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ECSTASY

LOUIS COUPERUS

ECSTASY:
A STUDY OF HAPPINESS

THE BOOKS OF THE SMALL SOULS

By

LOUIS COUPERUS

Translated by

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

I. SMALL SOULS.

II. THE LATER LIFE.

III. THE TWILIGHT OF THE SOULS.

IV. DR. ADRIAAN.

ECSTASY:

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A NOVEL

BY

LOUIS COUPERUS
Author of "Small Souls," "Old People and the Things that Pass," etc.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This delicate story is Louis Couperus' third novel. It appeared in the original Dutch some twenty-seven years ago and has not hitherto been published in America. At the time when it was written, the author was a leading member of what was then known as the "sensitivist" school of Dutch novelists; and the reader will not be slow in discovering that the story possesses an elusive charm of its own, a charm marking a different tendency from that of the later books.

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS
CHELSEA, 2 *June*, 1919

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CHAPTER I

1

DOLF VAN ATTEMA, in the course of an after-dinner stroll, had called on his wife's sister, Cecile van Even, on the Scheveningen Road. He was waiting in her little boudoir, pacing up and down, among the rosewood chairs and the *vieux rose moiré* ottomans, over and over again, with three or four long steps, measuring the width of the tiny room. On an onyx pedestal, at the head of a sofa, burned an onyx lamp, glowing sweetly within its lace shade, a great six-petalled flower of light.

Mevrouw was still with the children,

putting them to bed, the maid had told him; so he would not be able to see his godson, little Dolf, that evening. He was sorry. He would have liked to go upstairs and romp with Dolf where he lay in his little bed; but he remembered Cecile's request and his promise on an earlier occasion, when a romp of this sort with his uncle had kept the boy awake for hours. So Dolf van Attema waited, smiling at his own obedience, measuring the little boudoir with his steps, the steps of a firmly-built man, short, broad and thickset, no longer in his first youth, showing symptoms of baldness under his short brown hair, with small blue-grey eyes, kindly and pleasant of glance, and a mouth which was firm and determined, in spite of the smile, in the midst of the ruddy growth of his crisp Teutonic beard.

A log smouldered on the little hearth of nickel and gilt; and two little flames flick-

ered discreetly: a fire of peaceful intimacy in that twilight atmosphere of lace-shielded lamplight. Intimacy and discreetness shed over the whole little room an aroma as of violets; a suggestion of the scent of violets nestled, too, in the soft tints of the draperies and furniture—rosewood and *rose moiré*—and hung about the corners of the little rosewood writing-table, with its silver appointments and its photographs under smooth glass frames. Above the writing-table hung a small white Venetian mirror. The gentle air of modest refinement, the subdued and almost prudish tenderness which floated about the little hearth, the writing-table and the sofa, gliding between the quiet folds of the faded hangings, had something soothing, something to quiet the nerves, so that Dolf presently ceased his work of measurement, sat down, looked around him and finally remained staring

at the portrait of Cecile's husband, the minister of State, dead eighteen months back.

After that he had not long to wait before Cecile came in. She advanced towards him smiling, as he rose from his seat, pressed his hand, excused herself that the children had detained her. She always put them to sleep herself, her two boys, Dolf and Christie, and then they said their prayers, one beside the other in their little beds. The scene came back to Dolf as she spoke of the children; he had often seen it.

Christie was not well, she said; he was so listless; she hoped it might not turn out to be measles.

2

There was motherliness in her voice, but she did not seem a mother as she reclined, girlishly slight, on the sofa, with behind

her the soft glow of the lace flower of light on its stem of onyx. She was still in the black of her mourning. Here and there the light at her back touched her flaxen hair with a frail golden halo; the loose crape tea-gown accentuated the maidenly slimness of her figure, with the gently curving lines of her long neck and somewhat narrow shoulders; her arms hung with a certain weariness as her hands lay in her lap; gently curving, too, were the lines of her girlish youth of bust and slender waist, slender as a vase is slender, so that she seemed a still expectant flower of maidenhood, scarcely more than adolescent, not nearly old enough to be the mother of her children, her two boys of six and seven.

Her features were lost in the shadow—the lamplight touching her hair with gold—and Dolf could not at first see into her eyes; but presently, as he grew accustomed

to the shade, these shone softly out from the dusk of her features. She spoke in her low-toned voice, a little faint and soft, like a subdued whisper; she spoke again of Christie, of his god-child Dolf and then asked for news of Amélie, her sister.

"We are all well, thank you," he replied. "You may well ask how we are: we hardly ever see you."

"I go out so little," she said, as an excuse.

"That is just where you make a mistake: you do not get half enough air, not half enough society. Amélie was saying so only at dinner to-day; and that's why I've looked in to ask you to come round to us to-morrow evening."

"Is it a party?"

"No; nobody."

"Very well, I will come. I shall be very pleased."

"Yes, but why do you never come of your own accord?"

"I can't summon up the energy."

"Then how do you spend your evenings?"

"I read, I write, or I do nothing at all. The last is really the most delightful: I only feel myself alive when I am doing *nothing*."

He shook his head:

"You're a funny girl. You really don't deserve that we should like you as much as we do."

"How?" she asked, archly.

"Of course, it makes no difference to you. You can get on just as well without us."

"You mustn't say that; it's not true. Your affection means a great deal to me, but it takes so much to induce me to go out. When I am once in my chair, I sit thinking, or not thinking; and then I find it difficult to stir."

"What a horribly lazy mode of life!"

"Well, there it is! . . . You like me so much: can't you forgive me my laziness? Especially when I have promised you to come round to-morrow."

He was captivated:

"Very well," he said, laughing. "Of course you are free to live as you choose. We like you just the same, in spite of your neglect of us."

She laughed, reproached him with using ugly words and rose slowly to pour him out a cup of tea. He felt a caressing softness creep over him, as if he would have liked to stay there a long time, talking and sipping tea in that violet-scented atmosphere of subdued refinement: he, the man of action, the politician, member of the Second Chamber, every hour of whose day was filled up with committees here and committees there.

"You were saying that you read and

wrote a good deal: what do you write?" he asked.

"Letters."

"Nothing but letters?"

"I love writing letters. I write to my brother and sister in India."

"But that is not the only thing?"

"Oh, no!"

"What else do you write then?"

"You're growing a bit indiscreet, you know."

"Nonsense!" he laughed back, as if he were quite within his right. "What is it? Literature?"

"Of course not! My diary."

He laughed loudly and gaily:

"You keep a diary! What do you want with a diary? Your days are all exactly alike!"

"Indeed they are not."

He shrugged his shoulders, quite nonplussed. She had always been a riddle to

him. She knew this and loved to mystify him:

"Sometimes my days are very nice and sometimes very horrid."

"Really?" he said, smiling, looking at her out of his kind little eyes.

But still he did not understand.

"And so sometimes I have a great deal to write in my diary," she continued.

"Let me see some of it."

"By all means . . . after I'm dead."

A mock shiver ran through his broad shoulders:

"Brr! How gloomy!"

"Dead! What is there gloomy about that?" she asked, almost merrily.

But he rose to go:

"You frighten me," he said, jestingly. "I must be going home; I have a lot to do still. So we see you to-morrow?"

"Thanks, yes: to-morrow."

He took her hand; and she struck a little

silver gong, for him to be let out. He stood looking at her a moment longer, with a smile in his beard:

"Yes, you're a funny girl, and yet . . . and yet we all like you!" he repeated, as if he wished to excuse himself in his own eyes for this affection.

And he stooped and kissed her on the forehead: he was so much older than she.

"I am very glad that you all like me," she said. "Till to-morrow, then. Good-bye."

3

He went; and she was alone. The words of their conversation seemed still to be floating in the silence, like vanishing atoms. Then the silence became complete; and Cecile sat motionless, leaning back in the three little cushions of the sofa, black in her crape against the light of the lamp, her eyes gazing out before her. All

around her a vague dream descended as of little clouds, in which faces shone for an instant, from which low voices issued without logical sequence of words, an aimless confusion of recollection. It was the dreaming of one on whose brain lay no obsession either of happiness or of grief, the dreaming of a mind filled with peaceful light: a wide, still, grey Nirvana, in which all the trouble of thinking flows away and the thoughts merely wander back over former impressions, taking them here and there, without selecting. For Cecile's future appeared to her as a monotonous sweetness of unruffled peace, in which Dolf and Christie grew up into jolly boys, young undergraduates, men, while she herself remained nothing but the mother, for in the unconsciousness of her spiritual life she did not know herself entirely. She did not know that she was more wife than mother, however fond she

might be of her children. Swathed in the clouds of her dreaming, she did not feel that there was something missing, by reason of her widowhood; she did not feel loneliness, nor a need of some one beside her, nor regret that yielding air alone flowed about her, in which her arms might shape themselves and grope in vain for something to embrace. The capacity for these needs was there, but so deep hidden in her soul's unconsciousness that she did not know of its existence nor suspect that one day it might assert itself and rise up slowly, up and up, an apparition of more evident melancholy. For such melancholy as was in her dreaming seemed to her to belong to the past, to the memory of the dear husband whom she had lost, and never, never, to the present, to an unrealized sense of her loneliness.

Whoever had told her now that something was wanting in her life would have

roused her indignation; she herself imagined that she had everything that she wanted; and she valued highly the calm happiness of the innocent egoism in which she and her children breathed, a happiness which she thought complete. When she dreamed, as now, about nothing in particular—little dream-clouds fleeing across the field of her imagination, with other cloudlets in their wake—sometimes great tears would well into her eyes and trickle slowly down her cheek; but to her these were only tears of an unspeakably vague melancholy, a light load upon her heart, barely oppressive and there for some reason which she did not know, for she had ceased to mourn the loss of her husband.

In this manner she could pass whole evenings, simply sitting dreaming, never wearying of herself, nor reflecting how the people outside hurried and tired themselves, aimlessly, without being happy,

whereas she was happy, happy in the cloudland of her dreams.

The hours sped and her hand was too slack to reach for the book upon the table beside her; slackness at last permeated her so thoroughly that one o'clock arrived and she could not yet decide to get up and go to her bed.

CHAPTER II

1

NEXT evening, when Cecile entered the Van Attemas' drawing-room, slowly with languorous steps, in the sinuous black of her crape, Dolf at once came to her and took her hand:

"I hope you won't be annoyed. Quaerts called; and Dina had told the servants that we were at home. I'm sorry . . ."

"It doesn't matter!" she whispered.

Nevertheless, she was a little irritated, in her sensitiveness, at unexpectedly meeting this stranger, whom she did not remember ever to have seen at Dolf's and who now rose from where he had been sitting with Dolf's great-aunt, old Mrs. Hoze, Amélie and the two daughters,

Anna and Suzette. Cecile kissed the old lady and greeted the rest of the circle in turn, welcomed with a smile by all of them. Dolf introduced:

"My friend Taco Quaerts. . . . Mrs. van Even, my sister-in-law."

They sat a little scattered round the great fire on the open hearth, the piano close to them in the corner, its draped back turned to them, and Jules, the youngest boy, sitting behind it, playing a romance by Rubinstein and so absorbed that he had not heard his aunt come in.

"Jules! . . ." Dolf called out.

"Leave him alone," said Cecile.

The boy did not reply and went on playing. Cecile, across the piano, saw his tangled hair and his eyes abstracted in the music. A feebleness of melancholy slowly rose within her, like a burden, like a burden that climbed up her breast and stifled her breathing. From time to time,

forte notes falling suddenly from Jules' fingers gave her little shocks in her throat; and a strange feeling of uncertainty seemed winding her about as with vague meshes: a feeling not new to her, one in which she seemed no longer to possess herself, to be lost and wandering in search of herself, in which she did not know what she was thinking, nor what at this very moment she might say. Something melted in her brain, like a momentary weakness. Her head sank a little; and, without hearing distinctly, it seemed to her that once before she had heard this romance played so, exactly so, as Jules was now playing it, very, very long ago, in some former existence ages agone, in just the same circumstances, in this very circle of people, before this very fire. . . . The tongues of flame shot up with the same flickerings as from the logs of ages back; and Suzette blinked with the same ex-

pression which she had worn then on that former occasion. . . .

Why was it that Cecile should be sitting here again now, in the midst of them all? Why was it necessary, to sit like this round a fire, listening to music? How strange it was and what strange things there were in this world! . . . Still, it was pleasant to be in this cosy company, so agreeably quiet, without many words, the music behind the piano dying away plaintively, until it suddenly stopped.

Mrs. Hoze's voice had a ring of sympathy as she murmured in Cecile's ear:

"So we are getting you back, dear? You are coming out of your shell again?"

Cecile pressed her hand, with a little laugh:

"But I never hid myself from you! I have always been in to you!"

"Yes, but we had to come to you. You always stayed at home, didn't you?"

"You're not angry with me, are you?"

"No, darling, of course not; you have had such a great sorrow."

"Oh, I have still: I seem to have lost everything!"

How was it that she suddenly realized this? She never had that sense of loss in her own home, among the clouds of her day-dreams, but outside, among other people, she immediately felt that she had lost everything, everything. . . .

"But you have your children."

"Yes."

She answered faintly, wearily, with a sense of loneliness, of terrible loneliness, like one floating aimlessly in space, borne upon thinnest air, in which her yearning arms groped in vain.

Mrs. Hoze stood up. Dolf came to take her into the other room, for whist.

"You too, Cecile?" he asked.

"No, you know I never touch a card!"

He did not press her; there were Quaerts and the girls to make up.

"What are you doing there, Jules?" he asked, glancing across the piano.

The boy had remained sitting there, forgotten. He now rose and appeared, tall, grown out of his strength, with strange eyes.

"What were you doing?

"I . . . I was looking for something . . . a piëce of music."

"Don't sit moping like that, my boy!" growled Dolf, kindly, with his deep voice. "What's become of those cards again, Amélie?"

"I don't know," said his wife, looking about vaguely. "Where are the cards, Anna?"

"Aren't they in the box with the counters?"

"No," Dolf grumbled. "Nothing is ever where it ought to be."

Anna got up, looked, found the cards in the drawer of a buhl cabinet. Amélie also had risen, stood arranging the music on the piano. She was for ever ordering things in her rooms and immediately forgetting where she had put them, tidying with her fingers and perfectly absent in her mind.

"Anna, come and draw a card too. You can play in the next rubber," cried Dolf, from the other room.

The two sisters remained alone, with Jules.

The boy had sat down on a stool at Cecile's feet:

"Mamma, do leave my music alone."

Amélie sat down beside Cecile:

"Is Christie better?"

"He is a little livelier to-day."

"I'm glad. Have you never met Quaerts before?"

"No."

"Really? He comes here so often."

Cecile looked through the open folding-doors at the card-table. Two candles stood upon it. Mrs. Hoze's pink face was lit up clearly, with its smooth and stately features; her hair gleamed silver-grey. Quaerts sat opposite her: Cecile noticed the round, vanishing silhouette of his head, the hair cut very close, thick and black above the glittering white streak of his collar. His arms made little movements as he threw down a card or gathered up a trick. His person had something about it of great power, something energetic and robust, something of every-day life, which Cecile disliked.

"Are the girls fond of cards?"

"Suzette is, Anna not so very: she's not so brisk."

Cecile saw that Anna sat behind her father, looking on with eyes which did not understand.

"Do you take them out much nowadays?" Cecile asked next.

"Yes, I have to. Suzette likes going out, but not Anna. Suzette will be a pretty girl, don't you think?"

"Suzette's an awful flirt!" said Jules. "At our last dinner-party . . ."

He stopped suddenly:

"No, I won't tell you. It's not right to tell tales, is it, Auntie?"

Cecile smiled:

"No, of course it's not."

"I want always to do what's right."

"That is very good."

"No, no!" he said deprecatingly. "Everything seems to me so bad, do you know. Why is everything so bad, Auntie?"

"But there is much that is good too, Jules."

He shook his head:

"No, no!" he repeated. "Everything

is bad. Everything is very bad. Everything is selfishness. Just mention something that's not selfish!"

"Parents' love for their children."

But Jules shook his head again:

"Parents' love is ordinary selfishness. Children are a part of their parents, who only love themselves when they love their children."

"Jules!" cried Amélie. "Your remarks are always much too decided. You know I don't like it: you are much too young to talk like that. One would think you knew everything!"

The boy was silent.

"And I always say that we never know anything. We never know anything, don't you agree, Cecile? I, at least, never know anything, never. . . ."

She looked round the room absently. Her fingers smoothed the fringe of her

chair, tidying. Cecile put her arm softly round Jules' neck.

2

It was Quaerts' turn to sit out from the card-table; and, though Dolf pressed him to go on playing, he rose:

"I want to go and talk to Mrs. van Even," Cecile heard him say.

She saw him come towards the big drawing-room, where she was still sitting with Amélie—Jules still at her feet—engaged in desultory talk, for Amélie could never maintain a conversation, always wandering and losing the threads. She did not know why, but Cecile suddenly assumed a most serious expression, as though she were discussing very important matters with her sister; and yet all that she said was:

"Jules ought really to take lessons in harmony, when he composes so nicely. . . ."

Quaerts had approached; he sat down beside them, with a scarcely perceptible shyness in his manner, a gentle hesitation in the brusque force of his movements.

But Jules fired up:

"No, Auntie, I want to be taught as little as possible! I don't want to be learning names and principles and classifications. I couldn't do it. I only compose like this, like this. . . ." And he suited his phrase with a vague movement of his fingers.

"Jules can hardly read, it's a shame!" said Amélie.

"And he plays so nicely," said Cecile.

"Yes, Auntie, I remember things, I pick them out on the piano. Oh, it's not really clever: it just comes out of myself, you know!"

"But that's so splendid!"

"No, no! You have to know the names and principles and classifications. You

want that in everything. I shall never learn technique; I'm no good."

He closed his eyes for a moment; a look of sadness flitted across his restless face.

"You know a piano is so . . . so big, a great piece of furniture, isn't it? But a violin, oh, how delightful! You hold it to you like this, against your neck, almost against your heart; it is almost part of you; and you stroke it, like this, you could almost kiss it! You feel the soul of the violin quivering inside its body. And then you only have just a string or two, two or three strings which sing everything. Oh, a violin, a violin!"

"Jules . . ." Amélie began.

"And, oh, Auntie, a harp! A harp, like this, between your legs, a harp which you embrace with both your arms: a harp is exactly like an angel, with long golden hair. . . . Ah, I've never yet played on a harp!"

"Jules, leave off!" cried Amélie, sharply. "You drive me silly with that nonsense! I wonder you're not ashamed, before Mr. Quaerts."

