

**MERRICK  
LEONARD**

THE QUANT  
COMPANIONS

**Leonard Merrick**  
**The Quaint Companions**

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The Quaint Companions / With an Introduction by H. G. Wells:*

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**With an Introduction**  
**by H. G. Wells**

*"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ." – Galatians iii. 28.*

# INTRODUCTION

The chief fault of *The Quaint Companions* is that it ends. Mr. Merrick is no follower of the "well-made novel" school; he accepts his liberties as an English novelist, and this book has not only the beginning and middle and end of one story, but the beginning and some of the middle of another. The intelligent reader would be the gladder if it went on to that second end, and even then he might feel there was more to be said. For this book is about the tragedy of racial miscegenation. It is, perhaps, the most sympathetic and understanding novel, in its intimate everyday way, about the clash of colour and race-prejudice and racial quality that has ever been written in English, and its very merits make its limitation of length and scope the more regrettable. It is not a book to read alone. One should go from it to *Le Chat Maigre* of M. Anatole France; and good collaterals to it would be Mr. Archer's *Through Afro-America* and Mr. Hesketh Prichard's *Where Black rules White*.

On the whole the strength of the book lies rather in the earlier part of it. Elisha Lee is the realest, most touching individuality in this little piebald group of second-rate humanity. He has, as the vulgar way of the studio puts it — *guts*. When he is hurt he swears, and the heart of the reader responds. David Lee is a weakling, diffusing a weakness over all the story of his development. The story loses spirit as he replaces his father. He is sensitive without

strength, and expressive without pride. He *writes*. He wields what is ultimately the most powerful weapon a man can take into his hand, the pen. He has, we are told, the moving touch. What more is needed for pride and happiness? Apparently the normal gratification of a healthy guinea-pig. All Mr. Merrick's skill will not reconcile us to the pathos of David's disappointment at the loss of a pretty fool, or make us see in him and Bee anything more than two unreasonably despondent beings who have merely to look up to rejoice in the gifts of understanding they possess. This second story is not a tragedy, but a misunderstanding, and when Mr. Merrick should begin to elucidate that, when, indeed, he has just got to the gist of his enthralling subject and brought his Quaint Companions together, he sounds a short unjustifiable note of sentimentality – and ends.

Since 1900 when Mr. Merrick closed this story eighteen years have passed. It is now possible to tell a little more of the fate of Bee and David. They did come into closer juxtaposition even as Mr. Merrick fore-shadowed. Indeed, availing themselves of the wilder courage of these latter days, they married. They had no children. Bee developed a practical side that was extraordinarily sustaining to David. She learnt to write and he, adventuring beyond the delicacies of his earlier days, began to produce short fantastic pieces of fiction that had an immense vogue in America...

But why confine ourselves to the limit of 1918? Let us glance on a few years. David's long-deferred success was now at hand.

The younger generation hailed him with the utmost delight, his name became almost a symbol for the revolt against the lengthy, crowded novels of Bennett, Merrick, Wells, Cannan, Compton Mackenzie and their elderly contemporaries. David was inordinately praised by the aged but still active Yeats, and elected an original member of the New Academy of Literature which had just received its charter. Mr. Gosse was extremely nice to him... David's slight melancholy, his effect of ill-usage patiently borne has never quite deserted him, and the subtle charm of Bee's crumpled sweetness became more and more recognisable with the passing of the years...

Perhaps, like the sailor who wanted to fight the villain of the play, I have been a little carried away by the reality of the figures before me. How real these people are! So real are they that one can take them out of their author's hands and look at them in another light and not destroy them. That is a very good test of created reality. Elisha Lee is a memorable and unique figure. He stands for something that has never been done in fiction before, and he is done so well that he must necessarily become a type in our memories. He lives in my mind just as Micawber or Peter Quint live. And I would never be surprised to find myself in a railway carriage with Mrs. Lee and his stepson. How disagreeable they would make the journey! Bee I did actually see the other day, in the Hampstead tube; she did not look up, but I knew that it was Bee. And how admirable, too, is Professor Sorrenford and his comic opera!



But why go on? Yielding to a modern convention among publishers that good wine needs a bush, and being eager to set my admiration for and interest in Mr. Merrick on record, I have written this. But having subscribed my testimony, I very cheerfully gesture the reader on to the book.

*H.G. WELLS.*

# CHAPTER I

Lee had not returned from the concert alone. Gregarious at all times, he never found solitude so little to his taste as when he left the platform – when he was still excited by the fervour of his voice and the public's applause. Two of the other soloists had driven to the hotel with him, and he had taken them up to his sitting-room to give them champagne, and proffer fat cigars. Though his guests resented his prosperity too bitterly to need reminding of it, he had changed his dress-coat for a smoking-jacket of plum-coloured velvet and was complacently conscious, as he crossed his slippared feet on the window-sill, that neither of his fellow-artists would fail to notice that he wore silk socks.

There was a pause in the vociferous conversation. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck a quarter to one. Like his companions, he had arrived here only in time for his engagement, but unlike them, he was remaining a fortnight for his pleasure. His gaze wandered from their sprawling forms to the view outside. The night was fair, and behind the silent Parade the decorous sea of Brighton shimmered becomingly under a full moon. Fifteen years had slipped by since he was in Brighton last, and in his mind they were momentarily effaced. By a perfectly natural process there rose in the stillness beyond the uncurtained window the apparition of his First Love.

Neither of the other men in the room saw it. Indeed she

lingered there only an instant – just for a heart-beat – though some enchantment played upon the scene after she had gone. Lee turned in his chair, and followed the girl into the past. In reality he was thirty-one; in fancy he was sixteen.

She had been beautiful. Even in retracing his youth by the light of experience, he would not wrong her by a lesser word. She was beautiful, and there was justification for his homage. But heavens! In retrospect he was humiliated to perceive his shyness; he beheld his blunders and his ignorance with dismay. How very young he had been at sixteen – how very young, to be sure!

The discovery caused him a distinct shock, for at the time he was convinced that he was exceedingly old for his age, and he had never been back till now to see if it was true. He recollected the evening when she first dazzled him; he had gone to the theatre here, and the overture was not more than half over when his sight was smitten by a girl sitting in the next row. She had the slightly disdainful air which becomes a girl to whom the gods have been bountiful, and whose dressmaker has done her duty. He watched her as man watches woman in the stage when he has yet to realise that she is mortal. She was with a lady whose features seemed familiar to him, and presently he remembered the lady's name. She was Mrs. Tremlett, and the girl could be no other than "Ownie" – "Ownie" who, when he stayed in their lodging-house a few summers since, had been in short frocks. Of a truth it was a very pretty incident, and the ordinary boy would have pronounced it "jolly luck"; but he – O lout! how stupid he

had been, how self-conscious and impossible.

"You and Ownie must want to talk over old times?" A simple, kindly soul, the mother. He recalled her suggestion, and the divinity's involuntary glance at her white kid glove as he released her hand. The sentiment of the evening, his tremors and his painful struggle to think of something to say recurred to him, though fifteen years had gone by since the audience dispersed. As they streamed out, Ownie Tremlett had turned with a smile to look at herself in a mirror in the vestibule. That was vivid, the girl's movement, and the reflection of her figure with the flimsy white thing over her hair – quick with the warmth of yesterday.

His absurdity of the following morning recurred to him too: he had lately acquired a trick with a loop of string, and had tramped the town tirelessly with a piece of string in his pocket, thrilling with the thought that it might draw their heads together. He recollected that at last he had met her, but that he didn't show her the trick after all – somehow the careless reference to it that he had rehearsed stuck to his tongue. He had said, "How d'ye do," and agreed that Brighton was very full. There was a humming in his ears that dulled her voice, and he had been obliged to keep clearing his throat. He was rather relieved to bid her good-bye. Reviewing the period, he could not remember that there had been any more, excepting that he had had the emotion of bowing to her on several occasions. Yes, that was all that had happened really. In the lyric that he made up about her, things had gone further – in that he had saved her life, and married her – but actually he

had said very little, and forgotten her very soon.

Nevertheless she had been his First Love, and his thoughts strayed to her – or to his own boyhood – tenderly to-night. He wondered if she lived here still, and if it often surprised her to reflect that the lad whom she had once known had risen to fame. She must be his own age, or rather more; the fact struck him queerly. The cruelties of life had bruised her now – Time had dimmed the radiance of the girl who had patted her golden hair in the mirror. For years she had not flitted across his memory, but being where he was, he saw her again. His interest revived, and gained ephemeral strength. He hoped she was not unhappy.

The pause came to an end. One of the visitors yawned, and said something about "making a move." Lee went downstairs with them, and they accepted a cigar each from his jewelled case to smoke on their way.

"Of course he can't help it," said the 'cellist to the baritone tentatively, as they got into stride, "but he does grate on a gentleman's nerves a bit, eh?"

The baritone took his arm, and foresaw a cheerful walk.

"What can you expect of a nigger?" he said with a shrug. "I always say it's a damned insult to us to put us in the same programme as a black chap. Have you got a match? – this cigar isn't burning straight."

In the card-room the gas was still alight, and Lee went in for a minute to open a local directory. He had forgotten the number, but her home had been in Regency Square. The name of "Mrs.

Tremlett" appeared agreeably as the tenant of Sunnyview House. Ownie, no doubt, though, was married.

His youth sang clear to him when he went to bed, and it was not entirely mute next day. When he took a stroll after breakfast he smiled at his idea, but turned attentive eyes and hoped for what he felt to be unlikely. It was his humour to declare it possible that he might pass her, and he thought that he would know her if they came face to face. So Elisha Lee, the negro tenor, sauntered along the Brighton front, looking for Ownie Tremlett where he had looked for her fifteen years before.

## CHAPTER II

The month was November, and the King's Road wore its smartest air. This was in the time before Brighton boasted so many places of amusement and while it was much more amusing. People promenaded on the roof of the Aquarium after dinner then; the pier at night twinkled with diamonds; and "La Fille de Madame Angot" was the popular selection by the band. Lee had stopped at a florist's and bought a rose for his buttonhole. In his elaborate toilette, twirling a tortoise-shell stick, and with his hat tilted a trifle to one side, he bore himself proudly. Nearly all of the last night's audience idled on the front. He marked with painful eagerness the quick glances, the occasional whispers he provoked – always avid of signs of recognition, always fearful of reading derision of his race. Sometimes at a look he caught, his teeth met behind his great lips, and fiercely he reminded himself of his empire while he sang. It was not so they looked at him then, these insolent women – with the curious stare that they might have levelled at a showman's freak. No, he could make their cold eyes misty, and their hearts throb faster, sway them, and thrill them – he, with his voice!

The man was to be pitied, though nobody pitied him and there were thousands who would have changed skins with him for the sake of his income. He was not without vulgarities; he was vain; he was prodigal; his failings were the failings of the average

negro, intensified by the musical temperament and a dazzling success; but he had his higher hours, and in these he was doomed to be alone. He could buy gay company, but he could never gain affection; there were many who would laugh with him, but there was none to give him a sigh.

When he reached Regency Square he hesitated for an instant, and then moved slowly up it. He had no intention of calling at the house, but he wanted to look at the windows again. It was pleasurable to stroll round the square. It had not changed at all; it was just as he remembered it. He remembered the bushes at the top of the enclosure, and that they had been known to him as the "brigands' lair"; a military band used to play three times a week on the lawn when he was a child, and he wondered if it did so now. As he neared Mrs. Tremlett's, the door opened, and a woman came down the steps. She walked listlessly ahead of him. His full black eyes dilated, and he paused agape, presenting a rather comic appearance, as the negro so often does when he is in earnest. He thought that he had discerned a likeness to Ownie in her face; but it had flashed on him only for a second – in the circumstances he was very liable to deceive himself.

He saw that she was in mourning – more, that the veil depending from her bonnet proclaimed her a widow. He followed. She turned the corner; and, quickening his pace, he arrived in Preston Street just in time to see her enter a fishmonger's. Her position during the few minutes that she remained there was unfavourable; but when she came out, the



view that he caught of her could scarcely have been better, and now he was tempted to address her on the chance of being right.

She passed him before he had thought what to say, and he loitered behind her discreetly, until she went into a greengrocer's. A display of fruit offered an alternative to his waiting on the pavement this time; he would order some grapes to be sent to his hotel! He would order some grapes and utter his name loudly, so that she heard it; if he had really found Ownie, she might bow.

Her business was concluded, however, and she left the shop before anyone attempted to serve him. Some minutes were wasted before he was free to pursue her. He took hasty strides, afraid that she was lost. Her veil came in sight again at the end of the street, and, dodging among the crowd on the King's Road, he kept at close quarters to her for a long while, wishing that she would cross to the other side and sit down.

At the foot of Ship Street she crossed to the other side at last, but she did not stop until she reached Marine Parade. On Marine Parade there were fewer visitors. A nursemaid narrated her wrongs, while her charges imperilled their necks on the railings; here and there a bow-backed man who owned a bath-chair enjoyed a respite and a pipe; a sprinkling of convalescent Londoners, basking in the summer weather, forgot their shivers in the City of Gloom. The lady settled herself on a bench. Lee lounged nearer. She was paler and more languid than he recalled her; he could see shadows about Beauty's eyes which the mirror had not shown to him at the theatre, but he felt sure it was she.

Though he had believed himself prepared to find her changed, he found the difference saddening – just as if he were a white man, and a girl of whom he used to be fond had been met after many years.

As he drew level with her, she noticed him with a quick frown. Evidently she had misconstrued his interest. He stopped, and, throwing away his cigar with a flourish, said:

"Miss Tremlett?"

The lady in widow's weeds looked surprised and indignant, and he added hurriedly:

"That's the name I knew you by. Don't you remember me? I'm Elisha Lee."

Her expression was astonished still, but the indignation had faded when he heard her, voice.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, are you? I didn't know you again. Fancy! Yes, I remember. It's a long time ago."

"Let me see," he said; "it must be fifteen years. I recognised you at once."

She regarded him more kindly, and gave him a faint smile; "I shouldn't have thought you would."

"How's that? I'm not short-sighted. Do you know, I was thinking about you yesterday; hoped I should meet you – and here you are. I haven't been in Brighton since the last time I saw you."

"Haven't you really?"

"No; it's funny, isn't it? I've often been coming – for the week-end, or a concert, but something has always turned up to prevent

me. Well, this is first-rate! Were you at the Dome last night?"

"No," she said, "I couldn't go; I was sorry. I heard you in Liverpool once. Let me congratulate you – though I suppose you get such a lot of congratulations that you don't care much about them any more?"

"You can bet I care for yours," he said. "Have you been living here all the time?"

"Oh no; I left here when I married; I only came back after my loss." Her tone was bitter.

"I saw," said Lee, "I saw by your dress that – Is it long since you were left a widow?"

"Twelve months. My home was in Liverpool while my poor husband was alive. Why, you used to know him, Mr. Lee! Yes, of course you did. That summer as children we were all together. How strange! I'm not sure if you met him afterwards? I wonder if you can remember 'Reggy Harris'?"

The long-forgotten name awoke memories of a pasty-faced boy peppered with freckles, who had always called him "Snowball." He bowed solemnly. For a moment it deprived the situation of all its sentiment to hear that she had married Reggy Harris.

"Things happen queerly, don't they?" she said with a short laugh. "I married, and I left Brighton for good – and I sit telling you about it when I am in Regency Square all over again. I never thought I should come back any more, excepting on a visit. Of course I used to come to see mother."

"I hope your mother is well?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, "thank you... It was mother who was certain from the first that the singer we read about must be you. I had forgotten you were called 'Elisha,' but she was sure you were; and the 'Elisha' settled it. We did stare!"

"I thought you would. But I'm not the only 'Elisha' where I come from, by a long chalk. Biblical names are very common among us; we like them. In Savannah, where I was born, I daresay you'd find a good many 'Elishas' – and as to 'Lees,' they're as plentiful as pins. You stared, eh? It seemed wonderful?"

"Well, yes, it did. But your parents were – were musical, too, weren't they?"

"My parents came over here as ban joists when I was a kiddy. They played jolly well."

"Are they living?"

He shook his head. "I am quite alone in the world," he said theatrically. "They were spared to see me famous, though; I'm glad of that."

"They must have been ever so proud of you."

"They were ever so good to me," he replied, and his manner was natural again. "They got decent terms in the music-halls, and they sent me to school, and did all they could for me. It was on one of their tours, you know, that I stayed in your house. They paid some people to give me a good time during my holidays, God bless 'em."

There was a brief pause. A little child, trailing her toy spade,

lugged to a standstill and watched him expectantly. He drove her away with an angry gesture; the lady blushed.

"I think I must be going," she murmured, rising. "I've got to meet my baby and the nurse. If you sing down here again, Mr. Lee, I hope I shall hear you."

"I'll sing to you whenever you like," he said promptly. "Won't you and Mrs. Tremlett come and have dinner with me at the hotel one evening? I've got a piano in my sitting-room."

"My mother so seldom goes out at night."

"Let me ask her and do a bit of coaxing!"

"Oh – er – if you can, of course," she said, "though I'm afraid it would be no good. We shall be glad to see you."

He swept off his hat, and took leave of her buoyantly. While they talked he had ceased to contrast her with what she used to be and thought only of the young and pretty woman who was present. Having less refinement than when she was a girl, too, she made him a more intimate appeal. The vulgarities in her blood had come to the surface by this time. At seventeen, to be a gentlewoman superficially is not impossible, but at thirty-two the varnish cracks.

He saw her again, himself unnoticed, as he was returning to lunch. A little nurse-girl—a cheap imitation to be called a "nurse," he thought – pushed a perambulator, and the widow walked drearily beside it. Threading her way among the fashionable toilettes, she looked poor and discontented to him; she looked sullen, like a woman who resents her fate. But she had blue eyes

and yellow hair, and he had never resisted a desire in his life. He promised himself to call on her the next day.

## CHAPTER III

He went early in the afternoon, and he found her more cordial than on Marine Parade, though he gathered that she had been unprepared to see him so soon. He was shown into a small back parlour reserved for the family's own use, and when he entered she was in a rocking-chair with her baby on her lap. At his playful advances it began to cry, and it wailed continuously while he paid the usual compliments, and heard that it was fifteen months old, and christened "Vivian."

"The only one?" he asked, as the noise subsided.

"Yes," she said, "I lost my little girl. How nice of you to remember your promise! I made sure you'd forget."

"That was very wicked of you. You ought to have known better; didn't I show you what sort of a memory I've got?"

"Well, really you did! I can't think how you knew me again."

"Why, you haven't changed much," he said, "you were just as good-looking then."

"Don't be so foolish." She bent over the baby.

"I knew you directly I caught sight of you. You were just coming out of the house."

"What, this house? Were you passing?"

He nodded, grinning. "And I followed you into Preston Street."

"I saw you in Preston Street," she said. "You came into the

greengrocer's, didn't you?"

"Yes, but first I'd had to wait outside a fishmonger's. Oh, I had a heap of trouble before I got a chance to speak to you, I can tell you! You looked so – Lee was 'fraid!"

"Did I?" She gave him instinctively the glance she would have given to a white man. "Oh, I had no idea who you were, you know. I thought – "

"Thought my admiration infernal cheek, eh? Didn't you look me up and down when I came to the seat! 'Sir, how dare you?' you meant. *I knew!*" His jolly laughter shook him, and startled the baby into a fresh outbreak.

"Well, I was all right when I understood, now wasn't I? – There, there, pet, suck his ribbons, and let his mummy talk! – Do you know, I've got something to ask you, Mr. Lee; after you had gone it struck me you might be able to give me a hint. I want to make use of my voice; I thought perhaps you would tell me the best way to set about it? I have written to people already, but they don't answer, and – His mummy will have to send him away if he isn't quiet."

"Make use of your voice?" he said doubtfully. "Oh yes, I'll help you with pleasure if there's anything I can do, but what is it you mean?"

"I was thinking of concert singing; only in a small way, of course – I know I can't expect to do anything marvellous – but I've had a lot of lessons, and in Liverpool I used to practise hard. My master – If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll take Baby



upstairs."

He excused her for that purpose readily, and when she came back her mother was with her. He found that Mrs. Tremlett had altered too, but in the most surprising way. When he was a lad she had looked quite old to him, and now she looked only middle-aged. She was the widow of a novelist who had written such beautiful prose that many people had been eager to meet him – once. Afterwards they talked less about his prose than his manners. He had left her, their daughter, a policy for five hundred pounds, and an album of carefully pasted Press cuttings. During his life she had suffered with him in furnished apartments; at his death she took to letting them. She was a well-meaning, weak-natured creature. For forty years she had related her dream of the previous night over the breakfast-table, and read the morning paper after supper. She religiously preserved the reviews, which she had never understood; believed that Darwin was a monomaniac who said we sprang from monkeys; and that Mrs. Hemans had written the most beautiful poetry in the world.

"Mother was quite excited when she heard I had seen you," said Mrs. Harris. "Weren't you, mother?"

"You were a very bad girl. What do you think, Mr. Lee? She came home and said that a – that a" – she gulped – "a strange man had stopped and spoken to her. Such a thing to say! And she didn't tell me who it was for ever so long."

He understood that he had been referred to as a "nigger." She deprecated her blunder to the younger woman with worried eyes,

and the latter struck in hastily:

"I was just telling Mr. Lee what I want to do, mother. He thinks he might help me."

"Oh, now I'm sure that's very kind of him indeed! You see, Mr. Lee, it's not altogether nice for Ownie here, and of course having had a home of her own, she feels it more still. Well, dear, you do, it's no good denying it! If she had something to take her out of herself a little it would be so good for her in every way; and we always thought she would make money with her voice – it's a magnificent one, really."

Mrs. Harris shrugged her shoulders. "To talk about its being 'magnificent' in front of Mr. Lee is rather funny. But if I could make even a second-rate position," she went on, "I should be satisfied. I'd try for an engagement in a comic opera if I thought I could act, but I'm afraid I should be no good on the stage, and one has to start in such tiny parts. We had a lady staying with us who used to be in the profession, and she was telling us how hard the beginning was."

"And do you imagine that concert-engagements are to be had for the asking?" he said. "Good heavens! But of course you don't know anything about the musical world – how should you?"

"I don't imagine that they are to be had for the asking," she returned a shade tartly; "but if one can sing well enough, the platform must be easier for a woman like me than the stage, by all accounts."

"Accounts," he echoed, "whose accounts? I could give you

accounts that would make your hair stand up. Do you know that professional singers, with very fine voices, come over from the Colonies to try to get an appearance here and find they can't do it? They eat up all the money that they've saved and go back beggared. They go back beaten and beggared. It is happening all the time. My dear girl, you couldn't make a living on the concert-stage under five years if you had the voice of an Angel."

"Not if I had bad luck, I daresay," she muttered.

"I tell you nobody can do it – it isn't to be done. It would take you five years to earn a bare living if you were a Miracle. The Americans and Australians try it for two or three and clear out with broken hearts and empty pockets. It's killing; they starve while they are struggling to be heard. I'll give you an example; a singer with a glorious voice came to England —*I say it, 'glorious.'* I won't mention his name, it wouldn't be fair; but, mind, this is a fact! He had worked hard in his own country – they believed in him there; they got up a benefit for him before he sailed. He had three thousand pounds when he landed – and he spent every penny trying to get a footing here and went home in despair... Do you know that when I give a concert, even artists who *are* making a living go to my agent, and offer him twenty, twenty-five, thirty guineas to be allowed to sing at it?"

"They pay to be allowed to sing?" said Mrs. Tremlett. "But why should they do that?"

"Because they can't get into a fashionable programme without; and it's worth paying for. Singers who have been at the game half

their lives do it, I tell you. I'm not supposed to know. *I* don't get their money; I leave the agent to engage the people to support me, and if he makes a bit extra over the affair – well, he forgets to talk to me about it! But it's a usual thing. 'Easy for a woman'?" He turned to Mrs. Harris again, and rolled his black head. "Easy? Poor soul! She looks so fine, doesn't she, when she sweeps down the platform in her satin dress and lays her bouquet on the piano? Oh, dear Lord! if you knew what she has gone through to get there. And what it has cost her to get there. And how she has pigged to buy the bouquet and the satin dress. You think if you can sing, that's all that's wanted, do you? You can wait and beg for years before an agent will hear your singing. And when you are heard at last – if your production is first-rate, and the quality pleases him, and you are a smart and agreeable woman, and you have found him at the right moment – he will ask: 'How many pounds' worth of tickets will you guarantee?'"

"And in spite of everything, some women get on!" she said. "One would think nobody had ever had an immense success, to hear you talk. One would think there had never been a Patti, or –"

"Ah, Jehoshaphat! An immense success? With an immense success – when it comes – you're the cock of the walk. When a woman has made an 'mmense success' she can fill the Albert Hall, and move the world. She can move even the English, and hold them breathless in the gallery, though they have got no chairs and the notices forbid them to sit on the floor. The singers

who make 'immense successes' are the kings and queens. They mayn't be able to act, or to talk – they may be as stupid as geese; but God has given them this wonderful power; nobody knows why... And sometimes with His other hand He gives them a black skin; nobody knows why!"

At the unexpected reference to his colour, Mrs. Tremlett started as if she had been pinched; and her daughter murmured:

"Well, I thought you might be able to do something for me. I see you only think that I'm very foolish."

"I haven't heard you yet. I just warn you what sort of a life it is at the beginning. I'd do any blessed thing I could for you. What is your voice? Come, sing to me now!"

"Oh! not now, Ownie," exclaimed the landlady; "the drawing-room people are in, dear, and you know they complain so of every sound."

"You are still called 'Ownie,' I see," he said.

"Mother used to call me her 'little own, her little ownie,' when I was no higher than that, I believe " – she raised her hand about a foot from the table – "and I have been 'Ownie' ever since; I suppose I shall never be anything else now, though I was christened 'Lilian Augusta.' My voice is contralto. I'll sing to you the next time you are here – if the lodgers are out," she added with a harsh laugh. "One must consider the lodgers. The lodgers heard Baby crying in the night and were surprised we didn't keep it in the coal-cellar. At least that's what they seemed to mean."

"Oh, my dear," protested Mrs. Tremlett feebly, "I'm sure

they didn't mean that. Mrs. Wilcox had gone to bed with a bad headache, and was just dropping off to sleep. She only said – "

"She complained when she thought it belonged to the dining-rooms; when she heard it was mine, she was astonished at the impudence of a landlady's daughter in having a baby. Oh, I'm not finding any fault with what she said" – but her tone was very resentful – "a lodging-house isn't the place for a child, I know! It's a little hard on poor Baby, perhaps, that's all."

Lee felt very glad, when he rose, that the piano had not been opened. That she was inhabiting a castle in the air he had no doubt whatever, and he flinched from the task of shattering it. The woman of thirty-two who had had "a lot of lessons" was now a pathetic as well as an alluring figure to him; and she did not lose her pathos in the following days, for he often met her, and she never failed to recur to her desire. In their earliest meetings she was considerably abashed in walking beside him, and being conscious of his colour at every step, always declared herself bound for the least frequented parts. But soon she lost much of this embarrassment, and even came to take a nervous pride in the increased attention she attracted. She reminded herself that it was not as if she were with an ordinary negro, or as if he were a famous negro who wasn't recognised. Nearly all the people they passed knew he was Elisha Lee, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in being seen with him. He looked less repulsive to her, too, on acquaintance. She now remembered having noticed niggers with much wider nostrils than those that had looked so

wide to her a week ago; and his lips didn't seem to protrude so much as they had done at first. It was a pity they were so dark. If it hadn't been for his lips he really would not have been repugnant at all; there was nothing to make one shudder in a merely black skin when one grew used to seeing it, and he carried himself splendidly. As to his ears, if they had only been white, they would have been the prettiest ears she had ever seen on a man; little delicate ears, set close to his head. And he could interest her. Like most of his People, he told a good story well, and he was full of anecdotes of the musical celebrities. It made her feel nearer to the platform, to be admitted to the artists' room in his confidences.

But though she hankered after the platform, and spoke of her ambition daily, she was not an ambitious woman in the sense in which many women are ambitious who besiege the offices of the musical and dramatic agents. She was a dissatisfied woman; it was not notoriety she thirsted for so much as means. She wanted money – the road by which she earned it was a detail. If somebody had left her an independence, she would not have been eager to sing at all. Her life was sour to her. As a schoolgirl she had understood that her prettiness was damaged by her surroundings; when she was twelve years old she had felt that the hateful card, printed "Furnished Apartments," in the window ticketed her "cheap." It was the first card to deteriorate that square that has fallen from grace. The society in which girls went to dances and sat on the stairs with rich young men, was as unattainable as a carriage-and-pair. She had nothing to expect;

she looked down on the tradespeople, and the residents looked down on her. She couldn't even write novels as her father had done, and hope to escape her environment in that way.

She had married when she was five-and-twenty – not so soon as she would have married in happier circumstances; not so well as she would have married but for the card in the window. She married a furrier. Even this had been an improvement for her; she wore her first sealskin, and tasted the joy of comparative extravagance. But the business had failed and the bankrupt had died; and then there was nothing for her but the Brighton lodgings again.

It was in his sitting-room in the hotel that she at last sang to Lee. He had asked her and Mrs. Tremlett to luncheon – wondering how much he could contrive to spend on it – but the landlady had declared it was impossible for her to leave the house, and Ownie had come alone – "for ten minutes, just to hear his opinion."

She had begged him to let her sing the song through without interrupting her, and he said nothing until she finished. It had hurt him very much to hear her sing; for a few minutes he had almost forgotten her eyes and hair. His thick black fingers lingered on the final chord of the accompaniment with thankfulness and with dismay; he did not know how to undeceive her.

"Well?" she demanded.

He struck E, F, and F sharp, still hesitating. "You use too much



force there in swelling the tone of your head voice," he said. "Those are your weak notes – they are mine too. They are the weak notes with all tenors and sopranos. After G the crescendo is easy enough, but the E, F, and F sharp are devils."

"You call my voice soprano?" she exclaimed. "Why, my range is – "

"Range? Did your master tell you that the range makes the voice contralto or soprano? It's the colour of tone, not that." He kept striking and re-striking the notes without looking at her. She observed the diamonds on his hands enviously.

"Do you – are you trying to tell me I'm no good?" she asked with a little gasp.

"You have been badly taught," he said, "awfully badly. I expected it. Your voice has never been placed."

"Thank you," she said. "It's kind of you to be candid." She was very pale. "I suppose there's nothing I can do to – to make it all right?"

"I'm afraid not," said Lee.

"And all because I've been badly taught?"

"Oh, I don't say that. It has done harm of course – the natural colour of the voice isn't there; but I don't think – if you want me to tell you the truth – I don't think you could ever have done what you hoped under any circumstances."

There was a long silence. Then she forced a smile, and put out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said.

"You're not going like that? Ah, you make me feel a beast! Do you want it so much? Think of the hardships you'd have to go through, even if you could make a start. Cheer up! Things aren't so bad after all."

"Aren't they?" she muttered. She sank into a chair. "Why?"

"You aren't obliged to earn a living – you have a home, anyhow. Plenty of women haven't that; there are plenty of them worse off than you, I give you my word!"

"There aren't," she cried, "there's nobody worse off than I am! Some people are resigned to drig on all their lives and never have enough of anything. I'm not resigned. I hate the scrimping and scraping, and the peal of the lodgers' bells, and the drabs of servants who think they can be impudent to you because you 'let.' I'm sick, sick, sick of it all. I got away from it once, and now I'm in a back parlour again, with never a soul to speak to. How would *you* like it? But you don't know what loneliness means. How can you understand what I feel – you?"

"Why should you say I can't understand?" he answered. "Because my name is printed in large letters on the bills, and I've got all that you want? I haven't got all that *I* want. Doesn't it strike you that inside here I may feel all that a white man feels, though no white woman will ever feel the same for me? Ah, that's news to you, eh? But it's true. People say of fools like me, 'Oh, he keeps low company, he's happiest in the gutter.' Liars! Some of us take what we can get, that's all. The moon we cry for is over our heads, and we make shift with its reflection in the puddle. I do know

what loneliness, means – when I let myself think about it. Do I think about it often? No, not me, I'm not such a blooming fool: I enjoy. But the knowledge is there, and the loneliness is worse than yours. Money? I make pots of money – I never sing under eighty pounds – money isn't everything. You see these rings? They cost – Lord knows! – three hundred. I'll give them to you. All of them: here – one, two, three, four!" He threw them into her lap. "They belong to you now. Are you quite happy? No, you're not; you still want something. Well, with me it's the same. *I* still want something – and I shall go wanting all my life."

"So shall I," she returned. She picked the rings up one by one, and held them out to him with a sigh.

"What, you won't keep them?" he inquired. Though his impulse had taken a theatrical form, it was quite sincere.

"Keep them?" She looked at him amazed. "Do you mean to say you really gave them to me to keep?"

"Why shouldn't I give them to you? I'll give you anything you like. Go on, put them on, or – they're too big for you – put them in your pocket. Yes, I mean it – they're yours."

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I can't keep things from you like – But you're joking?"

"I mean it," he repeated. "Bless me, why not? I want you to have them. They're a present."

"You must be mad," she faltered: "I can't accept presents from you. It's very kind of you – very generous – but it isn't possible."

He extended his hand an inch at the time. She laid them in the

yellowish palm, and watched him slip them over the finger-nails that looked as if they were bruised. Her heart dropped heavily.

"It wasn't rude to offer them to you, was it?" he asked. "I didn't mean to offend you, you know."

"I'm not offended," she said. "But – but ladies can't take presents from men – not valuable presents, hundreds of pounds' worth of rings."

"Mustn't I give you anything?"

The rings magnetised her; she couldn't wrench her gaze from them.

"What for? Are you so sorry for me – the idiot who thought she could sing?"

"It's not that; it's nothing to do with your singing. Sweets? May I give you sweets?"

"I" – her eyelids fell – "I suppose so."

"What else?"

"Why should you give me anything at all?"

"Because I want to; because I – like you, Ownie... Tell me what I can get for you."

He leant nearer to her. She quivered in realising what he meant. Her physical impulse was to repel him, and the cravings of her mind tempted her to let him hope. She hesitated a moment.

"Get me some sweets, then," she said unsteadily. "I must go, or I shall be late."

## CHAPTER IV

When the time came for him to return to town, Mrs. Tremlett's first-floor lodgers left her, and Lee took the vacant rooms. Though his headquarters were in London, it was understood that he meant to run down to Brighton very often during the winter, and he explained that he would find private apartments more to his taste than an hotel.

