Aren't they your very own things?"

"Women don't have that sort of very own thing. Indeed, it's true! And think! You've been down there preaching the goodness of children, telling them the only good thing in a state is happy, hopeful children, working to free mothers and children--"

"And we give our own children to do it?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "And sometimes I think it's too much to give--too much altogether.... Children get into a woman's brain--when she mustn't have them, especially when she must never hope for them. Think of the child we might have now!--the little creature with soft, tender skin, and little hands and little feet! At times it haunts me. It comes and says, Why wasn't I given life? I can hear it in the night.... The world is full of such little ghosts, dear lover--little things that asked for life and were refused. They clamour to me. It's like a little fist beating at my heart. Love children, beautiful children. Little cold hands that tear at my heart! Oh, my heart and my lord!" She was holding my arm with both her hands and weeping against it, and now she drew herself to my shoulder and wept and sobbed in my embrace. "I shall never sit with your child on my knee and you beside me-never, and I am a woman and your lover!..."

2

But the profound impossibility of our relation was now becoming more and more apparent to us. We found ourselves seeking justification, clinging passionately to a situation that was coldly, pitilessly, impossible and fated. We wanted quite intensely to live together and have a child, but also we wanted very many other things that were incompatible with these desires. It was extraordinarily difficult to weigh our political and intellectual ambitions against those intimate wishes. The weights kept altering according as one found oneself grasping this valued thing or that. It wasn't as if we could throw everything aside for our love, and have that as we wanted it. Love such as we bore one another isn't altogether, or even chiefly, a thing in itself--it is for the most part a value set upon things. Our love was interwoven with all our other interests; to go out of the world and live in isolation seemed to us like killing the best parts of each other; we loved the sight of each other engaged finely and characteristically, we knew each other best as activities. We had no delusions about material facts; we didn't want each other alive or dead, we wanted each other fully alive. We wanted to do big things together, and for us to take each other openly and desperately would leave us nothing in the world to do. We wanted children indeed passionately, but children with every helpful chance in the world, and children born in scandal would be handicapped at every turn. We wanted to share a home, and not a solitude.

And when we were at this stage of realisation, began the intimations that we were found out, and that scandal was afoot against us....

I heard of it first from Esmeer, who deliberately mentioned it, with that steady grey eye of his watching me, as an instance of the preposterous falsehoods people will circulate. It came to Isabel almost simultaneously through a married college friend, who made it her business to demand either confirmation or denial. It filled us both with consternation. In the surprise of the moment Isabel admitted her secret, and her friend went off "reserving her freedom of action."

Discovery broke out in every direction. Friends with grave faces and an atmosphere of infinite tact invaded us both. Other friends ceased to invade either of us. It was manifest we had become--we knew not how--a private scandal, a subject for duologues, an amazement, a perplexity, a vivid interest. In a few brief weeks it seemed London passed from absolute unsuspiciousness to a chattering exaggeration of its knowledge of our relations.

It was just the most inappropriate time for that disclosure. The long smouldering antagonism to my endowment of motherhood ideas had flared up into an active campaign in the EXPURGATOR, and it would be altogether disastrous to us if I should be convicted of any personal irregularity. It was just because of the manifest and challenging respectability of my position that I had been able to carry the thing as far as I had done. Now suddenly my fortunes had sprung a leak, and scandal was pouring

in.... It chanced, too, that a wave of moral intolerance was sweeping through London, one of those waves in which the bitterness of the consciously just finds an ally in the panic of the undiscovered. A certain Father Blodgett had been preaching against social corruption with extraordinary force, and had roused the Church of England people to a kind of competition in denunciation. The old methods of the Anti-Socialist campaign had been renewed, and had offered far too wide a scope and too tempting an opportunity for private animosity, to be restricted to the private affairs of the Socialists. I had intimations of an extensive circulation of "private and confidential" letters....

I think there can be nothing else in life quite like the unnerving realisation that rumour and scandal are afoot about one. Abruptly one's confidence in the solidity of the universe disappears. One walks silenced through a world that one feels to be full of inaudible accusations. One cannot challenge the assault, get it out into the open, separate truth and falsehood. It slinks from you, turns aside its face. Old acquaintances suddenly evaded me, made extraordinary excuses; men who had presumed on the verge of my world and pestered me with an intrusive enterprise, now took the bold step of flat repudiation. I became doubtful about the return of a nod, retracted all those tentacles of easy civility that I had hitherto spread to the world. I still grow warm with amazed indignation when I recall that Edward Crampton, meeting me full on the steps of the Climax Club, cut me dead. "By God!" I cried, and came near catching him by the throat and wringing out of him what of all good deeds and bad, could hearten him, a younger man than I and

empty beyond comparison, to dare to play the judge to me. And then I had an open slight from Mrs. Millingham, whom I had counted on as one counts upon the sunrise. I had not expected things of that sort; they were disconcerting beyond measure; it was as if the world were giving way beneath my feet, as though something failed in the essential confidence of life, as though a hand of wet ice had touched my heart. Similar things were happening to Isabel. Yet we went on working, visiting, meeting, trying to ignore this gathering of implacable forces against us.

For a time I was perplexed beyond measure to account for this campaign. Then I got a clue. The centre of diffusion was the Bailey household. The Baileys had never forgiven me my abandonment of the young Liberal group they had done so much to inspire and organise; their dinner-table had long been a scene of hostile depreciation of the BLUE WEEKLY and all its allies; week after week Altiora proclaimed that I was "doing nothing," and found other causes for our bye-election triumphs; I counted Chambers Street a dangerous place for me. Yet, nevertheless, I was astonished to find them using a private scandal against me. They did. I think Handitch had filled up the measure of their bitterness, for I had not only abandoned them, but I was succeeding beyond even their power of misrepresentation. Always I had been a wasp in their spider's web, difficult to claim as a tool, uncritical, antagonistic. I admired their work and devotion enormously, but I had never concealed my contempt for a certain childish vanity they displayed, and for the frequent puerility of their political intrigues. I suppose contempt galls more than

injuries, and anyhow they had me now. They had me. Bailey, I found, was warning fathers of girls against me as a "reckless libertine," and Altiora, flushed, roguish, and dishevelled, was sitting on her fender curb after dinner, and pledging little parties of five or six women at a time with infinite gusto not to let the matter go further. Our cell was open to the world, and a bleak, distressful daylight streaming in.

I had a gleam of a more intimate motive in Altiora from the reports that came to me. Isabel had been doing a series of five or six articles in the POLITICAL REVIEW in support of our campaign, the POLITICAL REVIEW which had hitherto been loyally Baileyite. Quite her best writing up to the present, at any rate, is in those papers, and no doubt Altiora had had not only to read her in those invaded columns, but listen to her praises in the mouths of the tactless influential. Altiora, like so many people who rely on gesture and vocal insistence in conversation, writes a poor and slovenly prose and handles an argument badly; Isabel has her University training behind her and wrote from the first with the stark power of a clear-headed man. "Now we know," said Altiora, with just a gleam of malice showing through her brightness, "now we know who helps with the writing!"

She revealed astonishing knowledge.

For a time I couldn't for the life of me discover her sources. I had, indeed, a desperate intention of challenging her, and then I bethought me of a youngster named Curmain, who had been my supplemental typist and

secretary for a time, and whom I had sent on to her before the days of our breach. "Of course!" said I, "Curmain!" He was a tall, drooping, sidelong youth with sandy hair, a little forward head, and a long thin neck. He stole stamps, and, I suspected, rifled my private letter drawer, and I found him one day on a turn of the stairs looking guilty and ruffled with a pretty Irish housemaid of Margaret's manifestly in a state of hot indignation. I saw nothing, but I felt everything in the air between them. I hate this pestering of servants, but at the same time I didn't want Curmain wiped out of existence, so I had packed him off without unnecessary discussion to Altiora. He was quick and cheap anyhow, and I thought her general austerity ought to redeem him if anything could; the Chambers Street housemaid wasn't for any man's kissing and showed it, and the stamps and private letters were looked after with an efficiency altogether surpassing mine. And Altiora, I've no doubt left now whatever, pumped this young undesirable about me, and scenting a story, had him to dinner alone one evening to get to the bottom of the matter. She got quite to the bottom of it,--it must have been a queer duologue. She read Isabel's careless, intimate letters to me, so to speak, by this proxy, and she wasn't ashamed to use this information in the service of the bitterness that had sprung up in her since our political breach. It was essentially a personal bitterness; it helped no public purpose of theirs to get rid of me. My downfall in any public sense was sheer waste,--the loss of a man. She knew she was behaving badly, and so, when it came to remonstrance, she behaved worse. She'd got names and dates and places; the efficiency of her information was irresistible. And she set to work at it marvellously. Never before,

in all her pursuit of efficient ideals, had Altiora achieved such levels of efficiency. I wrote a protest that was perhaps ill-advised and angry, I went to her and tried to stop her. She wouldn't listen, she wouldn't think, she denied and lied, she behaved like a naughty child of six years old which has made up its mind to be hurtful. It wasn't only, I think, that she couldn't bear our political and social influence; she also--I realised at that interview couldn't bear our loving. It seemed to her the sickliest thing,--a thing quite unendurable. While such things were, the virtue had gone out of her world.

I've the vividest memory of that call of mine. She'd just come in and taken off her hat, and she was grey and dishevelled and tired, and in a business-like dress of black and crimson that didn't suit her and was muddy about the skirts; she'd a cold in her head and sniffed penetratingly, she avoided my eye as she talked and interrupted everything I had to say; she kept stabbing fiercely at the cushions of her sofa with a long hat-pin and pretending she was overwhelmed with grief at the DEBACLE she was deliberately organising.

"Then part," she cried, "part. If you don't want a smashing up,--part! You two have got to be parted. You've got never to see each other ever, never to speak." There was a zest in her voice. "We're not circulating stories," she denied. "No! And Curmain never told us anything--Curmain is an EXCELLENT young man; oh! a quite excellent young man. You misjudged him altogether."...

I was equally unsuccessful with Bailey. I caught the little wretch in the League Club, and he wriggled and lied. He wouldn't say where he had got his facts, he wouldn't admit he had told any one. When I gave him the names of two men who had come to me astonished and incredulous, he attempted absurdly to make me think they had told HIM. He did his horrible little best to suggest that honest old Quackett, who had just left England for the Cape, was the real scandalmonger. That struck me as mean, even for Bailey. I've still the odd vivid impression of his fluting voice, excusing the inexcusable, his big, shifty face evading me, his perspiration-beaded forehead, the shrugging shoulders, and the would-be exculpatory gestures--Houndsditch gestures--of his enormous ugly hands.

"I can assure you, my dear fellow," he said; "I can assure you we've done everything to shield you--everything."...

3

Isabel came after dinner one evening and talked in the office. She made a white-robed, dusky figure against the deep blues of my big window. I sat at my desk and tore a quill pen to pieces as I talked.

"The Baileys don't intend to let this drop," I said. "They mean that every one in London is to know about it."

"I know."

"Well!" I said.

"Dear heart," said Isabel, facing it, "it's no good waiting for things to overtake us; we're at the parting of the ways."

"What are we to do?"

"They won't let us go on."

"Damn them!"

"They are ORGANISING scandal."

