

with woman's emancipation as she understood it. Yet in no particular had her convictions changed; nor would they change. She herself was no longer one of the "odd women;" fortune had—or seemed to have—been kind to her; none the less her sense of a mission remained. No longer an example of perfect female independence, and unable therefore to use the same language as before, she might illustrate woman's claim of equality in marriage.—If her experience proved no obstacle.

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Next morning, as had been agreed, they met at some distance from Seascale, and spent two or three hours together. There was little danger of observation unless by a casual peasant; for the most part their privacy could not have been more secure in a locked chamber. Lest curiosity should be excited by his making inquiries at the hotel, Barfoot proposed to walk over to Gosforth, the nearest town, this afternoon, and learn where the registrar for the locality of Seascale might be found. By neither was allusion made to their difference of last evening, but Rhoda distressed herself by imagining a diminished fervour in her companion; he seemed unusually silent and meditative, and was content to hold her hand now and then.

"Shall you stay here all the week?" she inquired.

"If you wish me to."

"You will find it wearisome."

"Impossible, with you here. But if I run up to London for a day or two it might be better. There are preparations. We shall go first of all to my rooms——"

"I would rather not have stayed in London."

"I thought you might wish to make purchases."

"Let us go to some other town, and spend a few days there before leaving England."

"Very well. Manchester or Birmingham."

"You speak rather impatiently," said Rhoda, looking at him with an uneasy smile. "Let it be London if you prefer——"

"On no account. It's all indifferent to me so long as

we get safely away together. Every man is impatient of these preliminaries. Yes, in that case I must of course go up to London. To-morrow, and back on Saturday?"

A shower of rain caused them some discomfort. Through the afternoon it still rained at intervals whilst Barfoot was discharging his business at Gosforth. He was to see Rhoda again at eight o'clock, and as the time threatened to hang heavily on his hands he returned by a long detour, reaching the Seascale hotel about half-past six. No sooner had he entered than there was delivered to him a letter, brought by messenger an hour or two ago. It surprised him to recognize Rhoda's writing on the envelope, which seemed to contain at least two sheets of notepaper. What now? Some whimsey? Agitated and annoyed by the anticipation of trouble, he went apart and broke the letter open.

First appeared an enclosure—a letter in his cousin Mary's writing. He turned to the other sheet and read these lines,—

"I send you something that has come by post this afternoon. Please to bring it with you when you meet me at eight o'clock—if you still care to do so."

His face flushed with anger. What contemptible woman's folly was this? "If you still care to do so"—and written in a hand that shook. If this was to be his experience of matrimonial engagement—What rubbish had Mary been communicating?

"MY DEAR RHODA,—I have just gone through a very painful scene, and I feel bound to let you know of it without delay, as it *may* concern you. This evening (Monday), when I came home from Great Portland Street, Emma told me that Mr. Widdowson had called, that he wished to see me as soon as possible, and would be here again at six o'clock. He came, and his appearance alarmed me, he was looking so dreadfully ill. Without preface, he said, 'My wife has left me; she has gone to her sister, and refuses to return.' This was astonishing in itself, and I wondered still more why he should

come and tell *me* about it in so strange a way. The explanation followed very promptly, and you may judge how I heard it. Mr. Widdowson said that his wife had been behaving very badly of late; that he had discovered several falsehoods she had told him as to her employment during absences from home, in daytime and evening. Having cause for suspecting the worst, he last Saturday engaged a private detective to follow Mrs. Widdowson wherever she went. This man saw her go to the flats in Bayswater where Everard lives and knock at *his* door. As no one replied, she went away for a time and returned, but again found no one at home. This being at once reported to Mr. Widdowson, he asked his wife where she had been that afternoon. The answer was false; she said she had been here, with me. Thereupon he lost command of himself, and charged her with infidelity. She refused to offer any kind of explanation, but denied that she was guilty and at once left the house. Since, she has utterly refused to see him. Her sister can only report that Monica is very ill, and that she charges her husband with accusing her falsely.

“He had come to me, he said, in unspeakable anguish and helplessness, to ask me whether I had seen anything suspicious in the relations between Monica and my cousin when they met at this house or elsewhere. A nice question! Of course I could only reply that it had never even occurred to me to observe them—that to my knowledge they had met so rarely—and that I should never have dreamt of suspecting Monica. ‘Yet you see she *must* be guilty,’ he kept on repeating. I said no, that I thought her visit *might* have an innocent significance, though I couldn’t suggest why she had told falsehoods. Then he inquired what I knew about Everard’s present movements. I answered that I had every reason to think that he was out of town, but didn’t know when he went, or when he might be expected to return. The poor man was grievously dissatisfied; he looked at me as if I were in a base plot against him. It was an immense

relief when he went away, after begging me to respect his confidence.

“ I write very hurriedly, as you see. That I *ought* to write is, I think, clear—though I may be doing lamentable mischief. I cannot credit this charge against Mrs. Widdowson; there must surely be some explanation. If you have already left Seascale, no doubt this letter will be forwarded.—Ever yours, dear Rhoda,

“ MARY BARFOOT.”

Everard laughed bitterly. The completeness of the case against him in Rhoda's eyes must be so overwhelming, and his absolute innocence made it exasperating to have to defend himself. How, indeed, was he to defend himself?

The story was strange enough. Could he be right in the interpretation which at once suggested itself to his mind—or perhaps to his vanity? He remembered the meeting with Mrs. Widdowson near his abode on Friday. He recollected, moreover, the signs of interest in himself which, as he now thought, she had shown on previous occasions. Had the poor little woman—doubtless miserable with her husband—actually let herself fall in love with him? But, even in that case, what a reckless thing to do—to come to his rooms! Why, she must have been driven by a despair that blinded her to all sense of delicacy! Perhaps, had he been at home, she would have made a pretence of wishing to speak about Rhoda Nunn. That was imprudent behaviour of his, making such a person his confidante. But he was tempted by his liking for her.

“ By Jove!” he muttered, overcome by the thought. “ I'm glad I was *not* at home!”

But then—he had told her that he was going away on Saturday. How could she expect to find him? The hour of her visit was not stated; probably she hoped to catch him before he left. And was her appearance in the neighbourhood on Friday—her troubled aspect—to be explained as an abortive attempt to have a private interview with him?

The queerest affair—and maddening in its issues! Rhoda was raging with jealousy. Well, he too would rage. And without affectation. It was strange that he felt almost glad of a ground of quarrel with Rhoda. All day he had been in an irritable temper, and so far as he could understand himself it was due to resentment of his last night's defeat. He thought of Rhoda as ardently as ever, but an element that was very like brutality had intruded into his emotions; that was his reason for refraining from caresses this morning; he could not trust himself.

He would endure no absurdities. If Rhoda did not choose to accept his simple assurance—let her take the consequences. Even now, perhaps, he would bring her to her knees before him. Let her wrong him by baseless accusation! Then it would no longer be *he* who sued for favour. He would whistle her down the wind, and await her penitent reappearance. Sooner or later his pride and hers, the obstinacy in their natures, must battle it out; better that it should be now, before the irrevocable step had been taken.

He ate his dinner with savage appetite, and drank a good deal more wine than of wont. Then he smoked until the last minute of delay that his engagement allowed. Of course she had sent the letter to the hotel because he might be unable to read it in twilight. Wise precaution. And he was glad to have been able to think the matter over, to work himself into reasonable wrath. If ever man did well to be angry——!

There she was, down by the edge of the waves. She would not turn to see if he were coming; he felt sure of that. Whether she heard his footsteps he could not tell. When quite close to her, he exclaimed,—

“Well, Rhoda?”

She must have known of his approach, for she gave no start. She faced slowly to him. No trace of tears on her countenance; no, Rhoda was above that. Gravity of the sternest—that was all.

“Well,” he continued, “what have you to say to me?”

"I? Nothing."

"You mean that it is my business to explain what Mary has told you. I can't, so there's an end of it."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked in clear, distant tones.

"Precisely what I say, Rhoda. And I am obliged to ask what *you* mean by this odd way of speaking to me. What has happened since we parted this morning?"

Rhoda could not suppress her astonishment; she gazed fixedly at him.

"If you can't explain this letter, who can?"

"I suppose Mrs. Widdowson would be able to account for her doings. I certainly am not able to. And it seems to me that you are strangely forgetful of something that passed between us yesterday."

"Of what?" she asked coldly, her face, which was held proudly up, turning towards the sea.

"Evidently you accuse me of concealing something from you. Please to remember a certain plain question you asked me, and the equally plain answer I gave."

He detected the beginning of a smile about her rigid lips.

"I remember," she said.

"And you can still behave to me with indignation? Surely the indignation should be on my side. You are telling me that I deceived you."

For a moment Rhoda lost her self-control.

"How can I help thinking so?" she exclaimed, with a gesture of misery. "What can this letter mean? Why should she go to your rooms?"

"I simply don't know, Rhoda."

He preserved the show of calmness just because he saw that it provoked her to anger.

"She has never been there before?"

"Never to my knowledge."

Rhoda watched his face with greedy attention. She seemed to find there a confirmation of her doubts. Indeed, it was impossible for her to credit his denials after what she had observed in London, and the circumstances which, even before Mary's letter, had made her suspicious.

“When did you last see Mrs. Widdowson?”

“No, I shan’t consent to be cross-examined,” replied Everard, with a disdainful smile. “As soon as you refuse to accept my word it’s folly to ask further questions. You don’t believe me. Say it honestly and let us understand each other.”

“I have good reason for thinking that you could explain Mrs. Widdowson’s behaviour if you chose.”

“Exactly. There’s no misunderstanding *that*. And if I get angry I am an unpardonable brute. Come now, you can’t be offended if I treat you as simply my equal, Rhoda. Let me test your sincerity. Suppose I had seen you talking somewhere with some man who seemed to interest you very much, and then—to-day, let us say—I heard that he had called upon you when you were alone. I turn with a savage face and accuse you of grossly deceiving me—in the worst sense. What would your answer be?”

“These are idle suppositions,” she exclaimed scornfully.

“But the case is possible, you must admit. I want you to realize what I am feeling. In such a case as that, you could only turn from me with contempt. How else can I behave to *you*—conscious of my innocence, yet in the nature of things unable to prove it?”

“Appearances are very strongly against you.”

“That’s an accident—to me quite unaccountable. If I charged you with dishonour you would only have your word to offer in reply. So it is with me. And my word is bluntly rejected. You try me rather severely.”

Rhoda kept silence.

“I know what you are thinking. My character was previously none of the best. There is a prejudice against me in such a matter as this. Well, you shall hear some more plain speech, altogether for your good. My record is not immaculate; nor, I believe, is any man’s. I have gone here and there, and have had my adventures like other men. One of them you have heard about—the story of that girl Amy Drake—the subject of Mrs.

Goodall's righteous wrath. You shall know the truth, and if it offends your ears I can't help it. The girl simply threw herself into my arms, on a railway journey, when we met by pure chance."

"I don't care to hear that," said Rhoda, turning away.

"But you *shall* hear it. That story has predisposed you to believe the worst things of me. If I hold you by force, you shall hear every word of it. Mary seems to have given you mere dark hints——"

"No; she has told me the details. I know it all."

"From their point of view. Very well; that saves me a lot of narrative. What those good people didn't understand was the girl's character. They thought her a helpless innocent; she was a—I'll spare you the word. She simply planned to get me into her power—thought I should be forced to marry her. It's the kind of thing that happens far oftener than you would suppose; that's the reason why men so often smile in what you would call a brutal way when certain stories are told to other men's discredit. You will have to take this into account, Rhoda, before you reach satisfactory results on the questions that have occupied you so much. I was not in the least responsible for Amy Drake's desertion of creditable paths. At the worst I behaved foolishly; and knowing I had done so, knowing how thankless it was to try and clear myself at her expense, I let people say what they would; it didn't matter. And you don't believe me; I can see you don't. Sexual pride won't let you believe me. In such a case the man must necessarily be the villain."

"What you mean by saying you only behaved 'foolishly,' I can't understand."

"Perhaps not, and I can't explain as I once did in telling the story to a man, a friend of mine. But however strict your moral ideas, you will admit that a girl of thoroughly bad character isn't a subject for the outcry that was raised about Miss Amy Drake. By taking a little trouble I could have brought things to light

which would have given worthy Mrs. Goodall and cousin Mary a great shock. Well, that's enough. I have never pretended to sanctity; but, on the other hand, I have never behaved like a scoundrel. You charge me, deliberately, with being a scoundrel, and I defend myself as best I can. You argue that the man who would mislead an innocent girl and then cast her off is more likely than not to be guilty in a case like this of Mrs. Widdowson, when appearances are decidedly against him. There is only my word in each instance. The question is—Will you accept my word?"

For a wonder, their privacy was threatened by the approach of two men who were walking this way from Seascale. Voices in conversation caused Rhoda to look round; Barfoot had already observed the strangers.

"Let us go up on to the higher sand," he said.

Without reply Rhoda accompanied him, and for several minutes they exchanged no word. The men, talking and laughing loudly, went by; they seemed to be tourists of a kind that do not often trouble this quiet spot on the coast; their cigars glowed in the dusk.

"After all this, what have you to say to me, Rhoda?"

"Will you please to give me your cousin's letter?" she said coldly.

"Here it is. Now you will go back to your lodgings, and sit with that letter open before you half through the night. You will make yourself unutterably wretched, and all for what?"

He felt himself once more in danger of weakness. Rhoda, in her haughty, resentful mood, was very attractive to him. He was tempted to take her in his arms, and kiss her until she softened, pleaded with him. He wished to see her shed tears. But the voice in which she now spoke to him was far enough from tearfulness.

"You must prove to me that you have been wrongly suspected."

Ah, that was to be her line of conduct. She believed her power over him was absolute. She stood on her dignity, would bring him to supplication, would give him

all the trouble she could before she professed herself satisfied.

"How am I to prove it?" he asked bluntly.

"If there was nothing wrong between you and Mrs. Widdowson, there must be some very simple explanation of her coming to your rooms and being so anxious to see you."

"And it is my business to discover that explanation?"

"Can it be mine?"

"It must either be yours, Rhoda, or no one's. I shall take no single step in the matter."

The battle was declared. Each stood at full height, pertinacious, resolved on victory.

"You are putting yourself wildly in the wrong," Everard continued. "By refusing to take my word you make it impossible for me to hope that we could live together as we imagined."

The words fell upon her heart like a crushing weight. But she could not yield. Last night she had suffered in his opinion by urging what he thought a weak, womanly scruple; she had condescended to plead tenderly with him, and had won her cause. Now she would prevail in another way. If he were telling the truth, he should acknowledge that natural suspicion made it incumbent upon him to clear so strange a case of its difficulties. If he were guilty of deception, as she still believed, though willing to admit to herself that Monica might be most at fault, that there might have been no actual wrongdoing between them—he should confess with humblest penitence, and beseech pardon. Impossible to take any other attitude. Impossible to marry him with this doubt in her mind—equally out of the question to seek Monica, and humiliate herself by making inquiries on such a subject. Guilty or not, Monica would regard her with secret disdain, with woman's malice. Were she *able* to believe him, that indeed would be a grand consummation of their love, an ideal union of heart and soul. Listening to him, she had tried to put faith in his indignant words. But it was useless. The incredulity

she could not help must either part them for ever, or be to her an occasion of new triumph.

"I don't refuse to take your word," she said, with conscious quibbling. "I only say that your name must be cleared from suspicion. Mr. Widdowson is sure to tell his story to other people. Why has his wife left him?"

