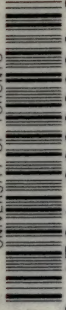
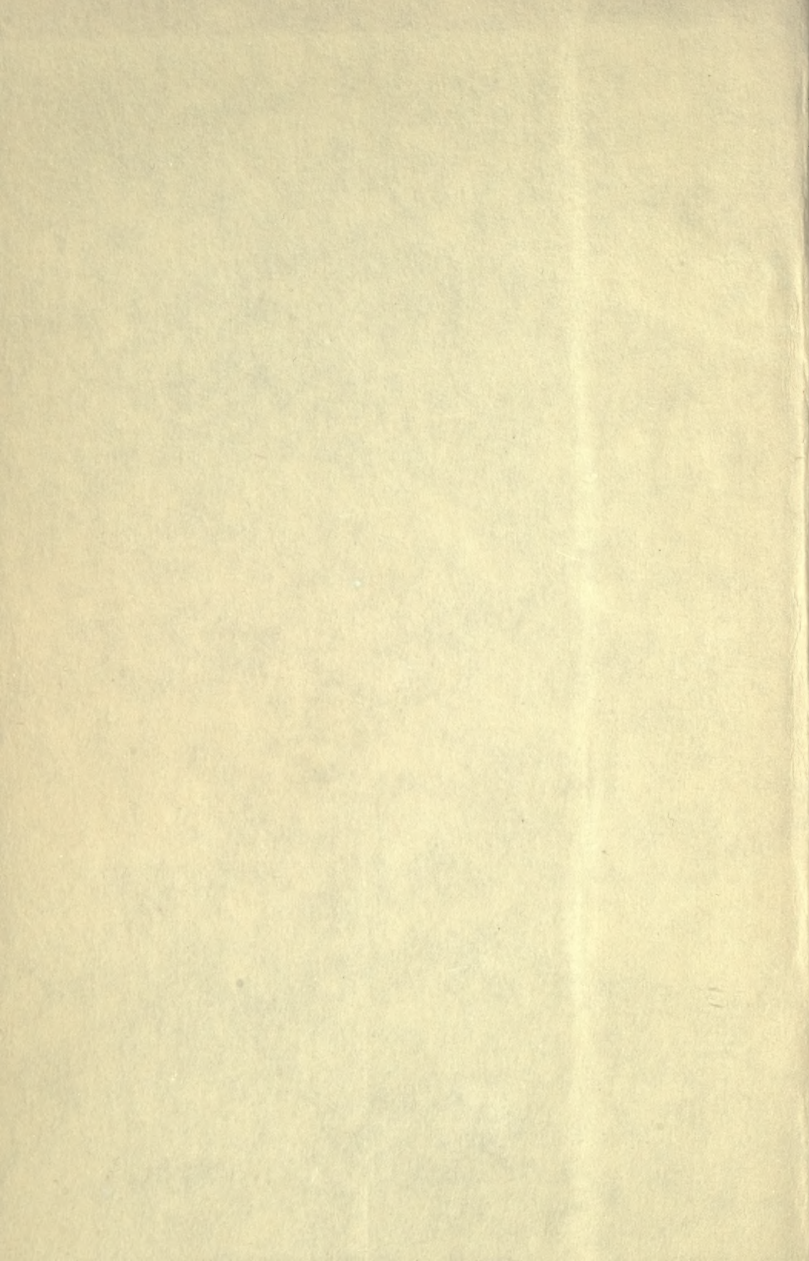
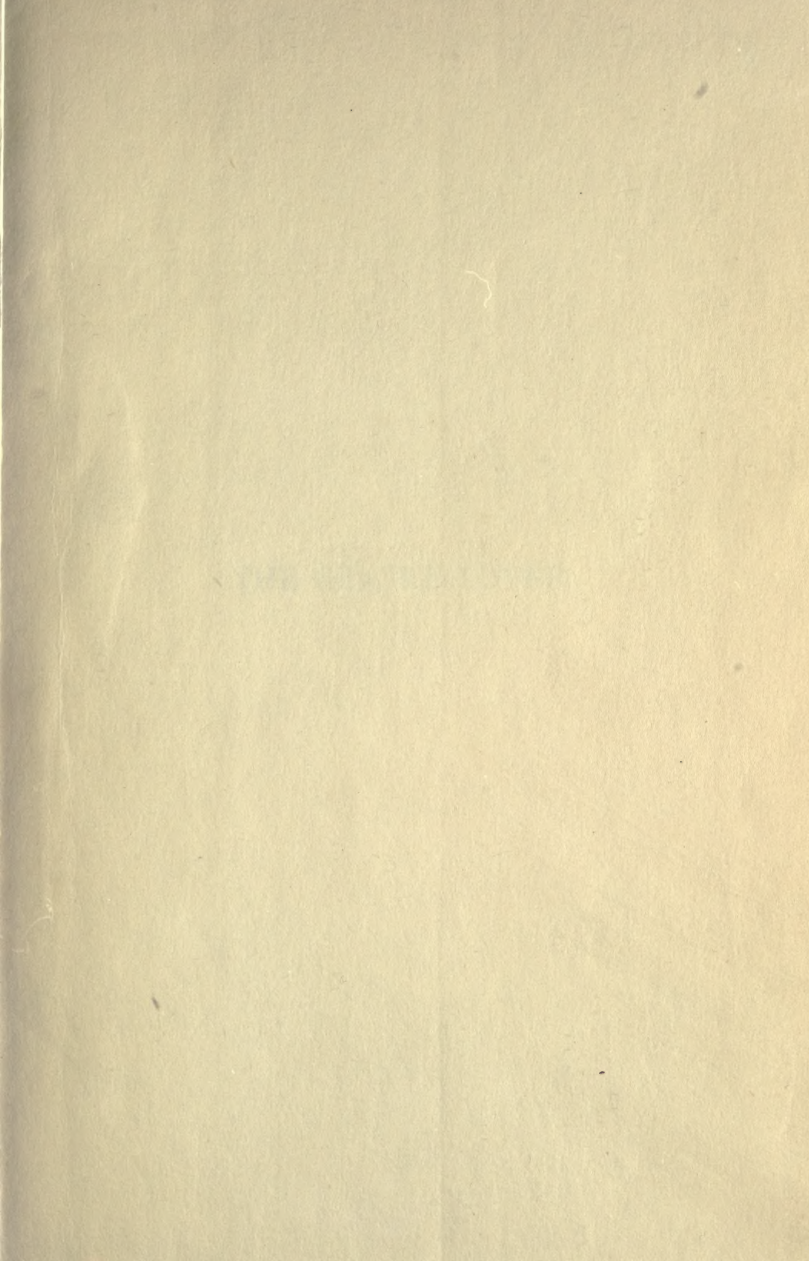


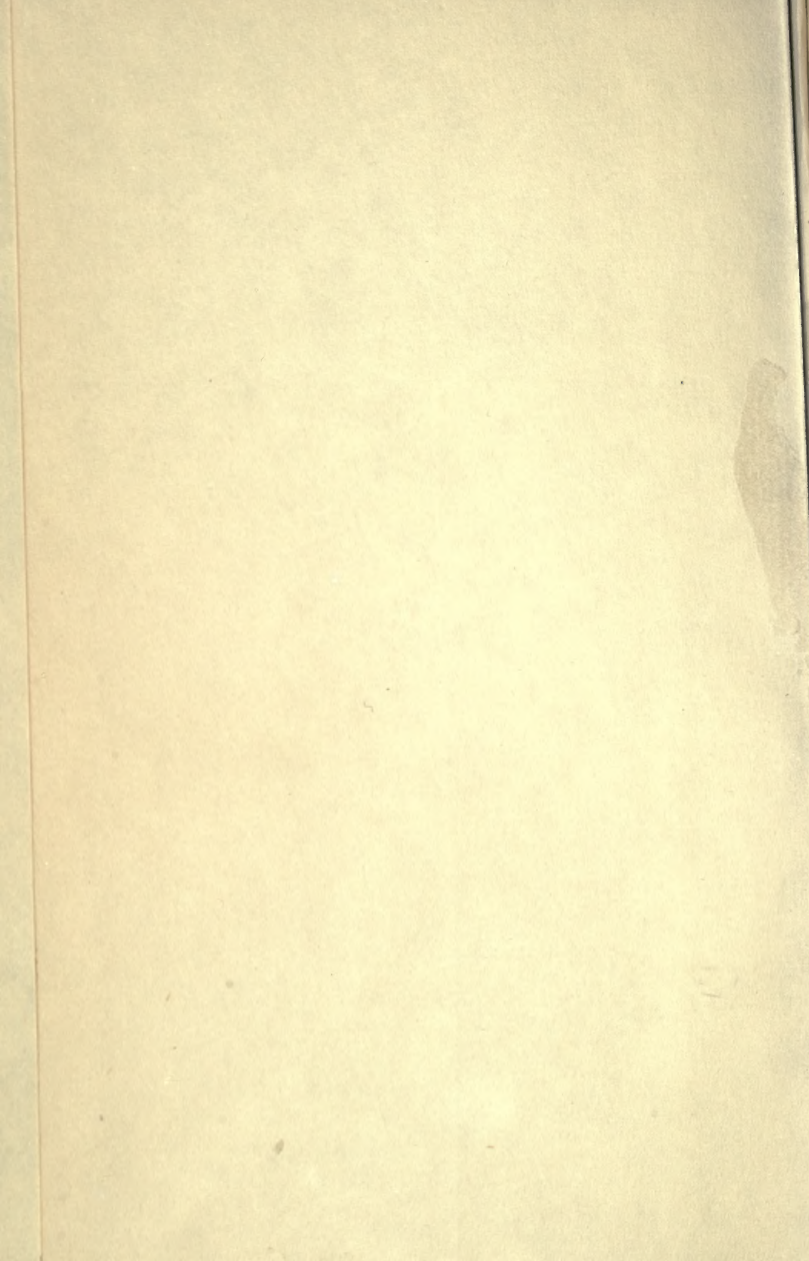
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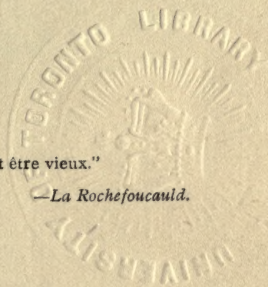
A COMEDY OF MIDDLE AGE

BY

FORREST REID

"Peu de gens savent être vieux."

—*La Rochefoucauld.*



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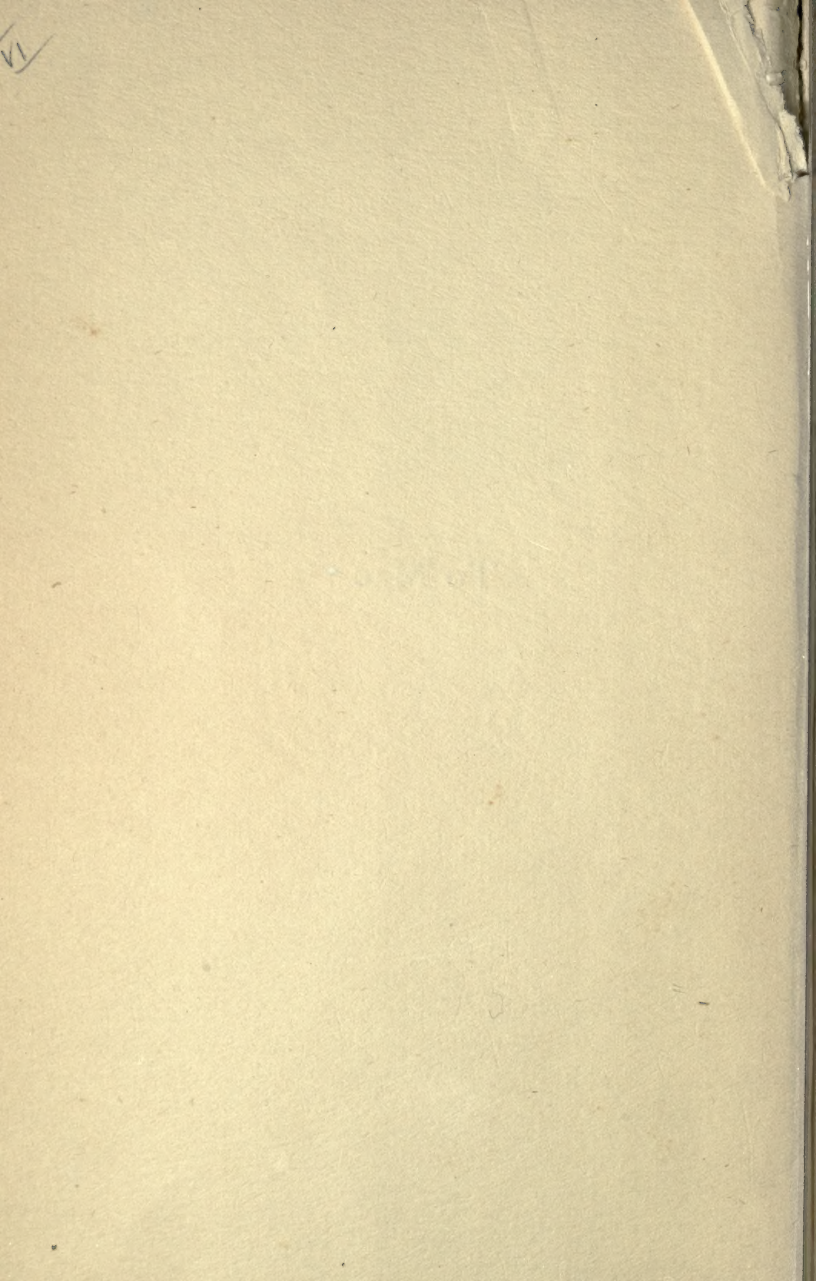
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THE GENTLE LOVER

CHAPTER I

AFTER breakfast Allingham, with his painting materials under his arm, strolled from his hotel in the direction of the Minnewater. By the Dyver he paused under the yellowing lime trees, for it had occurred to him yesterday afternoon that he might make something of the old gray garden wall, which rose, with its drapery of creepers, straight from the green, smooth water. But this morning he found two artists already established there with their easles, and as he passed behind them, and noticed that the canvas of one blazed with solid purples, blues, and reds, while that of the other glimmered faintly in low tones of gray, and faded yellow, Allingham reflected on the subjectivity of all art. As he himself saw the scene, it resembled neither of the pictures in course of construction, and this fact discouraged him from attempting a version of his own. He was easily discouraged, and much given to reflection. He supposed that it must be because he was only an

amateur that his visions of the futility of his craft were so alarmingly frequent. The green Norfolk jackets, knickerbockers, the wide soft hats, of the painters whose work he was surreptitiously studying, suggested to his innocent mind that they were professionals. Moreover, the one with the stained jacket seemed remarkably knowing in the usage of a palette-knife. Before Allingham's very eyes, he "put in" a canal with this implement—a canal that resembled, to the uninitiated, a streak of bright blue putty. Poor Allingham, in the simplicity of his heart, wondered if the slow, dark water really appeared to him to be like that? He also marvelled a little at the Norfolk jackets and knickerbockers. It seemed not very obvious why persons dedicated to the pursuit of beauty should be so indifferent to this quality in the matter of their personal attire. The æsthetic value of Norfolk suits could never, he thought, be very great, yet he was sure there were greens that were less bilious than these, and he continued on his way in a doubtful frame of mind, turning down the Rue Sainte Catherine to the Béguinage, still seeking, though less eagerly, a subject for the water-colour drawing with which he purposed to beguile his morning. Bruges was full of subjects; the whole town was nothing else but a museum of subjects; nevertheless he found this fact to have little of the inspiring effect he had hoped for. Somehow, they seemed to be already so sufficiently there—the charming, time-toned pictures—and any further treatment of them, especially by a bungler like himself,

seemed so superfluous and impertinent. Allingham hesitated and was lost. The whole thing would be too like copying old masters in a gallery. There was nothing else to do but copy. Any attempt at selection would be invidious, any attempt at "technique" would lead to horrid disasters, perhaps equalling those of the palette-knife man. The truth of the matter was that our elderly friend had few illusions concerning his own powers. The most serious was an idea that possibly they might improve with practice. Yet, in less optimistic hours, he was inclined to relinquish even this. Practice, he then felt, would have been more useful twenty years ago. All he could do now was to potter and dabble, to marvel at Claude Monet when he couldn't admire him, and to imagine himself, every now and then, to be on the verge of the real thing. He turned in at the gray stone gateway of the Béguinage, and paused to look round, pondering modest dreams of "fairly decent stuff," yet, characteristically, not eager to unpack his brushes. Close beside him a red-haired happy boy was making a pencil drawing of the little house at the corner, and singing, or rather humming, as he worked, in delightful obliviousness to the fact that he was not alone there :

“ ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages ;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages :
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.’ ”

Both the song and the red-haired boy pleased

Benedict Allingham, and pleased him still more when, at the end of the verse, the singer met his eyes with a frank smile, light-hearted and merry. There was something so pleasant in this smile, and in the red boy's expression, that Allingham at once felt conscious of liking him, and also of not requiring an introduction. The boy, of course, was just a part of the bright September morning, and as friendly and approachable as the sunlight. Allingham did not hesitate a moment ; he simply took for granted the truth, however odd, of his impression ; anything else would have been wrong and stupid.

"It's not bad, is it ?" he said, with a gesture that included the old, red-roofed, pointed houses, the tall elm-trees, the rain-washed golden air.

"No : we like it. At first the others, especially Aunt Sophy, wanted to go on next morning, but after a bit they settled down, and now the railway-station is ever so far away."

He had stopped working, and he stood facing Allingham. Moreover, he had spoken, somehow, exactly as Allingham had expected him to speak. In his loose, light flannel suit, with his slender body and straight limbs, he was the spirit of youth that had strayed by happy chance into an autumnal garden. Just as in the big paws of a half-grown dog, so in his large hands and feet, there was something delightfully young, and his gruff, uncertain, bass voice managed to suggest the childish treble it had been not long ago

“Go on where?” Allingham questioned eagerly. “To Brussels?”

The red boy shook his head. “Not to Brussels. Aunt Sophy did not like Brussels when she was there before.”

“Certainly it wouldn’t do after this,” Allingham admitted.

“I think we’ll go straight through to Italy.”

“And your holidays? In my time holidays used to come to an end in September; don’t they still?”

The red boy confessed that they did; “though mine are only beginning,” he added. “I had a tutor, but he left yesterday afternoon. He went back to England.”

“Was it from him you learned Shakespeare?”

The red boy laughed. “I learned him from a book of songs I was reading this morning in bed. My room is at the back, and I get wakened frightfully early by people coming into the yard and kicking up a row. It doesn’t matter, of course, because we go to bed frightfully early too. We’re staying at the Halle de Paris, near the Grande Place, and as there’s no gas, nor even lamps, there’s nothing to do when it gets dark but go to bed. It’s really a beer-house, but it’s cheap—about a franc a day. Aunt Sophy found it.”

“I wish Aunt Sophy had found an hotel for me. Mine seems to be remarkably dear—I don’t quite know why. I expect they must charge for a view of the belfry.”

“Oh, well, we’re really paying more than a franc. Five, to be exact.”

Allingham looked at the drawing pensively.