Jules looked up in surprise:

"Before Taco? Do you think I've anything to be ashamed of, Taco?"

"Of course not, my boy."

The sound of his voice was like a caress. Cecile looked at him, astonished; she would have expected him to make fun of Jules. She did not understand him, but she disliked him exceedingly, so healthy and strong, with his energetic face and his fine, expressive mouth, so different from Amélie and Jules and herself.

"Of course not, my boy."

Jules glanced at his mother with a slight look of disdain, as if to say that he knew better:

"You see! Taco's a good fellow."

He turned his footstool round towards

Quaerts and laid his head against his knee.

"Jules!"

"Pray let him be, mevrouw."

"Every one spoils that boy . . ."

"Except yourself," said Jules.

"I! I!" cried Amélie, indignantly. "I spoil you out and out! I wish I knew how not to give way to you! I wish I could send you to Kampen or Deli![1] That would make a man of you! But I can't do it by myself; and your father spoils you too. . . . I can't think what's going to become of you!"

"What is going to become of you, Jules?" asked Quaerts.

"I don't know. I mustn't go to college, I am too weak a doll to do much work."

"Would you like to go to Deli some day?"

"Yes, with you. . . . Not alone; oh, to

[1] Two military staff-colleges in Holland and Java respectively.

be alone, always alone! You will see: I shall always be alone; and it is so terrible to be alone!"

"But, Jules, you are not alone now!" said Cecile, reproachfully.

"Oh, yes, yes, in myself I am alone, always alone . . ."

He pressed himself against Quaerts' knee.

"Jules, don't talk so stupidly," cried Amélie, nervously.

"Yes, yes!" cried Jules, with a sudden half sob. "I will hold my tongue! But don't talk about me any more; oh, I beg you, don't talk about me!"

He locked his hands and implored them, with dread in his face. They all stared at him, but he buried his face in Quaerts' knees, as though deadly frightened of something. . . .

3

Anna had played execrably, to Suzette's despair: she could not even remember the winning trumps!

Dolf called out to his wife:

"Amélie, do come in for a rubber; that is, if Quaerts doesn't want to. You can't give your daughter many points, but still you're not quite so bad!"

"I would rather stay and talk to Mrs. van Even," said Quaerts.

"Go and play without minding me, if you prefer, Mr. Quaerts," said Cecile, in the cold voice which she adopted towards people whom she disliked.

Amélie dragged herself away with an unhappy face. She did not play a brilliant game either; and Suzette always lost her temper when she made mistakes.

"I have so long been hoping to make your acquaintance, mevrouw, that I should

not like to miss this opportunity," Quaerts replied.

She looked at him: it troubled her that she could not understand him. She knew him to be something of a Lothario. There were stories in which the name of a married woman was coupled with his. Did he wish to try his blandishments on her? She had no particular hankering for this sort of pastime; she had never cared for flirtations.

"Why?" she asked, calmly, immediately regretting the word; for her question sounded like coquetry and she intended anything but that.

"Why?" he echoed.

He looked at her in slight surprise as he sat near her, with Jules on the ground between them, against his knee, his eyes closed.

"Because . . . because," he stammered, "because you are my friend's sister, I

suppose, and I had never met you here. . . ."

She made no answer: in her seclusion she had forgotten how to talk and she did not take the least trouble about it.

"I used often to see you at the theatre," said Quaerts, "when Mr. van Even was still alive."

"At the opera," she said.

"Yes."

"Really? I didn't know you then."

"No."

"I have not been out in the evening for a long time, because of my mourning."

"And I always choose the evening to come to Dolf's."

"So that explains why we have never met."

They were silent for a moment. It seemed to him that she spoke very coldly.

"I should love to go to the opera!" murmured Jules, without opening his eyes.

"Or no, after all, I think I would rather not."

"Dolf told me that you read a great deal," Quaerts continued. "Do you keep in touch with modern literature?"

"A little. I don't read so very much."

"No?"

"Oh, no! I have two children; that leaves me very little time for reading. Besides, it has no particular fascination for me: life is much more romantic than any novel."

"So you are a philosopher?"

"I? Oh, no, I assure you, Mr. Quaerts! I am the most commonplace woman in the world."

She spoke with her wicked little laugh and her cold voice: the voice and the laugh which she employed when she feared lest she should be wounded in her secret sensitiveness and when therefore she hid deep within herself, offering to the outside

world something very different from what she really was. Jules had opened his eyes and sat looking at her; and his steady glance troubled her.

"You live in a charming house, on the Scheveningen Road."

"Yes."

She realized suddenly that her coldness amounted to rudeness; and she did not wish this, even though she did dislike him. She threw herself back negligently; she asked at random, quite without concern, merely for the sake of conversation:

"Have you many relations in The Hague?"

"No; my father and mother live at Velp and the rest of my family at Arnhem chiefly. I never fix myself anywhere; I can't stay long in one place. I have spent a good many years in Brussels."

"You have no occupation, I believe?"

"No. As a boy, my one desire was to enter the navy, but I was rejected on account of my eyes."

Involuntarily she looked into his eyes: small, deep-set eyes, the colour of which she could not determine. She thought they looked sly and cunning.

"I have always regretted it," he continued. "I am a man of action. I am always longing for action. I console myself as best I can with sport."

"Sport?" she repeated, coldly.

"Yes."

"Oh!"

"Quaerts is a Nimrod and a Centaur and a Hercules rolled into one, aren't you, Quaerts?" said Jules.

"Ah, so you're 'naming' me!" said Quaerts, with a laugh. "Where do you really 'class' me?"

"Among the very few people that I

really like!" the boy answered, ardently and without hesitation. "Taco, when are you going to teach me to ride?"

"Whenever you like, my son."

"Yes, but you must fix the day for us to go to the riding-school. I won't fix a day; I hate fixing days."

"Well, shall we say to-morrow? To-morrow will be Wednesday."

"Very well."

Cecile noticed that Jules was still staring at her. She looked at him back. How was it possible that the boy could like this man! How was it possible that it irritated her and not him, all that health, that strength, that power of muscle and rage of sport! She could make nothing of it; she understood neither Quaerts nor Jules; and she herself drifted away again into that mood of half-consciousness, in which she did not know what she thought nor what at that very moment she

might say, in which she seemed to be lost and wandering in search of herself.

She rose, tall, slender and frail in her crape, like a queen who mourns, with little touches of gold in her flaxen hair, where a small jet aigrette glittered like a black mirror.

"I'm going to see who's winning," she said and moved to the card-table in the other room.

She stood behind Mrs. Hoze, appeared to be interested in the game; but across the light of the candles she peered at Quaerts and Jules. She saw them talking together, softly, confidentially, Jules with his arm on Quaerts' knee. She saw Jules looking up, as if in adoration, into the face of this man; and then the boy suddenly threw his arms around his friend in a wild embrace, while the other pushed him away with a patient gesture.

CHAPTER III

1

NEXT evening, Cecile revelled even more than usual in the luxury of being able to stay at home.

It was after dinner; she was sitting on the sofa in her little boudoir with Dolf and Christie, an arm thrown round each of them, sitting between them, so young, like an elder sister. In her low voice she was telling them:

"Judah came near to him, and said, O my Lord, let me abide a bondman instead of the lad. For our father, who is such an old man, said to us, when we left with Benjamin, My son Joseph I have already lost; surely he is torn in pieces by the wild beasts. And if ye take this also from me and mischief befall him, ye shall bring

down my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. Then (Judah said) I said to our father that I would be surety for the lad and that I should bear the blame if I did not bring Benjamin home again. And therefore I pray thee, O my lord, let me abide a bondman, and let the lad go up with his brethren. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad be not with me? . . . "

"And Joseph, mamma, what did Joseph say?" asked Christie.

He had nestled closely against his mother, this poor little slender fellow of six, with his fine golden hair and his eyes of pale forget-me-not blue; and his little fingers hooked themselves nervously into Cecile's gown, rumpling the crape.

"Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him and he caused every man to leave him. And Joseph made himself known unto his

brethren. And he wept aloud and said, I am Joseph."

But Cecile could not continue the story, for Christie had thrown himself on her neck in a frenzy of despair and she heard him sobbing against her.

"Christie! Darling!"

She was greatly distressed; she had grown interested in her own recital and had not noticed Christie's excitement; and now he was sobbing against her in such violent grief that she could find no word to quiet him, to comfort him, to tell him that it ended happily.

"But, Christie, don't cry, don't cry! It ends happily."

"And Benjamin, what about Benjamin?"

"Benjamin returned to his father; and Jacob went down into Egypt to live with Joseph."

The child raised his wet face from her

shoulder and looked at her deliberately:

"Was it really like that? Or are you only making it up?"

"No, really, darling. Don't, don't cry any more. . . ."

Christie grew calmer, but he was evidently disappointed. He was not satisfied with the end of the story; and yet it was very pretty like that, much prettier than if Joseph had been angry and put Benjamin in prison.

"What a baby, Christie, to go crying like that!" said Dolf. "Why, it's only a story."

Cecile did not reply that the story had really happened, because it was in the Bible. She had suddenly become very sad, in doubt of herself. She fondly dried the child's sad eyes with her pocket-handkerchief:

"And now, children, bed! It's late!" she said, faintly.

She put them to bed, a ceremony which lasted a long time; a ceremony with an elaborate ritual of undressing, washing, saying of prayers, tucking in and kissing.

2

When, an hour later, she was sitting downstairs again alone, she realized for the first time how sad she felt.

Ah, no, she did not know! Amélie was quite right: one never knew anything, never! She had been so happy that day; she had found herself again, deep in the recesses of her secret self, in the essence of her soul; all day she had seen her dreams hovering about her as an apotheosis; all day she had felt within her that consuming love of her children. She had told them stories out of the Bible after dinner; and suddenly, when Christie began to cry, a doubt had arisen within her. Was she really good to her little boys? Did she

not, in her love, in the tenderness of her affection for them, spoil and weaken them? Would she not end by utterly unfitting them for practical life, with which she did not come into contact, but in which the children, when they grew up, would have to move? It flashed through her mind: parting, boarding-schools, her children estranged from her, coming home big, rough boys, smoking and swearing, with cynicism on their lips and in their hearts: lips which would no longer kiss her, hearts in which she would no longer have a place. She pictured them already with the swagger of their seventeen or eighteen years, tramping across her rooms in their cadet's and midshipman's uniforms, with broad shoulders and a hard laugh, flicking the ash from their cigars upon the carpet. . . . Why did Quaerts' image suddenly rise up in the midst of this cruelty? Was it chance or a logical

consequence? She could not analyse it; she could not explain the presence of this man, rising up through her grief in his atmosphere of antipathy. But she felt sad, sad, sad, as she had not felt sad since Van Even's death; not vaguely melancholy, as she so often felt, but sad, undoubtedly sorrowful at the thought of what must come. . . . Oh! to have to part with her children! And then, to be alone. . . . Loneliness, everlasting loneliness! Loneliness within herself: that feeling of which Jules had such a dread! Withdrawn from the world which had no charm for her, sinking away alone into emptiness! She was thirty, she was old, an old woman. Her house would be empty, her heart empty! Dreams, clouds of dreaming, which fly away, which lift like smoke, revealing only emptiness. Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness! The word each time fell hollowly, with hammer strokes,

upon her breast. Emptiness, emptiness! . . .

"Why am I like this?" she asked herself. "What ails me? What has altered?"

Never had she felt that word emptiness throb within her in this way: that very afternoon she had been gently happy, as usual. And now! She saw nothing before her: no future, no life, nothing but one great darkness. Estranged from her childen, alone within herself. . . .

She rose with a little moan of pain and walked across the boudoir. The discreet twilight troubled her, oppressed her. She turned the key of the lace-covered lamp: a golden gleam crept over the rose folds of the silk curtains like glistening water. A strange coolness wafted away something of that scent of violets which hung about everything. A fire burned on the hearth, but she felt cold.

She stopped beside the low table; she took up a visiting-card, with one corner turned down, and read:

"T. H. Quaerts."

There was a five-balled coronet above the name.

"Quaerts!"

How short it sounded! A name like the smack of a hard hand. There was something bad, something cruel in the name:

"Quaerts, Quaerts! . . ."

She threw down the bit of pasteboard, was angry with herself. She felt cold and not herself, just as she had felt at the Van Attemas' last evening:

"I will not go out again. Never again, never!" she said, almost aloud. "I am so contented in my own house, so contented with my life, so beautifully happy. . . . That card! Why should he leave a

card? What do I want with his card? . . ."

She sat down at her writing-table and opened her blotting-book. She thought of finishing a half-written letter to India; but she was in quite a different mood from when she had begun it. So she took from a drawer a thick manuscript-book, her diary. She wrote the date, then reflected a moment, tapping her teeth nervously with the silver penholder. . . .

But then, with a little ill-tempered gesture, she threw down the pen, pushed the book aside and, letting her head fall into her hands on the blotting-book, sobbed aloud.

CHAPTER IV

1

CECILE was astonished at her unusually long fit of abstraction, that it should continue for days before she returned to her usual condition of serenity, the delightful abode from which she had involuntarily wandered. But she compelled herself, with gentle compulsion, to recover the treasures of her loneliness; and she ended by recovering them. She argued with herself that it would be some years before she would have to part from Dolf and Christie: there was time enough to grow accustomed to the idea of separation. Besides, nothing had altered either about her or within her; and so she let the days glide slowly over her, like gently flowing water.

In this way, gently flowing by, a fortnight had elapsed since the evening which she spent at Dolf's. It was a Saturday afternoon; she had been working with the children—she still taught them herself—and she had walked out with them; and now she was sitting in her favourite room waiting for the Van Attemas, who came to tea every Saturday at half-past four. She rang for the servant, who lighted the blue flame of methylated spirit. Dolf and Christie were with her; they sat upon the floor on footstools, cutting the pages of a children's magazine to which Cecile subscribed for them. They were sitting quietly, looking very good and well-bred, like children who grow up in soft surroundings, in the midst of too much refinement, too pale, with hair too long and too fair, Christie especially, whose little temples were veined as if with azure blood. Cecile stepped by them as she went to

glance over the tea-table; and the look which she cast upon them wrapped the children in a warm embrace of devotion. She was in her calmly happy mood: it was so pleasant to think that she would soon see the Van Attemas come in. She liked these hours of the afternoon, when her silver tea-kettle hissed over the blue flame. An exquisite intimacy filled the room; she had in her long, shapely feminine fingers that special power of witchery, that gentle art of handling by which everything over which they merely glided acquired a look of herself, an indefinable something, of tint, of position, of light, which the things had not until the touch of those fingers came across them.

There was a ring. She thought it rather early for the Van Attemas, but she rarely saw any one else in her seclusion from the outer world; therefore it must be they. In a second or two, however, Greta

entered, with a card: was mevrouw at home and could the gentleman see her?

Cecile recognized the card from a distance: she had seen one like it lately. Nevertheless she took it up, glanced at it discontentedly, with drawn eyebrows.

What an idea, she reflected. Why did he do it? What did it mean?

But she thought it unnecessary to be impolite and refuse to see him. After all, he was a friend of Dolf's. But such persistence . . .

"Show meneer in," she said, calmly.

Greta went; and it seemed to Cecile as though something trembled in the intimacy which filled the room, as if the objects over which her fingers had just passed took on another aspect, a look of shuddering. But Dolf and Christie had not changed; they were still sitting looking at the pictures, with occasional remarks falling softly from their lips.

2

The door opened and Quaerts entered the room. As he bowed to Cecile, he had his air of shyness in still greater measure than before. To her this air was incomprehensible in him, who seemed so strong, so determined.

"I hope you will not think me indiscreet, mevrouw, in taking the liberty to come and call on you."

"On the contrary, Mr. Quaerts," she said, coldly. "Pray sit down."

He took a chair and placed his tall hat on the floor beside him:

"I am not disturbing you, mevrouw?"

"Not in the least; I am expecting Mrs. van Attema and her daughters. You were so kind as to leave a card on me; but, as I dare say you know, I see nobody."

"I knew that, mevrouw. Perhaps it is

to that very reason that you owe the indiscretion of my visit."

She looked at him coldly, politely, smilingly. There was a feeling of irritation in her. She felt inclined to ask him bluntly what he wanted with her.

"How so?" she asked, with her mannerly smile, which converted her face into a mask.

"I was afraid that I might not see you for a very long time; and I should consider it a great privilege to be allowed to know you better."

His tone was in the highest degree respectful. She raised her eyebrows, as if she did not understand; but the accent of his voice was so very courteous that she could not even find a cold word with which to answer him.

"Are these your two children?" he asked, with a glance towards Dolf and Christie.

"Yes," she replied. "Get up, boys, and shake hands with meneer."

The children approached timidly and put out their little hands. He smiled, looked at them penetratingly with his small, deep-set eyes and drew them to him:

"Am I mistaken, or is the little one very like you?"

"They both resemble their father," she replied.

It seemed to her she had set a protecting shield around herself, from which the children were excluded, within which she found it impossible to draw them. It troubled her that he was holding them so tight, that he looked at them as he did.

But he released them; and they went back to their little stools, gentle, quiet, well-behaved.

"Yet they both have something of you," he insisted.

"Possibly," she said.

"Mevrouw," he resumed, as if he had something important to say to her, "I wish to ask you a direct question: tell me honestly, quite honestly, do you think me indiscreet?"

"For calling to see me? No, I assure you, Mr. Quaerts. It is very kind of you. Only . . . if I may be candid . . ."

She gave a little laugh.

"Of course," he said.

"Then I will confess that I fear you will find little in my house to amuse you. I never see people . . ."

"I have not called on you for the sake of the people I might meet at your house."

She bowed, smiling, as if he had paid her a compliment:

"Of course I am very pleased to see you. You are a great friend of Dolf's, are you not?"

She tried each time to say something different from what she actually did say,

to speak more coldly, more aggressively; but she had too much breeding and could not bring herself to do it.

"Yes," he replied, "Dolf and I have known each other ever so long. We have always been great friends, though we are quite unlike."

"I'm very fond of him; he's always very kind to us."

She saw him look at the low table and smile. A few reviews were scattered on it, a book or two. On the top of these lay a little volume of Emerson's essays, with a paper-cutter marking the page.

"You told me you were not a great reader!" he said, mischievously. "I should think . . ."

And he pointed to the books.

"Oh," said she, carelessly, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "a little . . ."

She thought him very tiresome: why should he remark that she had hidden her-

self from him? Why, indeed, *had* she hidden herself from him?