Telegrams from different places were received from him every few days, and in Sunnyview House the theatrical element in his nature, found its supreme expression. Profuse at all times, he surpassed himself here. He was infatuated – blind to everything but the passion that had sprung up in him – and he meant to show the woman whom he burned to marry the sort of thing he could bestow on his wife. The housemaid, accustomed to speculating whether the parting tip would be a half-crown or five shillings, was dumfounded by a sovereign almost as often as he rang the bell; the supply of roses in his room made it look like a flower-show; prize peaches were ordered, only that they might be left to rot on the sideboard, and he had two bottles of champagne opened daily for the effect of banishing them to the kitchen three-parts full.

He had not failed, either, to place a liberal interpretation upon "sweets." The rain of bonbons and bouquets that descended on the discontented blonde in rusty crape could hardly have

been more persistent if she had been a prima donna, and his prodigality made the desired sensation in a household where the "drawing-rooms" usually took mental photographs of the joints before they were removed. Mrs. Tremlett it horrified, but to her daughter there was a strong fascination in it, a fascination even more potent than it exerted over the servants – a class who rejoice at extravagance, whether it be their own or other people's. She was not backward in deriving the moral; she, too, might enjoy this lavish life if she allowed him to ask her! The chance had befallen her so suddenly that it dizzied her. She felt strange to herself; she could not realise her point of view. His admiration for her had improved his appearance very much, but it could not quell the race prejudice entirely. She knew that if he had been a nonentity she would have found his homage preposterous; and ardently as she longed to embrace the life that he could open to her, she shrank from the thought of embracing the man.

She was aware, nevertheless, that she was precipitating a moment when it would be necessary for her to take a definite course, and she was not surprised to hear Mrs. Tremlett broach the subject to her one afternoon. The landlady was making out the dining-room bill, and Ownie had been sitting upstairs, in the twilight, while Lee sang to her at the grand piano that he had hired as soon as he was installed. In the morning he practised his cadenzas and phrases alone, but in the afternoon he sang, and had begged her to go up, assuring her that a vocalist needed someone present at such times; he had omitted to add that he

needed a true musician. To sing to her intoxicated him. To listen to him stimulated her. When his fancy ran riot and he thought of falling at her feet (to fall at her feet was his mental picture), he always saw himself doing it in an hour like this – while the dusk befriended him, and his voice was pleading in her senses.

"Have you been in there again, Ownie?"

"Yes," she said, pulling the rocking-chair to the fire; "it wasn't very long, was it? He wants us to go to his concert next week at the Albert Hall; he'd like us to stay the night at an hotel. Of course we should be his guests, and it would be a nice change. I told him I'd speak to you about it."

"Sleep in town at an hotel? Oh no, dear, I shouldn't think of such a thing! Whatever for?"

"Because he has invited us, because he's going to sing. I said I didn't think you'd go for the night, but we might run away in time to catch the last train. I don't much care about going alone – though he wants me to do that, if you won't come."

"Wants you to go alone?" She made a blot, and put down the pen. "Wants you to go alone, as his guest?" she repeated.

"Yes; why shouldn't I? Still, if you'll come too – "

"How can I go and leave everything to look after itself? Besides, it wouldn't be right. As to your going alone, that would be worse still. I'm sure I don't see – "

"Don't see what?"

Mrs. Tremlett hesitated. "Don't you think the servants will begin to talk?" she murmured. "You know what I mean, dear;

you're up there so much – and he's always sending you things. Of course I shouldn't like him to leave, but it's a pity he doesn't see that he oughtn't to – Well, I'm sure the servants are talking! When I wanted you just now about the deposit on the bottles, Ada said, 'Oh, she's with Mr. Lee, ma'am – I'd better not call her out.' I could see what she thought, though I pretended not to notice anything."

"What did she think?"

"Well, dear, she thought that – that he was paying you attentions. And so he is! The poor fellow... It's quite natural, I daresay, that he should take to you, but I should make him understand that he mustn't be foolish, before it goes any further, if I were you. Of course, with a man like that, it mayn't be serious, but you can't *tell* what ideas he may have in his head, can you?"

"You mean he might ask me to marry him?" said Ownie slowly; "is that it?"

"Well, my dear, I suppose that – ridiculous as it sounds, I suppose that is what it might come to; and of course it would make unpleasantness, and we should have the drawing-rooms empty at the worst time of the year. Much better to keep him in his place and to show him that it would be no good."

Ownie's abrupt little laugh sounded. She swung herself to and fro in the rocking-chair rather violently.

"If I did that, I think you'd have the drawing-rooms empty at once. His 'place'? 'His place' is funny! Why, sometimes he's paid as much as a thousand pounds for four nights, and I'm a pauper..."



You take it for granted, then, that if he asked me I should say 'No'?"

Mrs. Tremlett looked bewildered. Her gaze fell, and wandered helplessly. Her brow was puckered when she spoke.

"Wouldn't you say 'No'?" she faltered.

"Why should I?"

"Oh, of course if you could care for him – Of course in the sight of Heaven we're all equal; but it isn't as if he were a white man, is it? And you scarcely know him."

"I know who he is – I might do a good deal worse for myself than marry Elisha Lee. I should be a rich woman."

"I don't think you'd be very rich, dear; it seems to me he must spend every penny he makes, even if he does get a thousand pounds for four nights sometimes. Besides, if you mean to marry him just for what he can give you, I'm afraid you'd be very miserable. You're not a girl, I know, and you must judge for yourself in these things, but I don't think any amount of money would make you satisfied with what you'd done if you don't care for him – and I'm sure I don't see how you can! When I married your poor father – "

"When you married father he had nothing, I know. And you've had nothing ever since. The children of people who marry on nothing are seldom as sentimental as their parents were. You were brought up in a comfortable home, and so you were romantic, and said, 'Money's the least thing;' *I* was brought up in a lodging-house, and so I'm practical, and put money before

everything else. I think," she exclaimed, "I think it's wicked that people who make improvident marriages should brag of the folly to their poor children afterwards!"

"I am not bragging, dear. But when a woman has loved her husband, she never admits that their marriage was a folly, even in her own thoughts. A man – " She sighed. "A man, I am afraid, sometimes does. As I say, you're not a girl, and you must know your own mind, but the idea seems awful to me; I would never have believed you could think of doing such a thing."

Owgie flushed, and her shoe tapped the floor irritably. "Just because he is black," she muttered. "Where is your religion? I thought you said just now that in the sight of Heaven all men were equal?"

"In Heaven, no doubt, he will be as white as the rest of us," returned Mrs. Tremlett, after a slight pause. "But in the meantime he's a nigger, and I can't think it would be right."

Her daughter did not reply; nor did the elder woman summon courage to recur to the matter. She was, however, relieved on the morrow and the next day to notice that her remonstrance had borne fruit and that Owgie's visits to the drawing-room were discontinued. Lee, who passed the two days in hourly expectation of them, was first restless, and then enraged. The besetting tendency of the negro in his intercourse with Europeans is to take affront, and he told himself that her neglect was an insult which she would never have dared to put upon an Englishman. He left Brighton this time without any adieu, and he was absent

for longer than usual.

There were two reasons for his going back when he did. When women say of another woman – as they are often heard to say – that there is nothing in her to explain infatuation, they babble, for there is no young woman, however commonplace, who may not appear unique to some man. One of Lee's reasons was, that his desire to see Ownie again was fevering him; the other was, that he wanted to know if she meant to occupy the box that he had kept for her.

He returned late, and he had no hope of seeing her that night, but he spent the following morning between the windows – his hat and fur coat on the table – waiting for her to leave the house. She had no sooner done so than he descended the stairs with elaborate carelessness, and manoeuvred until they came face to face.

"Oh, Mr. Lee," she said. "So you are back again!"

His resolve to ignore his grievance succumbed to the temptation to reproach her for it.

"I didn't think you knew I'd been away," he said sulkily.

"Not know you had been away?" The innocent wonder of her tone was unsurpassable.

"I hadn't seen you for a long time when I went. Have you forgotten that?"

"A long time?" she smiled. "Two days, wasn't it?"

"It seemed a week to me."

Now she had trembled during his absence, and though she was

as far as ever from knowing whether she wished to marry him, she knew at least that she did not wish to avert his asking her. So she shot a glance at him before her eyes were lowered, and said:

"One can't always do as one likes, you know."

A platitude and a pair of eyes are sometimes potent. He walked on beside her mollified.

"What about the concert?" he inquired. "I've saved the box for you."

"Oh, have you?" she stammered. "I don't quite know. I'm afraid – Have you really saved it?"

"Rather! Don't say you aren't coming – you as good as promised. Have you spoken to your mother?"

"Yes, she can't go – that's to say, she says she can't. There's nothing to prevent her, but she's so funny, you know. I 'don't see how I can go alone."

"Why not? That would be jollier still. Don't be unkind. I should sing so much better if you were there."

"Such nonsense!" she said. "I – I'll see. Of course I should like it awfully. I'll think about it, and tell you to-morrow."

And on the morrow she told him that she was going. She was dogged, though Mrs. Tremlett sighed protests. Her life was dull enough, she insisted; she meant to extract the little amusement that was to be had! Lee went to town again jubilantly. He had arranged to meet her at the station when she arrived, and to travel back with her at night. She was to go up in the afternoon and to take her evening frock in a trunk.

On the day of the concert she found him at Victoria, attended by a gentlemanly person who he explained was his valet. As he greeted her, he tossed away a cigar which he had just lighted for that purpose; he felt it must impress her with his breeding to see him throw away a long cigar. The valet seemed to have little to do but to show that he existed. Lee led her to a brougham, and they were driven to the hotel that was then the most fashionable, and ushered into a sitting-room glorified with roses. A chambermaid conducted her to a bedroom.

Here more flowers did her honour, and on the dressing-table were bottles of scent, the largest that could be bought, and all of different colours. In front of the armchair that had been rolled to the fire was a pair of velvet slippers, with the sort of buckles she had coveted in the East Street windows.

She thrilled with a sense of her importance. The buckles fascinated her so much that she put the slippers on at once, and went back to the sitting-room in them, though in his excessive admiration he had chosen a size that cramped her toes.

She had scarcely rejoined him when a waiter appeared with tea and petits fours. She observed that Lee was addressed as if he had been a prince.

"Aren't you going to have any?" she asked.

"I mustn't," he said. "I must run away in a minute. But they'll look after you all right here, don't be afraid."

"I'm not," she said, laughing. "Did the manager provide the slippers?" She raised her foot coquettishly, and resented her

stockings. "I'm sure you might have a cup of tea and a biscuit if you may smoke – I saw you throw away a cigar as you met me."

He was gratified that this effect had been remarked.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said; "smoking doesn't hurt."

"You say so because you like it. Well, smoke now, then."

"May I?"

"Why, of course you may, if it really isn't bad; but I always thought it was awful for singers."

"Some fools say so. Mario always smoked just before he sang – he was the only man ever allowed to smoke behind at Covent Garden. I do wish I could stop! If you knew how glad I am you've come!"

"I'm glad too," she said. "But I won't encourage you to do anything wrong. Go home, and – " She was going to say, "Think of me," but she felt that her elation was carrying her too far. "And do your best," she added. "Remember I am coming to applaud you."

He remained for about a quarter of an hour, and as soon as he had gone she took the slippers off, and spread her feet on the hearth in comfort.

At half-past six the deferential waiter appeared again, accompanied by another – mute, but seeming to deprecate by his shoulders the liberty of moving on the same planet with her. For the first time in her experience she dined. Perhaps, because she was a woman, the appointments impressed her more than the cuisine, but she appreciated the menu too. She enjoyed the

oysters, the strange dark red soup, the sole with prawns and little mushrooms and things on the top; she liked the bird, and the pink frilled cutlets with a wonderful sauce, the omelette in blue flames, the silver bowl of strawberries and cream inserted in a block of ice. The resplendent sweet, representing a castle, and glowing with multi-coloured lights, astonished her, and the wines that flowed into the glasses stole through her veins deliciously.

She had not long set down her coffee-cup when she was informed that the brougham was at the door. She left the tiny flacons of liqueurs untouched, and ran back to the bedroom, to grimace at her toilette, and dip her puff in the powder again. In the brougham she felt even more opulent than she had done when Lee was beside her in it; she felt almost as if it were her own. She wrapped the rug about her knees, and looked out luxuriously at the gaslit streets. Soon all the traffic of London seemed to converge; the flash of carriage-lamps and the clatter of hoofs surrounded her. Into the cheaper parts of the Hall, the long black files of patient music-lovers still pressed forward. Her demeanour was haughty as she was shown to her box. To her first glance the great building seemed already full, but a thin stream of white-breasted women and shirt-fronts trickled continuously down the red stairway to the stalls. A certain exultation possessed her; they were all here to hear him – the man who was in love with her.

Somebody climbed to the great organ. His name was unfamiliar to her, and she did not know what the title of the

piece meant. He juggled with the stops, and flooded the house with a composition in E flat. She cared little for the organ; it reminded her too strongly of church. She was relieved when he finished. A lady sailed on to the platform and warbled something of Schumann's. Was it a fact that she could not afford her dress? How beautifully it was made! She retired amid loud applause, her finger-tips supported by a gentleman whose functions suggested the ring-master at a circus. She was recalled, and bowed deeply three times, and tripped off with the ring-master once more. A popular baritone received an "encore." A lady violinist had painfully thin arms. Ownie glanced at the programme again – yes, the next name was "Mr. Elisha Lee." The faces in the serried tiers of the vast dome seemed to crane a little; a wave of expectation stirred the throng. There was a long pause before he came.

He bore himself loftily – that was her first thought. The slow, measured steps that he had been taught to make added to his height; the conventional costume, in which his native predilections found no scope, became him well. The unsightly hands were gloved; only his black features and frizzy hair marred the dignity of the man as he stood before the hushed audience, during the opening bars on the piano. He raised his head – the music that he held vibrated for an instant; and then from the nigger's mouth – out over the breathless stalls, mounting high and mounting higher to the back of the far massed gallery – there seemed to float God's Voice. And now nobody remembered that



the features were black; and no man among the thousands knew what message the voice was bringing to the heart beside him, for to all there was a different message that the poet had never told. Men tightened their lips to hide their tremors; the jewels on the women's breasts rose faster. Among the hot, tense crowd that strained over the topmost railings, was heard the sobbing of a little child – but only one soul heard it, and the child would have been a woman then if she had lived.

The music was lowered – his arms falling in studied curves to his sides, gave the signal for applause; there was the moment's silence that was so sweet to him. He bowed, and drew a step back. The audience recovered itself; the thunders broke. She saw fashionable women beating their hands together frantically; the roar recalled him again and again. He responded, and retired with a glance at Ownie. Her eyes were moist, and she shivered a little. She was not an emotional woman, but she was a vain one.

In Part II. he sang early, to conform with her arrangements, and they drove to Victoria, where the valet was waiting with her trunk. Lee guided her to a first-class compartment, and she congratulated herself on her forethought in having taken only a "third single" at Brighton. She observed, though she betrayed no consciousness of the fact, that the guard turned his key in the door after the foot-warmers were put in.

"And so," asked Lee for the second time, "you were satisfied with me?" His desire to flatter her was inordinate, but it wasn't responsible for the question: he was only thirsting to be praised.

"I felt as if I had never heard you sing before," she said; "I felt as if I had never heard *anybody* sing. You thrilled me. You have given me a day I shall remember all my life; it was perfect from beginning to end."

"I should like to give you many such days," he blurted.

"Ah!" She smiled – the faint, appealing smile that had always been so effective with Harris before he married her. "I'm afraid that isn't possible; I must think of this one instead."

Her heart throbbed heavily at her boldness. Even now she was not sure what answer she meant to make; why was she encouraging him to ask the question?

But though he had promised himself to ask it on the journey, Lee hesitated. The question surged to his throat, and swelled immensely and stuck there. A great timidity was on the nigger who had just swaggered before a multitude. The man's heart throbbed heavily at his cowardice.

He leant forward, and tucked the rug round her. He was rather a long time tucking the rug round her. "Is that better?" he muttered. "You're not cold?"

"Thank you. No, I'm as warm as can be. Oughtn't you to keep your wrap round your neck?"

"Not in here," he said; "I'll put it on again at the other end. Sunset is the worst time for me, too – not night."

"That's funny."

"I believe it's the worst time for all singers."

The velocity of the train seemed to him phenomenal, and a

sudden misgiving seized him about the second door: somebody might intrude on them at the first stoppage, in spite of the tip. The minutes flew, and in every flashing bank and tree he saw a danger-signal.

"Why?" he said at last.

"'Why'?" She was at a loss.

"Why isn't it possible for you to have other days just as good?"

He was terribly black – she averted her face before she spoke:

"How can I?" she murmured.

"I love you," he said huskily.

She had no words. He got up, and sat beside her. She felt his hand groping for hers under the rug, and trembled. Should she let him take it?.. He was holding it. "Do I frighten you?" She shook her head. "I'd give my life for you!" he cried. "Oh, if you can like me a little, only a little, I'll be so good to you! You shall never be sorry – I'll give you everything you want. I love you; I sang to *you* to-night. No white man could adore you as I do. Can't you – can't you forget the difference? It's cruel to me. No, no, not cruel; you could never be cruel; I know, I know, it's natural you can't understand – you fill my soul, but you can see no deeper than my skin."

"I do like you," her voice made answer.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she said. She shut her eyes and let him kiss her.

## CHAPTER V

And she did not repent the promise, nor did her mother's consternation have any effect upon her, other than making her lend a willing ear to Lee's entreaties for a speedy marriage. She agreed to marry him at the end of the following month. She even came to accept his kisses without shrinking much, and to offer her own in return for the jewellery that he brought her. Only once during the engagement her reflections terrified her. The thought crossed her mind that he might lose his voice. He might lose his voice and she would have done it all for nothing! He would be helpless; she would have yoked herself for life to a negro dependent on her exertions. What a future! What a hell! In the moment of alarm it even occurred to her – because she attended church punctiliously every Sunday – that the disaster would be a fitting punishment for the sin she was committing in stifling her better instincts. She was abasing herself under a temptation – she might be bowed under a burden as the result. Characteristically she ignored the fact that to afflict her husband in order to point the moral would be a shade unjust; there are many Christians who would figuratively fire the house to roast the pig, like Ho-ti in the Dissertation. And quite as many who can reconcile their interests and their conscience by judicious prayer. The name of "Vivian" figured in Ownie's prayer. She prayed for strength to act a mother's part to Vivian.

Also she determined that before she had been Lee's wife long she would persuade him to assure his life. Experience teaches; and this precautionary measure had been neglected during her first marriage. She was naturally ignorant of the negro temperament, or she would have known that there is nothing from which it is quite so averse as providing for emergencies, and that she might almost as hopefully have begged him to acquire a cream-and-roses complexion.

Meanwhile there were paragraphs in the papers; and presents were delivered from his fellow-artists, and from some of the Musical Societies; and there were presents from the Public. Even Mrs. Tremlett began to say, "It might be all for the best," now. A man who received big silver teapots from total strangers, she felt, was entitled to more respect than she had shown to him. Her grandchild and the adolescent nurse were to remain with her until the honeymoon was over. The wedding took place in London, and Ownie and Lee departed for Paris, where he was to sing.

If Mrs. Lee had kept a journal at this period, it would have been one of the most fascinating of human documents, though much of its fascination would have lain between the lines, since she inherited nothing of her father's gift for expression. It would have been the gradual diminuendo, that told the tale, the change of key. They stayed in Paris nearly five weeks, and before a fortnight had passed, the outcry in her heart was still. She was resigned. She did not acknowledge it to herself yet; that would not have been written in the diary; she did not look it; but her

avaricious little soul was gratified, although her eyes claimed sympathy.

Strangers gave it to her. She was prettier still in the extravagant gowns that Lee paid for – that true loveliness unadorned is adorned the most is as silly a thing as the poet of "The Seasons" could have said – and the Englishmen and Americans in Paris spoke feelingly of "that pretty woman married to a nigger." There are women to whom pity is as sweet as noise to the masses, and Ownie Lee's abortive conscience found all the anodyne it needed in the perception that she was held a pathetic figure. The appealing smile which had always become her so well, gained in intensity. Lucretia might have worn that expression in time, if she had taken drives in the Bois instead of stabbing herself.

And Lee? Lee was intoxicated. If he had wooed her in a fool's paradise, at least the shadow of the tree of knowledge had been in it; he had had no illusions. He had not looked for passion, or for tenderness, or for understanding. It was enough for him as yet to squander devotion on indifference. He shook at the touch of the languid woman who accepted his transports with such sovereign calm. To pour out money for her adornment, to buy diamonds to flash on her fingers and her breast, was his delight. He had a contract for a six weeks' tour in England at six hundred a week, and he spent a fortnight's fees on jewels for her one morning. In the foyers and the streets, when he read the men's eyes, exultance swelled him; they envied his possession of her, these blatant fools who were consequential because they had been born with a white

skin. He cursed them cheerfully in his thoughts, arrogant with power – the woman who attracted them was his wife!

Yet there was one occasion before the honeymoon ended when he seemed almost to stultify himself, when the admiration that she roused enraged him instead, and was responsible for a burst of resentment. They had met a Londoner of his acquaintance, a singer; and Lee the elated had presented him to her gaily. The singer, who was a handsome man, and not a gentleman, was too bent on being gallant to remember to be polite as he ogled her, and curled his moustache, and propped his elbows on the café table. His shoulder excluded Lee more and more; the conversation became frankly a duologue. The art of rebuffing a man without gaucherie is not known to every woman; it is, in fact, the peculiar attribute of the well-bred. Still Ownie was to blame; she regarded such impertinence as a compliment, and she made no attempt to check it with dignity or otherwise. Lee's scowl grew fiercer and fiercer, his lips bulged appallingly; and the Englishman had no sooner bowed himself away than she beheld her husband in a new light.

He rose from his chair, and put his hand on her arm. She could feel that he was trembling, but he said nothing until they had walked some steps. She turned to him, half frightened and half defiant.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's the matter with you?"

"Don't you ever speak to that fellow again," he exclaimed hoarsely. "Do you hear? I won't have it. Don't you ever dare to

Speak to him again. If you meet him, you're to pass him by. Is that the way you think a respectable woman ought to behave? Sitting there and – Blast him, I wish I'd thrown the glasses in his face!"

She was alarmed and angry too now. She tried to subdue him by her tone.

"Have you gone out of your mind?" she said, as steadily as she could speak. "I think you forget who it is you're talking to."

"I'm talking to you," he gasped; "I'm talking to my wife; don't you forget it either! You flirted with him, you know you did. You sat there flirting with him – and in front of your husband; you sat flirting with a skunk you'd never seen before, in front of your husband." He came to a standstill, gesticulating excitedly. "You weren't so ready with *me*, were you? I suppose any man may make love to you if he's white, eh? But take care – you don't know me yet. By God – "

"Hush," she said, "for Heaven's sake; the people are staring at you."

She signalled nervously to a cabman, and gave him the name of the hotel. In the cab Lee's reproaches were so furious that she drew up the windows to muffle his voice from the passers-by. The distance between the café and the hotel was short, and in less than five minutes the courtyard was reached. She sprang out, and hurried to the bedroom while he paid the fare. When he tried the door he found that she had locked it. He called to her, but she made no answer. Then he beat at the panels, and to avoid a scandal she turned the key.



"Is this going on all night?" she demanded, running to the bell-pull. "If you try to hit me, I'll ring for the manager." Her dread of receiving a blow was of the slightest – such fear of personal violence as she had known had faded during the drive – but it was the cruellest thing that she could invent to say on the spur of the moment. She clung to the bell-pull, a picture of agitation.

The threat, the idea that she thought him capable of striking her, sobered him. He entered shamefacedly.

"You needn't be afraid that I shall hurt you," he muttered.

"Needn't I?" she said. "How do I know that? I don't know what you might do, you bully, you – you coward!"

He winced, and stood looking at the ground in silence. Then:

"I didn't mean to bully you," he said huskily. "I – I'm sorry, Ownie, I'll never do it again."

She saw that she was mistress of the situation. Her hold on the bell-pull relaxed; her tone acquired a tinge of shrewishness.

"You won't ever have the chance again," she retorted, "don't flatter yourself! You've shown me what I might expect – I won't live with you."

Though the words were empty enough, they frightened him. He took a step towards her in a panic.

"Ownie!" he cried. And again: "Ownie, I'm sorry!"

"It's not the least consequence whether you're sorry or not," she sneered; she was quite composed now. "I'm sure *I* don't care. It's very easy to say you're sorry after you've shouted at me, and insulted me as much as you want to. Yes, insulted me, you – Ah,

it's what I might have expected! I'm ashamed of having married you. Only a man – a man *like you* would talk so to a woman."

She saw him shiver. She was reminded suddenly of a dog that Harris used to beat. There was a pause, in which she observed the effect of her taunt with satisfaction. After a few seconds she turned away, and began to unpin her hat at the toilet-table.

"It was because I was jealous," he stammered; "I couldn't help it – I didn't mean to insult you. Ah, take that back – don't say you're ashamed of me! Trust me, and you shall see how good I'll be to you in future. I love you, I love you, you don't know how I love you. Look at yourself in the glass. See how beautiful you are. How can you wonder that I'm jealous? Look at your hair – how soft it is! And your skin – it feels like a flower. I'd die for you. It drove me mad to see you look at another man like that. I know, I know you didn't mean anything by it, but I couldn't bear it. Ownie, forgive me!"

She made no answer. She moved carelessly across the room, tossing her cloak on to the bed. Her slippers lay by an armchair, and she sat down in it, bending over her boots. He was on his knees before her in an instant, trying to seize her hands. She snatched them away with a gesture of aversion, and clasped them behind her head.

"I *am* ashamed," she repeated. "You've disgusted me. I'd let any white man make love to me, would I? Anyhow no white, man would be beast enough to say such a thing."

He put out his hands again – not to caress her this time, but

as if to ward off the daggers she was planting in him. The tears welled into his eyes, and, with a thrill of power, she watched one trickle down the black face.

"Forgive me," he implored.

"It serves me right for not listening to advice," she went on. "I ought to have known what you would be. You can't help being jealous? What right have you got to be jealous – how dare you use such a word to me? Do you suppose that I'm never going to speak to any other man again because I married you?"

"I was wrong," he cried, "I know I was wrong – don't say you're 'ashamed'! It's just because I'm a coloured man that the jealousy comes. Oh, can't you understand? Try to make allowances for me. Don't you see, don't you see? – I remember my colour all the time, I never forget it; and when you sat there talking so – talking like that to him, I hated him because he was white. But I'll never complain any more, I swear I won't! You shall do as you like – I know how good you are."

"There aren't many women who would forgive such behaviour, I can tell you," she said sulkily. She thrust out her foot, and he began to unbutton her boot. "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Trust me," he begged. "Be kind to me – only trust me."

She lay back in the chair without replying; her pretty face was stubborn still. He drew off her boots. "Be kind to me," he entreated, "be kind to me." He covered her feet with kisses. He knelt there, suing to her, until she said at last that she forgave.

## CHAPTER VI

But it was not in the woman's nature to refrain from accepting attentions and showing that they pleased her; and it was not in human nature for a husband who loved her to keep his oath and be tolerant. Before six months had passed there had been half-a-dozen such scenes. Lee upbraided more violently – the reconciliations did not always follow so soon, but the order of things was always the same; she flirted, and he abused her, and then grovelled for pardon till her resentment was assuaged. Her perception of the extent to which she could make him grovel awoke a savage instinct in the woman. Though her faults were the outcome of weakness, not of strength, the taste of power excited her, and she often remained obdurate merely to prolong the enjoyment of it. Once she even wounded him for no other reason than to gratify the taste. They had returned from a concert, and to see the man, fresh from his triumph, abasing himself before her so shamelessly, gave her a vicious pleasure.

They had taken a house at Hampstead, a house with an ample garden, and the necessary stabling. Except the practice-room, with its bare, polished floor, its windows curtainless – containing nothing but the piano and two chairs – she had revelled in the furnishing of every corner. She wrote to her mother with pride that "there wasn't a cheap thing in the place." With almost equal truth she might have added that there wasn't a thing beautiful.

She and Lee had one point in common: both admired the ostentatious, and he found his surroundings nearly ornate enough to justify the amount that had been wasted on them.

And she had half-a-dozen servants; the tenor's stepchild was wheeled to the Heath now in fine apparel by a competent nurse. In her servants Mrs. Lee aroused less sympathy than in the men whom her husband called his "friends"; they looked down upon her for having married "that blacky," who was so much more considerate to them as a master than was she as a mistress. Instinctively she knew it, and it was a frequent thing for a maid at The Woodlands to be discharged on the grounds of being "disrespectful in her manner." A landlady's daughter and negro's wife was the last person likely to submit to disrespect.

One or two women whom she met had also appeared to take a different view of her position from that taken by the men; she found feminine society a shade irksome after her marriage. There were a few mortifying incidents from the first; still she knew that people who were envious always pretended to be disdainful; and the benefits were countless, she reminded herself as time went by. But for the knowledge of what was in store, it would have sufficed for composure to reflect that the other women would act just the same, assuming they had the chance. Her real humiliation came in the form of a baby.

It was a little yellow baby who in the hour of its birth was not expected to live. She did not hear that until some days later – and when she was told, she closed her eyes, for fear they should

betray her thought. It was a little yellow baby that she sickened to know her own, and when they put it in her arms, her flesh shrank from it. Lee's joy enraged her. She hated him as he hung smiling over the pillow, was angered by what she felt to be his callousness in supposing she could be glad.

He was enraptured: the child was hers and his. With the passing of the months, he had come to seek more of her than acceptance, and it seemed to him that henceforth they must be one. She was no longer merely the sovereign who permitted – she was the mother of his boy.

But his mistake was very brief, and it was his child who proclaimed to the man that his marriage had been a madness. It was when he saw that she was ashamed of her motherhood that he was ashamed of his passion; it was her contempt for their baby that showed him how he himself was despised.

For her humiliation did not fade, and though she tried to hide the feeling, all the household knew that she never touched the child without an effort. She was humiliated as often as she saw him. The pomp of robes and ribbons, the lace, the paraphernalia of infancy, was painful to her. When he was carried into the air, she winced in imagining the neighbours' comments at their windows. Each time she bent over the bassinet the little face inside looked to her swarthier and more grotesque.

He was christened "David." It was Lee's wish, and the matter had no interest for her. It was Lee who brought him his first toy, and who haunted the nurseries in dread of draughts; it

was Lee to whom the nurse soon learnt to turn when she had expensive suggestions to make. Ownie's affection for the other boy had hitherto been somewhat careless, but now she was stung to jealousy, and knew spasms of devotion which were the outcome of resentment. Though the man remained as gentle and generous as ever to him, she called him, "poor little Vivie" in her oughts, and a giggling servant, who was overheard to remark that "his nose was out of joint with somebody," was dismissed tempestuously at an hour's notice.

The baby's unsightliness increased with its length. The stain of the skin deepened; only the tiny palms and the soles of the flat little feet retained the yellowish tint. The spread nostrils gradually widened; the bunch of lip and the high cheek-bones took more and more distressfully the negro type. Vivian had a complexion like a peach, and his head was crowned with damp little flaxen curls that had been coaxed round a comb; David's face became the colour of a medlar, and his hair threatened to be as kinky as his father's. Even for a mulatto he was ill-favoured, and the mulatto and his half-brother were a queer contrast opposite each other in the perambulator. Strangers used to stop the nurse in the street and ask questions – which she seldom failed to repeat to her mistress. Vivian was robust, and had "taking ways"; David was delicate, and the most that the maids found to say for him was that he was "a very patient baby." He made known his desire for food by the whimper which served him for speech, but if the bottle didn't come, the whimper ceased. A faint bleat, and he

gazed at the undesired world with resignation.

There was no resignation in Lee. He rebelled furiously – rebelled against his wife's disdain and his own weakness, for he remained the slave to a passion which he knew degraded him. This commonplace woman without intellect, without gratitude, without pretences, held him captive by a purely physical attraction against his will. There were hours when he hated her, yet she retained the power to fire him with a look, and torture him with a glance at another man.

She was not the woman to be unfaithful – for one thing, she appreciated the advantages of virtue too deeply to jeopardise them – but recriminations lost their terror for her soon, and she humoured her vanity without pity or fear. And Lee was no judge of character: in his hell, suspicion smouldered too. The recriminations were so frantic sometimes that the servants, startled from their sleep, hung trembling over the banisters; and there were crashes heard, and broken ornaments were swept up in the morning. "The nigger" was supposed to have thrown them in "the missis's face." In truth the madman shattered them to keep his hands off her.

By slow degrees he began to drink, not heavily – enough to give the situation a cheerier aspect for awhile; enough to shorten his career if he didn't check the habit. It was surprising how much brighter the world looked if he took a little whisky-and-water – especially if he took a little more whisky-and-water. Often after one of his frenzies of resentment he would remain away



from the house for a week, though his engagements permitted him to return in two or three days. He would sing at Exeter, or Worcester, or Newcastle, as the case might be, and then go back to town, but not to Hampstead. Moralists in his profession who came upon him dissipating, said that he "treated his wife damned badly." And while he laughed and filled the glasses, the thought of her contempt burned in the man, and at last the suspicion that he could not drown drove him home.

As the child grew old enough to be played with, there came another influence; Lee's love for his child saved him from many excesses. The remembrance of something the boy had said or done would rise in him suddenly and fill him with tenderness. The truest pleasure in the singer's life was when he walked abroad holding his little son's hand, to pick blue-bells where Fitz-John's Avenue stands now, or to bear him westward from the Swiss Cottage in a cab.

David was not mercenary. He jumped at the blue-bells as eagerly as at the cab, though he had learnt already that hansoms always went to the fairyland where presents hung. He was very solicitous about Lee's safety, and lisped cautions against crossing a road when a horse was in sight, and the danger of falling through a cellar-plate into a coal-cellar. Once the nurse told David that the fascinating berries in the hedge were called "deadly nightshade," and that "if he fiddled with them he would die." He was impressed, and "Must never figgle with deadly nightshirt!" was his next warning to his father.

At a very early age there were signs that he was ambitious to secure a reputation as a humorist, notably an evening when he said his prayers in a facetious voice, and met rebuke by explaining that he was only trying to make God laugh. But the phase was a brief one, and he developed into a mournful child who was found to be more like a girl in his character than a boy. "Now Vivian was such an 'igh-spirited little feller!"

David called the lady downstairs "mamma," because he had been told that was her name; and he called his father "pops," because the diminutive came naturally to him. When he was nearly six years old, Ownie closed a door too swiftly and jammed his finger in it. The circumstance caused him to take an unusual liberty – he clung to her knees, howling for comfort. She looked at the finger, and patted him on the frizzy head, and said, "There, there, it isn't bad; suck it – it'll soon be well!" She meant to be gracious. Lee, who watched her face, caught him in his arms, and fondled him till the sobs ceased; and there were tears in the man's eyes which the child was too young to understand.