“You’re staying at the Panier-d’Or, aren’t you?” the red boy pursued.

“How did you know?”

“Your view. It’s the best place for you any way; you wouldn’t think much of ours.”

“I must come and see.”

“Come and have lunch there. We all sit at a very long table—priests, artists, soldiers and tourists—extraordinary people. Nobody speaks English except us.”

“You are Irish, aren’t you?”

“I come from the north. But I was at school in England for a bit, to improve my accent. It’s now splendid.”

At that moment a girl dressed in white muslin, and carrying a big bunch of dark red roses, wandered in through the old crumbling gateway, and slowly crossed the grass behind them. She wore a large white straw hat trimmed with black, and a black velvet ribbon was tied in a loose bow round the collar of her dress. She was very fair, and, as she glanced at him, Allingham saw that her eyes were gray. Her face expressed an innocence that was almost that of a child, and her beauty had an exquisite quality of freshness, the freshness one associates with certain flowers, with wild roses, with wood-anemones, with early primroses. Allingham could not help following her with his eyes, she appeared

to him to be so much the pleasantest sight he had seen since his return.

“That is my sister,” said the red boy, confidently. “My name is Brian Grimshaw, and her name is Sylvie.”

“My name is Allingham, and I come from the other side of the earth. Till this spring I had not been in Europe for twenty-nine years, but when I was young, I belonged, like you, to the north of Ireland.”

Brian glanced at the paint-box. “Are you going to make a sketch?”

“I don’t know.” His desire to do so had suddenly left him. It occurred to him that he was very tired of the company of his own thoughts, and of his disappointing water-colours.

He watched the girl slowly make a tour of the *Béguinage* till she once more drew close to them. He saw that she was waiting to join her brother, and he was on the point of moving away when the latter called to her.

“Where are mamma and Aunt Sophy?”

“They’ve gone to see the Memlincks. They said something about meeting us there.”

“Come and be introduced to Mr. Allingham.”

The girl smiled at Allingham, and her colour deepened. “I was watching an old woman making lace,” she said. “I wonder if I could learn how to do it?”

“Well, I’ve finished this,” her brother declared, packing up his drawing, which was not particularly

promising. "Would you like to see the Memlincks, Mr. Allingham—or perhaps you have seen them?"

"No; not yet."

"Will you come with Sylvie and me?"

"I shall be delighted."

They went out together through the low porch. As he walked beside them, Allingham was conscious of their charm. They embodied for him the spirit of spring, of sunlight; they seemed to have come to him in a fairy tale. The contrast they made with the dreamy autumnal city—or was it with the autumnal colouring that had crept into his own soul?—was delicious. Curiously enough, he had rarely thought of his age before. There had been no landmarks, nothing by which to judge of his progress down the stream of time; and the years had glided past him so slowly and monotonously as to leave scarcely an impression of their passage. Very soon he would be fifty—he was almost startled by the thought. To the girl beside him—he guessed her age at eighteen—he would certainly appear old, a contemporary of her father. It was only when they reached the door of the Hospital of Saint John that he realized that he had not spoken a word since they had left the Béguinage. He apologized.

"Sometimes I fall asleep on my feet like that. I have lived so long in solitary places that even when I am not by myself it is natural to me to keep quiet."

Allingham spoke, just as he smiled, slowly, but his voice, which was soft and musical, and his smile, which

was melancholy and whimsical, had a distinct attractiveness. There was in his manner, in his way of saying things, a somewhat tentative quality, which only very enthusiastic persons found irritating. To such persons he appeared over-tolerant, and very likely they ascribed his lack of dogmatism to indifference. For if he made a statement he seldom pressed it home, and there was that in his voice, in his slightly hesitating manner, which seemed to imply a consciousness of an infinite number of points of view there for his interlocutor to choose from, any of which was quite as likely to be right as the one he had himself selected. This, combined with an absence of small talk, and a failure to appear amused when he wasn't amused, tended at times to produce an impression of aloofness and unsociability—qualities really quite foreign to his nature. He was perfectly aware of this impression, and regretted it, yet was powerless to avoid creating it; consequently, when he felt, as at present he felt, that he was understood, he was proportionately pleased.

They passed through the courtyard of the Hospital to the old chapter-room where the Memlincks hang. A gray, fussy, little curator, armed with several magnifying glasses, instantly descended upon them, like a demon of the Arabian Nights, and swept them impetuously before the "Adoration of the Magi."

"Memlinck's masterpiece. Look close; you see the hairs," he hissed ardently, drawing the reluctant attention of his visitors to the sprouting, three-day beard on the chin of one of the kings. "The man looking

through window is portrait of Memlinck himself . . . Memlinck—portrait of Memlinck. . . .” He turned in swift pursuit of Brian, who had made his escape, and silently gliding a magnifying glass between him and the head of a weeping Madonna, whispered : “Tears !”

Much was put into that hoarse monosyllable. The coldness and indifference, the unhallowed levity, the stealthy or hurried departure without “tipping,” of thousands of mean and ungrateful sightseers, swam up through it. Whether an artistic or merely mercenary motive fed the sacred stream, the enthusiasm remained. He looked round. “Tears !” he announced again, this time to Sylvie. Yet almost at the same moment he was at Allingham’s elbow. “Burgomeister’s Daughter.” And the magnifying glass passed swiftly and triumphantly over the transparent head-dress. “Burgomeister’s Daughter—Lace !” The words sounded this time almost a note of challenge.

The sharp “ping” of the door-bell rang out through the room, and the curator left Allingham abruptly. Two ladies appeared on the threshold—one, slight, insignificant, with fair, faded hair, and pale, prominent, blue eyes that peered shortsightedly through thick, rimless glasses ; the other, tall, erect, by no means slender, striking, handsome, and possibly a shade too richly dressed, though dressed in black.

“Here’s mamma and Aunt Sophie,” cried Brian.

The fair, faded lady, in whom the remains of a rather foolish prettiness still survived dimly, fell an instant

and easy prey to the little curator. His energy dominated her; he thrust one of his magnifying glasses into her resistless hand; he led her, almost pushed her in front of the "Adoration of the Magi"; and she listened to him in a sort of fascinated bewilderment, diligently peering through her glasses and the large lens to make out those portions of the picture he more particularly recommended.

"Memlinck's masterpiece. Look close; you see the hairs. . . . The man looking through window is portrait of Memlinck himself. . . . Memlinck—portrait of Memlinck!"

"Mamma, you're monopolizing him," said Brian, gaily; "Aunt Sophy can't see."

It was Aunt Sophy who held Allingham's gaze. The dark, "snapping" eyes; the boldly-modelled features and high colour, which together achieved a somewhat florid result; the black hair streaked with silver; the manner, imperious, assured—to whom could these belong—to whom in the name of all that was marvellous—if not to Sophy Kilronan? Yet he hesitated. It was twenty-nine years since he had last seen her. The lady with the pince-nez—mamma—Mrs. Grimshaw—in whom the little curator, with infallible flair, had recognized a sightseer after his own heart, and to whom he was now pointing out the tears of the Madonna—must then be Lucy Kilronan! Lucy must have married! She might, indeed, have been married half-a-dozen times for all he knew. And he still hesitated, keeping in the background, but watching with the

keenest interest. He wondered if he had changed as much as Sophy had? Evidently more, since on her entrance, she had looked him full in the face without the least sign of recognition. And of course when she had seen him last he had been a smooth-cheeked boy. In America, on his farm, he had got out of the habit of shaving, and it had not occurred to him to revert to it on his return to a more sophisticated life. At present his grizzled beard and moustache probably altered him even more than any change his features and figure might have undergone. But he was in no hurry to bring himself to Sophy's notice; he took a distinct pleasure in watching her thus, off her guard, as it were. Something very characteristic in her manner, as she got rid immediately of the officious little curator, made him smile. Then, lest Brian or Sylvie should forestall his surprise by introducing him, he advanced to where she still stood before the first picture. He bowed, and she returned his bow, but distantly, and with an almost imperceptible hesitation.

Allingham smiled with dark melancholy eyes. "Don't you remember me, Sophy?" he asked slowly, in his half-whimsical way, that had in it just the hint of a drawl.

"You're not——" and then she suddenly knew. "Bennet!" she almost screamed, between laughter and recognition. "Lucy, here's Bennet Allingham!"

Mrs. Grimshaw's glasses fell, and next moment, as she grabbed at them and put them on crookedly,

glittered at him in a kind of startled incredulity while she came forward.

"She doesn't believe you," laughed Allingham. "She demands proof."

"*We* knew him," cried the red boy, exciting the suspicions of the grey, dusty, little curator, who imagined that the genuineness of one of his works of art was being called in question.

"Memlinck's masterpiece," he murmured, offering a magnifying glass uneasily. Mrs. Grimshaw, indeed, still clung to one of these instruments, but the others had abandoned theirs. "Look close; you see the hairs. All painted by Memlinck."

"Oh, get away and wash or something," said Brian, unpolitely.

"Brian!" his mother reproved.

"It's all right; he doesn't understand—neither the idea nor the word. . . . Sylvie and I discovered Mr. Allingham in the Béguinage and brought him round here as a surprise for you and Aunt Sophy."

"But how did you know?" Mrs. Grimshaw wondered, and Allingham remembered so well that little air of constant perplexity.

Meanwhile Miss Kilronan was questioning him. "When did you arrive, Bennet? Why did nobody know you were coming?"

"I didn't know myself."

"But have you been home yet?"

"In Ireland? My dear Sophy, as if I should come to Ireland without coming to see you!"

"How long have you been over, then?"

"Since the spring. . . . It really isn't so long as it sounds," he added, with his low, pleasant laugh.

Miss Kilronan glanced at the gray curator, who still hovered discontentedly in the background. "Are we not allowed to talk here?" she asked. "He seems to be annoyed!"

"I'll cheer him up," said Brian. "Burgomeister's Daughter? Where? Burgomeister's Daughter?"

In a second the little man was at his post, his face lit up with the eagerness of exposition.

"We can't ask you to lunch with us, Bennet, because, unfortunately, we have promised to lunch with some people who motored over from Ghent this morning. . . . Where are you staying?"

"At the Panier-d'Or. . . . Couldn't you all dine with me to-night?"

"Well, there's no use pretending that it would be a great compliment to ask you to dine with us. Our hotel is an experiment—not even mentioned by Baedeker."

He moved by her side slowly round the room, pausing before each of the pictures in turn, but glancing at them very superficially. It seemed odd, now, that he and Sophy had not kept up a more regular correspondence, and he was inclined to blame his own indolence rather than hers. It seemed odd, too, that she should not have married. He found himself, as he talked to her, dropping back easily into his old tone of camaraderie. He was glad that she did not ask him any questions

about himself, that she appeared to recognize, as he did, that it was neither the time nor the place.

His eyes turned to Sylvie as she stood examining the shrine of Saint Ursula, in the middle of the room. "Your niece is very beautiful," he murmured, irrelevantly.

Sophy Kilronan smiled. "Beautiful? I should have thought 'very nice-looking' a more accurate description."

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen: the age we were, or, rather, the age you were, when I last saw you."

He grasped it with difficulty. "It seems impossible! And at the time I remember I felt perfectly grown-up."

"Oh, Sylvie is perfectly grown-up. We had a rather tiresome proof of it only the other day, when her brother's tutor fell in love with her and proposed. He was quite a nice boy, too, but of course he had to go. It is a nuisance, as it has left Brian with a superabundance of holidays, and it is impossible to get anybody here."

"Why isn't he at school?"

"He was until they came abroad. His father allowed him to come too, for six months or so. After that, he is to go into the business."

"Into the business! Why not send him to college?"

"You haven't got over your old antipathy, Bennet. He is the only son, you see, and the business is doing

very well. . . . Brian is perfectly content with the arrangement," she added, smiling at Allingham's dissatisfaction.

They moved on slowly, and presently Allingham's eyes were again attracted to Sylvie. "She's charming," he murmured; for there was for him an exquisite sweetness in the young girl's face that made the pictured walls of the museum seem, in comparison, insipid and uninteresting. "She is like the spirit of life," he added.

"Yes, she is a nice girl," Miss Kilronan admitted, not without a hint of surprise at this sudden enthusiasm. "She hasn't so much in her as Brian, but I fancy you will like her."

"By the way, couldn't you all dine with me to-night?" he suggested, absently.

"Of course we could, dear Bennet. You've already very kindly asked us. Didn't I accept?"

He shook himself from his abstraction, and laughed softly. "Yes; yes. I am getting old and stupid, Sophy. There is to be a band playing in the Grande Place especially for you, and we can listen to it from the balcony, and talk over old times."

"That will be very nice."

Mrs. Grimshaw, who had done the gallery in ten minutes, but had spent half-an-hour over the picture-postcards and photographs, now approached, to remind her sister that it was time for them to go. "You must come to see us soon, Mr. Allingham," she said, holding out her hand.

“Bennet has settled that we are to dine with him to-night—the whole family. It will really be more satisfactory than his coming to us, for we couldn’t possibly talk in that dreadful sitting-room. The chairs are as hard as boards, and people are for ever coming in and out, and leaving the door open.”

They moved towards the entrance, under the cold, indifferent, almost hostile eyes of the little curator, who, now that he had received his tip and had nothing further to show, had completely lost interest in the entire party. Allingham was still at Sophy Kilronan’s side, while Mrs. Grimshaw, Sylvie, and Brian, brought up the rear.

CHAPTER II

SOMETIMES Mrs. Allingham had gone to stay with her uncle and aunt, and very often, until he grew old enough to be sent to a public school, she had taken Bennet with her. After that, the boy's visits naturally became less frequent, though he still spent a part of each summer with his grand-uncle. Benedict's grand-uncle, whom he called simply "Grand-uncle," to distinguish him from those lesser uncles who bore subsidiary titles—John, George, or Henry—was a country parson. Attached to the rectory was an unusually large glebe, and the small stipend Grand-uncle received would have been ludicrously insufficient to keep up the place, had it not been augmented by his wife's private income. There had been no family, and in Bennet's time the old people still lived quite alone. Now and then romantic letters, with strange exotic stamps, rich in colour and quaint in design, arrived from scattered nephews, and these stamps were duly added to Bennet's collection, or exchanged for similar rarities. Grand-uncle, as he remembered him now, was a rather faddy old man, with an inexhaustible fund of clerical humour, jokes that Benedict sometimes, on

wet afternoons, looking over back volumes of *Punch*, came upon with a flash of recognition, at first perplexed, but afterwards expectant. For inquiry, unfortunately public, had revealed the fact that *Punch* had not got them from Grand-uncle, so that Grand-uncle, the conclusion was piped in a remorseless treble, must have got them from *Punch*. This had, somehow, caused his opinion of Grand-uncle's "funniness"—never, in truth, particularly exalted—to sink several degrees, and he presently noted that those who laughed most at Grand-uncle's antique tales, presented faces of perplexing blankness to anything really amusing which happened to be said.

The house in Ballinderry, where Grand-uncle and Grand-aunt lived, was low and white and square, with a humming of bees in the eaves, and on one side a closed-in rose-garden. Elsewhere, the grounds, sprinkled with fine old trees, stretched away, smooth and green and dense, till they became lost in a wilder land that was left almost to nature. Grand-uncle was a mysterious thing called a "canon," and spent much time in a room filled with books. Into this room Bennet was not allowed to go except by special invitation. Grand-uncle saw very little of his congregation, towards whom his duty appeared to be fulfilled if he devoted Saturday to the writing of a sermon for them, and Sunday morning to the preaching of it. When people from the parish called, it was Grand-aunt who received them, and the rest was left to two assistants, a curate and a scripture-reader, both of whom little

Bennet knew to be inferior persons—something vaguely described by Grand-aunt, in conversations with mamma, as “not gentlemen.” Grand-uncle, he discovered, again by direct inquiry, *was* a gentleman, and so, amazing and quite unexpected glory, was he, Bennet! The knowledge filled him with a mysterious pride until he found that it bore with it certain undesirable restrictions, one of which was that one wasn’t to be “too familiar with the gardener’s boy.” With whom else should one be familiar? The gardener’s boy was perfectly fascinating, and had taught him how to spit in the manner of a squirt, a gift which Bennet valued highly, and which his school companions envied and assiduously practised. But it appeared he wasn’t a “gentleman,” nor was the gardener himself, nor the coachman, nor any of the farmers—all delightful people. Alone, he and Grand-uncle possessed this gloomy distinction. Bennet was eager to renounce his share in it. The society of the coachman and the gardener and the gardener’s boy was much more congenial and amusing than Grand-uncle’s. The curate, too, when you got him by himself, was all right; and if he laughed at Grand-uncle’s “funniness” when Grand-uncle was there, at least he was never “funny” on his own account.

The curate’s wife was invited to the house on rare occasions, but the scripture-reader’s wife was never invited at all. Both Grand-uncle and Grand-aunt were very religious, especially on Sundays. On Saturday night all the amusing books were whisked away into a

book-case, whose doors were kept locked, and on Sunday afternoon, when Bennet looked for "Tom Sawyer," he found only "The Spanish Brothers," or "Mackay of Uganda." In the mornings they went, servants and all, to a little church in the village, where Bennet's mamma, and Grand-aunt, and Bennet himself, in his best clothes, with wide short trousers that did not reach to his knees, neatly-stockinged legs, and elastic garters that he could never keep from snapping, in spite of the stern glances of Grand-aunt, sat aristocratically apart from the rustic congregation. Sunday was the only day on which Grand-uncle wasn't "funny"; but, on the other hand, on Sunday you daren't make a noise until you got well away by yourself in the big garden or the grounds about it. On this particular day Grand-uncle and Grand-aunt were very easily made cross, and moreover, Grand-aunt suffered from a mysterious ailment called "depression," which made things unpleasant for everybody all round, until she retired to her bedroom and locked herself in there, a quite superfluous precaution. On ordinary days Grand-uncle was never cross—only once, when Bennet and mamma had looked vainly through the big telescope for certain "rings of Saturn," which Grand-uncle saw quite distinctly, could he remember Grand-uncle losing his temper. That night—event of terrific importance!—Grand-uncle had not come down for supper.

Grand-uncle was a wonderful carpenter, and had made a complete croquet-set—all except the hoops.

He was very fond of croquet, and excited Bennet's youthful admiration by using only one hand in playing that game. He, Bennet, had required to use both hands, and even then had seldom managed to win. But he was better than the curate, who never won at all. Grand-uncle was always at his "funniest" when playing with the curate, and made the most splendid jokes all the time. Bennet had once suggested, at lunch, that he did not think the curate cared for croquet, but this idea had been pooh-poohed, and indeed the curate always gratefully accepted Grand-uncle's challenges, and would patiently hunt for his ball amongst the bushes where Grand-uncle had knocked it (there being no boundary rule in those days), and reappear with a smile on his face. Neither Mrs. Curate, nor the scripture-reader's wife, was ever asked to play croquet, on account of their social positions.

Benedict liked staying with Grand-uncle, because the house in the country was a perpetual delight, with its huge, old-fashioned gardens, and its outlying grounds that grew more and more like a wilderness every year. It had all, somehow, smelt so good—even the sheets of the bed between which he had slid at night, tired out, and from which he had sprung in the mornings to lean his head out of the window and wonder if it was going to be as fine a day as it had been yesterday, and if he would be allowed to ride the donkey in the big meadow after breakfast. For a town-bred boy such pleasures could come only in holidays; and when he was at home Benedict lived in a very uninteresting house indeed.