"It's no good waiting for things to overtake us," I echoed; "they have

overtaken us." I turned on her. "What do you want to do?"

"Everything," she said. "Keep you and have our work. Aren't we Mates?"

"We can't."

"And we can't!"

"I've got to tell Margaret," I said.

"Margaret!"

"I can't bear the idea of any one else getting in front with it. I've been wincing about Margaret secretly--"

"I know. You'll have to tell her--and make your peace with her."

She leant back against the bookcases under the window.

"We've had some good times, Master;" she said, with a sigh in her voice.

And then for a long time we stared at one another in silence.

"We haven't much time left," she said.

"Shall we bolt?" I said.

"And leave all this?" she asked, with her eyes going round the room. "And that?" And her head indicated Westminster. "No!"

I said no more of bolting.

"We've got to screw ourselves up to surrender," she said.

"Something."

"A lot."

"Master," she said, "it isn't all sex and stuff between us?"

"No!"

"I can't give up the work. Our work's my life."

We came upon another long pause.

"No one will believe we've ceased to be lovers--if we simply do," she said.

"We shouldn't."

"We've got to do something more parting than that."

I nodded, and again we paused. She was coming to something.

"I could marry Shoesmith," she said abruptly.

"But--" I objected.

"He knows. It wasn't fair. I told him."

"Oh, that explains," I said. "There's been a kind of sulkiness--But--you told him?"

She nodded. "He's rather badly hurt," she said. "He's been a good friend to me. He's curiously loyal. But something, something he said one day--forced me to let him know.... That's been the beastliness of all this secrecy. That's the beastliness of all secrecy. You have to spring surprises on people. But he keeps on. He's steadfast. He'd already suspected. He wants me very badly to marry him...."

"But you don't want to marry him?"

"I'm forced to think of it."

"But does he want to marry you at that? Take you as a present from the world at large?--against your will and desire?... I don't understand him."

"He cares for me."

"How?"

"He thinks this is a fearful mess for me. He wants to pull it straight."

We sat for a time in silence, with imaginations that obstinately refused to take up the realities of this proposition.

"I don't want you to marry Shoesmith," I said at last.

"Don't you like him?"

"Not as your husband."

"He's a very clever and sturdy person--and very generous and devoted to me."

"And me?"

"You can't expect that. He thinks you are wonderful--and, naturally, that you ought not to have started this."

"I've a curious dislike to any one thinking that but myself. I'm quite ready to think it myself."

"He'd let us be friends--and meet."

"Let us be friends!" I cried, after a long pause. "You and me!"

"He wants me to be engaged soon. Then, he says, he can go round fighting these rumours, defending us both--and force a quarrel on the Baileys."

"I don't understand him," I said, and added, "I don't understand you."

I was staring at her face. It seemed white and set in the dimness.

"Do you really mean this, Isabel?" I asked.

"What else is there to do, my dear?--what else is there to do at all? I've been thinking day and night. You can't go away with me. You can't smash yourself suddenly in the sight of all men. I'd rather die than that should happen. Look what you are becoming in the country! Look at all you've built up!--me helping. I wouldn't let you do it if you could. I wouldn't let you--if it were only for Margaret's sake. THIS... closes the scandal, closes everything."

"It closes all our life together," I cried.

She was silent.

"It never ought to have begun," I said.

She winced. Then abruptly she was on her knees before me, with her hands upon my shoulder and her eyes meeting mine.

"My dear," she said very earnestly, "don't misunderstand me! Don't think I'm retreating from the things we've done! Our love is the best thing I could ever have had from life. Nothing can ever equal it; nothing could ever equal the beauty and delight you and I have had together. Never! You have loved me; you do love me...."

No one could ever know how to love you as I have loved you; no one could ever love me as you have loved me, my king. And it's just because it's been so splendid, dear; it's just because I'd die rather than have a tithe of all this wiped out of my life again--for it's made me, it's all I am--dear, it's years since I began loving you--it's just because of its goodness that I want not to end in wreckage now, not to end in the smashing up of all the big things I understand in you and love in you....

"What is there for us if we keep on and go away?" she went on. "All the big interests in our lives will vanish--everything. We shall become specialised people--people overshadowed by a situation. We shall be an elopement, a romance--all our breadth and meaning gone! People will always think of it first when they think of us; all our work and aims will be warped by it and subordinated to it. Is it good enough, dear?

Just to specialise.... I think of you. We've got a case, a passionate case, the best of cases, but do we want to spend all our lives defending it and justifying it? And there's that other life. I know now you care for Margaret--you care more than you think you do. You have said fine things of her. I've watched you about her. Little things have dropped from you. She's given her life for you; she's nothing without you. You feel that to your marrow all the time you are thinking about these things. Oh, I'm not jealous, dear. I love you for loving her. I love you in relation to her. But there it is, an added weight against us, another thing worth saving."

Presently, I remember, she sat back on her heels and looked up into my face. "We've done wrong--and parting's paying. It's time to pay. We needn't have paid, if we'd kept to the track.... You and I, Master, we've got to be men."

"Yes," I said; "we've got to be men."

4

I was driven to tell Margaret about our situation by my intolerable dread that otherwise the thing might come to her through some stupid and clumsy informant. She might even meet Altiora, and have it from her.

I can still recall the feeling of sitting at my desk that night in that large study of mine in Radnor Square, waiting for Margaret to come home. It was oddly like the feeling of a dentist's reception-room; only it was for me to do the dentistry with clumsy, cruel hands. I had left the door open so that she would come in to me.

I heard her silken rustle on the stairs at last, and then she was in the doorway. "May I come in?" she said.

"Do," I said, and turned round to her.

"Working?" she said.

"Hard," I answered. "Where have YOU been?"

"At the Vallerys'. Mr. Evesham was talking about you. They were all talking. I don't think everybody knew who I was. Just Mrs. Mumble I'd been to them. Lord Wardenham doesn't like you."

"He doesn't."

"But they all feel you're rather big, anyhow. Then I went on to Park Lane to hear a new pianist and some other music at Eva's."

"Yes."

"Then I looked in at the Brabants' for some midnight tea before I came on here. They'd got some writers--and Grant was there."

"You HAVE been flying round...."

There was a little pause between us.

I looked at her pretty, unsuspecting face, and at the slender grace of her golden-robed body. What gulfs there were between us! "You've been amused," I said.

"It's been amusing. You've been at the House?"

"The Medical Education Bill kept me."...

After all, why should I tell her? She'd got to a way of living that fulfilled her requirements. Perhaps she'd never hear. But all that day and the day before I'd been making up my mind to do the thing.

"I want to tell you something," I said. "I wish you'd sit down for a moment or so."...

Once I had begun, it seemed to me I had to go through with it.

Something in the quality of my voice gave her an intimation of unusual gravity. She looked at me steadily for a moment and sat down slowly in my armchair.

"What is it?" she said.

I went on awkwardly. "I've got to tell you--something extraordinarily distressing," I said.

She was manifestly altogether unaware.

"There seems to be a good deal of scandal abroad--I've only recently heard of it--about myself--and Isabel."

"Isabel!"

I nodded.

"What do they say?" she asked.

It was difficult, I found, to speak.

"They say she's my mistress."

"Oh! How abominable!"

She spoke with the most natural indignation. Our eyes met.

"We've been great friends," I said.

"Yes. And to make THAT of it. My poor dear! But how can they?" She paused and looked at me. "It's so incredible. How can any one believe it? I couldn't."

She stopped, with her distressed eyes regarding me. Her expression changed to dread. There was a tense stillness for a second, perhaps.

I turned my face towards the desk, and took up and dropped a handful of paper fasteners.

"Margaret," I said, "I'm afraid you'll have to believe it."

5

Margaret sat very still. When I looked at her again, her face was very white, and her distressed eyes scrutinised me. Her lips quivered as she spoke. "You really mean--THAT?" she said.

I nodded.

"I never dreamt."

"I never meant you to dream."

"And that is why--we've been apart?"

I thought. "I suppose it is."

"Why have you told me now?"

"Those rumours. I didn't want any one else to tell you."

"Or else it wouldn't have mattered?"

"No."

She turned her eyes from me to the fire. Then for a moment she looked

about the room she had made for me, and then quite silently, with a childish quivering of her lips, with a sort of dismayed distress upon her face, she was weeping. She sat weeping in her dress of cloth of gold, with her bare slender arms dropped limp over the arms of her chair, and her eyes averted from me, making no effort to stay or staunch her tears. "I am sorry, Margaret," I said. "I was in love.... I did not understand...."

Presently she asked: "What are you going to do?"

"You see, Margaret, now it's come to be your affair--I want to know what you--what you want."

"You want to leave me?"

"If you want me to, I must."

"Leave Parliament--leave all the things you are doing,--all this fine movement of yours?"

"No." I spoke sullenly. "I don't want to leave anything. I want to stay on. I've told you, because I think we--Isabel and I, I mean--have got to drive through a storm of scandal anyhow. I don't know how far things may go, how much people may feel, and I can't, I can't have you unconscious, unarmed, open to any revelation--"

She made no answer.

"When the thing began--I knew it was stupid but I thought it was a thing that wouldn't change, wouldn't be anything but itself, wouldn't unfold--consequences.... People have got hold of these vague rumours.... Directly it reached any one else but--but us two--I saw it had to come to you."

I stopped. I had that distressful feeling I have always had with Margaret, of not being altogether sure she heard, of being doubtful if she understood. I perceived that once again I had struck at her and shattered a thousand unsubstantial pinnacles. And I couldn't get at her, to help her, or touch her mind! I stood up, and at my movement she moved. She produced a dainty little handkerchief, and made an effort to wipe her face with it, and held it to her eyes. "Oh, my Husband!" she sobbed.

"What do you mean to do?" she said, with her voice muffled by her handkerchief.

"We're going to end it," I said.

Something gripped me tormentingly as I said that. I drew a chair beside her and sat down. "You and I, Margaret, have been partners," I began. "We've built up this life of ours together; I couldn't have done it without you. We've made a position, created a work--"

She shook her head. "You," she said.

"You helping. I don't want to shatter it--if you don't want it shattered. I can't leave my work. I can't leave you. I want you to have--all that you have ever had. I've never meant to rob you. I've made an immense and tragic blunder. You don't know how things took us, how different they seemed! My character and accident have conspired--We'll pay--in ourselves, not in our public service."

I halted again. Margaret remained very still.

"I want you to understand that the thing is at an end. It is definitely at an end. We--we talked--yesterday. We mean to end it altogether." I clenched my hands. "She's--she's going to marry Arnold Shoesmith."

I wasn't looking now at Margaret any more, but I heard the rustle of her movement as she turned on me.

"It's all right," I said, clinging to my explanation. "We're doing nothing shabby. He knows. He will. It's all as right--as things can be now. We're not cheating any one, Margaret. We're doing things straight--now. Of course, you know.... We shall--we shall have to make sacrifices. Give things up pretty completely. Very completely.... We shall have not to see each other for a time, you know. Perhaps not a long time. Two or three years. Or write--or just any of that sort of

thing ever--"

Some subconscious barrier gave way in me. I found myself crying uncontrollably--as I have never cried since I was a little child. I was amazed and horrified at myself. And wonderfully, Margaret was on her knees beside me, with her arms about me, mingling her weeping with mine. "Oh, my Husband!" she cried, "my poor Husband! Does it hurt you so? I would do anything! Oh, the fool I am! Dear, I love you. I love you over and away and above all these jealous little things!"