"I'm so glad you married pops, mamma," said David – "I do like him so!"

It was about this time that he began to understand, in a wordless, instinctive way, that his mother found him disgusting.

## CHAPTER VII

The two boys had a daily governess, and Vivian was her favourite. She was an unsympathetic person, who prided herself on being extremely just, and she was careful to explain that as David was much younger than Vivian, she set him much shorter tasks. She also talked a great deal about "the spirit of emulation, which she was afraid he lacked." To supply the deficiency she offered a prize to the child who earned the greater number of marks by the end of the term. Vivian took the lead, and kept it; and when David knew hopeful moments and promised to catch him up yet, Miss Fewster always answered reprovingly that "she feared he had let his half-brother get too far ahead." After which David the downcast made less progress still.

She found him inattentive. She told him once how bewilderingly far from the earth the sun was, and how comparatively close was the moon. In the same minute he asked her if the moon wasn't "much the nearest to Heaven." She sighed, and recapitulated figures.

David's most violent emotions at this period shook him on the mornings when she was late. It occasionally happened that she did not arrive at all, and then he was free to sit in the garden, doing nothing – "like a girl." (He was always hearing now that he was like a girl; he began to think it would be rather nice to know one.) His feverish hope, as the clock ticked on; the passion of

suspense in which he went out to watch for Miss Fewster, praying that she wouldn't appear; the sickening thud of his heart as she turned the corner, seemed physically to weaken him. And always she exclaimed briskly, "So you came to meet me, eh?" And knowing that she saw through him, he would force a hopeless smile and murmur that he had. His thought of the lost garden tied a knot in his throat during the lesson hours, and the droning of the bees grew so loud sometimes that it was impossible to understand what she said. It was really the garden that stood in the way of his writing his exercises, so full was it of sounds, and scents, and of fluttering shadows that he liked to see. In the drawing-room there was a silver inkstand which he knew the Queen had given to his "pops," and one day he thought that if he could have this royal object to dip his pen in, the exercises might be easier. So Lee, who was nettled by the comparisons, lent it to him gladly, and Miss Fewster shuddered. But the Queen's inkstand did not win David the prize.

"Isn't it strange that he never sings?" Ownie asked Lee reproachfully. "Nearly every child sings, or tries to, when he's playing about; they say this boy can't hum a bar."

Lee frowned, and looked away. She was telling him something that he knew already.

"Well, what of it?" he said.

"Well, isn't it strange? If he is going to sing at all – " She felt that if he had sung, he would have done something to justify his existence.

"Nobody can tell if he'll sing, as a man, till he's about eighteen. He won't sing as a child, of course."

"Humph," she said.

"What do you mean by 'humph'? Who wants him to sing as a child?" exclaimed Lee angrily; "why the hell should he?"

"One would think *you* wanted him to, by your tone!" said the woman. "I'm sorry I inquired, I'm sure. I was wondering what he would do when he grew up if he hadn't a voice."

"He'll do better than *I've* done, I hope, anyhow. There are worse troubles than having no voice."

"That's lucky for you," she retorted; "if you go on in the way you're going, you won't have one long!"

He rapped out an oath:

"Which skunk said that?"

"Which?" she sniggered. "Everybody!"

"Some man, of course! Drinks my champagne, and runs me down to my wife behind my back."

"Runs you down?" she echoed. "Do you think any man – or any woman either – could tell me more about you than I know?"

"And a lot you care, don't you?"

"I should care if you lost your voice," she said shamelessly. David was all ears behind a picture-book during this conversation.

As the boys grew older, they knew that their parents constantly quarrelled, just as the servants, and the tradespeople, and the neighbours knew it. Vivian, as was natural, had imbibed the

servants' view, and held his stepfather a brute who beat "poor mamma" in the night. He called him to David once "a black beast," and in the scuffle that followed, the younger child got badly beaten; his indignation was stronger than his arms. David understood quite early that his father was looked down on because he was black; he realised that it was a disgrace not to be white. That explained why grandmamma had called him "poor little fellow," and why mamma only kissed him when visitors were present. It explained why her rare kisses fell on his cheek like the flick of a wet flannel. He began to see things. And in gabbling his Collects to Miss Fewster, he pronounced with fervour the petition: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord!"

Once he asked Lee where he was born.

"In Savannah, sonny."

Miss Fewster's geography lessons had not extended to Savannah. David wanted to know where it was.

"In America, my boy."

"Are there other people like you and me in America, pops?"

"Oh yes, heaps of them," said Lee after a stare.

David was puzzled. He had always believed his pops so wise, and really he seemed to have done a very thoughtless thing indeed. He would have been more sensible himself.

"If I'd been you, I should have stopped there," he said at last.

"Then nobody would have noticed you so much."

Lee laughed, without being amused.

"You see I wanted to be noticed," he answered; "all artists do."

"Is that why you came to England?"

"Well, it's why I stayed here. I came with my father and mother when I was no bigger than you are."

"Shall I be an artist too, pops, when I'm a man?"

"I hope you will."

"And shall I marry a white girl, like you did?"

"I hope you won't," said Lee from his heart.

"Why?" asked David.

"Because the coloured man who marries a white girl is a fool, David. He won't be happy."

"I don't think I should like to marry a black one, pops."

"Then you'd better not marry at all," replied Lee. He reflected.

"Don't tell your mamma what I've said."

This was before David went to school. Vivian and he were sent to a day-school in the neighbourhood after Miss Fewster turned the corner for the last time, and the elder child reported that "David was an awful little duffer in the playground." The authorities were not much more flattering about his mental attainments. The only high marks that he ever secured were in the composition-class, in which he generally got "double-six" – and was humbled if he didn't. For the rest, he was not ambitious. It was always "Harris" who brought home a prize bound in calf at the end of the term, though it was "Lee" who used to read it. "Harris" was popular, and conspicuous in the lower-school Eleven; "Lee" was a solitary, and usually went out with a "duck's

egg." On the horizontal bar "Harris" was as good as many of the boys in trousers; "Lee" could barely manage to pull himself up to his chin.

He was just ten when he fell in love. She was a governess, who took some of the junior classes. Before he left in the evening he used to steal back into the silent schoolroom to say "good night" to her. He always found her standing at the wide window, looking out at the sunset, or the stars. She was still young enough to have her dreams – old enough to be weary. He never told her that he loved her, but she used to lend him her own books, and once she called him "David," and that day he walked up Belsize Park Gardens quivering with joy. Vivian said: "Can't you talk, fat-head?" – and he couldn't.

From the fly-leaves of the books he learnt that her name was Minnie. The knowledge was rapture; for a week he felt that he moved in a different world from the other boys, who only knew her as "Miss Pugh." Once she asked him if he was fond of poetry. He associated it with "Casabianca" and "The Collier's Dying Child," but he would not have sunk in her esteem for a whole holiday, and he said "Yes." So she lent him Tennyson – a shabby volume, with her favourite passages marked. The pencil-marks were very scholastic and precise, and the passages were very sad and sentimental. Poor Miss Pugh! The hardest duty of the governess was to discipline the woman. But David was too young to read the poetry in the margin.

And he was too young to understand the book, but parts of



"Maud" he read again and again, and they throbbed in him. They translated what he felt while his father sang, and what the shadows were always hinting in the garden. It was as if he had been waiting for a chord, and it had come. The melody of sense intoxicated him. To put the garden into words, and make music at the same time – how wonderful! Not long afterwards a master discovered him poring dejectedly over original and precocious verse when he ought to have been engaged with declensions, and passed sentence, whereat the versifier gave way to tears.

"I don't like to see boys cry when they're punished, Lee; it isn't English!" said the Englishman, meaning that it wasn't brave.

David looked at him, aggrieved.

"I am crying," he explained, "because I couldn't say what I meant." But henceforth he spoiled his paper more guardedly.

When Vivian was thirteen, Ownie complained that he ought to be at a public school, instead of at Belsize Manor. It was "only right," she declared – "they owed him such advantages" – and Elisha, who had never refused her anything but men to flirt with, answered carelessly, "All right, my dear. Why didn't you say so before? Let him go to Eton or Harrow then, where the swells go. Send him to any place you like." The boy's own wish was to accompany one of his chums to a college on the south coast, and though Ownie parted reluctantly with the idea of Eton or Harrow where the swells went, she gave him his way in the end. She told the cook to see that his playbox was properly filled, and his stepfather presented him with a five-pound note. He made

joyous adieux. David, it was understood, would follow him about two years later.

It was when the time came for David to proceed to the college that Vivian began to unburthen his mind to Ownie. The confidential period was not long-lived, but during that Easter recess they used to walk up and down the garden together, disparaging the man who kept them. In one of their conversations, the lad said impetuously:

"I do wish that Dave could be sent somewhere else, you know, mater! I shall get awfully boshed when he joins – it's rather hard lines on a fellow. Why can't he stop at the Manor?"

She sighed. "Will it be very bad for you, dear?"

"Well, a fellow's bound to be boshed. Of course he won't be in my form, but everybody 'll know who he is. It's rather hard lines, having a half-brother who's a blacky."

"Hush! Try and make the best of it," she said, squeezing his arm; "I'm afraid it's too late to send him anywhere else now. We all have things to put up with, Vivie; *I* have, as well as you."

"Y-e-s," he returned. "It's a good job he won't be in my form. I don't mind so tremendously much. The first time anybody gives me any cheek I'll jolly well sock their heads. Oh, I know you have things to put up with; by Jove, I wonder how you stand the governor sometimes!"

"We learn to stand things as we get older," she replied. "What can't be cured must be endured, Vivie."

"He's such a – I mean leaving his being a negro out of it

altogether – he's such a cad. It does lick me how you ever did it, mater!"

"Did it?" she murmured. Her heart missed a beat.

"Well, married him! You never got on with him – I don't see how you could have expected to. Why, I can remember your rows when I was a kid. I think it was awful. I can't make out how you could do it, I'm hanged if I can!"

She winced – the colour in her face fluttered a little. For an instant she was ashamed. Her son looked very tall to her, and her sale looked very foul. But when she answered, her tone was saint-like.

"I had a great deal to consider, dear," she said, "more than you are old enough to understand. To begin with, there was *you*. And another thing: I was very young, and your grandmother – Anyhow I did do it, and we must make the best of it, Vivie, while it lasts."

She drew his arm round her waist, and was humiliated to feel that it lay there limply. They strolled for a minute in silence, both thinking of the last words that had escaped her.

"It's beastly, going out with him, you know," went on the boy. "And he's got no tact – you'd think he'd know a fellow didn't like it! We met some chaps in Regent Street the other day – chaps in the Fourth; I saw 'em grin as they went by. *He* didn't see. He was as cool as a cucumber – lugged me into a shop and stood tuck. He'd have lugged them in too, if I'd given him half a chance. You'd have been much happier if you hadn't taken him, mater;

it would have been a jolly sight better for both of us."

"Not for you," she said; "I'm sure of that, I've always felt that. Of course there are drawbacks for you now, but, later on, you'll appreciate the benefits. I'm sure that when you're older you'll say I didn't make the sacrifice for nothing. I found it hard to do – I prayed to God to make me strong enough; but the knowledge that I was able to bring you up to be a gentleman has helped me to bear it all." She nodded sadly. "When you're a man, and getting on, you needn't see any more of him than you want to!" she added.

So when Vivian went back to the school, David went too; and the little mulatto's experiences there did nothing to lessen the sensitiveness that had been bred in him. He found his form-mates brutal, and his masters contemptuous. Probably he exaggerated their contempt – circumstances had made him morbid – but those with whom he was brought in contact were not magnanimous, and neither his race nor his temperament was any passport to their favour.

He was bullied atrociously. The taunt of "dirty nigger" embittered his life. When it could not be made aloud, it was written on scraps of paper and passed to him under cover of Latin grammars. A favourite amusement of the form was to pin him to the ground while one of the number set fire to his hair, and when it was discovered that he was the weakest among them, they punched his head and wrenched his ears twenty times a day. Often he used to drag himself away from their sports, to hide

in the Gothic corridors, or slink round the great cricket field, crying with pain; but to be found "blubbing" meant worse pain to follow, for then half-a-dozen stalwart lads would hack his shins, and twist his puny arms till he writhed on his knees in agony.

What he dreaded most were the classes which were held twice a week in an annexe of the college. The master who took these always withdrew for five or ten minutes in the middle of the afternoon, and no sooner had he gone than a shower of blows drove David to mount a desk by the window and keep watch, while the other boys had larks. The outcome was always the same. His cry of "Cave!" suppressed the frolics in good time, but the uplifted face of the little beaten sentry through the glass met the master's eyes the instant he set foot in the courtyard, and he re-entered with a stereotyped inquiry:

"Has anybody moved here besides Lee?"

To this there was a chorus of "No, sir."

Then he said, "Lee, fifty lines;" and by-and-by he came to say, "Two hundred lines." So twice a week David got an imposition as well as the kicks and blows. Apparently it never struck the man as noteworthy that the undesirable post of sentinel was always filled by the same boy; it never occurred to him to draw deductions from the fact. He was abnormally obtuse, even for a schoolmaster.

Elisha had not been sent to a public school himself, and when David went home, a false shame kept him from owning that he was ill-treated. However, as he got bigger, the worst of his

physical sufferings ceased. But he was always twitted with his colour, always made to feel that he was a lower thing than the lusty young English lads who insulted him with filthy verses and obscene cartoons. He never found a chum in the college in all the terms that he was there; his real companion was his father in the holidays.

It was a queer fellowship between the morbid youth and the despised husband. Before David was sixteen, he was Lee's confidant in all matters. He heard about his debts and debauches, and his difficulty in reconciling the diminished income with the expenses. He also advised. Though the fees remained the same, the engagements were far fewer, and the prodigal father waded in a sea of debt perpetually now; he talked of the money "I used to make," and of "What my voice was once." There was an afternoon in the practice-room when he gave way to despair, sobbing across the piano like a mourner across a grave; but that was after a late night when his nerves were out of order. David prescribed a couple of glasses of port and a cigar for him, and he was soon cheerful enough to suggest a dinner up West. The tenor and his ugly son were familiar figures in the Regent Street restaurants, "Café, and Café-au-lait" somebody had nick-named them.

At the age of sixteen "Café-au-lait" was a man in his knowledge of one side of life – a man in his reflections and self-restraint – though he still trembled under the masters' glances, and boggled over his Cæsar. He boggled, indeed, over everything

except the very occasional essays that demanded no dry-as-dust facts; when he was at liberty to draw on his imagination the essays were a pleasure to him. Lee's was not the nature to expurgate the subject which rankled in him most, and the warning that had escaped him to the child was amplified a thousandfold to the boy.

David understood. Marriage had spoiled his father's life; marriage was the forbidden fruit in his own. The warnings seemed superfluous to him, after what he had seen at home and at school. He no longer wanted to know a girl; he laughed when Lee said, "Remember all I've told you when you're mad about some woman yourself. Your wife would treat you as your mother has treated me. You'd suffer hell every time a white man spoke to her."

"There's no fear of *my* ever marrying, father."

"Ah!" said Lee, who knew more of temptation.

"I've seen too much."

"But you haven't seen the woman. When she comes along you'll fool yourself. She'll be 'so different' from everybody else; I thought your mother 'so different' before I got her. By God, we hadn't been married a month when she threw it in my face that I was a negro!"

David brought him some verses one day, and asked him nervously if they could be set and sung. For the first time he was timid with his father.

Lee said, "Why do you break your head in your holidays writing things? You're always scribbling in your bedroom, I hear.

What do you write about, sonny?"

David looked more confused still.

"Things come," he said; "there's so much to write about. I hope –"

"What do you hope?"

"I hope I shall always write. I've got it in me," he blurted.

"You just pray for a voice instead," his father answered; "it will pay you a heap better. Let fools hammer out the words for *you*! It's not the chaps that write things who have good times, my boy; it's the fellows that sing, or publish 'em." He read the lines slowly, while the author trembled. "I don't understand what it's meant to be," he said; "is it a hunting song? It's all about the fox's suffering, instead of the people's sport."

David winced: "The fox does suffer, doesn't he?"

"I daresay; but the people enjoy themselves. A hunting song must be jolly – Pink and Tallyho! Have you ever been to a meet? It's a very pretty sight, let me tell you."

"I know it is; but I didn't try to feel like the people who dress up to kill the fox – I tried to feel like the fox they all want to kill."

"What's the good of that? Foxes don't, buy songs. You should have thought about the fun and the cheers. It's all on the wrong side; it's wrong-headed, that's what it is."

"I did think about the cheers – I thought how they must sound to the fox. And I thought when he sees a crowd of big men and women on horses, with a pack of hounds, chasing him to death, the field must look like the world to his fright. He has run till he's



breathless, his legs 'll hardly carry him. The crowd are gaining on him and his heart feels as if it's going to burst. They swoop nearer and nearer, and he's bedraggled, and panting, and dead beat. Oh yes, I thought of the cheers – he hears them right to the end. And then the dogs fall on him – such a lot of dogs – and a man sticks a knife into his body, and the lady who's there when he dies carries away a piece of the corpse, and feels proud. It sounds like a game of savages, father."

"Whatever it is, you won't alter it, sonny. You don't suppose you're going to make the world any better?"

This was really David's most sanguine hope. But he looked modest.

"Anyhow, I can write the truth," he said.

"The truth? Who the devil wants the truth?" replied the nigger. "People hate the truth, especially English people; there's nothing English people detest so much. And they always deny it... I'll tell you what you might do if you feel like that – you might make it a bull-fight and go for the brutality of foreigners. But even then it would be no good for music. If you want to do lyrics, you must write about love, or the valour of Englishmen. Nothing else is any use. Nobody would sing this."

"I don't want to write about love," said David; "I only write what I feel. There are plenty of things in the world besides women and war. 'No good for music'? Why, some of it *is* music! Listen to this." He declaimed his pet stanza entreatingly, and waxed boastful. "Can't you hear it? They came, the last two lines, all by

themselves; they just ran into my head, and sang themselves on to the paper. I know they're good. You'll see! Wait till I'm famous. When I bring out a volume of poems, and everybody is talking about it, you won't think I'm so stupid for wanting to write. I tell you I've got it in me."

"Lord! I wish you had had a better mother," said Lee, dismayed at literary ambition.

Owne, grown rather stout, and puffy under the eyes, used to read novels in the drawing-room, while the pair strolled up and down the garden, talking. She was forty-nine now. When they turned, the lad could see her – the woman who was contemptuous of them both. She wore black; Mrs. Tremlett had recently died. The crape recalled to Lee the little parlour in Regency Square, the period of his courtship.

Her mind was at this time chiefly occupied by the thought of Vivian. He had left school, and she wondered what was to be done with him. He himself had no definite views on the subject. When she broached the matter to him, he said lightly that he was hanged if he knew. On the whole, he thought he preferred the Army, and as the Army was out of the question, he would try his hand at anything they liked. He was cheerful and indifferent.

"Business?" she suggested.

"I don't mind," he said. "Where's the oof to come from, though? Will he part?" Between Owne and Vivian, Lee was generally referred to as "he."

"I daresay a little could be found to give you a start with,

dear, but I don't know what you could do. I had better speak to him about it. You're so young, and you see we don't know many business people."

"I'll tell you what – I'll go to the Cape," he said. "Singleton, a fellow who left last term, is going out there. That would be rather jolly. It would suit me better than an office."

"Go to the Cape?" exclaimed Ownie. "Whatever would you do at the Cape? Don't talk nonsense; I'm not going to have you packed off to the world's end like that. You must stop in London, where I can see you. You're all I've got, remember!" She was hurt that he could propose such a thing.

"Oh, well," he demurred, "that's rot, you know, mater! A fellow can't sit in his mother's lap all his life. Singleton has got a mother too, I suppose, but it doesn't prevent him doing the best he can for himself."

Ownie was silent for a moment. Then she said: "We must try to find you something that you'll like quite as well, dear," and there was a little touch of sadness in her voice. She was reluctant to acknowledge it, but it had forced itself upon her more than once that her handsome young son was a shade selfish. It was the fault that jarred upon her most in others.

Time had not left her complacency unimpaired. The menace of the future was in her reveries, and she had lost her youth, and her figure, and her admirers. Decrepit foreigners who smelt of pomatum, and dyed their moustaches purple, were the only men who languished at her now. Even her youngest captives had

ceased to adore her when they heard Vivian, five feet ten in his socks, calling her "Mater." And she had never reproached him, even in her thoughts; she felt it was rather cruel that he wasn't more attached to her.

She very often attempted to discuss the subject of his career with Lee; but Lee found it easier to tip his stepson an occasional sovereign and let him loaf, than to give the matter serious consideration. Vivian was idle for the best part of a year; and when he made a beginning it was only in a West-End concert-hall as assistant business-manager. It was a depressing drop from the altitude on which his mother had foreseen him – he was paid thirty shillings a week, and the position was quite subordinate. But unless she sold some of her jewellery to put him into a profession, there seemed to be nothing else for him to do – and he did not incline to any profession except the Army.

So the elder boy went to town every day now and began to cultivate the air of an impresario, and the younger continued to meet his Muse clandestinely in the college grounds and write surreptitious verse. Then, in the middle of a term – one morning during the Euclid hour – he was summoned from the college by telegram, and sped to the station sick with fear. Lee was in the provinces, very ill.

## CHAPTER VIII

In the first days of an intended tour he had taken a slight cold. He had to leave for Birmingham on the morrow, and he reached it chilled and shivering. To sing was out of the question. He remained in the hotel, and ordered hot drinks and additional blankets. Next morning he woke with a cough, and sent for a doctor; but the cough grew worse in spite of medical aid, and when he was joined by a companion whom he had been expecting, he was found in bed with pneumonia.

He was asleep when David arrived. In the sitting-room the companion was having dinner. David accepted her presence without astonishment. She said she supposed he must be hungry, and told him to ring the bell; he answered that he was not hungry in the least. She had peroxide-of-hydrogen hair, and painted cheeks, and a coarse voice. He sat in an armchair by the fire, and looked at her.

"How soon shall I be able to go in?" he asked, trembling.

"They'll tell 'im you're here when 'e wakes up," she said, with her mouth full. "You'd better have something to eat, you know. 'David' your name is, isn't it?"

"Yes. I couldn't eat anything, thank you. Who is taking care of him?" He knew already that the companion wasn't.

"The doctor sent round two nurses from the hospital – a day nurse and a night nurse. He's in a bad way. You should see how

thin 'e's got."

"Will he – get well?" inquired his son, with a jerk.

"Let soap so," said the woman. She refilled her glass, and emptied the bottle. "Have some champagne?"

He shook his head. "I wish he'd wake."

"You better had," she rejoined; "there's nothing like champagne when you're feeling low." The waiter reappeared with the sweets. "Bring up another bottle," she said, "and a green chartrooze. I don't think I'll take any of those. What's that one – the floppy thing with the pink-and-white stuff on it?"

The waiter murmured that it was trifle.

"No, I don't want any." She made a wretched pun, and told him to pass her the cigarettes. The box was a silver one that belonged to the sick man; the boy winced to see her careless hand thrust in it. He wondered what the waiter thought of her, wondered that his father wasn't ashamed – and knew a gust of self-reproach for condemning him to-night. A lump rose suddenly in his throat, his eyeballs pricked; he stared hard at the fire in a struggle to keep back the tears that were starting... To his shame he felt one trickling down his cheek.

"Don't you smoke?" asked the woman.

"Not now," he muttered, and knew that his voice had betrayed him.

She turned to him surprised. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," he said angrily; "what should there be?"

In the road, a piano-organ reeled out a cadenza, and then

stopped short. After the sharp silence that ensued, the roll of the traffic seemed to fill the room. The cork popped, and he drank his wine at a draught.

"Go on."

"I don't want any more."

"Sure?" She tilted her glass. "Well, here's to Temperance, and down with champagne!"

Though he no longer watched her, he was intensely conscious of her presence; it weighed upon his senses, he resented it with every nerve. The odour of her cigarette permeated his thoughts while he waited, and he fancied that he could hear her breathe.

The nurse came in, and said that Lee was asking for him. She warned him not to remain more than a few minutes. The sight of her strengthened the boy. As he followed this clean-faced woman in her sober dress, a tinge of confidence lightened his apprehension.

Lee had altered painfully. His words were whispers. In the first moments there seemed something unreal in seeing him lying there so weak.

"Davie."

"Father."

"Sit down."

"Why didn't you wire before, father?"

"It was time enough."

"You're getting on nicely, they say."

"Perhaps."

"Do they know at home?"

Lee bent his head. "The papers. But I don't want her here. I told her she needn't come."

"But she may, and – "

"Oh no; she won't want to."

There was a pause. Then he said in firmer tones:

"This is a bad business, sonny."

"It'll be all right."

"Have you seen Julia?"

"The woman in there? Yes."

"She's a good sort, Julia – looks after everything. Most of 'em would have cleared out and left me."

David wondered what awaited her elsewhere. He turned very cold – the illusion frightened him, for in health Lee had had no illusions.

"A good sort," murmured the man, "eh?"

"Yes," said the boy, faintly.

"She's got a friend here now – comes in to see her sometimes – but it must be very slow for her; not many women would have stopped. See that she's comfortable, Davie."

"I'll see to it, father."

Lee closed his eyes, and his thoughts wandered through the years to a morning when he followed a widow about Brighton, and overtook her on Marine Parade. The sun shone out to him again, and he heard the wash of the waves on the beach. He came back to David.



"If I don't pull through, it'll be an awful mess," he said. "God knows what I owe I I wish I'd put a bit by for you."

"You'll have plenty of time to put by in, father. Don't talk nonsense about not pulling through; in a month you'll be as strong as ever."

The woman who was called Julia opened the door, and whisked over to the dressing-table.

"Sorry to bother," she said; "there's another bill from the chemist's come in; I've got no money left."

"Take some," said the dying man. "Where do you keep the key?"

She unlocked the drawer, and whisked out again. There had been a rustle of bank-notes.

"A good sort, Julia," he repeated; "looks after everything. I must give her something, Davie... There's my scarf-pin somewhere about – it'll do for her tie."

David left him soon, mindful of the nurse's instructions, and at nine o'clock the doctor paid another visit.

"I should like to have a physician down from town, if you don't mind," stammered the lad; "the best we can get."

"Just as you please," said the practitioner, stiffly. "But the treatment in these cases –"

David felt shy, and was annoyed with himself for being so. The sense, inherited and acquired, of racial inferiority cowed him as he opposed his opinion to the authoritative stranger's.

"Yes, if you don't mind, I should like a physician," he insisted,

after an inward struggle. Embarrassment lent a ring of defiance to his voice, and the doctor thought him a cub.

So the telegram was written, and the cub went out with it himself.

When he returned to the sitting-room, Julia was playing cards for coppers with a faded woman in shabby black, who was presented to him as "Mrs. Hayes." A brandy bottle and a syphon stood between the glasses on the table; and when Mrs. Hayes won a shilling she tittered: "Lucky at love, unlucky at cards, my dear!" As she put on her bonnet, she gave a start. "There! I meant to 'ave bought sixpenn'orth, against my being bad again in the night, dear," she exclaimed; "the pubs 'll be shut by now!" And then her hostess summoned the waiter, and Mrs. Hayes carried another bottle home under her cape.

It was in these surroundings, rather more than a week after the consultation, that the tenor died.

## CHAPTER IX

And Ownie – in weeds for the second time in her life – sighed as she had sighed when she lost Harris, "I don't know what will become of me!" Though her youth was gone, her egoism remained, and even the solicitor was touched by the pathos of her helplessness. "I was a good wife," she said, having had a week to convince herself of it; "it's hard that he never made any provision for the future."

David did not return to school, and Vivian, who found his mother's lamentations wearisome when he was at home, began to thaw towards his half-brother, and discussed matters with him.

"The mater is selfish, you know," he said; "she only thinks of herself. It's deuced rough on you and me, but she never talks about *that*. I suppose we shall have to go into a poky little house somewhere, and pig along with one or two servants eh?" He was unconsciously picturing the environment in which he had been born.

"I suppose so," said David.

"Good Lord! When one remembers all the money that was made, you know, it's awful. They ought to have saved. The idea of spending every bob, and never thinking about to-morrow! I don't blame him any more than her, of course," he added hastily; "it was her fault too; but I wish they had let me go to the Cape. It isn't a lively look-out to live in a tin-pot house here, and come

home to find the mater fretting over her lost splendours. That's what it will be – she isn't the woman to be cheerful when things go wrong. I shan't be able to stand it; I know I shan't. I shall cut it after a bit, and take a room up West."

"She won't let you. Besides, she may need your salary."

"What?"

"Well, who's going to keep her if *we* don't?"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Vivian, "do you mean to tell me we shall be as poor as all that?"

"I don't know. I hope we shan't. I'm sure *I* don't want to live at home either now; but it's likely enough, isn't it?"

Vivian pondered.

"There's her jewellery," he said at last; "that's worth a lump, you know. As to your not living at home either, one of us will have to, it's certain! She can't be left by herself; it wouldn't be right."

"I don't think that *my* going would trouble her; she has never wanted *me*. If she does, of course I'll stop. The thing is, I don't know what sort of berth I can expect to get. I'm afraid it won't be very easy for – for a fellow like me to get anything to do, will it?" He tried to force a laugh. "I've never been in demand so far."

"No, there *is* that," said Vivian. "She was talking about it yesterday."

"What did she say?"

"Only that. It won't be so easy as if you were – you know! You ought to have sung, Dave, then you'd have been all right. Fancy,

if you'd had the governor's voice; by Jove, there would have been none of this bother at all! Of course, if you can write, it'll be better than nothing." He hesitated, and looked a little sheepish, for such confidences were new between them. "You want to go in for being an author, don't you?"

David nodded. "I've sent verses to magazines already; only, they weren't taken."

"I should peg away at it if I were you. I always told the mater it wasn't half a bad idea for you when she called it 'rot.' It doesn't matter what an author looks like, you see; if he's as hideous as the veiled Johnny in what's-its-name, it doesn't show in his books. Just you go on turning it out; that's my advice. I'd like to see some of your things one day."

"Still," said David, "I shall have to get a berth at first, you know. I shall give it up before long, of course, but I must have one at the start."

A sincere belief in oneself generally inspires conviction in somebody. That is why Ownie had never failed to find supporters. Vivian regarded his half-brother a shade enviously.

"It's my opinion you're not half such a fool as the mater thinks, old chap," he murmured. "I wish I could do something of the sort myself, though I can't say I'm nuts on poetry. Just you swot away. If you write enough, some of it's bound to bring in some coin sooner or later. Now, what have J got to look forward to? Why, nothing at all! I can stick on where I am for ever. If I'd gone to the Cape, I might have come back a millionaire; but how

on earth can I hope to make any money in a billet in London?"

"I thought," David said, "that what you really wanted was to go into the Army?"

"Oh, well, I did – I was younger then; we all want to do something silly at that age. I've changed my mind about that. I want to make money, that's all *I* want; I'd like to be a manager. There's plenty of oof to be made in the musical business, I can tell you, even if you don't sing or play yourself. There are lots who do – and brains are as good as a voice, if it comes to that. Of course the swell artists get deuced big terms, but if you're smart you can get the others to pay *you*. I'm keeping my eyes open, what do *you* think? It isn't difficult to make a profit on a concert if your rent's not too high, and you go the right way to work; it's like making a book on a race. And, after a bit, you get cracked up in the papers for your 'services to musical art in England,' too. If I had something to start with, I'd have a shot at the game tomorrow."

He stroked an incipient moustache, and David looked at him with respect. Himself, he panted to be famous – fortune was a detail – but the flourish of qualities that he didn't possess impressed him.

Some little time passed before Vivian was relieved of his fear of having to contribute immediately towards his mother's support. Then, when light was shed, it was evident that if she sold her diamonds, she could withdraw from The Woodlands with a considerable sum, and the earliest idea was to remove

to a villa at Balham or Wandsworth. On the advice of one of the decrepit foreigners, however, who promised her a clientèle, she talked presently of taking a boarding-house at Regent's Park as soon as she was able to sub-let. The fall was crushing, but at least it was better than solitude in a suburb and living on her capital. Privately, too, as she foresaw herself ministering to the palates of bachelors, with a red lampshade over the dinner-table, she considered the possibility of marrying again. She was prepared to view purple moustaches with a more lenient eye now, and she contemplated a business run on good lines with more complacency than she permitted to appear.

In the meantime, before a tenant was forthcoming, several attempts were made to find David employment. The decrepit, but faithful, rallied round her – the least deserving generally receive the most sympathy – and though a coloured boy of forbidding countenance was no acquisition, he at last obtained a clerkship at a music publisher's.

When he had been engaged at Panzetta's a few days, he broached to his mother his desire to live alone. He didn't allude to her lack of affection for him; he put the matter on grounds of expedience.

"I don't think my money would be any help to you, would it?" he said; "fares and lunches run away with a good deal. I couldn't give you any more out of a pound a week than it would cost you to keep me. If I took a bedroom near Panzetta's, there wouldn't be any fares to pay. I saw one advertised for seven shillings, quite

close by; I might go and look at it, if you don't mind."

Now she had reflected already that he would be no acquisition to a boarding-house either, and in her heart she was relieved by his proposal. Still her hesitation was not wholly insincere.

"You're very young to go away by yourself, David," she demurred; "you're not seventeen, you know. I don't think you ought to do that yet."

"I'm quite old enough to take care of myself. If you have no objection, I should prefer to go." He spoke in the tone that was natural to him when he addressed his mother, and it sounded as if he were resigning a situation. It pierced even her coldness. She flushed, and looked down.

"I know you've never been very fond of me, of course," she faltered. "Now your father is dead, I suppose there's nothing to keep you with me?"

"I never said that," replied David. But she observed that he did not deny it. "I don't see what use there is in stopping here – and in a boarding-house you would find me in the way, too."

She was startled. It came upon her as a shock, to discover how well she was understood by the son to whom she had voluntarily revealed herself so little. For almost the first time she felt remorseful; something of tenderness moved her towards the boy whom she had taught to regard her as a stranger.

"If you'll be happier away, go," she returned, in a low voice; "only don't forget there's always your home if you want to come back." One cannot undo the past by a mood; missing



the confirmation of response, she was never keenly aware of it herself, but there was a stir of appeal within her as she added the last words.

"Thank you," said David politely.