"Emerson!" he read, bending forward a little. "Forgive me," he added quickly. "I have no right to spy upon your pursuits. But the print is so large; I read it from here."

"You are far-sighted?" she asked, laughing.

"Yes."

His courtesy, a certain respectfulness, as if he would not venture to touch the tips of her fingers, placed her more at her ease. She still disliked him, but there was no harm in his knowing what she read.

"Are you fond of reading?" asked Cecile.

"I do not read much: it is too great a delight for that; nor do I read everything that appears. I am too hard to please."

"Do you know Emerson?"

"No. . . ."

"I like his essays very much. They are written with such a wide outlook. They place one on such a deliciously exalted level. . . ."

She suited her phrase with an expansive gesture; and her eyes lighted up.

Then she observed that he was following her attentively, with his respectfulness. And she recovered herself; she no longer wanted to talk to him about Emerson.

"It is very fine indeed," was all she said, to close the conversation, in the most commonplace voice that she was able to assume. "May I give you some tea?"

"No, thank you, mevrouw; I never take tea at this time."

"Do you look upon it with so much scorn?" she asked, jestingly.

He was about to answer, when there was a ring at the bell; and she cried:

"Ah, here they are!"

Amélie entered, with Suzette and Anna. They were a little surprised to see Quaerts. He said he had wanted to call on Mrs. van Even. The conversation became general. Suzette was very merry, full of a fancy-fair, at which she was going to assist, in a Spanish costume.

"And you, Anna?"

"Oh, no, Auntie!" said Anna, shrinking together with fright. "Imagine me at a fancy-fair! I should never sell anybody anything."

"Ah, it's a gift!" said Amélie, with a far-away look.

Quaerts rose: he was bowing with a single word to Cecile, when the door opened. Jules came in, with some books under his arm, on his way home from school.

"How do you do, Auntie? Hallo, Taco, are you going just as I arrive?"

"You drive me away," said Quaerts, laughing.

"Oh, Taco, do stay a little longer!" begged Jules, enraptured to see him and lamenting that he had chosen just this moment to leave.

"Jules, Jules!" cried Amélie, thinking it was the proper thing to do.

Jules pressed Quaerts, took his two hands, forced him, like a spoilt child. Quaerts only laughed. Jules in his excitement knocked a book or two off the table.

"Jules, be quiet, do!" cried Amélie.

Quaerts picked up the books, while Jules persisted in his bad behaviour. As Quaerts replaced the last book, he hesitated a moment; he held it in his hand, looked at the gold lettering: "Emerson."

Cecile watched him:

"If he thinks I'm going to lend it him, he's mistaken," she thought.

But Quaerts asked nothing: he had released himself from Jules and said goodbye. With a quip at Jules he left.

3

"Is this the first time he has been to see you?" asked Amélie.

"Yes," replied Cecile. "An uncalled-for civility, don't you think?"

"Taco Quaerts is always very correct in matters of etiquette," said Anna, defending him.

"Still, this visit was hardly a matter of etiquette," said Cecile, laughing merrily. "But Taco Quaerts seems to be quite infallible in the eyes of all of you."

"He waltzes divinely!" cried Suzette. "The other day, at the Eekhofs' dance . . ."

Suzette chattered on; there was no re-

straining Suzette that afternoon; she seemed already to hear the castanets rattling in her little brain.

Jules had a peevish fit on him, but he remained quietly at a window, with the boys.

"You don't much care about Quaerts, do you, Auntie?" asked Anna.

"I don't find him attractive," said Cecile. "You know, I am easily influenced by my first impressions. I can't help it, but I don't like those very healthy, robust people, who look so strong and manly, as if they walked straight through life, clearing away everything that stands in their way. It may be morbid of me, but I can't help it; I always dislike any excessive display of health and physical force. Those strong people look upon others who are not so strong as themselves much as the Spartans used to look upon their deformed children."

Jules could control himself no longer:

"If you think that Taco is no better than a Spartan, you know nothing at all about him," he said, fiercely.

Cecile looked at him, but, before Amélie could interpose, he continued:

"Taco is the only person with whom I can talk about music and who understands every word I say. And I don't believe I could talk with a Spartan."

"Jules, how rude you are!" cried Suzette.

"I don't care!" he exclaimed, furiously, rising suddenly and stamping his foot. "I don't care! I won't hear Taco abused; and Aunt Cecile knows it and only does it to tease me. And I think it very mean to tease a boy, very mean. . . ."

His mother and sisters tried to bring him to reason with their authority. But he caught up his books:

"I don't care! I won't have it!"

He was gone in a moment, furious, slamming the door, which groaned with the shock. Amélie was trembling in every nerve:

"Oh, that boy!" she hissed out, shivering. "That Jules, that Jules! . . ."

"It's nothing," said Cecile, gently, excusing him. "He is just a little excitable. . . ."

She had turned rather paler and glanced at her boys, Dolf and Christie, who had looked up in dismay, their mouths wide open with astonishment.

"Is Jules naughty, mamma?" asked Christie.

She shook her head, smiling. She felt a strange, an unspeakably strange weariness. She did not know what it meant; but it seemed to her as if very distant vistas were opening before her eyes and fading into the horizon, pale, in a great light. Nor did she know what this meant;

but she was not angry with Jules and it seemed to her as if he had lost his temper, not with her, but with somebody else. A sense of the enigmatical depth of life, the soul's unconscious mystery, like to a fair, bright endlessness, a far-away silvery light, shot through her in silent rapture.

Then she laughed:

"Jules is so nice," she said, "when he gets excited."

Anna and Suzette, upset at the incident, played with the boys, looking over their picture-books. Cecile spoke only to her sister. But Amélie's nerves were still quivering.

"How can you defend those ways of Jules'?" she asked, in a choking voice.

"I think it nice of him to stand up for people he likes. Don't you think so too?"

Amélie grew calmer. Why should she be put out if Cecile was not?

"I dare say," she replied. "I don't know. He has a good heart I believe, but he is so unmanageable. But, who knows, perhaps it's my fault: if I understood things better, if I had more tact . . ."

She grew confused; she sought for something more to say and found nothing, wandering like a stranger through her own thoughts. Then, suddenly, as if struck by a ray of certain knowledge, she said:

"But Jules is not stupid. He has a good eye for all sorts of things and for persons too. Personally, I think you judge Taco Quaerts wrongly. He is a very interesting man and a great deal more than a mere sportsman. I don't know what it is, but there's something about him different from other people, I can't say exactly what. . . ."

She was silent, seeking, groping.

"I wish Jules got on better at school. As I say, he is not stupid, but he learns

nothing. He has been two years now in the third class. The boy has no application. He makes me despair of him."

She was silent again; and Cecile also did not speak.

"Ah," said Amélie, "I dare say it is not his fault! Very likely it is my fault. Perhaps he takes after me. . . ."

She looked straight before her: sudden, irrepressible tears filled her eyes and fell into her lap.

"Amy, what's the matter?" asked Cecile, kindly.

But Amélie had risen, so that the girls, who were still playing with the children, might not see her tears. She could not restrain them, they streamed down and she hurried away into the adjoining drawing-room, a big room in which Cecile never sat.

"What's the matter, Amy?" Cecile repeated.

She had followed Amélie out and now

threw her arms about her, made her sit down, pressed Amélie's head against her shoulder.

"How do I know what it is?" Amélie sobbed. "I don't know, I don't know. . . . I am wretched because of that feeling in my head. It is more than I can bear sometimes. After all, I am not mad, am I? Really, I don't feel mad, or as if I were going mad! But I feel sometimes as if everything had gone wrong in my head, as if I couldn't think. Everything runs through my brain. It's a terrible feeling!"

"Why don't you see a doctor?" asked Cecile.

"No, no, he might tell me I was mad; and I'm not. He might try to send me to an asylum. No, I won't see a doctor. I have every reason to be happy otherwise, have I not? I have a kind husband and dear children; I have never had any great

sorrow. And yet I sometimes feel profoundly miserable, desperately miserable! It is always as if I wanted to reach some place and could not succeed. It is always as if I were hemmed in. . . ."

She sobbed violently; a storm of tears rained down her face. Cecile's eyes, too, were moist; she liked her sister, she felt sorry for her. Amélie was only ten years older than she; and already she had something of an old woman about her, something withered and shrunken, with her hair growing grey at the temples, under her veil.

"Cecile, tell me, Cecile," she said, suddenly, through her sobs, "do you believe in God?"

"Why, of course I do, Amy!"

"I used to go to church sometimes, but it was no use. . . . And I've stopped going. . . . Oh, I am so unhappy! It is very ungrateful of me. I have so much to

be grateful for. . . . Do you know, sometimes I feel as if I should like to go to God at once, all at once, just like that!"

"Come, Amy, don't excite yourself so."

"Ah, I wish I were like you, so calm! Do you feel happy?"

Cecile smiled and nodded. Amélie sighed; she remained lying for a moment with her head against her sister's shoulder. Cecile kissed her, but suddenly Amélie started:

"Be careful," she whispered, "the girls might come in. There . . . there's no need for them to see that I've been crying."

Rising, she arranged her hat before the looking-glass, carefully dried her veil with her handkerchief:

"There, now they won't know," she said. "Let's go in again. I am quite calm. You're a dear thing. . . ."

They went back to the boudoir:

"Come, girls, it's time to go home," said Amélie, in a voice which was still a little unsettled.

"Have you been crying, Mamma?" Suzette at once asked.

"Mamma was a bit upset about Jules," said Cecile, quickly.

CHAPTER V

CECILE was alone; the children had gone upstairs to tidy themselves for dinner. She tried to get back her distant vistas, fading into the pale horizon; she tried to recover the silvery endlessness which had shot through her as a vision of light. But instead her brain was all awhirl with a kaleidoscope of very recent petty memories: the children, Quaerts, Emerson, Jules, Suzette, Amélie. How strange, how strange life was! . . . The outer life; the coming and going of people about us; the sounds of words which they utter in strange accents; the endless interchange of phenomena; the concatenation of those phenomena, one with the other; strange, too, the presence of a soul somewhere inside us, like a god

within us, never to be known in our own essence. Often, as indeed now, it seemed to Cecile that all things, even the most commonplace things, were strange, very strange, as if nothing in the world were absolutely commonplace, as if everything were strange: the strange form and outward expression of a deeper life that lies hidden behind everything, even the meanest objects; as if everything displayed itself under an appearance, a mask of pretence, while the reality, the very truth, lay underneath. How strange, how strange life was! . . . For it seemed to her as if she, under that very usual afternoon tea, had seen something very unusual; she did not know what, she could not express it nor even think it thoroughly; it seemed to her as if beneath the coming and going of those people something had glittered: a reality, an ultimate truth under the appearance of that casual afternoon tea.

"What is it? What *is* it?" she wondered. "Am I deluding myself, or is it so? I feel that it is so. . . ."

It was all very vague and yet so very clear. . . . It seemed to her as though there were a vision, a haze of light behind all that had happened there, behind Amélie and Jules and Quaerts and the book which he had picked up from the floor and held in his hand for a moment. . . . Did that vision, that haze of light mean anything, or . . .

But she shook her head:

"I am dreaming, I am giving way to fancy," she laughed, within herself. "It was all very simple; I only make it complex because it amuses me to do so."

But she had no sooner thought this than she felt something which denied the thought absolutely, an intuition which should have made her guess the essence of the truth, but did not quite succeed.

Surely there was something, something behind it all, hiding away, lurking as the shadow lurked behind the thing; and the shadow appeared to her as a vision and haze of light. . . .

Her thoughts still wandered over all those people and finally halted at Taco Quaerts. She saw him sitting there again, bending slightly forward in her direction, his hands folded and hanging between his knees, as he looked up to her. A barrier of aversion had stood between them like an iron bar. She saw him sitting there again, though he was gone. That again was past: how quickly everything moved; how small was the speck of the present!

She rose, sat down at her writing-table and wrote:

"Beneath me flows the sea of the past; above me drifts the ether of the future; and I stand midway upon the one speck of

reality, so small that I must press my feet firmly together lest I lose my hold. And from the speck of the present my sorrow looks down upon the sea and my longing up to the sky.

"It is scarcely life to stand upon this speck, so small that I hardly appreciate it, hardly feel it beneath my feet; and yet to me it is the one reality. I am not greatly occupied about it: my eyes only follow the rippling of those waves towards distant horizons, the gliding of those clouds towards distant spheres, vague manifestations of endless change, translucent ephemeras, visible incorporeities. The present is the only thing that is, or rather that seems to be. The speck is, or at least appears to be, but not the sea below nor the sky above, for the sea is but a memory and the air but an illusion. Yet memory and illusion are everything: they are the wide inheritance of the soul, which

alone can escape from the speck of the moment to float upon the sea towards the horizons which retreat, to drift upon the clouds towards the spheres which retreat and retreat. . . ."

Then she reflected. How was it that she had written all this and why? How had she come to write it? She went back upon her thoughts: the present, the speck of the present, which was so small. . . . Quaerts, Quaerts' very attitude, rising up before her just now. Was he in any way concerned with her writing down those sentences? The past a sorrow; the future an illusion. . . . Why, why illusion?

"And Jules, who likes him," she thought. "And Amélie, who spoke of him . . . but she knows nothing. . . . What is there in him, what lurks behind him: his visionary image? Why did he

come here? Why do I dislike him so? Do I dislike him? I cannot see into his eyes. . . ."

She would have liked to do this once; she would have liked to make sure that she disliked him or that she did not: one or the other. She was curious to see him once more, to know what she would think and feel about him then. . . .

She had risen from her writing-table and now lay at full length on the sofa, with her arms folded behind her head. She no longer knew what she dreamt, but she felt peacefully happy. She heard Dolf and Christie come down the stairs. They came in, it was dinner-time.

"Jules was really naughty just now, wasn't he, Mummy?" Christie asked again, with a grave face.

She drew the frail little fellow gently to her, took him tightly in her arms and

fondly kissed his moist, pale-raspberry lips:

"No, really not, darling!" she said. "He wasn't naughty, really. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

1

CECILE passed through the long hall, which was almost a gallery: footmen stood on either side of the hangings; a hum of voices came from behind. The train of her dress rustled against the leaves of a palm; and the sound gave a sudden jar to the strung cords of her sensitiveness. She was a little nervous; her eyelids quivered slightly and her mouth had a very earnest fold.

She walked in; there was much light, but soft light, the light of candles only. Two officers stepped aside for her as she stood hesitating. Her eyes glanced round in search of Mrs. Hoze; she saw her standing among two or three of her guests, with

her grey hair, her kindly and yet haughty face, rosy and smooth, almost without a wrinkle.

Mrs. Hoze came towards her:

"I can't tell you how charming I think it of you not to have played me false!" she said, pressing Cecile's hand with effusive and hospitable urbanity.

She introduced people to Cecile here and there; Cecile heard names the sound of which at once escaped her.

"General, allow me . . . Mrs. van Even," Mrs. Hoze whispered and left her, to speak to some one else.

Cecile drew a deep breath, pressed her hand to the edge of her bodice, as though to arrange something that had slipped from its place, answered the general cursorily. She was very pale; and her eyelids quivered more and more. She ventured to throw a glance round the room.

She stood next to the general, forcing herself to listen, so as not to give answers that would sound strikingly foolish. She was very tall, slender, and straight, with her shoulders, white as sunlit marble, blossoming out of a sombre vase of black: fine, black, trailing tulle, sprinkled all over with small jet spangles; glittering black on dull transparent black. A girdle with tassels of jet, hanging low, was wound about her waist. So she stood, blonde: blonde and black; a little sombre amid the warmth and light of other toilettes; and, for unique relief, two diamonds in her ears, like dewdrops.

Her thin suède-covered fingers trembled as she manipulated her fan, a black tulle transparency, on which the same jet spangles glittered with black lustre. Her breath came short behind the strokes of the diaphanous fan as she talked with the general, a spare, bald, distinguished-looking

man, not in uniform, but wearing his decorations.

Mrs. Hoze's guests walked about, greeting one another here and there, with a continuous hum of voices. Cecile saw Taco Quaerts come up to her; he bowed before her; she bowed coldly in return, not offering him her hand. He lingered by her for a moment, spoke a word or two and then passed on, greeting other acquaintances.

Mrs. Hoze had taken the arm of an old gentleman; a procession formed slowly. The servants threw back the doors; a table glittered beyond, half-visible. The general offered Cecile his arm, as she stood looking behind her with a listless turn of her neck. She closed her eyelids for a second, to prevent their quivering. Her brows contracted with a sense of disappointment; but smilingly she laid the tips of her fingers on the general's arm and

with her closed fan smoothed away a crease from the tulle of her train.

2

When Cecile was seated she found Quaerts sitting on her right. Then her disappointment vanished, the disappointment which she had felt at not being taken in to dinner by him; but her look remained cold, as usual. And yet she had what she wished; the expectation with which she had come to this dinner was fulfilled. Mrs. Hoze had seen Cecile at the Van Attemas' and had gladly undertaken to restore the young widow to society. Cecile knew that Quaerts was a frequent visitor at Mrs. Hoze's; she had heard from Amélie that he was invited to the dinner; and she had accepted. That Mrs. Hoze, remembering that Cecile had met Quaerts before, had placed him next to her was easy to understand.

Cecile was very inquisitive about herself. How would she feel? At least interested: she could not disguise that from herself. She was certainly interested in him, remembering what Jules had said, what Amélie had said. She already felt that behind the mere sportsman there lurked another, whom she longed to know. Why should she? What concern was it of hers? She could not tell; but, in any case, as a matter of curiosity, as a puzzle, it awoke her interest. And, at the same time, she remained on her guard, for she did not think that his visit to her was strictly in order; and there were stories in which the name of that married woman was coupled with his.

She succeeded in freeing herself from her conversation with the general, who seemed to feel called upon to entertain her, and it was she who spoke first to Quaerts:

"Have you begun to give Jules his riding-lessons?" she asked, with a smile.

He looked at her, evidently a little surprised at her voice and her smile, which were both new to him. He returned a bare answer:

"Yes, mevrouw, we were at the riding-school yesterday. . . ."

She at once thought him clumsy, to let the conversation drop like that; but he enquired with that slight shyness which became a charm in him who was so manly:

"So you are going out again, mevrouw?"

She thought—she had indeed thought so before—that his questions were sometimes questions which people do not ask. This was one of the strange things about him.

"Yes," she replied, simply, not knowing what else to say.

"Forgive me," he said, seeing that his

words had embarrassed her a little. "I asked, because . . ."