Benedict's father was a timber merchant, and rented a big, ugly, gardenless house in town, though at the time when he, the youngest son, was of an age to be sent to a public school, the business was quite prosperous enough to have paid for a garden even as large as Grand-uncle's. The elder brothers were, one an assistant to his father, and the other just beginning practice as a doctor; and when Benedict declared he was going to be an artist, his parents treated the decision much as they had, a few years back, treated his decision that he was going to be a tram-conductor and punch little round holes in blue-and-white tickets, and ride on the trams all day long free. It was only when he came home from school, term after term, still clinging to his idea, that they began to consider it as cause for anxiety. The drawings that the mother had once praised so fondly were now looked at with disapproval. The father had made inquiries, and had gathered that, though certain popular painters earned quite large incomes, and were even, some of them, knighted, the chances of his son becoming a Leighton or a Leader were too slender to be considered. It was then that the docile and gentle Benedict developed a disagreeable quality referred to at home as his "obstinacy." He refused to discover a taste for any sensible profession, and it was decreed that, since such was the case, he must go into his father's business.

Once this determination had been reached, art, viewed even as a recreation, was frowned upon; so much so, that the drawing-lessons he had up

till then been receiving at school were cut short. It was only from Sophy Kilronan, nominally a friend of one of his sisters, whom she secretly disliked, that Benedict received any encouragement. In his holidays he saw much of Sophy, a high-spirited, vivacious girl, boldly handsome, with a somewhat brusque manner, and certainly a temper. A year or so older than himself, she had always expressed her belief in him and in the fine works he was destined to produce. She had—then, at all events—the kind of nature to which generous enthusiasms come easily, and doubtless her affection for this gentle, retiring boy, helped her to appreciate his talents. Sophy pictured for him a path of glory, and thus helped him to picture one for himself. He was a charming boy, but by temperament and in spite of the famous “obstinacy,” fatally non-combative and unassertive. Even with Sophy’s persistent exhortations, really the secret of the “obstinacy,” he was powerless against his father’s prejudice. He shrank from rows in a manner shockingly unheroic, so that, in the end, instead of going to London or Paris to study art, he entered his father’s office, at the age of sixteen, as an apprentice.

After this he made no further complaints, but his work bored him and he did not do it well. In response to his father’s endless fault-finding, he began to think there was nothing he *could* do well, developing the vicious idea that he was a singularly useless person. This unfortunate notion presently became a conviction which he could not shake from him except at odd hours,

and under the immediate influence of the impetuous Sophy. From his mother he received no more sympathy than from the rest of the family. Her method of discouragement had been different from his father's ; she had tried to laugh him mildly and affectionately out of his " foolishness," which was the name she gave to his desire to be an artist ; and though Benedict had sometimes laughed too, his heart had been troubled, and his intimacy with her, in spite of her kindness in all other ways, had suffered more than she had ever guessed. His father had shouted, and Benedict, who dreaded scenes, oddly enough had been much less hurt by the shouts than by his mother's gentle and smiling dismissal of the whole thing as a romantic dream. She would ask him, playfully, if he thought he would make a good artist, and the boy could only mumble that he didn't know. Thanks to this treatment, he doubted now whether he would make a good anything ; but he was quite certain that he would make a bad business man

On Saturday afternoons, if he chanced to go for a walk with Sophy, he would express this pessimistic conviction, and Sophy would echo it, which was not consoling, even when she added that she was sure he could become a great painter, and that his sketches were the best she had ever seen. But, as one of his sisters pointed out when he made the remark at home, this meant very little. He was obliged to admit that Sophy's knowledge of such matters was slender, and the number of sketches she had examined few. Still, her sympathy

was all he had, and he was very fond of her. She suited him better than his boy friends, who were far from recognizing him as a phoenix. He began to paint an Annunciation for Sophy's birthday. The Madonna was as "soulful" as a long neck, and large eyes, and a butterfly mouth, could make her (Benedict being at this time an ardent admirer of everything pre-Raphaelite), but though portions of her were good enough, she was, somehow, all wrong as a whole. The sister, who was Sophy's friend, said that she looked fifteen feet high, and the truth of this criticism wrung, in private, some horrible hours of self-questioning from Benedict and even a few tears, of which, having now reached the mature age of sixteen, he was bitterly ashamed. He scraped out the Madonna, and painted a landscape on top of her, which Sophy, when she came to receive it, very much admired. . . .

And meanwhile his father, still obsessed by the "obstinacy" theory, declared angrily that everything the boy was given to do at the office was badly and grudgingly done, and discussed the matter passionately with Mrs. Allingham after they had retired to rest. This lady from time to time reproved Benedict for not giving his mind more to his work. The virtue of her reproofs was accentuated by the fact that she had fallen into ill-health, so that Benedict felt miserable pangs of conscience for troubling her. He was still very fond of his mother, though less so than he had been in the past, for he knew now that she had never understood nor tried to understand him, perhaps had

never even dreamed there was anything *to* understand. Her health failed rapidly, and a winter passed in a warmer climate did not succeed in restoring it. She returned home looking more fragile than ever. It became obvious now that the end was only a matter of months, perhaps of weeks.

One Sunday morning when the others were at church she had a long talk with Benedict, who had stayed at home with her at her request; and this talk had ended in the boy's promising to give up sketching altogether. He did not tell Sophy of the promise till after his mother's death, and then, to his surprise, Sophy was furiously angry with him. He pointed out how impossible it would have been under the circumstances *not* to promise; how his mother had first asked him if he would do something to please her very much, and when he had said that he would do anything, had begged him to give up his painting. Sophy privately considered the request as about the meanest trick she had ever heard of. Publicly she declared that such a promise was not binding. Her failure to convince her friend of this provoked her to still greater impatience. Benedict was now seventeen, and should be able to look at things reasonably. She almost quarrelled with him, and, alas! even her faith in his talent was shaken. If he had really been what she had once thought him, she told herself, he would not have given in so easily. . . .

The next event in his life was an illness, terminating in a hemorrhage from the lungs. Coming after his

mother's illness and death, the warning was not to be neglected, and its immediate result was that young Benedict ceased to be a timber merchant and became a fruit farmer in America.

Year after year passed, tranquilly, monotonously, while he made his living, but not his fortune. He never returned home. Gradually he seemed to lose touch with everything that home represented. Then one day came the news of his father's death, and of the division of the property, which was not nearly so large as it had been ten, even five, years earlier. Benedict invested his share in accordance with the advice of a friend, and continued fruit farming. The friend's advice turned out to have been excellent, so excellent that one day it occurred to Benedict that he was forty-seven years old, and that he had farmed enough. He recalled the dreams of his boyhood, and was surprised that an opportunity to realize one of them did not particularly thrill him. It was too late; the colour had faded out of his enthusiasm; what remained was but a shadow of the real thing. Nevertheless he resolved to give himself a chance. He had no longer any idea of becoming an artist; the day for that was over. But he had no ties, and, despite the lucky investment, no real friends. It seemed to him that he might just as well spend the years remaining to him in congenial surroundings; so he packed his trunk, and sailed for Europe.

CHAPTER III

THESE memories, like a soft cloud of dust, stirred by his unexpected meeting with Sophy Kilronan, floated to and fro in Allingham's mind when, in the soundless afternoon, he had gone out to execute the sketch he had failed to produce in the morning. Curiously enough, as it seemed to him, he found himself more interested in his work than he had been for a long time, and in the end it was only the fading light that drove him from it. He packed up his materials and strolled along the grassy margin of the Lac d'Amour, under the tall trees. He followed the avenue that leads straight on to the Porte de Gand, and as he paced slowly over the damp yellow grass, with its carpet of dead leaves, he found something in the tone of his surroundings that reminded him vividly of the walks he had taken with Sophy years and years ago, by the banks of the Lagan. It was in the moisture of the mild soft air, in the gray clouds, in the red and brown and yellow of the leaves, in the perfect quietude which seemed to descend out of a windless sky. The carillon, which had kept him awake during the earlier part of the night, now sounded far and faint, a dreamy,

melancholy music, curiously detached from earthly life. The rustle of his own footsteps, and now and then the shrill cry of a frog, were the only sounds he heard. . . . And the light faded slowly from the red roofs and gables of the dead town, with its many spires, its rough dark streets, its canals and bridges, its way-side shrines. . . .

When he reached the beautiful old gateway he turned homeward, passing through the park, where knitting mothers watched children at play upon the grass. Allingham was already looking forward with pleasure and a mild flutter of excitement to receiving his guests. There was something boyish about him still. Possibly his solitary life, but more probably a peculiar innocence of mind, had kept fresh within him a well of unspoiled youth. It was like a spring of water in an autumn landscape ; and it had made his first meeting with Brian in the Béguinage natural and easy.

As he came back, by the Rue de l'Ane Aveugle, to the Grande Place, he passed a shop in whose lighted windows views of Bruges, photographs and coloured postcards, were displayed. He glanced through the open door and saw the red boy and his sister. They were talking and laughing, and evidently very busy. Allingham walked on, but gradually his pace slackened, till at the corner of the deserted street he came to a standstill. He had a strong impulse to go back to the shop, but a feeling of shyness kept him from doing so. It was ridiculous, of course, that one should be shy at his age ; but he feared that they might look

upon him as a bore. It was the old, stupid diffidence, he told himself, which had spoiled so many of his pleasures in the past. With an effort he shook it from him and retraced his steps.

They saw him at once. "Here's Mr. Allingham," said Brian. "Look; she's been buying all those moonlight cards! Did you ever see anything like them?"

Sylvie held out a postcard for Allingham to inspect. "They're very pretty, aren't they, Mr. Allingham?"

"But you know they're only faked," her brother persisted. "And, at any rate, you've never seen the place looking like that, so what's the use of getting them? . . . You needn't keep on holding them out to Mr. Allingham," he added, unkindly; "he thinks they're rotten, or he would have said he didn't before this."

"He doesn't think anything of the kind, do you, Mr. Allingham?" Sylvie appealed.

"I ought to make a nocturnal exploration before I decide," Allingham compromised. "I think we'd all better go for a tour of inspection to-night. How would that do?"

"The band begins at eight," said Brian; "Sylvie and I were asking. Most of the cafés have put out their chairs and tables already. They've rows and rows of them just under your hotel windows. Sylvie and I are going to have something to drink at one of the cafés."

"That can very easily be managed."

Sylvie coloured. To Allingham there was an adorable

attractiveness in her blush, which came so easily, and he watched her with a faint smile in his dark eyes.

“Don’t listen to him, Mr. Allingham : it’s only his nonsense.”

“Well of *all*——” her brother began. “And it was you who proposed it !”

Allingham laughed.

“You know very well I was only making fun,” said Sylvie, tossing her head.

“I know very well you weren’t.” He took a cigar from his waistcoat pocket and smelt it appreciatively. As his glance met Allingham’s his left eye rapidly closed and opened.

“You may put *that* thing away, at all events, for mamma won’t let you smoke it.”

“Somebody must smoke it : it’s too good to be wasted.”

“We went to buy a box of matches,” Sylvie explained, scornfully, “and the girl in the shop offered Brian some cigars. He bought *one* because he didn’t like to tell her that he wasn’t allowed to smoke. . . . It cost five centimes.”

“This swanking comes very expensive,” said the red boy, putting the cigar back in his pocket.

Allingham laughed again. He liked Brian, and as he watched and listened to him now he reflected fantastically that it would be very pleasant to have a boy of one’s own. It occurred to him that there were a good many things in life he had missed—too many ; almost everything.

"I see you have been buying Tauchnitzes, Miss Sylvie," he remarked. "May I look? . . . *Doctor Claudius*: I remember reading it a long time ago. It's a nice book."

"Don't you like Marion Crawford?" said Sylvie, eagerly. "There's something about his books I love. Do you think they're really *great*, Mr. Allingham? I mean, in the same way as Dickens and Thackeray?"

"Are you fond of Dickens and Thackeray?"

"Oh, yes——" a little doubtfully.

"She's like Dan Leno: she never gets tired of reading them, because she never begins."

"I do begin," said Sylvie. "I like *The Only Way*. I think Martin Harvey's lovely."

"*The Only Way*?"

"It's by Dickens. It's very sad. I cried all the time, at the end. . . . So did everybody."

"I didn't," said her brother, promptly.

"You didn't understand it, perhaps," Sylvie suggested.

"Oh, didn't I? It's full of self-sacrifice, Mr. Allingham. You know the kind of stuff: a chap frightfully wild, and all that, but full of noble sentiments. He goes about longing to die for somebody. . . . 'I-am-going-to-do-a-better-thing-than-I-have-ever-done,'" he imitated. "And then the limelight's turned on, and all the women begin sniffing. Sylvie and I were at a *matinée*, and the pit was like the pool in *Alice in Wonderland*."

"Don't listen to him, Mr. Allingham. This is all put on to show off before you."

“ If I wanted to cry I’d wait till I got home to do it, anyway. But women love that sort of thing. They go prepared for it beforehand. . . . Mamma *did*,” he asserted indignantly, seeing Sylvie on the point of denying this. “When she went the second time she took two handkerchiefs—one for drying her glasses and one to cry into.”

“ It’s too bad, Miss Sylvie,” Allingham sympathized.

“ Please don’t think I mind what *he* says,” Sylvie replied, disdainfully. Then, with a rapid change of manner : “ Do you know, I’ve just remembered Aunt Sophy has a photograph of you in her bedroom at home . . . taken when you were quite young. I’ve often seen it, and one day I asked her who it was ; but I had forgotten about it till this moment.”

“ I’m afraid it must be out of date,” Allingham murmured. “ I believe it is the only ‘ professional ’ photograph I ever had taken.”

“ When you were laughing a minute ago you looked just like it.”

“ I can’t have been more than seventeen,” Allingham recalled. “ I remember I got it done for a Christmas-box for my mother. My sisters always said it was flattering.”

“ I’m sure it wasn’t. I can see the likeness quite well. It is in your eyes : they are just the same.”

* * * * *

On his way back to his hotel Allingham noticed a barber’s shop, and through the window he caught a glimpse of a man inside being shaved. He looked at his watch, and stood for a moment reflecting. Then he pushed open the glass door and entered.

CHAPTER IV

As he awaited his guests Allingham felt half amused, but at the same time a little self-conscious. He certainly had not imagined that it could make such a difference. He had noticed the surprise of the hotel servants: the hall porter had even failed to recognize him. He strolled across the room, taking up a position near the window, as if interested in what was going on in the square, where the cafés were already ablaze, but in reality studying his own image in one of the tall mirrors. The face that looked out from this polished glass was olive-complexioned, oval in shape, rather lean, and rather melancholy, with dark eyes and thin, mobile eyebrows—one of those faces which have little beauty in youth, but which gain, with the passing of years, a fineness, a delicacy, that is really the expression of the spirit within. He had already examined this countenance with some particularity while dressing for dinner, but neither then nor at present had the scrutiny been prompted by vanity. He was simply curious; and with the sense that his guests would very soon be noting all the changes that he was noting now his feeling of self-consciousness was increased.

It reminded him of an occasion in the remote past, when he had come down one Sunday morning to face the humorous criticism of many brothers and sisters in his first suit with long trousers. He recalled perfectly his ridiculous embarrassment on that day (it could scarcely have been greater had he been doomed to appear with no trousers at all), and a smile flickered across his dark, lean face. Then he saw the red boy in the square, and went out to the hall to meet him.

Brian, hatless, looking like one of the burning Seraphim of Milton, his flaming hair tossed, his eyes bright, at all events recognised him, did not appear even conscious of the alteration that had taken place. "The others will be here in a minute," he said.

"That's only his good manners," thought Allingham, pleased by the boy's tact.

But meanwhile Brian was talking: "I came on alone, because mamma wanted me to go to the post-office. Of course it was shut. . . . Sylvie sent you these." He held out a bunch of red roses that looked like the very bunch she had been carrying when Allingham had first seen her. "Shall I put them in water for you? . . ." He turned to a waiter: "Will you bring me something to hold these flowers, please."

"But you shouldn't have brought them, you know," Allingham demurred vaguely. "It's too bad."

"Oh, it's all right," the boy answered lightly. "Why shouldn't you have them as well as anybody else? . . . Here they come."

He disappeared with his roses into the dining-room, while Allingham turned round to welcome the ladies of his party.

"My dear Bennet," cried Miss Kilronan, gaily, "this is indeed a return to civilization!" She exhibited none of her nephew's delicacy as she studied her old friend with a calmly critical eye. "I wish I could take ten years off my age so easily!"

"It was Miss Sylvie who suggested it," Allingham answered, meekly.

The girl blushed. "I was talking about his photograph—the one you have, Aunt Sophy."

"I hope I come nearer to it now," Allingham said, turning to her with a smile.

"Doesn't he, Aunt Sophy? I think he's hardly changed at all."

"You're both rather personal, you know," Allingham laughed. "Aren't they, Mrs. Grimshaw? All the same I *feel* younger. It must be an example of the influence of matter over mind."

"It was very good of you to send me those flowers, Miss Sylvie," he added, as they made their way to their table in the window of the dining-room.

Brian had already put his finishing touches to the bowl of red roses, and he stood, in his light flannel suit, watching them cross the room.

"Did you post my letter?" Mrs. Grimshaw asked at once.

"I couldn't; the post-office was shut. I told you it would be."

"If it's only a question of stamps, I'm sure the hall porter here has plenty," Allingham suggested.

"It's not that, thank you, Mr. Allingham. The letter has to be weighed; I don't know how much it will be. . . . Give it back to me, dear; I don't want you to carry it about in your pocket for weeks."

"I'll post it in the morning," Brian promised.

"I'd rather you gave it back to me now."

"Is it anything very important?" Miss Kilronan inquired.

"It is important that it should be posted soon. If it doesn't catch Mrs. Leslie in Brussels she mayn't get it at all."

"Mrs. Leslie!" cried Sylvie in astonishment, while her brother reluctantly produced the letter from his pocket, but kept it on the table beside him.

"It's a handkerchief of hers," Mrs. Grimshaw explained. "I found it this morning among Brian's things, but I'm sure I don't know how it got there."

Brian had turned scarlet, and he bent his head over his soup.

"It is a lace handkerchief," his mother went on, "or I shouldn't have bothered about it. I can't think how it got into Brian's possession. I was just putting away some of his things that had come from the wash when I discovered it." She continued to express surprise at this peculiar accident till Sylvie changed the subject.

"Mr. Allingham is going to take us all to look at Bruges by moonlight. We want to see if it is like the

post-cards I bought to-day. If it isn't, I'll make them take them back at the shop."

"I fancy Mr. Allingham is quite content with seeing Bruges by daylight," Miss Kilronan said quietly. "You and Brian can tell us all about it."

"But he *wants* to come," Sylvie pouted. "I don't mean that we're going to start immediately after dinner. We'll stay with you and mamma and listen to the band as long as you like. It is after that we're going."

Miss Kilronan raised her eyebrows as she exchanged a glance with her sister, who looked doubtfully at Sylvie, but said nothing.

"They're beginning now," Brian cried, half rising from his chair to look out.

