

## § 7

The clue to all the perplexities of law and custom lies in this, that human association is an artificiality. We do not run together naturally and easily as grazing deer do or feeding starlings or a shoal of fish. We are a sort of creature which is only resuming association after a long heredity of extreme separation. We are beings strongly individualized, we are dominated by that passion which is no more and no less than individuality in action,--jealousy. Jealousy is a fierce insistence on ourselves, an instinctive intolerance of our fellow-creatures, ranging between an insatiable aggression as its buoyant phase and a savage defensiveness when it is touched by fear. In our expansive moments we want to dominate and control everyone and destroy every unlikeness to ourselves; in our recessive phases our homes are our castles and we want to be let alone.

Now all law, all social order, all custom, is a patch-up and a concession to this separating passion of self-insistence. It is an evasion of conflict and social death. Human society is as yet only a truce and not an alliance.

When you understand that, you will begin to understand a thousand perplexing things in legislation and social life. You will understand the necessity of all those restrictions that are called "conventionality," and the inevitableness of the general hostility to singularity. To be exceptional is to assert a difference, to disregard

the banked-up forces of jealousy and break the essential conditions of the social contract. It invites either resentment or aggression. So we all wear much the same clothing, affect modesty, use the same phrases, respect one another's "rights," and pretend a greater disinterestedness than we feel....

You have to face this reality as you must face all reality. This is the reality of laws and government; this is the reality of customs and institutions; a convention between jealousies. This is reality, just as the cat's way with the nestlings was reality, and the squealing rat one smashed in a paroxysm of cruelty and disgust in the barn.

But it isn't the only reality. Equally real is the passionate revolt of my heart against cruelty, and the deep fluctuating impulse not to pretend, to set aside fear and jealousy, to come nakedly out of the compromises and secretive methods of every-day living into the light, into a wide impersonal love, into a new way of living for mankind....

## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### INTENTIONS AND THE LADY MARY CHRISTIAN

#### § 1

I know that before the end of my Harbury days I was already dreaming of a Career, of some great and conspicuous usefulness in the world. That has always haunted my mind and haunts it now. I may be cured perhaps of the large and showy anticipations of youth, I may have learnt to drop the "great and conspicuous," but still I find it necessary to believe that I matter, that I play a part no one else can play in a progress, in a universal scheme moving towards triumphant ends.

Almost wholly I think I was dreaming of public service in those days. The Harbury tradition pointed steadfastly towards the state, and all my world was bare of allurements to any other type of ambition. Success in art or literature did not appeal to us, and a Harbury boy would as soon think of being a great tinker as a great philosopher. Science we called "stinks"; our three science masters were ex officio ridiculous and the practical laboratory a refuge for oddities. But a good half of our fathers at least were peers or members of parliament, and our sense of politics was close and keen. History, and particularly history as it came up through the eighteenth century to our own times, supplied us with a gallery of intimate models, our great uncles and grandfathers and

ancestors at large figured abundantly in the story and furnished the pattern to which we cut our anticipations of life. It was a season of Imperialism, the picturesque Imperialism of the earlier Kipling phase, and we were all of us enthusiasts for the Empire. It was the empire of the White Man's Burthen in those days; the sordid anti-climax of the Tariff Reform Movement was still some years ahead of us. It was easier for us at Harbury to believe then than it has become since, in our own racial and national and class supremacy. We were the Anglo-Saxons, the elect of the earth, leading the world in social organization, in science and economic method. In India and the east more particularly we were the apostles of even-handed justice, relentless veracity, personal cleanliness, and modern efficiency. In a spirit of adventurous benevolence we were spreading those blessings over a reluctant and occasionally recalcitrant world of people for the most part "colored." Our success in this had aroused the bitter envy and rivalry of various continental nations, and particularly of France, Russia, and Germany. But France had been diverted to North Africa, Russia to Eastern Asia, and Germany was already the most considered antagonist in our path towards an empire over the world.