"I neither know nor care."

"You must prove to me that you are not the cause of it."

"I shall not make the slightest effort to do so."

Rhoda began to move away from him. As he kept silence, she walked on in the Seascale direction. He followed at a distance of a few yards, watching her movements. When they had gone so far that five minutes more must bring them within sight of the hotel, Everard spoke.

"Rhoda!"

She paused and awaited him.

"You remember that I was going to London tomorrow. It seems that I had better go and not trouble to return."

"That is for you to decide."

"For you rather."

"I have said all that I *can* say."

"And so have I. But surely you must be unconscious how grossly you are insulting me."

"I want only to understand what purpose Mrs. Widdowson had in going to your rooms."

"Then why not ask her? You are friends. She would doubtless tell you the truth."

"If she comes to me voluntarily to make an explanation, I will hear it. But I shall not ask her."

"Your view of the fitness of things is that I should request her to wait upon you for that purpose?"

"There are others who can act for you."

"Very well. Then we are at a deadlock. It seems to me that we had better shake hands like sensible people, and say good-bye."

“ Much better—if it seems so to you.”

The time for emotional help was past. In very truth they had nothing more to say to each other, being now hardened in obstinacy. Each suffered from the other's coldness, each felt angry with the other's stubborn refusal to concede a point of dignity. Everard put out his hand.

“ When you are ready to say that you have used me very ill, I shall remember only yesterday. Till then—good-bye, Rhoda.”

She made a show of taking his hand, but said nothing. And so they parted.

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At eight o'clock next morning Barfoot was seated in the southward train. He rejoiced that his strength of will had thus far asserted itself. Of final farewell to Rhoda he had no thought whatever. Her curiosity would, of course, compel her to see Monica; one way or another she would learn that he was blameless. His part was to keep aloof from her, and to wait for her inevitable submission.

Violent rain was beating upon the carriage windows; it drove from the mountains, themselves invisible, though dense low clouds marked their position. Poor Rhoda! She would not have a very cheerful day at Seascale. Perhaps she would follow him by a later train. Certain it was that she must be suffering intensely—and that certainly rejoiced him. The keener her suffering the sooner her submission. Oh, but the submission should be perfect! He had seen her in many moods, but not yet in the anguish of broken pride. She must shed tears before him, declare her spirit worn and subjugated by torment of jealousy and fear. Then he would raise her, and seat her in the place of honour, and fall down at her feet, and fill her soul with rapture.

Many times between Seascale and London he smiled in anticipation of that hour.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE REASCENT.

WHILST the rain pelted, and it did so until afternoon, Rhoda sat in her little parlour, no whit less miserable than Barfoot imagined. She could not be sure whether Everard had gone to London; at the last moment reflection or emotion might have detained him. Early in the morning she had sent to post a letter for Miss Barfoot, written last night—a letter which made no revelation of her feelings, but merely expressed a cold curiosity to hear anything that might become known as to the course of Mr. Widdowson's domestic troubles. "You may still write to this address; if I leave, letters shall be forwarded."

When the sky cleared she went out. In the evening she again rambled about the shore. Evidently Barfoot had gone; if still here, he would have watched and joined her.

Her solitude now grew insufferable, yet she could not decide whither to betake herself. The temptation to return to London was very strong, but pride prevailed against it. Everard might perhaps go to see his cousin, and relate all that had happened at Seascale, justifying himself as he had here done. Whether Miss Barfoot became aware of the story or not, Rhoda could not reconcile it with her self-respect to curtail the stipulated three weeks of holiday. Rather she would strain her nerves to the last point of endurance—and if she were not suffering, then never did woman suffer.

Another cheerless day helped her to make up her mind. She cared nothing now for lake and mountain; human companionship was her supreme need. By the earliest train next day she started, not for London, but for her brother's home in Somerset, and there she remained until it was time to return to work. Miss Barfoot wrote twice in the interval, saying that she had heard nothing more of Monica. Of Everard she made no mention.

Rhoda got back again to Chelsea on the appointed Saturday afternoon. Miss Barfoot knew when she would arrive, but was not at home to meet her, and did not return till a couple of hours had passed. They met at length as if nothing remarkable had occurred during the three weeks. Mary, if she felt any solicitude, effectually concealed it; Rhoda talked as if very glad to be at home again, explaining her desertion of the lake country by the bad weather that prevailed there. It was not till after dinner that the inevitable subject came up between them.

"Have you seen Everard since you went away?" Miss Barfoot began by asking.

So he had not been here to tell his story and plead his cause—or it seemed not.

"Yes, I saw him at Seascale," Rhoda replied, without sign of emotion.

"Before or after that news came?"

"Both before and after. I showed him your letter, and all he had to say was that he knew nothing of the affair."

"That's all he has to say to me. I haven't seen him. A letter I sent to his address was answered, after a week, from a place I never heard of—Arromanches, in Normandy. The shortest and rudest letter I ever had from him. Practically he told me to mind my own business. And there things stand."

Rhoda smiled a little, conscious of the extreme curiosity her friend must be feeling, and determined not to gratify it. For by this time, though her sunken cheeks were

hard to reconcile with the enjoyment of a summer holiday, she had matured a resolve to betray nothing of what she had gone through. Her state of mind resembled that of the ascetic who has arrived at a morbid delight in self-torture. She regarded the world with an intense bitterness, and persuaded herself not only that the thought of Everard Barfoot was hateful to her soul, but that sexual love had become, and would ever be, to her an impure idea, a vice of blood.

"I suppose," she said carelessly, "Mr. Widdowson will try to divorce his wife."

"I am in dread of that. But they may have made it up."

"Of course you have no doubt of her guilt?"

Mary tried to understand the hard, austere face, with its touch of cynicism. Conjecture as to its meaning was not difficult, but, in the utter absence of information, certainty there could be none. Under any circumstances, it was to be expected that Rhoda would think and speak of Mrs. Widdowson no less severely than of the errant Bella Royston.

"I have *some* doubt," was Miss Barfoot's answer. "But I should be glad of some one else's favourable opinion to help my charity."

"Miss Madden hasn't been here, you see. She certainly would have come if she had felt convinced that her sister was wronged."

"Unless a day or two saw the end of the trouble—when naturally none of them would say any more about it."

This was the possibility which occupied Rhoda's reflections as long as she lay awake that night.

Her feelings on entering the familiar bedroom were very strange. Even before starting for her holiday she had bidden it good-bye, and at Seascale, that night following upon the "perfect day," she had thought of it as a part of her past life, a place abandoned for ever, already infinitely remote. Her first sensation when she looked upon the white bed was one of disgust; she thought it

would be impossible to use this room henceforth, and that she must ask Miss Barfoot to let her change to another. To-night she did not restore any of the ornaments which were lying packed up. The scent of the room revived so many hours of conflict, of hope, that it caused her a sick faintness. In frenzy of detestation she cursed the man who had so disturbed and sullied the swift, pure stream of her life.

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Arromanches, in Normandy——? On Sunday she sought the name on a map, but it was not marked, being doubtless too insignificant. Improbable that he had gone to such a place alone; he was enjoying himself with friends, careless what became of her. Having allowed all this time to go by he would never seek her again. He found that her will was the equal of his own, and, as he could not rule her, she was numbered among the women who had afforded him interesting experiences, to be thought of seriously no more.

During the next week she threw herself with energy upon her work, stifling the repugnance with which at first it affected her, and seeming at length to recover the old enthusiasm. This was the only way of salvation. Idleness and absence of purpose would soon degrade her in a sense she had never dreamt of. She made a plan of daily occupation, which by leaving not a vacant moment from early morning to late at night, should give her the sleep of utter weariness. New studies were begun in the hour or two before breakfast. She even restricted her diet, and ate only just enough to support life, rejecting wine and everything that was most agreeable to her palate.

She desired to speak privately with Mildred Vesper, and opportunity might have been made, but, as part of her scheme of self-subdual, this conversation was postponed until the second week. It took place one evening when work was over.

“I have been wanting to ask you,” Rhoda began, “whether you have any news of Mrs. Widdowson.”

“ I wrote to her not long ago, and she answered from a new address. She said she had left her husband and would never go back to him.”

Rhoda nodded gravely.

“ Then what I had heard was true. You haven't seen her ? ”

“ She asked me not to come. She is living with her sister.”

“ Did she give you any reason for the separation from her husband ? ”

“ None,” answered Mildred. “ But she said it was no secret ; that every one knew. That's why I haven't spoken to you about it—as I should have done otherwise after our last conversation.”

“ The fact is no secret,” said Rhoda coldly. “ But why will she offer no explanation ? ”

Mildred shook her head, signifying inability to make any satisfactory reply, and there the dialogue ended ; for Rhoda could not proceed in it without appearing to encourage scandal. The hope of eliciting some suggestive information had failed ; but whether Mildred had really disclosed all she knew seemed doubtful.

At the end of the week Miss Barfoot left home for her own holiday ; she was going to Scotland, and would be away for nearly the whole of September. At this time of the year the work in Great Portland Street was very light ; not much employment offered for the typewriters, and the pupils numbered only about half a dozen. Nevertheless, it pleased Rhoda to have the establishment under her sole direction ; she desired authority, and by magnifying the importance of that which now fell into her hands, she endeavoured to sustain herself under the secret misery which, for all her efforts, weighed no less upon her as time went on. It was a dreary make-believe. On the first night of solitude at Chelsea she shed bitter tears ; and not only wept, but agonized in mute frenzy, the passions of her flesh torturing her until she thought of death as a refuge. Now she whispered the name of her lover with every

word and phrase of endearment that her heart could suggest; the next moment she cursed him with the fury of deadliest hatred. In the half-delirium of sleeplessness, she revolved wild, impossible schemes for revenging herself, or, as the mood changed, all but resolved to sacrifice everything to her love, to accuse herself of ignoble jealousy and entreat forgiveness. Of many woeful nights this was the worst she had yet suffered.

It recalled to her with much vividness a memory of girlhood, or indeed of childhood. She thought of that figure in the dim past, that rugged, harsh-featured man, who had given her the first suggestion of independence; thrice her own age, yet the inspirer of such tumultuous emotion in her ignorant heart; her friend at Clevedon—Mr. Smithson. A question from Mary Barfoot had caused her to glance back at him across the years, but only for an instant, and with self-mockery. What she now endured was the ripe intensity of a woe that fell upon her, at fifteen, when Mr. Smithson passed from her sight and away for ever. Childish folly! but the misery of it, the tossing at night, the blank outlook! How contemptible to revive such sensations, with mature intellect, after so long and stern a discipline!

Dreading the Sunday, so terrible in its depressing effect upon the lonely and unhappy, she breakfasted as soon as possible, and left home—simply to walk, to exert herself physically, that fatigue and sleep might follow. There was a dull sky, but no immediate fear of rain; the weather brightened a little towards noon. Careless of the direction, she walked on and on until the last maddening church bell had ceased its clangour; she was far out in the western suburbs, and weariness began to check her quick pace. Then she turned back. Without intending it, she passed by Mrs. Cosgrove's house, or rather would have passed, when she saw Mrs. Cosgrove at the dining-room window making signs to her. In a moment the door opened and she went in. She was glad of this accident, for the social lady might have something to tell about Mrs. Widdowson, who often visited her.

"In mercy, come and talk to me!" exclaimed Mrs. Cosgrove. "I am quite alone, and feel as if I could hang myself. Are you obliged to go anywhere?"

"No. I was having a walk."

"A walk? What astonishing energy! It never occurs to me to take a walk in London. I came from the country last night and expected to find my sister here, but she won't arrive till Tuesday. I have been standing at the window for an hour, getting crazy with *ennui*."

They went to the drawing-room. It was not long before Mrs. Cosgrove made an allusion which enabled Rhoda to speak of Mrs. Widdowson. For a month or more Mrs. Cosgrove had seen and heard nothing of her; she had been out of town all the time. Rhoda hesitated, but could not keep silence on the subject that had become a morbid preoccupation of her mind. She told as much as she knew—excepting the suspicion against Everard Barfoot.

"It doesn't in the least surprise me," said the listener, with interest. "I saw they wouldn't be able to live together very well. Without children the thing was impossible. Of course she has told you all about it?"

"I haven't seen her since it happened."

"Do you know, I always have a distinct feeling of pleasure when I hear of married people parting. How horrible that would seem to some of our good friends! But it isn't a malicious pleasure; there's nothing personal in it. As I have told you before, I think, I led a very contented life with my husband. But marriage in general is *such* a humbug—you forgive the word."

"Of course it is," assented Rhoda, laughing with forced gaiety.

"I am glad of anything that seems to threaten it as an institution—in its present form. A scandalous divorce case is a delight to me—anything that makes it evident how much misery would be spared if we could civilize ourselves in this respect. There are women whose conduct I think personally detestable, and whom yet I can't help thanking for their assault upon social

laws. We shall have to go through a stage of anarchy, you know, before reconstruction begins. Yes, in that sense I am an anarchist. Seriously, I believe if a few men and women in prominent position would contract marriages of the free kind, without priest or lawyer, openly and defiantly, they would do more benefit to their kind than in any other possible way. I don't declare this opinion to every one, but only because I am a coward. Whatever one believes with heart and soul one ought to make known."

Rhoda wore a look of anxious reflection.

"It needs a great deal of courage," she said. "To take that step, I mean."

"Of course. We need martyrs. And yet I doubt whether the martyrdom would be very long, or very trying, to intellectual people. A woman of brains who boldly acted upon her conviction would have no lack of congenial society. The best people are getting more liberal than they care to confess to each other. Wait until some one puts the matter to the test and you will see."

Rhoda became so busy with her tumultuous thoughts that she spoke only a word now and then, allowing Mrs. Cosgrove to talk at large on this engrossing theme.

"Where is Mrs. Widdowson living?" the revolutionist at length inquired.

"I don't know. But I can get you her address."

"Pray do. I shall go and see her. We are quite friendly enough for me to do so without impertinence."

Having lunched with her acquaintance, Rhoda went in the afternoon to Mildred Vesper's lodgings. Miss Vesper was at home, reading, in her usual placid mood. She gave Rhoda the address that was on Mrs. Widdowson's last brief note, and that evening Rhoda sent it to Mrs. Cosgrove by letter.

In two days she received a reply. Mrs. Cosgrove had called upon Mrs. Widdowson at her lodgings at Clapham. "She is ill, wretched, and unwilling to talk. I could only stay about a quarter of an hour, and to ask

questions was impossible. She mentioned your name, and appeared very anxious to hear about you ; but when I asked whether she would like you to call she grew timid all at once, and said she hoped you wouldn't unless you really desired to see her. Poor thing ! Of course I don't know what it all means, but I came away with maledictions on marriage in my heart—one is always safe in indulging that feeling."

A week or so after this there arrived for Miss Barfoot a letter from Everard. The postmark was Ostend.

Never before had Rhoda been tempted to commit a breach of confidence such as in any one else she would have scorned beyond measure. She had heard, of course, of people secretly opening letters with the help of steam ; whether it could be done with absolute security from detection she did not feel sure, but her thoughts dwelt on the subject for several hours. It was terrible to hold this letter of Everard's writing, and yet be obliged to send it away without knowledge of the contents, which perhaps gravely concerned her. She could not ask Miss Barfoot to let her know what Everard had written. The information might perhaps be voluntarily granted ; but perhaps not.