"Sit down, dear; you must behave properly." Nevertheless, Mrs. Grimshaw herself peered out into the square, as well as she could, through her glasses. A crowd was already gathered there, surrounding the band-stand, about which a group of soldiers lounged, smoking.

"I met the conductor this afternoon," Sylvie said. "He wears glasses just like mamma's. It looks idiotic with a uniform."

At that moment the soldiers threw away their cigars, and the lights glittered on the brass and silver of instruments as they were drawn from their covers.

"There's the conductor now!" cried Brian.

They could see him look all round after he had taken up his position. Then he waved his baton, and the music swung out into the night.

"What is it? I seem to know it," Mrs. Grimshaw murmured, nodding her head in a not quite successful attempt to keep time with the tune.

"Mamma knows all the latest airs," Brian laughed.

"Is it new, dear? I'm sure I've heard it before somewhere."

"It's that wretched old *Zuider Zee*," exclaimed Sylvie. "We never hear anything else."

"Well, I don't profess to be musical," Mrs. Grimshaw sighed.

"One may be musical without being a detective, mamma. It sounds to me distinctly like 'op' something or other."

Mrs. Grimshaw let his remark pass, as she let a good many others—especially of her son's—without comment. To Allingham a sort of placid vagueness seemed to be this lady's chief mental characteristic. He remembered it of old, but it appeared to have increased, and often, now, lent a sufficiently cryptic quality to her own conversation.

After dinner they sat out on the balcony, and the band deserted the *Zuider Zee* for less popular airs, while Allingham and Miss Kilronan, with an occasional interjection from Mrs. Grimshaw, threw a frail bridge of memories and explanations across the gulf separating the past from the present. But, whether it was the presence of the others that hampered them, or only that they had waited too long to begin, they seemed to have less to build their bridge with than might have been expected, and, after a little, the conversation

languished. Still they sat on, though each remark was now followed by a silence, till at last the two elder ladies discovered that the air was getting chilly, and they all strolled back together to the other hotel.

“ I wonder where Brian has gone to ? ” Mrs. Grimshaw asked, suddenly missing him.

“ I expect he’s still listening to the band,” Sylvie replied. “ It’s really quite early ; isn’t it, Mr. Allingham ? ”

Allingham looked at his watch. “ Twenty minutes to ten.”

“ Then we’ve lots of time for our walk. There is the moon, too ; we *must* go now.”

“ It’s too late, dear,” Mrs. Grimshaw interposed, doubtfully.

“ But it’s only twenty to ten, mamma ! ”

“ Mr. Allingham, I’m sure, has done quite enough walking to-day.”

“ Have you, Mr. Allingham ? ”

“ Not at all. I shall be delighted. What do *you* say, Sophy ? We can drive, you know, as soon as you begin to feel tired ? ”

“ Oh, *I’m* not coming, thanks. I shall write a letter, and then go to bed.”

“ Mayn’t I go, mamma ? ” Sylvie begged.

Mrs. Grimshaw hesitated, and Allingham said : “ We shan’t be very long.”

“ Well, if Mr. Allingham is sure he doesn’t mind. . . . And remember, if you see Brian, to tell him to

come home at once," she added. "And if you feel it cold, turn back."

Sylvie was radiant. "All right! . . . Now, Mr. Allingham, I'm ready. We mustn't lose any more time."

CHAPTER V

“WHAT made you suggest driving to Aunt Sophy?” Sylvie asked, as soon as they were alone. “I don’t want to drive. It wouldn’t be a bit the same. . . . I hope Brian didn’t go away to smoke that cigar, because I’m sure it will make him very ill. . . . Don’t walk so quickly, Mr. Allingham. I must look at everything. I don’t believe you really want to come.”

“You overrate my unselfishness,” said Allingham, in his slow, pleasant voice.

“You mean, I impose upon it, I’m afraid. . . . It was a pity mamma began talking about Mrs. Leslie’s handkerchief at dinner to-night. I tried to stop her. Did you ever notice how impossible it is to stop people from saying something you don’t want them to say? If it is anything you *want* them to say, the least thing puts them off.”

“Why were those particular remarks unfortunate?” Allingham drawled.

“Brian didn’t like them. I expect he has been keeping the handkerchief as a memento. And then, to have mamma send it to the wash and return it was so extremely unromantic!”

“It hasn’t been returned yet; he still has the letter.”

“Did mamma not take it?”

“No. . . . Who is Mrs. Leslie, if you don’t think me very inquisitive?”

He paused to light his pipe, and Sylvie watched his dark, fine face, as it was lit up by the flare of a match. “She’s only a person we met in Holland. I really know nothing about her except that she’s a widow, and quite young, and supposed to be pretty. I didn’t admire her, but other people did. She was travelling with a Mrs. Gregg, a queer, lugubrious kind of creature, who, when she got you alone, used to talk about her late husband all the time. It was really rather dreadful, but one had either to be rude or to listen. And Mrs. Leslie was worse. She was for ever joining on to us and trying to be agreeable. Mamma, of course, seemed to like her, but mamma likes everybody. And Brian liked her. She flattered him in the most bare-faced way. I thought it perfectly disgusting, for she wouldn’t have taken any notice of him if there had been anybody older there—any man, I mean. She treated him as if he were grown-up, and you know he isn’t a bit that kind of boy. She used to ask him to take her to places, and appeal to him for his opinion about things. She made him look perfectly ridiculous, though he didn’t know it, poor child, and mamma didn’t know it. Aunt Sophy, unfortunately, wasn’t there.”

“Do you think such things really matter?”

Allingham asked. "Boys so often pass through a sentimental phase in connection with an older lady."

"It's rather silly, that is all. I daresay I shouldn't have minded if he hadn't been my own brother. But Brian isn't naturally like that. I mean, it was all her doing; he just did what she asked him to do." She paused, doubtfully. "Perhaps I shouldn't be talking to you in this way; but your having known mamma and Aunt Sophy for so long makes you seem like one of our family."

"Of course it does," said Allingham, smiling.

In spite of Sylvie's moon, which floated high and bright in the wide black sky, the narrow streets through which they passed were very dark, lit only at the corners by flickering lamps. Presently the tower of Saint Sauveur, stretching up, huge and gaunt, into the night, loomed before them. In one of the recesses of the wall, railed off by iron railings, was a life-sized, painted statue of Christ after the scourging, naked, with drawn white face and pale blood-streaked body. Lit from above by a small, hanging lantern, it looked, in its crude realism, ghastly and strange. Completely hidden in its niche till they were within a few feet of it, the feeble light lent it, as they came upon it suddenly and unexpectedly, a gruesome air of life that was for a moment disconcerting.

"It is horrid, isn't it?" said Sylvie, quickly.

"Don't let us look at it."

She hurried on, but at the corner of the Place de la Vigne they came upon another coloured image, though

this time it was only a statuette of Mary and the Child Jesus, set in the hollow of the wall. The moonlight touched it with a cold pallor, but the little votive lamp had gone out. The scene, the atmosphere, were oddly at variance with their conversation, and Allingham felt this when he murmured :

“ We are still in the middle ages here.”

“ It is the darkness that makes it all so strange.”

They slackened their pace.

“ Do you know that there is a sorcerer living in Bruges ? ”

Sylvie glanced at him. “ What do you mean ? ”

“ Oh, I am perfectly serious,” Allingham laughed. “ There was an American talking about him last night ; telling a young English clergyman who sits at my table that he ought to go to see him.”

“ I’m afraid I don’t understand, Mr. Allingham.”

“ He doesn’t call himself a sorcerer, of course, but he would certainly have been burned for one at the time these protective images were put up at the street corners.”

“ But what is he ? What does he do ? ”

“ He invokes spirits,” said Allingham. “ Don’t you know that for fifty cents you can hold long conversations with Plato, or Shakespeare, or George Washington, or Cyrus P. Higgins ? He is what is called a medium. The American who was talking about him is a spiritualist. I ought to introduce you to him, because he is going on to Italy from here, like you—to Milan, and then to Florence, where he has a scientific friend with

whom he is going to hold experiments. The friend lives at Fiesole, and the medium is to come and give sittings to them there. Oh, we heard wonderful tales ! ”

“ But do you believe in that sort of thing ? ” Sylvie questioned eagerly.

Allingham smiled. “ The American says I have no right to say whether I believe in it or not. I am not an ‘ inquirer,’ Miss Sylvie.”

Sylvie was disappointed. “ Then you are not going to see this person. . . . What is his name ? ”

“ Flamel is his name, and I *am* going to see him.”

“ But if you don’t want to ; I mean if you aren’t even curious ? ” she wondered.

“ Well, I more or less promised this young fellow at the hotel to go with him. He was very much enthralled, and he seemed a decent sort of youth.”

“ I’d simply love to go,” Sylvie sighed. “ But I’m sure Aunt Sophy wouldn’t let mamma allow me to.”

“ Do you know, these unconscious tributes to your Aunt Sophy’s good sense are very striking ! I had several from your brother this morning. . . . I don’t think you’ll miss much by not going,” he added. “ Mediums, as a rule, are rather second-rate individuals.”

“ You will tell me everything that happens, all the same, won’t you ? ” Sylvie begged.

“ I can tell you now,” Allingham replied. “ There will be a dark séance—flying tambourines, ghostly hands, and perhaps what we referred to last night as a ‘ materialization.’ ”

“ Why don't you let the young Englishmen go by himself, then ? ”

“ I'm sure I don't know. The risk wouldn't be very great.”

“ The risk ? ”

“ Well, there always is a risk, you see.”

“ In what way ? ”

“ The medium might have some practice in hypnotising, and if he saw a good opportunity might be tempted to play tricks with it. . . . I would let him go with the American, but the American is leaving Bruges to-morrow.”

They had come, by the Lac d'Amour, as far as the old round brick tower, once a part of the ramparts, and in the moonlight, as they stood on the iron bridge and looked out across town and country, they seemed, like the man in Hans Andersen's tale, to have found a mysterious way back into the fifteenth century. The beauty of the young girl's face, its expression of innocence and simplicity, was refined by the cold pure light in which he now saw it to a loveliness that was almost wholly spiritual. The silver-gray willows swept the water. A bat flew out, hovering over the lake, and now and then the peculiar, shrill cry of a frog broke the silence. They were on the verge of an enchanted city, where all the inhabitants had been asleep for hundreds of years.

“ If one could believe in spirits existing anywhere, it would be here,” said Allingham. “ Don't you think so, Miss Sylvie ? ”

“But I *do* believe in spirits,” said Sylvie. “Whether they can be called back to earth or not is a quite different matter. And because things seem to be impossible, it doesn’t follow that they mayn’t be true.”

“That, at all events, is unanswerable,” Allingham chuckled mildly. “You are like Saint Louis, Miss Sylvie, who, when he was asked to come to look at a miracle at that moment taking place in his own chapel, refused to do so. Christ, he was told, had become visible in the Host. But Saint Louis said, ‘I have always believed in the “real presence” because I have not seen it. If I saw it I should no longer be able to believe in it.’ The point is, to me, a little obscure, but Mr. Halvard, from whom I heard the tale, considered it eminently satisfactory, and I have no doubt you will do the same.”

“Who is Mr. Halvard? Is he your young Englishman?”

“Yes. He works in the east end of London. He told me he had worked there ever since his ordination, a ceremony which I suspect to have taken place rather recently.”

Sylvie was silent a moment. “What is he like?” she then asked. “He must be rather remarkable, don’t you think?”

“He’s remarkably young,” Allingham laughed. “I haven’t seen enough of him to discover more than that.”

They had turned homeward, following the same path by the lake side.

“Where does the medium live?” Sylvie next inquired.

“On the Quai de la Potterie. You can go and look at his house to-morrow, with Brian, and see if you can discover anything strange about it. I can’t give you the number, but I should think you would easily recognise it.”

“You make fun of everything, Mr. Allingham; but I *will* go. . . . And remember you promised to tell me all about the séance.”

“Supposing I am sworn to secrecy; what am I to do then?”

“I know what that means: you’re trying to get out of it already. You’ll go, and then you won’t tell me a thing. It’s like papa and his freemason secrets.”

“But if everybody went on your principle there would be no secrets left,” Allingham expostulated. “Romance would disappear from life.”

“I’m not going to talk to you any more, Mr. Allingham. You know what I expect of you.”

He didn’t know in the least, but he went home with a strange lightness of heart. It was as if something had come into his life that had given it an unexpected, an undreamed-of zest. He seemed to have taken a draught from the fountain of youth, a draught of that wonderful elixir, which perhaps had been concocted generations ago in one of these dark old houses of this dark old town. . . . Youth—youth—everything was in that! It was the unspoiled, the untried! It was romance! It was the dazzling, glittering mirage

that beckoned and called irresistibly. It awakened strange melodies that sang in a low passionate undertone—coming from far away, out of the past, out of the future. It blew on dying fires and fanned their ashes to flame. It filled the day with brightness, and the night with dreams.

CHAPTER VI

SYLVIE, on going upstairs, saw a light in Miss Kilronan's room, and went in. It was not her custom to pay confidential visits of this kind to Aunt Sophy, whom she now found reading in bed by the light of three tall candles, but to-night she wanted to talk to somebody, and it was Aunt Sophy, after all, who knew most about him.

"These are Brian's splendid idea," Miss Kilronan remarked, alluding to the sources of the unexpected brilliancy of her apartment. "He came in with a bundle of them. He has stuck them up all round his own room, each standing in a pool of grease, as it seems there are no candlesticks."

Sylvie, without removing her out-of-door things, sat down in a straw chair beside Aunt Sophy's bed. "Did I stay out too late?" she asked. "It's eleven. There's that silly old carillon just going to begin." She began to sing the tune with the bells.

"Don't you think it makes enough noise by itself?" Miss Kilronan suggested. "You'd better go and take off your things. You ought to be tired after tramping about all day." She returned to her book, with an

unflattering appearance of finding it of more interest than her niece.

"We had a perfectly delightful walk," Sylvie said, undiscouraged, "and I'm not a bit tired. This place is simply lovely at night. It's like a dream. I don't a bit want to go on to Italy."

Miss Kilronan continued reading, but her lips involuntarily formed the question, "Where did you go to?"

Sylvie gazed absently at the back of her aunt's book. "*Romola*," she read aloud. "I hate George Eliot. . . . We went everywhere."

"So I gathered. . . . I thought it was to be only a ten minutes' walk!"

"You're reading that, I suppose, because we're going to Florence?"

"I'm glad to see you know what it's about."

"I don't; but I remember painting the pictures in an old *Cornhill*. They were full of monks and friars and agitated heroines."

"Please do stop creaking that chair," Miss Kilronan interrupted, for Sylvie was swaying backward and forward, and the straw chair squeaked a hoarse accompaniment to each movement.

"It *is* about monks, isn't it, Aunt Sophy?"

"It is about Savonarola."

"Who was Savonarola?"

"Really, Sylvie! . . . One would think you had never been educated! If you would try to improve your mind a little, instead of rushing round playing

golf and tennis all day long, it would be a good thing."

"But I *do* read," Sylvie pouted.

"You read a lot of trash that would be much better at the back of the fire."

"Why? What harm does it do?"

"It fills your head with nonsense. The other day I saw you with a penny novelette!"

"Aunt Sophy, you never——"

"*Her Only Love*, or some such name."

Sylvie laughed. "It wasn't mine at all; it was mamma's. And, anyway, it was quite nice, and cost threepence. . . . Fancy, Aunt Sophy, Mr. Allingham says there's a magician in Bruges!"

Miss Kilronan seemed singularly unimpressed. "Was that all he could find to talk about?"

"No; but this is a real one—a medium, or whatever it is. Mr. Allingham's going to see him. . . . Why did you never mention Mr. Allingham, Aunt Sophy?"

"*Mention* him?"

"I mean—when you knew him so well. One would think you would have talked about him sometimes."

"My dear child, you seem to have come home in a very peculiar frame of mind, even for you. He was only a boy when I knew him; not much older than Brian."

"Don't you think he has melancholy eyes? . . . Weren't you surprised when you saw him without his beard? It makes such a difference, doesn't it? Do you like him, Aunt Sophy?"

Miss Kilronan had not replied to any of these questions, and Sylvie, apparently, had scarcely expected her to do so, for she went on without a pause: "He has a beautiful voice, hasn't he? I think he's just exactly like somebody you would read about in a book—one of Marion Crawford's books. *They're* not trash. . . . I wonder why he never got married?"

"I suppose because he didn't want to." It occurred to her, and somehow the reflection was not displeasing, that Allingham must have been rather bored by her niece.

"Do you think it's too late now? He's not so very old, is he?"

Miss Kilronan sighed. "Forty-seven."

"I suppose it *is* too late, then. I don't think he looks forty-seven, do you? He must be very lonely."

"Why?"

Again her question had been involuntary, for she knew that her niece needed only the slightest encouragement to keep on chattering till midnight.

"Well, I don't see how he can help feeling lonely, living that way, all by himself. He looks lonely, too. When you knew him before, was he at all like what he is now?"

"Very probably."

This reply was intended to be discouraging, but Aunt Sophy could not help spoiling its effect by adding directly afterwards, in a pensive voice, "I'm afraid he hasn't been successful."

Sylvie took her up eagerly. "Why? In what way has he not been successful?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't ask so many questions. . . . There! I'm perfectly certain I heard a mosquito! You must have let it in when you opened the door, for they can't get through the screen over the window. I knew you would. Now, I suppose, I'll be kept awake half the night! Really, Sylvie——!"

"I'm awfully sorry, Aunt Sophy. I'll see if I can't catch it before I go."

"Aren't you going now?"

"In a minute. I just want to ask you one thing. When you say he hasn't been successful, do you mean that he hasn't made a fortune?"

"I have no idea what he has made," answered Miss Kilronan. "People like Bennet Allingham don't make fortunes."

"Do you think that's against them?"

"I don't think anything about it. I've got something else to do. There's nothing against Mr. Allingham, and never was, except that he is too good-natured."

"Too good-natured?"

"About getting his own way. He lets anyone who wants to, take advantage of him."

Sylvie pondered this. "Don't you think there is something very attractive about a character like that?" she asked, softly.

"There's something distinctly irritating about it. However, it's a fault you're not likely to drop into. . . . You needn't begin to form romantic ideas about

Mr. Allingham. He is simply a middle-aged person who, on the whole, has lived a rather useless life."

"Aunt Sophy, how can you talk like that, when you know nothing about his life?" cried Sylvie, indignantly.

Miss Kilronan's lips drew into a rather grim smile, but she answered nothing.

Sylvie was silent, too, till she suddenly declared, "I think he is like a man who was once very much in love with somebody. But it was impossible for them to get married, so he has never got married at all."

Miss Kilronan glanced quickly at her niece, and, for the first time within Sylvie's experience, she actually blushed. Then she said sharply, "You're really too foolish and sentimental for anything, Sylvie! One would think you were still fifteen! I suppose this is the result of spending an hour with him in the moonlight."

Her manner of resuming *Romola* was emphatic enough to make her niece rise slowly to her feet. "Good-night, Aunt Sophy," she murmured dreamily.

"Good-night; and don't bang your door. Your mother has been in bed for an hour."