This was the spacious and by no means ignoble project of the later nineties. Most of us Harbury boys, trained as I had been trained to be uncritical, saw the national outlook in those terms. We knew little or nothing, until the fierce wranglings of the Free Traders and Tariff Reformers a few years later brought it home to us, of the commercial, financial and squalid side of our relations with the vast congeries of

exploited new territories and subordinated and subjugated populations. We knew nothing of the social conditions of the mass of people in our own country. We were blankly ignorant of economics. We knew nothing of that process of expropriation and the exploitation of labor which is giving the world the Servile State. The very phrase was twenty years ahead of us. We believed that an Englishman was a better thing in every way than any other sort of man, that English literature, science and philosophy were a shining and unapproachable light to all other peoples, that our soldiers were better than all other soldiers and our sailors than all other sailors. Such civilization and enterprise as existed in Germany for instance we regarded as a shadow, an envious shadow, following our own; it was still generally believed in those days that German trade was concerned entirely with the dishonest imitation of our unapproachable English goods. And as for the United States, well, the United States though blessed with a strain of English blood, were nevertheless "out of it," marooned in a continent of their own and--we had to admit it--corrupt.

Given such ignorance, you know, it wasn't by any means ignoble to be patriotic, to dream of this propagandist Empire of ours spreading its great peace and culture, its virtue and its amazing and unprecedented honesty,--its honesty!--round the world.

§ 2

When I look and try to recover those early intentions of mine I am astonished at the way in which I took them ready-made from the world immediately about me. In some way I seem to have stopped looking--if ever I had begun looking--at the heights and depths above and below that immediate life. I seem to have regarded these profounder realities no more during this phase of concentration than a cow in a field regards the sky. My father's vestments, the Burnmore altar, the Harbury pulpit and Mr. Siddons, stood between me and the idea of God, so that it needed years and much bitter disillusionment before I discovered my need of it. And I was as wanting in subtlety as in depth. We did no logic nor philosophy at Harbury, and at Oxford it was not so much thought we came to deal with as a mistranslation and vulgarization of ancient and alien exercises in thinking. There is no such effective serum against philosophy as the scholarly decoction of a dead philosopher. The philosophical teaching of Oxford at the end of the last century was not so much teaching as a protective inoculation. The stuff was administered with a mysterious gilding of Greek and reverence, old Hegel's monstrous web was the ultimate modernity, and Plato, that intellectual journalist-artist, that bright, restless experimentalist in ideas, was as it were the God of Wisdom, only a little less omniscient (and on the whole more of a scholar and a gentleman) than the God of fact....

So I fell back upon the empire in my first attempts to unify my life. I would serve the empire. That should be my total significance. There was

a Roman touch, I perceive, in this devotion. Just how or where I should serve the empire I had not as yet determined. At times I thought of the civil service, in my more ambitious moments I turned my thoughts to politics. But it was doubtful whether my private expectations made the last a reasonable possibility.

I would serve the empire.

§ 3

And all the while that the first attempts to consolidate, to gather one's life together into a purpose and a plan of campaign, are going on upon the field of the young man's life, there come and go and come again in the sky above him the threatening clouds, the ethereal cirrus, the red dawns and glowing afternoons of that passion of love which is the source and renewal of being. There are times when that solicitude matters no more than a spring-time sky to a runner who wins towards the post, there are times when its passionate urgency dominates every fact in his world.