To steam the back of the envelope—would it not leave marks, a rumpling or discoloration ? Even to be suspected of such dishonour would be more bitter to her than death. Could she even think of it ? How she was degraded by this hateful passion, which wrought in her like a disease !

With two others which that day had arrived she put the letter into a large envelope, and so dispatched it. But no satisfaction rewarded her ; her heart raged against the world, against every law of life.

When, in a few days, a letter came to her from Miss Barfoot, she tore it open, and there—yes, there was Everard's handwriting. Mary had sent the communication for her to read.

"DEAR COUSIN MARY,—After all I was rather too

grumpy in my last note to you. But my patience had been desperately tried. I have gone through a good deal; now at last I am recovering sanity, and can admit that you had no choice but to ask those questions. I know and care nothing about Mrs. Widdowson. By her eccentric behaviour she either did me a great injury or a great service, I'm not quite sure which, but I incline to the latter view. Here is a conundrum—not very difficult to solve, I dare say.

“Do you know anything about Arromanches? A very quiet little spot on the Normandy coast. You get to it by an hour's coach from Bayeux. Not infested by English. I went there on an invitation from the Brissendens, who discovered the place last year. Excellent people these. I like them better the more I know of them. A great deal of quiet liberality—even extreme liberality—in the two girls. They would suit you, I am sure. Well instructed. Agnes, the younger, reads half a dozen languages, and shames me by her knowledge of all sorts of things. And yet delightfully feminine.

“As they were going to Ostend I thought I might as well follow them, and we continue to see each other pretty frequently.

“By-the-bye, I shall have to find new quarters if I come back to London. The engineer, back from Italy after a longer absence than he anticipated, wants his flat, and of course must have it. But then I may not come back at all, except to gather my traps. I shall not call on you, unless I have heard that you don't doubt the assurance I have now twice given.—Your profligate relative,

E. B.”

“I think,” wrote Mary, “that we may safely believe him. Such a lie would be too bad; he is incapable of it. Remember, I have never charged him with falsehood. I shall write and tell him that I accept his word. Has it, or has it not, occurred to you to see Mrs. Widdowson herself? Or, if there are insuperable objections,

why not see Miss Madden? We talk to each other in a sort of cypher, dear Rhoda. Well, I desire nothing but your good, as I think you know, and you must decide for yourself where that good lies."

Everard's letter put Rhoda beside herself with wrath. In writing it he knew it would come into her hands; he hoped to sting her with jealousy. So Mrs. Widdowson had done him a service. He was free to devote himself to Agnes Brissenden, with her six languages, her extreme liberality, her feminine charm.

If she could not crush out her love for this man she would poison herself—as she had so often decided she would do if ever some hopeless malady, such as cancer, took hold upon her——

And be content to feed his vanity? To give him the lifelong reflection that, for love of him, a woman excelled by few in qualities of brain and heart had died like a rat?

She walked about the rooms, here and there, upstairs and downstairs, in a fever of unrest. After all, was he not behaving in the very way she ought to desire? Was he not helping her to hate him? He struck at her with unmanly blows, thinking, no doubt, to quell her pride, and bring her to him in prostrate humility. Never! Even if it were proved in the clearest way that she ought to have believed him she would make no submission. If he loved her he must woo once more.

But the suggestion in Mary's letter was not fruitless. When she had thought over it for a day or two she wrote to Virginia Madden, asking her as a favour to come to Queen's Road on Saturday afternoon. Virginia quickly replied with a promise to call, and punctually kept the engagement. Though she was much better dressed than in the days previous to Monica's marriage, she had lost something for which costume could not compensate: her face had no longer that unmistakable refinement which had been wont to make her attire a secondary consideration. A disagreeable redness tinged her eyelids and the lower part of her nose; her mouth

was growing coarse and lax, the under-lip hanging a little; she smiled with a shrinking, apologetic shyness only seen in people who have done something to be ashamed of—smiled even when she was endeavouring to look sorrowful; and her glance was furtive. She sat down on the edge of a chair, like an anxious applicant for work or charity, and a moistness of the eyes, which obliged her to use her handkerchief frequently, strengthened this resemblance.

Rhoda could not play at smooth phrases with this poor, dispirited woman, whose change during the last few years, and especially during the last twelve months, had often occupied her thoughts in a very unpleasant way. She came almost at once to the subject of their interview.

“Why have you not been to see me before this?”

“I—really couldn't. The circumstances—everything is so very painful. You know—of course you know what has happened?”

“Of course I do.”

“How,” asked Virginia timidly, “did the news first of all reach you?”

“Mr. Widdowson came here and told Miss Barfoot everything.”

“He came? We didn't know that. Then you have heard the accusation he makes?”

“Everything.”

“It is quite unfounded, I do assure you. Monica is not guilty. The poor child has done nothing—it was an indiscretion—nothing more than indiscretion—”

“I am very anxious to believe it. Can you give me certainty? Can you explain Monica's behaviour—not only on that one occasion, but the deceit she practised at other times? Her husband told Miss Barfoot that she had frequently told him untruths—such as saying that she called here when she certainly did not.”

“I can't explain that,” lamented Virginia. “Monica won't tell me why she concealed her movements.”

“Then how can you ask me to believe your assurance that she isn't guilty?”

The sternness of this question caused Virginia to redden and become utterly disconcerted. She dropped her handkerchief, fumbled for it, breathed hard.

"Oh, Miss Nunn! How can you think Monica——? You know her better; I'm sure you do!"

"Any human being may commit a crime," said the other impatiently, exasperated by what seemed to be merely new evidence against Barfoot. "Who knows any one well enough to say that a charge *must* be unfounded?"

Miss Madden began to sob.

"I'm afraid that is true. But my sister—my dear sister——"

"I didn't want to distress you. Do command yourself, and let us talk about it calmly."

"Yes—I will—I shall be so glad to talk about it with you. Oh, if I could persuade her to return to her husband! He is willing to receive her. I meet him very often on Clapham Common, and—— We are living at his expense. When Monica had been with me in my old lodgings for about a week he took these new rooms for us, and Monica consented to remove. But she won't hear of going back to live with him. He has offered to let us have the house to ourselves, but it's no use. He writes to her, but she won't reply. Do you know that he has taken a house at Clevedon—a beautiful house? They were to go to it in a week or two, and Alice and I would have gone to share it with them—then this dreadful thing happened. And Mr. Widdowson doesn't even insist on her telling him what she keeps secret. He is willing to take her back under any circumstances. And she is so ill——"

Virginia broke off, as if there were something more that she did not venture to impart. Her cheeks coloured, and she looked distressfully about the room.

"Seriously ill, do you mean?" inquired Rhoda, with difficulty softening her voice.

"She gets up each day, but I'm often afraid that—— She has had fainting fits——"

Rhoda gazed at the speaker with pitiless scrutiny.

"What can have caused this? Is it the result of her being falsely accused?"

"Partly that. But——"

Suddenly Virginia rose, stepped to Rhoda's side, and whispered a word or two. Rhoda turned pale; her eyes glared fiercely.

"And *still* you believe her innocent?"

"She has sworn to me that she is innocent. She says that she has a proof of it which I shall see some day—and her husband also. A presentiment has fixed itself in her mind that she can't live, and before the end she will tell everything."

"Her husband knows of this, of course—of what you have told me?"

"No. She has forbidden me to say anything—and how could I, Miss Nunn? She has made me promise solemnly that he shall not be told. I haven't even told Alice. But she will know very soon. At the end of September she leaves her place, and will come to London to be with us—for a time at all events. We do so hope that we shall succeed in persuading Monica to go to the house at Clevedon. Mr. Widdowson is keeping it, and will move the furniture from Herne Hill at any moment. Couldn't you help us, dear Miss Nunn? Monica would listen to you; I am sure she would."

"I'm afraid I can be of no use," Rhoda answered coldly.

"She has been hoping to see you."

"She has said so?"

"Not in so many words—but I am sure she wishes to see you. She has asked about you several times, and when your note came she was very pleased. It would be a great kindness to us——"

"Does she declare that she will never return to her husband?"

"Yes—I am sorry to say she does. But the poor child believes that she has only a short time to live. Nothing will shake her presentiment. 'I shall die, and

give no more trouble'—that's what she always says to me. And a conviction of that kind is so likely to fulfil itself. She never leaves the house, and of course that is very wrong; she ought to go out every day. She won't see a medical man."

"Has Mr. Widdowson given her any cause for disliking him?" Rhoda inquired.

"He was dreadfully violent when he discovered—I'm afraid it was natural—he thought the worst of her, and he has always been so devoted to Monica. She says he seemed on the point of killing her. He is a man of very severe nature, I have always thought. He never could bear that Monica should go anywhere alone. They were very, very unhappy, I'm afraid—so ill-matched in almost every respect. Still, under the circumstances—surely she ought to return to him?"

"I can't say. I don't know."

Rhoda's voice signified a conflict of feeling. Had she been disinterested her opinion would not have wavered for a moment; she would have declared that the wife's inclination must be the only law in such a case. As it was, she could only regard Monica with profound mistrust and repugnance. The story of decisive evidence kept back seemed to her only a weak woman's falsehood—a fiction due to shame and despair. Undoubtedly it would give some vague relief to her mind if Monica were persuaded to go to Clevedon, but she could not bring herself to think of visiting the suffering woman. Whatever the end might be, she would have no part in bringing it about. Her dignity, her pride, should remain unsullied by such hateful contact.

"I mustn't stay longer," said Virginia, rising after a painful silence. "I am always afraid to be away from her even for an hour; the fear of dreadful things that might happen haunts me day and night. How glad I shall be when Alice comes!"

Rhoda had no words of sympathy. Her commiseration for Virginia was only such as she might have felt for any stranger involved in sordid troubles; all the

old friendliness had vanished. Nor would she have been greatly shocked or astonished had she followed Miss Madden on the way to the railway station and seen her, after a glance up and down the street, turn quickly into a public-house, and come forth again holding her handkerchief to her lips. A feeble, purposeless, hopeless woman; type of a whole class; living only to deteriorate——

Will! Purpose! Was *she* not in danger of forgetting these watchwords, which had guided her life out of youth into maturity? That poor creature's unhappiness was doubtless in great measure due to the conviction that in missing love and marriage she had missed everything. So thought the average woman, and in her darkest hours she too had fallen among those poor of spirit, the flesh prevailing. But the soul in her had not finally succumbed. Passion had a new significance; her conception of life was larger, more liberal; she made no vows to crush the natural instincts. But her conscience, her sincerity should not suffer. Wherever destiny might lead, she would still be the same proud and independent woman, responsible only to herself, fulfilling the nobler laws of her existence.

A day or two after this she had guests to dine with her—Mildred Vesper and Winifred Haven. Among the girls whom she had helped to educate, these two seemed by far the most self-reliant, the most courageous and hopeful. In minor details of character they differed widely, and intellectually Miss Haven was far in advance. Rhoda had a strong desire to observe them as they talked about the most various subjects; she knew them well, but hoped to find in them some new suggestion of womanly force which would be of help to her in her own struggle for redemption.

It was seldom that either of them ailed anything. Mildred still showed traces of her country breeding; she was the more robust, walked with a heavier step, had less polish of manner. Under strain of any kind Winifred's health would sooner give way, but her natural

vivacity promised long resistance to oppressing influences. Mildred had worked harder, and amid privations of which the other girl knew nothing. She would never distinguish herself, but it was difficult indeed to imagine her repining so long as she had her strength and her congenial friends. Twenty years hence, in all probability, she would keep the same clear, steady eye, the same honest smile, and the same dry humour in her talk. Winifred was more likely to traverse a latitude of storm. For one thing, her social position brought her in the way of men who might fall in love with her, whereas Mildred lived absolutely apart from the male world; doubtless, too, her passions were stronger. She loved literature, spent as much time as possible in study, and had set her mind upon helping to establish that ideal woman's paper of which there was often talk at Miss Barfoot's.

In this company Rhoda felt her old ambitions regaining their power over her. To these girls she was an exemplar; it made her smile to think how little they could dream of what she had experienced during the last few weeks; if ever a moment of discontent assailed them, they must naturally think of her, of the brave, encouraging words she had so often spoken. For a moment she had deserted them, abandoning a course which her reason steadily approved for one that was beset with perils of indignity. It would shame her if they knew the whole truth—and yet she wished it were possible for them to learn that she had been passionately wooed. A contemptible impulse of vanity; away with it!

There was a chance, it seemed to her, that during Miss Barfoot's absence Everard might come to the house. Mary had written to him; he would know that she was away. What better opportunity, if he had not dismissed her memory from his thoughts?

Every evening she made herself ready to receive a possible visitor. She took thought for her appearance. But the weeks passed by, Miss Barfoot returned, and Everard had given no sign.

She would set a date, a limit. If before Christmas he neither came nor wrote all was at an end; after that she would not see him, whatever his plea. And having persuaded herself that this decision was irrevocable, she thought it as well to gratify Miss Barfoot's curiosity, for by now she felt able to relate what had happened in Cumberland with a certain satisfaction—the feeling she had foreseen when, in the beginning of her acquaintance with Everard, it flattered her to observe his growing interest. Her narrative, to which Mary listened with downcast eyes, presented the outlines of the story veraciously; she told of Everard's wish to dispense with the legal bond, of her own indecision, and of the issue.

"When your letter came, could I very well have acted otherwise than I did? It was not a flat refusal to believe him; all I asked was that things should be cleared up before our marriage. For his own sake he ought to have willingly agreed to that. He preferred to take my request as an insult. His unreasonable anger made me angry too. And now I don't think we shall ever meet again unless as mere acquaintances."

"I think," commented the listener, "that he behaved with extraordinary impudence."

"In the first proposal? But I myself attach no importance to the marriage ceremony."

"Then why did you insist upon it?" asked Mary, with a smile that might have become sarcastic but that her eye met Rhoda's.

"Would you have received us?"

"In the one case as readily as in the other."

Rhoda was silent and darkly thoughtful.

"Perhaps I never felt entire confidence in him."

Mary smiled and sighed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BURDEN OF FUTILE SOULS.

“ My own dearest love, if I could but describe to you all I have suffered before sitting down to write this letter! Since our last meeting I have not known one hour of quietness. To think that I missed you when you called and left that note—for it was you yourself, was it not? The journey was horrible, and the week that I have spent here—I assure you I have not slept for more than a few minutes at a time, and I am utterly broken down by misery. My darling”—etc. “ I regard myself as a criminal; if *you* have suffered a thousandth part of what *I* have, I deserve any punishment that could be devised. For it has all been my fault. Knowing as I did that our love could never end in happiness, it was my duty to hide what I felt. I ought never to have contrived that first meeting alone—for it *was* contrived; I sent my sisters away on purpose. I ought never”—etc. “ The only reflection that can ever bring me comfort is that our love has been pure. We can always think of each other without shame. And why should this love ever have an end? We are separated, and perhaps shall never see each other again, but may not our hearts remain for ever true? May we not think”—etc. “ If I were to bid you leave your home and come to me, I should be once more acting with base selfishness. I should ruin your life, and load my own with endless self-reproach. I find that even mere outward circumstances would not allow of what for a

moment we dreamt might be possible, and of that I am *glad*, since it helps me to overcome the terrible temptation. Oh, if you knew how that temptation"—etc. "Time will be a friend to both of us, dearest Monica. Forget each other we never can, we never *will*. But our unsullied love"—etc.