She drew down my head to her as a mother might draw down the head of a son. She caressed me, weeping bitterly with me. "Oh! my dear," she sobbed, "my dear! I've never seen you cry! I've never seen you cry. Ever! I didn't know you could. Oh! my dear! Can't you have her, my dear, if you want her? I can't bear it! Let me help you, dear. Oh! my Husband! My Man! I can't bear to have you cry!" For a time she held me in silence.

"I've thought this might happen, I dreamt it might happen. You two, I mean. It was dreaming put it into my head. When I've seen you together, so glad with each other.... Oh! Husband mine, believe me! believe me! I'm stupid, I'm cold, I'm only beginning to realise how stupid and cold, but all I want in all the world is to give my life to you."...

6

"We can't part in a room," said Isabel.

"We'll have one last talk together," I said, and planned that we should meet for a half a day between Dover and Walmer and talk ourselves out. I still recall that day very well, recall even the curious exaltation of grief that made our mental atmosphere distinctive and memorable. We had seen so much of one another, had become so intimate, that we talked of parting even as we parted with a sense of incredible remoteness. We went together up over the cliffs, and to a place where they fall towards the sea, past the white, quaint-lanterned lighthouses of the South Foreland. There, in a kind of niche below the crest, we sat talking. It was a spacious day, serenely blue and warm, and on the wrinkled water remotely below a black tender and six hooded submarines came presently, and engaged in mysterious manoeuvers. Shrieking gulls and chattering jackdaws circled over us and below us, and dived and swooped; and a skerry of weedy, fallen chalk appeared, and gradually disappeared again, as the tide fell and rose.

We talked and thought that afternoon on every aspect of our relations. It seems to me now we talked so wide and far that scarcely an issue in the life between man and woman can arise that we did not at least touch upon. Lying there at Isabel's feet, I have become for myself a symbol of all this world-wide problem between duty and conscious, passionate love

the world has still to solve. Because it isn't solved; there's a wrong in it either way.. .. The sky, the wide horizon, seemed to lift us out of ourselves until we were something representative and general. She was womanhood become articulate, talking to her lover.

"I ought," I said, "never to have loved you."

"It wasn't a thing planned," she said.

"I ought never to have let our talk slip to that, never to have turned back from America."

"I'm glad we did it," she said. "Don't think I repent."

I looked at her.

"I will never repent," she said. "Never!" as though she clung to her life in saying it.

I remember we talked for a long time of divorce. It seemed to us then, and it seems to us still, that it ought to have been possible for Margaret to divorce me, and for me to marry without the scandalous and ugly publicity, the taint and ostracism that follow such a readjustment. We went on to the whole perplexing riddle of marriage. We criticised the current code, how muddled and conventionalised it had become, how modified by subterfuges and concealments and new necessities, and the

increasing freedom of women. "It's all like Bromstead when the building came," I said; for I had often talked to her of that early impression of purpose dissolving again into chaotic forces. "There is no clear right in the world any more. The world is Byzantine. The justest man to-day must practise a tainted goodness."

These questions need discussion--a magnificent frankness of discussion--if any standards are again to establish an effective hold upon educated people. Discretions, as I have said already, will never hold any one worth holding--longer than they held us. Against every "shalt not" there must be a "why not" plainly put,--the "why not" largest and plainest, the law deduced from its purpose. "You and I, Isabel," I said, "have always been a little disregardful of duty, partly at least because the idea of duty comes to us so ill-clad. Oh! I know there's an extravagant insubordinate strain in us, but that wasn't all. I wish humbugs would leave duty alone. I wish all duty wasn't covered with slime. That's where the real mischief comes in. Passion can always contrive to clothe itself in beauty, strips itself splendid. That carried us. But for all its mean associations there is this duty....

"Don't we come rather late to it?"

"Not so late that it won't be atrociously hard to do."

"It's queer to think of now," said Isabel. "Who could believe we did all we have done honestly? Well, in a manner honestly. Who could believe we

thought this might be hidden? Who could trace it all step by step from the time when we found that a certain boldness in our talk was pleasing? We talked of love.... Master, there's not much for us to do in the way of Apologia that any one will credit. And yet if it were possible to tell the very heart of our story....

"Does Margaret really want to go on with you?" she asked--"shield you--knowing of... THIS?"

"I'm certain. I don't understand--just as I don't understand Shoesmith, but she does. These people walk on solid ground which is just thin air to us. They've got something we haven't got. Assurances? I wonder."...

Then it was, or later, we talked of Shoesmith, and what her life might be with him.

"He's good," she said; "he's kindly. He's everything but magic. He's the very image of the decent, sober, honourable life. You can't say a thing against him or I--except that something--something in his imagination, something in the tone of his voice--fails for me. Why don't I love him?--he's a better man than you! Why don't you? IS he a better man than you? He's usage, he's honour, he's the right thing, he's the breed and the tradition,--a gentleman. You're your erring, incalculable self. I suppose we women will trust this sort and love your sort to the very end of time...."

We lay side by side and nibbled at grass stalks as we talked. It seemed enormously unreasonable to us that two people who had come to the pitch of easy and confident affection and happiness that held between us should be obliged to part and shun one another, or murder half the substance of their lives. We felt ourselves crushed and beaten by an indiscriminating machine which destroys happiness in the service of jealousy. "The mass of people don't feel these things in quite the same manner as we feel them," she said. "Is it because they're different in grain, or educated out of some primitive instinct?"

"It's because we've explored love a little, and they know no more than the gateway," I said. "Lust and then jealousy; their simple conception--and we have gone past all that and wandered hand in hand...."

I remember that for a time we watched two of that larger sort of gull, whose wings are brownish-white, circle and hover against the blue. And then we lay and looked at a band of water mirror clear far out to sea, and wondered why the breeze that rippled all the rest should leave it so serene.

"And in this State of ours," I resumed.

"Eh!" said Isabel, rolling over into a sitting posture and looking out at the horizon. "Let's talk no more of things we can never see. Talk to me of the work you are doing and all we shall do--after we have parted.

We've said too little of that. We've had our red life, and it's over. Thank Heaven!--though we stole it! Talk about your work, dear, and the things we'll go on doing--just as though we were still together. We'll still be together in a sense--through all these things we have in common."

And so we talked of politics and our outlook. We were interested to the pitch of self-forgetfulness. We weighed persons and forces, discussed the probabilities of the next general election, the steady drift of public opinion in the north and west away from Liberalism towards us. It was very manifest that in spite of Wardenham and the EXPURGATOR, we should come into the new Government strongly. The party had no one else, all the young men were formally or informally with us; Esmeer would have office, Lord Tarvrille, I... and very probably there would be something for Shoesmith. "And for my own part," I said, "I count on backing on the Liberal side. For the last two years we've been forcing competition in constructive legislation between the parties. The Liberals have not been long in following up our Endowment of Motherhood lead. They'll have to give votes and lip service anyhow. Half the readers of the BLUE WEEKLY, they say, are Liberals....

"I remember talking about things of this sort with old Willersley," I said, "ever so many years ago. It was some place near Locarno, and we looked down the lake that shone weltering--just as now we look over the sea. And then we dreamt in an indistinct featureless way of all that you and I are doing now."

"I!" said Isabel, and laughed.

"Well, of some such thing," I said, and remained for awhile silent, thinking of Locarno.

I recalled once more the largeness, the release from small personal things that I had felt in my youth; statecraft became real and wonderful again with the memory, the gigantic handling of gigantic problems. I began to talk out my thoughts, sitting up beside her, as I could never talk of them to any one but Isabel; began to recover again the purpose that lay under all my political ambitions and adjustments and anticipations. I saw the State, splendid and wide as I had seen it in that first travel of mine, but now it was no mere distant prospect of spires and pinnacles, but populous with fine-trained, bold-thinking, bold-doing people. It was as if I had forgotten for a long time and now remembered with amazement.

At first, I told her, I had been altogether at a loss how I could do anything to battle against the aimless muddle of our world; I had wanted a clue--until she had come into my life questioning, suggesting, unconsciously illuminating. "But I have done nothing," she protested. I declared she had done everything in growing to education under my eyes, in reflecting again upon all the processes that had made myself, so that instead of abstractions and blue-books and bills and devices, I had realised the world of mankind as a crowd needing before all things fine

women and men. We'd spoilt ourselves in learning that, but anyhow we had our lesson. Before her I was in a nineteenth-century darkness, dealing with the nation as if it were a crowd of selfish men, forgetful of women and children and that shy wild thing in the hearts of men, love, which must be drawn upon as it has never been drawn upon before, if the State is to live. I saw now how it is possible to bring the loose factors of a great realm together, to create a mind of literature and thought in it, and the expression of a purpose to make it self-conscious and fine. I had it all clear before me, so that at a score of points I could presently begin. The BLUE WEEKLY was a centre of force. Already we had given Imperialism a criticism, and leavened half the press from our columns. Our movement consolidated and spread. We should presently come into power. Everything moved towards our hands. We should be able to get at the schools, the services, the universities, the church; enormously increase the endowment of research, and organise what was sorely wanted, a criticism of research; contrive a closer contact between the press and creative intellectual life; foster literature, clarify, strengthen the public consciousness, develop social organisation and a sense of the State. Men were coming to us every day, brilliant young peers like Lord Dentonhill, writers like Carnot and Cresswell. It filled me with pride to win such men. "We stand for so much more than we seem to stand for," I said. I opened my heart to her, so freely that I hesitate to open my heart even to the reader, telling of projects and ambitions I cherished, of my consciousness of great powers and widening opportunities....

Isabel watched me as I talked.

She too, I think, had forgotten these things for a while. For it is curious and I think a very significant thing that since we had become lovers, we had talked very little of the broader things that had once so strongly gripped our imaginations.

"It's good," I said, "to talk like this to you, to get back to youth and great ambitions with you. There have been times lately when politics has seemed the pettiest game played with mean tools for mean ends--and none the less so that the happiness of three hundred million people might be touched by our follies. I talk to no one else like this.... And now I think of parting, I think but of how much more I might have talked to you."...

Things drew to an end at last, but after we had spoken of a thousand things.

"We've talked away our last half day," I said, staring over my shoulder at the blazing sunset sky behind us. "Dear, it's been the last day of our lives for us.... It doesn't seem like the last day of our lives. Or any day."

"I wonder how it will feel?" said Isabel.

"It will be very strange at first--not to be able to tell you things."

"I've a superstition that after--after we've parted--if ever I go into my room and talk, you'll hear. You'll be--somewhere."

"I shall be in the world--yes."

"I don't feel as though these days ahead were real. Here we are, here we remain."

"Yes, I feel that. As though you and I were two immortals, who didn't live in time and space at all, who never met, who couldn't part, and here we lie on Olympus. And those two poor creatures who did meet, poor little Richard Remington and Isabel Rivers, who met and loved too much and had to part, they part and go their ways, and we lie here and watch them, you and I. She'll cry, poor dear."

"She'll cry. She's crying now!"