But in her own room Sylvie stood by the window, looking out over the pointed, moonlit roofs for a long time. Aunt Sophy was very odd and "snappy," she reflected. It was useful with hotel-keepers and railway-porters, but it had its disadvantages at other times. Aunt Sophy didn't understand people like Mr. Allingham. She decided that she was going to

be very "nice" to Mr. Allingham. He had already told her that he was going on to Paris next week, or they might have suggested his coming to Italy with them. She wondered if it would do to make such a suggestion. Of course, it ought to come from Aunt Sophy, but, unless Aunt Sophy thought of it herself, she wouldn't make it. It was funny hearing her call him Bennet. . . . And then, his shaving—that had been rather nice of him! . . . She laughed a little as she leaned her forehead against the window. . . . Her thoughts wandered for a moment to the unfortunate young man, Brian's tutor, who had fallen in love with her. At the time she had not cared much about him, one way or the other; and he had been dreadfully plain, with weak eyes. Sylvie couldn't imagine a successful lover with weak eyes. . . . She remembered him trying to play tennis, and how absurd he had looked, but she felt a certain tenderness towards him now. She pictured him as remaining a bachelor all his life, like Mr. Allingham. If one were really in love, and the other person didn't care, wasn't that what one naturally would do? And she saw her lover grown old in patient loyalty, as old as Mr. Allingham; and somehow his pale, weak eyes had become dark, melancholy, and romantic, and his slightly "squeaky" voice had grown low and musical, and he spoke with a little drawl, and with a slow smile that came and went when one didn't expect it—a smile that was very kind and very pleasant.

CHAPTER VII

ALLINGHAM slept soundly, and awoke with a drowsy feeling that something delightful had happened yesterday. For a few minutes he lay sleepily collecting his thoughts and planning how he could spend his morning. It was still early when he came downstairs, but he found Mr. Halvard, the young clergyman, already seated at one of the tables. The waiter pulled out a chair at the same table, and Allingham took it, acquiescing in the proposed coffee. He said good-morning to Mr. Halvard, who seemed very young, with an almost girlish freshness of complexion, and soft fair hair that waved over his forehead. He looked, Allingham thought, like one of the youthful saints who might be figured in a window of his own church. Where else could one find such guilelessness? And when he spoke his voice perfectly bore out this impression. It was so mild, so soft, yet withal so already ecclesiastical! Allingham amused himself by recognizing in it a distinctly high-church note, ritualistic, with a faint yearning after the older faith. He had been out, probably, at early mass, and was just returned. Allingham would have liked to be in a position to say

whether it was the manner of Oxford or of Cambridge that distinguished this young man, but in any case it was full of sweetness and light. And behind him, as he sat there, with his fair hair like a halo, rose a vision of beautiful old buildings, of college courts and gardens, of rectory lawns and cathedral closes, all mellow and golden and remote from ugly modern things, a cloistered world, lying within the common work-a-day world, like a pearl within the shell of an oyster. Yet he by no means suggested effeminacy. There was, in those delicately chiselled features, and in the eyes that had the strange cold blue of ice, an almost steel-like quality, something very fine but very strong.

These fantastic musings were scattered by the rather high-pitched voice of the young clergyman, who spoke with a clear cultured intonation which Allingham could admire as a work of art, though the tenor quality of his voice was not agreeable to him.

"I had no idea Bruges was so delightful," Mr. Halvard said. "I am so glad I did not miss it; yet my coming here was quite a matter of chance."

His manner was slightly shy in its friendly conventionality, and a little smile played constantly upon his beautifully-formed mouth.

"I like it myself," Allingham admitted cautiously. "There's something gloriously unsanitary about the canals that appeals to my sense of the picturesque."

"Perhaps I am enthusiastic because I have never been abroad before," Mr. Halvard pursued, "but I

love the dear, quaint old houses. I have been trying to think what it is that makes the whole place so charming."

"I should say the charm of Bruges was largely soporific. It is soothing. I arrived when it was raining, on the grayest of gray days, and I was soothed at once. Many people find it dull. The unsanitariness of the canals leaves them coldly suspicious, and they go about sniffing for smells."

Mr. Halvard smiled remotely, and his smile, though entirely friendly, yet managed to convey to Allingham that the phrase "sniffing for smells" was faintly vulgar. "I have been thinking of our visit to Flamel," Mr. Halvard murmured—"that is, if you really care to come with me. We might, perhaps, go to-day."

Allingham helped himself to a second cup of coffee. "Of course you *want* to go?" he surmised.

"Well—eh—I think one oughtn't to miss a chance of this kind. . . . Even if there isn't anything in it, you know, it—it helps to increase one's experience. And a clergyman can't have too wide a knowledge of life; he ought to see how much there really is in such things."

"I expect Flamel is only a quack," returned Allingham, lightly. "I mean by that, that I don't think you'd be doing the subject justice if you were to take your idea of its value from the performances of such a person. . . . However, I'll go if you like," he added, immediately.

"I should like to, very much, but of course I don't wish—— Perhaps I shouldn't have suggested it; perhaps you would prefer not to come?"

"Oh, I don't expect it will do me much harm," Allingham laughed. "And it was I myself who suggested it in the first instance, I think."

"But shouldn't one have a certain amount of faith before—— I mean, isn't it necessary for the manifestations?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I understood that the faith was to follow. If you have it already, it hardly seems necessary that there *should* be any manifestations. But we'll have faith. We'll go armed at all points."

Mr. Halvard did not appear to be in sympathy with this way of regarding the matter, but he was too polite to pursue the subject further. "The carillon here is very noted, is it not?" he asked, as the admonitory sounds heralding an approaching performance from that indefatigable chime floated out upon the air.

"I expect so," Allingham replied.

"It may be a long time before I find leisure to travel again, and I am anxious not to miss anything that is really noted."

"I'm afraid you couldn't miss the carillon, even if it wasn't," said Allingham. "But there are a couple of gnomes up in the tower who will show you everything."

"They are there to look after the bells, I suppose?"

"That's what they do now; but they used to be in one of Grimm's tales. I don't know how they ever

got out, and now they are out I don't know how they'll get back again."

Mr. Halvard allowed a slight pause to follow this remark, then he said: "I should think one could see everything here in two days? I have only six weeks holidays, and I am anxious to see Switzerland and Italy."

"I should leave Switzerland out, if I were you. It's not the proper time of year."

"I'm afraid I can't afford to be too particular about times of year," the young clergyman dimly smiled. "What hour would you think of for our visit?" he pursued, as Allingham, having finished his coffee, was getting up from the table.

"After dinner. It would hardly be giving him a chance, would it, to go in broad daylight?"

Again he noticed, with amusement, how Mr. Halvard overlooked his lack of seriousness.

"We shall probably meet before then," the young clergyman said.

"Very likely. You'll see me at one of the street corners, struggling with a masterpiece."

"A masterpiece?"

"In water-colour."

"Oh, you are an artist! I didn't know."

"Merely a dabbler. I don't take my painting very seriously, and certainly nobody else does. . . . Well, *au revoir*. Don't let the gnomes tempt you to fairyland."

He went out, leaving Mr. Halvard to the friendly and more congenial suggestions of the romantic and optimistic Baedeker.

CHAPTER VIII

COMING out of one of the curiosity shops at the corner of the Quai du Rosaire, and already beginning to regret the too hasty purchase of an old bronze crucifix, which was probably not old, and at the best would be a nuisance, adding to the weight of his luggage, Allingham encountered Brian and Sylvie. The girl was caressing a large black-and-white, rough-haired dog, who stood harnessed to a small milk-cart, his red tongue hanging out like a flag, and his sides heaving like bellows.

“Isn't it a shame to treat them like this?” she cried, as Allingham approached. “Just look at the lovely old darling! I'm sure he's never been patted before. Look how he's wagging his tail!”

The dog was indeed agitating this expressive appendage with an astonishing vigour, while a half-grown lad, his master, stood looking on, grinning sheepishly.

“But you know you can't keep them standing there all day,” Brian was expostulating. “They've got the milk to deliver.”

“It's wicked to make a dog drag a great, heavy

cart," Sylvie continued. "Just see how he's panting ! . . . Ask the boy where he lives, Brian."

"What for ?"

"Because I want to know."

"Où demeurez-vous ?" said Brian to the boy. "You can't have had any idea I was so polyglot, Mr. Allingham !"

"None whatever."

"My French is too pure for this chap, at any rate. . . . Où est votre maison ?" But the boy still kept silence, though he had grasped that he was being addressed.

"Dans quelle rue demeure ce gros chien-ci ?"

At this point the woman who had sold Allingham his crucifix appeared. She began to talk in guttural accents to the milk-boy, who responded in the same tones.

"Rue de la Vigne," she said, smilingly, to Sylvie. "A little shop ; quite small."

"Oh, thanks very much. Would you mind asking him if he is going back there now ?"

"Now, at once ; yes, he returns."

"Please tell him that I am coming with him. I want to buy the dog."

"The dogue ! Ah, they will not sell him. He is a good dogue, with great strength." But she told the boy, who gazed at Sylvie, grinning more than ever. With a sudden and unexpected cry he started the animal off, the cart rattling vigorously over the rough paving-stones.

Sylvie and her companions followed on the footpath. Every few minutes the boy looked round.

“ You’re not really going to buy him ? ” said Brian.

“ They’ll only laugh at you.”

“ Let them laugh.”

“ I’m afraid if you did buy him, Miss Sylvie, it would simply mean that they would get another,” Allingham reminded her.

“ Well, even if they do, that poor old thing has worked enough.”

“ He’s not old,” her brother contradicted. “ He’s quite a young dog.”

But they were obliged now to increase their pace in order to keep the cart in view, for the boy seemed suddenly desirous of shaking them off.

“ I don’t think we need go any further,” said Brian, dissuasively.

“ What would you do with him, suppose you got him ? ” Allingham asked.

“ If they let me have him it won’t be hard to manage about the rest. . . . Remember, you’re to help to look after him, Brian.”

“ I might do that in return for a small weekly wage. Aunt Sophy, however, is the one who will be keenest.”

“ But, you know, you’ll find him a fearful nuisance when you’re travelling,” Allingham felt it his duty to put in. “ He’ll be a great deal worse than my bronze crucifix.” And he tapped this regretted purchase feelingly.

Sylvie gave him a glance of disappointment. “ Mr.

Allingham, I'm surprised at you! I didn't know you would let yourself be prevented from doing a thing simply because there were a few difficulties in the way!"

"It's not Mr. Allingham who's going to have the difficulties," murmured Brian. "It's your poor little brother. . . . There's the shop," he added, for the milk-cart had stopped before a small house at the corner of the street. "Not much of a place!"

"Wait here," Sylvie commanded.

"Won't you allow me to do the bargaining for you?" Allingham asked.

"No, thanks," she returned severely; "I'd rather do it myself. And I don't want you to come with me," she added hastily.

"She doesn't want us to know how much she's going to give for him," said Brian. But Sylvie had already left them, and they watched her hurry on down the street and enter the shop.

"I expect she'll not find it so easy as she imagines," Allingham murmured. "They'll probably not even understand what it is she wants."

"Oh, they'll understand her all right. Very likely somebody speaks English—it seems to be a kind of place where you can get tea. At any rate the boy knows. But there'll be the mischief of a row when she brings him home. I really don't see much sense in it myself."

In a minute or two Sylvie reappeared, followed by a man, two women, and the boy, all talking at the

same time, in intense excitement. They crowded about the dog, criticising him passionately in incomprehensible tongues. Sylvie looked back at Allingham and her brother, as they stood, like the prudent disciples, watching from a distance. She smiled. Her face was flushed, and she seemed to be waiting for the storm to subside. Then suddenly they all, Sylvie included, retired into the shop again.

“It’s getting quite exciting,” said the red boy.

“I’m afraid it won’t be much use,” said Allingham.

The red boy, his hands in his pockets, looked on smiling. “Oh, she’ll get him,” he declared, confidently. “The only thing is that she’ll have to pay too much. . . . *Les riches Anglais*, you know; and unfortunately we’re only *pauvre Irlandais*, and I’ll have to go halves. . . . Here they come again! I wonder why foreigners can never do anything quietly! You’d think they were going to have a free fight for the beast!”

“But don’t you think we ought to——”

“No; stay here; it’s all right; we’d better not join in now. . . . What did I tell you? They’re going to unharness him!”

Sylvie looked back at her companions, a smile of triumph on her face, while the milk-boy fumbled with the straps that bound the animal to the cart. He then attached a cord to his collar, and next moment Sylvie came toward them, leading the dog, while his former owners, with several neighbours, who had joined the group, and to whom the matter was at

present being explained, stood in the middle of the road and watched her progress.

“Let’s hurry,” she cried, as she came up with them.

“Run away,” said the red boy, ferociously, to three or four ragged urchins who were escorting her.

But as they turned the corner of the street they relaxed their pace, and the girl began to laugh. “Now, Mr. Allingham, you see I did get him after all!”

“I congratulate you,” Allingham returned, dubiously.

“Poor old dear! The first thing is to take that horrid muzzle off.” She stooped down and unfastened the muzzle, while the dog wagged his tail gently. “Look! he’s licking my hand! Did you ever see such an old pet?”

“He gave it exactly one lick,” said Brian, dispassionately, “and even with that he seems to think he acted too impulsively.” For the dog had turned his back to Sylvie, and, sitting down, had begun to review the situation.

“What’s his name?” Allingham inquired.

“His name is Graf.”

“Here, Graf! Graf!” cried Brian, and the dog again wagged his tail, but without getting up. “He knows who his master is!”

“Does he? That’s just like you! The next thing you’ll say is that you took all the trouble.”

“The trouble hasn’t begun yet,” said Brian, darkly.

Graf was persuaded to walk on, but his reluctance increased as he drew farther and farther from his old

home, and his tendency to sit down and gaze questioningly at his new friends, and even to pull in the opposite direction, became more pronounced.

“Here’s a shop where we can get a proper lead for him.” And Brian disappeared inside, returning with a long leather leash.

“He looks more respectable now,” he said, as the leash was exchanged for the cord. “What he needs is a bath. Let’s take him back to the hotel and wash him.”

But a few minutes later, on entering the Grande Place, they came face to face with Mrs. Grimshaw and Miss Kilronan. Allingham felt suddenly as if he had been caught red-handed in some school-boy’s “scrape,” and wondered if his cigar lent him a sufficient air of detachment.

The two ladies stopped in astonishment.

“What have you got there?” cried Miss Kilronan, in piercing tones.

“This is Graf, Aunt Sophy,” Sylvie replied. “I’ve just bought him, and he’s coming home to be washed.”

“Sylvie, you’re surely joking?” Mrs. Grimshaw murmured, incredulously.

But Miss Kilronan had grasped the seriousness of the situation. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean what I say, Aunt Sophy. He’s my dog. I bought him a quarter of an hour ago. Didn’t I, Grafums?”

“Our dog,” corrected Brian. “Fine animal; and we got him dirt cheap.” He glanced at Allingham,

who had an idea that he was expected to back lance up, but found himself, under Sophy's stern gaze, utterly incapable of doing so.

"Cheap!" echoed Miss Kilronan. "You don't really mean to say, Sylvie, that you've *actually bought that dog?*"

"Yes. Why not?"

Mrs. Grimshaw looked helplessly at her sister, as if begging her not to be too severe.

"And might I ask what you are going to do with him?" Miss Kilronan went on, with ominous calmness, "You needn't think that they'll allow you to keep him at any hotel. You had better take him back at once to whoever you got him from."

"Whomever, Aunt Sophy," Brian ventured.

"Don't be impertinent, Brian."

But a little flush had come into Sylvie's cheeks, though she still smiled. "I think I can look after him all right, Aunt Sophy. We'll not let him trouble you in any way."

"Perhaps——" began Mrs. Grimshaw, timidly.

"Nonsense, Lucy! You can't possibly allow them to keep it. Sylvie is quite old enough to know better. If she hasn't any sense now she never will have any."

"Graf, come and make friends with your Aunt Sophy," ordered Brian. "*Look*, Aunt Sophy, he's wagging his tail at you! He did, really; I saw it move quite distinctly, didn't you, Mr. Allingham?" But Graf only responded with a deep, hollow bark.

Miss Kilronan turned to her sister. "The dog

must be sent back *immediately*, Lucy. Brian can take it. . . . The whole thing is perfectly outrageous. As if we could go about with a mongrel like that. Were you with them, Bennet, when they bought it ? ” she suddenly demanded, turning her glance upon Allingham.

“ Of course he was,” said Brian. “ It’s my impression that the original suggestion came from Mr. Allingham. He had a lot to do with dogs in America, you know. The very moment he saw Graf he said : ‘ There’s an animal that shouldn’t be missed.’ Sylvie and I would never have dreamed of getting him on our own account. We know nothing about dogs. What breed did you say he was, Mr. Allingham ? ”

“ A Bruges-hound, I think,” said Allingham, quietly.

“ Hold your tongue, Brian,” Miss Kilronan snapped. “ You’d better decide at once, Lucy, what you’re going to do.”

But Mrs. Grimshaw hated to decide anything at once. Even where the far future alone was concerned she found it difficult. Allingham saw the red boy’s bright, mischievous eyes fixed upon him, and he could not resist softly pinching his ear. “ If I were you, Sophy,” he murmured, pacifically, “ I should leave the responsibility with these young people. Let them take the trouble to find a lodging for their dog, and if he gets them into difficulties that’s their look-out. It will be an excellent chance for Master Brian to show what he is capable of.”

“ Well, I suppose we’d better think it over,” Mrs.

Grimshaw murmured tentatively, with another glance at Aunt Sophy, which, unfortunately, failed to mollify that lady.

“If you are going to indulge all Sylvie’s and Brian’s whims, Lucy, it would save a good deal of time and trouble to say so honestly, and have done with it. *This* is the moment to decide. The dog must either be taken back to its owner now or not at all.”

“But I don’t know who the owner is,” Mrs. Grimshaw feebly protested.

Her sister had merely silent scorn for such pusillanimity.

“That’s right, mamma,” laughed Brian. “Mamma feels a sympathy for Graf. So does everybody except you, Aunt Sophy; and you’re only disguising yours. From one fancier to another, Mr. Allingham, don’t you think that in Graf we have really a fine dog?”

“I expect he’s quite a good dog,” said Allingham, guardedly.

“Wait till you see him after his bath, Aunt Sophy.”

“How much did you pay for him?” Miss Kilronan next asked, turning abruptly to Sylvie.

The girl blushed, but she answered calmly: “Six pounds.”

“Six pounds for that creature!”

Mrs. Grimshaw looked a little blank; so even, for a moment, did Brian, though he immediately recovered himself. “That is three each,” he said quickly. “You can’t get Bruges-hounds for nothing, Aunt

Sophy, and there's no use pretending you can; is there, Graf?"

"I thought you were saving up your money to buy a camera," Miss Kilronan reminded him.

"That was before I had seen Graf."

The camera had evidently been forgotten by Sylvie, and she looked distressed. "I had only two pounds with me. The man is to call for the rest," she murmured.

Miss Kilronan gave an icy smile. "Well, Lucy, as you seem to be going to allow them to keep the dog, we need hardly stand here discussing it for the rest of the morning."

"My dear Sophy, one would think I had had something to do with it," her sister returned, querulously.

"You're forgetting that I have a third share in him," Allingham declared.