He went to look at the room during the luncheon hour next day. It was in Soho: the ordinary lodging-house attic, with a rickety chest of drawers, a white paraffin lamp, and a low ceiling that dipped to a window which commanded a fairly extensive view of neighbouring chimneys. However, he was not dissatisfied. The window, indeed, rather attracted him by reason of a resemblance it bore to the one in the familiar prints of Chatterton. He settled to move in on the following Monday, and left a half-crown as deposit. Ownie, duly informed of his arrangements, said little but that she should expect him to come to see her on Sundays, wherever she might be. Not so Vivian; Vivian said that he would be very short on a pound a week, but that he was to be envied all the same. As for himself, he had thrown out hints of taking diggings too, and "the mater had sat on him promptly. Considering she meant to run a hash-house, her opposition was distinct rot, you know, because she would have plenty of people to talk to there without him!"

It would have been becoming for David to feel sentimental when he packed his books, and his clothes, and went to bed in his little room in The Woodlands for the last time; but he did not. He was vaguely surprised at the absence of appropriate emotions. A profound relief was in his heart, the relief with which the

unwelcome embrace solitude. There is none deeper.

He had grown in fetters. The burden of knowledge had weighted his soul, hampered his speech, even cramped his gait; and he was to be free. His spirit stretched itself. The only love that had been given to him had passed away, and he expected life to yield no other, was resigned to know no other; he wasn't seventeen. To be alone, to be famous! as yet he asked no more. And he looked forward boldly. No suspicion of the disappointments, the disillusionments that lay before him, no inkling of the difficulties that throng the path of the literary idealist, leavened his mood.

When he drew up the blind next morning, the sky was fair; the garden of his childhood glistened in the sunshine. Ownie was not an early riser, and when he had breakfasted, he went upstairs again to say good-bye to her. "Well! – don't forget to come on Sunday," she said, and he nodded assent. His trunk was to be called for and delivered at the lodging during the day, so he walked with Vivian to the station. Hampstead was alive with young men walking to the station, young men recently introduced into their fathers' businesses and proudly conscious of their first silk hats, and their gold watch-chains. No overcoats hid the watch-chains, though it was freezing. David marked the youths pityingly: to have no other prospect than an office all one's life!

He took his seat in Panzetta's with a new exhilaration. The hopes of glory that have faded on an office-stool might have

provided him with another theme, but he did not think of that. Mentally he examined his manuscripts, and decided which of them to submit to an editor next. Nine-tenths of the journals published in London were unknown to him, his verse was as yet imitative, he believed that the best work was the easiest to sell. But the road was hidden from him, and he smiled.

A small fire was smoking in the attic when he reached it. His box had arrived. He lit the lamp, and produced from his pocket a purchase that he had just made – it was a penny bottle of ink. When he had had a cup of tea and some bread-and-butter, he put his clothes in the rickety chest of drawers, and arranged his books on the top of it. Then he took from the trunk pens and foolscap, drew the one chair to the table with infinite zest, and brushed the crumbs out of his way.

But he did not write. Memories flocked thick and fast. After awhile he got up and looked out over the chimney-pots. The view was very cold; under the moon the roofs shone white, and snow was falling. He thought of it falling on a grave. The poignancy of sorrow overcame him, and he sat huddled by the window, the tears dripping down his face.

## CHAPTER X

Thus began the second book of David's life, where so many books of life have begun, and where so many are fated to end – in a garret of a lodging-house. Now, too, began his acquaintance with larger London, no longer the capital of concerts and cafés to him, but the London of grim, inhospitable streets, of dull-faced, tramping crowds, the London that the millions know, sordid and unsmiling – cheerful only for a consideration, a niggard even of its light. There were many evenings when he could not write – in the first months many evenings when he did not attempt to write – and, drifting from Soho, he would rove about the city till late, rove west and east, tempted to unfamiliar quarters by the promise of their names, storing impressions. He supped at coffee-stalls and heard the vagrants talk, and rose at dawn to breakfast among the workers and the wastrels in the five-o'clock public-houses near the markets. On Sundays when it did not rain, and he didn't go to see his mother, he explored the parks, or wandered beyond the stretching tentacles of London in woodland which the monster had not yet absorbed. He journeyed among holiday-makers who were boisterous, but never gay, who shouted, but who never laughed. The outskirts that he found were beautiful, and he yearned to read the hearts of these excursionists who, whether they covered the miles in dreary silence, or shrieked the burden of a cockney song, had always the same vacant gaze, the

same sad, hopeless air. He saw that look on everyone, in varying degrees – the London look, bred of the dismal climate and the gloomy streets; he thought that he would recognise a Londoner anywhere, by his eyes. And when he returned, he noted how the fairness of England was disfigured where Englishmen began to build.

The love of London which some men have felt, was never born in David. He could not grow to love it though he tried. In time he came to wonder if he was blind – if something was lacking in him – when he read word-pictures of its "beauty," and knew that he found it execrable. True, there were many nights when the river mesmerised him and he hung rapt upon the bridges, but then the lamps shone only on the water, and the spell lay in the vast suggestiveness of a great city that he did not see.

Occasionally he went to the gallery of a theatre; more often he saved the shilling and bought a book that he coveted. Because he realised that he was not eating enough to feel very strong, he pawned his watch and chain when he had been in Soho about six months. It was a severe pang to him to part with what had been his father's present, even to part with it temporarily, and only the knowledge that his father, if he could advise, would bid him "pop it for all he could get," enabled him to make the sacrifice. A week afterwards, however, his diet had dwindled to its original proportions, and his library had much increased.

Meanwhile his manuscripts came back just as often as he enclosed a stamped and directed envelope. The word "regrets"

grew odious to him; in the work of David Lee the word was seldom to be found, and he never wrote it without reluctance. Nobody wanted his poetry, nobody thought it worth printing. The rose-colour gradually faded from his reveries; at the end of a year the boastfulness of boyhood had passed. He began to realise how stupendous was the task that he had approached so confidently. To attack London with a pen! he felt as if he were throwing sea-shells at a fortress. By degrees, too, he came to understand that a poet must be either celebrated, or ridiculous; the pennies that he spent in a news-room showed him that the poet in adversity appealed to the national sense of humour every week.

He derived encouragement from reading the biographies of great writers of the past – and was depressed when he scanned the reminiscences of successful authors of the day, for these always seemed to have "arrived" so gracefully. It surprised him to note that poverty and disdain had been the portion of only those who were dead.

It happened on a morning in April, the event that he never forgot, a morning when the sky across the chimney-pots was blue, and the sparrows hopped in a strange, yellow light which the oldest bird on the slates told them was called "sunshine." David woke up to find – not that he was famous, but that his jug of hot water supported a communication by which an editor offered him a guinea for a sonnet. And his behaviour was less original than his verse. He burned to impart the news to the drudge in curling-pins who brought in his tea and haddock, he wanted to pat the

heads of the children who were playing tip-cat in the roads. In Soho it is never too early nor too late for the children who fill the roads to play tip-cat. In Bloomsbury they incline to roller-skates; in Bayswater – that happy hunting-ground of the organ-grinder and the street-arab – they "Follow my leader," yelling, but the passion of Soho is tip-cat. He bought a bunch of daffodils on his way to the office, and stuck them on his desk. He was still at Panzetta's – his salary had been raised ten shillings by this time – and the prospect of tendering his resignation shone out to his eager eyes again. The clouds had hidden it so long that he was dazzled. There was the gladness of summer in the sunlight that slanted through the dusty windows; all the temptations of the country lurked in the pennyworth of daffodils beside the ink-pot; he panted to be in the open, free to loose the extravagance of joy that swelled his heart.

"It's the sort of morning," he said in a burst to the accountant, who sat opposite, "that makes you think it's hot out-of-doors and want to go and pick poppies, and hear the rye rustle!"

The accountant lived at Ealing, and travelled by the same train as a distinguished counsel every day. He often mentioned vaingloriously that Sir Edward Jennings had nodded to him on the platform.

"Ah!" he rhapsodised. "With a carriage-and-pair to come and fetch you!"

David was a little less than nineteen when his first verses were accepted; he was a little less than twenty when they were

paid for. Thus the thoughtfulness of the Editor provided him with two distinct occasions for rejoicing. He sent several other sonnets to the journal, and some of these were taken also, but a guinea is the professional *Pons asinorum*, and it was a long time before he cashed a cheque for any larger sum. The bright prospect of resigning the clerkship receded from him like a will-o'-the-wisp, and by-and-by he even smiled at his youthfulness, in remembering how happy that first acceptance of his work had made him feel.

And still he wrote. Sometimes he sat writing poetry, in front of the washhand-stand, until the lamp-flame waned and bobbed, and went out. So grew the manuscripts which were to be submitted to the publishers. Excepting the boarding-house, where Ownie reigned on in widowhood, he visited no one; excepting Vivian, who made his way to the attic at long intervals, no one visited him. Few among the millions in London were more utterly alone than this young man who alternately hoped and despaired, and, whether he was elated or despondent, had never an ear to heed him, heard never a voice that said "Cheer up." Vivian and Ownie were the only persons who ever inquired about his work, and to a dejected man the inquiries of the uncongenial are worse than none at all. No strangers could have been more foreign to each other than were the half-brothers, although they had a myriad memories in common. It is not time that enables people to understand one another, it is temperament. The world is heavy with couples who have sat opposite each other for forty



years and are still tone deaf to each other's humour, and stone blind to each other's moods; and a recent acquaintance may say the right things to both. Vivian had encouraged poetry while he thought it might pay; since it didn't pay, he explained that the proper line of action was to deal in something else instead. There was nothing unpractical about the son of the late Mr. Harris; he was the kind of young fellow of whom it may be predicted, even while his pockets are empty, that he will rise somehow, and throw a few of his scruples overboard in the process. He was an occasional caller, but never a companion.

And slowly there crept into David's life a dull resentment of the solitude that had once been a relief, a longing for sympathy, for tenderness – a sense of bitter oppression as he looked in the glass and knew that he must never expect to find these things. And the face of every girl became a glass to him, and he winced before it. When his resources were low, he took his mid-day meal in a vegetarian restaurant, a place with a faint distinctive smell, and a three-course dinner for sixpence. One of the waitresses there was very pretty, and all had arch glances and undertones for the regular customers who cheated hunger with scones and "coffee," or some dish with an attractive name and a strangely nasty taste. Only with David none was ever arch. Once he summoned courage to say more to the pretty waitress than "Two poached eggs, please," and the haughtiness of her eyebrows slew him before she turned away. Often in the streets he saw a negro – black as Elisha had been – and across the crowd the

gaze of the aliens would meet for a moment – drawn together by something deeper than curiosity. But neither could lift his silk hat and say to the other, "We are both damned, so let us be friends!" because the influence of civilisation prevented their acting like that, although their skins were the wrong colour.

Woman, impalpable, insistent, shared the garret with David now. And sometimes she was fair, and sometimes she was dark, but always she was beautiful; for at twenty the gift that man counts best in woman is loveliness; and at thirty it is wit; and at forty it is a keen appreciation of his own. From the dream-women who let him woo them, David heard many odes. At first his visitors were cold – mere Beauties from a hair-dresser's window – and he could only watch them timidly. But by degrees he found his voice, and told them how empty the attic had been before they came; and while he talked, the forms took flesh and blood, the lips whispered love words back to him; they made him confidences, and uttered sweet conceits, and then – Why then, the drudge in curling-pins banged, with a rejected poem, and the room was bare again.

The slim volume for the publishers grew slowly; some evil power of daylight seemed to freeze the verse that he had left aglow, so often was a night of exultation followed by an evening of dismay. A manuscript of sad surprises. Yet at last it was finished, for even he could find no more to alter.

Then its journeys began, and eventually it found a home; but it was not treated kindly there, and it brought him little recognition,

and no money. He had scarcely realised the intensity of his prayers for it till it failed; nor had he known what strength he derived from the hope of fame until the hope sank. With the loss of faith in his work, the feeling of desolation deepened. A passion of revolt possessed him as he looked from the mirror to the future and saw himself perpetually alone. Because his misery cried for expression, he picked up his pen again; but though his interest in his art revived as time went by, the bitterness was always in his soul. Even as the years passed, there grew within him a hatred of his own person – a jealousy of every shop-boy who was kissed by a servant-girl for love.

## CHAPTER XI

Professor Sorrenford had five daughters, but only the eldest and the youngest were unmarried; the others had removed to homes of their own. The house, of which the early Victorian furniture was falling to decay, stood in a genteel street in Beckenhampton – one of those streets in which every third household hankers after a "paying guest," and shivers at the proposal of a "boarder." On the door a brass plate announced, in worn lettering, that Professor Sorrenford taught music and elocution, and from time immemorial vain efforts had been made to induce the "generals" to pull down their sleeves before they opened that door.

In the dining-room, which was also the parlour – for the drawing-room was reserved for the reception of pupils in the daytime – a girl was lying on the sofa one afternoon before a fire, that needed poking. Her eyes, grey and luminous, and the fashion in which she coiled her abundant hair, gave to her delicate face a character, a grandeur, which she dissipated when she smiled. Her smile was perhaps a little foolish. When her mouth was in repose she looked a woman to die for; when she smiled she was merely a very pretty girl with a pink-and-white complexion and a dimple in her cheek. She wore a pale blue flannelette dressing-gown with a superfluity of ribbons; and as she was not smiling on the sofa, but stitching the dead body of a sea-gull on to her best hat,

she had that air of spiritual reflection which always embarrassed her partners so much until they discovered that there was really nothing to be afraid of. This was Hilda, the Professor's youngest. The eldest had been christened "Hebe," but in deference to her wishes no one ever called her so, nor did she ever write the name. She came in now – bringing the other something in a breakfast-cup – a girl with a curvature of the spine.

She was short. Her shoulders were square, her features drawn, the lips were thin and sensitive; only her eyes denoted to a cursory glance that nature had meant her to be beautiful. The angular deformity of the spine that defeated nature's intention had resulted from an accident when she was barely three: a nursemaid's carelessness for a moment – then for the child, inactive, prostrate, long years of suffering while her sisters played. Her mother died before the torture which the doctor described as "rest" had worn to an end, and – as the pastimes of the other girls were denied to her – it was Hebe who came gradually to fill the mother's place: to withhold the bills that would worry the Professor, and to order fish for dinner when the butcher's foot was down. It was her part to cut the sandwiches when the other girls went skating, and to stop behind and devise "high teas" for their return. It was her part, by-and-by, to screw their frocks out of the housekeeping money when they were asked to dances, and to sit up to look at their programmes when they came back. Later still, it was her part to watch lovers come into three lives in turn, and to contrive three trousseaux, and see

three younger sisters wooed and wed.

None of the family remembered any longer that she had not been born to stand aside; there is nothing from which we recover more healthily than the affliction of somebody else; and that she had a woman's heart, and all a woman's natural longings herself, was a fact that her poor exterior obscured – to the perception of other people. When we say that we admire a face, we mean, consciously or not, that we admire some attribute that the face suggests to us, and when the exterior repels we seldom speculate very curiously about the soul. To-day, at the age of twenty-six, she found the addition of the tradesmen's bills less disquieting than formerly, by reason of the reduction of the household; and since she earned a little money by her brush, she was able to sweep a number of thorns from the Professor's path. She was not his favourite daughter, because there were hours in which he found the sight of her deformity depressing, but when he was troubled about the rent he often exclaimed with emotion that he didn't know what he would do without her.

"What have you got in that cup, Bee?"

"Mutton broth," she said; "you didn't eat any dinner. Have you been asleep?"

"No," Hilda complained. "I couldn't; just as I was dropping off, half a dozen doors began to slam. Is there any salt in it?" Her voice was small and high. The first time that one heard it pipe from her queenliness one felt dismayed. One felt as if the grand organ stops had produced the effect of a penny whistle.

Bee nodded, and made up the fire. "It's snowing again," she said. "Why didn't you wait till the spring before you had your influenza? – then you might have gone to the seaside afterwards. Doctor Fellowes doesn't think it would do you much good this weather. I met him just now in Market Street, and asked him."

"What did he say?"

"He thought you had better wait till it was warmer and you could sit about more. I went to Tuffington's; I couldn't get any of the books on your list – they haven't had them down, of course. Miss Tuffington said that nobody had asked for them."

Tuffington's was the principal circulating library and bookseller's of Beckenhampton. The proprietor was at present displaying, at three-and-elevenpence-halfpenny, in wadded roan, a line that he had labelled "Tuffington's Series of Padded Poets. Tried, and not found wanting. Specially recommended." It was a rare occurrence to find a recent novel there, however, and he made no reference to padded fiction. Hilda's gesture was more impatient than surprised.

"There were eighteen on that list," she said. "I'm sure I don't know what we subscribe for. I can't keep on reading *East Lynne* and *Jane Eyre* all my life. Didn't you bring anything at all?"

"They said they'd try to send you up something to-night before they shut. I could only get the book I'd ordered – the one that's criticised in the *Review of Reviews* this month."

"Poetry!" She wrinkled her dainty nose. "What sinful waste of money. Where is it? Let's look."

"It's downstairs – I left it in the hall when I went to see about your broth. Shall I fetch it?"

"Yes, do, or father will pick it up, and then he'll elocute it at us all the evening; I'd rather read it myself than that. Who's in the drawing-room?"

"Nobody. It's Thursday, you know – father's afternoon at Great Hunby. I was going to send in a steak for his supper, but Rose always burns them so; the last we had came up a cinder. I really don't know what to get."

"As the dinner was raw, she's quite sure to burn the supper. Why don't you make him an omelette?"

"He likes something substantial when he comes back," said Bee thoughtfully. "Perhaps eggs and bacon –"

"Eggs and bacon are so soon over," objected Hilda; "and, besides, if they aren't broiling hot —*I* know! Get him a Perrin's pork-pie."

Bee brightened. Its pride in its pork-pies is a cult in Beckenhampton – they obsess the local mind – but there are pies and pies, and Perrin's are the pinnacle. If the King were to consent to sup in a Beckenhampton ménage, the breathless question, "What shall we give him?" would be disposed of when someone exclaimed, "Give him a Perrin's pork-pie."

"That's it," she said. "I'll tell Rose to run out now. I don't know what I was about not to think of it – I might have brought one in with me."

She went downstairs again promptly, and, when she returned,



the book that she had bought was in her hands. This had not, as had Rossetti and Tennyson and the others in the "line," the cachet of Mr. Tuffington's "special recommendation"; it was a mere work that he did not stock. She gave it to her sister, and lit the gas.

"There you are," she smiled; "it will be something to go on with, though it *is* poetry."

"Anything is livelier than the advertisement sheets of the newspaper," said Hilda, unwrapping it, "if you're sure you don't want it yourself. I'm so dull I could read Shakespeare. What a hideous cover! '*A Celibate's Love Songs – by David Lee.*' Why did you order it; is he anybody? He only seems to have written one thing before."

"The *Review of Reviews* said he had genius," answered Bee, "and parts of the criticism made me think I should like it. No, you can be quite comfortable with it; I'll wait till they send up your novel."

She pushed an armchair to the hearth and sat down as if she were tired. She was, as she had said, in no hurry for the book, though she had been eager to read it a week ago; her mind was full of other thoughts this afternoon, now that she was free to think them. There was the picture that she was unable to begin; it floated through her brain, elusive and incongruent. She had been so pleased last week when she came back from Elphick's farm, but the more she pondered over the photographs that she had taken there, the more she was perplexed. It was that barn

with the lichened roof that threw her out. Such colour! She couldn't bring herself to forget the barn; yet, if she didn't, the picture would be quite different from the one she proposed to paint. Her camera was always leading her into temptation, she reflected. She had bought it to see how her subjects composed, and to photograph the trunks and branches of trees, in order to study their form at her leisure; but since she had had it she was constantly preparing disappointments for herself, constantly happening on the impracticable. She stared into the fire, her elbows on her lap. Her gaze was wide while she was wondering; then her lids drooped low, and lower, as on the blank canvas of her mental view there grew laboriously a conception. Her chin was raised, and mechanically her thumb made little downward movements in the air.

The silence lasted perhaps a quarter of an hour; it was broken by the younger girl. She turned on the sofa petulantly: "Read to me, Bee, there's a dear!" she exclaimed. "My eyes ache, and the light makes them worse."

"I thought you hated being read to?" said Bee, starting, and hoping that the start wasn't noticed, because it would be considered affectation.

"Not by you; it's elocution lessons in disguise that get on my nerves. Do go on – it's very pretty here and there."

Bee took the book reluctantly, and began to read by an effort. For an instant the fact that she had been curious about it was dormant in her mind, but almost immediately she remembered,

and the cause of her curiosity – the expectation of finding in the poetry just the passionate protest that was in her own heart – brought a little eagerness into her voice. Very soon she came to some lines that had been quoted in the review. She read them twice – once to Hilda, and once to herself; and again she thanked the man for saying that.

"It's rather nice, isn't it?" Hilda commented, as she paused.

"Yes," she said, "it's rather 'nice.'"

But she held the book before her face as she went on. The man revealed her secrets – told all that she felt every day of her life – and she was afraid that Hilda must know it, though Hilda didn't. Her mind and spirit responded vehemently to his verse. He was voicing her soul, uttering the emotions which nature woke in her, and which she had never been taught to express in her art; he cried aloud thoughts that she had nursed in bitterness, and thoughts that she had shrunk from, too cowardly to own. Once she questioned if the poet was a man at all. Wasn't it the outcry of a woman, hungry and resentful like herself, only gifted with the power to interpret, and the courage to avow?

She questioned only for a minute; man's deification of woman's beauty, a man's illusions about women, thrilled through the verse too strongly for her to be deceived; but a deep interest in his personality mingled with her gratitude for his work. It was a keener interest than had been stirred in her by any other pen; she even fancied that she must understand him better than any other of his readers. She would have given much to hear him

talk, and though it was impossible – though she knew that few things were more unlikely than that she would ever meet him – she winced in reflecting that the very deformity which intensified her appreciation of his genius would make her appreciation a still poorer thing in his regard.

She was not reading now. The present pause had lasted so long that the fear that Hilda must divine spurred her to the next line guiltily, and she glanced across at Hilda as she read it; but Hilda was asleep. She was glad. She did not want to read any more just yet, or rather she did not want to read any further. She wanted to turn back, and read some of the stanzas again. There was the page that had brought before her eyes so vividly a view of the Little Tester churchyard from the hill. It had made her wonder if he had ever been there when the poplars were blackening against the sky, and all was vague suggestion but the lamplit windows of the cottagers, and the ghostly gravestones of their dead. She had often meant to paint an impression there, and when she had found the page, the desire to do so flamed in her again, fiercer for her admiration of the verse.

If she could have expressed the feelings that the scene aroused in her, the woman would have been a great painter, for she felt deeply and originally, in spite of the local art-school where the tuition – as in almost every English art-school – tended to crush the instinctive feeling of the students. Her brush had provided her only happiness, just as the school – where she had begun to study when she was about fifteen – had provided her only

training, but she paid for the hours of happiness with days of dumb despair. She could not stand before this or any other scene, and express clearly what it meant to her, and, baffled, she knew it. She painted very pretty pictures of average merit, poetical things with considerable charm, but further she could not go. She felt that her pictures lied about her almost as basely as her body lied. She tried to believe that they maligned her because she was still young; she reminded herself often that the greatest of our landscape painters had not accomplished the work that made them famous until they were nearly forty – in Constable's case not till later. She did not know that her stumbling-block was that while she had heard a great deal about the virtues of Rossetti, and Burne-Jones, and Ford Madox Brown, a great deal about the eighteenth-century masterpieces and the technique of Reynolds, and Gainsborough, and Romney, she had heard nothing at all about the virtue of going to Nature direct for her impressions – had never been told that her own likings were as valuable as Rembrandt's, or Velazquez', if she would only set them down with sufficient sincerity and courage.

She was one of many – one of the crowd of artists possessing a certain amount of talent and individuality – who are born in England, but whom England cannot teach. And for lack of the guidance that is not to be had in their own country they are for ever stultifying themselves, instead of doing what was promised by their natural gifts. They learn to imitate the work of the painter who has scored the biggest success of the year; to try to imitate

the old masters; to treat deliberately a commonplace subject in a commonplace way, with a view to pleasing the Powers of the Royal Academy. What they do not learn is to stand with an open mind, receptive and emotional, in a scene of the everyday life about them, forgetting all the pictures they have seen, and all the juries, and the ignorance of the British picture-buying public, until they know that the thing they are feeling and wanting to convey isn't a mere memory of the work of someone else, but a true impression of life or nature drawn from their inner selves. If Hebe Sorrenford could have studied in Paris for four or five years, she would have been, a better painter, and a happier woman. But she did not realise it. And, as the Professor could not have spared her, it was perhaps as well that she did not.

The servant entered to lay the supper, the pork-pie crowned by parsley on the dish. She said the master had complained that the beer from the new barrel was thick, and inquired if she should draw some for him, or bring up a bottle of stout. Bee replied that her father would rather have the stout.

He came home soon afterwards, a man with mild manners, and a dejected back, who had written several songs that had never been published, and one song that had been successful – under another composer's name. He had also a sanguine temperament, which had survived the corrections of thirty years. A musician who had never learnt to blow his own trumpet, he had failed for want of audacity; and because he was always eager to persuade himself that it was policy to accept injustice rather than face an

unpleasant interview, he was inclined, like most men who yield in the wrong places, to be exacting and consequential at home.

"Worn out, father?"

"Eh?" He bent to their caresses, and sank into a chair.

"Worn out?"

He sighed, stretching his feet for slippers.

Bee brought them to him, and moved the footstool.

"What news?" he asked. "How's the invalid?"

"The invalid has trimmed a hat," Hilda answered. "How did you get on to-day, dear?"

He sighed again. "Young Simpson isn't coming back next term. So much for Simpson!"

"So much the less for us," she said. "Why not?"

"Because he's a curate and puffed with vanity, and I let him choose 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' last lesson and pretended he didn't squeak. He's so highly satisfied with his elocutionary graces that he thinks he has nothing more to learn. That's the worst of the elocution pupils; if you encourage them, they get conceited and give you up; and if you don't encourage them, they get disheartened and give you up. Pupils – " He spread his hands seeking epithets to stigmatise pupils.

"And the Mayor?" said Bee. "It was the Mayor's morning with you, wasn't it?"

"The Mayor, my dear, was, if possible, more hopeless than ever. He talks through his teeth, and as to his finals, you never get even a g. Half the forty minutes go in grammar lessons – not to

be mentioned of course. I've been working on his Address with him now for a fortnight, and he still says 'Gentlemen, you was.'"

She laughed. "There's nothing like leather," she said. The Mayor had made his fortune out of boots. "It seems only the other day we used to see his wife scrubbing her doorstep when we went through Hippodrome Place."

"Anyhow his wife carries the position better than he does," Hilda put in. "You might almost take her for a lady if you looked at her in a hurry."

"And if you didn't hear her speak," added the Professor. His gaze wandered to the dish, rested on the pie, and gladdened. "A Perrin's?" he exclaimed. "Good children! I'm hungry." He rubbed his hands, and shuffled to the table. "Let's sit down. Yes," he went on – but he spoke slowly now, because to cut a Perrin's was a rite – "yes, young Simpson is leaving. And Miss Kimber's class – well, you know about Miss Kimber's class! Only seven piano thumpers now, as against twelve at midsummer. If it weren't for the private lessons at the room, it would hardly pay to go over to Great Hunby on Mondays and Thursdays any more. Hilda, my dear, did I give you a piece of the jelly?"

She bent her stately head to see. The grace of her slender figure had been apparent when she moved from the couch, the length of limb. At the mean table, laid with a soiled cloth, she looked a goddess to whom men might offer worship, sacrifices, for the recompense of her regard. To offer her pork-pie seemed a profanation – until she smiled.



"The school advertises your name in *The Herald*," said Bee. "There's that."

"Yes," he admitted, "there's the ad., and of course it means recommendations to other schools, too. Still the fees are not high, and the little girls are not interesting."

"Wait till the opera is produced!" she said. "It will be taken some day, and then –"

"Ah, yes," echoed Hilda, "wait till the opera is produced! Father conducting, and us – 'we,' which is it? – in a private box. Has any manager got it now, Dad?"

Years ago, so many years ago that they told falsehoods to one another about its age, pretending that the poor dear was less ancient than it was, the man had written a light opera, the librettist being a friend even unluckier than he. By half the theatres in London, and many in the provinces, this opera had been rejected. Its leaves were tattered, and the librettist had long since renounced his pen in favour of auctioneering in the North. But the Professor nursed his illusion still, still wove dreams around his opera over his evening pipe. It was the family fetich. They played its airs, and sang its lyrics, and laughed – still laughed – at the auctioneer's familiar jokes. When their best friends supped with them, the piano was opened and "Father's opera", was the feature of the entertainment. When it happened, as it sometimes did, that the receipt of the discoloured bundle was acknowledged by a curt managerial note, the composer, who had so little to encourage him, was uplifted by that – in fancy

felt the baton in his fingers and foretasted all the rapture of his First Night. At such times he paid visits; his eyes twinkled, and his stoop had nearly gone. "They're nibbling, my boy!" he would say. And then again, with a beam and a toss of the head, "The managers are nibbling!" But when it is added that the score was musicianly and the airs were tuneful, and that the rejected work would have been performed long before puns went out of fashion if Sorrenford had only been a well-known name, there remains less humour in the pathos than his acquaintances enjoyed.

The old man looked up from his plate and smiled roguishly.

"It's odd you should mention the opera just now," he said. "Because there's a prospect! I told you all the bad news first, and was keeping that for the end. Wait till we've finished supper, and I will" – he chuckled – "I will a tale unfold!"

They were all eagerness, but they knew his idiosyncrasies too well to demur at the delay. Until the moment arrived which, for no good reason, he had fixed upon to tell his tale, questions would be useless. They exchanged glances, wondering how good the news really was, and recalling past "prospects," that they might not be disappointed when the facts came out.

Presently they rose and went back to the hearth. He filled his pipe carefully, extinguished the spill, and placed it with deliberation on the mantelpiece. Next he made himself comfortable in the only comfortable chair.

"Ha!" he said.

"Well, Dad?"

"Well, my dears, it has been whispered to me – Mind, this is to go no further; you mustn't mention this. I was told in confidence."

"Yes, father, yes? We won't breathe a word."

"Well, I was told in confidence" – he puffed placidly – "that the Theatre Royal is – changing hands!"

They were a little slow. "Changing hands?"

"I'm told that Mobsby is likely to give it up. I hear that in a few months' time the Royal may be run by some other manager – a manager who, one may say without being unduly sanguine, is sure to be more enterprising, for new brooms sweep clean."

"Ah!" said Bee, "you think the opera will have another chance there?"

"Oh, oh!" cried Hilda.

"Think?" His expression was gay, his manner important, there was even a tremor of triumph in his tone. "Think? Don't you see for yourself what it means? My dear, women are very dense in practical matters, really – your poor mother, God bless her, was just the same. Don't you see that it is one of the best things that could have happened for the opera? I'm not sure, I'm not by any means sure, that it isn't quite the best thing. Remember who I am. I'm somebody here; not rich, far from it, but in my way – in the little world of Beckenhampton-a personage. I may say that, I think? – I don't want to flatter myself, but 'in my way, in the little world of Beckenhampton, a personage?'"

"Yes, yes, Dad – a personage; of course you are!"

"Good! So far so good. Well, what follows?" He took three

slow whiffs of the pipe again. "The new manager wants to ingratiate himself with the Beckenhampton public. He says to himself, 'I could hardly do a cleverer stroke of business than open my campaign with the work of one of the oldest and most respected of the residents.' It's as good for him to get the opera as for me to give it to him. Our interests are identical; we – so to speak – we link arms!"

They caught a little of his confidence, and affected more.

"But won't the touring companies stand in the way?" they asked.

"Tschut! Let him give it a production, that's all I want – a fortnight, a week, even a night will be enough to make it known. Once it is heard, there will be offers from London. It will get about how the audience received it; the managers will see the criticisms – I shall post them to all the principal theatres myself. I think, I really do think, that the poor opera has got its chance at last!"

He mixed some whisky and water, and dilated on the subject till his daughters' bedtime. At eleven o'clock they kissed him and went upstairs. In their hearts they felt a little ashamed, because they had pretended to more enthusiasm than the great tidings aroused. The Professor hummed snatches of the overture, and lay back, seeing visions in the fire.

"Do you think it's really of any consequence that the theatre is changing hands?" inquired Hilda on the landing.

"Oh, I don't know," said Bee drearily. "Poor father! Let's hope

it is, as long as we can!"

They had occupied separate rooms since there had been rooms to spare, and when Bee went into hers she took David Lee's book with her. She sat under the gas bracket, reading – a little crooked figure with rapt eyes – until the clock of St. Sepulchre's boomed her to her feet, dismayed.

## CHAPTER XII

She was standing in her studio, in front of her Academy picture, wondering lazily when it would be finished, and if it would get in. She had exhibited several times at Birmingham and Manchester, and last spring her "The Grove is all a Pale Frail Mist" in the Leeds Exhibition had sold for thirty guineas, but she had had nothing hung yet in the Royal Academy, though she had sent there more than once.

Her studio was an attic. On the discoloured walls, and stacked in corners on the floor, were early works – a record to the investigator of the various stages she had passed. They were all there – the pictures that one would have expected to find. There were the usual attempts at family portraits, the usual still-life groups of ginger-jars, Japanese fans, and bowls of flowers; there were the more ambitious canvases depicting lackadaisical females posturing in medieval landscapes – painstaking exaggerations of a famous man's most obvious faults. There were the subjects with silver beeches and willowy streams, painted after she had given her heart to landscape for good and all, and had returned to Beckenhampton entranced by the work of Corot. Compared with those early insincerities the picture on the easel was a masterpiece; but she was not looking at them for encouragement – indeed not many of them were in a position to be observed – nor was she at work, though the colours

on the palette were freshly set. Although her gaze wandered constantly from the picture to the study beside it – showing in miniature the same stretch of gorse-grown common, the same sunk wayfarer upon a bench – her brush was motionless, and presently she tossed it to the table with a gesture of impatience.

She was thinking of *A Celibate's Love Songs*. A fortnight had passed since she bought it, and the volume haunted her. She had been filled by an intense desire to write to the author, to tell him of the effect his poetry had had on her, also to ask him one or two questions about it. Such impulses are obeyed by a thousand women every day in the year, but to this woman, remote, unfashionable, the desire seemed so romantic, and even immodest, that she blushed at the temptation. She wondered again if such things were done, wondered if the appreciation of an obscure, bent, plain little artist would excite his ridicule.

It was the latter doubt that deterred her most strongly, the fear that he might scoff. The sensitiveness to her deformity which made it an ordeal to her to confront a stranger, which made her ashamed of her Christian name, rendered her shy even in correspondence, and she shrank as much from revealing herself on paper as in speech. Still this correspondent would not know that she was bent, or plain, or an obscure artist, so there would be nothing for him to scoff at, excepting, perhaps, the way she expressed her ideas. She reflected for a moment that the "H. Sorrenford," which was her usual signature, might even conceal her sex.