"Poor little beasts! I think he'll cry too. He winces. He could--for tuppence. I didn't know he had lachrymal glands at all until a little while ago. I suppose all love is hysterical--and a little foolish. Poor mites! Silly little pitiful creatures! How we have blundered! Think how we must look to God! Well, we'll pity them, and then we'll inspire him to stiffen up again--and do as we've determined he shall do. We'll see it through,--we who lie here on the cliff. They'll be mean at times, and horrid at times; we know them! Do you see her, a poor little fine lady in a great house,--she sometimes goes to her room and writes."

"She writes for his BLUE WEEKLY still."

"Yes. Sometimes--I hope. And he's there in the office with a bit of her copy in his hand."

"Is it as good as if she still talked it over with him before she wrote it? Is it?"

"Better, I think. Let's play it's better--anyhow. It may be that talking over was rather mixed with love-making. After all, love-making is joy rather than magic. Don't let's pretend about that even.... Let's go on watching him. (I don't see why her writing shouldn't be better. Indeed I don't.) See! There he goes down along the Embankment to Westminster just like a real man, for all that he's smaller than a grain of dust. What is running round inside that speck of a head of his? Look at him going past the Policemen, specks too--selected large ones from the country. I think he's going to dinner with the Speaker--some old thing like that. Is his face harder or commoner or stronger?--I can't quite see.... And now he's up and speaking in the House. Hope he'll hold on to the thread. He'll have to plan his speeches to the very end of his days--and learn the headings."

"Isn't she up in the women's gallery to hear him?"

"No. Unless it's by accident."

"She's there," she said.

"Well, by accident it happens. Not too many accidents, Isabel. Never any more adventures for us, dear, now. No!... They play the game, you know. They've begun late, but now they've got to. You see it's not so very hard for them since you and I, my dear, are here always, always faithfully here on this warm cliff of love accomplished, watching and helping them under high heaven. It isn't so VERY hard. Rather good in some ways. Some people HAVE to be broken a little. Can you see Altiora down there, by any chance?"

"She's too little to be seen," she said.

"Can you see the sins they once committed?"

"I can only see you here beside me, dear--for ever. For all my life, dear, till I die. Was that--the sin?"...

I took her to the station, and after she had gone I was to drive to Dover, and cross to Calais by the night boat. I couldn't, I felt, return to London. We walked over the crest and down to the little station of Martin Mill side by side, talking at first in broken fragments, for the most part of unimportant things.

"None of this," she said abruptly, "seems in the slightest degree real

to me. I've got no sense of things ending."

"We're parting," I said.

"We're parting--as people part in a play. It's distressing. But I don't feel as though you and I were really never to see each other again for years. Do you?"

I thought. "No," I said.

"After we've parted I shall look to talk it over with you."

"So shall I."

"That's absurd."

"Absurd."

"I feel as if you'd always be there, just about where you are now. Invisible perhaps, but there. We've spent so much of our lives joggling elbows."...

"Yes. Yes. I don't in the least realise it. I suppose I shall begin to when the train goes out of the station. Are we wanting in imagination, Isabel?"

"I don't know. We've always assumed it was the other way about."

"Even when the train goes out of the station--! I've seen you into so many trains."

"I shall go on thinking of things to say to you--things to put in your letters. For years to come. How can I ever stop thinking in that way now? We've got into each other's brains."

"It isn't real," I said; "nothing is real. The world's no more than a fantastic dream. Why are we parting, Isabel?"

"I don't know. It seems now supremely silly. I suppose we have to. Can't we meet?--don't you think we shall meet even in dreams?"

"We'll meet a thousand times in dreams," I said.

"I wish we could dream at the same time," said Isabel.... "Dream walks. I can't believe, dear, I shall never have a walk with you again."

"If I'd stayed six months in America," I said, "we might have walked long walks and talked long talks for all our lives."

"Not in a world of Baileys," said Isabel. "And anyhow--"

She stopped short. I looked interrogation.

"We've loved," she said.

I took her ticket, saw to her luggage, and stood by the door of the compartment. "Good-bye," I said a little stiffly, conscious of the people upon the platform. She bent above me, white and dusky, looking at me very steadfastly.

"Come here," she whispered. "Never mind the porters. What can they know? Just one time more--I must."

She rested her hand against the door of the carriage and bent down upon me, and put her cold, moist lips to mine.

CHAPTER THE THIRD ~~ THE BREAKING POINT

1

And then we broke down. We broke our faith with both Margaret and Shoesmith, flung career and duty out of our lives, and went away together.

It is only now, almost a year after these events, that I can begin to see what happened to me. At the time it seemed to me I was a rational, responsible creature, but indeed I had not parted from her two days before I became a monomaniac to whom nothing could matter but Isabel. Every truth had to be squared to that obsession, every duty. It astounds me to think how I forgot Margaret, forgot my work, forgot everything but that we two were parted. I still believe that with better chances we might have escaped the consequences of the emotional storm that presently seized us both. But we had no foresight of that, and no preparation for it, and our circumstances betrayed us. It was partly Shoesmith's unwisdom in delaying his marriage until after the end of the session--partly my own amazing folly in returning within four days to Westminster. But we were all of us intent upon the defeat of scandal and the complete restoration of appearances. It seemed necessary that Shoesmith's marriage should not seem to be hurried, still more necessary

that I should not vanish inexplicably. I had to be visible with Margaret in London just as much as possible; we went to restaurants, we visited the theatre; we could even contemplate the possibility of my presence at the wedding. For that, however, we had schemed a weekend visit to Wales, and a fictitious sprained ankle at the last moment which would justify my absence....

I cannot convey to you the intolerable wretchedness and rebellion of my separation from Isabel. It seemed that in the past two years all my thoughts had spun commisures to Isabel's brain and I could think of nothing that did not lead me surely to the need of the one intimate I had found in the world. I came back to the House and the office and my home, I filled all my days with appointments and duty, and it did not save me in the least from a lonely emptiness such as I had never felt before in all my life. I had little sleep. In the daytime I did a hundred things, I even spoke in the House on two occasions, and by my own low standards spoke well, and it seemed to me that I was going about in my own brain like a hushed survivor in a house whose owner lies dead upstairs.

I came to a crisis after that wild dinner of Tarvrille's. Something in that stripped my soul bare.

It was an occasion made absurd and strange by the odd accident that the house caught fire upstairs while we were dining below. It was a men's dinner--"A dinner of all sorts," said Tarvrille, when he invited me;

"everything from Evesham and Gane to Wilkins the author, and Heaven knows what will happen!" I remember that afterwards Tarvrille was accused of having planned the fire to make his dinner a marvel and a memory. It was indeed a wonderful occasion, and I suppose if I had not been altogether drenched in misery, I should have found the same wild amusement in it that glowed in all the others. There were one or two university dons, Lord George Fester, the racing man, Panmure, the artist, two or three big City men, Weston Massinghay and another prominent Liberal whose name I can't remember, the three men Tarvrille had promised and Esmeer, Lord Wrassleton, Waulsort, the member for Monckton, Neal and several others. We began a little coldly, with duologues, but the conversation was already becoming general--so far as such a long table permitted--when the fire asserted itself.

It asserted itself first as a penetrating and emphatic smell of burning rubber,--it was caused by the fusing of an electric wire. The reek forced its way into the discussion of the Pekin massacres that had sprung up between Evesham, Waulsort, and the others at the end of the table. "Something burning," said the man next to me.

"Something must be burning," said Panmure.

Tarvrille hated undignified interruptions. He had a particularly imperturbable butler with a cadaverous sad face and an eye of rigid disapproval. He spoke to this individual over his shoulder. "Just see, will you," he said, and caught up the pause in the talk to his left.

Wilkins was asking questions, and I, too, was curious. The story of the siege of the Legations in China in the year 1900 and all that followed upon that, is just one of those disturbing interludes in history that refuse to join on to that general scheme of protestation by which civilisation is maintained. It is a break in the general flow of experience as disconcerting to statecraft as the robbery of my knife and the scuffle that followed it had been to me when I was a boy at Penge. It is like a tear in a curtain revealing quite unexpected backgrounds. I had never given the business a thought for years; now this talk brought back a string of pictures to my mind; how the reliefs arrived and the plundering began, how section after section of the International Army was drawn into murder and pillage, how the infection spread upward until the wives of Ministers were busy looting, and the very sentinels stripped and crawled like snakes into the Palace they were set to guard. It did not stop at robbery, men were murdered, women, being plundered, were outraged, children were butchered, strong men had found themselves with arms in a lawless, defenceless city, and this had followed. Now it was all recalled.

"Respectable ladies addicted to district visiting at home were as bad as any one," said Panmure. "Glazebrook told me of one--flushed like a woman at a bargain sale, he said--and when he pointed out to her that the silk she'd got was bloodstained, she just said, 'Oh, bother!' and threw it aside and went back...."

We became aware that Tarvrille's butler had returned. We tried not to seem to listen.

"Beg pardon, m'lord," he said. "The house IS on fire, m'lord."

"Upstairs, m'lord."

"Just overhead, m'lord."

"The maids are throwing water, m'lord, and I've telephoned FIRE."

"No, m'lord, no immediate danger."

"It's all right," said Tarvrille to the table generally. "Go on! It's not a general conflagration, and the fire brigade won't be five minutes. Don't see that it's our affair. The stuff's insured. They say old Lady Paskershortly was dreadful. Like a harpy. The Dowager Empress had shown her some little things of hers. Pet things--hidden away. Susan went straight for them--used to take an umbrella for the silks. Born shoplifter."

It was evident he didn't want his dinner spoilt, and we played up loyally.

"This is recorded history," said Wilkins,--"practically. It makes one wonder about unrecorded history. In India, for example."

But nobody touched that.

"Thompson," said Tarvrille to the imperturbable butler, and indicating the table generally, "champagne. Champagne. Keep it going."

"M'lord," and Thompson marshalled his assistants.

Some man I didn't know began to remember things about Mandalay. "It's queer," he said, "how people break out at times;" and told his story of an army doctor, brave, public-spirited, and, as it happened, deeply religious, who was caught one evening by the excitement of plundering--and stole and hid, twisted the wrist of a boy until it broke, and was afterwards overcome by wild remorse.

I watched Evesham listening intently. "Strange," he said, "very strange. We are such stuff as thieves are made of. And in China, too, they murdered people--for the sake of murdering. Apart, so to speak, from mercenary considerations. I'm afraid there's no doubt of it in certain cases. No doubt at all. Young soldiers fresh from German high schools and English homes!"

"Did OUR people?" asked some patriot.

"Not so much. But I'm afraid there were cases.... Some of the Indian troops were pretty bad."

Gane picked up the tale with confirmations.

It is all printed in the vividest way as a picture upon my memory, so that were I a painter I think I could give the deep rich browns and warm greys beyond the brightly lit table, the various distinguished faces, strongly illuminated, interested and keen, above the black and white of evening dress, the alert menservants with their heavier, clean-shaved faces indistinctly seen in the dimness behind. Then this was coloured emotionally for me by my aching sense of loss and sacrifice, and by the chance trend of our talk to the breaches and unrealities of the civilised scheme. We seemed a little transitory circle of light in a universe of darkness and violence; an effect to which the diminishing smell of burning rubber, the trampling of feet overhead, the swish of water, added enormously. Everybody--unless, perhaps, it was Evesham--drank rather carelessly because of the suppressed excitement of our situation, and talked the louder and more freely.