But on this point at least Mrs. Grimshaw was firm. "Nonsense, Mr. Allingham. If the children like to squander their money it is their own affair."

"Mr. Allingham was only joking," said Brian, quietly. "Well, I think I'd better go on and get this old chap washed and into his best clothes."

"Remember, dear, we are having lunch early," his mother warned him, as he led Graf away. "The train goes at a quarter-past one."

Brian looked back. "I suppose Mr. Allingham will be coming too?"

"I'm sure I don't know whether he'd care to. We are going to Ghent, Mr. Allingham, to see that cele-

brated picture—you know the one—the something or other, by Memlinck.”

“Van Eyck’s ‘Adoration of the Lamb,’” Miss Kilronan corrected, crossly.

“That’s what I said, Sophy. Perhaps you would lunch with us, Mr. Allingham, and come too. There’s a train back which will bring us home in time for dinner.”

“I shall be delighted,” Allingham declared.

“Where are you going to now, mamma?” Sylvie asked.

“We were going to see the arrival of the new curé. They told us at the hotel that there would be quite a procession to bring him in, and that we shouldn’t miss it. . . . I forgot to tell Brian. I’m sure he would like to come.”

“We’d better go and fetch him,” Sylvie suggested. “He can wash Graf afterwards.”

She and her mother turned in pursuit of the boy, leaving Allingham with Miss Kilronan. There was a moment’s pause before Sophy said, with a curious change from her former severity of manner: “I don’t think we need wait for them: it’s evidently nearly the time.” She had caught sight of a young clergyman hurrying across the square, a pair of opera glasses, in a shining black leather case, swinging from his shoulder, and a Baedeker in his hand. He bowed as he passed them, and Allingham returned his salute.

“Who is he?” Miss Kilronan inquired.

“ A young parson called Halvard. He is staying at the Panier d’Or.”

Sophy Kilronan still followed him with her eyes. “ He is very handsome,” she decided.

“ A beautiful youth,” Allingham admitted.

“ Does that mean that you dislike him or only that you don’t admire him ? ”

Allingham laughed. “ My dear Sophy, it means simply what it says. He *is* a beautiful youth, isn’t he ? ”

“ I rather like that ascetic, spiritual type.”

“ What is there particularly spiritual about him ? ”

“ I think everything.”

“ Well, I daresay he fasts once a week.”

Meanwhile they were following, at a more leisurely pace, the path Mr. Halvard had taken.

“ Do you mind telling me, Bennet, why you allowed them to buy that miserable mongrel ? ”

“ I can’t see on what grounds I could have interfered, since I don’t particularly recollect that they consulted me.”

“ One surely doesn’t wait to be consulted by children.”

“ Do you call Miss Sylvie a child ? ”

“ She behaves like one.”

“ To me she appears to be an extremely dignified young lady.”

“ No, Bennet ; I’m really serious about this. It isn’t a joke at all. It will be most inconvenient, and lead to endless trouble when we are travelling or

looking for rooms. . . . And I'm sure it was Sylvie's idea."

"I don't think it was an idea that one need be ashamed of. I'm rather a hardened person, and yet I must say I don't like to see these unfortunate beasts dragging carts about."

"That's all nonsense. You know perfectly well that buying a dog in this way won't do the slightest good. It was simply a fad on Sylvie's part. The one who was, and who always is, generous, is Brian."

"Yes, he's a fine little chap. I like him immensely."

"Try not to spoil him, then."

"Why should I spoil him?" He was silent till he presently asked, "Should you consider it spoiling if I—eh—"

"I know what you're going to say, and I *should* consider it spoiling—very much so. What is more, to do him justice, I don't believe he'd like it himself."

"Well, I had a vague notion that perhaps he mightn't. . . . My taste, you see, Sophy, isn't yet altogether vile."

"It's not as if this were the only thing of the sort," Miss Kilonan pursued, returning to her grievance. "Sylvie would sometimes try the patience of an angel; she's so obstinate."

Allingham glanced at his companion as if expecting to find her amused by her own remark, but she wasn't. "I think you're a little severe with them, you know, Sophy," he ventured. "If you recollect, you and

I, at their age, weren't always on the side of the authorities."

"That may be, but we had some common sense."

"*You* had. I don't know that I ever possessed a great deal, even then."

"You were the most docile boy I ever came across."

"But wasn't that just what you used to find fault with me for being?"

"Well, Bennet, I won't argue with you. You know very well that what I say is true."

They were walking down the Rue des Pierres towards Saint Sauveur. The street was already full of people, and arches and festoons of paper flowers hung across the road from house to house. People were standing in windows and on balconies, and the sound of a brass band came faintly on the wind, mingled with the solemn tolling of the cathedral bell. Miss Kilronan, bold, handsome, and holding her head high, was condescendingly interested, as she moved among this crowd of humble persons.

"Doesn't it seem ridiculous to make all this fuss about the arrival of an extra priest?" she exclaimed.

"Here, child, look where you are going to, and don't rush into people like that!" A small ragged urchin drew back, staring at her out of wide black eyes.

"Let us wait here," said Allingham, amused. They had reached a door-step, which just at that moment happened to be vacated by its occupants. "Here come the others," he added, as he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Grimshaw being borne along through the

crowd by Sylvie and Brian, like a helpless sailing ship in the tow of two rival tugs.

“Here’s Aunt Sophy and Mr. Allingham,” they heard Brian call out.

“Well, I’m sure they must think a great deal of their clergy,” panted Mrs. Grimshaw, as she was steered triumphantly into the harbour of the doorstep, “or else they have got hold of a particular treasure this time.” She wiped and fixed her pince-nez, which had been knocked awry in the crowd.

“They’re coming !” Brian cried.

The music had grown rapidly louder, and the band now came into sight, followed by a number of men carrying banners. Then a crowd of children appeared (all the children of Bruges, it seemed), walking four and five abreast, and each carrying a small flag in his right hand. Many of the boys represented Saint John the Baptist, wearing flesh-coloured tights, with skins, like rabbit-skins, round their loins and across their shoulders. Lithe, brown-skinned, faun-like, each bore a slender cross, and after them followed two boys in long robes, with wreaths of golden wire, and stars in their hair, impersonating the young Jesus. These latter were attended by angels, little girls, painfully conscious of white muslin frocks and wings of some soft fleecy substance, like cotton-wool. The angels waved banners of artificial flowers, and the boys, bold, already half corrupt with a precocious knowledge of life, slid their dark, liquid eyes over the faces of the admiring crowd. The procession became more strictly

ecclesiastical. Incense boys, in red and white robes, waved their censers, while other boys carried lighted candles that burned with a faint and sickly flame in the bright sunshine. An image of the Virgin Mary was borne past, shoulder high, and immediately after the image marched the priests, two by two, some very old, barely able to hobble along, others quite young; and last of all came the new curé himself, fat, bald, with little shifty eyes, loose, thick mouth, and an almost simian absence of forehead.

"He's awfully rotten-looking," Brian murmured, disgustedly. "You could understand them having a procession in the town he's just left!"

"You shouldn't judge by appearances, dear," his mother reminded him. "He may be a very good man though he is a Roman Catholic."

"It's not because he's a Roman Catholic that I'm objecting to him," Brian growled. "However, I hope his looks belie him."

In a few minutes the music ceased, and the procession, followed by as many of the populace as could squeeze in, passed through the high doors of the cathedral, while Allingham, Miss Kilronan, and the Grimshaws, turned down a side street, and took a circuitous route back to the Grande Place. They found it deserted, for already the crowd had dispersed, almost miraculously, and the town had resumed its normal aspect, like a sleeper who has been momentarily disturbed by a cry, only to settle down into a deeper repose.

CHAPTER IX

STROLLING back to the hotel in the evening dusk, having bidden good bye to the Grimshaws, Allingham, with a quick flash of regret, recollected his promise to Mr. Halvard. In the hall he made an inquiry of the porter, who informed him that the young clergyman had returned an hour ago, thus removing the extremely forlorn hope that Mr. Halvard might have gone on some excursion which would have prevented him from keeping his engagement. Allingham went upstairs to his own room.

When the gong sounded for dinner he had again forgotten Mr. Halvard. He lingered before his window, looking out across the empty square, from which rose the clack, clack, of a woman's sabots, as she passed beneath him, a basket of linen on her head. He thought of Ghent and of Sylvie. The memory of the girl's charm seemed to linger with him, like a faint and sweet perfume there in the darkness. He felt a little tired, pleasantly tired; and the notes of the carillon sounded dreamy and delightful. That the girl should appear to find some attractiveness about him, to be happy in his society, was very pleasant. And that

she *did* like him, he had now no doubt. Part of her charm lay in her frankness and simplicity, in an absence of all "manner," or polite insincerity. He had an idea that he should always be able to read her likings and dislikings. There was something in her character, a kind of delicate naiveté, that was exactly the spiritual reflection of the bright dawn of her beauty. She was like a rose in an old-fashioned garden, a rose with the fresh coolness of dew upon it, that one finds, suddenly, unexpectedly, in the early morning, where last night there had been only green leaves and a few unfolded buds. Her colouring, the clear red and white of her complexion, seemed to make his comparison extremely apt. A milk-maid in one of Isaac Walton's meadows might have looked a little like her, but only a little, for in Sylvie the milk-maid's beauty was refined and softened, delicate as the velvet petal of the rose he had first compared her to. . . .

There came a tap at his door—a waiter, dead perhaps to all romance, but alive to the fact that dinner had begun ten minutes ago. Yes—yes—he was just coming. . . . "She is charming," he said to himself, as he obediently followed the thoughtful waiter downstairs. "And the boy, too," he added. "They are both charming. . . ."

CHAPTER X

"I'm afraid I'm rather late," he said, as he sat down opposite Mr. Halvard. "However, they haven't waited for me, I see."

Mr. Halvard looked up. "I—eh—thought of waiting," he murmured.

Allingham laughed. "That was kind of you. . . . I wonder where they've put my flowers?"

"The roses? . . ." Mr. Halvard glanced round at the other tables. "I don't see them."

"It is rather nice having roses to look at, when outside it is chill September. . . . But I remember now: they are up in my bedroom. . . . What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

"I went to see the modern picture gallery this afternoon."

"Rather a dismal collection, isn't it? I believe even one of my works might brighten it up."

"I'm not a very competent judge of pictures, but they did not appear to be good."

Allingham smiled. He did not know why Mr. Halvard's manner should so amuse him, but it had this effect. "I see you've finished," he remarked. "Please

don't wait for me. It's particularly uninteresting watching other people eat, and I'm accustomed to solitary repasts."

"Oh, I've nothing to do," Mr. Halvard declared.

His beautiful face, in the shaded light, had an extraordinary youthfulness, but he must really be, Allingham reflected, several years older than he looked. The fact that he was the son of a brewer, that he should be connected in any way with Halvard's Ale—a beverage so splendidly vulgar in its grossly advertised popularity—seemed unkind, almost cynical, and Allingham was sure Mr. Halvard never partook of it. Then suddenly he saw that what had been puzzling him ever since their first meeting was a really remarkable resemblance the young man bore to Mantegna's Saint George in the Accademia at Venice.

"You still think of paying a visit to your mysterious friend?" he asked.

"Certainly . . . That is, if you would care to," Mr. Halvard added. "I don't want to take you if——"

"Oh, I shall be delighted, though such things aren't really at all in my line."

Mr. Halvard was extremely serious. "But don't you think we should investigate them before—before dismissing them?"

"I don't know that we should," Allingham said.

"But——"

"I'm sure you'll think me narrow-minded and unenterprising when I tell you that I've never had the faintest inclination to converse with spirits, even

of the most superior kind. Intellectually they deteriorate so remarkably in their new world. Whether it is the too joyous life they lead there, or the other spooks they associate with, I can't say : but, you know, the sort of stuff that Tennyson and the rest communicate through mediums !—well, if they've nothing better to tell us than that——! ”

Mr. Halvard was all eagerness. “ But surely—if it were proved, I mean—the importance is extraordinary, inestimable ! It would be the death-blow to materialism.”

Allingham considered this, while his dark eyes rested half quizzically on the young man's earnest face. In the strange, ice-blue eyes he seemed to read an intensity of feeling that perplexed him. “ I can't see just what *you'll* get out of it ? ” he said, at last.

“ I was not thinking of myself, but of the people who reject everything that is not scientifically proved to them.”

“ They *must* be rather annoying,” Allingham admitted.

The face of the young idealist clouded for a moment. “ You don't take me seriously, Mr. Allingham, but I *am* serious in this.”

Allingham stretched across the table and laid a conciliating hand on his arm. “ My dear young man, do not be offended. I take you perfectly seriously.”

Mr. Halvard sank into a reverie, and his friend, under the guidance of the pale, melancholy waiter, persevered through the somewhat tedious

courses of a dinner that had lost its freshness. The red nose of the attendant, he presently observed, was not the result of intemperance, but simply of a cold in his head ; and the depressing sniffs to the accompaniment of which he conscientiously handed dishes and removed plates, at length induced Allingham to recommend him a remedy for this ailment. Taking advantage of Mr. Halvard's absorption, he entered into a highly characteristic discussion on the profession of waiting in general, its prospects, its emoluments, the number of hours a day one had to work.

As soon as he had finished, he and Mr. Halvard went out, walking leisurely through badly-lit streets and by dark, silent canals, to give Allingham time to smoke his cigar. Mr. Halvard, he now learned, never smoked, and Allingham had an idea that he was rather excited.

"This is the house," the young man suddenly said, when they had proceeded for some time along the Quai de la Potterie. He had paused before an iron railing, beyond which lay a small, bare garden. At the end of a straight walk, a house rose, dusky and dim, offering a perfectly blank face to the night.

"It hardly looks as if they expected us," Allingham observed. "You made it quite clear that you were coming to-night, of course?"

"Oh, yes; perfectly clear. Probably they only use the back rooms. These houses are very large."

"Well, we'll have a try."

They walked up the narrow cinder path, and Allingham gave a sturdy tug at the bell, which echoed

most dismally, as though through empty rooms and passages. They waited in silence, but just as he had raised his hand to ring again, they heard the sound of shuffling footsteps, and a moving glimmer appeared in the fan-light above the door. There was the noise of a bolt being drawn back, but the door itself only opened a few inches, just sufficiently for them to see the white face of a girl peering out of the heavy shadow.

“Is Mr. Flamel at home?” the young clergyman politely inquired; and instantly the door was closed and the light vanished.

“You don’t, somehow, appear to have asked quite the right question,” observed Allingham, jocosely. But Mr. Halvard did not reply.

Again the light became visible, and again they heard the shuffle and flap of slippers that were too large over a stone floor. The door opened, this time wide enough to admit them, and at the girl’s invitation, delivered in excellent English, they entered. She held a small lamp in her hand, and by its light they followed her through a bare hall and up two flights of creaking, uncarpeted stairs; but they could see little save the soft dense black shadows that slid fantastically over the walls and ceiling. At the top of the second flight of stairs the girl waited, motioning to them to pass in front of her. At the same instant a door at the end of the passage opened wide, letting out a flood of light that almost dazzled them. Allingham could distinguish nothing clearly, but he was conscious of a white face, and a short stout figure clad in a black gown, like

the robe of a monk. Down the front of this gown a long gray beard flowed. The figure stood there motionless, framed in the brilliancy of the doorway, and there was a distinct pause before a deep, rather melodious voice, speaking with a slightly guttural intonation, invited them to enter.

"Thanks very much," Allingham replied lightly, and not at all, he was afraid, in a manner Mr. Halvard would consider appropriate. But for some reason, perhaps because he felt that his fellow-visitor's nerves were already a little overstrung, perhaps only because of the theatrically solemn voice of the Spiritualist, he refused to be impressed.

"I hope we're not disturbing you, Mr. Flamel," he pursued, in the conversational tone of one dropping in to pay a social call at a rather unusual hour. Meanwhile, Mr. Halvard seemed to be smitten with dumbness, and the Spiritualist also was uncommunicative, motioning them majestically to seats in the full glow of the light, to which his own back was turned.

Allingham could now make out his features more distinctly. He judged him to be about fifty. He was bald, save for two tufts of dirty, colourless hair just above his ears, but an abundant, untrimmed, grayish beard flowed down over his breast. Except for this beard, he was clean-shaved, which Allingham decided was a mistake. It would have been better to have hidden a mouth so lipless as to be a mere gash in the lower half of his face. His skin was very white and

smooth ; his nose long, and thick at the end ; his forehead high and retreating. The face was commonplace enough, except for the extraordinarily glittering little eyes, and the ugly mouth. It was not his custom to rush to conclusions, yet Allingham had already made up his mind that he disliked Flamel. Were it not for Mr. Halvard, he told himself, his visit would be brief ; but the presence of this susceptible boy—for so Allingham figured him—altered matters, and he determined to stay as long as Mr. Halvard stayed.

“ You are serious inquirers,” the Medium volunteered suddenly, “ and as such you are welcome. But you are perhaps beginners ? ”

The latter observation appeared to be addressed more particularly to the elder of the inquirers, who immediately confirmed it. Allingham was puzzled as to the nationality of the Medium. Save for his guttural intonation, which might possibly be put on for their benefit, he spoke English quite perfectly, and yet he did not look English. He had remained standing all this time, and in spite of his flowing robe Allingham noticed that his body was very long, and his legs extremely short.

The Medium now proceeded to explain the situation further. “ People come to me sometimes,” he said, solemnly, “ in the hope of seeing wonders ; but I tell them to go to professional conjurors. I am but a seeker after truth, not a wonder-worker. Yet I believe we are on the eve of marvellous discoveries. The light is shining through ; the curtain is trembling. Where

there is sympathy, where there is faith, the spirits are ready to manifest themselves ; but where there is mere curiosity, hostile or sceptical, they come reluctantly, or not at all. In such surroundings we know that the Nazarene himself was powerless.”

The allusion to the Nazarene appeared to Allingham feeble, and even in questionable taste. “ But one may come, I suppose, simply with the intention of trying to form an opinion ? ” he said. “ After all, a good many people, I understand, go in for this sort of thing in order to *get* faith.”

The Medium assented. “ In my own experience I have seen many conversions, even among the most sceptical, the professors and so-called men of science.”

Allingham glanced at Mr. Halvard, and caught that young man’s eye, but without eliciting from it the responsive flash of intelligence he had hoped for. It was obvious that Mr. Halvard was impressed.

At that moment the door opened noiselessly, and the girl who had admitted them slipped into the room, quiet as a ghost. There was something wraith-like in her appearance also, in the unhealthy pallor of her face, which contrasted vividly with the black, frightened eyes and purple-black hair.

“ My daughter,” said the Spiritualist vaguely ; and Allingham and Mr. Halvard bowed.

“ She too is psychic,” Flamel went on. “ She is clairvoyant, and can see the spirits that I and most others can feel and hear, but can rarely see.”

The gifted girl presented indeed an appearance of

having seen only too many of these unearthly visitants, and it struck Allingham that she was proportionately uncomfortable in the society of the parent who attracted them. She sat, like a nervous school-boy, on the extreme edge of a chair, and seemed to be watching with a painful attention for some sign from her father. Allingham regarded her with a curiosity that was mingled with compassion, while the Medium continued to talk, in a high-sounding, windy style, throwing out the wildest statements as if they were established facts, heaping contempt on the Society for Psychological Research, because of its timidity and caution, its suppression of the very facts that if published would prove once and for all the truth of what it professed to be searching for.