Monica read it through again, the long rigmarole. Since the day that she received it—addressed to "Mrs. Williamson" at the little stationer's by Lavender Hill—the day before she consented to accompany her sister into new lodgings—the letter had lain in its hiding-place. Alone this afternoon, for Virginia was gone to call on Miss Nunn, alone and miserable, every printed page a weariness to her sight, she took out the French-stamped envelope and tried to think that its contents interested her. But not a word had power of attraction or of repulsion. The tender phrases affected her no more than if they had been addressed to a stranger. Love was become a meaningless word. She could not understand how she had ever drifted into such relations with the writer. Fear and anger were the sole passions surviving in her memory from those days which had violently transformed her life, and it was not with Bevis, but her husband, that these emotions were connected. Bevis's image stood in that already distant past like a lay figure, the mere semblance of a man. And with such conception of him his letter corresponded; it was artificial, lifeless, as if extracted from some vapid novel.

But she must not destroy it. Its use was still to come. Letter and envelope must go back again into hiding, and await the day which would give them power over human lives.

Suffering, as always, from headache and lassitude, she sat by the window and watched the people who passed along—her daily occupation. This sitting-room was on the ground floor. In a room above some one was receiving a music lesson; every now and then the teacher's voice became audible, raised in sharp impatience, and generally accompanied by a clash upon the keys of the

piano. At the area gate of the house opposite a servant was talking angrily with a tradesman's errand boy, who at length put his thumb to his nose with insulting significance and scampered off. Then, at the house next to that one, there stopped a cab, from which three busy-looking men alighted. Cabs full of people were always stopping at that door. Monica wondered what it meant, who might live there. She thought of asking the landlady.

Virginia's return aroused her. She went upstairs with her sister into the double-bedded room which they occupied.

"What have you heard?"

"He went there. He told them everything."

"How did Miss Nunn look? How did she speak?"

"Oh, she was very, very distant," lamented Virginia. "I don't quite know why she sent for me. She said there would be no use in her coming to see you—and I don't think she ever will. I told her that there was no truth in——"

"But how did she look?" asked Monica impatiently.

"Not at all well, I thought. She has been away for her holiday, but it doesn't seem to have done her much good."

"He went there and told them everything?"

"Yes—just after it happened. But he hasn't seen them since that. I could see they believed him. It was no use all that I said. She looked so stern and——"

"Did you ask anything about Mr. Barfoot?"

"My dear, I didn't venture to. It was impossible. But I feel quite sure that they must have broken off all intercourse with him. Whatever he may have said, they evidently didn't believe it. Miss Barfoot is away now."

"And what did you tell her about me?"

"Everything that you said I might, dear."

"Nothing else—you are sure?"

Virginia coloured, but made asseveration that nothing else had passed her lips.

"It wouldn't have mattered if you had," said Monica indifferently. "I don't care."

The sister, struggling with shame, was irritated by the needlessness of her falsehood.

"Then why were you so particular to forbid me, Monica?"

"It was better—but I don't care. I don't care for anything. Let them believe and say what they like——"

"Monica, if I find out at last that you have deceived me——"

"Oh, do, do, do be quiet!" cried the other wretchedly. "I shall go somewhere and live alone—or die alone. You worry me—I'm tired of it."

"You are not very grateful, Monica."

"I can't be grateful! You must expect nothing from me. If you keep talking and questioning I shall go away. I don't care what becomes of me. The sooner I die the better."

Scenes such as this had been frequent lately. The sisters were a great trial to each other's nerves. Tedium and pain drove Monica to the relief of altercation, and Virginia, through her secret vice, was losing all self-control. They wrangled, wailed, talked of parting, and only became quiet when their emotions had exhausted them. Yet no ill-feeling resulted from these disputes. Virginia had a rooted faith in her sister's innocence; when angry, she only tried to provoke Monica into a full explanation of the mystery, so insoluble by unaided conjecture. And Monica, say what she might, repaid this confidence with profound gratitude. Strangely, she had come to view herself as not only innocent of the specific charge brought against her, but as a woman in every sense maligned. So utterly void of significance, from her present point of view, was all that had passed between her and Bevis. One reason for this lay in the circumstance that, when exchanging declarations with her lover, she was ignorant of a fact which, had she known it, would have made their meetings impossible. Her husband she could never regard but as a cruel

enemy ; none the less, nature had set a seal upon their marriage against which the revolt of her heart was powerless. If she lived to bear a child, that child would be his. Widdowson, when he heard of her condition, would declare it the final proof of infidelity ; and this injustice it was that exclusively occupied her mind. On this account she could think only of the accusation which connected her name with Barfoot's—all else was triviality. Had there been no slightest ground for imputation upon her conduct, she could not have resented more vigorously her husband's refusal to acquit her of dishonour.

On the following day, after their early dinner, Monica unexpectedly declared that she must go out.

“Come with me. We'll go into the town.”

“But you refused to go out this morning when it was fine,” complained Virginia. “And now you can see it will rain.”

“Then I shall go alone.”

The sister at once started up.

“No, no ; I'm quite ready. Where do you wish——”

“Anywhere out of this dead place. We'll go by train, and walk from Victoria—anywhere. To the Abbey, if you like.”

“You must be very careful not to catch cold. After all this time that you haven't left the house——”

Monica cut short the admonition and dressed herself with feverish impatience. As they set forth, drops of rain had begun to fall, but Monica would not hear of waiting. The journey by train made her nervous, but affected her spirits favourably. At Victoria it rained so heavily that they could not go out into the street.

“It doesn't matter. There's plenty to see here. Let us walk about and look at things. We'll buy something at the bookstall to take back.”

As they turned again towards the platform, Monica was confronted by a face which she at once recognized, though it had changed noticeably in the eighteen months since she last saw it. The person was Miss Eade, her

old acquaintance at the shop. But the girl no longer dressed as in those days; cheap finery of the "loudest" description arrayed her form, and it needed little scrutiny to perceive that her thin cheeks were artificially reddened. The surprise of the meeting was not Monica's only reason for evincing embarrassment. Seeing that Miss Eade was uncertain whether to make a sign of acquaintance, she felt it would be wiser to go by. But this was not permitted. As they were passing each other the girl bent her head and whispered,—

"I want to speak to you—just a minute."

Virginia perceived the communication, and looked in surprise at her sister.

"It's one of the girls from Walworth Road," said Monica. "Just walk on; I'll meet you at the book-stall."

"But, my dear, she doesn't look respectable——"

"Go on; I won't be a minute."

Monica motioned to Miss Eade, who followed her towards a more retired spot.

"You have left the shop?"

"Left—I should think so. Nearly a year ago. I told you I shouldn't stand it much longer. Are you married?"

"Yes."

Monica did not understand why the girl should eye her so suspiciously.

"You are?" said Miss Eade. "Nobody that I know, I suppose?"

"Quite a stranger to you."

The other made an unpleasant click with her tongue, and looked vaguely about her. Then she remarked inconsequently that she was waiting the arrival of her brother by train.

"He's a traveller for a West-end shop; makes five hundred a year. I keep house for him, because of course he's a widower."

The "of course" puzzled Monica for a moment, but she remembered that it was an unmeaning expletive

much used by people of Miss Eade's education. However, the story did not win her credence; by this time her disagreeable surmises had too much support.

"Was there anything you wished particularly to speak about?"

"You haven't seen nothing of Mr. Bullivant?"

To what a remote period of her life this name seemed to recall Monica! She glanced quickly at the speaker, and again detected suspicion in her eyes.

"I have neither seen nor heard of him since I left Walworth Road. Isn't he still there?"

"Not he. He went about the same time you did, and nobody knew where he hid himself."

"Hid? Why should he hide?"

"I only mean he got out of sight somewheres. I thought perhaps you might have come across him."

"No, I haven't. Now I must say good-bye. That lady is waiting for me."

Miss Eade nodded, but immediately altered her mind and checked Monica as she was turning away.

"You wouldn't mind telling me what your married name may be?"

"That really doesn't concern you, Miss Eade," replied the other stiffly. "I must go——"

"If you don't tell me, I'll follow you till I find out, and chance it!"

The change from tolerable civility to coarse insolence was so sudden that Monica stood in astonishment. There was unconcealed malignity in the gaze fixed upon her.

"What do you mean? What interest have you in learning my name?"

The girl brought her face near, and snarled in the true voice of the pavement,—

"Is it a name as you're ashamed to let out?"

Monica walked away to the bookstall. When she had joined her sister, she became aware that Miss Eade was keeping her in sight.

"Let us buy a book," she said, "and go home again. The rain won't stop."

They selected a cheap volume, and, having their return tickets, moved towards the departure platform. Before she could reach the gates Monica heard Miss Eade's voice just behind her; it had changed again, and the appealing note reminded her of many conversations in Walworth Road.

"Do tell me! I beg your pardon for bein' rude. Don't go without telling me."

The meaning of this importunity had already flashed upon Monica, and now she felt a slight pity for the tawdry, abandoned creature, in whom there seemed to survive that hopeless passion of old days.

"My name," she said abruptly, "is Mrs. Widdowson."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"I have told you what you wish to know. I can't talk——"

"And you don't really know nothing about *him*?"

"Nothing whatever."

Miss Eade moved sullenly away, not more than half convinced. Long after Monica's disappearance she strayed about the platform and the approaches to the station. Her brother was slow in arriving. Once or twice she held casual colloquy with men who also stood waiting—perchance for their sisters; and ultimately one of these was kind enough to offer her refreshment, which she graciously accepted. Rhoda Nunn would have classed her and mused about her: a not unimportant type of the odd woman.

* * * * *

After this Monica frequently went out, always accompanied by her sister. It happened more than once that they saw Widdowson, who walked past the house at least every other day; he didn't approach them, and had he done so Monica would have kept an obstinate silence.

For more than a fortnight he had not written to her. At length there came a letter, merely a repetition of his former appeals.

"I hear," he wrote, "that your elder sister is coming

to London. Why should she live here in lodgings, when a comfortable house is at the disposal of you all? Let me again entreat you to go to Clevedon. The furniture shall be moved any moment you wish. I solemnly promise not to molest you in any way, not even by writing. It shall be understood that business makes it necessary for me to live in London. For your sister's sake do accept this offer. If I could see you in private, I should be able to give you a very good reason why your sister Virginia would benefit by the change; perhaps you yourself know of it. Do answer me, Monica. Never again will I refer by word or look to what has passed. I am anxious only to put an end to the wretched life that you are leading. Do go to the house at Clevedon, I implore you."

It was not the first time he had hinted darkly at a benefit that might accrue to Virginia if she left London. Monica had no inkling of what he meant. She showed her sister this communication, and asked if she could understand the passage which concerned her.

"I haven't the least idea," Virginia replied, her hand trembling as she held the paper. "I can only suppose that he thinks that I am not looking well."

The letter was burnt, as all the others had been, no answer vouchsafed. Virginia's mind seemed to waver with regard to the proposed settlement at Clevedon. Occasionally she had urged Monica, with extreme persistence, to accept what was offered; at other times, as now, for instance, she said nothing. Yet Alice had written beseeching her to use all means for Monica's persuasion. Miss Madden infinitely preferred the thought of dwelling at Clevedon—however humble the circumstances had been—to that of coming back into London lodgings whilst she sought for a new engagement. The situation she was about to quit had proved more laborious than any in her experience. At first merely a governess, she had gradually become children's nurse as well, and for the past three months had been expected to add the tendence of a chronic invalid to her other duties. Not

a day's holiday since she came. She was broken down and utterly woebegone.

But Monica could not be moved. She refused to go again under her husband's roof until he had stated that his charge against her was absolutely unfounded. This concession went beyond Widdowson's power; he would forgive, but still declined to stultify himself by a statement that could have no meaning. To what extent his wife had deceived him might be uncertain, but the deception was a proved fact. Of course it never occurred to him that Monica's demand had a significance which emphasized the name of Barfoot. Had he said, "I am convinced that your relations with Barfoot were innocent," he would have seemed to himself to be acquitting her of all criminality; whereas Monica, from her point of view, illogically supposed that he might credit her on this one issue without overthrowing all the evidence that declared her untrustworthy. In short, she expected him to read a riddle which there was scarcely a possibility of his understanding.

Alice was in correspondence with the gloomy husband. She promised him to use every effort to gain Monica's confidence. Perhaps as the eldest sister she might succeed where Virginia had failed. Her faith in Monica's protestations had been much shaken by the item of intelligence which Virginia secretly communicated; she thought it too likely that her unhappy sister saw no refuge from disgrace but in stubborn denial of guilt. And in the undertaking that was before her she had no hope save through the influence of religion—with her a much stronger force than with either of the others.

Her arrival was expected on the last day of September. The evening before, Monica went to bed soon after eight o'clock; for a day or two she had suffered greatly, and at length had allowed a doctor to be called. Whenever her sister retired very early, Virginia also went to her own bedroom, saying that she preferred to sit there.

The room much surpassed in comfort that which she had occupied at Mrs. Conisbee's; it was spacious, and

provided with a couple of very soft armchairs. Having locked her door, Virginia made certain preparations which had nothing to do with natural repose. From the cupboard she brought out a little spirit-kettle, and put water to boil. Then from a more private repository were produced a bottle of gin and a sugar-basin, which, together with a tumbler and spoon, found a place on a little table drawn up within reach of the chair where she was going to sit. On the same table lay a novel procured this afternoon from the library. Whilst the water was boiling, Virginia made a slight change of dress, conducive to bodily ease. Finally, having mixed a glass of gin and water—one-third only of the diluent—she sat down with one of her frequent sighs and began to enjoy the evening.

The last, the very last, of such enjoyment; so she assured herself. Alice's presence in the house would render impossible what she had hitherto succeeded in disguising from Monica. Her conscience welcomed the restraint, which was coming none too soon, for her will could no longer be depended upon. If she abstained from strong liquors for three or four days it was now a great triumph; yet worthless, for even in abstaining she knew that the hour of indulgence had only been postponed. A fit of unendurable depression soon drove her to the only resource which had immediate efficacy. The relief, she knew, was another downward step; but presently she would find courage to climb back again up to the sure ground. Save for her trouble on Monica's account the temptation would already have been conquered. And now Alice's arrival made courage a mere necessity.

Her bottle was all but empty; she would finish it to-night, and in the morning, as her custom was, take it back to the grocer's in her little hand-bag. How convenient that this kind of thing could be purchased at the grocer's! In the beginning she had chiefly made use of railway refreshment rooms. Only on rare occasions did she enter a public-house, and always with the

bitterest sense of degradation. To sit comfortably at home, the bottle beside her, and a novel on her lap, was an avoidance of the worst shame attaching to this vice; she went to bed, and in the morning—ah, the morning brought its punishment, but she incurred no risk of being detected.

Brandy had first of all been her drink, as is generally the case with women of the educated classes. There are so many plausible excuses for taking a drop of brandy. But it cost too much. Whisky she had tried, and did not like. Finally she had recourse to gin, which was palatable and very cheap. The name, debased by such foul associations, still confused her when she uttered it; as a rule, she wrote it down in a list of groceries which she handed over the counter.

To-night she drank her first glass quickly; a consuming thirst was upon her. By half-past eight the second was gently steaming at her elbow. At nine she had mixed the third; it must last a long time, for the bottle was now empty.