"But what a flimsy thing our civilisation is!" said Evesham; "a mere thin net of habits and associations!"

"I suppose those men came back," said Wilkins.

"Lady Paskershortly did!" chuckled Evesham.

"How do they fit it in with the rest of their lives?" Wilkins

speculated. "I suppose there's Pekin-stained police officers, Pekin-stained J. P.'s--trying petty pilferers in the severest manner."...

Then for a time things became preposterous. There was a sudden cascade of water by the fireplace, and then absurdly the ceiling began to rain upon us, first at this point and then that. "My new suit!" cried some one. "Perrrrrr-up pe-rr"--a new vertical line of blackened water would establish itself and form a spreading pool upon the gleaming cloth. The men nearest would arrange catchment areas of plates and flower bowls. "Draw up!" said Tarvrille, "draw up. That's the bad end of the table!" He turned to the imperturbable butler. "Take round bath towels," he said; and presently the men behind us were offering--with inflexible dignity--"Port wine, Sir. Bath towel, Sir!" Waulsort, with streaks of blackened water on his forehead, was suddenly reminded of a wet year when he had followed the French army manoeuvres. An animated dispute sprang up between him and Neal about the relative efficiency of the new French and German field guns. Wrassleton joined in and a little drunken shrivelled Oxford don of some sort with a black-splashed shirt front who presently silenced them all by the immensity and particularity of his knowledge of field artillery. Then the talk drifted to Sedan and the effect of dead horses upon drinking-water, which brought Wrassleton and Weston Massinghay into a dispute of great vigour and emphasis. "The trouble in South Africa," said Weston Massinghay, "wasn't that we didn't boil our water. It was that we didn't boil our men. The Boers drank the same stuff we did. THEY didn't get dysentery."

That argument went on for some time. I was attacked across the table by a man named Burshort about my Endowment of Motherhood schemes, but in the gaps of that debate I could still hear Weston Massinghay at intervals repeat in a rather thickened voice: "THEY didn't get dysentery."

I think Evesham went early. The rest of us clustered more and more closely towards the drier end of the room, the table was pushed along, and the area beneath the extinguished conflagration abandoned to a tinkling, splashing company of pots and pans and bowls and baths. Everybody was now disposed to be hilarious and noisy, to say startling and aggressive things; we must have sounded a queer clamour to a listener in the next room. The devil inspired them to begin baiting me. "Ours isn't the Tory party any more," said Burshort. "Remington has made it the Obstetric Party."

"That's good!" said Weston Massinghay, with all his teeth gleaming; "I shall use that against you in the House!"

"I shall denounce you for abusing private confidences if you do," said Tarvrille.

"Remington wants us to give up launching Dreadnoughts and launch babies instead," Burshort urged. "For the price of one Dreadnought--"

The little shrivelled don who had been omniscient about guns joined in the baiting, and displayed himself a venomous creature. Something in his eyes told me he knew Isabel and hated me for it. "Love and fine thinking," he began, a little thickly, and knocking over a wine-glass with a too easy gesture. "Love and fine thinking. Two things don't go together. No philosophy worth a damn ever came out of excesses of love. Salt Lake City--Piggott--Ag--Agapemone again--no works to matter."

Everybody laughed.

"Got to rec'nise these facts," said my assailant. "Love and fine think'n pretty phrase--attractive. Suitable for p'litical dec'rations. Postcard, Christmas, gilt lets, in a wreath of white flow's. Not oth'wise valu'ble."

I made some remark, I forget what, but he overbore me.

Real things we want are Hate--Hate and COARSE think'n. I b'long to the school of Mrs. F's Aunt--"

"What?" said some one, intent.

"In 'Little Dorrit,'" explained Tarvrille; "go on!"

"Hate a fool," said my assailant.

Tarvrille glanced at me. I smiled to conceal the loss of my temper.

"Hate," said the little man, emphasising his point with a clumsy fist. "Hate's the driving force. What's m'rality?--hate of rotten goings on. What's patriotism?--hate of int'loping foreigners. What's Radicalism?--hate of lords. What's Toryism?--hate of disturbance. It's all hate--hate from top to bottom. Hate of a mess. Remington owned it the other day, said he hated a mu'll. There you are! If you couldn't get hate into an election, damn it (hic) people wou'n't poll. Poll for love!--no' me!"

He paused, but before any one could speak he had resumed.

"Then this about fine thinking. Like going into a bear pit armed with a tagle--talgent--talgent galv'nometer. Like going to fight a mad dog with Shasepear and the Bible. Fine thinking--what we want is the thickes' thinking we can get. Thinking that stands up alone. Taf Reform means work for all, thassort of thing."

The gentleman from Cambridge paused. "YOU a flag!" he said. "I'd as soon go to ba'ell und' wet tissue paper!"

My best answer on the spur of the moment was:

"The Japanese did." Which was absurd.

I went on to some other reply, I forget exactly what, and the talk of the whole table drew round me. It was an extraordinary revelation to me. Every one was unusually careless and outspoken, and it was amazing how manifestly they echoed the feeling of this old Tory spokesman. They were quite friendly to me, they regarded me and the BLUE WEEKLY as valuable party assets for Toryism, but it was clear they attached no more importance to what were my realities than they did to the remarkable therapeutic claims of Mrs. Eddy. They were flushed and amused, perhaps they went a little too far in their resolves to draw me, but they left the impression on my mind of men irrevocably set upon narrow and cynical views of political life. For them the political struggle was a game, whose counters were human hate and human credulity; their real aim was just every one's aim, the preservation of the class and way of living to which their lives were attuned. They did not know how tired I was, how exhausted mentally and morally, nor how cruel their convergent attack on me chanced to be. But my temper gave way, I became tart and fierce, perhaps my replies were a trifle absurd, and Tarvrille, with that quick eye and sympathy of his, came to the rescue. Then for a time I sat silent and drank port wine while the others talked. The disorder of the room, the still dripping ceiling, the noise, the displaced ties and crumpled shirts of my companions, jarred on my tormented nerves....

It was long past midnight when we dispersed. I remember Tarvrille coming with me into the hall, and then suggesting we should go upstairs to see the damage. A manservant carried up two flickering candles for us. One end of the room was gutted, curtains, hangings, several chairs and

tables were completely burnt, the panelling was scorched and warped, three smashed windows made the candles flare and gutter, and some scraps of broken china still lay on the puddled floor.

As we surveyed this, Lady Tarvrille appeared, back from some party, a slender, white-cloaked, satin-footed figure with amazed blue eyes beneath her golden hair. I remember how stupidly we laughed at her surprise.

2

I parted from Panmure at the corner of Aldington Street, and went my way alone. But I did not go home, I turned westward and walked for a long way, and then struck northward aimlessly. I was too miserable to go to my house.

I wandered about that night like a man who has discovered his Gods are dead. I can look back now detached yet sympathetic upon that wild confusion of moods and impulses, and by it I think I can understand, oh! half the wrongdoing and blundering in the world.

I do not feel now the logical force of the process that must have convinced me then that I had made my sacrifice and spent my strength in vain. At no time had I been under any illusion that the Tory party had higher ideals than any other party, yet it came to me like a thing newly discovered that the men I had to work with had for the most part no such dreams, no sense of any collective purpose, no atom of the faith I held. They were just as immediately intent upon personal ends, just as limited by habits of thought, as the men in any other group or party. Perhaps I had slipped unawares for a time into the delusions of a party man--but I do not think so.

No, it was the mood of profound despondency that had followed upon the abrupt cessation of my familiar intercourse with Isabel, that gave this

fact that had always been present in my mind its quality of devastating revelation. It seemed as though I had never seen before nor suspected the stupendous gap between the chaotic aims, the routine, the conventional acquiescences, the vulgarisations of the personal life, and that clearly conscious development and service of a collective thought and purpose at which my efforts aimed. I had thought them but a little way apart, and now I saw they were separated by all the distance between earth and heaven. I saw now in myself and every one around me, a concentration upon interests close at hand, an inability to detach oneself from the provocations, tendernesses, instinctive hates, dumb lusts and shy timidities that touched one at every point; and, save for rare exalted moments, a regardlessness of broader aims and remoter possibilities that made the white passion of statecraft seem as unearthly and irrelevant to human life as the story an astronomer will tell, half proven but altogether incredible, of habitable planets and answering intelligences, suns' distances uncounted across the deep. It seemed to me I had aspired too high and thought too far, had mocked my own littleness by presumption, had given the uttermost dear reality of life for a theoriser's dream.

All through that wandering agony of mine that night a dozen threads of thought interwove; now I was a soul speaking in protest to God against a task too cold and high for it, and now I was an angry man, scorned and pointed upon, who had let life cheat him of the ultimate pride of his soul. Now I was the fool of ambition, who opened his box of gold to find blank emptiness, and now I was a spinner of flimsy thoughts, whose web

tore to rags at a touch. I realised for the first time how much I had come to depend upon the mind and faith of Isabel, how she had confirmed me and sustained me, how little strength I had to go on with our purposes now that she had vanished from my life. She had been the incarnation of those great abstractions, the saving reality, the voice that answered back. There was no support that night in the things that had been. We were alone together on the cliff for ever more!--that was very pretty in its way, but it had no truth whatever that could help me now, no ounce of sustaining value. I wanted Isabel that night, no sentiment or memory of her, but Isabel alive,--to talk to me, to touch me, to hold me together. I wanted unendurably the dusky gentleness of her presence, the consolation of her voice.

We were alone together on the cliff! I startled a passing cabman into interest by laughing aloud at that magnificent and characteristic sentimentality. What a lie it was, and how satisfying it had been! That was just where we shouldn't remain. We of all people had no distinction from that humanity whose lot is to forget. We should go out to other interests, new experiences, new demands. That tall and intricate fabric of ambitious understandings we had built up together in our intimacy would be the first to go; and last perhaps to endure with us would be a few gross memories of sights and sounds, and trivial incidental excitements....

I had a curious feeling that night that I had lost touch with life for a long time, and had now been reminded of its quality. That infernal

little don's parody of my ruling phrase, "Hate and coarse thinking," stuck in my thoughts like a poisoned dart, a centre of inflammation. Just as a man who is debilitated has no longer the vitality to resist an infection, so my mind, slackened by the crisis of my separation from Isabel, could find no resistance to his emphatic suggestion. It seemed to me that what he had said was overpoweringly true, not only of contemporary life, but of all possible human life. Love is the rare thing, the treasured thing; you lock it away jealously and watch, and well you may; hate and aggression and force keep the streets and rule the world. And fine thinking is, in the rough issues of life, weak thinking, is a balancing indecisive process, discovers with disloyal impartiality a justice and a defect on each disputing side. "Good honest men," as Dayton calls them, rule the world, with a way of thinking out decisions like shooting cartloads of bricks, and with a steadfast pleasure in hostility. Dayton liked to call his antagonists "blaggards and scoundrels"--it justified his opposition--the Lords were "scoundrels," all people richer than he were "scoundrels," all Socialists, all troublesome poor people; he liked to think of jails and justice being done. His public spirit was saturated with the sombre joys of conflict and the pleasant thought of condign punishment for all recalcitrant souls. That was the way of it, I perceived. That had survival value, as the biologists say. He was fool enough in politics to be a consistent and happy politician....