"Because?" she echoed, with wide-open eyes.

He took courage and explained:

"When Dolf spoke of you, he used always to say that you lived so quietly. . . . And I could never picture you to myself returning to society, mixing with many people; I had formed an idea of you; and it now seems that this idea was a mistaken one."

"An idea?" she asked. "What idea?"

"Perhaps you will be angry when I tell you. Perhaps, even as it is, you are none too well pleased with me!" he replied, jestingly.

"I have not the slightest reason to be either pleased or displeased with you," she jested in return. "But tell me, what was your idea?"

"Then you are interested in it?"

"If you will answer candidly, yes. But you must be candid!" and she threatened him with her finger.

"Well," he began, "I thought of you as a very cultured woman, as a very interesting woman—I still think all that—*and* . . . as a woman who cared nothing for the world beyond her own sphere; and this . . . this I can no longer think. And I feel almost inclined to say, at the risk of your looking on me as very strange, that I am sorry no longer to be able to think of you in that way. I would almost rather not have met you here. . . ."

He laughed, to soften what might sound strange in his words. She looked at him, her eyelashes flickering with amazement, her lips half-opened; and suddenly it struck her that she was looking into his eyes for the first time. She looked into his eyes and saw that they were a dark, very dark grey around the black depth of

the pupil. There was something in his eyes, she could not say what, but something magnetic, as though she could never again take away her own from them.

"How strange you can be sometimes!" she said mechanically: the words came intuitively.

"Oh, please don't be angry!" he almost implored her. "I was so glad when you spoke kindly to me. You were a little distant to me when I saw you last; and I should be so sorry if I put you out. Perhaps I am strange, but how could I possibly be commonplace with you? How could I possibly, even if you were to take offence? . . . *Have* you taken offence?"

"I ought to, but I suppose I must forgive you, if only for your candour!" she said, laughing. "Otherwise your remarks were anything but gallant."

"And yet I did not mean it ungallantly."

"Oh, no doubt!" she jested.

She remembered that she was at a big dinner-party. The guests ranged before and around her; the footmen waiting behind; the light of the candles gleaming on the silver and touching the glass with all the hues of the rainbow; on the table prone mirrors, like sheets of water surrounded by flowers, little lakes amidst moss-roses and lilies of the valley. She sat silent a moment, still smiling, looking at her hand, a pretty hand, like a white precious thing upon the tulle of her gown: one of the fingers bore several rings, scintillating sparks of blue and white.

The general turned to her again; they exchanged a few words; the general was delighted that Mrs. van Even's right-hand neighbour was keeping her entertained and enabling him to get on quietly with his dinner. Quaerts turned to the lady on his right.

Both of them were glad when they were able to resume their conversation:

"What were we talking about just now?" she asked.

"I know!" he replied, mischievously.

"The general interrupted us."

"You were *not* angry with me!" he jested.

"Oh, of course," she replied, laughing softly, "it was about your idea of me, was it not? Why could you no longer picture me returning to society?"

"I thought that you had become a person apart."

"But why?"

"From what Dolf said, from what I myself thought, when I saw you."

"And why are you now sorry that I am not 'a person apart,' as you call it?" she asked, still laughing.

"From vanity; because I made a mis-

take. And yet perhaps I have not made a mistake. . . ."

They looked at each other; and both of them, although each thought it in a different way, now thought the same thing, namely, that they must be careful with their words, because they were speaking of something very delicate and tender, something as frail as a soap-bubble, which could easily break if they spoke of it too loudly; the mere breath of their words might be sufficient. Yet she ventured to ask:

"And why . . . do you believe . . . that perhaps . . . you are not mistaken?"

"I don't quite know. Perhaps because I wish it so. Perhaps, too, because it is so true as to leave no room for doubt. Oh, yes, I am almost sure that I judged rightly! Do you know why? Because otherwise I should have hidden myself and been com-

monplace; and I find this impossible with you. I have given you more of myself in this short moment than I have given people whom I have known for years in the course of all those years. Therefore surely you must be a person apart."

"What do you mean by 'a person apart'?"

He smiled, he opened his eyes; she looked into them again, deeply.

"You understand, surely!" he said.

Fear for the delicate thing that might break came between them again. They understood each other as with a freemasonry of feeling. Her eyes were magnetically held upon his.

"You are very strange!" she again said, automatically.

"No," he said, calmly, shaking his head, with his eyes in hers. "I am certain that I am not strange to you, even though you may think so for the moment."

She was silent.

"I am so glad to be able to talk to you like this!" he whispered. "It makes me very happy. And see, no one knows anything of it. We are at a big dinner; the people next to us can even catch our words; and yet there is not one among them who understands us or grasps the subject of our conversation. Do you know the reason?"

"No," she murmured.

"I will tell you; at least, I think it is like this. Perhaps you know better, for you *must* know things better than I, you are so much subtler. I personally believe that each person has a circle about him, an atmosphere, and that he meets other people who have circles or atmospheres about them, sympathetic or antipathetic to his own."

"This is pure mysticism!" she said.

"No," he replied, "it is quite simple.

When the two circles are antipathetic, each repels the other; but, when they are sympathetic, they glide and overlap in smaller or larger curves of sympathy. In some cases the circles almost coincide, but they always remain separate. . . . Do you really think this so very mystical?"

"One might call it the mysticism of sentiment. But . . . I have thought something of the sort myself. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that," he continued, calmly, as if he expected it. "I believe that those around us would not be able to understand us, because we two alone have sympathetic circles. But my atmosphere is of a much grosser texture than yours, which is very delicate."

She was silent again, remembering her former aversion to him: did she still feel it?

"What do you think of my theory?" he asked.

She looked up; her white fingers trembled in the tulle of her gown. She made a poor effort to smile:

"I think you go too far!" she stammered.

"You think I rush into hyperbole?"

She would have liked to say yes, but could not:

"No," she said; "not that."

"Do I bore you? . . ."

She looked at him, looked deep into his eyes. She shook her head, by way of saying no. She would have liked to say that he was too unconventional just now; but she could not find the words. A faintness oppressed her whole being. The table, the people, the whole dinner-party appeared to her as through a haze of light. When she recovered herself again, she perceived that a pretty woman opposite had been staring at her and was now looking away, out of politeness. She did not

know how or why this interested her, but she asked Quaerts:

"Who is the lady over there, in pale blue, with the dark hair?"

She saw that he started.

"That is young Mrs. Hijdrecht!" he said, calmly, a little distantly.

She too was perturbed; she turned pale; her fan flapped nervously to and fro in her fingers.

He had named the woman whom rumour said to be his mistress.

3

It seemed to Cecile as though that delicate, frail thing, that soap-bubble, had burst. She wondered if he had spoken to that dark-haired woman also of circles of sympathy. So soon as she was able, Cecile observed Mrs. Hijdrecht. She had a warm, dull-gold complexion, dark, glowing eyes, a mouth as of fresh blood.

Her dress was cut very low; her throat and the slope of her breast showed insolently handsome, brutally luscious. A row of diamonds encompassed her neck with a narrow line of white flame.

Cecile felt ill at ease. She felt as if she were playing with fire. She looked away from the young woman and turned to Quaerts, in obedience to some magnetic force. She saw a cloud of melancholy stealing over the upper half of his face, over his forehead and his eyes, which betrayed a slight look of age. And she heard him say:

"Now what do you care about that lady's name? We were just in the middle of such a charming conversation. . . ."

She too felt sad now, sad because of the soap-bubble that had burst. She did not know why, but she felt pity for him, a sudden, deep, intense pity.

"We can resume our conversation," she said, softly.

"Ah no, don't let us take it up where we left it!" he rejoined, with feigned airiness. "I was becoming tedious."

He spoke of other things. She answered little; and their conversation languished. They each occupied themselves with their neighbours. The dinner came to an end. Mrs. Hoze rose, took the arm of the gentleman beside her. The general escorted Cecile to the drawing-room, in the slow procession of the others.

4

The ladies remained alone; the men went to the smoking-room with young Hoze. Cecile saw Mrs. Hoze come towards her. She asked her if she had not been bored at dinner; they sat down together, in a confidential *tête-à-tête*.

Cecile made the necessary effort to re-

ply to Mrs. Hoze; but she would have liked to go somewhere and weep quietly, because everything passed so quickly, because the speck of the present was so small. Gone was the sweet charm of their conversation during dinner about sympathy, a fragile intimacy amid the worldly show about them. Gone was that moment, never, never to return: life sped over it with its constant flow, as with a torrent of all-obliterating water. Oh, the sorrow of it, to think how quickly, like an intangible perfume, everything speeds away, everything that is dear to us! . . .

Mrs. Hoze left her; Suzette van Attema came to talk to Cecile. She was dressed in pink; and she glittered in all her aspect as if gold-dust had poured all over her, upon her movements, her eyes, her words. She spoke volubly to Cecile, telling interminable tales, to which Cecile did not always listen. Suddenly, through Su-

zette's prattle, Cecile heard the voices of two women whispering behind her; she only caught a word here and there:

"Emilie Hijdrecht, you know. . . ."

"Only gossip, I think; Mrs. Hoze does not seem to heed it. . . ."

"Ah, but I know it as a fact!"

The voices were lost in the hum of the others. Cecile just caught a sound like Quaerts' name. Then Suzette asked, suddenly:

"Do you know young Mrs. Hijdrecht, Auntie?"

"No."

"Over there, with the diamonds. You know, they talk about her and Quaerts. Mamma doesn't believe it. At any rate, he's a great flirt. You sat next to him, didn't you?"

Cecile suffered severely in her innermost sensitiveness. She shrank into herself entirely, doing all that she could to

appear different from what she was. Suzette saw nothing of her discomfiture.

The men returned. Cecile looked to see whether Quaerts would speak to Mrs. Hijdrecht. But he wholly ignored her presence and even, when he saw Suzette sitting with Cecile, came over to them to pay a compliment to Suzette, to whom he had not yet spoken.

It was a relief to Cecile when she was able to go. She was yearning to be alone, to recover herself, to return from her abstraction. In her brougham she scarcely dared breathe, fearful of something, she could not say what. When she reached home she felt a stifling heaviness which seemed to paralyse her; and she dragged herself languidly up the stairs to her dressing-room.

And yet, on the stairs, there fell over her, as from the roof of her house, a haze of protecting safety. Slowly she went

up, her hand, holding a long glove, pressing the velvet banister of .the stairway. She felt as if she were about to swoon:

"But, Heaven help me . . . I am fond of him, I love him, I love him!" she whispered between her trembling lips, in sudden amazement.

It was as in a rhythm of astonishment that she wearily mounted the stairs, higher and higher, in a silent surprise of sudden light.

"But I am fond of him, I love him, I love him!"

It sounded like a melody through her weariness.

She reached her dressing-room, where Greta had lighted the gas; she dragged herself inside. The door of the nursery stood half open; she went in, threw back the curtain of Christie's little bed, dropped on her knees and looked at the child. The boy partly awoke, still in the warmth of a

deep sleep; he crept a little from between the sheets, laughed, threw his arms about Cecile's bare neck:

"Mummy dear!"

She pressed him tightly in the embrace of her slender, white arms; she kissed his raspberry mouth, his drowsed eyes. And meantime the refrain sang on in her heart, right across the weariness which seemed to break her by the bedside of her child:

"But I am fond of him, I love him, I love him, I love him . . .!"

5

The mystery! Suddenly, on the staircase, it had beamed open before her in her soul, like a great flower of light, a mystic rose with glistening petals, into whose golden heart she now looked for the first time. The analysis to which she was so much inclined was no longer possible: this was the riddle of love, the eternal riddle,

which had beamed open within her, transfixing with its rays the very width of her soul, in the midst of which it had burst forth like a sun in a universe; it was too late to ask the reason why; it was too late to ponder and dream upon it; it could only be accepted as the inexplicable phenomenon of the soul; it was a creation of sentiment, of which the god who created it would be as impossible to find in the inner essence of his reality as the God who had created the world out of chaos. It was light breaking forth from darkness; it was heaven disclosed above the earth. And it existed: it was reality and not a fairy-tale! For it was wholly and entirely within her, a sudden, incontestable, everlasting truth, a felt fact, so real in its ethereal incorporeity that it seemed to her as if, until that moment, she had never known, never thought, never felt. It was the beginning, the opening out of herself, the dawn

of her soul's life, the joyful miracle, the miraculous inception of love, love focussed in the midst of her soul.

She passed the following days in self-contemplation, wandering through her dreams as through a new country, rich with great light, where distant landscapes paled into a wan radiance, like fantastic meteors in the night, quivering in incandescence on the horizon. It seemed to her as though she, a pious and glad pilgrim, were making her way along paradisaical oases towards those distant scenes, there to find even more, the goal. . . . Only a little while ago, the prospect before her had been narrow and forlorn—her children gone from her, her loneliness wrapping her about like a night—and now, now she saw stretching in front of her a long road, a wide horizon, glittering with light, nothing but light. . . .

That *was*, all that *was!* It was no fine poets' fancy; it existed, it gleamed in her

heart like a sacred jewel, like a mystic rose with stamina of light! A freshness as of dew fell over her, over her whole life: over the life of her senses; over the life of outward appearances; over the life of her soul; over the life of the indwelling truth. The world was new, fresh with young dew, the very Eden of Genesis; and her soul was a soul of newness, born anew in a metempsychosis of greater perfection, of closer approach to the goal, that distant goal, far away yonder, hidden like a god in the sanctuary of its ecstasy of light, as in the radiance of its own being.

CHAPTER VII

1

CECILE did not go out for a few days; she saw nobody. One morning she received a note; it ran:

"MEVROUW,

"I do not know if you were offended by my mystical utterances. I cannot recall distinctly what I said, but I remember that you told me that I was going too far. I trust that you did not take my indiscretion amiss.

"It would be a great pleasure to me to come to see you. May I hope that you will permit me to call on you this afternoon?

"With most respectful regards,

"QUAERTS."

As the bearer was waiting for a reply, she wrote back in answer:

"DEAR SIR,

"I shall be very pleased to see you this afternoon.

"CECILE VAN EVEN."

When she was alone, she read his note over and over again; she looked at the paper with a smile, looked at the handwriting:

"How strange," she thought. "This note . . . and everything that happens. How strange everything is, everything, everything!"

She remained dreaming a long time, with the note in her hand. Then she carefully folded it up, rose, walked up and down the room, sought with her dainty fingers in a bowl full of visiting-cards, taking out two which she looked at for some time.

"Quaerts." The name sounded differently from before. . . . How strange it all was! Finally she locked away the note and the two cards in a little empty drawer of her writing-table.

She stayed at home and sent the children out with the nurse. She hoped that no one else would call, neither Mrs. Hoze nor the Van Attemas. And, staring before her, she reflected for a long, long while. There was so much that she did not understand: properly speaking, she understood nothing. So far as she was concerned, she had fallen in love with him: there was no analysing that; it must simply be accepted. But he, what did he feel, what were his emotions?

Her earlier aversion? Sport: he was fond of sport she remembered. . . . His visit, which was an impertinence: he seemed now to be wishing to atone for it, not to repeat his call without her permiss-

ion. . . . His mystical conversation at the dinner-party. . . . And Mrs. Hijdrecht. . . .

"How strange he is!" she reflected. "I do not understand him; but I love him, I cannot help it. Love, love: how strange that it should exist! I never realized that it existed! I am no longer myself; I am becoming some one else! . . . What does he want to see me for? . . . And how singular: I have been married, I have two children! How singular that I should have two children! I feel as if I had none. And yet I am so fond of my little boys! But the other thing is so beautiful, so bright, so transparent, as if that alone were truth. Perhaps love *is* the only truth. . . . It is as if everything in and about me were turning to crystal!"

She looked around her, surprised and troubled that her surroundings should have remained the same: the rosewood fur-

niture, the folds of the curtains, the withered landscape of the Scheveningen Road outside. But it was snowing, silently and softly, with great snow-flakes falling heavily, as though they meant to purify the world. The snow was fresh and new, but yet the snow was not real nature to her, who always saw her distant landscape, like a *fata morgana*, quivering in pure incandescence of light.

2

He came at four o'clock. She saw him for the first time since the self-revelation which had flashed upon her astounded senses. And when he came she felt the singularly rapturous feeling that in her eyes he was a demigod, that he perfected himself in her imagination, that everything in him was good. Now that he sat there before her, she saw him for the first time and she saw that he was physically

beautiful. The strength of his body was exalted into the strength of a young god, broad and yet slender, sinewed as with the marble sinews of a statue; and all this seemed so strange beneath the modernity of his morning coat.

She saw his face completely for the first time. The cut of it was Roman, the head that of a Roman emperor, with its sensual profile, its small, full mouth, living red under the brown gold of his curly moustache. The forehead was low, the hair cut very close, like an enveloping black casque; and over that forehead, with its single furrow, hovered sadness, like a mist of age, strangely contradicting the wanton youthfulness of his mouth and chin. And then his eyes, which she already knew, his eyes of mystery, small and deep-set, with the depth of their pupils, which seemed now to veil themselves and then again to look out.

But the strangest thing was that from all his beauty, from all his being, from all his attitude, as he sat there with his hands folded between his knees, a magnetism emanated, dominating her, drawing her irresistibly towards him, as though she had suddenly, from the first moment of her self-revelation, become *his*, to serve him in all things. She felt this magnetism attracting her so violently that every power in her melted into listlessness and weakness. A weakness as if he might take her and carry her away, anywhere, wherever he pleased; a weakness as if she no longer possessed her own thoughts, as if she had become nothing, apart from *him*.

She felt this intensely; and then, then came the very strangest thing of all, as he continued to sit there, at a respectful distance, his eyes looking up to her in reverence, his voice falling in reverential accents. This was the very strangest thing

of all that she saw him beneath her, while she felt him above her; that she wished to be his inferior and that he seemed to consider her higher than himself. She did not know how she suddenly came to realize this so intensely, but she did realize it; and it was the first pain that her love gave her.

"It is very kind of you not to be angry with me," he began.

There was often something caressing in his voice; it was not clear and was even now and then a little broken, but this just gave it a certain charm of quality.

"Why?" she asked.

"In the first place, I did wrong to pay you that visit. In the second place, I was ill-mannered at Mrs. Hoze's dinner."

"A whole catalogue of sins!" she laughed.

"Surely!" he continued. "And you are very good to bear me no malice."

"Perhaps that is because I always hear so much good about you at Dolf's."

"Have you never noticed anything odd in Dolf?" he asked.

"No. What do you mean?"