§ 4

One must have children and love them passionately before one realizes the deep indignity of accident in life. It is not that I mind so much when unexpected and disconcerting things happen to you or your sisters, but that I mind before they happen. My dreams and anticipations of your lives are all marred by my sense of the huge importance mere chance encounters and incalculable necessities will play in them. And in friendship and still more here, in this central business of love, accident rules it seems to me almost altogether. What personalities you will encounter in life, and have for a chief interest in life, is nearly as much a matter of chance as the drift of a grain of pollen in the pine forest. And once the light hazard has blown it has blown, never to drive again. In other schoolrooms and nurseries, in slum living-rooms perhaps or workhouse wards or palaces, round the other side of the earth, in Canada or Russia or China, other little creatures are trying their small limbs, clutching at things about them with infantile hands, who someday will come into your life with a power and magic monstrous and irrational and irresistible. They will break the limits of your concentrating self, call you out to the service of beauty and the service of the race, sound you to your highest and your lowest, give you your chance to be godlike or filthy, divine or utterly ignoble, react together with you upon the very core and essence of your being. These unknowns are the substance of your fate. You will in extreme intimacy love them, hate them, serve them, struggle with them, and in that interaction the vital force in you and the substance of your days will

be spent.

And who they may chance to be and their peculiar quality and effect is haphazard, utterly beyond designing.

Law and custom conspire with the natural circumstances of man to exaggerate every consequence of this accumulating accident, and make it definite and fatal....

I find it quite impossible now to recall the steps and stages by which this power of sex invaded my life. It seems to me now that it began very much as a gale begins, in catspaws upon the water and little rustlings among the leaves, and then stillness and then a distant soughing again and a pause, and then a wider and longer disturbance and so more and more, with a gathering continuity, until at last the stars were hidden, the heavens were hidden; all the heights and depths of life were obscured by stormy impulses and passionate desires. I suppose that quite at the first there were simple curiosities; no doubt they were vivid at the time but they have left scarcely a trace; there were vague first intimations of a peculiar excitement. I do remember more distinctly phases when there was a going-out from myself towards these things, these interests, and then a reaction of shame and concealment.

And these memories were mixed up with others not sexual at all, and particularly with the perception of beauty in things inanimate, with lights seen at twilight and the tender mysteriousness of the dusk and

the confused disturbing scents of flowers in the evening and the enigmatical serene animation of stars in the summer sky....

I think perhaps that my boyhood was exceptionally free from vulgarizing influences in this direction. There were few novels in my father's house and I neither saw nor read any plays until I was near manhood, so that I thought naturally about love and not rather artificially round and about love as so many imaginative young people are trained to do. I fell in love once or twice while I was still quite a boy. These earliest experiences rarely got beyond a sort of dumb awe, a vague, vast, ineffectual desire for self-immolation. For a time I remember I worshipped Lady Ladislaw with all my being. Then I talked to a girl in a train--I forget upon what journey--but I remember very vividly her quick color and a certain roguish smile. I spread my adoration at her feet, fresh and frank. I wanted to write to her. Indeed I wanted to devote all my being to her. I begged hard, but there was someone called Auntie who had to be considered, an Atropos for that thread of romance.

Then there was a photograph in my father's study of the Delphic Sibyl from the Sistine Chapel, that for a time held my heart, and--Yes, there was a girl in a tobacconist's shop in the Harbury High Street. Drawn by an irresistible impulse I used to go and buy cigarettes--and sometimes converse about the weather. But afterwards in solitude I would meditate tremendous conversations and encounters with her. The cigarettes increased the natural melancholy of my state and led to a reproof from old Henson. Almost always I suppose there is that girl in the

tobacconist's shop....

I believe if I made an effort I could disinter some dozens of such memories, more and more faded until the marginal ones would be featureless and all but altogether effaced. As I look back at it now I am struck by an absurd image; it is as if a fish nibbled at this bait and then at that.

Given but the slightest aid from accidental circumstances and any of those slight attractions might have become a power to deflect all my life.

The day of decision arrived when, the Lady Mary Christian came smiling out of the sunshine to me into the pavilion at Burnmore. With that the phase of stirrings and intimations was over for ever in my life. All those other impressions went then to the dusty lumber room from which I now so slightly disinter them.