Hate and coarse thinking; how the infernal truth of the phrase beat me down that night! I couldn't remember that I had known this all along,

and that it did not really matter in the slightest degree. I had worked it all out long ago in other terms, when I had seen how all parties stood for interests inevitably, and how the purpose in life achieves itself, if it achieves itself at all, as a bye product of the war of individuals and classes. Hadn't I always known that science and philosophy elaborate themselves in spite of all the passion and narrowness of men, in spite of the vanities and weakness of their servants, in spite of all the heated disorder of contemporary things? Wasn't it my own phrase to speak of "that greater mind in men, in which we are but moments and transitorily lit cells?" Hadn't I known that the spirit of man still speaks like a thing that struggles out of mud and slime, and that the mere effort to speak means choking and disaster? Hadn't I known that we who think without fear and speak without discretion will not come to our own for the next two thousand years?

It was the last was most forgotten of all that faith mislaid. Before mankind, in my vision that night, stretched new centuries of confusion, vast stupid wars, hastily conceived laws, foolish temporary triumphs of order, lapses, set-backs, despairs, catastrophes, new beginnings, a multitudinous wilderness of time, a nigh plotless drama of wrong-headed energies. In order to assuage my parting from Isabel we had set ourselves to imagine great rewards for our separation, great personal rewards; we had promised ourselves success visible and shining in our lives. To console ourselves in our separation we had made out of the BLUE WEEKLY and our young Tory movement preposterously enormous things-as though those poor fertilising touches at the soil were indeed

the germinating seeds of the millennium, as though a million lives such as ours had not to contribute before the beginning of the beginning. That poor pretence had failed. That magnificent proposition shrivelled to nothing in the black loneliness of that night.

I saw that there were to be no such compensations. So far as my real services to mankind were concerned I had to live an unrecognised and unrewarded life. If I made successes it would be by the way. Our separation would alter nothing of that. My scandal would cling to me now for all my life, a thing affecting relationships, embarrassing and hampering my spirit. I should follow the common lot of those who live by the imagination, and follow it now in infinite loneliness of soul; the one good comforter, the one effectual familiar, was lost to me for ever; I should do good and evil together, no one caring to understand; I should produce much weary work, much bad-spirited work, much absolute evil; the good in me would be too often ill-expressed and missed or misinterpreted. In the end I might leave one gleaming flake or so amidst the slag heaps for a moment of postmortem sympathy. I was afraid beyond measure of my derelict self. Because I believed with all my soul in love and fine thinking that did not mean that I should necessarily either love steadfastly or think finely. I remember how I fell talking to God--I think I talked out loud. "Why do I care for these things?" I cried, "when I can do so little! Why am I apart from the jolly thoughtless fighting life of men? These dreams fade to nothingness, and leave me bare!"

I scolded. "Why don't you speak to a man, show yourself? I thought I had a gleam of you in Isabel,--and then you take her away. Do you really think I can carry on this game alone, doing your work in darkness and silence, living in muddled conflict, half living, half dying?"

Grotesque analogies arose in my mind. I discovered a strange parallelism between my now tattered phrase of "Love and fine thinking" and the "Love and the Word" of Christian thought. Was it possible the Christian propaganda had at the outset meant just that system of attitudes I had been feeling my way towards from the very beginning of my life? Had I spent a lifetime making my way back to Christ? It mocks humanity to think how Christ has been overlaid. I went along now, recalling long-neglected phrases and sentences; I had a new vision of that great central figure preaching love with hate and coarse thinking even in the disciples about Him, rising to a tidal wave at last in that clamour for Barabbas, and the public satisfaction in His fate....

It's curious to think that hopeless love and a noisy disordered dinner should lead a man to these speculations, but they did. "He DID mean that!" I said, and suddenly thought of what a bludgeon they'd made of His Christianity. Athwart that perplexing, patient enigma sitting inaudibly among publicans and sinners, danced and gibbered a long procession of the champions of orthodoxy. "He wasn't human," I said, and remembered that last despairing cry, "My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

"Oh, HE forsakes every one," I said, flying out as a tired mind will, with an obvious repartee....

I passed at a bound from such monstrous theology to a towering rage against the Baileys. In an instant and with no sense of absurdity I wanted--in the intervals of love and fine thinking--to fling about that strenuously virtuous couple; I wanted to kick Keyhole of the PEEPSHOW into the gutter and make a common massacre of all the prosperous rascaldom that makes a trade and rule of virtue. I can still feel that transition. In a moment I had reached that phase of weakly decisive anger which is for people of my temperament the concomitant of exhaustion.

"I will have her," I cried. "By Heaven! I WILL have her! Life mocks me and cheats me. Nothing can be made good to me again.... Why shouldn't I save what I can? I can't save myself without her...."

I remember myself--as a sort of anti-climax to that--rather tediously asking my way home. I was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Holland Park....

It was then between one and two. I felt that I could go home now without any risk of meeting Margaret. It had been the thought of returning to Margaret that had sent me wandering that night. It is one of the ugliest facts I recall about that time of crisis, the intense aversion I felt for Margaret. No sense of her goodness, her injury and nobility, and

the enormous generosity of her forgiveness, sufficed to mitigate that. I hope now that in this book I am able to give something of her silvery splendour, but all through this crisis I felt nothing of that. There was a triumphant kindliness about her that I found intolerable. She meant to be so kind to me, to offer unstinted consolation, to meet my needs, to supply just all she imagined Isabel had given me.

When I left Tarvrille's, I felt I could anticipate exactly how she would meet my homecoming. She would be perplexed by my crumpled shirt front, on which I had spilt some drops of wine; she would overlook that by an effort, explain it sentimentally, resolve it should make no difference to her. She would want to know who had been present, what we had talked about, show the alertest interest in whatever it was--it didn't matter what.... No, I couldn't face her.

So I did not reach my study until two o'clock.

There, I remember, stood the new and very beautiful old silver candlesticks that she had set there two days since to please me--the foolish kindliness of it! But in her search for expression, Margaret heaped presents upon me. She had fitted these candlesticks with electric lights, and I must, I suppose, have lit them to write my note to Isabel. "Give me a word--the world aches without you," was all I scrawled, though I fully meant that she should come to me. I knew, though I ought not to have known, that now she had left her flat, she was with the Balfes--she was to have been married from the Balfes--and I sent my

letter there. And I went out into the silent square and posted the note forthwith, because I knew quite clearly that if I left it until morning I should never post it at all.

3

I had a curious revulsion of feeling that morning of our meeting. (Of all places for such a clandestine encounter she had chosen the bridge opposite Buckingham Palace.) Overnight I had been full of self pity, and eager for the comfort of Isabel's presence. But the ill-written scrawl in which she had replied had been full of the suggestion of her own weakness and misery. And when I saw her, my own selfish sorrows were altogether swept away by a wave of pitiful tenderness. Something had happened to her that I did not understand. She was manifestly ill. She came towards me wearily, she who had always borne herself so bravely; her shoulders seemed bent, and her eyes were tired, and her face white and drawn. All my life has been a narrow self-centred life; no brothers, no sisters or children or weak things had ever yet made any intimate appeal to me, and suddenly--I verily believe for the first time in my life!--I felt a great passion of protective ownership; I felt that here was something that I could die to shelter, something that meant more than joy or pride or splendid ambitions or splendid creation to me, a new kind of hold upon me, a new power in the world. Some sealed fountain was opened in my breast. I knew that I could love Isabel broken, Isabel beaten, Isabel ugly and in pain, more than I could love any sweet or delightful or glorious thing in life. I didn't care any more for anything in the world but Isabel, and that I should protect her. I trembled as I came near her, and could scarcely speak to her for the emotion that filled me....

"I had your letter," I said.

"I had yours."

"Where can we talk?"

I remember my lame sentences. "We'll have a boat. That's best here."

I took her to the little boat-house, and there we hired a boat, and I rowed in silence under the bridge and into the shade of a tree. The square grey stone masses of the Foreign Office loomed through the twigs, I remember, and a little space of grass separated us from the pathway and the scrutiny of passers-by. And there we talked.

"I had to write to you," I said.

"I had to come."

"When are you to be married?"

"Thursday week."

"Well?" I said. "But--can we?"

She leant forward and scrutinised my face with eyes wide open. "What do

you mean?" she said at last in a whisper.

"Can we stand it? After all?"

I looked at her white face. "Can you?" I said.

She whispered. "Your career?"

Then suddenly her face was contorted,--she wept silently, exactly as a child tormented beyond endurance might suddenly weep....

"Oh! I don't care," I cried, "now. I don't care. Damn the whole system of things! Damn all this patching of the irrevocable! I want to take care of you, Isabel! and have you with me."

"I can't stand it," she blubbered.

"You needn't stand it. I thought it was best for you.... I thought indeed it was best for you. I thought even you wanted it like that."

"Couldn't I live alone--as I meant to do?"

"No," I said, "you couldn't. You're not strong enough. I've thought of that; I've got to shelter you."

"And I want you," I went on. "I'm not strong enough--I can't stand life

without you."

She stopped weeping, she made a great effort to control herself, and looked at me steadfastly for a moment. "I was going to kill myself," she whispered. "I was going to kill myself quietly--somehow. I meant to wait a bit and have an accident. I thought--you didn't understand. You were a man, and couldn't understand...."

"People can't do as we thought we could do," I said. "We've gone too far together."

"Yes," she said, and I stared into her eyes.

"The horror of it," she whispered. "The horror of being handed over. It's just only begun to dawn upon me, seeing him now as I do. He tries to be kind to me.... I didn't know. I felt adventurous before.... It makes me feel like all the women in the world who have ever been owned and subdued.... It's not that he isn't the best of men, it's because I'm a part of you.... I can't go through with it. If I go through with it, I shall be left--robbed of pride--outraged--a woman beaten...."

"I know," I said, "I know."

"I want to live alone.... I don't care for anything now but just escape. If you can help me...."

"I must take you away. There's nothing for us but to go away together."

"But your work," she said; "your career! Margaret! Our promises!"

"We've made a mess of things, Isabel--or things have made a mess of us. I don't know which. Our flags are in the mud, anyhow. It's too late to save those other things! They have to go. You can't make terms with defeat. I thought it was Margaret needed me most. But it's you. And I need you. I didn't think of that either. I haven't a doubt left in the world now. We've got to leave everything rather than leave each other. I'm sure of it. Now we have gone so far. We've got to go right down to earth and begin again.... Dear, I WANT disgrace with you...."

So I whispered to her as she sat crumpled together on the faded cushions of the boat, this white and weary young woman who had been so valiant and careless a girl. "I don't care," I said. "I don't care for anything, if I can save you out of the wreckage we have made together."

4

The next day I went to the office of the BLUE WEEKLY in order to get as much as possible of its affairs in working order before I left London with Isabel. I just missed Shoesmith in the lower office. Upstairs I

found Britten amidst a pile of outside articles, methodically reading the title of each and sometimes the first half-dozen lines, and either dropping them in a growing heap on the floor for a clerk to return, or putting them aside for consideration. I interrupted him, squatted on the window-sill of the open window, and sketched out my ideas for the session.

"You're far-sighted," he remarked at something of mine which reached out ahead.

"I like to see things prepared," I answered.