That fancy faded almost as it rose. Since her object in writing would be to obtain an answer, she ought to enclose an envelope stamped and addressed. Yes, he was bound to know that the appreciation was a woman's. She faltered again, and wished that the poet were not a man.

In one respect she resembled all the readers who want autographs or information; she was supported by the remembrance that she meant to spare him the expense of the penny stamp. It emboldened her to begin the letter. She had not a sentence in her mind when she sat down, and her opening lines were the lines that popular authors have come to know by heart – the lines with which even less favoured authors are familiar. Before long, though, the knowledge that she was free to destroy the letter when it was finished made her spontaneous, and she ceased to consider the propriety of her action, forgot to question whether he would sneer or not.

She was not a literary woman and she did not write literary English, but she was an unhappy woman, who for the first time in her life had experienced the joy of finding herself understood; and she came nearer to uttering what she meant with her untutored pen than she had ever done with her misguided brush. Because she was not literary, she believed that when she suppressed the pronoun "I" she stilled the personal note, and the true value of the letter lay in its suggestiveness. The pleasure of expressing her love, her gratitude for the verse was very great, and though she chose to ignore the fact that the pages



were destined to meet his eyes, the inward consciousness of it remained forceful.

When the letter was written, she read it slowly through, and twice she made as if to tear it up. But she did not tear it up; she put it away irresolutely. It occurred to her now that she could direct it only to the office of the publisher, and several times during the day she wondered if the publisher would forward it. Once in recalling something that she had said, she regretted a word that had been used, and she wished she could substitute a weaker one. She went to the studio and took the letter out and examined it. She wrote with a "J," and the word was thick and black; the alteration would be noticeable. She did not like the thought of that, was averse from giving to an unaffected letter an air of artifice, and she was reluctant to copy it. She stood hesitating a long while. But how foolish she was! She had not decided yet that she meant to post it at all.

The same on the morrow; she vacillated hourly. She wanted so much to post it, but it seemed such a preposterous thing to do; the more she reflected, the more certain she was that she would feel ashamed if she yielded to the desire. Still she would put the letter in the pocket of her jacket! She could determine whether it should go into the pillar-box or the fire while she was out.

Beckenhampton itself is not picturesque, though the outskirts are pretty enough. The visitor finds nothing to admire in the town save the factory-girls, some of whom are beautiful – excepting on Sunday when they wear their best clothes and mock pearl

necklaces. She was tired to death of the long, dull, stuccoed roads that offered nothing to the imagination. She crossed the market-place and passed a post-office and made her way towards London Street. In London Street the Misses Simpson nodded to her without stopping. They agreed that she was "beginning to look old, poor girl," as they went on. In her hand were the letter, and the cheesemonger's bill, which she was about to pay. The fancy did not strike her, but the two things that she held were typical of her existence.

She paid the bill and turned homeward. Now she walked more slowly, and when she reached the post-office again, she paused. She moved a step closer to it – and wavered. The thought came, to embarrass her, that she was making herself more ridiculous still by so much hesitation. At the worst the man would throw the thing aside and forget it. She wished that it had been sent at once, or that she had never written it at all. The whole incident seemed to her intolerably stupid. She pushed the letter hastily into the box.

## CHAPTER XIII

Yes, David's success had come. It had not been won so easily as was imagined by the readers who had never heard of him till now, for he had written for many papers – verse and articles too – before *A Celibate's Love Songs* appeared. It had not come so soon that success intoxicated him; but it had come a decade earlier than it comes as a rule even to the fortunate.

It was the pity of it, that the recognition he had wooed so ardently found his embrace at last a little passionless. "A humbug" his friends, if he had had any, would have called him when he hinted as much, but some of Fame's fairness had faded in the courtship, or the wooer had lost some of his capacity for rapture.

The "interviews" and the introductions that might have been his were not forthcoming because nobody had met him yet, but he was conscious of no sacrifice in waiving them; on the contrary, he shrank distressed from the thought of thrusting his negro face? between the public and their appreciation of his verse. Mr. Norton, his publisher, might have intimated suavely that his personality had a distinct commercial value, but David had even excused himself from calling on his publisher.

Few things are more circumscribed than "widespread literary fame"; and David's was only spreading. Though *A Celibate's Love Songs* was in brisk demand, and a second edition, the

author's mother in her boarding-house at Regent's Park had not heard of it yet; Vivian was travelling, as business-manager of a dramatic company; and at present the poet's parentage had not transpired. At Panzetta's somebody might have given the kick-off to a ball of personal gossip, remembering the whisper of the ex-clerk's tendencies, but before a volume of poems penetrated to Panzetta's it would have to see, not two, but twenty editions.

In solitude as complete as when he saw his first sonnet printed, or when – as an unattached journalist – he bade the clerkship good-bye, David lived to-day. The residence of the "new poet whom Mr. Norton had discovered" – there are always paragraphists who talk naively of the publisher or manager "discovering" a writer who has been peeling at the bell for years – was a philistine and even shabby first-floor in an undesirable street shadowed by Gray's Inn Road. On his notepaper he ignored Gray's Inn Road, and flaunted Mecklenburgh Square. When he worked, his eyes rested now on an oleograph of Romeo and Juliet in a gilt frame, instead of on a washhand-stand, and his meals were laid by a domestic who removed her curling-pins by noon, and was clean by tea-time. One does not attain distinction as a poet without acquiring certain luxuries.

He was not writing this morning; he seldom did much good until the gas was lighted – until the bawl of hawkers, and the riot of children, and the clatter and crash of milk-cans had ceased. In the evening there were only piano-organs to prevent his earning a living, and by ten or eleven o'clock even these finished. He

was not writing; when the second post was delivered, he had his overcoat spread on the table, and was trying to expunge a grease-spot with a rag soaked in turpentine. There was a letter for him. Though the servant was slow in coming upstairs, the grease spot was still slower in yielding to his treatment, and when she thudded across the room, he was still rubbing vigorously.

His publisher's name was on the envelope, so he put the rag down, wondering if there was any important news. At the sight of an enclosure, and a printed slip conveying Mr. Norton's compliments, he said "damn," for enclosures usually proved to be circulars from Press-cutting agencies. He opened Bee's letter with little interest, and fingers that smelt of turpentine.

The feeling roused in him by the first lines was a very commonplace one – the gratified flutter of a young artist who is praised – but after a few seconds the letter affected him more subtly. It was not merely that "Miss H. Sorrenford," who desired a reply, admired his work; so did more authoritative critics. Nor was it simply that he was thankful to her for owning it; he had been thankful to them too. It wasn't only that her appreciation was intelligent; a few of the criticisms had been more than that. The arresting fact was that he was stirred by curiosity about her. For once a woman permitted him a glimpse of her soul, and the loneliness of his life made the strange event more fascinating. He wondered who she was, and how she looked, and was humiliated to reflect how disenchanting she would be if she could see him. He read the letter twice before he put it in his pocket, and smiled

again at the diffidence of her beginning. What was the picture in her mind – the seclusion of a study, a secretary sorting the poet's morning mail? He regarded his surroundings ruefully.

He thought he would reply to her on the morrow, but the curiosity she had wakened in him did not subside; on the contrary, her letter kept recurring to him during the day, and he pondered what he should say. He was young enough to quake lest his response should dethrone him. Because the matter was engrossing he sat down to answer her the same afternoon, and he found himself writing at much greater length than he had intended.

As he took the second sheet of paper, the doubt arose whether such prolixity would not cheapen him in her view. Unaccustomed to a crown, he was of course afraid of its slipping off. He left the table, and revolved a polite and colourless note that seemed more consistent with the position to which she elevated him; but he wasn't satisfied with it. To assist his meditations he re-read her letter, and now he realised that at the back of his mind lay the desire to hear from her again. The note would frustrate it. He returned to the table, and went on with the fifth page. By dint of squeezing his wisdom a good deal he contrived to avoid encroaching on page six.

Late on the next day but one, he received a few lines of acknowledgment from her. They were grateful, but they provided no reason for his addressing her any more. He was chagrined, and it would have astonished Bee much to know how often David

Lee's thoughts turned to her.

At the end of a week she was sufficiently astonished; she recognised the writing on the envelope and the package a shade incredulously. He begged her acceptance of his first book, which he hoped she would like as well as his second. He even hinted that he awaited her opinion of it with considerable eagerness. She thanked him by return of post, and when another week had gone by, her opinion was expressed. She had written with a faltering pen this time, because she did not like his first book so well as his second, and was perturbed by the necessity for saying so.

David put down the letter discomfited. He had been looking for it every day, and the knowledge that he had been impatient made him angrier still. He was incensed with himself for having provoked the disappointment. Why had he sent her the book? The tepidity of her praise! Never a superlative. Besides, in parts she failed to see his meaning. After all, she was less spiritual than he had thought her!

If her earliest letter had stirred his imagination less deeply, the correspondence which he had rescued once would now have been allowed to die; as it was, he wrote to her not long afterwards, defending himself from her criticism, and explaining a passage which he said she misunderstood. It was manifest that he was wounded. She replied – evidently abased by his displeasure – that she had not presumed to "criticise." So does humility juggle with words. The poet was appeased; and then mortified to feel that he had been a churl. He scribbled a line of deprecation. Also,

angling for further favours, he tied an inquiry to the end of it.

Thus the correspondence entered upon its second stage. In its second stage they exchanged letters at longer intervals, but he ceased to invent pretexts for asking her to reply, and she signed herself, "Sincerely yours, H. Sorrenford," instead of "Yours very truly." When the spring came, he complained: "It is nearly a month since I heard from you – the bareness of the breakfast-table affronts me every morning," and Bee, who had been the prey of scruples, put them from her, and wrote again.

They were wholly natural, the letters that had begun to mean so much; they would have seemed unnatural only if they had been published, with an editor's "Foreword" proclaiming that the writers were strangers to each other. David wrote on impulse in the hours when he was loneliest; Bee responded gladly when the temptation to confess herself was too strong to be denied. There was no news in the letters; hers especially were poor in facts – her thoughts about a book he had recommended to her, the impression of a ramble through the fields, seldom more. He was surprised sometimes to reflect how little he knew about the woman whom at other times he seemed to know so well. It surprised the woman that she could unveil her soul with such audacity to a man she had not met.

Only in moments she realised that she was able to write without constraint because they had not met. He didn't know her, and unknown, she was unembarrassed; the disparity between her body and her mind ceased to oppress her until the envelope was



sealed. She would not even tell him she was an artist, lest he should make inquiries, and discover that she was deformed. In their sensitiveness to their exteriors, as well as in their hunger for love, these two were akin. Often when the man wrote to her, he shivered in imagining her aversion if she could see her correspondent's face. Often when the woman posted her answers, she was ashamed, conjecturing his fancy-portrait of her and cowering before her crooked shadow on the road.

And his fancy sketched a score of portraits of her. She had youth – he was sure of that – yet she was not so young that her outlook was a girl's. She had beauty – manlike, he clung to that, although he had so good a cause to know that lovely thoughts may inhabit unlovely homes. But after it was said, how little had been told! He craved the definite. Was she fair, or was she dark? Were her eyes brown or blue? What colour was her hair? Was she small, or queenly? At once he longed to see her, and trembled at the thought of revealing himself to her astounded gaze. Frequently he was harassed by the thought that an opportunity for their meeting would occur, and he wondered what excuse he could offer for avoiding it. Her letters were friendly, frank; one day he might open one to learn that she was coming to town. How could he dare to greet her? "I am David Lee." He foresaw her start, the colour falling from her face, the effort with which she put out her hand after the shock. And then? Yes, they would talk together for a little while unhappily; she would be painstakingly polite and struggle to conceal the dismay

that he read in her every tone and gesture. And afterwards there would be a difference in her letters; and by degrees they would grow shorter, and presently they would cease – and the woman who had given him a new interest in life would be lost. While he could retain this sweet and strange companionship he swore he would retain it. The shock must come to her some time, he supposed, from a newspaper paragraph; for the present – But cowardice could not quiet his curiosity, and again and again he wished that he could see her once; always he wondered how she looked.

Bee's dread of his suggesting a visit to her was deepened by the fact that if she seemed reluctant to receive him, her correspondence would assume a clandestine air. Into the woman's life as well had come a new and eager fascination; she, too, desired and feared together. She wanted to hear him talk; she did not ask herself if he was handsome, but she wanted to hear him talk. What joy to have a presence that he would approve! To be able to tear open his welcome letters with no misgiving; one day to read that he was coming, and go down to the drawing-room, a graceful figure in a becoming frock, without the terror of reading consternation in his gaze. She pictured her entrance as it must be: his blank astonishment as she appeared on the threshold; their perfunctory conversation, with a lump in her throat; his pitiful pretence that he was pleased that he had come. How her letters would shrivel in his remembrance! She bowed her head.

Each was fast falling in love with an individuality; each was

frightened at the thought of meeting the other's eyes. The man said bitterly, "She would shrink from a mulatto!" The woman sighed, "No doubt he thinks me beautiful!"

## CHAPTER XIV

April was drawing to a close, and every evening the Professor said, "Have you heard from the Academy, my dear?" and sighed when she answered "No." She had begun to conclude that "The Sun's Last Rays" was rejected, and it distressed her to think of the money that she had laid out on the frame. Before the order for that frame was given, the price had been exhaustively debated at the supper-table; she knew that a good frame was a recommendation to a hanging committee – her father had argued that "an artist's work ought to stand on its own merits." In his demeanour now she read a reproach of her extravagance, and each time that he asked her if she had heard yet, it was a greater effort to her to reply.

At last, however – one evening when hope had almost died in her – the servant entered the room with a letter. The Professor lolled in the armchair smoking his pipe; Hilda was engrossed in a "new novel" from Turlington's – published in the previous spring – and Bee herself was sitting idle. Her thoughts flew to David Lee as she watched the girl advance towards her. She had withheld from her family the fact of her correspondence with the poet – withheld it, not because they would regard her friendship with him as an impropriety, but because they would consider she was making herself ridiculous – and she prayed that her father would not ask from whom the letter came. The handwriting relieved her

anxiety, and the crest on the flap excited her. The next moment she pulled her varnishing ticket from the envelope.

"From the Academy, my dear?"

"Yes," she exclaimed, "I've got in!"

"What's that?" said Hilda, glancing up from the book. "Got in? Oh, have you – how nice!"

"What do they say?" inquired the old man. "Let me see!"

"It's a ticket for varnishing day," she said. "I wonder how I'm hung."

"Very odd," he remarked, "that they didn't send it you before." He read the ticket attentively, pursing his lips, and turned it over, as if a clue to the delay might be discovered at the back. "What did I tell you? I knew it would be all right. A pity you wasted such a lot on the frame now, eh, my dear?"

She could not perceive that the mistake was demonstrated, but his legitimate triumphs were so few that it would have been petty of her to grudge him an illusory one. "It must have been among the doubtfuls," she explained – "the pictures they didn't make up their minds about at once – that's why I didn't hear before."

"Of course," he said, "there are pictures that are put away to be examined again; the committee can't decide about them right off. Whether they are, taken eventually depends – er – depends on circumstances. They are called the 'doubtfuls.'" He returned her information to her with the air of letting her into a secret. "I expect they thought it a bit dull, you know – a bit dull. It's pretty – it's a pretty thing – but it wants more sunshine. It isn't bright

enough. You haven't got the blaze of the gorse into it; that's what you've failed in – you haven't got the blaze of the gorse."

"It's eight o'clock in the evening," she said. "The title is 'The Sun's Last Rays.'"

The sunshine was paling from her spirits too. Extraordinary, she reflected, that it was possible for those who always meant well always to miss saying the things one wanted to hear. Both he and Hilda were genuinely pleased – she knew it – yet how flat the news had fallen! And neither of them had cried, "I wonder how you're hung!"

"Y-e-s, you don't convey the glory of summer, unfortunately; the thing isn't gay enough; there's no heat in it, no glare. That's what's the matter with it, my dear – there isn't the glare there should be. Now, to do justice to that scene, to paint it to advantage, you should have shown it on a scorching afternoon, under a vivid sky. The tramp on the seat should have been hot – mopping his forehead. There might even have been a touch of humour in the figure of the tramp. As it is, he only looks tired. You understand what I mean?"

"Oh yes," she murmured, "I understand. But that isn't the picture I wanted to do. I meant the wayfarer to look tired. I wanted to get what George Eliot called 'the sadness of a summer's evening' into it."

"Mopping his forehead with a red handkerchief, now, would be natural; and the red would liven the picture up. You might paint a red handkerchief in before the Academy opens, mightn't

you? Think it over, my dear. A red handkerchief and a brighter light on the gorse would improve the thing wonderfully. It's a pity the man isn't more to the front, more important. He isn't prominent enough. That's where the fault lies really – the tramp isn't prominent enough."

Though it exasperated him to hear the ignorant try to criticise music, he never hesitated to dogmatise about the arts of which he knew nothing himself; and as she listened to him, the elation that had been born within her faded into lassitude. The fact that good news had come appeared to be already forgotten; her sister, having said, "How nice," was again immersed in the novel, and while her father discoursed didactically without once speculating how her picture had been hung, it seemed to Bee that her successes were always made an opportunity for homilies in her home rather than for rejoicing.

How her work had been hung, and how it would look, were doubts that filled her mind when she travelled to town on varnishing day. It was only in moments she even remembered that she was nearing the city that held David Lee. She knew the change that removal from the studio wrought in the aspect of a picture, and she crossed the great courtyard – as an exhibitor for the first time – with increasing nervousness. She went upstairs, and for a quarter of an hour wandered through the rooms in an unavailing search. Then she discovered her work, high in a corner, beside a picture of a child in a bright blue frock, playing with a puppy on a Brussels carpet. She stopped with a heart-

quake. Though she had prepared herself to be disappointed, the shock sickened her. Surrounded by other pictures, also clashing with it in subject and treatment, and viewed in the harsh light of the Academy, her quiet landscape appeared to her insignificant and unfamiliar. She marvelled that there could have been hours when she was pleased with it; she stood rooted there, seeking the qualities that had endeared it to her. They had gone – everything had gone! It was the ghost of the landscape that she had painted that appalled her from the Academy walls. The ghost of it. She drooped drearily to a step-ladder and sat down. When she had recovered sufficiently to return to the picture, she put on a light varnish, which brought up the colour of the parts that had sunk in; but varnish could not brighten her mood, and she had little hope that "No. 790" would ever find a purchaser.

She had often reflected with a tremor that when David Lee went to the Academy, he might observe her work and recognise her name in the catalogue. In the novels that Hilda borrowed from Tuffington's the Academy was always revealing somebody's identity to someone else. "He moved to where the crowd was densest, and a minute later a half-cry escaped his lips. The scene that had never faded from his memory – the scene of their farewell – glowed upon the canvas. He knew that only one hand could have portrayed it – knew that the artist who had leapt to fame must be the trustful girl whom he had loved and lost!" Now that there was no danger of the work attracting Mr. Lee's notice, she wondered why she had feared its doing so; her



misgiving that it might lead to his finding out the truth about her seemed ridiculous. She even parted regretfully with the prospect of arousing his admiration.

In the train, her despondence was deepened by the thought of having to give an account of the day's experiences when she arrived. While she could imagine nothing sweeter than to be approaching a home where affection was interpreted by tact, her soul fainted before the ordeal of detailing the disappointment to her father and Hilda. She knew that she would feel worse in the parlour than she did in the train, that, besides being dejected, she would be incensed. Whether things went well, or whether they went badly, she mused, it was an equal effort to have to talk about them if the listeners seized upon the trivial, and ignored the point – if they put faith in what they were meant to smile at, and were sceptical where they were asked to believe. How often she had gone home brimming with news, and no sooner imparted the first item than she wished fervently that she hadn't any at all!

The porters bawled "Becken'ampton," and she got out with a sigh, and made her way – dusty, unwilling, tired – towards the house. When she entered it, there were some letters lying on the hall table, and she saw one among them for herself from David. She picked it up, rejoicing; a flush warmed the whiteness of her cheeks, and she forgot she was fatigued. Her home-coming had been happier than she expected after all.

## CHAPTER XV

In June she went to Surrey for a month. She generally managed to make studies in the country during a few weeks in the year, and more often than not took Hilda with her, the Professor agreeing to their departure with as generous an air as if he were paying the expenses. Hilda went with her again this time. They had the luck to light on Godstone, where they found surprisingly attractive quarters, and – what was stranger still – a sufficiency of simple food, the typical village consisting chiefly of drawbacks and public-houses.

Godstone was quite exceptional. Although it was the very quintessence of the country – all cows, and clover, and quietude – the milk there was not watered with an audacity that would have startled a dairyman of the London slums. Fresh butter could actually be obtained without much difficulty, at a price only a little higher than it was sold at in the cities. Crowning marvel in the country, they were not bowed under a burden of obligation in securing green vegetables, though that was certainly because the Kemps grew such luxuries in the garden. Village tradesmen never "supply" what the customer orders – they occasionally "oblige him" with it. To foster a fine spirit of indifferentism there is nothing like the knowledge that your competitors are as bad as yourself. Laundresses and village tradesmen are the only truly independent classes in England.

Of course there were drawbacks even here. There were, for instance, a butcher's and a grocer's opposite Daisymead, and this meant flies and wasps investigating Daisymead in large numbers. The butcher threw the onus of the wasps on the grocer's sugar, and the grocer said, that wasps were harmless things if you hadn't no fear of 'em, and was bitter about the butcher's flies. Panics were frequent in the lodgers' parlour, and as the window faced the shops, it became a question whether it was better to be stifled or stung.

In the morning, while the artist worked, Hilda loitered under the apple-trees, and languished in basket-chairs and light frocks where the shade lay deepest in the landlord's field. One could see the railway from the field, and many a young fellow in the trains saw Hilda, and regretted that Godstone wasn't his destination. In the afternoon there was the tangle of the woods to wander through – so close that it was a constant temptation to get lost there. And there was the way that began with wild strawberry blossom, and rose to wooded heights, below which the county spread like a green tablecloth decked with a box of toys; and then, after avenues of giant firs where darkness fell, no matter how fierce the sun, there were the surprises of lichened glades where one tiptoed among the ferns in hope of fairies. With her easel, and her canvases, and her camera, Bee found the days all too short. She found the days too short, but there was a charm in the evenings too. The final saunter along the still white road before supper, just as far as the gate where the rabbits scampered, or the

bridge by the water-mill where strange birds sometimes flashed among the boughs; the hush of the little lamplit room with a book afterwards; if one liked, a glimpse of the stars from the garden-path, a breath of the flowers – and then to bed.

She had written to David a few days after her arrival, and his first letter to Surrey came when she had been installed in Daisymead about a fortnight. She opened it by the little stack of hay which was all that the field had granted this year.

He wrote that her description of her surroundings made London still more loathsome to him, that he wished vainly he could escape from it. A somewhat laboured reference to his journalistic work followed – a plaint that though they had become such good friends, it seemed unlikely they would meet. A pucker crept between her brows as she read; she wondered why he said that, wondered why he found it necessary all at once to harp upon the difficulties of taking a short journey to see her. It was as if he were warning her not to expect him. Had he interpreted her enthusiasm for the place as a hint to him to come? She tried, discomfited, to remember what her words had been. After a minute she went on reading, and then she saw that all this had been the prelude to a request – a none too skilful prelude; but that she did not see. "So I have been summoning my courage to ask you – " She scanned the next lines rapidly, and the letter quivered in her hand. He asked her for her photograph.

She leant against the fence, dismayed. Her first thought – to explain that she hadn't a likeness of herself to send – forsook

her under the fear of his thinking her ungracious if she did not promise to be photographed when she went home. Confused, she sought an excuse that would sound natural. Never had she exaggerated her disfigurement more morbidly, never had her face appeared uglier to her, her shoulders higher, her back more bent. To send him her photograph? She felt that it demanded the courage of a heroine.

His petition darkened the day to her; it threatened her in the night; she woke to be harassed by it again. To send him her photograph – to show him what she was? Again and again she asked herself if her hold on him was strong enough to withstand the revelation. Momentarily she wished she were a man; it was woman's mission to be beautiful. And he, he shrank from ugliness, she could read it in his work. To him "woman" meant "beauty" —

"Beauty of worshipped form and face ...  
Sweet hands, sweet hair, sweet cheeks, sweet eyes,  
sweet mouth,  
Each singly wooed and won."

The lines of Rossetti's that had flouted her insignificance since she was a girl, jeered at her now. She found no comfort in the next: —

"Yet most with the sweet soul  
Shall love's espousals then be knit."

Yes, "then" – after the rest was wooed! "Woman" meant features to inspire men, and a form to make them mad. In a transport of imagination she imagined almost with a man's desires, and hung before her glass, abased.

But, after all, how could confession rob her of her happiness? She had woven the tie between them of her thoughts, her spirit; it was her mind that pleased him – how could the knowledge that she was misshapen destroy his interest in her mind? She insisted that it could not – and deep in her heart was hurt to feel that his interest in her was this purely intellectual thing. He cared too little for her hand-clasp even to travel to see her. Then she was a fool to hesitate – she would write him the truth! Next, resentment scorched her that, caring so little, he had put this humiliation upon her. A whim, a spasm of curiosity, and he had made her suffer so. Her misery cried that he was not worth it, but tears sprang to her eyes at the same moment. She would write to him before her courage failed her. She would write as soon as Hilda was settled in the field for the morning; her folly should end to-day!

She was eager to write at once, fearful that if she waited long, her mood would change. When she saw the landlady's daughter in the passage, she asked her to come to the parlour before she went out and take a letter to the post. The girl said she wouldn't forget, and the arrangement, trivial though it was, gave to the woman a sense of something accomplished. She was dimly aware, too,

that it would shorten her ordeal.

On the breakfast-table there was another letter for her, redirected by the Professor. Hilda called her attention to it.

"For you," she piped in her thin voice. "What hours you've been dressing! I began to think you were never coming down. Do pour the tea out, or it will be cold; it has been standing there ten minutes."

"You shouldn't have waited for me." She poured the tea, and picked up the letter absently. It was an invitation to exhibit "The Sun's Last Rays" in Liverpool, and at any other time the request would have excited her; now she was too preoccupied to find it interesting.

"Oh," she murmured.

"'Oh,' what?"

"They want 'The Sun's Last Rays' at the Walker Art Gallery when the Academy closes, that's all."

"Where's that? Pass me the salt, will you?"

"Liverpool."

"Shall you let them have it?"

"Oh yes," she said, "I suppose so. Why not?"

"The carriage will cost a lot, won't it?"

"No, it won't cost anything. They'll send for the picture, and return it to me free of charge, if it isn't sold." Her lips tightened, and she looked away through the window. Engrossed as she was, she noticed that her sister did not say "How jolly for you!" but "Won't the carriage cost a lot?" In the course of the summer

Hilda would refer to the invitation casually as "That nice letter you had from Liverpool," quite unconscious that she had shown no perception of its being "nice" when it came.

"Why don't you eat your breakfast?" she asked now, having exhausted the subject of the picture.

"I don't want it," said Bee. "You can have this egg too, if you like."

When the table was cleared, and she was left alone, she sat down to her task. What should she say? Now that the pen was in her hand her eagerness deserted her, and the thought of dispelling his delusion made her tremble again. Her arguments of a while ago recurred to her vainly – she was as sure that he imagined her what she would like to be as she was sure that ugliness repelled him. She set her teeth, and dipped the pen in the ink.

She could find no words. Presently she addressed the envelope, but the notepaper was still blank. In the kitchen the mother and the girl were talking; she could hear them quite distinctly: "And don't forget to call in about the bread as you come back!" She glanced at the clock, and wrote desperately.

"I cannot do as you wish," she scrawled, "because I have never been photographed in my life. I have never been photographed because I am deformed, and – "

No! not like that, she couldn't say it like that. She sat motionless again, hearing the loud ticking of the clock, and hating herself. The clock struck insistently. She pushed the sheet of paper aside, and searched through the blotting-book for



another. There was no other in it, so she went to the chiffonnier and opened the drawer. In the drawer there were several things besides the stationery: a sketch-book, some unmounted photographs that she had taken last week in Penshurst, some unmounted photographs that she had taken last week of Hilda. She picked one of them up mechanically, and stood looking at it; stood looking at the photograph of Hilda – a study in sunlight and shadow, dreaming in a garden chair under the boughs.

There was a knock at the door, and Miss Kemp came in.

"I'm just going, Miss," she said. "Have you got your letter ready?"

"What?" said Bee huskily, without turning.

"I'm just going. Is your letter ready?"

"Yes," muttered the woman. She ran back to the table, and thrust the photograph in the envelope, and put it in the girl's hand.

## CHAPTER XVI

David sat hunched in a chair, the likeness on his knees. He had risen determinedly and put it from him twice – lodged it against one of the eyesores on the mantelpiece that were referred to as the "ornaments" – but after intervals of abstraction he had found that he was nursing it again. He had a lurking consciousness that if he put it from him half a dozen times, it would be back on his lap before five minutes had gone by.

It surpassed all his dream-pictures of her. The situation confused him; he could not realise it quite, with the photograph under his eyes. He had for a friend this young, this beautiful girl. Though he had vaguely imagined her beautiful, the definite was bewildering; his letters seemed suddenly audacious to him – there was a breath of the incredible in the thought that he had written them to her. And hers! still more wonderful the thought of hers. His correspondent was this daughter of the gods, serene, imperial, proud – the girl who wrote to him was like this!

He had for a friend this young, this beautiful girl. For a "friend"? His manhood abjured the word. Was she not his by a subtler, stronger bond than friendship? If the community between them could be called friendship, what was love? She had yielded herself to him – her spiritual self – surrendered to his keeping thoughts more sacred than her body. He craved to go to her, and trembled with the dread of effacing by his

personality the impression that he had made upon her by his art. To let his looks destroy the love his soul was waking in her? No, he could not go, he must be strong. But if he dared – if only it were possible! She lived – it was no vision conjured up by loneliness – she lived. She was smiling, speaking, thinking of him not thirty miles away. He was fevered by the idea of their meeting as it might have been – as it would have been if he had had a white skin. He found her here where she was sitting; the sunlight touched her just as now – "Your friend has come to you!" The eyes in the portrait shone to him, and he saw gladness in their gaze... The trees had darkened, and the stars were lit. How long a time had passed? In his fancy there was no calendar, but the photograph had magic powers. He was telling her he loved her. The eyes looked tenderer, the bosom swelled; the lips – Oh, madman! the thing was only paper after all. If the delusion had lasted a second longer!

Then a new idea possessed him. He might see her at least – he might see her without her knowing who he was. It must be easy to catch a glimpse of her in such a place as she had described, easier by far than it would be when she was at home. He would go to Godstone on the first fair morning and discover Daisymead, and linger in its neighbourhood till she came out... Perhaps when he arrived it would be wet? Then he must obtain a bedroom for the night. He might even stay a week; why shouldn't he? He might stay a week and see her every day. His thoughts spun exultantly. She and her sister themselves were in lodgings – there

was nothing to prevent his seeking rooms in the same house. But his name? Well, he could assume a name for the week; he would go as "Tremlett." By no earthly chance could "Mr. Tremlett," looking as he looked, suggest David Lee to her mind. He might stroll round the field when she was in it, sit near her under the trees; he might even speak to her after a day or two. By degrees she would grow used to his appearance. In the circumstances, in the solitude, she might not disdain his company. One evening he might avow himself, talk to her of his work, tell her all that was in his heart for her – on an evening when the moon was hidden and she couldn't see his face. Elisha had once said to him: "When I was in love with your mother I used to sing to her – in the dusk." The dead man's words came back to him, and he shivered. He thought: "*I am following in my father's way!*"

Awe fell upon him. He heard his father's warnings again – was walking with him on the lawn. For an instant the past had swept so near that the present seemed unreal. The scent of the trite flower-beds, the scenes of jealousy, the taunts of the languid woman toying with her rings, the sound of her sneering laugh, even the rustle of her dress, all these things were close, close upon him. He thought of his childhood, and it ached in him anew. His own child would not escape! Wouldn't it be cruel, wouldn't it be monstrous, to bring a child into the world to suffer as he had suffered himself? Human nature pleaded that his own child would know a different kind of mother; and memory answered: "We always think a woman 'so different' before we've got her."

But she *was* different! Yes, he affirmed it to the dead; his father would have owned that she was different. . . She was different, but the world was the same. The recollection of his schooldays, the consciousness of all his dull, empty, years of passionate rebellion, menaced him. It would be a cowardice, it would be a crime, to snatch a joy of which his child must pay the cost.

Awe had fallen on him, and of awe was born an ardent wish to pin the thought to paper, to capture it for verse. It was a gruesome thought, that even his will was leagued against him; but while half his consciousness shrank from it appalled, the artist in him, allured by the thought's poetical promise, darted to it admiringly, tremulous with the fear that it might escape. With the verbal artificer whose servitude is complete it is always so, this instinctive, inevitable appraisalment of the spirit. It is the penalty of his degrading craft. He has surrendered to a power which holds nothing sacred, not a son's remembrance, nor a father's love, nor a husband's agony – not death, nor devotion, nor despair, and the power is inexorable and remorseless. He may forget in hours and rejoice and suffer simply, like a free man, but the clash of his chains will jangle on the divinest melodies of his life, forcing him to scrutinise, and analyse, and define, when he were worthier merely to feel. He shall register the heart-beats of his passion, and whittle an aphorism with his head on the breast of his bride. His mind is for ever alert to estimate the literary value of his soul. When he fondles his child his idolatry cannot save him from seeking copy in his emotions, and when he sorrows by a grave

his tears shall not blind him to the virtues of a lament that has not been written before.

The morrow was fine, but David did not go to Godstone. Just to ascertain how long it took to get there, however, he bought an "A B C," a fascinating book with the breeze of the moors, and the splash of the sea in it, and the suggestiveness of old townlets with quaint names. The toss of a Channel crossing, and the lights of the Boulevard are in it; and the luxury of ideal hotels in English gardens, and the aroma of after-dinner coffee under the trees. The reader may arrive in imagination at a thousand delightful places for sixpence.

And he did not go on the next day either, though he had half a mind to do so during the afternoon, and only stayed at home because he vacillated until it was too late to catch the train. He succumbed on the third day. An omnibus jolted him to Charing Cross with his bag behind his legs, and he bought a copy of a weekly journal with an essay by him in it, and was fortunate enough to secure a corner seat.