§ 5

We five had all been playmates together. There were Lord Maxton, who was killed at Paardeberg while I was in Ladysmith, he was my senior by nearly a year, Philip, who is now Earl Ladislaw and who was about eighteen months younger than I, Mary, my contemporary within eight days, and Guy, whom we regarded as a baby and who was called, apparently on account of some early linguistic efforts, "Brugglesmith." He did his best to avenge his juniority as time passed on by an enormous length of limb. I had more imagination than Maxton and was a good deal better read, so that Mary and I dominated most of the games of Indians and warfare and exploration in which we passed our long days together. When the Christians were at Burnmore, and they usually spent three or four months in the year there, I had a kind of standing invitation to be with them. Sometimes there would also be two Christian cousins to swell our party, and sometimes there would be a raid of the Fawney children with a detestable governess who was perpetually vociferating reproaches, but these latter were absent-minded, lax young persons, and we did not greatly love them.

It is curious how little I remember of Mary's childhood. All that has happened between us since lies between that and my present self like some luminous impenetrable mist. I know we liked each other, that I was taller than she was and thought her legs unreasonably thin, and that once when I knelt by accident on a dead stick she had brought into an Indian camp we had made near the end of the west shrubbery, she flew at

me in a sudden fury, smacked my face, scratched me and had to be suppressed, and was suppressed with extreme difficulty by the united manhood of us three elder boys. Then it was I noted first the blazing blueness of her eyes. She was light and very plucky, so that none of us cared to climb against her, and she was as difficult to hold as an eel. But all these traits and characteristics vanished when she was transformed.

For what seems now a long space of time I had not seen her or any of the family except Philip; it was certainly a year or more, probably two; Maxton was at a crammer's and I think the others must have been in Canada with Lord Ladislaw. Then came some sort of estrangement between him and his wife, and she returned with Mary and Guy to Burnmore and stayed there all through the summer.

I was in a state of transition between the infinitely great and the infinitely little. I had just ceased to be that noble and potent being, that almost statesmanlike personage, a sixth form boy at Harbury, and I was going to be an Oxford undergraduate. Philip and I came down together by the same train from Harbury, I shared the Burnmore dog-cart and luggage cart, and he dropped me at the rectory. I was a long-limbed youngster of seventeen, as tall as I am now, and fair, so fair that I was still boyish-faced while most of my contemporaries and Philip (who favored his father) were at least smudgy with moustaches. With the head-master's valediction and the grave elder-brotherliness of old Henson, and the shrill cheers of a little crowd of juniors still echoing

in my head, I very naturally came home in a mood of exalted gravity, and I can still remember pacing up and down the oblong lawn behind the rockery and the fig-tree wall with my father, talking of my outlook with all the tremendous savoir faire that was natural to my age, and noting with a secret gratification that our shoulders were now on a level. No doubt we were discussing Oxford and all that I was to do at Oxford; I don't remember a word of our speech though I recall the exact tint of its color and the distinctive feeling of our measured equal paces in the sunshine....

I must have gone up to Burnmore House the following afternoon. I went up alone and I was sent out through the little door at the end of the big gallery into the garden. In those days Lady Ladislaw had made an Indian pavilion under the tall trees at the east end of the house, and here I found her with her cousin Helena Christian entertaining a mixture of people, a carriageful from Hampton End, the two elder Fawneys and a man in brown who had I think ridden over from Chestoxter Castle. Lady Ladislaw welcomed me with ample graciousness--as though I was a personage. "The children" she said were still at tennis, and as she spoke I saw Guy, grown nearly beyond recognition and then a shining being in white, very straight and graceful, with a big soft hat and overshadowed eyes that smiled, come out from the hurried endearments of the sunflakes under the shadows of the great chestnuts, into the glow of summer light before the pavilion.

"Steve arrived!" she cried, and waved a welcoming racquet.

I do not remember what I said to her or what else she said or what anyone said. But I believe I could paint every detail of her effect. I know that when she came out of the brightness into the shadow of the pavilion it was like a regal condescension, and I know that she was wonderfully self-possessed and helpful with her mother's hospitalities, and that I marvelled I had never before perceived the subtler sweetness in the cadence of her voice. I seem also to remember a severe internal struggle for my self-possession, and that I had to recall my exalted position in the sixth form to save myself from becoming tongue-tied and abashed and awkward and utterly shamed.