The novel entertained her, but she often let her thoughts stray from it; she reflected with exultation that to-night's indulgence was her very last. On the morrow she would be a new woman. Alice and she would devote themselves to their poor sister, and never rest till they had restored her to a life of dignity. This was a worthy, a noble task; success in it must needs minister to her own peace. Before long they would all be living at Clevedon—a life of ideal contentment. It was no longer necessary to think of the school, but she would exert herself for the moral instruction of young women—on the principles inculcated by Rhoda Nunn.

The page before her was no longer legible; the book dropped from her lap. Why this excited her laughter she could not understand; but she laughed for a long time, until her eyes were dim with tears. It might be better to go to bed. What was the hour? She tried vainly to read her watch, and again laughed at such absurd incapacity. Then—

Surely that was a knock at her door? Yes; it was repeated, with a distinct calling of her name. She endeavoured to stand up.

"Miss Madden!" It was the landlady's voice. "Miss Madden! Are you in bed yet?"

Virginia succeeded in reaching the door.

"What is it?"

Another voice spoke.

"It is I, Virginia. I have come this evening instead of to-morrow. Please let me come in."

"Alice? You can't—I'll come—wait downstairs."

She was still able to understand the situation, and able, she thought, to speak coherently, to disguise her condition. The things on the table must be put out of sight. In trying to do this, she upset her glass and knocked the empty bottle on to the floor. But in a few minutes bottle, glass, and spirit-kettle were hidden away. The sugar-basin she lost sight of; it still remained in its former place.

Then she opened the door, and with uncertain step went out into the passage.

"Alice!" she called aloud.

At once both her sisters appeared, coming out of Monica's chamber. Monica had partly dressed herself.

"Why have you come to-night?" Virginia exclaimed, in a voice which seemed to her own ears perfectly natural.

She tottered, and was obliged to support herself against the wall. The light from her room fell full upon her, and Alice, who had stepped forward to give her a kiss, not only saw, but smelt, that something very strange was the matter. The odour proceeding from the bedroom, and that of Virginia's breath, left small doubt as to the cause of delay in giving admittance.

Whilst Alice stood bewildered, Monica received an illumination which instantly made clear to her many things in Virginia's daily life. At the same moment she understood those mysterious hints concerning her sister in Widdowson's letters.

"Come into the room," she said abruptly. "Come, Virgie."

"I don't understand—why has Alice come to-night?—what's the time?"

Monica took hold of the tottering woman's arm and drew her out of the passage. The cold air had produced its natural effect upon Virginia, who now with difficulty supported herself.

"O Virgie!" cried the eldest sister, when the door was closed. "What is the matter? What does it mean?"

Already she had been shedding tears at the meeting with Monica, and now distress overcame her; she sobbed and lamented.

"What have you been doing, Virgie?" asked Monica with severity.

"Doing? I feel a little faint—surprise—didn't expect——"

"Sit down at once. You are disgusting! Look, Alice." She pointed to the sugar-basin on the table; then, after a rapid glance round the room, she went to the cupboard and threw the door open. "I thought so. Look, Alice. And to think I never suspected this! It has been going on a long time—oh, a long time. She was doing it at Mrs. Conisbee's before I was married. I remember smelling spirits——"

Virginia was making efforts to rise.

"What are you talking about?" she exclaimed in a thick voice, and with a countenance which was changing from dazed astonishment to anger. "It's only when I feel faint. Do you suppose I drink? Where's Alice? Wasn't Alice here?"

"O Virgie! What *does* it mean? How *could* you?"

"Go to bed at once, Virginia," said Monica. "We're ashamed of you. Go back into my room, Alice, and I'll get her to bed."

Ultimately this was done. With no slight trouble, Monica persuaded her sister to undress, and got her into a recumbent position, Virginia all the time protest-

ing that she had perfect command of her faculties, that she needed no help whatever, and was utterly at a loss to comprehend the insults directed against her.

"Lie quiet and go to sleep," was Monica's last word, uttered contemptuously.

She extinguished the lamp and returned to her own room, where Alice was still weeping. The unexpected arrival had already been explained to Monica. Sudden necessity for housing a visitor had led to the proposition that Miss Madden, for her last night, should occupy a servant's bedroom. Glad to get away, Alice chose the alternative of leaving the house at once. It had been arranged that she should share Virginia's room, but to-night this did not seem advisable.

"To-morrow," said Monica, "we must talk to her very seriously. I believe she has been drinking like that night after night. It explains the look she always has the first thing in the morning. Could you have imagined anything so disgraceful?"

But Alice had softened towards the erring woman.

"You must remember what her life has been, dear. I'm afraid loneliness is very often a cause——"

"She needn't have been lonely. She refused to come and live at Herne Hill, and now of course I understand why. Mrs. Conisbee must have known about it, and it was her duty to tell me. Mr. Widdowson had found out somehow, I feel sure."

She explained the reason of this belief.

"You know what it all points to," said Miss Madden, drying her sallow, pimpled cheeks. "You must do as your husband wishes, dearest. We must go to Clevedon. There the poor girl will be out of temptation."

"You and Virgie may go."

"You too, Monica. My dear sister, it is your duty."

"Don't use that word to me!" exclaimed the other angrily. "It is *not* my duty. It can be no woman's duty to live with a man she hates—or even to make a pretence of living with him."

"But, dearest——"

"You mustn't begin this to-night, Alice. I have been ill all day, and now my head is aching terribly. Go downstairs and eat the supper they have laid for you."

"I couldn't touch a morsel," sobbed Miss Madden. "Oh, everything is too dreadful! Life is too hard!"

Monica had returned to bed, and lay there with her face half hidden against the pillow.

"If you don't want any supper," she said in a moment, "please go and tell them, so that they needn't sit up for you."

Alice obeyed. When she came up again, her sister was, or pretended to be, asleep; even the noise made by bringing luggage into the room did not cause her to move. Having sat in despondency for a while, Miss Madden opened one of her boxes, and sought in it for the Bible which it was her custom to make use of every night. She read in the book for about half an hour, then covered her face with her hands and prayed silently. This was *her* refuge from the barrenness and bitterness of life.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONFESSION AND COUNSEL.

THE sisters did not exchange a word until morning, but both of them lay long awake. Monica was the first to lose consciousness; she slept for about an hour, then the pains of a horrid dream disturbed her, and again she took up the burden of thought. Such waking after brief, broken sleep, when mind and body are beset by weariness, yet cannot rest, when night with its awful hush and its mysterious movements makes a strange, dread habitation for the spirit—such waking is a grim trial of human fortitude. The blood flows sluggishly, yet subject to sudden tremors that chill the veins and for an instant choke the heart. Purpose is idle, the will impure; over the past hangs a shadow of remorse, and life that must yet be lived shows lurid, a steep pathway to the hopeless grave. Of this cup Monica drank deeply.

A fear of death compassed her about. Night after night it had thus haunted her. In the daytime she could think of death with resignation, as a refuge from miseries of which she saw no other end; but this hour of silent darkness shook her with terrors. Reason availed nothing; its exercise seemed criminal. The old faiths, never abandoned, though modified by the breath of intellectual freedom that had just touched her, reasserted all their power. She saw herself as a wicked woman, in the eye of truth not less wicked than her husband declared her. A sinner stubborn in impenitence, defending herself by a paltry ambiguity that had

all the evil of a direct lie. Her soul trembled in its nakedness.

What redemption could there be for her? What path of spiritual health was discoverable? She could not command herself to love the father of her child; the repugnance with which she regarded him seemed to her a sin against nature, yet how was she responsible for it? Would it profit her to make confession and be humbled before him? The confession must some day be made, if only for her child's sake; but she foresaw in it no relief of mind. Of all human beings her husband was the one least fitted to console and strengthen her. She cared nothing for his pardon; from his love she shrank. But if there were some one to whom she could utter her thoughts with the certainty of being understood—

Her sisters had not the sympathetic intelligence necessary for aiding her; Virginia was weaker than she herself, and Alice dealt only in sorrowful commonplaces, profitable perhaps to her own heart, but powerless over the trouble of another's. Among the few people she had called her friends there was one strong woman—strong of brain, and capable, it might be, of speaking the words that go from soul to soul; this woman she had deeply offended, yet owing to mere mischance. Whether or no Rhoda Nunn had lent ear to Barfoot's wooing she must be gravely offended; she had given proof of it in the interview reported by Virginia. The scandal spread abroad by Widdowson might even have been fatal to a happiness of which she had dreamt. To Rhoda Nunn some form of reparation was owing. And might not an avowal of the whole truth elicit from her counsel of gratitude—some solace, some guidance?

Amid the tremors of night Monica felt able to take this step, for the mere chance of comfort that it offered. But when day came the resolution had vanished; shame and pride again compelled her to silence.

And this morning she had new troubles to think about. Virginia was keeping her room; would admit no one;

answered every whisper of appeal with brief, vague words that signified anything or nothing. The others breakfasted in gloom that harmonized only too well with the heavy, dripping sky visible from their windows. Only at midday did Alice succeed in obtaining speech with her remorseful sister. They were closeted together for more than an hour, and the elder woman came forth at last with red, tear-swollen eyes.

"We must leave her alone to-day," she said to Monica. "She won't take any meal. Oh, the wretched state she is in! If only I could have known of this before!"

"Has it been going on for very long?"

"It began soon after she went to live at Mrs. Conisbee's. She has told me all about it—poor girl, poor thing! Whether she can ever break herself off it, who knows? She says that she will take the pledge of total abstinence, and I encouraged her to do so; it may be some use, don't you think?"

"Perhaps—I don't know——"

"But I have no faith in her reforming unless she goes away from London. She thinks herself that only a new life in a new place will give her the strength. My dear, at Mrs. Conisbee's she starved herself to have money to buy spirits; she went without any food but dry bread day after day."

"Of course that made it worse. She must have craved for support."

"Of course. And your husband knows about it. He came once when she was in that state—when you were away——"

Monica nodded sullenly, her eyes averted.

"Her life has been so dreadfully unhealthy. She seems to have become weak-minded. All her old interests have gone; she reads nothing but novels, day after day."

"I have noticed that."

"How can we help her, Monica? Won't you make a sacrifice for the poor girl's sake? Cannot I persuade you, dear? Your position has a bad influence on her;

I can see it has. She worries so about you, and then tries to forget the trouble—you know how."

Not that day, nor the next, could Monica listen to these entreaties. But her sister at length prevailed. It was late in the evening; Virginia had gone to bed, and the others sat silently, without occupation. Miss Madden, after several vain efforts to speak, bent forward and said in a low, grave voice,—

"Monica—you are deceiving us all. You are guilty."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know it. I have watched you. You betray yourself when you are thinking."

The other sat with brows knitted, with hard, defiant lips.

"All your natural affection is dead, and only guilt could have caused that. You don't care what becomes of your sister. Only the fear, or the evil pride, that comes of guilt could make you refuse what we ask of you. You are afraid to let your husband know of your condition."

Alice could not have spoken thus had she not believed what she said. The conviction had become irresistible to her mind. Her voice quivered with intensity of painful emotion.

"That last is true," said her sister, when there had been silence for a minute.

"You confess it? O Monica——"

"I don't confess what you think," went on the younger, with more calmness than she had yet commanded in these discussions. "Of that I am *not* guilty. I am afraid of his knowing, because he will never believe me. I have a proof which would convince any one else; but, even if I produced it, it would be no use. I don't think it is possible to persuade him—when once he knows——"

"If you were innocent you would disregard that."

"Listen to me, Alice. If I were guilty I should not be living here at his expense. I only consented to do that when I knew what my condition was. But for this thing I should have refused to accept another penny

from him. I should have drawn upon my own money until I was able to earn my living again. If you won't believe this it shows you know nothing of me. Your reading of my face is all foolishness."

"I would to God I were sure of what you say!" moaned Miss Madden, with vehemence which seemed extraordinary in such a feeble, flabby person.

"You know that I told my husband lies," exclaimed Monica, "so you think I am never to be trusted. I did tell him lies; I can't deny it, and I am ashamed of it. But I am not a deceitful woman—I can say that boldly. I love the truth better than falsehood. If it weren't for that I should never have left home. A deceitful woman, in my circumstances—you don't understand them—would have cheated her husband into forgiving her—such a husband as mine. She would have calculated the most profitable course. I left my husband because it was hateful to me to be with a man for whom I had lost every trace of affection. In keeping away from him I am acting honestly. But I have told you that I am also afraid of his making a discovery. I want him to believe—when the time comes——"

She broke off.

"Then, Monica, you ought to make known to him what you have been concealing. If you are telling the truth, that confession can't be anything very dreadful."

"Alice, I am willing to make an agreement. If my husband will promise never to come near Clevedon until I send for him I will go and live there with you and Virgie."

"He has promised that, darling," cried Miss Madden delightedly.

"Not to me. He has only said that he will make his home in London for a time: that means he would come whenever he wished, if it were only to speak to you and Virgie. But he must undertake never to come near until I give him permission. If he will promise this, and keep his word, I pledge myself to let him know the whole

truth in less than a year. Whether I live or die, he shall be told the truth in less than a year."

Before going to bed Alice wrote and dispatched a few lines to Widdowson, requesting an interview with him as soon as possible. She would come to his house at any hour he liked to appoint. The next afternoon brought a reply, and that same evening Miss Madden went to Herne Hill. As a result of what passed there, a day or two saw the beginning of the long-contemplated removal to Clevedon. Widdowson found a lodging in the neighbourhood of his old home; he had engaged never to cross the bounds of Somerset until he received his wife's permission.

As soon as this compact was established Monica wrote to Miss Nunn. A short submissive letter. "I am about to leave London, and before I go I very much wish to see you. Will you allow me to call at some hour when I could speak with you in private? There is something I must make known to you, and I cannot write it." After a day's interval came the reply, which was still briefer. Miss Nunn would be at home at half-past eight this or the next evening.

Monica's announcement that she must go out alone after nightfall alarmed her sisters. When told that her visit was to Rhoda Nunn they were somewhat relieved, but Alice begged to be permitted to accompany her.

"It will be lost trouble," Monica declared. "More likely than not there is a spy waiting to follow me wherever I go. Your assurance that I really went to Miss Barfoot's won't be needed."

When the others still opposed her purpose she passed from irony to anger.

"Have you undertaken to save him the expense of private detectives? Have you promised never to let me go out of your sight?"

"Certainly I have not," said Alice.

"Nor I, dear," protested Virginia. "He has never asked anything of the kind."

"Then you may be sure that the spies are still watch-

ing me. Let them have something to do, poor creatures. I shall go alone, so you needn't say any more."

She took train to York Road Station, and thence, as the night was fine, walked to Chelsea. This semblance of freedom, together with the sense of having taken a courageous resolve, raised her spirits. She hoped that a detective might be tracking her; the futility of such measures afforded her a contemptuous satisfaction. Not to arrive before the appointed hour she loitered on Chelsea Embankment, and it gave her pleasure to reflect that in doing this she was outraging the proprieties. Her mind was in a strange tumult of rebellious and distrustful thought. She had determined on making a confession to Rhoda; but would she benefit by it? Was Rhoda generous enough to appreciate her motives? It did not matter much. She would have discharged a duty at the expense of much shame, and this fact alone might strengthen her to face the miseries beyond.

As she stood at Miss Barfoot's door her heart quailed. To the servant who opened she could only speak Miss Nunn's name; fortunately instructions had been given, and she was straightway led to the library. Here she waited for nearly five minutes. Was Rhoda doing this on purpose? Her face, when at length she entered, made it seem probable; a cold dignity, only not offensive haughtiness, appeared in her bearing. She did not offer to shake hands, and used no form of civility beyond requesting her visitor to be seated.