Exhilaration was in his veins as he saw the flag waved; he would even have forgotten his colour if a lady who had entered the compartment while he was reading his essay had not looked affronted when he displayed his face. The train loitered about the city in so exasperating a fashion that he began to think it would never get any further than London Bridge; but after about twenty minutes it dragged itself away, and puffed Surreyward with a hundred shrieks. At the shout of "Godstone" he threw the

paper down, and made haste to disencumber himself of the bag. A spirit of adventure possessed him as he turned from the cloak-room and strode into the pebbled yard. He did not inquire for Daisymead at once; it was enough that he was here. He saw the receding train glide far along the line, watched the smoke trail across the distance and dissolve. The roar came to him more faintly – was not unpleasant, and was still. His eagerness melted into peace; he crossed the pebbles, and walked along the winding road. The perfume of honeysuckle was blown across his nostrils; the hedges were gemmed with the pink of bachelor's buttons, and the blue of bird's-eye; meadows sloped graciously. It was the country.

His soul gave thanks for that sweet and rare thing, silence. At first he thought it silence. Then as his hearing became attuned to the surroundings, he grew conscious that the air was indeed alive with sound – with a twittering and trilling, with the hum of bees, and the whisper of long grass running in silver wavelets before the wind. It must also be said that he was aware of the buzzing of a fly which accompanied him for nearly half a mile, and kept alighting on his neck.

He picked some wild-flowers that caught his glance, and stuck them in his coat; they were beautiful, and he wondered what they were. Presently he met a band of village children, and inquired the flowers' names. The youngest of the party perhaps was twelve: they stared and did not know. The notes of a storm-cock held him, calling in an elm; again he wondered. A woman

came down the road with a basket on her arm, and he spoke to her, and asked, "What bird is that?" She was old and bent, and had lived here all her life: she stared and did not know.

"I've never took no heed o' birds," she answered. It was the country.

He trusted that information would be easier to acquire when he sought the house. A stile suggested a pipe, and, smoking, he noticed a hedge-gap, and found himself at the entrance to a wood. It must be the wood of which he had heard, the wood that *she* had pictured to him in her letters. He always thought of her as "She"; the formality of "Miss Sorrenford" as impossible in meditation, and he could hardly think of her as "H." She had said that she came here constantly; it might be that she would come while he lingered – it might be that the bushes hid her from him now! In the sudden fancy it appeared to him that the wood was the scene where he desired most fervidly to find her – that it was here that he must first behold her in order to complete the joy. He parted the brambles, and pushed eagerly into the depths.

He pressed into the labyrinth as ardently as if he could hope to speak to her if they met. How dark it was with the sky shut out! The foliage sighed a little overhead; the tangle was so low that often he had to stoop. His feet crushed the litter of dry dead leaves; the branches of the wild-rose clung to his clothes. He attained to light. Solitude engulfed him, and the bracken was as high as his knees; in the cool, moist hush he could hear a twig drop upon the moss. He stood reflecting that it was not a place



for a girl to roam in unprotected – the nearest habitation might have been miles away. Near as it was, no scream could reach it, no cry for help was likely to penetrate even to the road. His mind was now less occupied with agreeable visions of discovering her than with solicitude for her safety every day. At this moment he was startled by a stealthy tread.

A rough figure was creeping cautiously between the trees. He did not see David; but for an instant David saw nothing but him, nothing but the cruel eyes, the avid face, the upraised arm. For an instant. In the next, he saw – trusting itself to earth a few yards off – a starling; and the lad stole towards it greedily, the only thought quickened in him by its loveliness, the idea of smashing it with a stone. It was the country.

The bird's plumage gleamed like satin; the little creature was so confident, so fragile, so happy that the hellishness of the thing turned the man's heart sick. He flung his pipe, and the starling flew upward, saved, a second before the stone was hurled. The lad was both aggrieved and contemptuous: viewed as a missile, the pipe argued the man a fool. Then David, who burned to thrash him, explained himself with heat; but the other showed such dull amazement at his indignation, such utter lack of understanding, that wrath gave place to misery in the poet. It even seemed to him, as he moved away, that he had been unjust. A little later in the year cultured men and graceful women would also murder birds for fun. One bird, or another, with a gun, or a stone – ? To the yokel, too, his shame was "sport." The difference in the

barbarism was only a difference of class.

David had had enough of the wood. Having recovered his pipe among the ferns, he made his way out, and sauntered back along the high-road. Overtaking a large sack, slung across the shoulder of a small boy, who at close quarters revealed the peaked cap and uniform of a postman, he asked to be directed to Daisymead, and learnt that he had not far to go.

It was a low white house, with stiff white curtains hanging in the windows, and full white roses climbing on the walls. The sight of it disappointed him rather, and it seemed to him to be on the wrong side of the way, though he had never preconceived its situation consciously. A flight of steps led to a white gate and a patch of front-garden wonderfully abloom – a revel of pinks and canterbury-bells, and the velvet of sweetwilliam. He gave a knock, questioning a little how to account for his application, for he saw no card with the familiar London legend, "Furnished Apartments," over the door.

It was opened by a strapping woman, drying her hands on her apron. She was not a peasant – her eyes were alert, her face was mobile; and, though she had grey hair, she bore herself erect. Her gaze widened at him; there was even a tinge of apprehension in it.

"Good morning," he said; "I'm looking for rooms – or for one room if I can't get any more. Have you any to let?"

"Y-e-s," answered the woman, hesitatingly. "Can I see them?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure," she faltered. He understood that it was his appearance that made her doubtful. "I don't know

whether – Might I ask 'oo it was that recommended you?"

He pointed airily. "The postman directed me here. I've just come down from town; my luggage is at the station."

"I'm not sure whether my husband 'd care to take in any more people this year. We've got two ladies staying with us already, and If you'll wait a minute I'll see what 'e says about it."

He waited in suspense. She returned after a consultation in the kitchen, her husband with her. Though the man came fully informed of what was wanted, David felt sure that it would be necessary to begin at the beginning again, and in this he wasn't mistaken. The couple stood contemplating him curiously, waiting for him to speak.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm looking for two rooms, or for one room if I can't get any more. Have you any to let?"

"Well, we *ave* got two rooms," admitted the man.

"Can I see them?"

The householder scratched his head. "Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "My wife 'ere she's not quite sure whether she could manage with anybody else this summer. Are you, Emma? There's two ladies staying 'ere now, and it makes a bit o' work for her. Don't it, Emma? You might get a room a bit lower down, very likely. What was it you were wanting?"

"Oh, anything would suit me!" exclaimed David, with an ingratiating smile, and suppressed rage. "I'm not particular at all – only I should have liked to go to a house where I could be sure of being comfortable. Yours looks so pretty, and so clean;

it's the only place I've seen round here that I should care to pay much in." He had been struggling to recall their name – trying to see it mentally in one of Bee's letters – and it flashed upon him now. "Cold meat and cleanliness, Mrs. Kemp – It is 'Mrs. Kemp,' I think?" He made her a bow. "Cold meat and cleanliness are worth more than late dinners and – er – " The sentence would not round itself; he forced another smile for climax.

"You might eat off any floor in this 'ouse!" she declared, deciding he was human.

"I'm sure you might," he replied. "In London we don't often see a house like it, I can tell you!"

"You've not been in London long, I suppose?" she said. "You come from abroad, don't you?"

"No, I've lived in London all my life – my business is there. That's why I go to the country when I get a holiday."

"Ah," said Mr. Kemp reflectively, "it's a great place, London – room for all sorts in it!"

"Yes," said David. "What lovely roses you have, Mrs. Kemp, and how sweet the pinks smell! What flowers are those in the corner – the high, purple flowers against the wall?"

"Them?" she said. "Lor! I'm a poor one at flowers. What do you call 'em, John?"

"I dunno," said John.

"Well, I don't wonder you think twice about taking lodgers, but I" – he laughed feebly – "I'm a very honest person; I wouldn't steal so much as a leaf."

There was a pause. They all looked at one another.

"What do you say, John?" she murmured. "We might manage to take the young man in, perhaps, eh?"

"You won't find me any trouble if you do. You'll give me a first-rate character when I leave you!" cried David with geniality that exhausted him.

"About rent," said Mr. Kemp. "What did you think of paying?"

"What do you want?"

The couple exchanged anxious glances. Mr. Kemp breathed heavily.

"Well, we have had as much as a pound for those two rooms, for a lady and three children through the summer," he said.

"Of course," added the woman, "for only one person –"

"Call it a pound!" said David, whipping out his purse. "And I suppose it's fairest to pay in advance. My name is Tremlett. I'll just look round, and then I'll go to the station, and get my bag."

And so it was accomplished. The same roof sheltered him and Her! He smiled now naturally in savouring the fact. His little sitting-room was at the back, overlooking the cabbages and a red, rose-bordered path that led to the hennery and the field. Its old-fashioned shabbiness was not without a charm, and, having yielded consent, Mrs. Kemp adopted a solicitous manner with a strong flavour of wondering compassion in it. She still seemed to him in moments to be marvelling silently that he was able to talk her language. When he came in from the station he found

that she had brightened his table with a bowl of poppies and elder-blossom. Gathering the poppies had robbed them of their sprightliness, and they hung shrivelled, like pricked airballs, but the delicacy of the elder-blossom was exquisite, and he liked the tone of what she called the old "crock." Because wild-flowers pleased him less in his coat than anywhere else, he put those that he was wearing into a mug preserved on the mantelshelf. On the front of the mug he saw a view described as "Rickmansworth Church from the East," and on the base he saw the inscription "Made in Germany."

His mind began to misgive him about the sister – perhaps she would prove a dragon, in the way? He half hoped that Mrs. Kemp would let fall some particulars when she brought in his chop. She said nothing to the point, however, nor did he hear any voice about the premises to wake sensations. When his dinner was eaten he went out to the path, and threw eager-glances round the field; but the two chairs under the trees were empty, and there was nobody in sight; so he came back and smoked a pipe on the sofa.

A young girl entered with his tea; he judged her rightly to be the Kemps' daughter. She evidently came to ascertain how a mulatto looked, and she was not disinclined to hear one talk. He felt that he was enlarging his circle of acquaintances amazingly; in a day here he had spoken to more people than he addressed at home in a month. From Miss Kemp he learnt in conversation that she had just been getting tea ready for "the ladies" too. She

coupled the information with a reference to "one pair of hands"; he waited for her to add the companion phrase about "her head never saving her legs," but she did not.

She was a nice girl, and not uneducated, though she did say "one pair of hands" when she meant "one person"; and when he bewailed the fact that it had begun to rain, and she brought him some novels to pass the time, he was surprised to find what novels she read. However, they entertained him very little. His soul was divided between dejection at the weather and gratitude for her kindness. He was so unused to kindness that the landlady's daughter offering to lend him books seemed to him a tender and a touching thing. The chairs had been brought indoors; the rain rattled on the laurels, and strewed the petals of the roses on the path. Through the long twilight a pair of heavy hands in a neighbouring cottage laboured a hymn – the village pianist always chooses hymns – with mournful persistence. David stood at the window, recognising despondently that "the ladies" would remain in their parlour all the evening. The field of his expectations would be void and profitless – it might even be too wet for them to-morrow.

## CHAPTER XVII

But it was not. When he woke, the day was radiant. A guileless sky denied its misdemeanour merrily. Mrs. Kemp, in clattering the china, asked him "how he lay last night." He thanked her, and took a mental note of the locution, inquiring in his turn when the rain had ceased. For answer she snorted "Rain?" and frowned reproof at the sunshine, and he attributed her manner to crops.

His pouch was empty. She told him that tobacco could be obtained at the grocer's; so he went across the road presently and bought some at a little shop that proclaimed itself "Renowned for its breakfast-eggs," and "Celebrated for its bacon." As he came out, a woman passed him, laden with a canvas, and a sketching box, a camp-stool, and what looked like a bunch of rods. She was pale and slight. He saw that she was deformed as he hurried by. He didn't take much notice of her.

A chair had been put back in the shade of the boughs, and he waited feverishly where it was well in view. Soon a girl strolled down the path between the roses. She wore a white frock, and had a book in her hand. Her face dazzled him; his heart leapt to greet her. She entered the field, and sat down under the tree. The photograph had come to life. He leant, gazing at her, unnoticed.



## CHAPTER XVIII

This was the event of his second day here. This was all. He had seen her; the knowledge sang in his senses. Momentarily he felt that if his visit yielded no more, it would have been bountiful enough. When her glance lighted on him, he read her thought in it, and drew back ashamed. He turned away ashamed, and afraid of seeming to intrude. In town he had dared to picture himself sitting near her, watching her movements, breaking the ice. In Godstone self-consciousness confounded him. She appeared to him unapproachable; he had even been humiliated by her look.

Hilda said to Bee that afternoon: "There's another lodger here; he's a nigger – or something of the sort. Isn't it a nuisance? I wonder the Kemps take that kind of people in, with us in the house!"

"Oh, is he staying here?" said Bee; "I saw him coming out of Peters'. Perhaps he is only down for the week-end. I don't suppose he'll be in our way. If he does make himself objectionable, you had better come out with me in the morning while he stops."

"I think I could keep him at a distance without that," returned Hilda scornfully. "Besides, he would never have the impudence. What horrid luck, though! If it had been a man come to stay here now, it would have been rather nice."

But they had no reason to complain of his being "in their

way"; the new lodger did not attempt to scrape acquaintance with them, although in the next two days they often passed him, idling in the garden, or sauntering along the road. He refrained so punctiliously from staring at them, that they were able to steal a few glances themselves. Bee observed that he looked unhappy, and was fond of flowers; and Hilda remarked that he wore a well-cut suit, and had a nice taste in neckties. "Evidently not a common 'nigger,'" she said; "a medical student, or something!" She was not concerned, though it was clear that he had come for longer than the week-end.

On Tuesday she was obliged to acknowledge his existence. It was a stupid incident – to happen with a "nigger." It might as easily have happened with somebody worth meeting; say, with one of the young men who bowled into the station-yard in dog-carts and looked as if they wished they knew her. She had gone out to get a daily paper, and the lodger was in the shop buying foolscap. She was told that the last of the newspapers had just been sold to him. As soon as he heard that, he stammered something about "not depriving" her of it. He stood before her with his straw-hat in one hand, and the paper extended in the other. She thanked him, but said that it really had no interest for her at all. He persisted. She was firm – and left him overwhelmed by his gaucherie in not persuading her to take it.

*Ten minutes later – Mrs. Kemp to Miss Hilda Sorrenford: "Mr. Tremlett has done with this paper, so 'e says you can 'ave it now if you like."*

*Miss Hilda Sorrenford, understanding that the message has suffered in delivery:* "Tell Mr. Tremlett I am much obliged to him." And in the evening, when she saw him in the garden, she bowed and said that she thought the weather was a little cooler.

David went back to his foolscap, having discovered that it is sometimes much easier to write poetry about a girl than to talk to her. And already he was reconciled to her voice because it was hers.

Prose was still a crutch that he couldn't afford to drop, and he had hoped to transfer some of an essay from his head to the foolscap by bedtime. His subject was before him, nothing less than an acorn, sprouting a slender stem and a handful of leaves, in a tumbler of water. Spying it in the woods, he had brought it home, and given it honour, to Mrs. Kemp's diversion. He had enthroned it on the table, that little acorn bursting with the ambition to be a tree, and as he sat wondering at it, the slip of a stalk had grown to be gnarled and old, and the bunch of leaves had towered above the centuries. Children came to play beneath it who were chided for forgetting whether Elizabeth or Victoria had reigned first over England in the long ago, and generations of lovers had flitted past its shade, prattling of eternity. The story of the acorn had clamoured in him to be written, but now he was too excited and unhappy to work. Besides, how could he say it all in two or three thousand words? It asked to be a book.

How clumsy he had been in the shop, stuttering and blundering like a schoolboy; how absurd in the garden, with his

fatuous mono-syllable! Why couldn't he disguise his shyness? he had disguised it well enough from the landlady when he paid her compliments on the doorstep; nobody would have suspected how turbulent his nerves were then. At the time he had been proud of his fluency – are not shy people always proud of being fluent, even when they hear themselves saying things they don't mean? – now he remembered it wistfully, jealous of himself. And his letters! his letters mocked him. To write to a girl like that, and be tongue-tied in her presence. The thing was laughable.

But he had learnt her name at last, for when he made Mrs. Kemp his messenger, she had said: "Oh! you mean Miss 'Ilda."

Estimated by emotion it was ages before it happened, before their relations advanced beyond "good-morning," or "good-evening," with a platitude dropped in passing, and a commonplace returned with the lifting of his hat. Yes, estimated by emotion it was ages before it happened, but according to the almanac he had been here exactly nine days. She was under the same tree, in the same chair. He had seen her settle herself there half an hour ago, and for half an hour he had been questioning how she would receive him if he joined her. What should he say first; could he give to the indulgence a sufficiently casual air; in fine, what sort of figure would he cut?

He ruffled his manuscript irresolutely. In a yard close by somebody was hammering at a fence. It appeared to him that somebody began to hammer at a fence as often as he tried to work. There was no possibility of his writing even if he made

another attempt, and inclination pulled him hard towards the field. He gathered the papers up, and put them cautiously away, as a criminal removes clues.

When he gained the path, she had risen from the chair, and was running bareheaded in his direction. He did not for an instant see more than that, more than that she was running; and he wondered. Then he saw her face, and her voice reached him, and he realised that she was running for help.

So they ran towards each other for five, perhaps ten seconds, she as if pursued, and he seeking the cause.

"A wasp," she panted, "in my hair! A wasp! Get it out!"

"A wasp?" Why must one always echo in emergencies? He called himself a fool. "Don't be frightened. Keep still. I'll get it out in a minute."

"Quick, quick!" she said, pulling at her hair frantically; "I shall go mad!"

"Keep still," he repeated. "Take your hands down – it'll sting you."

He could hear the angry buzzing of the thing, but it was entangled, hidden, and her hair dizzied him. She found the diffidence of his touches exasperating.

"Take the pins out," she cried; "yes, yes, take them out. Oh! not like that, be quick!"

Her impatience showed his breathlessness the way. He fought reverence down, and tore them out as fast as she. Her hair rained over his hands, and swept his arms. The wasp gave a last buzz

venomously. "Oh, thank you so much! I hope, I do hope, you aren't stung?" she said.

"Stung?" He was faint, shaken by a hurricane of new and strange emotion. "It's all right, thanks."

"I've given you a lot of trouble," she said apologetically. "It was silly of me to make such a fuss, I suppose; but I can't tell you what it felt like."

"I can imagine."

"I've always been afraid it would happen one day; the place swarms with them, doesn't it?"

"They come from the shops across the road," he said.

He was being stupid; he felt it. His little minute of authority was over, and he was self-conscious again.

She began to pick up the hairpins from the grass. David stooped too. As she looked at his hands she thought of the service they had rendered, and shuddered slightly. Absorbed, he watched her lift her hair, and twist it in a hasty coil, and stab it thrice with unconcern. In "The People of the Dream Street" there is a line that was born at this moment, though it was not written till long afterwards.

"You have been staying here for some time, haven't you?" he blurted.

"Yes, nearly a month," she said.

"How pretty it is!"

"Isn't it? We came here for my sister's work – she paints, you know."

"Yes, I know; I saw her before I saw you, though I didn't know she was your sister then. She seems to work hard – I mean she is out a great deal."

"Yes, it's just the sort of country she likes; I think she's sorry we're going. She talks about coming back in the autumn to make some more studies here."

"You're going?" he said blankly. "Are you? When?"

"Our month is up the day after to-morrow; we only came for a month."

There was the slightest pause, while he cursed himself for wasted weeks.

"And you," he asked, "do you paint too?"

"I? Oh no." She smiled her foolish smile, complacent in the consciousness of youth and a profile. His eyes allayed her misgivings about her hair. "I don't do anything; I'm quite ordinary," she said.

David smiled with her. There was a fascination in pretending to know nothing of her mind when he believed he knew so much.

"It's original to be ordinary now that everybody is a genius."

"Is everybody a genius?" She looked a shade vacant. "Perhaps you live in London? Our home is in Beckenhampton; in the provinces, I am afraid, we are rather out of it."

"Oh, one can be quite as much out of it in London. What can be more 'provincial' than the life of the average Londoner? He goes to his business after breakfast, and he goes back to his villa after tea. The few friends he makes are, naturally,

in the same groove, and talk about the same things. Why," he went on, overjoyed to have found his tongue, "he has no more acquaintance with artistic London, or political London, or fashionable London than the people with businesses and villas in the other towns. I don't understand the average Londoner's idea that, because his own particular hencoop is in the capital, he must have a wider range of vision than all the other hens in the kingdom; I don't know what it's based on. One would suppose that the sight of the General Post Office from the top of a bus every day converted people into a kind of intellectual aristocracy. The suburbs snigger at the provinces, and Bloomsbury sneers at the suburbs, and the truth is that, outside a few exclusive circles, Londoners get all their knowledge of London from the newspapers – which the provincials are reading at the same time."

She was not interested in the subject; it struck her only as a strange one for him to discuss.

"I suppose so," she said. "Still in London one sees things and one can get books to read. It's as difficult to get a new book in Beckenhampton as it is to get cream in the country."

"Is that difficult?" he asked, thinking of Keats's "tight little fairy."

"Oh, you don't know the country very well. Try! They look at you amazed when you ask for it." She laughed. "Last year when we went away we took a new American tinned thing in the shape of a breakfast food with us. I forget what it was called; a sort of



porridge. They told you on the tin that it was to be eaten with cream. Carelessly, 'cream'! I believe in America cream isn't a curiosity. Our efforts to get threepennyworth! There was only one place for miles round where there was the slightest chance of it – a dairy belonging to a great lady who supplied the public with milk as a favour. I don't mean that she didn't take their money, but that the customers had to call for the milk and carry it away. We used to go there two or three times a week and kow-tow to a consequential dairy woman. We almost thought at first she must be the great lady, but when she accepted our tips we concluded she wasn't. She unbent so far as to promise 'to try to manage it for us one morning.' After about a fortnight we reckoned it would have cost us two shillings by the time it was 'managed.' I daresay it would have cost more, but we decided that we couldn't afford the price of threepennyworth of cream in the country, and we never got any. I can't say I'm very fond of the country on the whole."

"Why, I imagined you loved it. That is" – he corrected himself hastily – "you've the air of being so contented out here."

"Have I? Oh, I do gush about it sometimes, but" – she shrugged her shoulders – "country walks are rather tiresome after you've got used to them, don't you think so?"

He hesitated. "I think they must have been pleasanter before bicycles were invented," he said; "it's difficult to enjoy a stroll along a country lane when you have to keep skipping into a hedge to save yourself from being cut in halves. Men who drive realise

their responsibility, but every counter-jumper seems to ride a bicycle, and the cad in power is always dangerous. The most exasperating thing about the country to me is the blindness and deafness of the people to all the beauties round them. I'll except Mr. Kemp because I've discovered that he notices the birds – they steal his grain, and he shoots them – but I've been trying to learn the names of the wild-flowers ever since I've been here, and it's impossible; one might as well inquire at Bethnal Green."

"I didn't know that," she said; "I haven't tried to find out. But certainly everybody is very stupid."

There was a moment's silence. His glance wandered, and reverted to her. She made a delightful picture; she was as lovely a philistine as ever looked to the main chance with the gaze of a goddess, and for him she had the magic of letters that she had never written, the seduction of thoughts that she had never known. He would not admit to himself that a shade of disappointment was clouding his mood.

Her name was cried before he spoke again.

"Hilda! where are you?"

"Hark! my sister's calling," she said; "I expect dinner's ready."

She moved towards the house, David beside her, and met Bee coming down the path.

"Mr. Tremlett has been saving my life, Bee! I've been attacked while you were out."

"Mr. Tremlett was very kind," answered Bee, smiling. "How did he do it?"

The three loitered in the doorway, talking, and she thanked him seriously when she understood what had happened. He noted that her tones were grave and sweet, and pitied her; and his gaze kept straying to the beautiful face. After a minute he turned away, and the sisters went inside.

"He's quite a gentleman," said the girl; "and I'm sure he must have been stung, though he pretended he wasn't. It would have been quite romantic if he had been another colour."

"She loved me for the dangers I had – averted," murmured Bee.

"What's that – a quotation?" asked Hilda,

## CHAPTER XIX

The rest of the day was barren, and in the knowledge that their visit was so near its end, David chafed at each empty hour. He had seen Hilda for a moment only since the morning. Standing aside as she came down the stairs, he had asked her if she was going to the field again, and she shook her head, saying that she had a letter to write. He thrilled with the fancy that it might be a letter to himself.

How queer to think that she might even give it to him to post! Still queerer to reflect that the thoughts which had so often held him captive, and the blithesome chatter that had rung so false were coin from the same mint. If they had been the strangers to each other that she believed, he would never have divined the gold beneath the small change. For that matter he too had been commonplace; the soul wasn't a jack-in-the-box to jump to order. "Oh, Mr. Thackeray, don't!" breathed Charlotte Brontë disillusioned, when he helped himself again to potatoes; and probably he had said nothing to justify her homage by the time the cheese came. He, David Lee, had *talked* potatoes. More than likely the girl whom he had found trivial had found him trite.

Ever recurring, and overthrowing his reverie, was a gust of sensation – in part a perfume, in part a sickness, in which it seemed to him that the scent of her hair was in his throat.

Before he left town he had scribbled a few lines expressing his

gratitude for the photograph, and now it occurred to him that an answer might be lying at his lodging already. He wished he could read it; he wished he could re-read all the letters here while he was seeing her. He felt that to do so would help him. Without defining his need he felt that the letters, tangible, familiar, would lessen the vague sense of unreality that blew across his mind. During a few seconds he craved more to re-read the letters than to find himself alone with her.

Not so in the morning. He rose eagerly. While he dressed, it seemed to him that he had been unreasonable yesterday; he accused himself of having resented circumstances, of having all unconsciously expected her to accord to Tremlett the confidences she made to Lee. That was absurd. Ostensibly a stranger, a mulatto thrown in her path by chance, how could he hope for her to lift her veil? But let her keep it down – it couldn't hide her from him. Let her yield a finger-tip, after she had bared her heart – he knew her even as she knew herself. He smiled to think that by a word he could transfigure her. It was too soon, he was afraid to speak it; the complexity of the emotion that he foresaw in her warned him back; but the idea of power was sweet to him. He could tear the veil aside and call the real woman breathless to his view, he the stranger! There was a throb of triumph in his delusion.

The day was Sunday, and when he joined her, he found the sisters together. He regretted that the elder had remained at home, although he knew that he had had nothing to hope from

a tête-à-tête.

"You don't paint to-day, Miss Sorrenford?"

"No," she said, "I don't paint on Sunday."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Hilda, "I should think she didn't. What do you suppose the Kemps would say to her? We should be turned out, shouldn't we, Bee?"

"Oh yes, I forgot the Kemps," he said; "it would shock them, of course." – "Bee," he assumed, was a diminutive of "Beatrice." "I've only spent one Sunday here. It was rather depressing; everybody looked so out of place – all the villagers seemed to have gone. Why do they dress up and spoil themselves on Sunday? It was as if a lot of supers in a play had come on in the wrong scene."

Hilda smiled. "They'd think you had very bad taste if they heard you say so. You might as well try to persuade a servant that she looks smarter in a frilled cap and a muslin apron than when she goes out to meet her young man. Poor people always make frights of themselves on Sunday – and they pride themselves on their boots creaking."

"Poor people!" he answered. "And the little children – that was worse still. It made me wretched to see the children; my heart ached for them whenever I went to the door."

"Oh, you noticed them," said Bee, "did you? Yes, it's painful. Their hushed voices, and their sad eyes! They mustn't play; they're forbidden to be happy. They sit in solemn groups, talking in whispers – cursing Sunday I often think. If one of them forgets

and laughs, its mother comes out and shakes it – to teach it to love God."

"Bee, don't get on the platform, or we might as well have gone to church. We do go to church, Mr. Tremlett; don't think we never do any better than this, please! But one doesn't feel so religious in the country on Sunday as one does in a town. It must be something in the air."

"Perhaps it's because in the country one feels so much more religious every other day of the week," said David. Bee had frowned, discomfited; she sat silent. In her silence David was sorry for the Beauty – her banter had been so innocent; the frown, the tightened lips seemed to him an undeserved reproach.

Then he talked to the wrong woman while the right woman listened, and he was even a little piqued that his earnestness couldn't rouse the wrong woman to permit him a glimpse of the poetry that was not in her. But once, when her skirt fluttered against his hand, it was not the thought of the poetry in her that sent a shiver up his arm; and it was not the thought of her sensibility that made his heart gallop, as imagination gave him back the tingle of her hair. That was herself, her pretty flesh-and-blood, the potent pink-and-white reality of her.

Something he said, some chance remark, brought a line of "A Celibate's Love Songs" to Bee's mind. Her thoughts darted again to the photograph, and for the thousandth time she wished she could recall her stupid act; for the thousandth time she sought the courage to acknowledge it. The confession from which she

had shrunk at the beginning looked by comparison easy: "I am deformed." Well, at least, no one could laugh at that. But "I sent my sister's likeness instead of my own." That was ridiculous, contemptible. And how could she explain the impulse? Wouldn't the man put his own construction on it? Wouldn't he think – wouldn't it be tacitly to admit – that she was in love with him?

Still, did the folly she had committed matter very much? He would never see her, never see her or Hilda either. If he had meant to come, surely he would have come already? Sooner or later the correspondence would die, and she would be alone again. Was it necessary to degrade herself in his sight?

He would think she was in love with him! Once more the question that she was always trying to evade flared through her brain. Did it really mean that – in love with a man she had not met? She said the thing was impossible, and felt it was indecent, and knew it was true. The man had needed an appeal to the senses before he repudiated the term of "friendship"; the woman had no such need. She knew that she loved him, although she refused to own it. She loved him for his mind, for all that was herself in him, for all that was kin to her, but beyond her reach. And now, while her reverie might have borne her far from the conversation at her side, she was forced to listen to him, though she had no suspicion that it was he who talked. The mind that she loved compelled her to listen – for David was striving to make the dainty Hilda lift a corner of the veil.

And there being no veil, she could not lift it; but the woman,



whose presence he had half forgotten, felt her sympathies stirred within her strongly, and could have given him thought for thought, and note for note, while she sat there silent and unheeded. There was no veil. He was straining to clutch a phantasm, surrendering to the temptations of his fancied power. And, whilst the poet, pluming himself on power, put forth his intellect to master the girl that there was not, the indolent pink-and-white girl that there was, was mastering him.

"He talks too much, now he has got over his shyness," she murmured, as he moved away. "I'm glad he has gone."

"Are you?" said Bee. "Why? I'm not; he interested me."

"Really? Well, I wish you had joined in, then, instead of sitting there mum. Why didn't you?"

"I don't think he would have been very grateful; he didn't want to talk to me."

Hilda's admirable eyebrows rose just a shade higher than they would have risen if she had been surprised. Because she knew what was meant, she said, "What do you mean?"

"I could see he wanted to talk to *you*. He always does. I think it's rather a good thing we're going home to-morrow."

"Good heavens! don't be so idiotic. Do you suppose for a single moment I could – "

"No; I was thinking of *him*, poor fellow!" said Bee. "I daresay he is unhappy enough without any other trouble."

It was not unpleasant to hear that she was esteemed so dangerous. The girl essayed the languid tone of her favourite

heroines.

"What an imagination you have!" she drawled. "Now, he only struck *me* as a dull person who didn't know when to get up. When a man looks like that, he ought to be very careful what he talks about; so few subjects go with his complexion."

Bee thought – "Oh, the arrogance of beauty! It would even deny to the others the right to have beautiful minds."

In the afternoon a thunderstorm broke over Godstone, and rain fell with more or less violence all the evening. It saved Hilda from being bored by him again, for their train next day was an early one, and after breakfast she was upstairs a good deal, watching the trunks being packed. Once or twice as she tripped to Bee from the sitting-room with a book, or a work-basket, or a packet of labels, he met her in the passage, and she threw him the brave smile of one who was sunny in fatigue; but there was no opportunity for conversation.

To David the shadow of her departure had fallen across Daisymead already. Already he felt desolate in anticipating its emptiness when she had gone. It seemed to him quite a month ago that he had arrived here, and the few scenes of their brief association, now that the end had come, were as dear to his regret as close companionship. Even the period of his bashfulness and despondence had a tender charm in looking back at it. He was eager to flee with his memories to town, instinctively conscious that in no place would he be so forlorn as in the place where she had been; but there would be heavy hours before he was able to

go, poignant hours in which to miss her first.

It had been in his mind to walk to the station with them both, but she did not seem to wish it, so he bade them good-bye in the front garden while the porter was making the luggage fast on the truck. The landlady and her daughter had come out too, and at the last minute Mr. Kemp appeared. He had a dead bird in his hand; Hilda uttered an exclamation of pity as she saw it, and Bee was mute.

"Oh, the dear! What bird is it, Mr. Kemp?"

"A green linnet, Miss," he said. "Mischievious things!"

"A linnet? I thought linnets were always brown; I'd no idea they were ever so pretty as this. Why, it's perfectly lovely! What a shame they aren't all made green."

"Yes, it's a showy thing," admitted Mr. Kemp; "the brown 'un ain't much to look at alongside it, that's a fact." He rubbed his hand on his coat, and put it out to her in farewell. "But the green linnet has got no song."

The sisters went slowly up the road; and David followed the "showy" figure with his eyes until the road swerved.

## CHAPTER XX

"Well, my dears," said the Professor, "and how are you, eh? Got nice and sunburnt, and done yourselves good, have you? Bee, my dear, you might just touch the bell – I told the girl not to make the tea until we rang. Let me have a look at you both now!" He looked at Hilda. "Come, come, that's first rate! And what's the news?"

"Oh, we're splendid," she replied. "I don't think there's any news; we just did nothing. That is, I did nothing, and Bee worked. You might have come down to us, Dad, if only for a day! We were always expecting a wire to tell us you were coming."

"Yes, I know, my dear," he said, "I know; you wrote me. When I read your letter I thought I really would go down; I made up my mind to. 'Now I know what I'll do,' I thought; 'I won't answer her – I'll say nothing about it – and on Saturday I'll pack my bag, and take her by surprise.' But God bless my soul! when Saturday came I couldn't get away, my dear, I couldn't get away." His glance wandered to his other daughter, and rested on her doubtfully. "Or perhaps it was you who wrote, Bee? One of you did, I know; it's all the same."

"Just the same, father," she said, "all the same; we both wanted you."

The teapot was brought in presently, and half a dozen words were uttered which did more to make her feel at home again than

anything that had happened yet. The servant knocked a cup over, put a forefinger inside it, in setting it right, and said in a hoarse whisper, "Can I speak to you, Miss?"

When the conference with the servant was over, Bee carried her father's cup to the armchair, and took Hilda's to the sofa, and the Professor murmured in the tone that belongs to after-thoughts:

"And did you make your studies, Bee?"