"Has it never struck you that he has more of an eye for the great aggregate of political problems as a whole than for the details of his own surroundings?"

She looked at him, with a smile of surprise:

"Yes," she said. "You are quite right. You know him well."

"Oh, we have known one another from boyhood! It is curious: he never sees the things that lie close to his hand; he does not penetrate them. He is intellectually far-sighted."

"Yes," she assented.

"He does not know his wife, nor his daughters, nor Jules. He does not see what they have in them. He identifies

each of them by means of an image which he fixes in his mind; and he forms these images out of two prominent characteristics, which are generally a little opposed. Mrs. van Attema appears to him a woman with a heart of gold, but not very practical: so much for her; Jules, a musical genius, but an untractable boy: that settles *him!*"

"Yes, he does not go very deeply into character," she said. "For there is a great deal more in Amélie . . ."

"And he is quite wrong about Jules," said Quaerts. "Jules is thoroughly tractable and anything but a genius. Jules is nothing more than an exceedingly receptive boy, with a little rudimentary talent. And you . . . he misconceives you too!"

"Me?"

"Entirely! Do you know what he thinks of you?"

"No."

"He thinks you—let me begin by telling you this—very, very lovable and a dear little mother to your boys. But he thinks also that you are incapable of growing very fond of any one; he looks upon you as a woman without passion and melancholy for no reason, except that you are bored. He thinks you bore yourself!"

She looked at him in utter dismay and saw him laughing mischievously.

"I am never bored!" she said, joining in his laughter, with full conviction.

"No, of course you're not!" he replied.

"How can *you* know?" she asked.

"I feel it!" he answered. "And, what is more, I know that the basis of your character is not melancholy, not dark, but, on the contrary, very light."

"I am not so sure of that myself," she scarcely murmured, slackly, with that weakness within her, but happy that he

should estimate her so exactly. "And do you too," she continued, airily, "think me incapable of loving any one very much?"

"Now that is a matter of which I am not competent to judge," he said, with such frankness that his whole countenance suddenly grew younger and the crease disappeared from his forehead. "How can *I* tell?"

"You seem to know a great deal about me otherwise," she laughed.

"I have seen you so often."

"Barely four times!"

"That is very often."

She laughed brightly:

"Is this a compliment?"

"It is meant for one," he replied. "You do not know how much it means to me to see you."

It meant much to him to see her! And she felt herself so small, so weak; and him so great, so perfect. With what decision

he spoke, how certain he seemed of it all! It almost saddened her that it meant so much to him to see her once in a while. He placed her too high; she did not wish to be placed so high.

And that delicate, fragile something hung between them again, as it had hung between them at the dinner. Then it had been broken by one ill-chosen word. Oh, that it might not be broken now!

"And now let us talk about yourself!" she said, affecting an airy vivacity. "Do you know that you are taking all sorts of pains to fathom me and that I know nothing whatever about you? That's not fair."

"If you knew how much I have given you already! I give myself to you entirely; from others I always conceal myself."

"Why?"

"Because I am afraid of the others!"

"*You* . . . afraid?"

"Yes. You think that I do not look as if I could feel afraid? I have something . . ."

He hesitated.

"Well?" she asked.

"I have something that is very dear to me and about which I am very much afraid lest any should touch it."

"And that is . . .?"

"My soul. I am not afraid of your touching it, for you would not hurt it. On the contrary, I know that it is very safe with you."

She would have liked once more, mechanically, to reproach him with his strangeness: she could not. But he guessed her thoughts:

"You think me a very odd person, do you not? But how can I be otherwise with you?"

She felt her love expanding within her

heart, widening it to its full capacity within her. Her love was as a domain in which he wandered.

"I do not understand you yet; I do not know you yet!" she said, softly. "I do not see you yet. . . ."

"Would you be in any way interested to know me, to see me?"

"Surely."

"Let me tell you then; I should like to do so; it would be a great joy to me."

"I am listening to you most attentively."

"One question first: you cannot endure people who go in for sport?"

"On the contrary, I like to see the display and development of strength, so long as it is not too near me. Just as I like to hear a storm, when I am safely within doors. And I can even find pleasure in watching acrobats."

He laughed quietly:

"Nevertheless you held my particular predilection in great aversion?"

"Why should you think that?"

"I felt it."

"You feel everything," she said, almost in alarm. "You are a dangerous person."

"So many think that. Shall I tell you why I believe that you took a special aversion in my case?"

"Yes."

"Because you did not understand it in me, even though you may have observed that physical exercise is one of my hobbies."

"I do not understand you at all."

"I think you are right. . . . But don't let me talk about myself like this: I would rather talk of you."

"And I of you. So be nice to me for

the first time in our acquaintance and speak . . . of yourself."

He bowed, with a smile:

"You will not think me tiresome?"

"Not at all. You were telling me of yourself. You were speaking of your love of exercise . . ."

"Ah, yes! . . . Can you understand that there are in me two distinct individuals?"

"Two distinct . . ."

"Yes. My soul, which I regard as my real self; and then . . . there remains the other."

"And what is that other?"

"Something ugly, something common, something grossly primitive. In one word, the brute."

She shrugged her shoulders lightly:

"How dark you paint yourself. The same thing is more or less true of everybody."

"Yes, but it troubles me more than I can tell you. I suffer; that brute within me hurts my soul, hurts it even more than the whole world hurts it. Now do you know why I feel such a sense of security when I am with you? It is because I do not feel the brute that is in me. . . . Let me go on a little longer, let me confess; it does me good to tell you all this. You thought I had only seen you four times? But I used to see you so often formerly, in the theatre, in the street, everywhere. It was always rather strange to me when I saw you in the midst of accidental surroundings. And always, when I looked at you, I felt as if I were being lifted to something more beautiful. I cannot express myself more clearly. There is something in your face, in your eyes, in your movements, I don't know what, but something better than in other people, something that addressed itself,

most eloquently, to my soul only. All this is so subtle and so strange; I can hardly put it more plainly. But you are no doubt once more thinking that I am going too far, are you not? Or that I am raving?"

"Certainly, I should never have thought you such an idealist, such a sensitivist," said Cecile, softly.

"Have I leave to speak to you like this?"

"Why not?" she asked, to escape the necessity of replying.

"You might perhaps fear that I should compromise you. . . ."

"I do not fear that for an instant!" she replied, haughtily, as in utter contempt of the world.

They were silent for a moment. That delicate, fragile thing, which might so easily break, still hung between them, thin, like a gossamer, lightly joining them to-

gether. An atmosphere of embarrassment hovered about them. They felt that the words which had passed between them were full of significance. Cecile waited for him to continue; but, as he was silent, she boldly took up the conversation:

"On the contrary, I value it highly that you have spoken to me like this. You are right: you have indeed given me much of yourself. I want to assure you that whatever you have given me will be quite safe with me. I believe that I understand you better now that I see you better."

"I want very much to ask you something," he said, "but I dare not."

She smiled, to encourage him.

"No, really I dare not," he repeated.

"Shall I guess?" Cecile asked, jestingly.

"Yes; what do you think it is?"

She glanced round the room until her eye rested on the little table covered with books.

"The loan of Emerson's essays?" she hazarded.

But Quaerts shook his head and laughed:

"No, thank you," he said. "I bought the volume long ago. No, no, it is a much greater favour than the loan of a book."

"Be brave then and ask it," Cecile went on, still jestingly.

"I dare not," he said again. "I should not know how to put my request into words."

She looked at him earnestly, into his eyes, which gazed steadily upon her; and then she said:

"I know what you want to ask me, but I will not say it. *You* must do that: so seek your words."

"If you know, will you then permit me to say it?"

"Yes, for, if it is what I think, it is nothing that you are not entitled to ask."

"And yet it would be a great favour. . . . But let me warn you beforehand that I look upon myself as some one of a much lower order than you."

A shadow passed across her face, her mouth had a little contraction of pain and she pressed him, a little unnerved:

"I beg you, ask. Just ask me simply."

"It is a wish, then, that sympathy might be sealed between you and me. Would you allow me to come to you when I am unhappy? I always feel so happy in your presence, so soothed, so different from the state of ordinary life, for with you I live only my better, my real self: you know what I mean."

Everything within her again melted into weakness and slackness; he was placing her upon too high a pedestal; she was happy, because of what he asked her, but sad, that he felt himself so much lower than she.

"Very well," she said, nevertheless, with a clear voice. "It shall be as you wish. Let us seal a bond of sympathy."

And she gave him her hand, her beautiful, long, white hand, where on one white finger gleamed the sparks of jewels, white and blue. For a second, very reverently, he pressed her finger-tips between his own:

"Thank you," he said, in a hushed voice, a voice that was a little broken.

"Are you often unhappy?" asked Cecile.

"Always," he replied, almost humbly and as though embarrassed at having to confess it. "I don't know why, but it has always been so. And yet from my childhood I have enjoyed much that people call happiness. But yet, yet . . . I suffer through myself. It is I who do myself the most hurt. And after that the world . . . and I have always to hide myself. To the world, to people generally I

only show the individual who rides and fences and hunts, who goes into society and is very dangerous to young married women . . ."

He laughed with his bad, low laugh, looking aslant into her eyes; she remained calmly gazing at him.

"Beyond that I give them nothing. I hate them; I have nothing in common with them, thank God!"

"You are too proud," said Cecile. "Each of those people has his own sorrow, just as you have: the one suffers a little more subtly, the other a little more coarsely; but they all suffer. And in that they all resemble yourself."

"Each taken by himself, perhaps. But that is not how I take them: I take them in the lump and therefore I hate them. Don't you?"

"No," she said calmly. "I don't believe that I am capable of hating."

"You are very strong within yourself. You suffice unto yourself."

"No, no, not that, really not; but you . . . you are unjust towards the world."

"Possibly; but why does it always give me pain? Alone with you, I forget that it exists, the outside world. Do you understand now why I was so sorry to see you at Mrs. Hoze's? You seemed to me to have lowered yourself. And it was because . . . because of that special quality which I saw in you that I did not seek your acquaintance earlier. The acquaintance was fatally bound to come; and so I waited. . . ."

Fate? What would it bring her? thought Cecile. But she could not pursue the thought: she seemed to herself to be dreaming of beautiful and subtle things which did not exist for other people, which only floated between them two. And those beautiful things were already

there: it was no longer necessary to look upon them as illusions; it was as if she had overtaken the future! For one brief moment only did this happiness endure; then again she felt pain, because of his reverence.

3

He was gone and she was alone, waiting for the children. She neglected to ring for the lamp to be lighted; and the twilight of the late afternoon darkened into the room. She sat motionless, looking out before her at the leafless trees.

"Why should *I* not be happy?" she thought. "He is happy with me; he is himself with me only; he cannot be so among other people. Why then can *I* not be happy?"

She felt pain; her soul suffered and it seemed to her as if her soul were suffering for the first time, perhaps because now, for

the first time, her soul had not been itself but another. It seemed to her as if another woman and not she had spoken to him, to Quaerts, just now. An exalted woman, a woman of illusions; the woman, in fact, whom he saw in her and not the woman that she was, a humble woman, a woman of love. Ah, she had had to restrain herself not to ask him:

"Why do you speak to me like that? Why do you raise up your beautiful thoughts to me? Why do you not rather let them drip down upon me? For see, I do not stand so high as you think; and see, I am at your feet and my eyes seek you above me."

Ought she to have told him that he was deceiving himself? Ought she to have asked him:

"Why do I lower myself when I mix with other people? What do you see in me after all? Behold, I am only a wo-

man, a woman of weakness and dreams; and I have come to love you, I don't know why."

Ought she to have opened his eyes and said to him:

"Look upon your own soul in a mirror; look upon yourself and see how you are a god walking the earth, a god who knows everything because he feels it, who feels everything because he knows it. . . ."

Everything? . . . No, not everything; for he deceived himself, this god, and thought to find an equal in her, who was but his creature.

Ought she to have declared all this, at the cost of her modesty and his happiness? For his happiness—she felt perfectly assured—lay in seeing her in the way in which he saw her.

"With me he is happy!" she thought. "And sympathy is sealed between us. . . . It was not friendship, nor did he

speak of love; he called it simply sympathy. . . . With me he feels only his real self and not that other . . . the brute that is within him! . . . The brute! . . ."

Then there came drifting over her a gloom as of gathering clouds; and she shuddered at something that suddenly rolled through her: a broad stream of blackness, as though its waters were filled with mud, which bubbled up in troubled rings, growing larger and larger. And she took fear before this stream and tried not to see it; but it swallowed up all her landscapes—so bright before, with their luminous horizons—now with a sky of ink smeared above, like a foul night.

"How loftily he thinks, how noble his thoughts are!" Cecile still forced herself to imagine, in spite of it all. . . .

But the magic was gone: her admiration of his lofty thoughts tumbled away into

an abyss; then suddenly, by a lightning flash through the night of that inky sky, she saw clearly that this loftiness of thought was a supreme sorrow to her in him.

It was quite dark in the room. Cecile, afraid of the lightning which revealed her to herself, had thrown herself back upon the cushions of the couch. She hid her face in her hands, pressing her eyes, as though she wished, after this moment of self-revelation, to be blind for ever.

But demoniacally it raged through her, a hurricane of hell, a storm of passion, which blew out of the darkness of the landscape, lashing the tossed waves of the stream towards the inky sky.

"Oh!" she moaned. "I am unworthy of him . . . unworthy! . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

1

QUAERTS lived on the Plein, above a tailor, where he occupied two small rooms furnished in the most ordinary style. He could have had much better lodgings if he chose, but he was indifferent to comfort: he never gave it a thought in his own place; when he came across it elsewhere, it did not attract him. But it distressed Jules that Quaerts should live in this fashion; and the boy had long wanted to improve the sitting-room. He was now busy hanging some trophies on an armour-rack, standing on a pair of steps, humming a tune which he remembered from some opera. But Quaerts paid no heed to what Jules was doing: he lay

without moving on the sofa, at full length, in his pyjamas, unshorn, with his eyes fixed upon the Renascence decorations of the Law Courts, tracing a background of architecture behind the leafless trees of the Plein.

"Look, Taco, will this do?" asked Jules, after hanging an Algerian sabre between two Malay creeses and draping the folds of a Javanese sarong between.

"Yes, beautifully," replied Quaerts.

But he did not look at the rack of arms and continued gazing at the Law Courts. He lay back motionless. There was no thought in him, nothing but listless dissatisfaction with himself and consequent sadness. For three weeks he had led a life of debauch, to deaden consciousness, or perhaps he did not know precisely what: something that was in him, something that was beautiful but tedious, in ordinary life. He had begun by shooting over a friend's

land in North Brabant. It lasted a week; there were eight of them; sport in the open air, followed by sporting dinners, with not only a great deal of wine, certainly the best, but still more geneva, also of the finest, like a liqueur. Ragging-excursions on horseback in the neighbourhood; follies at a farm—the peasant-woman carried round in a barrel and locked up in the cow-house—mischievous exploits, worthy only of unruly boys and savages and ending in a summons before a magistrate, with a fine and damages. Wound up to a pitch of excitement with too much sport, too much oxygen and too much drink, five of the pack, including Quaerts, had gone on to Brussels, where one of them had a mistress. There they stayed nearly a fortnight, leading a life of continual excess, with endless champagne and larking: a wild joy of living, which, natural enough at first, had in the

end to be screwed up and screwed up higher still, to make it last a couple of days longer; the last nights spent wearedly over écarté, with none but the fixed idea of winning, the exhaustion of all their violence already pulsing through their bodies, like a nervous relaxation, and their eyes gazing without expression at the cards.

During that time Quaerts had only once thought of Cecile; and he had not followed up the thought. She had no doubt arisen three or four times in his brain, as a vague image, white and transparent, an apparition which had vanished again immediately, leaving no trace of its passage. All this time too he had not written to her; and it had only once struck him that a silence of three weeks, after their last conversation, must seem strange to her. There it had remained. He was back now; he had lain three days long at home

on his bed, on his sofa, tired, feverish, dissatisfied, disgusted with everything, everything; then, one morning, remembering that it was Wednesday, he had thought of Jules and his riding-lesson.

He sent for Jules, but, too lazy to shave or dress, he remained lying where he was. And he still lay there, realizing nothing. There before him were the Law Courts, with the Privy Council adjoining. At the side he could see the Witte [1] and William the Silent standing on his pedestal in the middle of the Plein: that was all exceedingly interesting. And Jules was hanging up trophies: also interesting. And the most interesting of all was the stupid life he had been leading. What a tense effort to lull his boredom! Had he really amused himself during that time? No; he had made a pretence of being amused: the episode of the peasant-

[1] The leading club at The Hague.

woman and the écarté had excited him; the sport was bad, the wine good, but he had drunk too much of it. And then the filthy champagne of that wench, at Brussels! . . .

Well, what then? He had absolute need of it, of a life like that, of sport and wild enjoyment; it served to balance the other thing in him, which became impossible in everyday life.

But why could he not preserve some sort of mean in both? He was perfectly well-equipped for ordinary life; and with that he possessed something in addition, something that was very beautiful in his soul: why could he not remain balanced between those two inner spheres? Why was he always tossed from one to the other, as a thing that belonged to neither? How fine he could have made his life with just the least tact, the least self-restraint! How he might have lived in a healthy de-

light of purified animal existence, tempered by a higher joyousness of soul! But tact, self-restraint: he had none of all this; he lived according to his impulses, always in extremes; he was incapable of half-measures. And in this lay his pride as well as his regret: his pride that he felt this or that thing "wholly," that he was unable to compromise with his emotions; and his regret that he could *not* compromise and bring into harmony the elements which for ever waged war within him.

When he had met Cecile and had seen her again and yet once again, he had felt himself carried wholly to the one extreme, the summit of exaltation, of pure crystal sympathy, in which the circle of his atmosphere—as he had said—glided in sympathy over hers, in a caress of pure chastity and spirituality, as two stars, spinning closer together, might mingle their at-

mospheres for a moment, like breaths. What smiling happiness had not been within his reach, as it were a grace from Heaven!

Then, then he had felt himself toppling down, as if he had rocked over the balancing-point; and he had longed for earthly pleasures, for great simplicity of emotion, for primitive enjoyment of life, for flesh and blood. He now remembered how, two days after his last conversation with Cecile, he had seen Emilie Hijdrecht, here, in these very rooms, where at length, stung by his neglect, she had ventured to come to him one evening, heedless of all caution. With a line of cruelty round his mouth he recalled how she had wept at his knees, how in her jealousy she had complained against Cecile, how he had ordered her to be silent and forbidden her to pronounce Cecile's name. Then, their mad embrace, an embrace of cruelty: cruelty

on her part against the man whom time after time she lost when she thought him secured for good, whom she could not understand and to whom she clung with all the violence of her brutal passion, a purely animal passion of primitive times; cruelty on his part against the woman he despised, while in his passion he almost stifled her in his embrace.