"I am going away," Monica began, when silence compelled her to speak.

"Yes, so you told me."

"I see that you can't understand why I have come."

"Your note only said that you wished to see me."

Their eyes met, and Monica knew in the moment that succeeded that she was being examined from head to foot. It seemed to her that she had undertaken something beyond her strength; her impulse was to invent a subject of brief conversation and escape into the darkness. But Miss Nunn spoke again.

"Is it possible that I can be of any service to you?"

"Yes. You might be. But—I find it is very difficult to say what I——"

Rhoda waited, offering no help whatever, not even that of a look expressing interest.

"Will you tell me, Miss Nunn, why you behave so coldly to me?"

"Surely that doesn't need any explanation, Mrs. Widdowson?"

"You mean that you believe everything Mr. Widdowson has said?"

"Mr. Widdowson has said nothing to me. But I have seen your sister, and there seemed no reason to doubt what she told me."

"She couldn't tell you the truth, because she doesn't know it."

"I presume she at least told no untruth."

"What did Virginia say? I think I have a right to ask that."

Rhoda appeared to doubt it. She turned her eyes to the nearest bookcase, and for a moment reflected.

"Your affairs really don't concern me, Mrs. Widdowson," she said at length. "They have been forced upon my attention, and perhaps I regard them from a wrong point of view. Unless you have come to defend yourself against a false accusation, is there any profit in our talking of these things?"

"I *have* come for that."

"Then I am not so unjust as to refuse to hear you."

"My name has been spoken of together with Mr. Barfoot's. This is wrong. It began from a mistake."

Monica could not shape her phrases. Hastening to utter the statement that would relieve her from Miss Nunn's personal displeasure, she used the first simple words that rose to her lips.

"When I went to Bayswater that day I had no thought of seeing Mr. Barfoot. I wished to see some one else."

The listener manifested more attention. She could

not mistake the signs of sincerity in Monica's look and speech.

"Some one," she asked coldly, "who was living with Mr. Barfoot?"

"No. Some one in the same building; in another flat. When I knocked at Mr. Barfoot's door, I knew—or I felt sure—no one would answer. I knew Mr. Barfoot was going away that day—going into Cumberland."

Rhoda's look was fixed on the speaker's countenance.

"You knew he was going to Cumberland?" she asked in a slow, careful voice.

"He told me so. I met him, quite by chance, the day before."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Near the flats," Monica answered, colouring. "He had just come out—I saw him come out. I had an appointment there that afternoon, and I walked a short way with him, so that he shouldn't——"

Her voice failed. She saw that Rhoda had begun to mistrust her, to think that she was elaborating falsehoods. The burdensome silence was broken by Miss Nunn's saying repellently,—

"I haven't asked for your confidence, remember."

"No—and if you try to imagine what it means for me to be speaking like this—I am not shameless. I have suffered a great deal before I could bring myself to come here and tell you. If you were more human—if you tried to believe——"

The agitation which found utterance in these words had its effect upon Rhoda. In spite of herself she was touched by the note of womanly distress.

"Why have you come? Why do you tell me this?"

"Because it isn't only I that have been falsely accused. I felt I must tell you that Mr. Barfoot had never—that there was nothing between us. What has he said? How did he meet the charge Mr. Widdowson made against him?"

"Simply by denying it."

"Hasn't he wished to appeal to *me*?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard of his expressing such a wish. I can't see that you are called upon to take any trouble about Mr. Barfoot. He ought to be able to protect his own reputation."

"Has he done so?" Monica asked eagerly. "Did you believe him when he denied——"

"But what does it matter whether I believed him or not?"

"He would think it mattered a great deal."

"Mr. Barfoot would think so? Why?"

"He told me how much he wished to have your good opinion. That is what we used to talk about. I don't know why he took me into his confidence. It happened first of all when we were going by train—the same train, by chance—after we had both been calling here. He asked me many questions about you, and at last said—that he loved you—or something that meant the same."

Rhoda's eyes had fallen.

"After that," pursued Monica, "we several times spoke of you. We did so when we happened to meet near his rooms—as I have told you. He told me he was going to Cumberland with the hope of seeing you; and I understood him to mean that he wished to ask you——"

The sudden and great change in Miss Nunn's expression checked the speaker. Scornful austerity had given place to a smile, stern indeed, but exultant. There was warmth upon her face; her lips moved and relaxed; she altered her position in the chair as if inclined for more intimate colloquy.

"There was never more than that between us," pursued Monica with earnestness. "My interest in Mr. Barfoot was only on your account. I hoped he might be successful. And I have come to you because I feared you would believe my husband—as I see you have done."

Rhoda, though she thought it very unlikely that all this should be admirable acting, showed that the explanation had by no means fully satisfied her. Unwill-

ing to put the crucial question, she waited, with gravity which had none of the former harshness, for what else Mrs. Widdowson might choose to say. A look of suffering appeal obliged her to break the silence.

"I am very sorry you have laid this task upon yourself——"

Still Monica looked at her, and at length murmured,—

"If only I could know that I had done any good——"

"But," said Rhoda, with a searching glance, "you don't wish me to repeat what you have said?"

"It was only for you. I thought—if you felt able to let Mr. Barfoot know that you had no longer any——"

A flash of stern intelligence shot from the listener's eyes.

"You have seen him then?" she asked with abrupt directness.

"Not since."

"He has written to you?"—still in the same voice.

"Indeed he has not. Mr. Barfoot never wrote to me. I know nothing whatever about him. No one asked me to come to you—don't think that. No one knows of what I have been telling you."

Again Rhoda was oppressed by the difficulty of determining how much credit was due to such assertions. Monica understood her look.

"As I have said so much I must tell you all. It would be dreadful after this to go away uncertain whether you believed me or not."

Human feeling prompted the listener to declare that she had no doubts left. Yet she could not give utterance to the words. She knew they would sound forced, insincere. Shame at inflicting shame caused her to bend her head. Already she had been silent too long.

"I will tell you everything," Monica was saying in low, tremulous tones. "If no one else believes me, you at all events shall. I have not done what——"

"No—I can't hear this," Rhoda broke in, the speaker's voice affecting her too powerfully. "I will believe you without this."

Monica broke into sobbing. The strain of this last effort had overtaxed her strength.

"We won't talk any more of it," said Rhoda, with an endeavour to speak kindly. "You have done all that could be asked of you. I am grateful to you for coming on my account."

The other controlled herself.

"Will you hear what I have to say, Miss Nunn? Will you hear it as a friend? I want to put myself right in your thoughts. I have told no one else; I shall be easier in mind if you will hear me. My husband will know everything before very long—but perhaps I shall not be alive——"

Something in Miss Nunn's face suggested to Monica that her meaning was understood. Perhaps, notwithstanding her denial, Virginia had told more when she was here than she had permission to make known.

"Why should you wish to tell *me*?" asked Rhoda uneasily.

"Because you are so strong. You will say something that will help me. I know you think that I have committed a sin which it is a shame to speak of. That isn't true. If it were true I should never consent to go and live in my husband's house."

"You are returning to him?"

"I forgot that I haven't told you."

And Monica related the agreement that had been arrived at. When she spoke of the time that must elapse before she would make a confession to her husband, it again seemed to her that Miss Nunn understood.

"There is a reason why I consent to be supported by him," she continued. "If it were true that I had sinned as he suspects I would rather kill myself than pretend still to be his wife. The day before he had me watched I thought I had left him for ever. I thought that if I went back to the house again it would only be to get the few things that I needed. It was some one who lived in the same building as Mr. Barfoot. You have met him——"

She raised her eyes for an instant, and they encountered the listener's. Rhoda was at no loss to supply the omitted name; she saw at once how plain things were becoming.

"He has left England," pursued Monica in a hurried but clear voice. "I thought then that I should go away with him. But—it was impossible. I loved him—or thought I loved him; but I was guiltless of anything more than consenting to leave my husband. Will you believe me?"

"Yes, Monica, I do believe you."

"If you have any doubt, I can show you a letter he wrote to me from abroad, which will prove——"

"I believe you absolutely."

"But let me tell you more. I must explain how the misunderstanding——"

Rapidly she recounted the incidents of that fatal Saturday afternoon. At the conclusion her self-command was again overcome; she shed tears, and murmured broken entreaties for kindness.

"What shall I do, Miss Nunn? How can I live until——? I know it's only for a short time. My wretched life will soon be at an end——"

"Monica—there is one thing you must remember."

The voice was so gentle, though firm—so unlike what she had expected to hear—that the sufferer looked up with grateful attention.

"Tell me—give me what help you can."

"Life seems so bitter to you that you are in despair. Yet isn't it your duty to live as though some hope were before you?"

Monica gazed in uncertainty.

"You mean——" she faltered.

"I think you will understand. I am not speaking of your husband. Whether you have duties to him or not I can't say; that is for your own mind and heart to determine. But isn't it true that your health has a graver importance than if you yourself only were concerned?"

"Yes—you have understood me——"

"Isn't it your duty to remember at every moment that your thoughts, your actions, may affect another life—that by heedlessness, by abandoning yourself to despair, you may be the cause of suffering it was in your power to avert?"

Herself strongly moved, Rhoda had never spoken so impressively, had never given counsel of such earnest significance. She felt her power in quite a new way, without touch of vanity, without posing or any trivial self-consciousness. When she least expected it an opportunity had come for exerting the moral influence on which she prided herself, and which she hoped to make the ennobling element of her life. All the better that the case was one calling for courage, for contempt of vulgar reticences; the combative soul in her became stronger when faced by such conditions. Seeing that her words were not vain, she came nearer to Monica and spoke yet more kindly.

"Why do you encourage that fear of your life coming to an end?"

"It's more a hope than a fear—at most times. I can see nothing before me. I don't wish to live."

"That's morbid. It isn't yourself that speaks, but your trouble. You are young and strong, and in a year's time very much of this unhappiness will have passed."

"I have felt it like a certainty—as if it had been foretold to me—ever since I knew——"

"I think it very likely that young wives have often the same dread. It is physical, Monica, and in your case there is so little relief from dark brooding. But again you must think of your responsibility. You will live, because the poor little life will need your care."

Monica turned her head away and moaned.

"I shall not love my child."

"Yes, you will. And that love, that duty, is the life to which you must look forward. You have suffered a great deal, but after such sorrow as yours there comes quietness and resignation. Nature will help you."

“ Oh, if you could give me some of *your* strength! I have never been able to look at life as you do. I should never have married him if I hadn't been tempted by the thought of living easily—and I feared so—that I might always be alone—— My sisters are so miserable; it terrified me to think of struggling on through life as they do——”

“ Your mistake was in looking only at the weak women. You had other examples before you—girls like Miss Vesper and Miss Haven, who live bravely and work hard and are proud of their place in the world. But it's idle to talk of the past, and just as foolish to speak as if you were sorrowing without hope. How old are you, Monica?”

“ Two-and-twenty.”

“ Well, I am two-and-thirty—and I don't call myself old. When you have reached my age I prophesy you will smile at your despair of ten years ago. At your age one talks so readily of 'wrecked life' and 'hopeless future,' and all that kind of thing. My dear girl, you may live to be one of the most contented and most useful women in England. Your life isn't wrecked at all—nonsense! You have gone through a storm, that's true; but more likely than not you will be all the better for it. Don't talk or think about *sins*; simply make up your mind that you won't be beaten by trials and hardships. There cannot—can there?—be the least doubt as to how you ought to live through these coming months. Your duty is perfectly clear. Strengthen yourself in body and mind. You *have* a mind, which is more than can be said of a great many women. Think bravely and nobly of yourself! Say to yourself, This and that it is in me to do, and I will do it!”

Monica bent suddenly forward and took one of her friend's hands, and clung to it.

“ I knew you could say something that would help me. You have a way of speaking. But it isn't only now. I shall be so far away, and so lonely, all through the dark winter. Will you write to me?”

"Gladly. And tell you all we are doing."

Rhoda's voice sank for a moment; her eyes wandered; but she recovered the air of confidence.

"We seemed to have lost you; but before long you will be one of us again. I mean, you will be one of the women who are fighting in woman's cause. You will prove by your life that we can be responsible human beings—trustworthy, conscious of purpose."

"Tell me—do you think it right for me to live with my husband when I can't even regard him as a friend?"

"In that I dare not counsel you. If you *can* think of him as a friend, in time to come, surely it will be better. But here you must guide yourself. You seem to have made a very sensible arrangement, and before long you will see many things more clearly. Try to recover health—health; that is what you need. Drink in the air of the Severn Sea; it will be a cordial to you after this stifling London. Next summer I shall—I hope I shall be at Cheddar, and then I shall come over to Clevedon—and we shall laugh and talk as if we had never known a care."

"Ah, if that time were come! But you have done me good. I shall try——"

She rose.

"I mustn't forget," said Rhoda, without looking at her, "that I owe you thanks. You have done what you felt was right in spite of all it cost you; and you have very greatly relieved my mind. Of course it is all a secret between us. If I make it understood that a doubt is no longer troubling me I shall never say how it was removed."

"How I wish I had come before."

"For your own sake, if I have really helped you, I wish you had. But as for anything else—it is much better as it is."

And Rhoda stood with erect head, smiling her smile of liberty. Monica did not dare to ask any question. She moved up to her friend, holding out both hands timidly.

“ Good-bye ! ”

“ Till next summer.”

They embraced, and kissed each other, Monica, when she had withdrawn her hot lips, again murmuring words of gratitude. Then in silence they went together to the house-door, and in silence parted.

CHAPTER XXX.

RETREAT WITH HONOUR.

ALIGHTING, on his return to London, at the Savoy Hotel, Barfoot insensibly prolonged his stay there. For the present he had no need of a more private dwelling; he could not see more than a few days ahead; his next decisive step was as uncertain as it had been during the first few months after his coming back from the East.

Meantime, he led a sufficiently agreeable life. The Brissendens were not in town, but his growing intimacy with that family had extended his social outlook, and in a direction correspondent with the change in his own circumstances. He was making friends in the world with which he had a natural affinity; that of wealthy and cultured people who seek no prominence, who shrink from contact with the circles known as "smart," who possess their souls in quiet freedom. It is a small class, especially distinguished by the charm of its women. Everard had not adapted himself without difficulty to this new atmosphere; from the first he recognized its soothing and bracing quality, but his experiences had accustomed him to an air more rudely vigorous; it was only after those weeks spent abroad in frequent intercourse with the Brissendens that he came to understand the full extent of his sympathy with the social principles these men and women represented.

In the houses where his welcome was now assured he met some three or four women among whom it would have been difficult to assign the precedence for grace of

manner and of mind. These persons were not in declared revolt against the order of things, religious, ethical, or social; that is to say, they did not think it worth while to identify themselves with any "movement;" they were content with the unopposed right of liberal criticism. They lived placidly; refraining from much that the larger world enjoined, but never aggressive. Everard admired them with increasing fervour. With one exception they were married, and suitably married; that member of the charming group who kept her maiden freedom was Agnes Brissenden, and it seemed to Barfoot that, if preference were at all justified, Agnes should receive the palm. His view of her had greatly changed since the early days of their acquaintance; in fact, he perceived that till of late he had not known her at all. His quick assumption that Agnes was at his disposal if he chose to woo her had been mere fatuity; he misread her perfect simplicity of demeanour, the unconstraint of her intellectual sympathies. What might now be her personal attitude to him he felt altogether uncertain, and the result was a genuine humility such as he had never known. Nor was it Agnes only that subdued his masculine self-assertiveness; her sisters in grace had scarcely less dominion over him; and at times, as he sat conversing in one of these drawing-rooms, he broke off to marvel at himself, to appreciate the perfection of his own suavity, the vast advance he had been making in polished humanism.