“And those who come to consult you,” Allingham ventured deliberately, “I presume there is—eh—some fee?”

The Medium smiled. “One does not sell the breath of the spirit,” he said. “I am the means of giving to others, according as they are fitted to receive. I am not rich, and those who make use of me give me, in return, what they want to give; I neither ask nor refuse. . . . It is your wish, I think,”—he turned to Mr. Halvard—“that we should have a sitting?”

“I see, Mr. Flamel, that you are indeed a diviner,” Allingham remarked, with his slight drawl.

The Medium faced him quickly, and his little, glittering eyes for a moment appeared to expand. Then they half closed. “If you are determined to resist, if you

have come here with that intention, it will be better to attempt nothing. When even one of the party is out of sympathy it is very difficult to get into communication. You will admit that this is not surprising. The state of mind of the inquirer must either help or hinder the spiritual forces to manifest themselves."

"We are not out of sympathy," Mr. Halvard hastened to assure him.

The Medium fixed his eyes upon the young clergyman. "When I come into your environment, I am conscious of a brightness. . . . You were born in the cool of the year. You were born in one of the cool months, were you not?"

"In May," Mr. Halvard murmured.

"May? That is a cool month, isn't it? On what day of May were you born?"

"The thirty-first," Mr. Halvard stammered, and Allingham laughed.

The glance that Flamel darted at him was swift as the flicker of a lizard's tongue, but at once he reconcentrated his attention upon his other visitor. "When I come into your environment, I am conscious of one who is near you—a lady—a lady who has passed over. Can you place that? Your mother? Has your mother passed over?"

"Do you mean, is she dead?"

"Yes, yes. Is your mother in the spirit world?" The question came with something that to Allingham sounded very like suppressed irritation.

“No; but I had an aunt who died a few months ago.”

“An aunt? Your mother’s *sister*, then?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. . . . She is with you now. She brings you a great spiritual power and encouragement. But you must give the right vibrations—love vibrations—vibrations of sympathy—if we are to be successful. . . . Can you for an hour lay aside your old prejudices, your old ideas?” It was to the elder man that this last remark was addressed.

“Can you, Halvard?” Allingham echoed, gaily. But he saw that Mr. Halvard was not pleased with the attitude he had adopted.

“Certainly,” the young man replied, without looking at him.

The Medium paused for a moment. “Come this way,” he then said.

As he spoke he stepped back a couple of paces and opened a door; not the door they had entered by, but another, and Allingham and Mr. Halvard and the girl passed through, the Medium following them, and closing the door behind him.

The large room in which they now found themselves was, Allingham supposed, the one in which the *séances* usually took place. It was feebly lit by a gas-jet only half turned on, and was unfurnished save for a few chairs, and a couple of round tables, on one of which lay some kind of stringed instrument unfamiliar to Allingham. The floor was uncarpeted; the walls were

bare save for a mirror that faced the door ; from the high ceiling a bronze lamp, unlit, hung on metal chains. There was to Allingham's frankly prejudiced view something calculated in the very bareness of the room, and he prepared himself to witness a not particularly brilliant conjuring exhibition. The absence of curtains, of cabinets, of anything which could offer a hiding-place, seemed to plead that there would be " no deception." He would not have been surprised to see the Medium roll up his sleeves, and indeed something of the kind took place when Flamel removed his black gown and put on an ordinary jacket that was hanging over the back of one of the chairs. He then motioned them to their seats, which were drawn up round a table—not the one upon which the musical instrument lay. Allingham sat at the Medium's right, Mr. Halvard at his left. Then the girl, at a gesture from her father, lowered the gas to a blue spark, and in the darkness slipped to her seat between Allingham and Mr. Halvard. They joined hands and waited.

Allingham began to wonder what form the trickery would take, for he had never attended a séance before ; he also wondered if he should be able to detect it. Suddenly the guttural voice of the Medium broke the silence. " There may be nothing ; we must be patient ; very often it is necessary to wait for half an hour even when all the circumstances are favourable."

They sat on, and the performance, to Allingham, who supposed he was the unfavourable circumstance alluded to in the Medium's last remark, took on a

slightly ludicrous air. What appeared to be a long time passed, and still there was no sign given. Allingham's expectations of even a conjuring entertainment grew faint. He knew the Medium had divined his hostility, and very likely he intended to make it an excuse for a fruitless sitting, so that Mr. Halvard might be encouraged to return alone. The best way to prevent this would be to convict Flamel of fraud. Allingham had, he didn't know why, developed a strong desire to protect Mr. Halvard from his own credulity; yet he could hardly show the Medium up if the latter did nothing. His mind wandered round this idea. Supposing Flamel attempted some trickery, what would be the best way to expose him? The gas was out of reach. A match suddenly struck—that might do! One of those small electric lamps would have been better still, if he had thought of getting one. . . . But, after all, why should he be so anxious to prevent Mr. Halvard from being duped? . . .

They seemed to have been sitting like this for hours, and he began to feel bored and to wonder when it would be decided that the experiment had failed. He was on the point of asking when he became conscious that somebody was trembling. He started into alertness. Was it the Medium?—Halvard?—the girl? Was it the table? He could not decide, for the impression had been only momentary, and everything was once more quite still. But Allingham now began to feel a certain eeriness in the situation. . . . The darkness seemed intense. He could see the little blue point of gas

behind him reflected in the mirror. It was the stillness, the waiting, that were uncanny. Grim tales of impossible happenings flashed into his mind, and then the thought that this was probably what the Medium was working for, steadied him again. . . .

Suddenly he felt that something *had* happened, he did not know what. This time, at any rate, it was the Medium who trembled. A low sigh escaped him, seemed to shudder out into the darkness, and to be followed by another sigh that was almost a moan. Allingham could feel him stirring uneasily; another deep sigh; and then profound quiet. Allingham became conscious of a cold breath that blew past his face. Far away, right outside their circle, in some distant corner of the room, a sharp rap broke the silence. It was followed by another and another in quick succession, a whole series of little explosive sounds, increasing in loudness and then growing fainter. The table trembled, tilted towards Allingham, was still.

“They are here,” a voice said faintly.

“Who is here?” Allingham asked; but there was no reply.

Then the same voice that had spoken before called out, “I cannot see. . . . I cannot see.”

There was another silence, broken by a stifled groan from the Medium. . . . Allingham became conscious of a scent, sweet, familiar; something cool and soft brushed his face—a flower; something was pulling at the lapel of his coat. And the sweetness persisted, the scent of a rose, strong, unmistakable. . . . A plain-

tive note of a musical instrument sounded far above his head ; and then, right at the other side of the room, a speck of light floated out of nothing, crossed the mirror, grew larger, passed above them, disappeared.

Allingham gripped the hand of the Medium, the hand of the girl. He knew they were doing these things, but how ? All at once the bronze lamp above him began to swing on its metal chains, with a low tinkling sound ; a hand stroked his hair from behind.

“ I can feel something—somebody is touching my face,” Mr. Halvard’s voice piped oddly.

A faint, bluish light stole out from the metal lamp, that could now be seen waving from side to side with a wide sweeping motion, like the swing of a pendulum ; a heavy odour of incense floated across the room, drowning the fainter scent of roses, and increasing rapidly till the whole atmosphere grew dense with it. It seemed to be coming from the lamp ! Allingham felt it closing in about him ; a voice whispered, “ Who is there ? Is it Hugo ? ” and another voice, coming from the Medium, but not his, answered, “ No—no.” And again the faint, melancholy note of a stringed instrument was plucked out in a feeble twang.

In spite of himself, Allingham had a disagreeable sense of something vague and shadowy behind Mr. Halvard’s chair—a sort of concentration of the darkness, as if it were gradually materialising, though he could not make out any definite form. He struggled against the impression, but it continued to gain upon

him. Another wave of cold air passed through the room, and at the same instant the light of the lamp went out. For the space of a few seconds Allingham felt himself slipping over the boundary of credulity; for the space of a few seconds he was distinctly conscious of the presence of something mysterious, ghostly—something that had not been there before. He made a last effort to recover his presence of mind. There was a jarring crash; he was on his feet. The gas? He plunged at it, and by good luck twitched it on at once, wheeling round as he did so. The others were sitting at the table, Mr. Halvard rather pale, the Medium leaning back, his eyes shut, his head resting against the top bar of the chair. There was no sign of disorder save his own overturned seat, and the lamp, far out of reach of anybody sitting down, still swung gently to and fro.

Yet, with the coming of the light, Allingham was certain he had been tricked. The eyes of the Medium opened and he sat up; the eyes of all three sitters stared at Allingham. The Medium got on his feet, but he still appeared slightly dazed. "You were nervous?" he suggested. "What happened? I should have told you not to do anything rash like this. It is wrong—wrong."

Allingham was angry. He sniffed at the heavy incense fumes that filled the room, and gave a snort of disgust. "You'd better open a window," he recommended, contemptuously.

"You shouldn't have moved," the Medium continued

calmly. "You have spoiled it. It might have been an excellent sitting. Was it Hugo?" he asked the girl, who shook her head.

Allingham became aware of Mr. Halvard's fixed gaze, and glancing down in the apparent direction of it, discovered the cause. There, in his own button-hole, in full bloom, was a red rose, exactly similar to those Brian had brought him yesterday.

He felt that he had been fooled, and his first impulse was to snatch the flower out, but as he lifted his hand to do so he saw the absurdity of his anger. He was convinced that the whole thing had been fraud, but he had no proofs, for the mere triviality of the "phenomena" did not constitute a proof. It was quite conceivable that spirits, especially if they were human, would behave idiotically. The best thing was to apologise.

"I'm afraid I've shown myself very unworthy," he said, with an effort. "You must put it down, Mr. Flamel, to the influence of some ill-behaved spook who managed to slip in uninvited. . . . I'm sorry, Halvard, for having broken up the sitting."

"You thought you were being tricked," the Medium explained, with a provoking simplicity, which to Allingham sounded suspiciously like impudence.

"And I was annoyed at not discovering the trick," he completed. "That's very likely the truth." He laughed shortly. "You don't want to begin again, Halvard, do you, even if I promise to keep perfectly still?"

But Mr. Halvard had risen, and was expressing his

interest and regrets to the Medium. Allingham waited for him. The girl had disappeared before these explanations had been reached, but she now came back, to light them down the dark staircase ; and the vision of her pale, sad, frightened face haunted Allingham long after the heavy outer door had closed behind them.

CHAPTER XI

THEY came out into a night of extraordinary quiet and beauty. The air had a cold freshness that dispelled the fumes of the heated atmosphere which had accompanied their recent, dubious initiation into the occult world. And presently, through the stillness, there dropped the familiar chime of the carillon, coming to the older man with an exquisite assurance of peace.

The dreaming city lay all around them, its dark, pinnacled roofs, pointed gables, and tall spires, silhouetted against the moon-washed sky. Their footsteps awoke lonely echoes as they passed along roughly-paved streets and by black, motionless water-ways. Allingham could understand how stimulating all this might be to the imagination of an impressionable and slightly superstitious neophyte, who should have attended one of Flamel's séances ; and he was reminded of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, a work he had not read since his boyhood—of the arrival of its hero in Thessaly, where, under the influence of many tales he has heard of that witch-haunted land, he cannot help seeing in everything around him evidences of magic, in each tree and stone a possible human creature,

transformed by the spell of a malicious wizard. The temporary excitement of their adventure over, it took on for him a half ridiculous, half disreputable light, and certainly, so far as he was concerned, it would never be repeated. At the best, that kind of thing held no attraction for him, and what he had witnessed, he was sure, had been very far from the best. He disbelieved instinctively—he could not help it—in all the mysterious phenomena vouched for by persons infinitely more trustworthy than Mr. Flamel. He knew that the attitude he had adopted in this particular instance would have struck him as highly unintelligent in any other connection, nor had he, in argument, ever attempted to justify it. The explanation really lay in the fact that, despite his scepticism, such things had an unaccountably disquieting effect upon his mind, his nerves at all events. They seemed, in a fashion, to be so closely related to insanity, to various kinds of mental abnormality, and of anything of that sort he had a horror. He believed in hallucinations, if he did not believe in ghosts; and he knew that even were he to see a ghost he should not believe in it; therefore, what purpose could be served by inquiring into matters he found so distasteful? One thing, however, he had learned from their visit; namely, that Mr Halvard was more highly-strung than he had imagined him to be. He had an idea that Mr. Halvard had been very much more ‘*in*’ the experiment than he had, and was avoiding discussing it till he should have had time to think it over. Yet he found it

difficult to understand how anybody—anybody of Mr. Halvard's intelligence—could be impressed by such vulgar and futile trickery.

“Well, good-night,” he drawled pleasantly to the young clergyman, when they reached their hotel. “I hope our dreams, at all events, will be free from manifestations.” He smiled his slow smile as he separated from his companion, for it was his own intention to dismiss the matter at once from his mind and go quietly to bed.

CHAPTER XII

ALLINGHAM'S slumbers, at any rate, were untroubled by spiritual visitors, but in the morning, while he still lay dozing very comfortably, he became conscious of a rapping at his door. It sounded, to his dreamy perception, quite like the trick of some playful poltergeist, though in the sunlight he thought he might risk a reply.

"Come in," he lazily called, and the next moment Brian entered, with an apology for paying so early a visit.

"You're a real boy, aren't you?" Allingham asked, clutching him, as if for proof of his solidity, by the arm. "Ah, that's all right!" Then, as Brian looked at him in surprise, he laughed aloud. "I thought you might be part of last night's séance."

Brian had forgotten, but he now remembered. "Oh, yes; Sylvie told me. I wanted to ask you to take me with you, but she said that I mustn't. . . . What happened?"

"Wonderful things." He felt under his pillow for his watch. "I find that it's not so much that your visit is early, as that I am late. You'll have to stay and talk to me while I dress and get my breakfast."

"I'm afraid I can't," Brian answered, as he seated himself near the window, and began to twirl his cap round and round. "Shall I pull up the blind?"

"I think you had better."

The boy let the two spring blinds run up, one after the other, with a loud click. Allingham lay drowsily watching him as he moved about the room, taking stock of everything, examining the hair-brushes, the dressing-case, the razors. He drew one of these latter from its box. "Shall I strop it for you?" Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him, and, blushing, he sat down abruptly again in the chair by the window.

"What's the matter?" Allingham asked.

"I wasn't thinking of what I was doing—rummaging about among your things. I'm awfully sorry."

"Rummage as much as you like," Allingham laughed. "I have no secrets. You can strop the razor, too, if you consider that the odds are against your cutting the leather."

But Brian, having remembered his manners, sat still. "I came to see you last night," he said, "but of course you were out at this séance."

"You should have waited. However, I'm afraid we were rather late."

"I did wait for a bit. I ought to have left a note for you, but I didn't think of it till I was in bed. . . . We are going away to-day—this morning—at half-past ten—which doesn't leave us very much time. . . . It's all Aunt Sophy's doing. She began to grouse like anything, the minute we got home from Ghent, about

Bruges being unhealthy, and a lot of rot of that sort, till she got mamma to think there must be something in it, especially as she happened to have a headache. Aunt Sophy knows as well as I do that mamma gets a headache every time she goes in a train, but she insisted that it was the canals. And then she dragged in about me. I wasn't very well a week or two ago, and the doctor said I had outgrown my strength or some nonsense of that kind, because I fainted—the way anyone might do. Sylvie and I said we were going to stay on, but that only made Aunt Sophy choose the morning train instead of the afternoon one. It's awfully stupid. I wanted to stay here another week. And it's not as if we were in any hurry; we've plenty of time. Besides, you might have come with us then, though Aunt Sophy says you're going to Paris."

"I see!" Allingham was no longer drowsy, but he was conscious of a sudden blankness of outlook. This departure was the last thing he had expected. As for Paris, he had forgotten all about it.

There was a longish pause, which was again broken by Brian. "Well, I suppose I'll have to cut along now. Do you think you'll have time to come over to our place before we go? The others were saying at breakfast that they would drive round here on their way to the station, to say good-bye to you."

"Oh, yes; I'll come," Allingham promised.

"And you'll come to Florence, too, won't you?" the red boy added shyly from the doorway, where he stood, framed against the darkness of the passage

beyond, looking back into the room, fiddling with the handle of the door. "If you could follow by another train, Sylvie and I would meet you at the station. I suppose it would be too much of a rush to catch the one we're going by?"

The next moment Allingham was alone. He dressed quickly, and cut himself while shaving. In this way he lost time, so that on coming downstairs he went out at once. But when he reached the smaller hotel the only person he saw was Miss Kilronan, already dressed for the journey. The others evidently had not finished packing, and Sophy was paying the bill when he entered.

"Why this hasty flight, Sophy?" he asked quietly.

"It is not really so hasty as it seems," Miss Kilronan explained, but she coloured a little. "We never intended to stay here more than a few days. . . . There is the carriage now!" A rattle of approaching wheels was in fact audible outside. "Well, he may just wait: I told him not to come till ten-past."

Allingham saw that she was not quite at her ease, but he forebore to press her further, though he felt that Sophy had not treated him well. "I had no idea you were going to-day," he said simply. "Was such an early hour necessary?"

"There is nothing unusual about the hour, Bennet. The half-past ten train happens to be the best—that is all. People *do*, now and then, catch morning trains, you know. Besides, once you have made up your mind to leave a place I think much the most satisfactory

way is to get it all over as quickly as possible." She was interrupted by a loud barking, which apparently came from the hall. "That's that wretched beast!" (Poor Graf, for Aunt Sophy, was never a dog, but always either a beast, or a brute, or a mongrel—at the best an animal.) "I wish I had bribed somebody to steal him last night. . . . Excuse me a minute, Bennet: I must tell the others the carriage is here."

"You have plenty of time," Allingham murmured, looking at his watch. "It is barely ten o'clock, and five minutes will take you to the station."

But Miss Kilronan bustled off, and he was left alone in the long narrow room. The coarse, white tablecloth was still littered with the remains of breakfast. He gazed at a picture of Christ carrying the cross, and at a mirror backed with pink gauze. He wondered what the gauze was there for, and his eyes wandered to the sinister fly-traps that dangled from the ceiling. Through the door that Sophy had not shut he could see people passing along the hall on their way to the beer-house at the back, and the clatter which accompanies the washing of plates and dishes came from the kitchen.

In spite of Miss Kilronan's words, Allingham thought their starting off like this, at a moment's notice, very strange. He did not want to think so, but he knew that only an invitation to follow them to Florence could remove the impression. And it was somehow strengthened by the fact that such an invitation *had* been given him by Brian. He remembered the boy's

shyness. Brian had known how the matter would strike him. . . . His thoughts were interrupted by the hasty entrance of Mrs. Grimshaw, who came in buttoning her gloves, and in a state of distraction which precluded a consciousness of anything save luggage and the train. She shook hands with Allingham, and immediately wanted to know what time it was. She seemed, as she waited anxiously for his reply, to have lost faith in all the clocks and watches she had previously consulted, and even in the carillon.

“Are you sure I can't help you in any way?” he inquired.

“Oh, no, thanks, Mr. Allingham. Brian has gone on with Graf; and a man is seeing after the luggage. I am just waiting for Sophy and Sylvie.”