2

Yes, what then? How was he to find the mean between the two poles of his nature? He shrugged his shoulders. He knew that he could never find it. He lacked some quality, or a certain power, necessary to find it. He could do nothing but allow himself to swing to and fro. Very well then: he would let himself swing; there was no help for it. For now, in the lassitude following his outburst of savagery, he began to experience

again a violent longing, like one who, after a long evening passed in a ball-room heavy with the foul air of gaslight and the stifling closeness and mustiness of human breath, craves a high heaven and width of atmosphere: a violent longing for Cecile. And he smiled, glad that he knew her, that he was able to go to her, that it was now his privilege to enter into the chaste sanctuary of her environment, as into a temple; he smiled, glad that he felt his longing and proud of it, exalting himself above other men. Already he tasted the pleasure of confessing to her honestly how he had lived during the last three weeks; and already he heard her voice, though he could not distinguish the words. . . .

Jules climbed down the steps. He was disappointed that Quaerts had not followed his arranging of the weapons upon the rack and his draping of the stuffs around them. But he had quietly con-

tinued his work and, now that it was finished, he climbed down and came and sat on the floor quietly, with his head against the foot of the couch on which his friend lay thinking. Jules said never a word; he looked straight before him, a little sulkily, knowing that Quaerts was looking at him.

"Jules," said Quaerts.

But Jules did not answer, still staring.

"Tell me, Jules, what makes you like me so much?"

"How should I know?" answered Jules, with thin lips.

"Don't you know?"

"No. How can you know why you are fond of any one?"

"You oughtn't to be so fond of me, Jules. It's not good."

"Very well, I will be less so in the future."

Jules rose suddenly and took his hat.

He put out his hand; but Quaerts held him back with a laugh:

"You see, scarcely any one is fond of me, except . . . you and your father. Now I know why your father likes me, but not why you do."

"You want to know everything."

"Is that so very wrong?"

"Certainly. You'll never be satisfied. Mamma always says that no one knows anything."

"And you?"

"I? . . . Nothing. . . ."

"How do you mean, nothing?"

"I know nothing at all. . . . Let me go."

"Are you cross, Jules?"

"No, but I have an engagement."

"Can't you wait till I'm dressed? Then we can go together. I am going to Aunt Cecile's."

Jules objected:

"All right, provided you hurry."

Quaerts got up. He now saw the arrangement of the weapons, which he had entirely forgotten:

"You've done it very nicely, Jules," he said, in an admiring tone. "Thank you very much."

Jules did not answer; and Quaerts went through into his dressing-room. The lad sat down on the sofa, bolt upright, looking out at the Law Courts, across the bare trees. His eyes filled with great round tears, which ran down his cheeks. Sitting stiff and motionless, he wept.

CHAPTER IX

1

CECILE had passed those three weeks in a state of ignorance which had filled her with pain. She had, it is true, heard through Dolf that Quaerts was away shooting, but beyond that nothing. A thrill of joy electrified her when the door behind the screen opened and she saw him enter the room. He was standing in front of her before she could recover herself; and, as she was trembling, she did not rise, but, still sitting, reached out her hand to him, her fingers quivering imperceptibly.

"I have been out of town," he began.

"So I heard."

"Have you been well all this time?"

"Quite well, thank you."

He noticed that she was somewhat pale, that she had a light blue shadow under her eyes and that there was lassitude in all her movements. But he came to the conclusion that there was nothing extraordinary in this, or that perhaps she merely looked pale in the creamy whiteness of her soft, white dress, like silky wool, even as her figure became yet slighter in the constraint of the scarf about her waist, with its long white fringe falling to her feet. She was sitting alone with Christie, the child upon his footstool with his head in her lap and a picture-book on his knees.

"You two are a perfect Madonna and Child," said Quaerts.

"Little Dolf has gone out to walk with his god-father," she said, looking fondly upon her child and motioning to him gently.

At this bidding the boy stood up and

shyly approached Quaerts, offering him a hand. Quaerts lifted him up and set him on his knee:

"How light he is!"

"He is not strong," said Cecile.

"You coddle him too much."

She laughed:

"Pedagogue!" she laughed. "How do I coddle him?"

"I always find him nestling against your skirts. He must come with me one of these days: I should make him do some gymnastics."

"Jules horse-riding and Christie gymnastics!" she exclaimed.

"Yes . . . sport, in fact!" he answered, with a meaning look of fun.

She glanced back at him; and sympathy smiled from the depths of her gold-grey eyes. He felt thoroughly happy and, with the child still upon his knees, said:

"I have come to confess to you . . . Madonna!"

Then, as though startled, he put the child away from him.

"To confess?"

"Yes. . . . There, Christie, go back to Mamma; I mustn't keep you by me any longer."

"Very well," said Christie, with great, wondering eyes, and caught hold of the cord of Quaerts' eyeglass.

"The Child would forgive too easily," said Quaerts.

"And I, have I anything to forgive you?" she asked.

"I shall be only too happy if you will see it in that light."

"Then begin your confession."

"But the Child . . ." he hesitated.

Cecile stood up; she took the child, kissed him and sat him on a stool by the

window with his picture-book. Then she came back to the sofa:

"He will not hear. . . ."

And Quaerts began the story, choosing his words: he spoke of the shooting, of the ragging-parties and the peasant-woman and of Brussels. She listened attentively, with dread in her eyes at the violence of such a life, the echo of which reverberated in his words, even though the echo was softened by his reverence.

"And is all this a sin calling for absolution?" she asked, when he had finished.

"Is it not?"

"I am no Madonna, but . . . a woman with fairly emancipated views. If you were happy in what you did, it was no sin, for happiness is good. . . . Were you happy, I ask you? For in that case what you did was . . . good."

"Happy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"No. . . . Therefore I have sinned, sinned against myself, have I not? Forgive me . . . Madonna."

She was troubled at the sound of his voice, which, gently broken, wrapped her about as with a spell; she was troubled to see him sitting there, filling with his body, his personality, his existence a place in her room, beside her. In a single second she lived through hours, feeling her calm love lying heavy within her, like a sweet weight; feeling a longing to throw her arms about him and tell him that she worshipped him; feeling also an intense sorrow at what he had admitted, that once again he had been unhappy. Hardly able to control herself in her compassion, she rose, moved towards him and laid her hand upon his shoulder:

"Tell me, do you mean all this? Is

it all true? Is it true that you have been living as you say and yet have not been happy?"

"Perfectly true, on my soul."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I couldn't help it."

"You were unable to force yourself to be more moderate?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I should like to teach you."

"And I should not like to learn, from *you*. For it is and always will be my best happiness to be immoderate also where you are concerned, immoderate in the life of my real self, my soul, just as I have now been immoderate in the life of my apparent self."

Her eyes grew dim; she shook her head, her hand still upon his shoulder:

"That is not right," she said, in deep distress.

"It is a joy . . . for both those beings. I have to be like that, I have to be immoderate: they both demand it."

"But that is not right," she insisted. "Pure enjoyment . . ."

"The lowest, but also the highest. . . ."

A shiver passed through her, a deadly fear for him.

"No, no," she persisted. "Don't think that. Don't do it. Neither the one nor the other. Really, it is all wrong. Pure joy, unbridled joy, even the highest, is not good. In that way you force your life. When you speak so, I am afraid for your sake. Try to recover moderation. You have so many possibilities of being happy."

"Oh, yes! . . ."

"Yes, but what I mean is that you must not be fanatical. And . . . and also, for the love of God, don't run quite so madly after pleasure."

He looked up at her; he saw her beseeching him with her eyes, with the expression of her face, with her whole attitude, as she stood bending slightly forward. He *saw* her beseeching him, even as he *heard* her; and then he knew that she loved him. A feeling of bright rapture came upon him, as though something high were descending upon him to guide him. He did not stir—he felt her hand thrilling at his shoulder—afraid lest with the smallest movement he should drive that rapture away. It did not occur to him for a moment to speak a word of tenderness to her or to take her in his arms and press her to him: she was so profoundly transfigured in his eyes that any such profane desire remained far removed from him. And yet he felt at that moment that he loved her, but as he had never yet loved any one before, so completely and exclusively, with the noblest elements that lie

hidden away in the soul, often unknown even to itself. He felt that he loved her with new-born feelings of frank youth and fresh vigour and pure unselfishness. And it seemed to him that it was all a dream of something which did not exist, a dream lightly woven about him, a web of sunbeams.

"Madonna!" he whispered. "Forgive me. . . ."

"Promise then. . . ."

"Willingly, but I shall not be able to keep my promise. I am weak. . . ."

"No."

"Ah, I am! But I give you my promise; and I promise also to try my utmost to keep it. Will you forgive me now?"

She nodded to him; her smile fell on him like a ray of sunlight. Then she went to the child, took it in her arms and brought it to Quaerts:

"Put your arms round his neck, Christie, and give him a kiss."

He took the child from her; it threw its little arms about his neck and kissed him on the forehead.

"The Madonna forgives me . . . and the Child!" he whispered.

2

They stayed long talking to each other; and no one came to disturb them. The child had gone back to sit by the window. Twilight began to strew pale ashes in the room. He saw Cecile sitting there, sweetly white; the kindly melody of her half-breathed words came rippling towards him. They talked of many things: of Emerson; of Van Eeden's new poem in the *Nieuwe Gids;* of their respective views of life. He accepted a cup of tea, only for the pleasure of seeing her move with

the yielding lines of her graciousness, standing before the tea-table in the corner. In her white dress, she had something about her of marble grown lissom with inspiration and warm life. He sat motionless, listening reverently, swathed in a still rapture of delight. It was a mood which defied analysis, without a visible origin, springing from their sympathetic fellowship as a flower springs from an invisible seed after a drop of rain and a kiss of the sunshine. She too was happy; she no longer felt the pain which his reverence had caused her. True, she was a little sad by reason of what he had told her, but she was happy for the sake of this speck of the present. Nor did she any longer see that dark stream, that inky sky, that night landscape: everything that she now saw was bright and calm. And happiness breathed about her, a tangible happiness, like a living caress. Sometimes

they ceased speaking and both of them looked towards the child, as it sat reading; or Christie would ask them something and they would answer. Then they smiled one to the other, because the child was so good and did not disturb them.

"If only this could continue for ever," he ventured to say, though still fearing lest a word might break the crystalline transparency of their happiness. "If you could only see into me now, how all in me is peace. I don't know why, but that is how I feel. Perhaps because of your forgiveness. Really the Catholic religion is delightful, with its absolution. What a comfort that must be for people of weak character!"

"But I cannot think your character weak. And it is not. You tell me that you sometimes know how to place yourself above ordinary life, whence you can look down upon its grief as on a comedy

which makes one laugh sadly for a minute, but which is not true. I too believe that life, as we see it, is no more than a symbol of a truer life, concealed beneath it, which we do not see. But I cannot rise beyond the symbol, while you can. Therefore you are very strong and feel yourself very great."

"How strange, when I just think myself weak and you great and powerful. You dare to be what you are, in all your harmony; and I am always hiding and am afraid of people individually, though sometimes I am able to rise above life in the mass. But these are riddles which it is vain for me to attempt to solve; and, though I have not the power to solve them, at this moment I feel nothing but happiness. Surely I may say that once aloud, may I not, quite aloud?"

She smiled to him in the bliss which she felt of making him happy.

"It is the first time I have felt happiness in this way," he continued. "Indeed it is the first time I have felt it at all. . . ."

"Then don't analyse it."

"There is no need. It is standing before me in all its simplicity. Do you know why I am happy?"

"Don't analyse, don't analyse," she repeated in alarm.

"No," he said, "but may I tell you, without analysing?"

"No, don't," she stammered, "because . . . because I know. . . ."

She besought him, very pale, with folded, trembling hands. The child looked at them; it had closed its book, and come to sit down on its stool by its mother, with a look of gay sagacity in its pale-blue eyes.

"Then I obey you," said Quaerts, with some difficulty.

And they were both silent, their eyes

expanded as with the lustre of a vision. It seemed to be gently beaming about them through the pale ashen twilight.

CHAPTER X

THIS evening Cecile had written a great deal into her diary; and she now paced up and down in her room, with locked hands hanging before her and her head slightly bowed and a fixed look in her eyes. There was anxiety about her mouth. Before her was the vision, as she had conceived it. He loved her with his soul alone, not as a woman who is pretty and good, but with a higher love than that, with the finest nervous fibres of his being—his real being—with the supreme emotion of the very essence of his soul. Thus she felt that he loved her and in no other way, with contemplation, with adoration. Thus she felt it actually, through a sympathetic power of divination by which each of them

was able to guess what actually passed within the other. And this was his happiness—his first, as he said—thus to love her and in no other way. Oh, she well understood him! She understood his illusion, which he saw in her; and she now knew that, if she really wished to love him for his sake and not for her own, she must needs appear to be nothing else to him, she must preserve his illusion of a woman not of flesh, one who desired none of the earthly things that other women did, one who should be soul alone, a sister soul to his. But, while she saw before her this vision of her love, calm and radiant, she saw also the struggle which awaited her, the struggle with herself, with her own distress: distress because he thought of her so highly and named her Madonna, the while she longed only to be lowly and his slave. She would have to seem the woman he saw in her, for

the sake of his happiness, and the part would be a heavy one for her to support, for she loved him, ah, with such simplicity, with all her woman's heart, wishing to give herself to him entirely, as only once in her life a woman gives herself, whatever the sacrifice might cost her, the sacrifice made in ignorance of herself and perhaps afterwards to be made in bitterness and sorrow! The outward appearance of her conduct and her inward consciousness of herself: the conflict of these would fall heavily upon her, but she thought upon the struggle with a smile, with joy beaming through her heart, for this bitterness would be endured for *him*, deliberately for him and for him alone. Oh, the luxury to suffer for one whom she loved as she loved him; to be tortured with inner longing, that he might not come to her with the embrace of his arms and the kiss of his mouth; and to feel that

the torture was for the sake of his happiness, his! To feel that she loved him enough to go to him with open arms and beg for the alms of his caresses; but also to feel that she loved him more than that and more highly and that—not from pride or bashfulness, which are really egoism, but solely from sacrifice of herself to his happiness—she never would, never could, be a suppliant before him!

To suffer, to suffer for him! To wear a sword through her soul for him! To be a martyr for her god, for whom there was no happiness on earth save through her martyrdom! And she had passed her life, had spent long, long years, without feeling until this day that such luxury could exist, not as a fantasy in rhymes, but as a reality in her heart. She had been a young girl and had read the poets and what they rhyme of love; and she had thought she understood it all, with a subtle

comprehension and yet without ever having had the least acquaintance with emotion itself. She had been a young woman, had been married, had borne children. Her married life flashed through her mind in a lightning-flicker of memory; and she stopped still before the portrait of her dead husband, standing there on its easel, draped in sombre plush. The mask it wore was of ambition: an austere, refined face, with features sharp, as if engraved in fine steel; coldly-intelligent eyes with a fixed portrait look; thin, clean-shaven lips, closed firmly like a lock. Her husband! And she still lived in the same house where she had lived with him, where she had had to receive her many guests when he was Foreign Minister. Her receptions and dinners flickered up in her mind, so many scenes of worldliness; and she clearly recalled her husband's eye taking in everything with a quick glance of

approval or disapproval: the arrangement of her rooms, her dress, the ordering of her parties. Her marriage had not been unhappy; her husband was a little cold and unexpansive, wrapped wholly in his ambition; but he was attached to her after his fashion and even tenderly; she too had been fond of him; she thought at the time that she was marrying him for love: her dependent womanliness loved the male, the master. Of a delicate constitution, probably undermined by excessive brain-work, he had died after a short illness. Cecile remembered her sorrow, her loneliness with the two children, as to whom he had already feared that she would spoil them. And her loneliness had been sweet to her, among the clouds of her dreaming. . . .

This portrait—a handsome life-size photograph; a carbon impression dark with a Rembrandt shadow—why had she

never had it copied in oils, as she had at first intended? The intention had faded away within her; for months she had not given it a thought; now suddenly it recurred to her. . . . And she felt no self-reproach or remorse. She would not have the painting made now. The portrait was well enough as it was. She thought of the dead man without sorrow. She had never had cause to complain of him; he had never had anything with which to reproach her. And now she was free; she became conscious of the fact with a great exultation. Free, to feel what she would! Her freedom arched above her as a blue firmament in which new love ascended with a dove's immaculate flight. Freedom, air, light! She turned from the portrait with a smile of rapture; she thrust her arms above her head as if she would measure her freedom, the width of the air, as if she would go to meet the light. Love,

she was in love! There was nothing but love; nothing but the harmony of their souls, the harmony of her handmaiden's soul with the soul of her god, an exile upon earth. Oh, what a mercy that this harmony could exist between him so exalted and her so lowly! But he must not see her lowliness; she must remain the Madonna, remain the Madonna for his sake, in the martyrdom due to his reverence, in the dizziness of the high place, the heavenly throne to which he raised her, beside himself. She felt this dizziness shuddering about her like rings of light. And she flung herself on her sofa and locked her fingers; her eyelids quivered; then she remained staring before her, towards some very distant point.

CHAPTER XI

JULES had been away from school for a day or two with a bad headache, which had made him look very pale and given him an air of sadness; but he was a little better now and, feeling bored in his own room, he went downstairs to the empty drawing-room and sat at the piano. Papa was at work in his study, but it would not interfere with Papa if he played. Dolf spoilt him, seeing in his son something that was wanting in himself and therefore attracted him, even as possibly it had formerly attracted him in his wife also: Jules could do no wrong in his eyes; and, if the boy had only been willing, Dolf would have spared no expense to give him a careful musical education. But Jules violently opposed him-

self to anything resembling lessons and besides maintained that it was not worth while. He had no ambition; his vanity was not tickled by his father's hopes of him or his appreciation of his playing: he played only for himself, to express himself in the vague language of musical sounds. At this moment he felt alone and abandoned in the great house, though he knew that Papa was at work two rooms off and that when he pleased he could take refuge on Papa's great couch; at this moment he had within himself an almost physical feeling of dread at his loneliness, which caused something to reel about him, an immense sense of utter desolation.