You see she had her hair up and very prettily dressed, and those aggressive lean legs of hers had vanished, and she was sheathed in muslin that showed her the most delicately slender and beautiful of young women. And she seemed so radiantly sure of herself!

After our first greeting I do not think I spoke to her or looked at her again throughout the meal. I took things that she handed me with an appearance of supreme indifference, was politely attentive to the elder Miss Fawney, and engaged with Lady Ladislav and the horsey little man in brown in a discussion of the possibility of mechanical vehicles upon the high road. That was in the early nineties. We were all of opinion that it was impossible to make a sufficiently light engine for the purpose. Afterwards Mary confessed to me how she had been looking forward to our meeting, and how snubbed I had made her feel....



Then a little later than this meeting in the pavilion, though I am not clear now whether it was the same or some subsequent afternoon, we are walking in the sunken garden, and great clouds of purple clematis and some less lavish heliotrope-colored creeper, foam up against the ruddy stone balustrading. Just in front of us a fountain gushes out of a grotto of artificial stalagmite and bathes the pedestal of an absurd little statuette of the God of Love. We are talking almost easily. She looks sideways at my face, already with the quiet controlled watchfulness of a woman interested in a man, she smiles and she talks of flowers and sunshine, the Canadian winter--and with an abrupt transition, of old times we've had together in the shrubbery and the wilderness of bracken out beyond. She seems tremendously grown-up and womanly to me. I am talking my best, and glad, and in a manner scared at the thrill her newly discovered beauty gives me, and keeping up my dignity and coherence with an effort. My attention is constantly being distracted to note how prettily she moves, to wonder why it is I never noticed the sweet fall, the faint delightful whisper of a lisp in her voice before.

We agree about the flowers and the sunshine and the Canadian winter--about everything. "I think so often of those games we used to invent," she declares. "So do I," I say, "so do I." And then with a sudden boldness: "Once I broke a stick of yours, a rotten stick you thought a sound one. Do you remember?"

Then we laugh together and seem to approach across a painful, unnecessary distance that has separated us. It vanishes for ever. "I couldn't now," she says, "smack your face like that, Stephen."

That seems to me a brilliantly daring and delightful thing for her to say, and jolly of her to use my Christian name too! "I believe I scratched," she adds.

"You never scratched," I assert with warm conviction. "Never."

"I did," she insists and I deny. "You couldn't."

"We're growing up," she cries. "That's what has happened to us. We shall never fight again with our hands and feet, never--until death do us part."

"For better, or worse," I say, with a sense of wit and enterprise beyond all human precedent.

"For richer, or poorer," she cries, taking up my challenge with a lifting laugh in her voice.

And then to make it all nothing again, she exclaims at the white lilies that rise against masses of sweet bay along the further wall....

How plainly I can recall it all! How plainly and how brightly! As we

came up the broad steps at the further end towards the tennis lawn, she turned suddenly upon me and with a novel assurance of command told me to stand still. "There," she said with a hand out and seemed to survey me with her chin up and her white neck at the level of my eyes. "Yes. A whole step," she estimated, "and more, taller than I. You will look down on me, Stephen, now, for all the rest of our days."

"I shall always stand," I answered, "a step or so below you."

"No," she said, "come up to the level. A girl should be smaller than a man. You are a man, Stephen--almost.... You must be near six feet.... Here's Guy with the box of balls."

She flitted about the tennis court before me, playing with Philip against Guy and myself. She punished some opening condescensions with a wicked vigor--and presently Guy and I were straining every nerve to save the set. She had a low close serve I remember that seemed perfectly straightforward and simple, and was very difficult to return.