Towards the end of November he learnt that the Brissendens were at their town house, and a week later he received an invitation to dine with them.

Over his luncheon at the hotel Everard reflected with some gravity, for, if he were not mistaken, the hour had come when he must make up his mind on a point too long in suspense. What was Rhoda Nunn doing? He had heard nothing whatever of her. His cousin Mary wrote to him, whilst he was at Ostend, in a kind and friendly tone, informing him that his simple assurance with regard to a certain disagreeable matter was all she

had desired, and hoping that he would come and see her as usual when he found himself in London. But he had kept away from the house in Queen's Road, and it was probable that Mary did not even know his address. As the result of meditation he went to his sitting-room, and with an air of reluctance sat down to write a letter. It was a request that Mary would let him see her somewhere or other—not at her house. Couldn't they have a talk at the place in Great Portland Street, when no one else was there?

Miss Barfoot answered with brief assent. If he liked to come to Great Portland Street at three o'clock on Saturday she would be awaiting him.

On arriving, he inspected the rooms with curiosity.

"I have often wished to come here, Mary. Show me over the premises, will you?"

"That was your purpose——?"

"No, not altogether. But you know how your work interests me."

Mary complied, and freely answered his various questions. Then they sat down on hard chairs by the fire, and Everard, leaning forward as if to warm his hands, lost no more time in coming to the point.

"I want to hear about Miss Nunn."

"To hear about her? Pray, what do you wish to hear?"

"Is she well?"

"Very well indeed."

"I'm very glad of that. Does she ever speak of me?"

"Let me see—I don't think she has referred to you lately."

Everard looked up.

"Don't let us play a comedy, Mary. I want to talk very seriously. Shall I tell you what happened when I went to Seascale?"

"Ah, you went to Seascale, did you?"

"Didn't you know that?" he asked, unable to decide the question from his cousin's face, which was quite friendly, but inscrutable.

"You went when Miss Nunn was there?"

"Of course. You must have known I was going, when I asked you for her Seascale address."

"And what did happen? I shall be glad to hear—if you feel at liberty to tell me."

After a pause, Everard began the narrative. But he did not see fit to give it with all the detail which Mary had learnt from her friend. He spoke of the excursion to Wastwater, and of the subsequent meeting on the shore.

"The end of it was that Miss Nunn consented to marry me."

"She consented?"

"That comes as a surprise?"

"Please go on."

"Well, we arranged everything. Rhoda was to stay till the fifteen days were over, and the marriage would have been there. But then arrived your letter, and we quarrelled about it. I wasn't disposed to beg and pray for justice. I told Rhoda that her wish for evidence was an insult, that I would take no step to understand Mrs. Widdowson's behaviour. Rhoda was illogical, I think. She did not refuse to take my word, but she wouldn't marry me until the thing was cleared up. I told her that she must investigate it for herself, and so we parted in no very good temper."

Miss Barfoot smiled and mused. Her duty, she now felt convinced, was to abstain from any sort of meddling. These two people must settle their affairs as they chose. To interfere was to incur an enormous responsibility. For what she had already done in that way Mary re-proved herself.

"Now I want to ask you a plain question," Everard resumed. "That letter you wrote to me at Ostend—did it represent Rhoda's mind as well as your own?"

"It's quite impossible for me to say. I didn't know Rhoda's mind."

"Well, perhaps that is a satisfactory answer. It implies, no doubt, that she was still resolved not to concede

the point on which I insisted. But since then? Has she come to a decision?"

It was necessary to prevaricate. Mary knew of the interview between Miss Nunn and Mrs. Widdowson, knew its result; but she would not hint at this.

"I have no means of judging how she regards you, Everard."

"It is possible she even thinks me a liar?"

"I understood you to say that she never refused to believe you."

He made a movement of impatience.

"Plainly—you will tell me nothing?"

"I have nothing to tell."

"Then I suppose I must see Rhoda. Perhaps she will refuse to admit me?"

"I can't say. But if she does her meaning would be unmistakable."

"Cousin Mary"—he looked at her and laughed—"I think you will be very glad if she *does* refuse."

She seemed about to reply with some pleasantry, but checked herself, and spoke in a serious voice.

"No. I have no such feeling. Whatever you both agree upon will satisfy me. So come by all means if you wish. I can have nothing to do with it. You had better write and ask her if she will see you, I should think."

Barfoot rose from his seat, and Mary was glad to be released so quickly from a disagreeable situation. For her own part she had no need to put indiscreet questions; Everard's manner acquainted her quite sufficiently with what was going on in his thoughts. However, he had still something to say.

"You think I have behaved rather badly—let us say, harshly?"

"I am not so foolish as to form any judgment in such a case, cousin Everard."

"Speaking as a woman, should you say that Rhoda had reason on her side—in the first instance?"

"I think," Mary replied, with reluctance, but deliber-

ately, "that she was not unreasonable in wishing to postpone her marriage until she knew what was to be the result of Mrs. Widdowson's indiscreet behaviour."

"Well, perhaps she was not," Everard admitted thoughtfully. "And what *has* been the result?"

"I only know that Mrs. Widdowson has left London and gone to live at a house her husband has taken somewhere in the country."

"I'm relieved to hear that. By-the-bye, the little lady's 'indiscreet behaviour' is as much a mystery to me as ever."

"And to me," Mary replied with an air of indifference.

"Well, then, let us take it for granted that I was rather harsh with Rhoda. But suppose she still meets me with the remark that things are just as they were—that nothing has been explained?"

"I can't discuss your relations with Miss Nunn."

"However, you defend her original action. Be so good as to admit that I can't go to Mrs. Widdowson and request her to publish a statement that I have never——"

"I shall admit nothing," interrupted Miss Barfoot rather tartly. "I have advised you to see Miss Nunn—if she is willing. And there's nothing more to be said."

"Good. I will write to her."

* * * * *

He did so, in the fewest possible words, and received an answer of equal brevity. In accordance with permission granted, on the Monday evening he found himself once more in his cousin's drawing-room, sitting alone, waiting Miss Nunn's appearance. He wondered how she would present herself, in what costume. Her garb proved to be a plain dress of blue serge, certainly not calculated for effect; but his eye at once distinguished the fact that she had arranged her hair as she wore it when he first knew her, a fashion subsequently abandoned for one that he thought more becoming.

They shook hands. Externally Barfoot was the more

agitated, and his embarrassment appeared in the awkward words with which he began.

"I had made up my mind never to come until you let me know that I was tried and acquitted. But after all it is better to have reason on one's side."

"Much better," replied Rhoda, with a smile which emphasized her ambiguity.

She sat down, and he followed her example. Their relative positions called to mind many a conversation they had held in this room. Barfoot—he wore evening-dress—settled in the comfortable chair as though he were an ordinary guest.

"I suppose you would never have written to me?"

"Never," she answered quietly.

"Because you are too proud, or because the mystery is still a mystery?"

"There is no longer any mystery."

Everard made a movement of surprise.

"Indeed? You have discovered what it all meant?"

"Yes, I know what it all meant."

"Can you gratify my not unnatural curiosity?"

"I can say nothing about it, except that I know how the misunderstanding arose."

Rhoda was betraying the effort it had cost her to seem so self-possessed when she entered. Her colour had deepened, and she spoke hurriedly, unevenly.

"And it didn't occur to you that it would be a kindness, not inconsistent with your dignity, to make me in some way acquainted with this fact?"

"I feel no uneasiness on your account."

Everard laughed.

"Splendidly frank, as of old. You really didn't care in the least how much I suffered?"

"You misunderstand me. I felt sure that you didn't suffer at all."

"Ah, I see. You imagined me calm in the assurance that I should some day be justified."

"I had every reason for imagining it," rejoined Rhoda. "Otherwise, you would have given some sign."

Of course he had deeply offended her by his persistent silence. He had intended to do so first of all; and afterwards—had thought it might be as well. Now that he had got over the difficulty of the meeting he enjoyed his sense of security. How the interview would end he knew not; but on his side there would be nothing hasty, unconsidered, merely emotional. Had Rhoda any new revelation of personality within her resources?—that was the question. If so, he would be pleased to observe it. If not—why, it was only the end to which he had long ago looked forward.

“It was not for me to give any sign,” he remarked.

“Yet you have said that it is well to have reason on one’s side.”

Perhaps a softer note allowed itself to be detected in these words. In any case, they were not plainly ironical.

“Admit, then, that an approach was due from me. I have made it. I am here.”

Rhoda said nothing. Yet she had not an air of expectancy. Her eye was grave, rather sad, as though for the moment she had forgotten what was at issue, and had lost herself in remoter thought. Regarding her, Everard felt a nobility in her countenance which amply justified all he had ever felt and said. But was there anything more—any new power?

“So we go back,” he pursued, “to our day at Westwater. The perfect day—wasn’t it?”

“I shall never wish to forget it,” said Rhoda reflectively.

“And we stand as when we quitted each other that night—do we?”

She glanced at him.

“I think not.”

“Then what is the difference?”

He waited some seconds, and repeated the question before Rhoda answered.

“You are conscious of no difference?” she said.

“Months have elapsed. We are different because we are older. But you speak as if you were conscious of some greater change.”

"Yes, you are changed noticeably. I thought I knew you; perhaps I did. Now I should have to learn you all over again. It is difficult, you see, for me to keep pace with you. Your opportunities are so much wider."

This was puzzling. Did it signify mere jealousy, or a profounder view of things? Her voice had something even of pathos, as though she uttered a simple thought, without caustic intention.

"I try not to waste my life," he answered seriously. "I have made new acquaintances."

"Will you tell me about them?"

"Tell me first about yourself. You say you would never have written to me. That means, I think, that you never loved me. When you found that I had been wrongly suspected—and you suspected me yourself, say what you will—if you had loved me, you would have asked forgiveness."

"I have a like reason for doubting *your* love. If you had loved me you could never have waited so long without trying to remove the obstacle that was between us."

"It was you who put the obstacle there," said Everard, smiling.

"No. An unlucky chance did that. Or a lucky one. Who knows?"

He began to think: If this woman had enjoyed the social advantages to which Agnes Brissenden and those others were doubtless indebted for so much of their charm, would she not have been their equal, or more? For the first time he compassionated Rhoda. She was brave, and circumstances had not been kind to her. At this moment, was she not contending with herself? Was not her honesty, her dignity, struggling against the impulses of her heart? Rhoda's love had been worth more than his, and it would be her one love in life. A fatuous reflection, perhaps; yet every moment's observation seemed to confirm it.

"Well, now," he said, "there's the question which we must decide. If you incline to think that the chance was fortunate——"

She would not speak.

"We must know each other's mind."

"Ah, that is so difficult!" Rhoda murmured, just raising her hand and letting it fall.

"Yes, unless we give each other help. Let us imagine ourselves back at Seascale, down by the waves. (How cold and grim it must be there to-night!) I repeat what I said then: Rhoda, will you marry me?"

She looked fixedly at him.

"You didn't say that then."

"What do the words matter?"

"That was not what you said."

He watched the agitation of her features, until his gaze seemed to compel her to move. She stepped towards the fireplace, and moved a little screen that stood too near the fender.

"Why do you want me to repeat exactly what I said?" Everard asked, rising and following her.

"You speak of the 'perfect day.' Didn't the day's perfection end before there was any word of marriage?"

He looked at her with surprise. She had spoken without turning her face towards him; it was visible now only by the glow of the fire. Yes, what she said was true, but a truth which he had neither expected nor desired to hear. Had the new revelation prepared itself?

"Who first used the word, Rhoda?"

"Yes; I did."

There was silence. Rhoda stood unmoving, the fire's glow upon her face, and Barfoot watched her.

"Perhaps," he said at length, "I was not quite serious when I——"

She turned sharply upon him, a flash of indignation in her eyes.

"Not quite serious? Yes, I have thought that. And were you quite serious in *anything* you said?"

"I loved you," he answered curtly, answering her steady look.

"Yet wanted to see whether——"

She could not finish the sentence; her throat quivered.

"I loved you, that's all. And I believe I still love you."

Rhoda turned to the fire again.

"Will you marry me?" he asked, moving a step nearer.

"I think you are 'not quite serious.'"

"I have asked you twice. I ask for the third time."

"I won't marry you with the forms of marriage," Rhoda answered in an abrupt, harsh tone.

"Now it is you who play with a serious matter."

"You said we had both changed. I see now that our 'perfect day' was marred by my weakness at the end. If you wish to go back in imagination to that summer night, restore everything, only let *me* be what I now am."

Everard shook his head.

"Impossible. It must be then or now for both of us."

"Legal marriage," she said, glancing at him, "has acquired some new sanction for you since then?"

"On the whole, perhaps it has."

"Naturally. But I shall never marry, so we will speak no more of it."

As if finally dismissing the subject she walked to the opposite side of the hearth, and there turned towards her companion with a cold smile.

"In other words, then, you have ceased to love me?"

"Yes, I no longer love you."

"Yet, if I had been willing to revive that fantastic idealism—as you thought it——"

She interrupted him sternly.

"What *was* it?"

"Oh, a kind of idealism undoubtedly. I was so bent on making sure that you loved me."

She laughed.

"After all, the perfection of our day was half make-believe. You never loved me with entire sincerity. And you will never love any woman—even as well as you loved me."

"Upon my soul, I believe it, Rhoda. And even now——"

“And even now it is just possible for us to say good-bye with something like friendliness. But not if you talk longer. Don't let us spoil it; things are so straight—and clear——”

A threatened sob made her break off, but she recovered herself and offered him her hand.

* * * * *

He walked all the way back to his hotel, and the cold, clammy night restored his equanimity. A fortnight later, sending a Christmas present, with greetings, to Mr. and Mrs. Micklethwaite, he wrote thus,—

“I am about to do my duty—as you put it—that is, to marry. The name of my future wife is Miss Agnes Brissenden. It will be in March, I think. But I shall see you before then, and give you a fuller account of myself.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW BEGINNING.

WIDDOWSON tried two or three lodgings; he settled at length in a small house at Hampstead; occupying two plain rooms. Here, at long intervals, his friend Newdick came to see him, but no one else. He had brought with him a selection of solid books from his library, and over these the greater part of each day was spent. Not that he studied with any zeal; reading, and of a kind that demanded close attention, was his only resource against melancholia; he knew not how else to occupy himself. Adam Smith's classical work, perused with laborious thoroughness, gave him employment for a couple of months; subsequently he plodded through all the volumes of Hallam.

His landlady, and the neighbours who were at leisure to observe him when he went out for his two hours' walk in the afternoon, took him for an old gentleman of sixty-five or so. He no longer held himself upright, and when out of doors seldom raised his eyes from the ground; grey streaks had begun to brindle his hair; his face grew yellower and more deeply furrowed. Of his personal appearance, even of cleanliness, he became neglectful, and occasionally it happened that he lay in bed all through the morning, reading, dozing, or in a state of mental vacuity.