He was fourteen years old, but he felt himself neither child nor boy: a certain feebleness, an almost feminine need of dependency, of devotion to some one who would be everything to him had already, in his earliest childhood, struck at his

virility; and he shivered in his dread of this inner loneliness, as if he were afraid of himself. He suffered greatly from vague moods in which that strange something oppressed and stifled him; then, not knowing where to hide his inner being, he would go to play, so that he might lose himself in the great sound-soul of music. His thin, nervous fingers would grope hesitatingly over the keys; he himself would suffer from the false chords which he struck in his search; then he would let himself go, find a single, very short motive, of plaintive, minor melancholy, and caress that motive in his joy at possessing it, at having found it, caress it until it returned each moment as a monotony of sorrow. He would think the motive so beautiful that he could not part with it; those four or five notes expressed so well everything that he felt that he would play them over and over again, until Suzette

burst into the room and made him stop, saying that otherwise she would be driven mad.

Thus he sat playing now. And it was pitiful at first: he hardly recognized the notes; cacophonous discords wailed and cut into his poor brain, still smarting from the headache. He moaned as if he were in pain afresh; but his fingers were hypnotized, they could not desist, they still sought on; and the notes became purer: a short phrase released itself with a cry, a cry which returned continually on the same note, suddenly high after the dull bass of the prelude. And this note came as a surprise to Jules; that fair cry of sorrow frightened him; and he was glad to have found it, glad to have so sweet a sorrow. Then he was no longer himself; he played on until he felt that it was not he who was playing but another, within him, who compelled him; he found the full, pure

chords as by intuition; through the sobbing of the sounds ran the same musical figure, higher and higher, with silver feet of purity, following the curve of crystal rainbows lightly spanned on high; reaching the topmost point of the arch it struck a cry, this time in very drunkenness, out into the major, throwing up wide arms in gladness to heavens of intangible blue. Then it was like souls of men, which first live and suffer and utter their complaint and then die, to glitter in forms of light whose long wings spring from their pure shoulders in sheets of silver radiance; they trip one behind the other over the rainbows, over the bridges of glass, blue and rose and yellow; and there come more and more, kindreds and nations of souls; they hurry their silver feet, they press across the rainbow, they laugh and sing and push one another; in their jostling their wings clash together, scattering silver down. Now

they stand all on the top of the arc and look up, with the great wondering of their laughing child-eyes; and they dare not, they dare not; but others press on behind them, innumerous, more and more and yet more; they crowd upwards to the topmost height, their wings straight in the air, close together. And now, now they must; they may hesitate no longer. One of them, taking deep breaths, spreads his flight and with one shock springs out of the thick throng into the ether. Soon many follow, one after another, till their shapes swoon in the blue; all is gleam about them. Now, far below, thin as a thin thread, the rainbow arches itself, but they do not look at it; rays fall towards them: these are souls, which they embrace; they go with them in locked embraces. And then the light: light beaming over all; all things liquid in everlasting light; nothing but light: the sounds sing the light, the sounds

are the light, there is nothing now but the light everlasting. . . .

"Jules!"

He looked up vacantly.

"Jules! Jules!"

He smiled now, as if awakened from a dream-sleep; he rose, went to her, to Cecile. She stood in the doorway; she had remained standing there while he played; it had seemed to her that he was playing a part of herself.

"What were you playing, Jules?" she asked.

He was quite awake now and distressed, fearing that he must have made a terrible noise in the house. . . .

"I don't know, Auntie," he said.

She hugged him, suddenly, violently, in gratitude. . . . To him she owed it, the great mystery, since the day when he had broken out in anger against her. . . .

CHAPTER XI

1

"OH, for that which cannot be told, because words are so few, always the same combinations of a few letters and sounds; oh, for that which cannot be thought of in the narrow limits of comprehension; that which at best can only be groped for with the antennæ of the soul; essence of the essences of the ultimate elements of our being! . . ."

She wrote no more, she knew no more: why write that she had no words and yet seek them?

She was waiting for him and she now looked out of the open window to see if

he was coming. She remained there for a long time; then she felt that he would come immediately and so he did: she saw him approaching along the Scheveningen Road; he pushed open the iron gate of the villa and smiled to her as he raised his hat.

"Wait!" she cried. "Stay where you are!"

She ran down the steps, into the garden, where he stood. She came towards him, beaming with happiness and so lovely, so delicately frail; her blonde head so seemly in the fresh green of May; her figure like a young girl's in the palest grey gown, with black velvet ribbon and here and there a touch of silver lace.

"I am so glad that you have come! You have not been to see me for so long!" she said, giving him her hand.

He did not answer at once; he merely smiled.

"Let us sit in the garden, behind: the weather is so lovely."

"Let us," he said.

They walked into the garden, by the mesh of the garden-paths, the jasmine-vines starring white as they passed. In an adjoining villa a piano was playing; the sounds came to them of Rubinstein's Romance.

"Listen!" said Cecile, starting. "What is that?"

"What?" he asked.

"What they are playing."

"Something of Rubinstein's, I believe," he said.

"Rubinstein? . . ." she repeated, vaguely. "Yes. . . ."

And she relapsed into the wealth of memories of . . . what? Once before, in this way, she had walked along these same paths, past jasmine-vines like these, long, ever so long ago; she had walked

with him, with him. . . . Why? Could the past repeat itself, after centuries? . . .

"It is three weeks since you have been to see me," she said, simply, recovering herself.

"Forgive me," he replied.

"What was the reason?"

He hesitated throughout his being, seeking an excuse:

"I don't know," he answered, softly. "You will forgive me, will you not? One day it was this, another day that. And then . . . I don't know. Many reasons together. It is not good that I should see you often. Not good for you, nor for me."

"Let us begin with the second. Why is it not good for you?"

"No, let us begin with the first, with what concerns you. People . . ."

"People?"

"People are talking about us. I am looked upon as an irretrievable rake. I will not have your name linked profanely with mine."

"And is it?"

"Yes. . . ."

She smiled:

"I don't mind."

"But you must mind; if not for your own sake . . ."

He stopped. She knew he was thinking of her boys; she shrugged her shoulders.

"And now, why is it not good for you?"

"A man must not be happy too often."

"What a sophism! Why not?"

"I don't know; but I feel I am right. It spoils him; it is too much for him."

"Are you happy here, then?"

He smiled and gently nodded yes.

They were silent for very long. They were now sitting at the end of the garden,

on a seat which stood in a semicircle of flowering rhododendrons: the great purple-satin blossoms shut them in with a tall hedge of closely-clustered bouquets, rising from the paths and overtopping their heads; standard roses flung their incense before them. They sat still, happy in each other, happy in the sympathy of their atmospheres mingling together; yet in their happiness there was the invincible melancholy which is an integral part of all life, even in happiness.

"I don't know how I am to tell you," he said. "But suppose that I were to see you every day, every moment that I thought of you. . . . That would not do. For then I should become so refined, so subtle, that for pure happiness I should not be able to live; my other being would receive nothing and would suffer like a beast that is left to starve. I am bad, I am selfish, to be able to speak like this, but I must tell

you the truth, that you may not think too well of me. And so I only seek your company as something very beautiful which I allow myself to enjoy just once in a way."

She was silent.

"Sometimes . . . sometimes, too, I imagine that in doing this I am not behaving well to you, that in some way or other I offend or hurt you. Then I sit brooding about it, until I begin to think that it would be best to take leave of you for ever."

She was still silent; motionless she sat, with her hands lying slackly in her lap, her head slightly bowed, a smile about her mouth.

"Speak to me," he begged.

"You do not offend me, nor hurt me," she said. "Come to me whenever you feel the need. Do always as you think best; and I shall think that best too: you must not doubt that."

"I should so much like to know in what way you like me?"

"In what way? Surely, as a Madonna does a sinner who repents and gives her his soul," she said, archly. "Am I not a Madonna?"

"Are you content to be so?"

"Can you be so ignorant about women as not to know how every one of us has a longing to solace and relieve, in fact, to play at being a Madonna?"

"Do not speak like that," he said, with pain in his voice.

"I am speaking seriously. . . ."

He looked at her; a doubt rose within him, but she smiled to him; a calm glory was about her; she sat amidst the bouquets of the rhododendrons as in the blossoming tenderness of one great mystic flower. The wound of his doubt was soothed with balsam. He surrendered himself wholly to his happiness; an atmosphere wafted

about him of the sweet calm of life, an atmosphere in which life becomes dispassionate and restful and smiling, like the air which is rare about the gods. It began to grow dark; a violet dusk fell from the sky like crape falling upon crape; quietly the stars lighted up. The shadows in the garden, between the shrubs among which they sat, flowed into one another; the piano in the next villa had stopped. And happiness drew a veil between his soul and the outside world: the garden with its design of plots and paths; the villa with curtains at its windows and its iron gate; the road behind, with the rattle of carriages and trams. All this withdrew itself far back; all ordinary life retreated far from him; vanishing behind the veil, it died away. It was no dream nor conceit: reality to him was the happiness that had come while the world died away; the happiness that was rare, invisible, in-

tangible, coming from the love which alone is sympathy, calm and without passion, the love which exists purely of itself, without further thought either of taking anything or even of giving anything, the love of the gods, which is the soul of love itself. High he felt himself: the equal of the illusion which he had of her, which she wished to be for his sake, of which he also was now absolutely certain. For he could not know that what had given him happiness—his illusion—so perfect, so crystal-clear, might cause her some sort of grief; he could not at this moment penetrate without sin into the truth of the law which insists on equilibrium, which takes away from one what it offers to another, which gives happiness and grief together; he could not know that, if happiness was with him, with her there was anguish, anguish in that she had to make a pretence and deceive him

for his own sake, anguish in that she wanted what was earthly, that she craved for what was earthly, that she yearned for earthly pleasures! . . . And still less could he know that, notwithstanding all this, there was nevertheless voluptuousness in her anguish: that to suffer through him, to suffer for him made of her anguish all voluptuousness.

2

It was dark and late; and they were still sitting there.

"Shall we go for a walk?" she asked.

He hesitated, with a smile; but she repeated her suggestion:

"Why not, if you care to?"

And he could no longer refuse.

They rose and went along by the back of the house; and Cecile said to the maid, whom she saw sitting with her needle-work by the kitchen-door:

"Greta, fetch me my little black hat, my black-lace shawl and a pair of gloves."

The servant rose and went into the house. Cecile noticed how a trifle of shyness was emphasized in Quaerts' hesitation, now that they stood loitering, waiting among the flower-beds. She smiled, plucked a rose and placed it in her waistband.

"Have the boys gone to bed?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, still smiling, "long ago."

The servant returned; Cecile put on the little black hat, threw the lace about her neck, but refused the gloves which Greta offered her:

"No, not these; get me a pair of grey ones. . . ."

The servant went into the house again; and as Cecile looked at Quaerts her gaiety increased. She gave a little laugh:

"What is the matter?" she asked, mis-

chievously, knowing perfectly well what it was.

"Nothing, nothing!" he said, vaguely, and waited patiently until Greta returned.

Then they went through the garden-gate into the Woods. They walked slowly, without speaking; Cecile played with her long gloves, not putting them on.

"Really . . ." he began, hesitating.

"Come, what is it?"

"You know; I told you the other day: it's not right. . . ."

"What isn't?"

"What we are doing now. You risk too much."

"Too much, with you?"

"If any one were to see us. . . ."

"And what then?"

He shook his head:

"You are wilful; you know quite well."

She clinched her eyes; her mouth grew

serious; she pretended to be a little angry:

"Listen, you mustn't be anxious if *I'm* not. I am doing no harm. Our walks are not secret: Greta at least knows about them. And, besides, I am free to do as I please."

"It's my fault: the first time we went for a walk in the evening, it was at my request. . . ."

"Then do penance and be good; come now, without scruple, at *my* request," she said, with mock emphasis.

He yielded, feeling far too happy to wish to make any sacrifice to a convention which at that moment did not exist.

They walked on silently. Cecile's sensations always came to her in shocks of surprise. So it had been when Jules had grown suddenly angry with her; so also, midway on the stair, after that conversation at dinner of circles of sympathy. And now, precisely in the same way, with

the shock of sudden revelation, came this new sensation, that after all she was not suffering so seriously as she had at first thought; that her agony, being a voluptuousness, could not be a martyrdom; that she was happy, that happiness had come about her in the fine air of his atmosphere, because they were together, together. . . . Oh, why wish for anything more, above all for things less pure? Did he not love her and was not his love already a fact and was not his love earthly enough for her, now that it was a fact? Did he not love her with a tenderness which feared for anything that might trouble her in the world, through her ignoring that world and wandering about with him alone in the dark? Did he not love her with tenderness, but also with the lustre of his soul's divinity, calling her Madonna and by this title—unconsciously, perhaps, in his simplicity—making her the equal of all that

was divine in him? Did he not love her? Heavens above, did he not love her? Well, what did she want more? No, no, she wanted nothing more: she was happy, she shared happiness with him; he gave it to her just as she gave it to him; it was a sphere that moved with them wherever they went, seeking their way along the darkling paths of the Woods, she leaning on his arm, he leading her, for she could see nothing in the dark, which yet was not dark, but pure light of their happiness. And so it was as if it were not evening, but day, noonday, noonday in the night, hour of light in the dusk!

3

And the darkness was light; the night dawned with light which beamed on every side. Calmly it beamed, the light, like one solitary planet, beaming with the soft radiance of purity, bright in a heaven of

still, white, silver light, a heaven where they walked along milky ways of light and music; it beamed and sounded beneath their feet; it welled in seas of ether high above their heads and beamed and sounded there, high and clear. And they were alone in their heaven, in their infinite heaven, which was as space, endless beneath them and above and around them, with endless spaces of light and music, of light that was music. Their heaven lay eternal on every side with blissful vistas of white radiance, fading away in lustre and vanishing landscapes, like oases of flowers and plants beside waters of light, still and clear and hushed with peace. For its peace was the ether in which all desire is dissolved and becomes transparent and crystal; and their life was a limpid existence in unruffled peace; they walked on, in heavenly sympathy of fellowship, close together, hemmed in one narrow circle, a

circle of radiance which embraced them both. Barely was there a recollection in them of the world which had died out in the glitter of their heaven; there was naught in them but the ecstasy of their love, which had become their soul, as if they no longer had any soul, as if they were only love; and, when they looked about them and into the light, they saw that their heaven, in which their happiness was the light, was nothing but their love, and they saw that the landscapes—the flowers and plants by waters of light—were nothing but their love and that the endless space, the eternities of light and space, of spaces full of light and music, stretching on every hand, beneath them and above and around them, that all this was nothing but their love, which had grown into heaven and happiness.

And now they came into the very midst, to the very sun-centre, the very goal which

Cecile had once foreseen, concealed in the distance, in the irradiance of innate divinity. Up to the very goal they stepped; and on every side it shot its endless rays into each and every eternity, as if their love were becoming the centre of the universe. . . .

4

But they sat on a bench, in the dark, not knowing that it was dark, for their eyes were full of the light. They sat against each other, silently at first, till, remembering that he had a voice and could still speak words, he said:

"I have never lived through such a moment as this. I forget where we are and who we are and that we are human. We were, were we not? I seem to remember that we once were?"

"Yes, but we are that no longer," she said, smiling; and her eyes, grown

big, looked into the darkness that was light.

"Once we were human, suffering and desiring, in a world where certainly much was beautiful, but where much also was ugly."

"Why speak of that now?" she asked; and her voice sounded to herself as coming from very far and low beneath her.

"I seemed to remember it."

"I wanted to forget it."

"Then I will do so too. But may I not thank you in human speech for lifting me above humanity?"

"Have I done so?"

"Yes. May I thank you for it . . . on my knees?"

He knelt down and reverently took her hands. He could just distinguish the outline of her figure, seated motionless and still upon the bench; above them was a

pearl-grey twilight of stars, between the black boughs. She felt her hands in his and then his mouth, his kiss, upon her hand. Very gently, she released herself; and then, with a great soul of modesty, full of desireless happiness, very gently she bent her arms about his neck, took his head against her and kissed him on the forehead:

"And I, I thank you too!" she whispered, rapturously.

He was still; and she held him fast in her embrace.

"I thank you," she said, "for teaching me this and how to be happy as we are and no otherwise. You see, when I still lived and was human, when I was a woman, I thought that I had lived before I met you, for I had had a husband and I had children of whom I was very fond. But from you I first learnt to live, to live without egoism and without desire; I

learnt that from you this evening or . . . this day, which is it? You have given me life and happiness and everything. And I thank you, I thank you! You see, you are so great and so strong and so clear and you have borne me towards your own happiness, which should also be mine, but it was so far above me that, without you, I should never have attained it! For there was a barrier for me which did not exist for you. You see, when I was still human"—and she laughed, clasping him more tightly—"I had a sister; and she too felt that there was a barrier between her happiness and herself; and she felt that she could not surmount this barrier and was so unhappy because of it that she feared lest she should go mad. But I, I do not know: I dreamed, I thought, I hoped, I waited, oh, I waited; and then you came; and you made me understand at once that you could be no man, no hus-

band for me, but that you could be more for me: my angel, O my deliverer, who would take me in his arms and bear me over the barrier into his own heaven, where he himself was god, and make me his Madonna! Oh, I thank you, I thank you! I do not know how to thank you; I can only say that I love you, that I adore you, that I lay myself at your feet. Remain as you are and let me adore you, while you kneel where you are. I may adore you, may I not, while you yourself are kneeling? You see, I too must confess, as you used to do," she continued, for now she could not but confess. "I have not always been straightforward with you; I have sometimes pretended to be the Madonna, knowing all the time that I was but an ordinary woman, a woman who frankly loved you. But I deceived you for your own happiness, did I not? You wished me so, you were happy when I was

so and no otherwise. And now, now too, you must forgive me, because now I need no longer pretend, because that is past and has died away, because I myself have died away from myself, because now I am no longer a woman, no longer human for myself, but only what you wish me to be: a Madonna and your creature, an atom of your own essence and divinity. So will you forgive me the past? May I thank you for my happiness, for my heaven, my light, O my master, for my joy, my great, my immeasurable joy?"

He rose and sat beside her, taking her gently in his arms:

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, laying her head on his shoulder in a giddiness of light. "And you?"

"Yes," he answered; and he asked again, "And do you desire . . . nothing more?"

"No, nothing!" she stammered. "I want nothing but this, nothing but what is mine, oh, nothing, nothing more!"

"Swear it to me . . . by something sacred!"

"I swear it to you . . . by yourself!" she declared.