§ 6

All that golden summer on the threshold of my manhood was filled by Mary. I loved her with the love of a boy and a man. Either I was with Mary or I was hoping and planning to be with Mary or I was full of some vivid new impression of her or some enigmatical speech, some pregnant nothing, some glance or gesture engaged and perplexed my mind. In those days I slept the profound sweet sleep of youth, but whenever that deep flow broke towards the shallows, as I sank into it at night and came out of it at morning, I passed through dreams of Mary to and from a world of waking thought of her.

There must have been days of friendly intercourse when it seemed we talked nothings and wandered and meandered among subjects, but always we had our eyes on one another. And afterwards I would spend long hours in recalling and analyzing those nothings, questioning their nothingness, making out of things too submerged and impalpable for the rough drags of recollection, promises and indications. I would invent ingenious things to say, things pushing out suddenly from nothingness to extreme significance. I rehearsed a hundred declarations.

It was easy for us to be very much together. We were very free that summer and life was all leisure. Lady Ladislav was busied with her own concerns; she sometimes went away for two or three days leaving no one but an attenuated governess with even the shadow of a claim to interfere with Mary. Moreover she was used to seeing me with her children at

Burnmore; we were still in her eyes no more than children.... And also perhaps she did not greatly mind if indeed we did a little fall in love together. To her that may have seemed a very natural and slight and transitory possibility....

One afternoon of warm shadows in the wood near the red-lacquered Chinese bridge, we two were alone together and we fell silent. I was trembling and full of a wild courage. I can feel now the exquisite surmise, the doubt of that moment. Our eyes met. She looked up at me with an unwonted touch of fear in her expression and I laid my hands on her. She did not recoil, she stood mute with her lips pressed together, looking at me steadfastly. I can feel that moment now as a tremendous hesitation, blank and yet full of light and life, like a clear sky in the moment before dawn....

She made a little move towards me. Impulsively, with no word said, we kissed.

§ 7

I would like very much to give you a portrait of Mary as she was in those days. Every portrait I ever had of her I burnt in the sincerity of what was to have been our final separation, and now I have nothing of her in my possession. I suppose that in the files of old illustrated weeklies somewhere, a score of portraits must be findable. Yet photographs have a queer quality of falsehood. They have no movement and always there was a little movement about Mary just as there is always a little scent about flowers. She was slender and graceful, so that she seemed taller than she was, she had beautifully shaped arms and a brightness in her face; it seemed to me always that there was light in her face, more than the light that shone upon it. Her fair, very slightly reddish hair--it was warm like Australian gold--flowed with a sort of joyous bravery back from her low broad forehead; the color under her delicate skin was bright and quick, and her mouth always smiled faintly. There was a peculiar charm for me about her mouth, a whimsicality, a sort of humorous resolve in the way in which the upper lip fell upon the lower and in a faint obliquity that increased with her quickening smile. She spoke with a very clear delicate intonation that made one want to hear her speak again; she often said faintly daring things, and when she did, she had that little catch in the breath--of one who dares. She did not talk hastily; often before she spoke came a brief grave pause. Her eyes were brightly blue except when the spirit of mischief took her and then they became black, and there was something about the upper and lower lids that made them not only the

prettiest but the sweetest and kindest eyes in the world. And she moved with a quiet rapidity, without any needless movements, to do whatever she had a mind to do....

But how impossible it is to convey the personal charm of a human being. I catalogue these things and it is as if she moved about silently behind my stumbling enumeration and smiled at me still, with her eyes a little darkened, mocking me. That phantom will never be gone from my mind. It was all of these things and none of these things that made me hers, as I have never been any other person's....

We grew up together. The girl of nineteen mingles in my memory with the woman of twenty-five.

Always we were equals, or if anything she was the better of us two. I never made love to her in the commoner sense of the word, a sense in which the woman is conceived of as shy, unawakened, younger, more plastic, and the man as tempting, creating responses, persuading and compelling. We made love to each other as youth should, we were friends lit by a passion.... I think that is the best love. If I could wish your future I would have you love someone neither older and stronger nor younger and weaker than yourself. I would have you have neither a toy nor a devotion, for the one makes the woman contemptible and the other the man. There should be something almost sisterly between you. Love neither a goddess nor a captive woman. But I would wish you a better fate in your love than chanced to me.