"Yes, thanks, father."

"That's right. Many?"

"Oh, just as many as I hoped to do. I'm rather pleased with one of them."

"*That's* right."

"Anything new here, father?"

"In a way, my dear, in a way; the new man has taken over the Theatre Royal. Mobsby has left the town; I hear he has gone to Nottingham. You might give me another piece of sugar, a very small piece – or break a lump in halves."

"The new man taken over the theatre?" said Hilda. "Have you written to him about the opera?"

"Have you, father?" asked Bee, searching the sugar-basin.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I did write to him. I'm afraid he's not a gentleman. I dropped him a line, explaining matters, and offering to call on him one day when he had an hour to spare, if he would suggest an appointment, and he – er – I got no answer."

"Perhaps the letter didn't reach him, dear."

"I fancied that might be the reason," said the Professor; "the same idea occurred to me. So I wrote to him again, but – No, I'm afraid both letters reached him. Now Mobsby used to answer – I'll give him credit for that. He wasn't enterprising, but he was civil, at all events; he made excuses for declining my work. This Mr. Jordan seems to have no enterprise, and no politeness either. We don't go to the Royal any more, my dears! I put my foot down about that. For the future when we take tickets for a theatre, they shall be for the Grand."

"The Royal always has the best companies, though," pouted Hilda; "and the audience at the Grand is so dirty."

"For all that we shall go to the Grand," repeated the Professor; "it's the only dignified protest I can make. While the Royal remains under this fellow's management it will see no money of mine. I am quite firm on that point – unless of course diplomacy effects anything," he added, "unless diplomacy effects anything."

"Diplomacy can't effect much with a man who doesn't answer your letters," said Hilda. Her voice was tart.

"What more do you think of doing, then, father?" inquired Bee. "Have you a plan?"

"I never let the grass grow under my feet, you know; when there is an opportunity, I make the most of it. A friend at court may do a great deal, and the other afternoon – " He sipped slowly, and spread his handkerchief across his knee. "It seemed almost providential; I don't do such a thing once in two months, but it was a very hot day, and I was tired and thirsty; it was on my way

home from Great Hunby. I turned into the 'George' for something to drink, my dear, and I made the acquaintance of Mr. Jordan's business manager. The thin edge of the wedge, perhaps! though I am never sanguine. Of course I did no more than mention the opera – the merest word – but he seemed interested. The next time we meet I shall refer to it again. It may lead to something. He was intelligent. He may pull the strings. I'm never sanguine, but it stands to reason that the business manager of a theatre has a lot to say in the conduct of affairs. If I cultivate him – " He looked about him impatiently. "You might pass me the tobacco-jar, my dear."

She got up, and took it from the mantelpiece, and gave it to him.

"Here it is, father. If you cultivate him, you think he might use his influence with Mr. Jordan?"

"Just so. But *festina lente*, my dear – hasten slowly. Don't look too far ahead. It's because people look too far ahead that they trip in reading aloud. The same principle, exactly! The eye travels too fast, and the tongue stumbles. Half the mistakes that the pupils make in reading blank verse are due to the fact that they look too far ahead. In life, as in reading, we should clearly enunciate one word at a time. What was I going to say?.. Yes, having made his acquaintance, there's no telling what it may lead to if I show the young man a little hospitality. It's quite on the cards that Mr. Jordan may sing a different tune and ask me to let him hear the opera. If he should do that, I – I am not vindictive – if he should

do that, and give the work his honest consideration, we would certainly go to the Royal as usual."

The prospect of his showing a new young man a little hospitality smoothed the frown from Hilda's brow. The young men of Beckenhampton were mercenary, and girls who had been her schoolfellows and knew her age – girls who had no other attraction than their fathers' incomes – had married in their teens. She was not without a lurking fear of being "left on the shelf," as she phrased it; in which misgiving she resembled a multitude of girls who look equally superior to the fear and the phrase. It is, indeed, an unpleasant comment on our method of bringing up the maiden that in the minds of even the most modest girls, the eagerness to marry should precede the wish to marry any man in particular. To the blunter and less refined sensibilities of the male there seems something a little indelicate in this impartial eagerness.

The Professor's intention commended itself to Hilda so warmly, that during the next few days she introduced the subject of the opera more than once. It was not until she had been back from Godstone a week, however, that the growth of the grass to which he had made reference was in any way checked. And then chance was the mower. She had gone but with him, ostensibly to help him to choose a hat, and of a truth to prevent his choosing one, for the years during which man is free to exercise his own judgment about his own clothes are few. As they turned into Market Street, he gave her a nudge, so hard that it



hurt her, and waving his hand to a stranger, slackened his pace. The stranger, who had been hurrying past, saw that the elderly bore was accompanied by a bewilderingly pretty girl, and came promptly to a standstill – in his bearing all the deference which a young man can yield to old age under the eyes of beauty.

"Oh, how do you do, Professor Sorrenford?"

"Ah, pleased to meet you again," exclaimed the Professor. "Let me – er – my daughter; Mr. Harris – my daughter."

Vivian made another bow – one far different from the shamefaced bob of the local swains, Hilda thought. It was, indeed, modelled on the obeisance he saw the lovers make to the heroines when he was counting the house in the dress-circle.

"Mr. Harris is a new-comer to the town," said the Professor blandly.

"I am afraid Mr. Harris must find it very dull?" murmured the girl.

The jeune premier was his exemplar still: "It reveals new attractions every day!" he declared. He looked at her significantly. Her eyelids drooped. The father saw nothing but the opera in his desk. —

"Yes, I think, myself, there are many attractions to be found in the place," he said; "though, as an old resident – one of the very oldest residents, in fact – I may be too partial, perhaps. I have been in Beckenhampton now – how many years? I begin to lose count. People will tell you that the name of 'Sorrenford' is as well known here as the name of – ha, ha – the name of the Theatre

Royal, itself. Mr. Harris is interested in the Theatre Royal, my dear – the scene of so many of our pleasant evenings."

"Oh, indeed?" She was gently surprised. "You're at the theatre, Mr. Harris?"

"In the front," he said. "I hope we shall give you some pleasanter evenings still under the new régime, Miss Sorrenford. We mean to make the house one of the most go-ahead theatres in the provinces." His tone was bright, inspiriting. He struck her as likely to succeed in anything that he undertook.

"We shall not fail to sample the – er – the bill of fare," said the Professor; "ha, ha, the bill of fare! We shall pay you an early visit. I hope you'll return it. A composer's time is not his own, but we are always glad to see our friends on Sunday nights. If you have nothing better to do one Sunday – "

"I shall be charmed."

"Mr. Harris is busy on week nights like yourself," put in Hilda with a smile.

"To be sure! – like myself. Sunday is really the only day a professional man has a chance to be sociable, isn't it? We have a bond in common. Take us as we are, Mr. Harris. Drop in. Pot luck, and a little music, and a hearty welcome. Now don't forget. Let us be among the first in Beckenhampton to – to make you feel at home in it."

"I shall be charmed," repeated Vivian, gazing undisguised admiration at Hilda. She gave him her hand. He crossed the road victoriously; the father and daughter continued their way to the

hatter's.

For some seconds the old man was silent, wrapt in ecstatic reverie. Then he broke out:

"Well? Eh? Not bad – what do you think? Did you notice how glad he was I invited him? He's been asking about me since I saw him; he's been turning the opera over in his mind. That's the plain English of it. Very cordial, but he can't take *me* in! There's the pounds, shillings, and pence interest underneath, my dear! *I* saw through him." He chuckled. "He's nibbling – the business manager is nibbling! It won't be long before he comes, you'll see!.. We'd better have a Perrin's for supper next Sunday, my dear, on the chance of his turning up."

Vivian was much pleased to have somewhere to go, and he made no longer delay in presenting himself than he considered that appearances required. Sunday had been dismal enough while he was with a company on tour; here in his new post, without even a game of napoleon on a railway journey to mitigate the tedium, he had found it drearier still. The opportunity for talking to a girl who wasn't a barmaid would have tempted him had the girl been plain; when she was admitted to be the prettiest girl in Beckenhampton – or, as the landlord of the "George" had it, "the belle of our town" – he felt that it was really a matter for rejoicing.

And his host's greeting was as warm as his invitation. Certainly his performance on the 'cello after supper was rather a nuisance, but "the belle" made a delightful picture as an

accompanist; and when she sang an entirely new ballad about Dead Days and a Garden, with a tune that a fellow could catch, to take away the taste of the classics commanded by her papa, the visitor felt quite a stir of sentiment.

And he was given another whisky-and-soda, and another of the six cigars which the Professor had arranged in a cigar-box that had lain empty for years. Even when "Father" had been persuaded to let Mr. Harris hear "something from the opera" and Mr. Harris began to realise that the garrulous old gentleman wanted more from him than compliments, the evening was not a disappointment; the younger girl was so enchanting, and the atmosphere of a home was such a novelty. It was impossible for Vivian to be sorry he had come, though he perceived that it would be unwise to define the boundaries of his position in the theatre if he wished to come often.

"Do you play or sing yourself, Mr. Harris?" Bee inquired.

"No," he said; "no, I'm not musical." In this musical family he regretted to acknowledge it.

"Sure?" asked Hilda, swinging round on the stool.

"Oh yes, unfortunately – quite sure." He was at the point of adding: "Though I was, brought up in the thick of it all," but to explain that his mother's second husband had been a negro was never agreeable to him. "I'm awfully fond of it, though! I could listen to singing all night. Won't you give us something else? Do, please; don't get up!"

"I really don't know what there is." She ruffled the stack

beside her listlessly. "I'm afraid there's nothing else for me to sing."

"Let me help you find something."

"If you can. If you really haven't had enough?"

He went across to her, and they bent their heads over the heap together; and he hung at the piano while she sang another entirely new ballad about Days that were No More, and a Stream.

When she finished he murmured "Thank you," and threw into his manner the suggestion of being too much moved to say anything more lengthy.

"It's rather pretty, isn't it?" she said, lifting her eyes in the candle-light.

"Yes; and your voice – " he sighed expressively.

"Oh!" she looked down again, affording him a good view of her lashes, and stroked the keys. "My voice is really as small as a voice can be."

"I've never heard one that carried me away as yours does. Do you know – I suppose you'll be shocked – but I like the drawing-room ballad – sometimes – nearly as well as the classical things."

"I like them better," she said archly.

"Do you?" He was delighted. "So do I. I hadn't the courage to own that."

"I daren't let my father hear. It would be high treason."

They both laughed. The pretence of having a secret together was quite charming.

"I see there is a concert announced for Thursday fortnight at

the Town Hall," remarked the Professor. "Those are pleasures you're unable to enjoy, Mr. Harris, eh? I suppose you can't leave the theatre? But there is a big bill. We shall have some fine artists. We shall have a treat, quite a rare treat."

"Yes," said Vivian. "I know. I'm afraid it'll spoil our Thursday night's house; I wish they had fixed it for another evening. Thursday is our best night in the dress-circle as a rule."

"How lovely it must be," exclaimed Hilda, "to go to the theatre every evening! Though I suppose you get tired of it, too?"

"I should think it was nicer in the country than in London," said Bee, "isn't it? You do see a different piece here every week."

"Yes," he answered. "One gets a change. But I never see a piece right through, you know. There's so much to do in front."

"The business of a theatre," observed the Professor ponderously, "is naturally enormous. The outsider has no conception of the – er – intricacies of theatrical management. These young ladies look at the stage in the limelight, they know nothing of the commercial element of the enterprise. The sea of figures in which the manager wades is to them of course a *terra incognita*."

Vivian stroked his moustache, and hid a smile.

"Yes, the figures are a bit of a bore," he said. "I was acting manager to a company on tour before I joined Jordan. That was more bother still, you know."

"Acting manager?" said Hilda. "To manage the acting I should have thought was jolly?"

"Oh, I had nothing to do with the stage! 'Acting manager' and 'business manager' mean the same thing."

"How curious!"

"Yes, it is rather odd. No, I had nothing to do with the stage, but there were the journeys to arrange then, and there are always people in a company who grumble at the train call, whatever time it's for. If you take them early they complain because they have to get up so soon; and if you take them late, they say they've never known a tour on which they had to make so many journeys at night. And of course it's always the poor acting manager's fault!"

"Why not take them in the afternoon? Wouldn't that get over the difficulty?"

"Well, you can't travel from Bristol to Yarmouth in an afternoon, and that was one of the journeys we had to make. The train call was for twelve o'clock Saturday night, after the show, and we didn't get into Yarmouth till the next evening. How cross some of them were!"

"So should *I* have been!"

He tried to look as if he couldn't imagine her cross. "It wasn't very pleasant certainly. At four in the morning we were at a standstill. Black dark. And we had to stick in the station till half-past seven. There was no refreshment room open, of course; we all sat shivering in the train. And it rained. Oh! how it rained! About six o'clock, one of the ladies asked two or three of us into her compartment, and made tea with a little spirit-lamp that she had brought. I think I enjoyed that tea more than any I've ever

drunk, but we didn't get a solid meal till we reached Peterborough – three hours more to wait. It had stopped raining by then, and we had roast mutton at an hotel, and yawned at the cathedral."

"I hope you took the good Samaritan who had given you the tea?" said the Professor.

"We did, yes. As a matter of fact, the leading man proposed to her during the wait at Peterborough. It was the tea that had done it – he said he hadn't believed any woman could look so nice at 6 A.M. Of course the other ladies declared she had curled her hair before she invited us into the compartment, but that was jealousy; he was a good-looking chap, and getting ten pounds a week... They were engaged all the tour."

"Do you mean that they married then?" Bee asked.

"No, they didn't marry, but they were engaged all the tour. They quarrelled at the Grand, Islington. Her father had been a celebrated wit, and she used to say awfully insulting things and think they were funny."

It was nearly midnight when he rose to go. He was perhaps less impressionable than most young men of his age, less addicted to wasting time in flirtations that promised nothing more satisfactory than a kiss and a keepsake; but as he strode down the silent road to his apartments he was not quite fancy-free in the moonlight, his reverie was not quite so practical as usual. He resolved to send a box to the Professor at the earliest date that it was desirable to "put a little paper out"; and as he foresaw himself welcoming the party in the foyer, he was



gratified to reflect that he looked his best in an evening suit. He was also gratified to reflect that "the belle" must go for walks, and examine the windows in the High Street, and that her sister couldn't be always with her.

After he had gone the Professor said —

"Well, he was taken by what he heard of the opera, I think? He'll mention it to Jordan if I'm not very much mistaken. Rome wasn't built in a day, but I've laid the foundation stone. We're getting on!"

"Yes, I'm sure he liked it," answered Bee. "I wish it had been Mr. Jordan himself, though. Don't you think Mr. Harris is rather young to have much authority, father?"

"Tut, tut," replied the composer tetchily, "what nonsense! He's shrewd, he's a smart fellow. What do you suppose he came for — to smoke a cigar with me? Business men don't run after strangers for nothing. You talk without considering. There's always a motive for these friendly actions, my dear. Women don't look beneath the surface; I could never teach your poor mother, God bless her! to look beneath the surface. I daresay he'll drop in next Sunday again; it wouldn't surprise me at all."

He turned to Hilda, as he generally did when he wasn't in trouble. And Hilda nodded — and smiled.

## CHAPTER XXI

The following morning there came to "Miss H. Sorrenford" a letter from David Lee – an urgent letter because he had been so long impatient, demanding an explanation of her silence. The explanation was that each time she had re-read the note of thanks he had written before leaving town her imposture had looked to her more shameful; but after considering a great deal how to say as much in her answer, she did not say it at all. She told him instead something of her feelings in returning to the house that was called her home.

It was very sweet, very strange, to David to receive the first of her confessions breathing a familiar presence. Hilda had never seemed so close to him as she did in the hour when he pored over these pages of her sister's. He heard Hilda's voice while he welcomed Bee's thoughts; when he replied to Bee, he saw Hilda's face. And it was the face, not the thoughts, that maddened him with longing. It was the face that was dizzying him as he paltered with his conscience and offered prayers to the future. Though he did not discriminate, though he associated the soul of the woman with the form of the girl, the triumph was to the physical. The form, not the soul, tempted him to renounce his father's gospel, even while he proclaimed the soul his justification. The charm of the woman's letters lay no longer in what she said, but in his belief that the girl said it.

Hilda's fairness, not Bee's mind, held his love; and in his confidences to Bee there was a cadence that there had not been, a difference which she strove to persuade herself was imaginary, because to admit that it existed would be to realise that the photograph had wrought mischief. There was nothing tangible, no word to point to, but beneath the intimate record of his doings, and the references to his work, underlying the intuition which enabled him to respond, as always, to more than she had spelt, she felt something in her friend's letters that was new, something – she was conscious of it only in moments – something that made them now a man's letters to a woman.

When September was nearing its end, David received a few lines from Ownie. She wrote:

"I have been meaning to congratulate you oh the success of the book of poems that people are talking about. So you have made a hit? Well, I am very glad. I was always sure when you were a child you would do well at writing – you have all my poor father's talent. Well, I am very glad. Though I haven't had a chance to read it, and never seen anything of you, I am delighted to hear you have done so well. I hope you are well, and don't forget I like to see you whenever you have time to spare." She remained, on paper, his "Affectionate Mother."

His conscience pricked him, for his last visit had been paid in the spring. When he sent a copy of the book, which he knew would bore her to the verge of extinction, he promised to call on her the next Sunday.

He went in the afternoon. The latest of the Swiss lads to be described in the advertisements as "man servant" opened the door while struggling into his coat. His English was as unintelligible as his predecessors', and David had doubts whether she was at home while he waited in the hall. Dinner was over, but the smell of it lingered; she was unlikely to be out, he thought. The Swiss sped back, and delivering himself of strange syllables, led the way to the drawing-room. It was empty, and the smell of dinner was less strong here. After some minutes Ownie came in.

Her hair was yellow still, but the yellow of a "restorer," not the yellow of her youth, and under this piteous travesty of the past her aged face looked older. The years had caricatured her defects, and her business had stamped its mark upon her. Ownie was a bulky woman with a long upper lip and a fretful, vulgar mouth. In conversation she had the restless eye and mechanical smile of the boarding-house keeper, who during three meals every day makes an effort at cheerful small-talk – illustrating the advantages of the district in which her boarding-house is situated – while she listens suspensive to the servant inquiring behind a chair whether the occupant will "take any more." Of the girl who had once smiled victoriously in the mirror of a theatre vestibule nothing was left; in her stead was all the pathos of a lifetime. Only to the bulky woman it was given still to discern a likeness to the girl. Nature had yielded that; she did not see herself as she was. To her the rouge on her cheeks was not so palpable, the wrinkles were not so deep. Dyed, painted, dreary, she sank into a chair,

and yawned widely, with her hands in her lap.

"I thought you were never coming again," she said.

He pleaded stress of work: "And I've been in the country since I saw you. Well, how are you, mother?"

"Oh, nothing to brag about; the heat has been killing, hasn't it? *I* should have liked a change too... I haven't been able to read your book yet – I can't read for long, it tries my eyes so; I must get some new glasses. Well, are you making a fortune out of it?"

"It's selling splendidly – for poetry. Yes, I shall make a good deal by it, strange to say. If you want a change, why not go to Brighton for a week or two? I" – he was embarrassed – "I can give you the money."

"Oh, it isn't that," she explained with another gape; "I can't leave the house. Who's going to look after it while I'm gone? It's an awful drag if you haven't got a house-keeper. And if you have, you can't go away and leave everything to her! Fancy you with money to spare, though! Well, you've got to thank *me* for that, David – your cleverness comes from *my* side. You didn't have your father's voice, you know; if you hadn't written, I don't know what you'd have done."

He did not know either; his life would have been insupportable if he hadn't written. He looked beyond her vaguely, and nodded. "Is the house full?" he asked.

"Pretty full. They're most of them new now – Americans, and people up for a few weeks; the others 'll be coming back at the end of the month... There's another boarding-house opened

round the corner; they keep the gas full up in every room all the evening."

"As an advertisement?"

"Yes; it's stupid. Not enough people pass here in the evening to make it pay. It isn't as if it were at the seaside. Would you like a cup o' tea or anything?"

"No, thanks," he said.

"You may as well. I want a cup o' tea myself; it'll wake me up – I was just going to have forty winks when the man told me you were here."

"I'm sorry." He rang the bell. "I wish I'd come at another time."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she returned; "there's always something... I suppose you haven't heard from Vivian?"

"I never hear from him. I think it's nearly a year since I saw him. What is he doing?"

"He's got a first-rate berth. He left the company at the end of the last tour; you knew he was on tour with a theatrical company, didn't you? He's settled in one place now – much nicer for him than travelling all the time, a great improvement in every way." She roused herself to boast feebly about Vivian. "Not many young men of his age get into such a thing; it's a very responsible position, to be business manager of a theatre. And there's the salary all the year round – every week he's sure of so much. That's an advantage you can't hope for, eh? You may be comfortably off one year, and have nothing the next. Writing is so precarious

– you never know where you are."

"I jog along," said David amiably.

"Oh yes," she allowed, "I'm sure it's wonderful, your keeping yourself as you have. And it's nice to have your book talked about. But of course there's no certainty about your profession – you can't depend on that sort of thing." She tittered. "Fame is all very well, but I'm afraid Vivian would say 'Give *me* a regular income.' ... He'll be up on Sunday, if you'd like to see him."

"Yes, I'll come in," he answered. "What town has he gone to?"

"Beckenhampton," she said; "the Theatre Royal."

"Beckenhampton?" He looked at her wide-eyed.

"Do you know it?"

"N-no," he said; "no, I don't know it exactly. How long has he been there?"

"Oh, two or three months. He's having great times, I believe – he's so popular wherever he goes; he gets asked out to supper parties, and all that." She hesitated, toying with the keeper on her finger, as he remembered her toying in his childhood with rings that flashed. But now the ring no longer turned. "I rather fancy there's an attraction," she went on more slowly; "I hope to goodness it isn't serious! Don't let out that I said anything when you meet him; I didn't mean to mention it."

"An attraction?"

She lifted her fat shoulders impatiently. "There may be nothing in it, but young men are so soft; any girl can catch the smartest of them. It wouldn't astonish me a bit when he comes up,

to hear that he's engaged. I had a gushing letter from him a few weeks ago, telling me he'd met the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. I know what that means! He wouldn't have written about her if he hadn't lost his head. And he doesn't answer my questions. It looks as if he's making an idiot of himself."

"Who is she?" asked David, in a low voice.

"He didn't say. What's the difference who she is? You may be sure she hasn't got a sixpence to bless herself with. A nice mess he'll make of his life if he doesn't take care. It's a lucky thing for you that you haven't got that sort of risk to run. 'A young man married is a man that's marred,' as Ouida says."

"Shakespeare," he said, in the same dull tone; "not Ouida."

"Was it? It's at the beginning of one of Ouida's books, I know. If your brother gets married at his age, he might as well hang himself at once."

The tremor was in his pulses still. But Beckenhampton was not a village – the coincidence was so unlikely; he kept repeating that it couldn't be.

"If his salary is such a good one, and he's fond of her – " he demurred.

"Such a good one'? Well" – she was a shade confused – "it's good enough for him as he is; it wouldn't go far with a wife and family to keep. Besides, a man's always better off single than married; only he's so soft as soon as a pretty face comes along. Some artful minx who wants a home makes up to him, and all of a sudden he imagines he can't go through life without her. Good



Lord! if a man could see into a girl's head while she's gushing about the view and pretending she's an angel. Men are taken in by every girl they meet, the fools!" Her scorn of the fools was in no wise restrained by the fact that she had captured two husbands herself. She was thinking of her son. When a woman lives to see the arts by which she gained her husband practised to ensnare her son, candour can reveal no more. Nor in the badly constructed tragedy of life is there any other situation that comes so close to poetical justice.

David found the afternoon the most irksome that he had spent at Regent's Park. Though he told himself that his misgiving was fantastic, it continued to disturb him, and while he sipped weak tea, and made perfunctory responses, he was trying to define Hilda's feeling for him, questioning whether it was in woman's nature for Hilda to write to him as he believed she wrote, and yet to be susceptible to the courtship of another man. Vivian was handsome, debonair, "so popular wherever he went." Yes, Vivian had always been popular, he remembered bitterly. Might not the passion of a lover at her side prove a stronger force than the worship of a correspondent which had never been confessed? Could she not say – might she not be happy to say – that by never a word had her letters to himself been more than the letters of a friend? Then Vivian would take her from him. Vivian, who it seemed to him in a burst of fear and jealousy had always taken everything, would rob him of her too!.. But, again, the coincidence was so improbable. Besides, his mother might be

wrong; she might be exaggerating the idlest fancy; perhaps Vivian had no desire to marry anyone!

He was relieved when the clock gave him an excuse to rise.

"Well, good-bye, mother." He avoided her complexion and dropped a kiss on her dyed fringe.

"Must you go?" she said. "Er – David, if you're really sure you can spare a few pounds, I'd be very glad of the money to get a new dress with. I haven't got a decent thing to put on for dinner. This blouse is so shabby I'm ashamed to sit at the table in it."

He promised to send what she wanted, and took up his hat. When his hand was on the door-knob, she asked him if he would stay to supper; but he declined the invitation. As he made his way home, he repeated more than once that his tremor was ridiculous, and assured himself that he was much amused at his folly. He smiled stiffly, to prove his amusement... Still he wished that the week were past and Vivian had come to town. He would feel easier when he had seen Vivian.

## CHAPTER XXII

Ownie's conjectures were not misleading her; the business manager's views of life had been deranged. To dress well and have a "good time" now appeared to him less dazzling a prospect than to clothe Hilda and have a home. Confronted by temptation he had been no stronger than the multitude; he was prepared to travel the course handicapped, and like every other young man at the inevitable crisis, persuaded himself that a pair of arms round his neck would accelerate the pace. Hilda, too, was in love. Moreover, she was in love with the idea of being married. She had, passed the stage at which the Beauty of every family looks forward to wedding a millionaire, and although she had gathered something of Vivian's position by now, she meant to accept him when he asked her. One of the greatest sacrifices for love that a girl in the provinces can make is to marry and remove to local lodgings. There were perfervid moments when Hilda felt equal even to this, but in moods less head-long it was her intention to remain engaged to him until he secured a similar appointment in another town. Meanwhile Vivian wondered whether she would be startled if he confessed his feelings thus early.

Fearful that he might "lose it all," he resolved to be discreet; so he confided to her facts of which she was unaware, and withheld the one that she knew. It was a vast relief to him to settle the matter of the opera between them. Of late the opera

had seemed to darken his future; and when he had intimated nervously that her father overestimated his influence with Mr. Jordan, he thanked Heaven to see that she did not find the news an overwhelming shock.

One afternoon – it was on the Friday after Ownie unbosomed herself to David – Hilda exclaimed —

"What do you think, Bee? The man who wrote *A Celibate's Love Songs* is Mr. Harris's half-brother. He has just gone."

The colour left Bee's face; her heart thudded.

"Who?" she faltered. "David Lee?"

"No, Mr. Harris. He dropped in just now to return a book. Isn't it strange? His mother married twice; she married Elisha Lee, the black tenor – I don't know how she could have done it. The poet is their son – a mulatto. Fancy!"

The woman stood stone-still... She moved by a blind instinct to a chair. It seemed to her a long time before she could reach chair.

"A mulatto?" she said faintly.

"Yes – almost a nigger, Mr. Harris says. He's ashamed – I could tell, though he tried to sound casual. Of course it isn't nice for him to have a half-brother like that, is it? And then his mother doing such a thing! I was awfully sorry for him, poor fellow – he did look so uncomfortable while he was talking. Of course he hung on to his brother's cleverness and all that, but – Well, he can't be very proud, can he?"

Bee made no answer; she did not hear. "A mulatto – almost

a nigger." For an instant her mind was dwarfed by it. She could not think beyond it, could see no further than the monstrous personality that seemed to close upon her. "Almost a nigger." The instant was heavy, affrighting with his presence. In the next, her thoughts flashed to the mulatto who had gone to Godstone – and she knew that he was the man.

"He must look rather like that Mr. Tremlett, I suppose," Hilda was saying.

She nodded. "Yes."

"Fancy a nigger writing poetry! You don't seem very interested? I thought you'd gasp when I told you – you liked his book so much."

"Did you? Oh, I *am* interested. Yes, fancy his writing poetry."

She felt sick, stupefied; she could not talk. David Lee was a mulatto; was the poor young man with the swarthy skin and the negro features whom she had pitied condescendingly, whom she had passed, and repassed, and addressed with no emotion. She sat struggling with the thing. She did not doubt it, she never questioned it for a moment; it was so obvious now that she even wondered that she had not suspected it then; but anomalously David seemed for the first time strange to her, remote. The association dazed her, and before the physical impression all the sense of familiarity receded.

"Tremlett" was David Lee. He had been to seek her. As the cloud of her confusion lifted, she saw the reason of his long delay, saw why, at last, he had assumed a name. Light was shed upon

his work; its sorrow was illumined, she understood the secret of its intimate appeal. Like herself, he suffered and was despised.

He had been to seek her, afraid to tell her who he was. Her? No, not her — *Hilda!* She stared across the room at her sister blankly: Hilda had renounced the effort at conversation, and was in a love-reverie over a novelette. It was Hilda he had been to seek, attracted by her photograph! He had gone at last not to find the writer of the letters, but the girl whose likeness he had seen. Only when the likeness reached him had he cared to go! And he had followed Hilda about the garden, looked at her with his heart in his eyes — he was fond of her. Yes, it was to Hilda that his letters were really written now — and Hilda would probably marry his half-brother!

Her misery and shame were profound; she did not define the vague, pained stir of another feeling in her breast. She was engulfed by the knowledge that she had brought a new grief into his life, had given him still more to bear. She hated herself, and she felt that when he learned the truth he too would hate her — that he must; that he would curse the misshapen fool who had cheated him into loving the girl who would be his brother's wife.

When hours had passed, she untied the letters that had come to her since her return from Surrey, and read them in her bedroom slowly by the light of recognition. The sore stir of the subtle feeling within her was stronger as she read them, realising that they were meant for Hilda. But compassion for him swept her like a flood. The spirit of the man spoke to her again; she found

herself again sensitive to his spirit – less dominated by his face.

They were meant for Hilda! Always her mind reverted to this. It became her ascendant thought. She locked the letters in their drawer, and tried to consider the one that she must write; and now she shuddered before confession, not so much in dread of the throes that she would suffer, as of the blow that she would deal. His confidences were meant for Hilda, and he must be told that Hilda had never heard from him, had never responded by a line. She perceived dismayed that the words explaining it would sound to him the words of a stranger – of a little woman with a crooked back, claiming her sister's qualities. Yes, the very qualities that had first pleased him he attributed to Hilda now! And in herself, when he understood, they would fall to nothingness. Her sympathies were abstractions, shadows; the realities were Hilda's lips and eyes, and lithe, straight form. While she sat there, Hilda came to the room with a message; Bee did not look at her as she answered. She tried to think it was because she had been crying; but there was another reason which she would not see, which she shunned because the inborn prejudices of a white woman feared to own it – in her heart there was a jealousy of Hilda.

Sunday came before she had written to David. He went to Regent's Park uneasily. Vivian and his mother were in the little room, half-parlour, half-office, in which she made out the bills, and received applicants for "board residence." It was clear that he had interrupted an altercation. Vivian's smile of greeting was

an obvious effort, and Ownie was frankly discomposed. For two or three minutes, while the young men exchanged remarks, she kept silent, breathing quickly, her nostrils dilated, her mouth compressed. Then she broke out —

"Why don't you tell David your news? Your brother's going to be married, David. Don't you congratulate him on his luck?"

"Is that so?" said David, turning to him.

"So the mater says," muttered Vivian. "I didn't know it myself — I'm not engaged yet."

She sniggered: "Oh, it doesn't take long to get engaged; you can soon do that if you want to!"

"Well, I do want to, and I mean to marry her if she'll have me!" he exclaimed. "And now you've got it, so we needn't say any more."

"How pretty," she said between a sneer and a sob. "She has a beautiful influence over you, I must say — to make you rude to your mother."

"Oh, of course," he returned, "it's all *her* fault that you take it badly, isn't it? It's all *her* fault that you quarrel with me when I confide in you? That's rich! It strikes me I've behaved about as well as a fellow could, in telling you how things stand; I needn't have said anything till it was settled. I think you might pretend to be glad even if you aren't."

"Glad'?"

"Yes, glad. What's to prevent your being glad? One would imagine I was doing you some infernal injury by the way you



talk."

"I'm talking for your own good; you're too young to get married. Before you've been – "

"Oh, I know all about that!" he cried; "I should always be too young, according to you. I tell you what it is: you're not thinking of my good at all – you're thinking of yourself. You don't like the idea of my marrying; you've got it in your head that you'll 'lose' me if I marry – you said so at the beginning – and so you call me names, and run her down – a girl you've never seen – and try to persuade yourself it's holy affection for me. But it isn't, it isn't anything of the kind. It's just selfishness; and as you've used such very plain English, I'll use some too and tell you so. It's sheer selfishness, to want me to spoil my life to please you. What have you ever done for me, that you should expect me to sacrifice myself for you? I think it's disgusting."

His handsome face was flushed, his manner insolent. The girl to whom his attachment presented him at his best would scarcely have recognised her lover here at his worst. He stirred in Ownie memories of his father, memories of scenes in the Liverpool villa when the fur business had become involved. She did not speak; her lips twitched. Although her objections appeared to David unreasonable, he felt sorry for her. Whatever her faults towards others, she had always been fond of Vivian – it jarred that Vivian reproached her for selfishness.

After a little pause she said wistfully: "If that's the way you feel, I'm afraid I can't expect to see much of you in future whether

you marry or not?"

"You don't see much of me now; I don't live here."

"But you belong to me still," she pleaded.

He looked towards David with an air of triumph. "You see what I say is quite true: it isn't for my sake that she's against my marrying, but for her own – I'm to sacrifice myself because she's jealous."

David lit a cigarette, without replying. All this time his pulses were impatient for the sound of the girl's name.

Ownie's humility deserted her; her temper flamed, though there were still tears in her voice.

"'Sacrifice'?" she retorted. "It's a fine sacrifice, to keep your comfort! The sacrifice'll come in if you throw yourself away for the first pretty face you meet. I thought you had more sense – you talk like a sentimental boy. 'Sacrifice yourself'? In a year's time you'd have forgotten you ever wanted her, and she'd be engaged to somebody else! Any young man can get spoony on any girl if he sees enough of her. Why don't you pick up a girl of a different sort? You must have plenty of opportunities. If you want to play the fool, choose a girl who doesn't aim at getting married!"

Vivian rose with fury in his veins. He made a desperate effort to disguise it, to answer her with dignity.