He pressed her head to his shoulder again. He smiled; and she did not see that there was sadness in his laugh, for she was blinded with light.

5

They were long silent, sitting there. She remembered having said many things, she no longer knew what. About her she saw that it was dark, with only that pearl-grey twilight of stars above their heads, between the black boughs. She felt that she was lying with her head on his shoulder; she heard his breath. A sort of chill crept down her shoulders, notwithstand-

ing the warmth of his embrace; she drew the lace closer about her throat and felt that the bench on which they sat was moist with dew.

"I thank you, I love you so, you make me so happy," she repeated.

He was silent; he pressed her to him very gently, with sheer tenderness. Her last words still sounded in her ears after she had spoken them. Then she was bound to acknowledge to herself that they had not been spontaneous, like all that she had told him before, as he knelt before her with his head at her breast. She had spoken them to break the silence: formerly that silence had never troubled her; why should it now?

"Come!" he said gently; and even yet she did not hear the sadness of his voice, in this single word.

They rose and walked on. It came to him that it was late, that they must re-

turn by the same path; beyond that, his thoughts were sorrowful with many things which he could not have expressed; a poor twilight had come about him, after the blinding light of their heaven of but now. And he had to be cautious: it was very dark here; and he could only just see the path, lying very pale and undecided at their feet; they brushed against the trunks of the trees as they passed.

"I can see nothing," said Cecile, laughing. "Can you see the way?"

"Rely upon me: I can see quite well in the dark," he replied. "I have eyes like a lynx. . . ."

Step by step they went on and she felt a sweet joy in being guided by him; she clung close to his arm, saying laughingly that she was afraid and that she would be terrified if he were suddenly to leave hold of her.

"And suppose I were suddenly to run

away and leave you alone?" said Quaerts, jestingly.

She laughed; she besought him with a laugh not to do so. Then she was silent, angry with herself for laughing; a burden of sadness bore her down because of her jesting and laughter. She felt as if she were unworthy of that into which, in radiant light, she had just been received.

And he too was filled with sadness: the sadness of having to lead her through the dark, by invisible paths, past rows of invisible tree-trunks which might graze and wound her; of having to lead her through a dark wood, through a black sea, through an ink-dark sphere, when they were returning from a heaven where all had been light and all happiness, without sadness or darkness.

And so they were silent in that sadness, until they reached the highroad, the old Scheveningen Road.

They approached the villa. A tram went by; two or three people passed on foot; it was a fine evening. He brought her home and waited until the door opened to his ring. The door remained unopened; meantime he pressed her hand tightly and hurt her a little, involuntarily. Greta must have fallen asleep, she thought:

"Ring again, would you?"

He rang again, louder this time; after a moment, the door opened. She gave him her hand once more, with a smile.

"Good-night, mevrouw," he said, taking her fingers respectfully and raising his hat.

Now, now she could hear the sound of his voice, with its note of sadness. . . .

CHAPTER XII

1

THEN she knew, next day, when she sat alone, wrapped in reflection, that the sphere of happiness, the highest and brightest, may not be trod; that it may only beam upon us as a sun; and that we may not enter into it, into the sacred sun-centre. They had done that. . . .

Listless she sat, with her children by her side, Christie looking pale and languid. Yes, she spoiled them; but how could she change herself?

Weeks passed; and Cecile heard nothing from Quaerts. It was always so: after he had been with her, weeks would drag by without her ever seeing him. For he was much too happy with her, it was more than

he could bear. He looked upon her society as a rare pleasure to be very jealously indulged. And she, she loved him simply, with the innermost essence of her soul, loved him frankly, as a woman loves a man. . . . She always wanted him, every day, every hour, at every pulse of her life.

Then she met him by chance, at Scheveningen, where she had gone one evening with Amélie and Suzette. Then once again at a reception at Mrs. Hoze's. He seemed shy with her; and a certain pride in her kept her from asking him to call. Yes, something was changed in what had been woven between them. But she suffered sorely, suffered also because of that foolish pride, because she had not humbly begged him to come to her. Was he not her god? Whatever he did was good.

So she did not see him for weeks and

weeks. Life went on: each day she had her little occupations, in her household, with her children; Mrs. Hoze reproached her for her withdrawal from society and she began to think more about her friends, to please Mrs. Hoze, who had asked this of her. There were flashes in her memory; in those flashes she saw the dinner-party, their conversations and walks, all her love for him, all his reverence for her whom he called Madonna; their last evening of light and ecstasy. Then she smiled; and the smile itself beamed over her anguish, her anguish in that she no longer saw him, in that she felt proud and cherished a little inward bitterness. Yet all things must be well, as he wished them to be.

Oh, the evenings, the summer evenings, cooling after the warm days, the evenings when she sat alone, staring out from her room, where the onyx lamp burnt with a subdued flame, staring out of the open

windows at the trams which, with their tinkling bells, came and went to Scheveningen, full, full of people! Waiting, the endless long waiting, evening after evening in solitude, after the children had gone to bed! Waiting, when she simply sat still, staring fixedly before her, looking at the trams, the tedious, everlasting trams! Where was her modulated joy of dreaming happiness? And where, where was her radiant happiness? Where was her struggle within herself between what she was and what he saw in her? This struggle no longer existed, this struggle also had been overcome; she no longer felt the force of passion; she only longed to see him come as he had always come, as he no longer came. Why did he not come? Happiness palled; people were talking about them. . . . It was not right that they should see much of each other—he had said so the evening before that high-

est happiness—not good for him and not good for her.

So she sat and thought; and great silent tears fell from her eyes, for she knew that, though he remained away partly for his own sake, it was above all for hers that he did not come. What had she not said to him that evening on the bench in the Woods, when her arms were about his neck! Oh, she should have been silent, she felt it now! She should not have uttered her rapture, but have enjoyed it secretly within herself; she should have let him utter himself: she herself should have remained his Madonna. But she had been too full, too happy; and in that overbrimming happiness she had been unable to be other than true and clear as a bright mirror.

He had glanced into her and read her entirely: she knew that, she was certain of it.

He knew now in what manner she loved him; she herself had revealed it to him. But, at the same time, she had made known to him that this was all past, that she was now what he wished her to be. And this had been true then, clear at that time and true. . . . But now? Does ecstasy endure only for one moment and did he know it? Did he know that her soul's flight had reached its limit and must now descend again to a commoner sphere? Did he know that she loved him again now, quite ordinarily, with all her being, wholly and entirely, no longer as widely as the heavens, only as widely as her arms could reach out and embrace? And could he not return this love, this so petty love of hers, and was that why he did not come to her?

2

Then she received his letter:

"Forgive me if I put off from day to day coming to see you; forgive me if even today I cannot decide to come and if I write to you instead. Forgive me if I even venture to ask you whether it may not be necessary that we see each other no more. If I hurt you and offend you, if I—which may God forbid—cause you pain, forgive me, forgive me! Perhaps I procrastinated a little from indecision, but much more because I considered that I had no other choice.

"There has been between our two lives, between our two souls, a rare moment of happiness which was a special boon, a special grace of heaven. Do you not think so too? Oh, if only I had the words to tell you how grateful I am in my innermost soul for that happiness! If later I ever look back upon my life, I shall always see that happiness gleaming in between the ugliness and the blackness, like a star

of light. We received it as such, as a gift of light. And I venture to ask you if that gift is not a thing for you and me to keep sacred?

"Can we do that if I continue to see you? You, yes, I have no doubt of you: you will be strong to keep it sacred, our sacred happiness, especially because you have already had your struggle, as you confided to me on that sacred evening. But I, can I too be strong, especially now that I know that you have been through the struggle? I doubt myself, I doubt my own force; I am afraid of myself. There is cruelty in me, a love of destruction, something of a savage. As a boy I took pleasure in destroying beautiful things, in breaking and soiling them. The other day, Jules brought me some roses to my room; in the evening, as I sat alone, thinking of you and of our happiness—yes, at that very moment—my fingers began to

fumble with a rose whose petals were loose; and, when I saw that one rose dispetalled, there came a cruel frenzy within me to tear and destroy them all; and I rumpled every one of them. I only give you a small instance, because I do not wish to give you larger instances, from vanity, lest you should know how bad I am. I am afraid of myself. If I saw you again and again and yet again, what should I begin to feel and think and wish, unconsciously? Which would be the stronger, my soul or the beast that is in me? Forgive me for laying bare my dread before you and do not despise me for it. Up to the present I have *not* attempted a struggle, in the sacred world of our happiness. I saw you, I saw you often before I knew you; I guessed you as you were; I was permitted to speak to you; it was given me to love you with my soul alone: I beseech you, let it remain so.

Let me continue to keep my happiness like this, to keep it sacred, a thousand times sacred. I think it worth while to have lived, now that I have known *that:* happiness, the highest. And I am afraid of the struggle which would probably come and pollute that sacred thing.

"Will you believe me when I swear to you that I have reflected deeply on all this? Will you believe me when I swear to you that I suffer at the thought of never being permitted to see you again? And, above all, will you forgive me when I swear to you that I am acting in this way because I think that I am doing right? Oh, I am grateful to you and I love you as a soul of light alone, of nothing but light!

"Perhaps I am wrong to send you this letter. I do not know. Perhaps presently I will tear up what I have written. . . ."

Yet he had sent her the letter.

There was great bitterness within her. She had struggled once, had conquered herself and, in a sacred moment, had confessed both struggle and conquest; she knew that fate had compelled her to do so; she now knew what she would lose through her confession. For a short moment, a single evening perhaps, she had been worthy of her god and his equal. Now she was so no longer; for this reason also she felt bitter. And she felt bitterest of all because the thought dared to rise within her:

"A god! Is he a god? Is a god afraid of the struggle?"

Then her threefold bitterness changed to despair, black despair, a night which her eyes sought to penetrate in order to see something where they saw nothing, nothing; and she moaned low and wrung her hands, sinking into a heap before the

window and staring at the trams which, with the tinkling of their bells, ran pitilessly to and fro.

CHAPTER XIII

SHE shut herself up; she saw little of her children; she told her friends that she was ill. She was at home to no visitors. She guessed intuitively that people in their circles were speaking of Quaerts and herself. Life hung dull about her in a closely-woven web of tiresome, tedious meshes; and she remained motionless in her corner, to avoid entangling herself in those meshes. Once Jules forced his way to her; he went upstairs, in spite of Greta's protests; he sought her in the little boudoir and, not finding her, went resolutely to her bedroom. He knocked without receiving a reply, but entered nevertheless. The room was half in darkness, for she kept the blinds lowered; in the shadow of the canopy which rose above the bedstead,

with its hangings of old-blue brocade, Cecile lay sleeping. Her tea-gown was open over her breast; the train trailed from the bed and lay creased over the carpet; her hair spread loosely over the pillows; one of her hands was clutching nervously at the tulle bed-curtains.

"Auntie!" cried Jules. "Auntie!"

He shook her by the arm; and she woke heavily, with heavy, blue-girt eyes. She did not recognize him at first and thought that he was little Dolf.

"It's me, Auntie; Jules. . . ."

She knew him now, asked how he came there, what was the matter and if he did not know that she was ill?

"I knew, but I wanted to speak to you. I came to speak to you about . . . him. . . ."

"Him?"

"About Taco. He asked me to tell you. He couldn't write to you, he said.

He is going on a long journey with his friend from Brussels; he will be away a long time and he would like . . . he would like to take leave of you."

"To take leave?"

"Yes; and he told me to ask you if he might see you once more?"

She had half-raised herself and was looking at Jules with a vacant air. In an instant the memory ran through her brain of the long look which Jules had directed on her so strangely when she saw Quaerts for the first time and spoke to him coolly and distantly:

"Have you many relations in The Hague? . . . You have no occupation, I believe? . . . Sport? . . . Oh! . . ."

Then came the memory of Jules playing the piano, of Rubinstein's Romance, of the ecstasy of his fantasia: the glittering rainbows and the souls turning to angels.

"To take leave?" she repeated.

Jules nodded:

"Yes, Auntie, he is going away for ever so long."

He could have shed tears himself and there were tears in his voice, but he would not give way and his eyes merely grew moist.

"He told me to ask you," he repeated, with difficulty.

"If he can come and take leave?"

"Yes, Auntie."

She made no reply, but lay staring before her. An emptiness began to stretch before her, in endless vistas. It was a shadowy image of their evening of rapture, but no light beamed out of the shadow.

"Emptiness!" she muttered through her closed lips.

"What, Auntie?"

She would have liked to ask Jules whether he was still, as formerly, afraid of the emptiness within himself; but a gentleness of pity, a soft feeling, a sweetening of the bitterness which filled her being, stayed her.

"To take leave?" she repeated, with a smile of melancholy; and the big tears fell heavily, drop by drop, upon her fingers wrung together.

"Yes, Auntie. . . ."

He could no longer restrain himself: a single sob convulsed his throat, but he gave a cough to conceal it. Cecile threw her arm round his neck:

"You are very fond of . . . Taco, are you not?" she asked; and it struck her that this was the first time that she had pronounced the name, for she had never called Quaerts by it: she had never called him by any name.

He did not answer at first, but nestled in her arm, in her embrace, and began to cry:

"Yes, I can't tell you how fond I am of him," he said.

"I know," she said; and she thought of the rainbows and the angels: he had played as out of her own soul.

"May he come?" asked Jules, loyally remembering his instructions.

"Yes."

"He asks if he might come this evening?"

"Very well."

"Auntie, he is going away, because of . . . because of . . ."

"Because of what, Jules?"

"Because of you: because you don't like him and will not marry him! Mamma says so. . . ."

She made no reply; she lay sobbing, with her head against Jules' head.

"Is it true, Auntie? No, it is not true, is it? . . ."

"No."

"Why then?"

She raised herself suddenly, conquering herself, and looked at him fixedly:

"He is going away because he must, Jules. I cannot tell you why. But what he does is right. All that he does is right."

The boy looked at her, motionless, with large wet eyes, full of astonishment:

"Is right?" he repeated.

"Yes. He is better than any one of us. If you go on loving him, Jules, it will bring you happiness, even if . . . if you never see him again."

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Does he bring happiness? Even in that case? . . ."

"Even in that case."

She listened to her own words as she

spoke: it was to her as if another were speaking, another who consoled not only Jules but herself as well and who would perhaps give her the strength to take leave of Taco in the manner which would be best, without despair.

CHAPTER XIV

1

"SO you are going on a long journey?" she asked.

He sat facing her, motionless, with anguish on his face. Outwardly she was very calm, only there was a sadness in her look and in her voice. In her white dress, with the girdle falling before her feet, she lay back among the three pillows of the *rose-moiré* sofa; the tips of her little slippers were buried in the white sheepskin rug. On the table before her lay a great bouquet of loose roses, pink, white and yellow, bound together with a broad riband. He had brought them for her and she had not yet placed them. There was a great calm about her;

the exquisite atmosphere of the boudoir seemed unchanged.

"Tell me, am I not paining you severely?" he asked, with the anguish in his eyes, the eyes which she now knew so well.

She smiled:

"No," she said. "I will be honest with you. I have suffered, but I suffer no longer. I have struggled with myself for the second time and I have conquered myself. Will you believe me?"

"If you knew the remorse that I feel . . ."

She rose and went to him:

"What for?" she asked, in a clear voice. "Because you read me and gave me happiness?"

"Did I?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"No," he said, "but I thought . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know; I thought that you would . . . would suffer so . . . and I . . . I cursed myself! . . ."

She shook her head gently, with smiling disapproval:

"For shame!" she said. "Do not blaspheme! . . ."

"Can you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive. Listen to me. Swear to me that you believe me, that you believe that you have given me happiness and that I am not suffering."

"I . . . I swear."

"I trust that you are not swearing this merely to satisfy my wish."

"You have been the highest thing in my life," he said, gently.

A rapture shot through her soul.

"Tell me only . . ." she began.

"What?"

"Tell me if you believe that I, I, *I* . . .

shall always remain the highest thing in your life."

She stood before him, tall, in her clinging white. She seemed to shed radiance; never had he seen her so beautiful.

"I am certain of that," he said. "Certain, oh, certain! . . . My God, how can I convey the certainty of it to you?"

"But I believe you, I believe you!" she exclaimed.

She laughed a laugh of rapture. In her soul a sun seemed to be shooting forth rays on every side. She placed her arm tenderly about his neck and kissed his forehead with a chaste caress.

For one moment he seemed to forget everything. He too rose, took her in his arms, almost savagely, and clasped her suddenly to him, as if he were about to crush her against his breast. She just caught sight of his sad eyes; then she saw nothing more, blinded by the kisses of

his mouth, which scorched her whole face as though with sparks of fire. With the sun-rapture of her soul was mingled a bliss of earth, a yielding to the violence of his embrace. But the thought flashed across her of what she would lose if she yielded. She released herself, put him away and said:

"And now . . . go."

He felt stunned; he understood that he had no choice:

"Yes, yes, I am going," he said. "I may write to you, may I not?"

She nodded yes, with her smile:

"Write to me, I shall write to you too," she said. "Let me always hear from you. . . ."

"Then these are not to be the last words between us? This . . . this . . . is not the end?"

"No."

"Thank you. Good-bye, mevrouw,

good-bye . . . Cecile. Ah, if you knew what this moment costs me!"

"It must be. It cannot be otherwise. Go, go. You must go. Do go . . ."

She gave him her hand again, for the last time. A moment later he was gone.

2

She looked about her strangely, with bewildered eyes, with hands locked together:

"Go, go . . ." she repeated, like one raving.

Then she noticed the roses. With something like a faint scream she sank down before the little table and buried her face in his gift, until the thorns wounded her face. The pain—two drops of blood which fell from her forehead—brought her back to her senses. Standing before the Venetian mirror hanging over her

writing-table, she wiped away the red spots with her handkerchief.

"Happiness!" she stammered to herself. "His happiness! The highest thing in his life! So he knew happiness, though short it was. But now . . . now he suffers, now he will suffer again, as he did before. The remembrance of happiness cannot do everything. Ah, if it could only do that, then everything would be well, everything! . . . I wish for nothing more, I have had my life, my own life, my own happiness; I now have my children; I now belong to them. To him I must no longer be anything. . . ."

She turned away from the mirror and sat down on the settee, as though tired with a great space traversed, and she closed her eyes, as though blinded with too great a light. She folded her hands together, like one in prayer; her face

beamed in its fatigue, from smile to smile.

"Happiness!" she repeated, faltering between her smiles. "The highest thing in his life! O my God, happiness! I thank Thee, O God, I thank Thee! . . ."

THE END

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