Mary was not only naturally far more quick-minded, more swiftly understanding than I, but more widely educated. Mine was the stiff limited education of the English public school and university; I could not speak and read and think French and German as she could for all that I had a pedantic knowledge of the older forms of those tongues; and the classics and mathematics upon which I had spent the substance of my years were indeed of little use to me, have never been of any real use to me, they were ladders too clumsy to carry about and too short to reach anything. My general ideas came from the newspapers and the reviews. She on the other hand had read much, had heard no end of good conversation, the conversation of people who mattered, had thought for herself and had picked the brains of her brothers. Her mother had let her read whatever books she liked, partly because she believed that was the proper thing to do, and partly because it was so much less trouble to be liberal in such things.

We had the gravest conversations.

I do not remember that we talked much of love, though we were very much in love. We kissed; sometimes greatly daring we walked hand in hand; once I took her in my arms and carried her over a swampy place beyond the Killing Wood, and held her closely to me; that was a great event between us; but we were shy of one another, shy even of very intimate words; and a thousand daring and beautiful things I dreamt of saying to her went unsaid. I do not remember any endearing names from that time.



But we jested and shared our humors, shaped our developing ideas in quaint forms to amuse one another and talked--as young men talk together.

We talked of religion; I think she was the first person to thaw the private silences that had kept me bound in these matters even from myself for years. I can still recall her face, a little flushed and coming nearer to mine after avowals and comparisons. "But Stephen," she says; "if none of these things are really true, why do they keep on telling them to us? What is true? What are we for? What is Everything for?"

I remember the awkwardness I felt at these indelicate thrusts into topics I had come to regard as forbidden.

"I suppose there's a sort of truth in them," I said, and then more Siddonsesquely: "endless people wiser than we are----"

"Yes," she said. "But that doesn't matter to us. Endless people wiser than we are have said one thing, and endless people wiser than we are have said exactly the opposite. It's we who have to understand--for ourselves.... We don't understand, Stephen."

I was forced to a choice between faith and denial. But I parried with questions. "Don't you," I asked, "feel there is a God?"

She hesitated. "There is something--something very beautiful," she said and stopped as if her breath had gone. "That is all I know, Stephen...."

And I remember too that we talked endlessly about the things I was to do in the world. I do not remember that we talked about the things she was to do, by some sort of instinct and some sort of dexterity she evaded that, from the very first she had reserves from me, but my career and purpose became as it were the form in which we discussed all the purposes of life. I became Man in her imagination, the protagonist of the world. At first I displayed the modest worthy desire for respectable service that Harbury had taught me, but her clear, sceptical little voice pierced and tore all those pretences to shreds. "Do some decent public work," I said, or some such phrase.

"But is that All you want?" I hear her asking. "Is that All you want?"

I lay prone upon the turf and dug up a root of grass with my penknife.

"Before I met you it was," I said.

"And now?"

"I want you."

"I'm nothing to want. I want you to want all the world.... Why shouldn't you?"

I think I must have talked of the greatness of serving the empire. "Yes, but splendidly," she insisted. "Not doing little things for other people--who aren't doing anything at all. I want you to conquer people and lead people.... When I see you, Stephen, sometimes--I almost wish I were a man. In order to be able to do all the things that you are going to do."

"For you," I said, "for you."

I stretched out my hand for hers, and my gesture went disregarded.

She sat rather crouched together with her eyes gazing far away across the great spaces of the park.

"That is what women are for," she said. "To make men see how splendid life can be. To lift them up--out of a sort of timid grubbiness----" She turned upon me suddenly. "Stephen," she said, "promise me. Whatever you become, you promise and swear here and now never to be grey and grubby, never to be humpy and snuffy, never to be respectable and modest and dull and a little fat, like--like everybody. Ever."

"I swear," I said.

"By me."

"By you. No book to kiss! Please, give me your hand."