"Yes," he said, and ripped open the envelope of a fresh aspirant.

I was silent while he read.

"You're going away with Isabel Rivers," he said abruptly.

"Well!" I said, amazed.

"I know," he said, and lost his breath. "Not my business. Only--"

It was queer to find Britten afraid to say a thing.

"It's not playing the game," he said.

"What do you know?"

"Everything that matters."

"Some games," I said, "are too hard to play."

There came a pause between us.

"I didn't know you were watching all this," I said.

"Yes," he answered, after a pause, "I've watched."

"Sorry--sorry you don't approve."

"It means smashing such an infernal lot of things, Remington."

I did not answer.

"You're going away then?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

"Right away."

"There's your wife."

"I know."

"Shoesmith--whom you're pledged to in a manner. You've just picked him out and made him conspicuous. Every one will know. Oh! of course--it's nothing to you. Honour--"

"I know."

"Common decency."

I nodded.

"All this movement of ours. That's what I care for most.... It's come to be a big thing, Remington."

"That will go on."

"We have a use for you--no one else quite fills it. No one.... I'm not sure it will go on."

"Do you think I haven't thought of all these things?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and rejected two papers unread.

"I knew," he remarked, "when you came back from America. You were alight with it." Then he let his bitterness gleam for a moment. "But I thought you would stick to your bargain."

"It's not so much choice as you think," I said.

"There's always a choice."

"No," I said.

He scrutinised my face.

"I can't live without her--I can't work. She's all mixed up with this--and everything. And besides, there's things you can't understand. There's feelings you've never felt.... You don't understand how much we've been to one another."

Britten frowned and thought.

"Some things one's GOT to do," he threw out.

"Some things one can't do."

"These infernal institutions--"

"Some one must begin," I said.

He shook his head. "Not YOU," he said. "No!"

He stretched out his hands on the desk before him, and spoke again.

"Remington," he said, "I've thought of this business day and night too. It matters to me. It matters immensely to me. In a way--it's a thing one doesn't often say to a man--I've loved you. I'm the sort of man who leads a narrow life.... But you've been something fine and good for me, since that time, do you remember? when we talked about Mecca together."

I nodded.

"Yes. And you'll always be something fine and good for me anyhow. I know things about you,--qualities--no mere act can destroy them.. .. Well, I can tell you, you're doing wrong. You're going on now like a man who is hypnotised and can't turn round. You're piling wrong on wrong. It was wrong for you two people ever to be lovers."

He paused.

"It gripped us hard," I said.

"Yes!--but in your position! And hers! It was vile!"

"You've not been tempted."

"How do you know? Anyhow--having done that, you ought to have stood the consequences and thought of other people. You could have ended it at the first pause for reflection. You didn't. You blundered again. You kept on. You owed a certain secrecy to all of us! You didn't keep it.
You were careless. You made things worse. This engagement and this publicity!--Damn it, Remington!"

"I know," I said, with smarting eyes. "Damn it! with all my heart! It came of trying to patch.... You CAN'T patch."

"And now, as I care for anything under heaven, Remington, you two ought to stand these last consequences--and part. You ought to part. Other people have to stand things! Other people have to part. You ought to.
You say--what do you say? It's loss of so much life to lose each other.
So is losing a hand or a leg. But it's what you've incurred. Amputate.
Take your punishment--After all, you chose it."

"Oh, damn!" I said, standing up and going to the window.

"Damn by all means. I never knew a topic so full of justifiable damns.
But you two did choose it. You ought to stick to your undertaking."

I turned upon him with a snarl in my voice. "My dear Britten!" I cried.
"Don't I KNOW I'm doing wrong? Aren't I in a net? Suppose I don't go!
Is there any right in that? Do you think we're going to be much to

ourselves or any one after this parting? I've been thinking all last night of this business, trying it over and over again from the beginning. How was it we went wrong? Since I came back from America--I grant you THAT--but SINCE, there's never been a step that wasn't forced, that hadn't as much right in it or more, as wrong. You talk as though I was a thing of steel that could bend this way or that and never change. You talk as though Isabel was a cat one could give to any kind of owner.... We two are things that change and grow and alter all the time. We're--so interwoven that being parted now will leave us just misshapen cripples.... You don't know the motives, you don't know the rush and feel of things, you don't know how it was with us, and how it is with us. You don't know the hunger for the mere sight of one another; you don't know anything."

Britten looked at his finger-nails closely. His red face puckered to a wry frown. "Haven't we all at times wanted the world put back?" he grunted, and looked hard and close at one particular nail.

There was a long pause.

"I want her," I said, "and I'm going to have her. I'm too tired for balancing the right or wrong of it any more. You can't separate them. I saw her yesterday.... She's--ill.... I'd take her now, if death were just outside the door waiting for us."

"Torture?"

I thought. "Yes."

"For her?"

"There isn't," I said.

"If there was?"

I made no answer.

"It's blind Want. And there's nothing ever been put into you to stand against it. What are you going to do with the rest of your lives?"

"No end of things."

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you are right," I said. "I believe we can save something--"

Britten shook his head. "Some scraps of salvage won't excuse you," he said.

His indignation rose. "In the middle of life!" he said. "No man has a right to take his hand from the plough!"

He leant forward on his desk and opened an argumentative palm. "You know, Remington," he said, "and I know, that if this could be fended off for six months--if you could be clapped in prison, or got out of the way somehow,--until this marriage was all over and settled down for a year, say--you know then you two could meet, curious, happy, as friends. Saved! You KNOW it."

I turned and stared at him. "You're wrong, Britten," I said. "And does it matter if we could?"

I found that in talking to him I could frame the apologetics I had not been able to find for myself alone.

"I am certain of one thing, Britten. It is our duty not to hush up this scandal."

He raised his eyebrows. I perceived now the element of absurdity in me, but at the time I was as serious as a man who is burning.

"It's our duty," I went on, "to smash now openly in the sight of every one. Yes! I've got that as clean and plain--as prison whitewash. I am convinced that we have got to be public to the uttermost now--I mean it--until every corner of our world knows this story, knows it fully, adds it to the Parnell story and the Ashton Dean story and the Carmel story and the Witterslea story, and all the other stories that have

picked man after man out of English public life, the men with active imaginations, the men of strong initiative. To think this tottering old-woman ridden Empire should dare to waste a man on such a score! You say I ought to be penitent--"

Britten shook his head and smiled very faintly.

"I'm boiling with indignation," I said. "I lay in bed last night and went through it all. What in God's name was to be expected of us but what has happened? I went through my life bit by bit last night, I recalled all I've had to do with virtue and women, and all I was told and how I was prepared. I was born into cowardice and debasement. We all are. Our generation's grimy with hypocrisy. I came to the most beautiful things in life--like peeping Tom of Coventry. I was never given a light, never given a touch of natural manhood by all this dingy, furtive, canting, humbugging English world. Thank God! I'll soon be out of it! The shame of it! The very savages in Australia initiate their children better than the English do to-day. Neither of us was ever given a view of what they call morality that didn't make it show as shabby subservience, as the meanest discretion, an abject submission to unreasonable prohibitions! meek surrender of mind and body to the dictation of pedants and old women and fools. We weren't taught--we were mumbled at! And when we found that the thing they called unclean, unclean, was Pagan beauty--God! it was a glory to sin, Britten, it was a pride and splendour like bathing in the sunlight after dust and grime!"

"Yes," said Britten. "That's all very well--"

I interrupted him. "I know there's a case--I'm beginning to think it a valid case against us; but we never met it! There's a steely pride in self restraint, a nobility of chastity, but only for those who see and think and act--untrammeled and unafraid. The other thing, the current thing, why! it's worth as much as the chastity of a monkey kept in a cage by itself!" I put my foot in a chair, and urged my case upon him. "This is a dirty world, Britten, simply because it is a muddled world, and the thing you call morality is dirtier now than the thing you call immorality. Why don't the moralists pick their stuff out of the slime if they care for it, and wipe it?--damn them! I am burning now to say: 'Yes, we did this and this,' to all the world. All the world!... I will!"

Britten rubbed the palm of his hand on the corner of his desk. "That's all very well, Remington," he said. "You mean to go."

He stopped and began again. "If you didn't know you were in the wrong you wouldn't be so damned rhetorical. You're in the wrong. It's as plain to you as it is to me. You're leaving a big work, you're leaving a wife who trusted you, to go and live with your jolly mistress.... You won't see you're a statesman that matters, that no single man, maybe, might come to such influence as you in the next ten years. You're throwing yourself away and accusing your country of rejecting you."

He swung round upon his swivel at me. "Remington," he said, "have you forgotten the immense things our movement means?"

I thought. "Perhaps I am rhetorical," I said.

"But the things we might achieve! If you'd only stay now--even now! Oh! you'd suffer a little socially, but what of that? You'd be able to go on--perhaps all the better for hostility of the kind you'd get. You know, Remington--you KNOW."

I thought and went back to his earlier point. "If I am rhetorical, at any rate it's a living feeling behind it. Yes, I remember all the implications of our aims--very splendid, very remote. But just now it's rather like offering to give a freezing man the sunlit Himalayas from end to end in return for his camp-fire. When you talk of me and my jolly mistress, it isn't fair. That misrepresents everything. I'm not going out of this--for delights. That's the sort of thing men like Snuffles and Keyhole imagine--that excites them! When I think of the things these creatures think! Ugh! But YOU know better? You know that physical passion that burns like a fire--ends clean. I'm going for love, Britten--if I sinned for passion. I'm going, Britten, because when I saw her the other day she HURT me. She hurt me damnably, Britten.... I've been a cold man--I've led a rhetorical life--you hit me with that word!--I put things in a windy way, I know, but what has got hold of me at last is her pain. She's ill. Don't you understand? She's a sick thing--a weak thing. She's no more a goddess than I'm a god.... I'm

not in love with her now; I'm RAW with love for her. I feel like a man that's been flayed. I have been flayed.... You don't begin to imagine the sort of helpless solicitude.... She's not going to do things easily; she's ill. Her courage fails.... It's hard to put things when one isn't rhetorical, but it's this, Britten--there are distresses that matter more than all the delights or achievements in the world.... I made her what she is--as I never made Margaret. I've made her--I've broken her.... I'm going with my own woman. The rest of my life and England, and so forth, must square itself to that...."

For a long time, as it seemed, we remained silent and motionless. We'd said all we had to say. My eyes caught a printed slip upon the desk before him, and I came back abruptly to the paper.

I picked up this galley proof. It was one of Winter's essays. "This man goes on doing first-rate stuff," I said. "I hope you will keep him going."

He did not answer for a moment or so. "I'll keep him going," he said at last with a sigh.

5

I have a letter Margaret wrote me within a week of our flight. I cannot resist transcribing some of it here, because it lights things as no word of mine can do. It is a string of nearly inconsecutive thoughts written in pencil in a fine, tall, sprawling hand. Its very inconsecutiveness is essential. Many words are underlined. It was in answer to one from me; but what I wrote has passed utterly from my mind....