"I must decline to discuss the matter. If you can compare the love of my life with – with that kind of thing, there's no more to be said."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, exasperated, "what an idiot you are!"

Marry her then, and drag uphill with a wife and a family on your back, and see how you like it. Make haste before the bargain has gone; I daresay she'll jump at any man who asks her."

"Ah, it isn't *every* woman who'll jump at any man who asks her," he said savagely. "You're not a fair judge on that point, you know!"

The blood swept up to her forehead, and then she blanched, and the rouge stains looked grotesque. She trembled as if the blow had been struck with his fists. Her dyed head went down in her hands, and she began to sob – unrestrainedly, hysterically, in an abandonment of wretchedness.

He watched her, discomfited. His anger dwindled in view of her defeat, and already he repented his taunt. He decided, ashamed, to pretend that he did not understand what she was crying about.

David went over to her, murmuring encouragement.

"Let me alone," she quavered. "Go away, both of you; I don't want anyone."

"I don't know what has upset you," Vivian stammered. "I didn't mean anything particular."

"You did," she gasped; "you insulted me – you tried to! You said I was too low to judge her – your mother was too low to judge her! I'll never talk about your marriage again as long as I live. I don't want to hear about it." She dabbed her eyes and cheeks impetuously, and moved to the door. "I hope you'll be happy ... that's all. I'm going; I've nothing more to say."

The door closed, and there was a moment's pause. Her sons looked at each other.

"Damned nonsense!" said Vivian, scowling.

"I didn't mean any harm. I wish I hadn't come."

"She has gone up to her bedroom," said David constrainedly.

"You'd better run up after her."

"What for – to have another scene? No, thank you; I've had enough... Well, I suppose we may as well go."

"I think I'll just say a word to her first. Will you wait for me? I won't be long. You will wait, won't you? I want to talk to you."

Vivian nodded. "All right; but don't tell her that *I* want to come up, because I don't. It's beastly, this sort of thing. Good Lord! one would think I was dependent on her; one would think she was making me an allowance... Give me a cigarette."

David found a servant to point "Madam's" room out to him, and tapped timidly. Ownie had thrown herself on the bed, and at his entrance she turned, in the hope that it was his brother's.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "Has he gone?"

"No, he's downstairs. He – I'm sure he's sorry he hurt you, mother."

"He's hard," she faltered, "hard as nails. He doesn't care; he doesn't care for me a bit. You heard how he talked to me. 'What have I ever done for him?' he asked. What have I ever done for him? You know, you know very well how good I've always been to Vivian. When he was a child I never refused him anything – I studied him in every way – he was always first to me. And this

is how he treats me. He talks to me as if I were a stranger. It wouldn't trouble him for a minute if he never saw me again."

"Oh, you shouldn't say that," he murmured; "it isn't true. He's got a rough tongue, but his heart is good. He doesn't show what he feels. He's just as unhappy now as you are, but he – it isn't easy for him to find the right words. You understand that really, only you're too sore to remember it yet."

"He only thinks of that girl," she sobbed. "'Jealous,' he called me. If I *am* jealous, what of it? He's all I've got, and she's taking him away from me. I'm not young any more, I haven't the interests that I used to have; I don't want to be left alone. He doesn't care a snap of his fingers for me now. He never cared much, but I wouldn't see it, and now he cares nothing. Nobody cares for me; there's not a soul to mind whether I live or die. Oh, it was nice of you to come up – it's more than *he* did – but you're not fond of me, David; you never were. I'm not blaming you – I'm not unjust – it's my own fault, that. But it isn't my fault with him, God knows it isn't! If I deserve anything I deserve to be loved by Vivie. I don't ask for much, I don't expect miracles; but I did expect to be treated well by Vivie when I was old, when I was lonely, and I had nobody else to turn to."

The tears had streaked the rouge on her quivering face; her yellow hair, disordered by the pillow, showed the lines of age that it was trained to hide. Timeworn and desolate, she lay huddled on the bed, making her moan while he sought pityingly to comfort her; and it pained him that he could not speak of his own affection

for her – that she could not believe him if he did.

When she was more tranquil he left her. She had not asked for her elder son to be sent to her, nor did he inquire whether he was wanted.

"You've been long enough!" he said. "Well, is she better?"

"Yes," David answered coldly, "she is better. Have you anything to do? What time do you go back?"

Vivian explained that he was not returning to Beckenhampton till the morrow: "I've business here; that's why I came up. No, I've nothing to do till eight o'clock – then I've got to see a man at the Eccentric." They descended the steps, and, after a furtive glance at his half-brother, he added deprecatingly: "It has been going on for an hour pretty nearly – you only heard the fag-end of it. I can tell you that what I've had to listen to would have tried the patience of a saint!" It embarrassed him to walk in the streets with David, and he signed to a passing hansom. "Where shall I tell him to drive? I'll come to your place with you if you like."

His contrition by no means abated his sense of being ill-used, nor did his indifference to his companion extend to his companion's disapproval. That David should be presuming to censure him was a situation not the less annoying because it seemed to him anomalous, and they were no sooner in the cab than he began vehemently to expatiate upon his grievance. David waited with rising eagerness for an opportunity to frame the question that again engrossed him.

"If I had guessed how she'd take the news, there'd have been

none of this confounded row at all – I'd have left her in the dark. It's an encouraging thing, upon my soul it is, to be bullied when you make a confidant of your mother! What's it to do with her, anyhow? It won't cost her anything. How does it affect her if I marry? It's not as if I had to keep her – she's in no need of my assistance; I've never given her a pound in my life." He seemed to regard this as conclusive, and repeated it. "On my honour, I've never given her a pound in my life; she'd be every bit as well off if I were married, as she is now I'm single! There isn't a grain of logic in her objection; it isn't even as if I were living at home. Hang it, I scarcely ever see her! It's a regular dog-in-the-manger attitude she adopts – she hasn't got me herself, and she grudges me to anybody else."

"That isn't the way she looks at it," said David; "while you're single she feels she *has* still got you. Who is the girl?"

"She's beautiful – she's absolutely the most beautiful girl I ever met. She – she's the top stair of the highest flight of an artist's imagination. You should see the people turn round after her wherever she goes. And she's as clever as she's good-looking. I never believed I should meet a woman who'd understand me as she does. 'Jump at the first man who asks her'? Ha, ha! You can take your oath she's had proposals enough, young as she is... I didn't come up with the intention of talking about it at all; it was the mater pumped me. I thought she was entering into it at the start – she was smiling, she seemed interested; I gave myself away before I dreamt she was going to make a fuss. Then it began.

A bit of a sneer, a little ridicule, pretending it was all too silly to talk seriously about – after she'd led me on, after she'd made me think she was sympathising! Then when she saw that didn't work, she got nasty; she began to show her claws – I was a 'fool' in every other sentence. A man is the best judge of his own life; I know what I want, without anybody telling me. I'd have proposed long ago if I were sure it would be all right. I haven't much to offer, unfortunately. 'Throwing myself away'? I'm no catch for a girl like that. And then, of course ... I don't know; I think she does, but ... I can't swear she cares for me. Perhaps when it came to the point – she may only like me as a friend."

"What's her name?" said David. "How did you meet her?"

"I met her father first, and then he asked me up to the house. I'd seen her already then, or I daresay I shouldn't have gone. I might have missed everything if she hadn't been with him that afternoon. Funny, eh? Did it ever strike you how a fellow's life is often altered by things that don't seem anything at the time? I mean how the biggest things turn up from things that you'd think don't matter. There's a new idea for your poetry – you go in for original fancies like that, don't you? I read somewhere that your book's full of 'em. Her father is very amiable to me, but – he's not very wide awake – I don't think he sees how the land lies. He mayn't be keen on giving his daughter to me when I spring it on him, even if she accepts me. I wish she hadn't got a father. If she were on her own in the profession, the running would be easier for me; they marry in the profession on nothing – some of



them – live in lodgings, and carry the babies down to the station on Sunday mornings. It's different with a girl like her. And the town is full of Johnnies who are in their governors' businesses and could offer her a decent home – a villa on the Hunby Road, and a couple of servants. It makes one a bit shaky about one's chances, you know."

The cab stopped before David could obtain the answer that he sought, and he opened the door with his latchkey, and led the way upstairs. His restlessness under the flood of discourse loosed upon him had heightened his misgiving. There had been nothing to justify his fear except enthusiasm – no word to suggest that it was Hilda who was referred to; he kept telling himself so. But, fluttering in his senses, there was a nervous, inexplicable conviction that it *was* Hilda. Reason could not still it. He even dreaded to repeat his question, feeling that with insistence the bolt would fall.

He took the whisky and a syphon out of the miniature sideboard, and called on the landing for tumblers. Vivian dropped into the armchair on the hearth.

"Yes, it doesn't make a fellow sanguine, to remember how much better she might do," he went on. "I don't mean that she's mercenary – nothing of the sort – but I daresay her family will be against it. Not that they're particularly well off themselves, as far as that goes – rather the reverse. Still, they have got a house. It's not being able to take a house that makes a fellow look so hard up. It doesn't show while he's single – I might have a thousand a

year now, for all anybody can tell – but if I stop in diggings after I'm married, it'll be a different pair of shoes. There's no doubt that when a fellow marries, he advertises his position for all the world to see. I'm sick of diggings."

"So am I," said David.

The drudge had burst in with the glasses. Vivian got up, and lounged about the room. "Is that where you write?" he asked. He wandered to the smaller table in a corner, on which some manuscript lay, and swung round with an ejaculation:

"Good heavens! How did you get this?" He held up Hilda's photograph.

The answer to David's question had come. It reverberated as if he had been unprepared. Almost he felt that he *had* been unprepared. He stared at his brother mutely.

"This is her likeness... *Isn't* this Hilda Sorrenford? How did you get it?"

"She sent it to me," replied David, dragging out his voice.

"Sent it to you? ... Sent it to you? Why, she doesn't know you!"

"Oh yes, she knows me. That is, she writes to me."

"Writes to you?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"I must explain to you. It's difficult to say. We have written to each other for a long time. She wrote first about my work – she liked it – and then somehow we began to correspond regularly..."

She doesn't know that we're related; I haven't spoken of you – I didn't know she had ever seen you."

"I don't understand. I've spoken of *you*: she didn't say she knew you. Why did she make a secret of it?"

"I can't think why."

"Have you ever met her?"

"Yes."

"It's the most extraordinary – Where?"

"She was in the country this summer with her sister."

"Bee?"

"Yes, 'Bee.' I went down there. That was after she sent me the likeness. I wanted to see her. I had rooms in the same house for a few days."

"Upon my soul!.. And she let me think – why, she seemed astonished to hear you were a – She knew nothing about you except your name!"

There was silence for an instant.

"Do you mean she was astonished to hear I was a mulatto?" asked David. "You told her?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"The other day."

"When? ... Last week? This week?"

"This week."

David turned aside. It was a week since he had received Bee's last letter. "What did she say?" he faltered.

"She was astonished."

"Horrified?"

"N – no, she wasn't so interested as all that. But I don't understand!" he exclaimed again; "you said just now that you had met her?"

"She doesn't know I've met her – she doesn't know it was I. I took another name; I called myself 'Tremlett.'"

"You called, yourself 'Tremlett'? Why? What the devil is all this about – what did you take another name for?"

"I didn't want her to discover I – I wasn't a white man; not then, not so soon. I was afraid."

"'Afraid'?"

"Afraid she might stop writing to me if she knew."

"So help me God! it sounds as if you're telling me you are in love with her?"

"Yes," said David quietly, "that is what I have to tell you. I am in love with her."

They stood looking into each other's eyes for several seconds, neither of them moving.

"Is this a joke?" asked Vivian harshly.

"Oh no, it's true, it's perfectly true. I'm sorry, very sorry, to hear you're fond of her; but I loved her before I heard it – you mustn't forget that. It oughtn't to make bad blood between us, whatever happens. I've told you as soon as I could; I've been quite open with you."

"I – I'm hanged if I'm quite sure now what you're driving

at," said Vivian after another pause. "You're 'sorry' – 'whatever happens'?.. What is it you're doing – warning me? Do you mean – You don't mean to say you think she'll marry you?"

"I hope and pray she will. If she cares more for *you*, of course she won't."

"What?" He forced a laugh. "Are you out of your mind? Why, the thing's preposterous! It's an insult to her to imagine it... Look here, I don't want a row with you. You must see very well that it's no good. We don't make ourselves, it's not your fault that you're not the same as other fellows, it's your misfortune – but you can't expect a decent girl to marry a coloured man; it's against nature."

"Our mother did," said David.

"I've had quite enough about that!.. Besides, we all know she was wretched. And I've told you Hilda belongs to *me*. Don't come interfering; it has gone too far already, with the correspondence and the likeness. I can't make it out."

"She doesn't belong to you; if she belonged to you, I'd say nothing. She belongs to neither of us – she can choose the one she likes best. Well, let her choose! If my love is preposterous, if it's an insult to her, why are you frightened for me to go and plead?"

"Frightened?" Vivian blazed; "do you think I'm jealous of *you*? You know better. You're frightened yourself – you said so. When you went to her, it was like a coward; by your own showing, you've hung about her under a false name. I suppose that was 'open,' was it? You've been trying to get round her by your poetry, haven't you? trying to sneak her fancy before she knew what you

were like! Go and plead – and be damned to you – and hear what she'll say, now she knows what you are!"

He waited for an answer, affected another laugh, and then turned to the table and picked up his hat. David drew close to him, shaking.

"*You* make the quarrel," he panted, "do you? *You* complain?.. By what right? She was dear to me before you had ever seen her, before you had ever heard of her, before you'd set foot in the town she lives in. *You* complain? It's for me to resent, not you. All our lives since we were children, you've had everything I was denied because you were good-looking and I was hideous; when we were boys your good looks made things harder for me; as men, all the pleasure of life has been for you, while I've had nothing but contempt. And at last when a girl has come to care for me – to care for what I am, my work, my thoughts, my feelings, the things that *are* myself —*you* must blunder in the way, and want to take *her* from me too. You taunt me with my colour? It ought to remind you of what I've had to bear; it ought to shame you for asking me to give up to you the only chance of happiness I've ever had! If I've been a coward, I was what the intolerance of minds like yours has made me. Show your own courage – take your appeals to the girl you love, don't beg me to stand aside for you! You taunt me with my colour? Wait till *she* does! Talk to her as best you can – and so will I. For once I'm not afraid of your good looks – she has seen deeper than my skin. *Tell* her that you love her, and find which has more power to move her heart

– your face, or *the words in me!*"

And while he boasted, he believed in the power of words, not knowing that he had preferred a face himself.

When he was alone, he cried, looking uglier still.

And late in the evening he wrote his first love-letter.

It was a very long letter. He wrote of the joy that the correspondence had brought him, of the years of loneliness and suffering that had made him afraid to own the truth. He wrote of the day the portrait came, his temptation, his weakness – of his longing to confess himself at Godstone, and of the fear that had still held him back. He poured out the story of his life, the story of his childhood, of his youth, and of his love. He prayed to her for pity, for tenderness, for "Heaven." He said that on the morrow he would go to her to hear her answer. And because the need for pretending ignorance of the name was past now, he addressed the letter to "Miss Hilda Sorrenford" in full.

## CHAPTER XXIII

It reached her early the next afternoon. She was sitting before the dining-room fire, with a shilling manicure set in her lap, polishing her finger-nails. There was no one else in the room; Bee had gone back to the studio, and the Professor was at Great Hunby. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and she opened the envelope with as much interest as was natural in a girl whose letters were few. Astonishment laid hold of her at the first lines. She glanced instinctively at the address again, and then found the last page, and looked at the signature. Her lovely eyes dilated, her brows climbed high; truth to tell, she had a rather stupid air as she sat deciphering David's declaration, with her mouth ajar, and the file, and the rubber, and the little powder-box lying in her lap. Only two points were intelligible to her: the "Mr. Tremlett" she had met was David Lee, and he adored her. It can never be unpleasant to be adored; she by no means shared the opinion that his adoration was an insult, though she did not regard it seriously; but she was too bewildered even to simper. "Her photograph, their correspondence?" At every reference to these things she felt more dazed. By what extraordinary mistake could a man from whom she had never heard till now imagine that he had been corresponding with her?

After she had stared at the fire, and smiled at herself in the glass, she mounted to the studio, her eyes still wide, a glimmer



of amusement in them.

"Just look at this! Read it through!" she exclaimed, holding the letter out.

Bee was writing, and rose confused.

"What is it?"

"A proposal!" She giggled. "I mean it From David Lee! It's a mystery."

Bee started. Her gaze wandered from the letter in Hilda's hand to the letter on the table. She did not speak.

"Read it," repeated Hilda.

"I'd rather not," she answered painfully; "it's written to *you*."

"What rubbish! Well, listen, then. You'd better sit down again, my dear – he worships me at great length."

She dropped into a chair herself, and began to declaim the pages with zest. In moments she looked up, with a comment or grimace. The woman sat passive, never meeting her glance. She listened to David's avowal of devotion to her sister dumbly – line after line, to the end – her hands hanging at her sides, her chin sunk. Only her meagre bosom showed that she was listening. For the first time it heaved to love words that were not ordered for the ears of all – for the first time in her life she heard a man's passion crying out to flesh and blood. When she raised her head at last, she was white to the lips.

"What's the matter?"

Contrition, love and pity surged in her. In the distorted body all the forces of womanhood beat at his appeal. She yearned over

the story of his childish years like a mother, she trembled to his passion like a wife. The thin hands strained across the lifting bosom; she found her voice.

"There's something I must tell you. I – I ought to have told you before... It's *I* who have been writing to him," she said.

"You?.. It's you who have been What do you mean? Why does he write to *me* then?"

"He doesn't know. I always signed myself 'H,' of course, and one day he asked for my photograph. I – " She hesitated. She drooped before the girl abjectly.

"You sent him mine?" cried Hilda.

Bee nodded, her eyes to the ground... The pause was broken by Hilda's giggle.

"Whatever did you do that for?" she said.

The deformed woman spoke by a gesture. "Then he came to Godstone, and fell in love with you," she went on huskily. "I didn't know it was he when we were there; I only guessed when I heard he was – when I heard what his brother had told you about him. I was writing to him when you came in, to say that I had deceived him. It's too late, the harm is done, but I was writing!"

"It was an awful shame," exclaimed Hilda with sudden heat. "Supposing he has talked to Vivian – I mean 'Mr. Harris' – about it? I expect he has – he seems to know his brother's here. Why, what a liar I shall look! It was a beastly thing to do, Bee. What will his brother think of me?"

"You're fond of Mr. Harris, aren't you?" inquired Bee humbly.

"Perhaps. Anyhow, I don't want him to imagine I'm such a hateful liar as to pretend I don't know a fellow I've been corresponding with for months."

"That can soon be put right; I wish I'd done no worse harm than that."

"What else have you done, for goodness' sake?"

Bee's lips tightened. She pointed to David's letter, which had fallen to the floor.

"Have you forgotten he loves you?" she asked.

"Oh!" Hilda was relieved. "Well, you'll have to own up to everybody, that's all," she said; "I hope you'll like it. But carrying on a correspondence with a man you've never seen – you! That's what gets over me. What on earth did you find to say to him?"

"I wrote about his work."

"And why should you have minded his knowing about your accident – what difference did that make? Really" – her vexation melted into amusement – "it may have been all about poetry and the fine arts, but it was going rather far, wasn't it? If *I* had done such a thing – A secret correspondence with a strange man! I'd never have believed it of you. I'm appalled. I shouldn't like to call you 'fast,' but – And he turns out to be a nigger!" Her laughter pealed. "Oh, it's funny! it is, it is, it's screaming!"

"He loves you," said the woman again, flushing to the temples; "try to remember it."

The ridicule in the girl's stare shamed her through and through. She picked the scattered pages up, and folded them.

Hilda took them negligently, and stood struggling to control her mouth. Smiles still played hide-and-seek with the dimple in her cheek.

"Which likeness has he got of me?" she said after a minute.

"It was the one I took at Godstone."

"You might as well have sent the one you took of me in the tucked chiffon, while you were about it. That thing at Godstone didn't show the best side of my face."

"He loves you," cried Bee passionately. "Are you made of wood? You're the world to him, he thinks you understand him, he's coming to you to-day, praying for your answer! Have you got no feeling in you; can't you pity him?"

"Good Lord!" said Hilda, "don't go on at me like that. Of course I pity him; I'm very sorry for him indeed, I'm sure. I think I shall write him a very nice note after he has got over the shock," she added complacently, "hoping he'll soon forget me, and 'find comfort in his work.' I might do that, mightn't I? Something very kind."

"And when he comes to-day?"

"What, when he comes? You don't expect *me* to explain matters to him, do you?"

"No, *I* must do that, I know; it serves me right for not having told him before. But he'll ask to see you afterwards – to say good-bye to you. You'll go down and speak to him?"

"I shan't do anything of the sort, it isn't likely. To say 'good-bye' to me? Why, the man's a stranger to me, it would be most

horribly embarrassing – I should feel a perfect idiot. You can tell him I had to go out – or that I'm not well. Besides, I shouldn't think he *would* ask to see me when he hears he has been taken in; why should he?"

"Why should he'? Because he loves you, because he's hungry for you, mad for you. Because you're pretty and soft, and made for men to admire, and he'll want to look at your face, and touch your hand, and hold it for a second longer than he ought to. And if you let him, would it kill you? Would it be so much to give him? Can you read that letter – can you hear his life – and smirk and talk of your 'embarrassment'? To him it'll be worse than embarrassment, it'll be despair."

"You're very rude," said Hilda, paling. "I think you're in love with him yourself, upon my word I do!"

"Do you? It would be very strange, wouldn't it? I'm not pretty like you, and I've got a crooked spine – so I'm not a woman. You can hardly believe that *I* could be in love, can you?"

"I really don't know what to believe," stammered Hilda, "when you talk like that. I should have thought you'd have respected yourself more than to fall in love with a ni – with a mulatto, at any rate."

"I respect myself because I do love him – I love him better than it's in you to love anybody. You fool, you doll, you'll write him something very 'kind,' and think you're condescending? If that letter had been written to me, I'd have thanked God for it on my knees – God knows it's true! Yes, I love him – with all

my body and all my soul, and if he had wanted me, instead of you, and I had looked no further than my own joy, I'd have given myself to him body and soul, and been proud."

"Ah, ssh!" the girl faltered, "you don't know what you're saying."

"And been proud!" she sobbed. "Yes, I do know, I mean it!.. Without fear – it would have been my honour. Body and soul – his and mine – one mind, one life, one flesh!.. I'd have gloried. That's love, that's human!" She shrank against the wall, and bowed her head there under the failures of her art. "Go away from me, don't stare at me! I'm a cripple, no one ever cared for me – I wish I were dead!"

In the hush of the next instant a bell rang. Their gaze met, startled. Neither spoke. Both listened intently.

The servant came up the stairs with slow, heavy feet. She said: "Mr. Lee to see Miss Hilda."

"Where is he?" murmured the girl.

"In the drawing-room, Miss."

The attic was still again after the servant went. Her footsteps struck the oilcloth of the top stairs harshly, and fell duller on the carpet, and subsided in the hall. In the silence the sisters sat looking away from each other, as strangers look.

"One of us must go down to him!" said Hilda at last in a nervous gasp.

"I'll go down as soon as I can," Bee answered.

## CHAPTER XXIV

He waited restlessly. The suspense that had shivered in him on the journey – that sickened him as the fly rattled through the town – had culminated with the sight of the house in which she lived. He was in her home. There was nothing gracious in the shabby, formal room where the music and the elocution lessons were given. No flowers lent a touch of nature to the early Victorian vases on the mantelpiece; no piece of fancy-work had been forgotten, to humanise the asperity of the clumsy furniture with the hint of a woman's presence. But he was in her home – and everything in the room spoke to him. Things quite trivial, quite trite, woke emotion in him because they were familiar to her; they took unto their inanimate ugliness some of the fascination of her life.

He stood on the faded hearthrug, watching the door. After the servant's feet had clattered to the basement all was quiet except the clock, which ticked behind him sadly. He became acutely conscious of its tick in the long waiting; it stole into his nerves, and heightened his misgiving. At last he caught a sound outside the door; the handle stirred. For an instant it was as if Hilda were before him; he knew that upheaval of the chest with which a man sees the woman of whom he is despairing turn the corner. He moved a step towards the door breathlessly – and then blankness fell and Bee came slowly in.

"How do you do, Mr. Lee?" she murmured.

"How do you do, Miss Sorrenford?"

She did not offer him her hand – she felt that it would be unfair to make him take her hand before he knew what she had to say; she did not ask him to sit – she did not think of it. In the pause, the significant tick of the clock vibrated in him.

"You expected to see my sister," she began monotonously, reciting the sentence she had prepared; "I have come instead, because I have something to tell you."

"She won't see me?" asked David in a whisper.

She made an effort to swallow. "When she got your letter, I was writing to you. I – I have behaved very badly. I had no idea – I did not think of the consequences. Hilda has never – the letters you've received haven't come from Hilda... All the letters have come from *me*."

He did not start. Only his eyes showed that he had heard. He stood gazing at her – and she knew that she had killed something in him. The dark lips moved. Watching them, she understood that he said "From you?"

"Yes," she muttered. "It was I who wrote about your poems. I've written all the letters. Hilda hasn't written. Hilda has never heard from you before... She didn't send you her likeness – I sent it. You wanted mine; I'm deformed – I didn't like to tell you – I sent Hilda's... I didn't think it would matter – I didn't think long enough – it was an impulse. I shall never forgive myself as long as I live; nothing can tell you how ashamed I am!.. You're a stranger



to Hilda; she doesn't – it's impossible – you're a stranger to her."

She was trembling violently. She put out a hand to a chair, and sat down. David still stood motionless, his gaze fixed.

"A stranger to her," he echoed.

"She only met you at Godstone. There was nothing at Godstone to – to make you hope she might care for you, was there? Was there?"

"No," he said dully; "no, there was nothing at Godstone to make me hope she might care for me. It was at Godstone I began to love her, that's all... Your name is 'Bee'?"

"My name is 'Hebe,'" she answered bitterly. "I am called 'Bee' for – for short."

"I understand; Hilda has never written to me – she has never heard from me before. I understand, of course; you've explained it, and – and I do understand, I think. But all the same ... I have believed she – Oh, God!" he broke out, "it was a cruel thing to do. *Why?* What for? Wasn't I wretched enough? To do this to me – for nothing! to spare your petty pride."

She twisted her hands in agony. "All my life I shall be sorry."

"Sorry! Thank you. All mine I shall be sorry, too. If you had wished to torture me – if you had tried! I love her. She's more to me than all the world, than the only soul I think of in the next. I love her! do you know what it means? To say I'd die for her says nothing – my life is empty; but the one joy I have had has been my work, and I would give all the work I've done, and all the power to do any more – I'd give it gladly – just to kiss her

once... If she knew – if I could tell her what I feel for her, there might – mightn't there be hope for me yet?"

"No," she said; the tears were running down her face; "she's fond of someone else."

"Of Vivian?.. Oh, she is fond of him, is she? Don't cry, I didn't mean to make you cry. It can't be helped now."

"Forgive me," she sobbed. "Don't hate me! Say that you forgive me!"

"May God make her happy with him," murmured the man, deaf and blind.

"Forgive me, forgive me," she moaned. "It was cruel, what you said was true, I've tortured you – to spare my pride, to spare my vanity, but forgive me. Say you forgive me what I've done!"

"I forgive you," he said. "After all, you were no more cowardly than I was. You might have told me so; you didn't."

It was some minutes before either of them spoke another word.

"If she had loved me!" cried David, suddenly. He fell on to the couch, and hid his face in his hands. "If she had loved me!"

"If she had loved you," said Bee's pitying voice, "it would have been worse for you to bear; you would have had a harder trial. She couldn't have married you. It would have been wrong."

He raised his head. "Because I'm what I am?" he asked.

"No," she said – and her wet eyes did not fall before him – "because of what your child would be... Had you ever thought of that?"

"Yes. For my own childhood seems the other day."

"I know – I've heard your letter; don't grudge me having heard it. Your child would suffer too, not so deeply, perhaps, but the world wouldn't be kind to him; if your child were a girl, God knows the world wouldn't be kind to her... It is a very barren world for some of us, but we oughtn't to steal our joy, ought we? We oughtn't to make others pay for it. You know that; Hilda would know it. She couldn't have been your wife."

"If she had loved me," he said, brokenly, "she wouldn't have argued so."

"The woman who loved you with all her heart and soul would have argued so," affirmed the woman... "And you would have suffered more in knowing that she loved you, when you had to lose her. The knowledge that she loved you would have brought no light into your life; it would have made your loneliness lonelier."

"How can you say?"

"Because you are a man."

"And a woman? Would it be different with a woman?"

"Yes," she answered, out of her longing. "A woman's loneliness would be less for knowing she was loved."

"What is my sin?" he cried out. "Why should the freedom of other men be always denied to me? I have the same feelings, the same heeds, the same God put them in me. You are so righteous, you teach me my duty; have *you* no duty towards *me*? The world mouths the Scriptures that tell us all men are brothers,

and persecutes me while it cants. From the time I can remember, it has been so. My own mother was ashamed of me. At school they prayed God to pardon the Jews and the infidels – 'Take from them all hardness of heart' – and came out from the Service and beat the 'nigger.' As a man, I have never had a friend. Is it charity, is it justice, to make a pariah of me? Why should I be shunned? I was given life, I didn't ask for it."

"No," she said gently, "but could you bear to have your child say that to you? It is a brutal world, a merciless world. When they tell us it is a beautiful world, they tell a lie. They speak with their eyes shut to everything that is painful to see. When Browning wrote, 'God's in His heaven, all's right with the world,' I think God must have shuddered. I know you believe in a life afterwards where all the crookedness down here will be put straight – all the crooked backs, and things: try to be strong, and wait for the Explanation – and the soul you spoke of. And you've your work to help you; if I could only work like you! I am not 'righteous,' I am not very patient, I have rebelled as passionately as you do; if it can comfort you to know it, I suffer as you do. We are alike, we two – you and I weren't made for happiness."

"Forgive me," said David; "I might have remembered that you suffer. You can understand me... But you always *have* understood me." It recurred to him with surprise that from her came the letters that he had treasured. It was difficult to realise that the mind within the bent little woman who seemed a stranger was indeed the one so near to him. Even, as yet, their affinity left

him desolate. It was still to Hilda that his spirit turned – Hilda despoiled of all the qualities by which he had justified his love, but sovereign still, still Hilda. "How strange it is," he murmured. "Your letters used to make me very happy. And the letters are real, aren't they? I think I was ready to love her for what she wrote, only – "

"Only then you loved her for herself?"

"Yes... Vivian will marry her now. Vivian would be glad to know what *I* know; he is afraid she doesn't care for him. If – if, she wonders whether he loves her, you might tell her that I know he does. I boasted to him yesterday. How he might laugh at me to-day!"

"I'm so sorry for you. It's a worn-out word; it seemed an insult to you when I used it just now, but what other is there? The relief will come. You'll pour your pain into your poetry; you'll write something beautiful and great because of what you're suffering, and know that it is beautiful and great. The pain will fade a little because you'll feel you utter it so well."

He looked beyond her thoughtfully. "Yes," he said... "It sounds paltry, doesn't it? But it's true. Are we so shallow?"

"We?" she sighed. "I'm not an artist, I am dumb. I used to think – but what has that to do with it!"

"Tell me," he said.

"I used to think I must have genius; I didn't think a little gift like mine could cry so loud. If people knew some of the things I have done in my life, they would laugh, because – because one

has no right to feel like that and be mediocre; it is silly... Did you know as a child that you had power?"

"I always longed... I remember telling my father once that it was in me. I lost hope afterwards... I've been so miserable."

"I could hear it in your work; you seemed to be speaking for me sometimes... I wanted to thank you for such a long while before I found the courage to do it. If I had guessed what was to come of it! I did nearly tear the letter up – so nearly!"

"I used to ask myself what you'd say if you could see me. I was frightened I shouldn't hear from you any more if you knew what I was like... I *should* have heard from you, shouldn't I?"

"Yes."

"Shall I hear from you still?"

Her gaze rose to him wonderingly. "Do you mean that?" she faltered. "Do you want to?"

"I don't know," he said.

"It would keep the pain alive. You wouldn't be able to bear it."

He was silent a moment, pondering. "Your letters made me happy," he repeated, "they have been all I've had – I shall be poorer without them. Yes, I must have them. I'll try not to think of her when I read them. I'll read them for what they are – what they were to me before I saw her... This isn't the end?"

"If you are sure you wish it, write to me; I will always answer," she promised.

The poignancy was fading from their tones, as the anger against her had already faded from his heart. By degrees they

talked more freely. She lost the bearing of a penitent before her judge; the weakness was all the man's, and it became her part to comfort. A slow thankfulness that she had been revealed to him began to tinge the greyness of his outlook; in him, and in her, a sense was dawning that they could never again be so utterly alone. When she went to the door with him not an hour had passed since he uttered his reproaches – and upon the threshold he took both her hands, and she said, "It's not 'good-bye.'"

On the morning when David's father followed a blonde in crape along the Brighton sea-front, the band was playing "La Fille de Madame Angot": when David held Bee's hands, and she said, "It's not good-bye," the present century was born. So far as the lives of David Lee and Hebe Sorrenford are lived, the story of their lives is told. Where it ends, another is beginning, and to some of us it must seem that the story of their friendship can end only when the man or woman dies. For the sympathy between these two who in spirit are one cannot die. That must last longer than their youth, and longer than their passions; I who have said what has been, believe it must last longer than the bodies that belie their souls. The pages of the story are blank, and we can do no more than guess how Time will write it. But after Hilda has become Vivian's wife, and when the music-room is silent, it cannot be rash to think that Bee will make her new home close to David's, and, since Nature calls to both, that through some village street the figures of the quaint companions will pass together every day – and pass together for so many days that at last the

rustics cease to point at them. Alike in their ideals, in their feeling for beauty, alike even in their weaknesses, how can they drift apart? Far on in the unwritten story I see no separation but the night. I see them working together, hoping together – hopeful of an immortality for David's verse which perhaps it will not win – but both happier, both braver, each of them fortified by the other's love. When the name of Ownie is unspoken and she rests as "Lilian Augusta, Widow of Elisha Lee," I see them together still, and I think there is no knowledge in his comrade's heart that David does not share, excepting that his history has held such love as women give to men where children sing. If I am not wrong, one day he will know that too, but he will learn it only where there is a fuller charity, and a clearer light – in a World where a hue of the skin cannot ostracise, and a crook of the body cannot ban.

**THE END**