It was long since he had seen his relative, the sprightly widow; but he had heard from her. On the point of leaving England for her summer holiday, Mrs. Luke

sent him a few lines, urging him, in the language of the world, to live more sensibly, and let his wife "have her head" now and then; it would be better for both of them. Then followed the time of woe, and for many weeks he gave no thought to Mrs. Luke. But close upon the end of the year he received one day a certain society journal, addressed in a hand he knew to the house at Herne Hill. In it was discoverable, marked with a red pencil, the following paragraph:—

"Among the English who this year elected to take their repose and recreation at Trouville there was no more brilliant figure than Mrs. Luke Widdowson. This lady is well known in the *monde* where one never *s'ennuie*; where smart people are gathered together, there is the charming widow sure to be seen. We are able to announce that, before leaving Trouville, Mrs. Widdowson had consented to a private engagement with Capt. William Horrocks—no other, indeed, than 'Captain Bill,' the universal favourite, so beloved by hostesses as a sure dancing man. By the lamented death of his father, this best of good fellows has now become Sir William, and we understand that his marriage will be celebrated after the proper delays. Our congratulations!"

Subsequently arrived a newspaper with an account of the marriage. Mrs. Luke was now Lady Horrocks: she had the title desired of her heart.

Another two months went by, and there came a letter—readdressed, like the other communications, at the post office—in which the baronet's wife declared herself anxious to hear of her friends. She found they had left Herne Hill; if this letter reached him, would not Edmund come and see her at her house in Wimpole Street?

Misery of solitude, desire for a woman's sympathy and counsel, impelled him to use this opportunity, little as it seemed to promise. He went to Wimpole Street and had a very long private talk with Lady Horrocks, who, in some way he could not understand, had changed from

her old self. She began frivolously, but in rather a dull, make-believe way; and when she heard that Widdowson had parted from his wife, when a few vague, miserable words had suggested the domestic drama so familiar to her observation, she at once grew quiet, sober, sympathetic, as if really glad to have something serious to talk about.

"Now look here, Edmund. Tell the whole story from the first. You're the sort of man to make awful blunders in such a case as this. Just tell me all about it. I'm not a bad sort, you know, and I have troubles of my own—I don't mind telling you so much. Women make fools of themselves—well, never mind. Just tell me about the little girl, and see if we can't square things somehow."

He had a struggle with himself, but at length narrated everything, often interrupted by shrewd questions.

"No one writes to you?" the listener finally inquired.

"I am expecting to hear from them," was Widdowson's answer, as he sat in the usual position, head hanging forward and hands clasped between his knees.

"To hear what?"

"I think I shall be sent for."

"Sent for? To make it up?"

"She is going to give birth to a child."

Lady Horrocks nodded twice thoughtfully, and with a faint smile.

"How did you find this out?"

"I have known it long enough. Her sister Virginia told me before they went away. I had a suspicion all at once, and I forced her to tell me."

"And if you are sent for shall you go?"

Widdowson seemed to mutter an affirmative, and added,—

"I shall hear what she has to tell me, as she promised."

"Is it—is it possible——?"

The lady's question remained incomplete. Widdowson, though he understood it, vouchsafed no direct

answer. Intense suffering was manifest in his face, and at length he spoke vehemently.

"Whatever she tells me—how can I believe it? When once a woman has lied how can she ever again be believed? I can't be sure of anything."

"All that fibbing," remarked Lady Horrocks, "has an unpleasant look. No denying it. She got entangled somehow. But I think you had better believe that she pulled up just in time."

"I have no love for her left," he went on in a despairing voice. "It all perished in those frightful days. I tried hard to think that I still loved her. I kept writing letters—but they meant nothing—or they only meant that I was driven half crazy by wretchedness. I had rather we lived on as we have been doing. It's miserable enough for me, God knows; but it would be worse to try and behave to her as if I could forget everything. I know her explanation won't satisfy me. Whatever it is I shall still suspect her. I don't know that the child is mine. It may be. Perhaps as it grows up there will be a likeness to help me to make sure. But what a life! Every paltry trifle will make me uneasy; and if I discovered any fresh deceit I should do something terrible. You don't know how near I was——"

He shuddered and hid his face.

"The Othello business won't do," said Lady Horrocks not unkindly. "You couldn't have gone on together, of course; you had to part for a time. Well, that's all over; take it as something that couldn't be helped. You were behaving absurdly, you know; I told you plainly; I guessed there'd be trouble. You oughtn't to have married at all, that's the fact; it would be better for most of us if we kept out of it. Some marry for a good reason, some for a bad, and mostly it all comes to the same in the end. But there, never mind. Pull yourself together, dear boy. It's all nonsense about not caring for her. Of course you're eating your heart out for want of her. And I'll tell you what I think: it's very likely Monica was pulled up just in time by discovering—you

understand?—that she was more your wife than any one else's. Something tells me that's how it was. Just try to look at it in that way. If the child lives she'll be different. She has sowed her wild oats—why shouldn't a woman as well as a man? Go down to Clevedon and forgive her. You're an honest man, and it isn't every woman—but never mind. I could tell you stories about people—but you wouldn't care to hear them. Just take things with a laugh—we *all* have to. Life's as you take it: all gloom or moderately shiny."

With much more to the same solacing effect. For the time Widdowson was perchance a trifle comforted; at all events, he went away with a sense of gratitude to Lady Horrocks. And when he had left the house he remembered that not even a civil formality with regard to Sir William had fallen from his lips. But Sir William's wife, for whatever reason, had also not once mentioned the baronet's name.

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Only a few days passed before Widdowson received the summons he was expecting. It came in the form of a telegram, bidding him hasten to his wife; not a word of news added. At the time of its arrival he was taking his afternoon walk; this delay made it doubtful whether he could get to Paddington by six-twenty, the last train which would enable him to reach Clevedon that night. He managed it, with only two or three minutes to spare.

Not till he was seated in the railway carriage could he fix his thoughts on the end of the journey. An inexpressible repugnance then affected him; he would have welcomed any disaster to the train, any injury which might prevent his going to Monica at such a time. Often, in anticipation, the event which was now come to pass had confused and darkened his mind; he loathed the thought of it. If the child, perhaps already born, were in truth his, it must be very long before he could regard it with a shadow of paternal interest; uncertainty, to which he was condemned, would in all likeli-

hood make it an object of aversion to him as long as he lived.

He was at Bristol by a quarter past nine, and had to change for a slow train, which by ten o'clock brought him to Yatton, the little junction for Clevedon. It was a fine starry night, but extremely cold. For the few minutes of detention he walked restlessly about the platform. His chief emotion was now a fear lest all might not go well with Monica. Whether he could believe what she had to tell him or not, it would be worse if she were to die before he could hear her exculpation. The anguish of remorse would seize upon him.

Alone in his compartment, he did not sit down, but stamped backwards and forwards on the floor, and before the train stopped he jumped out. No cab was procurable; he left his bag at the station, and hastened with all speed in the direction that he remembered. But very soon the crossways had confused him. As he met no one whom he could ask to direct him, he had to knock at a door. Streaming with perspiration, he came at length within sight of his own house. A church clock was striking eleven.

Alice and Virginia were both standing in the hall when the door was opened; they beckoned him into a room.

"Is it over?" he asked, staring from one to the other with his dazzled eyes.

"At four this afternoon," answered Alice, scarce able to articulate. "A little girl."

"She had to have chloroform," said Virginia, who looked a miserable, lifeless object, and shook like one in an ague.

"And all's well?"

"We think so—we hope so," they stammered together.

Alice added that the doctor was to make another call to-night. They had a good nurse. The infant seemed healthy, but was a very, very little mite, and had only made its voice heard for a few minutes.

"She knows you sent for me?"

"Yes. And we have something to give you. You were to have this as soon as you arrived."

Miss Madden handed him a sealed envelope; then both the sisters drew away, as if fearing the result of what they had done. Widdowson just glanced at the unaddressed missive and put it into his pocket.

"I must have something to eat," he said, wiping his forehead. "When the doctor comes I'll see him."

This visit took place while he was engaged on his supper. On coming down from the patient the doctor gave him an assurance that things were progressing "fairly well;" the morning, probably, would enable him to speak with yet more confidence. Widdowson had another brief conversation with the sisters, then bade them good-night, and went to the room that had been prepared for him. As he closed the door he heard a thin, faint wail, and stood listening until it ceased; it came from a room on the floor below.

Having brought himself with an effort to open the envelope he had received, he found several sheets of note-paper, one of them, remarked immediately, in a man's writing. At this he first glanced, and the beginning showed him that it was a love-letter written to Monica. He threw it aside and took up the other sheets, which contained a long communication from his wife; it was dated two months ago. In it Monica recounted to him, with scrupulous truthfulness, the whole story of her relations with Bevis.

"I only make this confession"—so she concluded—"for the sake of the poor child that will soon be born. The child is yours, and ought not to suffer because of what I did. The enclosed letter will prove this to you, if anything can. For myself I ask nothing. I don't think I shall live. If I do I will consent to anything you propose. I only ask you to behave without any pretence; if you cannot forgive me, do not make a show of it. Say what your will is, and that shall be enough."

He did not go to bed that night. There was a fire in the room, and he kept it alight until daybreak, when he

descended softly to the hall and let himself out of the house.

In a fierce wind that swept from the north-west down the foaming Channel, he walked for an hour or two, careless whither the roads directed him. All he desired was to be at a distance from that house, with its hideous silence and the faint cry that could scarcely be called a sound. The necessity of returning, of spending days there, was an oppression which held him like a nightmare.

Monica's statement he neither believed nor disbelieved; he simply could not make up his mind about it. She had lied to him so resolutely before; was she not capable of elaborate falsehood to save her reputation and protect her child? The letter from Bevis might have been a result of conspiracy between them.

That Bevis was the man against whom his jealousy should have been directed at first astounded him. By now he had come to a full perception of his stupidity in never entertaining such a thought. The revelation was equivalent to a second offence just discovered; for he found it impossible to ignore his long-cherished suspicion of Barfoot, and he even surmised the possibility of Monica's having listened to love-making from that quarter previously to her intimacy with Bevis. He loathed the memory of his life since marriage; and as for pardoning his wife, he could as soon pardon and smile upon the author of that accursed letter from Bordeaux.

But go back to the house he must. By obeying his impulse, and straightway returning to London, he might be the cause of a fatal turn in Monica's illness. Constraint of bare humanity would keep him here until his wife was out of danger. But he could not see her, and as soon as possible he must escape from such unendurable circumstances.

Re-entering at half-past eight, he was met by Alice, who seemed to have slept as little as he himself had done. They went into the dining-room.

"She has been inquiring about you," began Miss Madden timorously.

"How is she?"

"Not worse, I believe. But so very weak. She wishes me to ask you——"

"What?"

His manner did not encourage the poor woman.

"I shall be obliged to tell her something. If I have nothing to say she will fret herself into a dangerous state. She wants to know if you have read her letter, and if—if you will see the child."

Widdowson turned away and stood irresolute. He felt Miss Madden's hand upon his arm.

"Oh, don't refuse! Let me give her some comfort."

"It's the child she's anxious about?"

Alice admitted it, looking into her brother-in-law's face with woeful appeal.

"Say I will see it," he answered, "and have it brought into some room—then say I *have* seen it."

"Mayn't I take her a word of forgiveness?"

"Yes, say I forgive her. She doesn't wish me to go to her?"

Alice shook her head.

"Then say I forgive her."

As he directed so it was done; and in the course of the morning Miss Madden brought word to him that her sister had experienced great relief. She was sleeping.

But the doctor thought it necessary to make two visits before nightfall, and late in the evening he came again. He explained to Widdowson that there were complications, not unlikely to be dangerous, and finally he suggested that, if the morrow brought no decided improvement, a second medical man should be called in to consult. This consultation was held. In the afternoon Virginia came weeping to her brother-in-law, and told him that Monica was delirious. That night the whole household watched. Another day was passed in the gravest anxiety, and at dusk the medical attendant no longer disguised his opinion that Mrs. Widdowson was sinking. She became unconscious soon after, and in the early morning breathed her last.

Widdowson was in the room, and at the end sat by the bedside for an hour. But he did not look upon his wife's face. When it was told him that she had ceased to breathe, he rose and went into his own chamber, death-pale, but tearless.

* * * * *

On the day after the funeral—Monica was buried in the cemetery, which is hard by the old church—Widdowson and the elder sister had a long conversation in private. It related first of all to the motherless baby. Widdowson's desire was that Miss Madden should undertake the care of the child. She and Virginia might live wherever they preferred; their needs would be provided for. Alice had hardly dared to hope for such a proposal—as it concerned the child, that is to say. Gladly she accepted it.

"But there's something I must tell you," she said, with embarrassed appeal in her wet eyes. "Poor Virginia wishes to go into an institution."

Widdowson looked at her, not understanding; whereupon she broke into tears, and made known that her sister was such a slave to strong drink that they both despaired of reformation unless by help of the measure she had indicated. There were people, she had heard, who undertook the care of inebriates.

"You know that we are by no means penniless," sobbed Alice. "We can very well bear the expense. But will you assist us to find a suitable place?"

He promised to proceed at once in the matter.

"And when she is cured," said Miss Madden, "she shall come and live with me. And when baby is about two years old we will do what we have been purposing for a long time. We will open a school for young children, either here or at Weston. That will afford my poor sister occupation. Indeed, we shall both be better for the exertion of such an undertaking—don't you think so?"

"It would be a wise thing, I have no doubt whatever." The large house was to be abandoned, and as much of

the furniture as seemed needful transported to a smaller dwelling in another part of Clevedon. For Alice resolved to stay here in spite of painful associations. She loved the place, and looked forward with quiet joy to the life that was prepared for her. Widdowson's books would go back to London; not to the Hampstead lodgings, however. Fearful of solitude, he proposed to his friend Newdick that they should live together, he, as a man of substance, bearing the larger share of the expense. And this plan also came into execution.

* * * * *

Three months went by, and on a day of summer, when the wooded hills and green lanes and rich meadows of Clevedon looked their best, when the Channel was still and blue, and the Welsh mountains loomed through a sunny haze, Rhoda Nunn came over from the Mendips to see Miss Madden. It could not be a gladsome meeting, but Rhoda was bright and natural, and her talk as inspiring as ever. She took the baby in her arms, and walked about with it for a long time in the garden, often murmuring, "Poor little child! Dear little child!" There had been doubt whether it would live, but the summer seemed to be fortifying its health. Alice, it was plain, had found her vocation; she looked better than at any time since Rhoda had known her. Her complexion was losing its muddiness and spottiness; her step had become light and brisk.

"And where is your sister?" inquired Miss Nunn.

"Staying with friends at present. She will be back before long, I hope. And as soon as baby can walk we are going to think very seriously about the school. You remember?"

"The school? You will really make the attempt?"

"It will be so good for us both. Why, look," she added laughingly, "here is one pupil growing for us!"

"Make a brave woman of her," said Rhoda kindly.

"We will try—ah, we will try! And is your work as successful as ever?"

"More!" replied Rhoda. "We flourish like the green

bay-tree. We shall have to take larger premises. By-the-bye, you must read the paper we are going to publish; the first number will be out in a month, though the name isn't quite decided upon yet. Miss Barfoot was never in such health and spirits—nor I myself. The world is moving!”

Whilst Miss Madden went into the house to prepare hospitalities, Rhoda, still nursing, sat down on a garden bench. She gazed intently at those diminutive features, which were quite placid and relaxing in soft drowsiness. The dark, bright eye was Monica's. And as the baby sank into sleep, Rhoda's vision grew dim; a sigh made her lips quiver, and once more she murmured, “Poor little child!”

THE END.

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