"Certainly," she says, "I want to hear from you, but I do not want to see you. There's a sort of abstract YOU that I want to go on with. Something I've made out of you.... I want to know things about you--but I don't want to see or feel or imagine. When some day I have got rid of my intolerable sense of proprietorship, it may be different. Then perhaps we may meet again. I think it is even more the loss of our political work and dreams that I am feeling than the loss of your presence. Aching loss. I thought so much of the things we were DOING for the world--had given myself so unreservedly. You've left me with nothing to DO. I am suddenly at loose ends....

"We women are trained to be so dependent on a man. I've got no life of my own at all. It seems now to me that I wore my clothes even for you and your schemes....

"After I have told myself a hundred times why this has happened, I ask again, 'Why did he give things up? Why did he give things up?'...

"It is just as though you were wilfully dead....

"Then I ask again and again whether this thing need have happened at all, whether if I had had a warning, if I had understood better, I might not have adapted myself to your restless mind and made this catastrophe impossible....

"Oh, my dear! why hadn't you the pluck to hurt me at the beginning, and tell me what you thought of me and life? You didn't give me a chance; not a chance. I suppose you couldn't. All these things you and I stood away from. You let my first repugnances repel you....

"It is strange to think after all these years that I should be asking myself, do I love you? have I loved you? In a sense I think I HATE you. I feel you have taken my life, dragged it in your wake for a time, thrown it aside. I am resentful. Unfairly resentful, for why should I exact that you should watch and understand my life, when clearly I have understood so little of yours. But I am savage--savage at the wrecking of all you were to do.

"Oh, why--why did you give things up?

"No human being is his own to do what he likes with. You were not only pledged to my tiresome, ineffectual companionship, but to great purposes. They ARE great purposes....

"If only I could take up your work as you leave it, with the strength

you had--then indeed I feel I could let you go--you and your young mistress.... All that matters so little to me....

"Yet I think I must indeed love you yourself in my slower way. At times I am mad with jealousy at the thought of all I hadn't the wit to give you.... I've always hidden my tears from you--and what was in my heart. It's my nature to hide--and you, you want things brought to you to see. You are so curious as to be almost cruel. You don't understand reserves. You have no mercy with restraints and reservations. You are not really a CIVILISED man at all. You hate pretences--and not only pretences but decent coverings....

"It's only after one has lost love and the chance of loving that slow people like myself find what they might have done. Why wasn't I bold and reckless and abandoned? It's as reasonable to ask that, I suppose, as to ask why my hair is fair....

"I go on with these perhapses over and over again here when I find myself alone....

"My dear, my dear, you can't think of the desolation of things--I shall never go back to that house we furnished together, that was to have been the laboratory (do you remember calling it a laboratory?) in which you were to forge so much of the new order....

"But, dear, if I can help you--even now--in any way--help both of you, I

mean.... It tears me when I think of you poor and discredited. You will let me help you if I can--it will be the last wrong not to let me do that....

"You had better not get ill. If you do, and I hear of it--I shall come after you with a troupe of doctor's and nurses. If I am a failure as a wife, no one has ever said I was anything but a success as a district visitor...."

There are other sheets, but I cannot tell whether they were written before or after the ones from which I have quoted. And most of them have little things too intimate to set down. But this oddly penetrating analysis of our differences must, I think, be given.

"There are all sorts of things I can't express about this and want to. There's this difference that has always been between us, that you like nakedness and wildness, and I, clothing and restraint. It goes through everything. You are always TALKING of order and system, and the splendid dream of the order that might replace the muddled system you hate, but by a sort of instinct you seem to want to break the law. I've watched you so closely. Now I want to obey laws, to make sacrifices, to follow rules. I don't want to make, but I do want to keep. You are at once makers and rebels, you and Isabel too. You're bad people--criminal people, I feel, and yet full of something the world must have. You're so much better than me, and so much viler. It may be there is no making without destruction, but it seems to me sometimes that it is nothing

but an instinct for lawlessness that drives you. You remind me--do you remember?--of that time we went from Naples to Vesuvius, and walked over the hot new lava there. Do you remember how tired I was? I know it disappointed you that I was tired. One walked there in spite of the heat because there was a crust; like custom, like law. But directly a crust forms on things, you are restless to break down to the fire again.

You talk of beauty, both of you, as something terrible, mysterious, imperative. YOUR beauty is something altogether different from anything I know or feel. It has pain in it. Yet you always speak as though it was something I ought to feel and am dishonest not to feel. MY beauty is a quiet thing. You have always laughed at my feeling for old-fashioned chintz and blue china and Sheraton. But I like all these familiar USED things. My beauty is STILL beauty, and yours, is excitement. I know nothing of the fascination of the fire, or why one should go deliberately out of all the decent fine things of life to run dangers and be singed and tormented and destroyed. I don't understand...."

6

I remember very freshly the mood of our departure from London, the platform of Charing Cross with the big illuminated clock overhead, the bustle of porters and passengers with luggage, the shouting of newsboys and boys with flowers and sweets, and the groups of friends seeing travellers off by the boat train. Isabel sat very quiet and still in the compartment, and I stood upon the platform with the door open, with a curious reluctance to take the last step that should sever me from London's ground. I showed our tickets, and bought a handful of red roses for her. At last came the guards crying: "Take your seats," and I got in and closed the door on me. We had, thank Heaven! a compartment to ourselves. I let down the window and stared out.

There was a bustle of final adieux on the platform, a cry of "Stand away, please, stand away!" and the train was gliding slowly and smoothly out of the station.

I looked out upon the river as the train rumbled with slowly gathering pace across the bridge, and the bobbing black heads of the pedestrians in the footway, and the curve of the river and the glowing great hotels, and the lights and reflections and blacknesses of that old, familiar spectacle. Then with a common thought, we turned our eyes westward to where the pinnacles of Westminster and the shining clock tower rose hard and clear against the still, luminous sky.

"They'll be in Committee on the Reformatory Bill to-night," I said, a little stupidly.

"And so," I added, "good-bye to London!"

We said no more, but watched the south-side streets below--bright gleams of lights and movement, and the dark, dim, monstrous shapes of houses and factories. We ran through Waterloo Station, London Bridge, New Cross, St. John's. We said never a word. It seemed to me that for a time we had exhausted our emotions. We had escaped, we had cut our knot, we had accepted the last penalty of that headlong return of mine from Chicago a year and a half ago. That was all settled. That harvest of feelings we had reaped. I thought now only of London, of London as the symbol of all we were leaving and all we had lost in the world. I felt nothing now but an enormous and overwhelming regret....

The train swayed and rattled on its way. We ran through old Bromstead, where once I had played with cities and armies on the nursery floor. The sprawling suburbs with their scattered lights gave way to dim tree-set country under a cloud-veiled, intermittently shining moon. We passed Cardcaster Place. Perhaps old Wardingham, that pillar of the old Conservatives, was there, fretting over his unsuccessful struggle with our young Toryism. Little he recked of this new turn of the wheel and how it would confirm his contempt of all our novelties. Perhaps some faint intimation drew him to the window to see behind the stems of the

young fir trees that bordered his domain, the little string of lighted carriage windows gliding southward....

Suddenly I began to realise just what it was we were doing.

And now, indeed, I knew what London had been to me, London where I had been born and educated, the slovenly mother of my mind and all my ambitions, London and the empire! It seemed to me we must be going out to a world that was utterly empty. All our significance fell from us--and before us was no meaning any more. We were leaving London; my hand, which had gripped so hungrily upon its complex life, had been forced from it, my fingers left their hold. That was over. I should never have a voice in public affairs again. The inexorable unwritten law which forbids overt scandal sentenced me. We were going out to a new life, a life that appeared in that moment to be a mere shrivelled remnant of me, a mere residuum of sheltering and feeding and seeing amidst alien scenery and the sound of unfamiliar tongues. We were going to live cheaply in a foreign place, so cut off that I meet now the merest stray tourist, the commonest tweed-clad stranger with a mixture of shyness and hunger.... And suddenly all the schemes I was leaving appeared fine and adventurous and hopeful as they had never done before. How great was this purpose I had relinquished, this bold and subtle remaking of the English will! I had doubted so many things, and now suddenly I doubted my unimportance, doubted my right to this suicidal abandonment. Was I not a trusted messenger, greatly trusted and favoured, who had turned aside by the way? Had I not, after all, stood

for far more than I had thought; was I not filching from that dear great city of my birth and life, some vitally necessary thing, a key, a link, a reconciling clue in her political development, that now she might seek vaguely for in vain? What is one life against the State? Ought I not to have sacrificed Isabel and all my passion and sorrow for Isabel, and held to my thing--stuck to my thing?

I heard as though he had spoken it in the carriage Britten's "It WAS a good game." No end of a game. And for the first time I imagined the faces and voices of Crupp and Esmeer and Gane when they learnt of this secret flight, this flight of which they were quite unwarned. And Shoesmith might be there in the house,--Shoesmith who was to have been married in four days--the thing might hit him full in front of any kind of people. Cruel eyes might watch him. Why the devil hadn't I written letters to warn them all? I could have posted them five minutes before the train started. I had never thought to that moment of the immense mess they would be in; how the whole edifice would clatter about their ears. I had a sudden desire to stop the train and go back for a day, for two days, to set that negligence right. My brain for a moment brightened, became animated and prolific of ideas. I thought of a brilliant line we might have taken on that confounded Reformatory Bill....

That sort of thing was over....

What indeed wasn't over? I passed to a vaguer, more multitudinous

perception of disaster, the friends I had lost already since Altiora began her campaign, the ampler remnant whom now I must lose. I thought of people I had been merry with, people I had worked with and played with, the companions of talkative walks, the hostesses of houses that had once glowed with welcome for us both. I perceived we must lose them all. I saw life like a tree in late autumn that had once been rich and splendid with friends--and now the last brave dears would be hanging on doubtfully against the frosty chill of facts, twisting and tortured in the universal gale of indignation, trying to evade the cold blast of the truth. I had betrayed my party, my intimate friend, my wife, the wife whose devotion had made me what I was. For awhile the figure of Margaret, remote, wounded, shamed, dominated my mind, and the thought of my immense ingratitude. Damn them! they'd take it out of her too. I had a feeling that I wanted to go straight back and grip some one by the throat, some one talking ill of Margaret. They'd blame her for not keeping me, for letting things go so far.... I wanted the whole world to know how fine she was. I saw in imagination the busy, excited dinner tables at work upon us all, rather pleasantly excited, brightly indignant, merciless.

Well, it's the stuff we are!...

Then suddenly, stabbing me to the heart, came a vision of Margaret's tears and the sound of her voice saying, "Husband mine! Oh! husband mine! To see you cry!"...

I came out of a cloud of thoughts to discover the narrow compartment, with its feeble lamp overhead, and our rugs and hand-baggage swaying on the rack, and Isabel, very still in front of me, gripping my wilting red roses tightly in her bare and ringless hand.

For a moment I could not understand her attitude, and then I perceived she was sitting bent together with her head averted from the light to hide the tears that were streaming down her face. She had not got her handkerchief out for fear that I should see this, but I saw her tears, dark drops of tears, upon her sleeve....

I suppose she had been watching my expression, divining my thoughts.

For a time I stared at her and was motionless, in a sort of still and weary amazement. Why had we done this injury to one another? WHY? Then something stirred within me.

"ISABEL!" I whispered.

She made no sign.

"Isabel!" I repeated, and then crossed over to her and crept closely to her, put my arm about her, and drew her wet cheek to mine.