He followed her from the room, and they were joined at the door by Miss Kilronan and her niece. Allingham assisted them into the carriage, and then took the vacant front seat beside Sylvie. They arrived at the station ten minutes too soon. The luggage was already there in a heap upon the platform, where Brian stood mounting guard over it, with Graf at his heels. They waited for the train, manufacturing conversation in which nobody was interested, and glancing every now and then at the hands of the station clock. No one had said anything about Allingham's joining them in Florence, and he had quite ceased to expect it when Sylvie asked: “Why don't you come with us, Mr. Allingham?”

“Mr. Allingham has already said that he is going

to Paris," Aunt Sophy replied; "and since he has just left Florence we can hardly expect him to return there even for the privilege of travelling by the next train to ours. You *are* going to Paris, Bennet, aren't you?"

"I daresay," he answered, quietly. "My plans are always rather vague."

"I don't believe you have any plans at all, Mr. Allingham," Sylvie declared, "and therefore you have no excuse for not coming to Florence. At any rate, the fact that we will be there alters the whole situation. . . . You might at least *say* it does, even if it doesn't," she added, her smile resting on his face, and filling him with a sudden resolve.

"It is very probable that you may see me there," he said.

"Here is the train!" Mrs. Grimshaw cried nervously, as the whistle of the engine reached them. "We'll be very glad to see you, Mr. Allingham: you must be sure to let us know when you come. I had no idea myself that we were going to leave in such a hurry but Sophy seemed to think—— Brian, dear, don't stand so close to the edge."

"I'm several feet from the edge, mamma, not to say yards. Besides, I'm going to hold your hand as soon as the engine comes in sight."

"An accident can so easily happen," Mrs. Grimshaw went on.

"All the same, I don't believe there's going to be one. . . . And I'm insured. You'll get a thousand

pounds for me if you remember to keep the cover of the newspaper."

"Don't jest about such things," said Mrs. Grimshaw, nervously.

Allingham shook hands with the two elder ladies as the train drew in with a rattle and clash of chains, and a shrill cry of escaping steam.

"I'm not going to say good-bye to you, Mr. Allingham," said Sylvie, as he turned to her. "Then you'll *have* to come to Florence."

Mrs. Grimshaw and Miss Kilronan had already clambered up the steep, high steps of an empty carriage. Sylvie followed them.

"It was very good of you to come to the station with us, Mr. Allingham," Mrs. Grimshaw murmured, distractedly, through the window. "Is the luggage all right, Brian?"

The boy approached, coming leisurely along the platform, having left Graf with the guard.

"All except one box of Aunt Sophy's."

"One box! What do you mean?" She made a movement to rise from her corner seat, but Sophy Kilronan pulled her back.

"Sit down, Lucy."

"But why does he say——?"

"Don't listen to what he says."

"You'll come, Mr. Allingham, won't you?" asked Brian, as the others were arranging umbrellas, rugs, and various articles of apparel, on the racks. "We want you to come."

Allingham shook his hand. "Yes," he answered.

A porter slammed the door and the engine whistled. Allingham raised his hat to his departing friends. He stood on the platform as long as the train remained in sight. The red boy at the window waved his hand; next moment Sylvie, too, leaned out, her face close to her brother's, cheek by cheek. They both waved once more, and then were hidden from view.

Allingham walked out of the station and round by the ramparts in the direction of the park. The sun had come out, and in the clear autumn stillness he could hear the crisp dry rustle of the brown leaves as they dropped on the faded grass. Bruges had never looked more beautiful than on this perfect morning, yet somehow it seemed strangely chilling and disheartening, so that he took no pleasure in his stroll. He passed by the Lac d'Amour, but felt no temptation to linger anywhere. And suddenly he saw, leaning out of the back window of a lonely house beside the outer canal, a head, sinister, strange, ugly. It was only when he came closer that he discovered it to be carved out of wood and coloured rudely to imitate life. The effect, he knew not why, had been extraordinarily unpleasant. He turned to go home, feeling depressed and lonely. He was not fond of railway travel, but he knew it would be a great happiness now to be suffering all the discomforts of that jolting, weary journey between Bruges and Florence, even were it twice as weary, twice as long, dusty, and uncomfortable.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN he reached the Panier d'Or, he had already decided to take the afternoon train to Paris.

"I'm going on to-day," he abruptly told Mr. Halvard, whom he found at lunch, and bestowing a more serious attention upon that repast than might have been expected from so ascetic a young man, or, indeed, than the repast itself, in Allingham's opinion, deserved. "I hope you won't pay another visit to our friend of last night. I'm convinced that the man is a black-guard, an adventurer, who might easily become positively dangerous."

Mr. Halvard's dark blue eyes were fixed upon him as he made this speech, and Allingham suddenly smiled. He rather liked Mr. Halvard now; there was more in him than he had at first thought, and his personal beauty was wonderful.

"No, I don't think I shall go back," the young clergyman replied. "I—I have been thinking the matter over, and I am not sure that it is right. . . . I must confess, however," he added, more importantly, "that I have not at all reached your conclusion that the man is an impostor; nor, even granting part of

the performance to have trickery, been due to do I see how that can possibly explain everything. I am convinced that neither he nor the girl ever stirred from their chairs; yet some of the furniture on the other side of the room was moved. And then the lights . . . and your rose . . .”

“The rose trick was certainly clever,” Allingham admitted, “especially as we imagined ourselves to be holding their hands at the time. But the fact that the flower appeared to have been spirited from the bunch in my room at home must have been due merely to a happy chance. . . . Altogether apart from these marvels, my dear fellow, you ought to be able to tell a scoundrel by the look of him. I should think it particularly desirable in your profession, since you must come across plenty of people only too willing to take advantage of you.”

“It does not do for a clergyman to be suspicious,” Mr. Halvard replied. “If he is he can be of very little use to anyone. It is better that he should be taken advantage of now and then, than that he should perhaps be unjust at the time when he is most needed.”

This remark pleased Allingham—pleased him much more than anything he had yet heard Mr. Halvard say. “Well, in this case I want you to take my word for it,” he went on, persuasively. “If I had been alone last night I should not have stayed five minutes. And as for all that took place, I fancy we were partially stupefied by that abominable stuff he burned. Some of the ‘phenomena,’ too, may have been due to a

kind of self-hypnotism. I do not think the girl had a great deal to do with what happened ; she seemed to be too frightened to be of much use in that way. On the other hand, she must have been there for *some* purpose, or she wouldn't have been there at all."

"It may be so."

"At all events, I'd feel happier if I had your positive assurance that you were not going back. I know," he went on, kindly, "that I run the risk of appearing very meddlesome, and that it's perfectly open to you to tell me to mind my own business, but what I say is prompted by the best of motives, by my interest in you ; and the man, I feel sure, is quite unscrupulous."

"You are very kind," said Mr. Halvard.

"It is you who will be kind, if you do what I ask."

"If I promise not to go back ? Certainly I will give you my word, if you want it. Indeed, I am not sure now that I ever ought to have gone. We are not, I fancy, intended to pry into these things. They appear to have been veiled from us purposely, and my original motive, I now see, was much more a mere morbid curiosity than the one I took credit for at the time."

"Well, as long as you aren't bent on following it up——" Allingham smiled. "It is a mistake to have anything to do with people of that sort. You never know when or how they may get some kind of hold upon you, and if they do, the result, of course, is disastrous."

"I daresay I shall leave Bruges to-morrow or the next day myself," Mr. Halvard said.

“ In that case we may meet again soon—if you think of coming to Paris.”

Mr. Halvard shook his head.

“ In Italy, then,” Allingham suggested.

“ You are going back to Italy ? ”

“ To Florence, I expect. I don't know when exactly ; but certainly within the next few weeks. I'll look out for you.”

“ Thanks very much. I shall look out for you also.”

CHAPTER XIV

ON his arrival in Paris Allingham drove straight to an English hotel in the rue St. Honoré, where he booked a room looking out into a charming, enclosed court, green with tall plants in tubs.

“ Shall you be staying long, sir ? ” the manager inquired, as he showed him his apartment.

“ I don't know. About a week. I'm late for dinner, I suppose ? ”

“ A little, sir ; but I expect we can manage.”

So Allingham dined alone, in a large, brilliant dining-room, with red-shaded lamps, flowers, and a profusion of white linen, of plate and glass ; but dined excellently. Coming out into the broad hall, he stepped most gingerly from mat to mat across the over-polished floor, with an uncomfortable sense that it was only a matter of time before he should become more closely acquainted with it. He had his coffee in a little nook among the palms, and glanced about him languidly. He did not know what to do to pass the evening, for he had no friends in Paris, and it was too late for the theatres. He had the hall, the palms and hothouse plants, almost to himself. There were two

or three ladies (including one who appeared to be an Indian Empress) reading novels or writing letters; there was an old gentleman looking over an American newspaper; there was a small boy wandering about with his hands in the pockets of his knickerbockers, and entering into conversation with any one and everyone—the manager, the head waiter, and Allingham himself, to whom he confided that his father, his sister, and brother, had gone to the opera, and that his mother had gone to bed. Allingham pathetically envied this lady. Why, he asked himself, had he come to Paris at all? He might just as well have stayed on in Bruges and been bored there at considerably less expense. He had an idea that he had really obeyed a suggestion from Sophy Kilronan. He thought of going out for a stroll, but he did not know his way about, and did not feel equal to the exertion of asking it. Presently he drifted to the door, and stood there, looking disconsolately down the long narrow street, which was somehow quite different from what he had expected it to be. His hotel was nearly at the corner, and he at last ventured as far as that point of observation. From there he by-and-by proceeded across the Place Vendôme, when he suddenly found himself facing the Opera House, which flamed and flared in a radiance of blue light. Allingham pursued his careful course, keeping always in a straight line, so that his return should involve no difficulty. He was really shockingly unenterprising, but in the end he sat down at one of the small tables of a café which sprawled out

over half the pavement. Here he ordered a drink—an innocuous compound of lemon and soda-water—and sat watching the stream of pedestrians passing before him. The scene struck him as spectacular and vivid, rather than attractive. Advertisements flashed in and out in letters of fire, the colour changing from red to green, and from green to white. There was a continuous noise of traffic. A horrible man, in the service of the Paphian goddess, lingered by his little table, offering himself as a guide. A youth threaded his way between the chairs with an armful of books, calling out their titles: “Oh-é, ‘Les Pauvres Sœurs.’ Oh-é, ‘Les Pauvres Sœurs.’” A bent old man was picking up the cigarette and cigar ends from among the feet of the loungers with a barbed walking-stick, and dropping them into a capacious pocket. All around were fat men with moustaches and cigars and an amazing volubility; ladies with hats and complexions, their elbows leaning on the little tables before them. And everywhere a kind of fever of unrest, a blinding glare of light, a ceaseless din of voices and motors, that acted upon his nerves like a strong light flashed suddenly upon delicate eyes. Half an hour of this was as much as Allingham required, and at the expiration of that period he returned to his hotel. He there found everything just as he had left it. The old gentleman was still engaged upon his newspaper; the little boy was examining the superscriptions upon some recently-arrived letters which the hall-porter was sorting; the Indian empress was drinking a

lemon-squash through a straw. Allingham went upstairs to his room.

He undressed and got into the cool, comfortable bed, but he did not drop asleep for what seemed to him a long time, and then, almost immediately, he was awakened by a variety of noises in the corridor. There was a slamming of doors, a ringing of bells, a murmur of voices, a clatter of boots being hurled out of bedrooms. He switched on the electric light and read till the noises gradually quieted down; then he switched the light off and composed himself once more to slumber. He was just getting drowsy when he was re-awakened by sounds in the court below, the court that had looked so charming when he was engaging his room. Voices in intermittent, but by no means subdued, conversation, rose now up its echoing, well-like walls, mingled with the swishing of a hose. Allingham again turned on his light, and looked at his watch. It was after two. "What on earth are they washing out the place for at this hour?" he wondered, impatiently. He got up and shut his window; but he had never been able to sleep with closed windows, and did not expect to be successful now. The premonition proved to be well-founded. In a short time he was obliged to re-open his window, and draw in deep breaths of the cool fresh air. The noise in the court had ceased, however, and Allingham, retiring to his bed, murmured an exhausted "At last!" He lay with closed eyes, and the still darkness was like a caress upon his forehead. A lulling sleepiness slid

beneath his heavy eyelids, and passed through all his limbs in a delicious relaxation. Ten minutes later there was a tramping in the corridor outside, and the door of the room next Allingham's was opened and shut with a careless bang. The tramping continued, now inside the room, which communicated with Allingham's by another door, whose existence he had not previously noticed, but through which the slightest sound penetrated. Again the outer door opened and shut with a jarring bang. The wanderer had flung out his boots, but he continued for some time to tramp about the room with muffled thuds of heavy feet. At last silence—a silence that seemed charged with latent noises ready to explode at any minute. Allingham heard the half-hour strike; then another clock, and another, and another, irritatingly insisting upon the passing of precious time. He made a determined effort to go to sleep, but he was now wrought up to such a pitch of expectancy that the rustle of a ghost would have been audible to him, and the slightest creak of a board set all his nerves jarring like tangled bell-wires.

He heard the clocks strike four; he heard them strike five; then, through sheer weariness, he fell asleep. He was aroused by a door opening in the court below. "What are they going to do now?" he asked himself in despair. He lay, too fatigued to get up and shut his window, listening to the moving of tubs (the tubs in which grew those green plants he had thought so pleasant yesterday), and watching the day grow brighter.

CHAPTER XV

THEY breakfasted at nine o'clock, and Miss Kilronan, who had been worried by travelling, and whose bell, it appeared, the chambermaid had refused to answer, was not in one of her more placid moods. In the opinion of Brian and Sylvie, a tendency to crossness had distinguished this lady ever since their departure from Bruges, and, seeing that she herself had been wholly responsible for their taking that step, such behaviour was inexcusable. Nobody else had wanted to leave Bruges. On the contrary, everybody had wanted to stay; though their mother had pretended to drop in with Aunt Sophy's idea. It was possibly with some vague notion of backing it up now that Mrs. Grimshaw said: "It seems so comfortable here after our last hotel, doesn't it? Yes; coffee please."

But Aunt Sophy was not conciliated. "It depends on what you call comfort. . . . What is the man taking away our milk for? . . . When you can't get hot water in the morning, and the chambermaid is impertinent and tells you there is something wrong with the bell though you can hear it ring yourself perfectly distinctly, I must say I can conceive of a higher

standard of comfort ! As for the dust ! The place at Bruges was at all events clean ! We must look for lodgings this morning."

" I suppose if we could find suitable rooms, it *would* be better," Mrs. Grimshaw agreed, pacifically.

" Why announce it in that tone, Lucy ? You know we never intended to stay anywhere *but* in rooms. . . . And I don't see why we can't now and then have a meal without an animal sniffing about us !" She flapped her serviette threateningly at a particularly lean and hungry cat, whose attention Brian had secretly attracted. " Sshh—get away ! Take it away," she rapped out to the dreamy waiter, who at once sprang into exaggerated activity, and sent the unfortunate creature flying from the room.

" It was rather a nice cat, and it eats bread," said Brian, softly.

" If you and Sylvie want cats messing round, you must have your meals at another table, that is all."

" Really, Aunt Sophy !" Sylvie exclaimed.

But Miss Kilronan was not overawed. " Now don't ' Aunt Sophy ' me," she returned sharply. " Do what you're told without talking about it. Brian mayn't be old enough to know better, but you are. We never go anywhere without having all the miserable curs and half-starved cats in the neighbourhood at our heels five minutes after our arrival. I've put up with it quite long enough. It's a mere fad. I never see that you're the least thoughtful where human beings are

concerned. . . . And what, in the name of goodness, has Brian got plastered on his hair? Is it oil or water?" Her dark, bright eyes were fixed on the immaculate parting which her nephew had so carefully produced. "If it's water, I suppose it will dry during the day; but if it's oil, it had better be removed after breakfast. These elaborate toilets are surely rather a recent development!"

Brian coloured up, for Aunt Sophy had touched a particularly sensitive spot. The toilets alluded to—a subtle harmony of ties and socks, a pronouncedness of trouser-creases, and a general air of being brushed and groomed—had, in fact, only come into existence with the advent of Mrs. Leslie. They had been duly noted by the mother and the sister, but these ladies had refrained from passing any remark. Aunt Sophy showed no such scruples, and even the rage and shame that flamed in Brian's face did not soften her. Allingham was not the only person to whom she had mentioned her regard for her nephew, or, for that matter, to whom she had confided the secret that she preferred him to her niece; but this affection, whatever else it may have been, was not sentimental. She had more than once given expression to the bewildering theory that the boy took after her; though, as she cordially disliked her brother-in-law, and was at least fully conscious of Lucy's limitations, the opinion may have been based on nothing more substantial than that she hoped he didn't take after them. She was rather enjoying her nephew's confusion when Sylvie came to

his rescue with a not particularly brilliant attempt to change the subject.

"I wonder what Mr. Allingham is doing at present?"

"There are not many things one *can* do at this hour of the morning, except have breakfast," Aunt Sophy replied.

"Perhaps we should have brought him with us," murmured Mrs. Grimshaw, who was really extremely kind, though, unfortunately, in so vague and unpractical a fashion, that her benevolence was principally exercised in retrospect.

"Sylvie did suggest it," said Brian, in his gruff, bass voice, "but nobody else was very pressing."

"Why should we have been pressing?" demanded Miss Kilronan.

"I don't know, I'm sure, Aunt Sophy, if you don't. I thought he was a friend of yours."

"Perhaps we *should* have asked him, Sophy," Mrs. Grimshaw regretted. "Do you think he expected it? I daresay the poor man feels rather lonely. He can't know very many people, and none of those he did know, before he went away, are at all likely to be on the Continent."

"If he cared to come there was nothing to prevent his doing so," Miss Kilronan replied. "I suppose the man knows his own mind."

"But he never *was* like that," urged Mrs. Grimshaw, remorsefully. "He would be the last person in the

world to push himself where he thought he wasn't wanted."

"Then why didn't you ask him yourself? It was your place to do so, if he was to be asked at all."

"*My* place!" echoed Mrs. Grimshaw, in astonishment. "How was it my place?"

"He may very easily have thought we didn't want him," Sylvie put in. "In fact it is what anybody would think who had been treated the way he was treated."

"*Do* hold your tongue," snapped Aunt Sophy. "One can't make the simplest remark without either you or Brian chiming in, no matter what it's about!" She held out the empty coffee-pot to the dreamy waiter with an air that sent that person on wings to the kitchen.

"He certainly never had much determination," Mrs. Grimshaw mused, conscious herself of possessing a boundless supply of that quality to draw upon. "All the same, I think you're a little hard upon him, Sophy."

"Aunt Sophy seems to prefer his photograph," said Sylvie, sweetly.

"I don't know whether it has ever struck you that your children are impertinent, Lucy?" Miss Kilronan suggested, with suppressed anger.

"I'm sure Sylvie didn't mean to be impertinent."

Sylvie slightly raised her eyebrows, but Aunt Sophy's attention was fortunately diverted by the reappearance of the lean and famished cat. She hissed fiercely at it, but the offending beast merely withdrew as far as the

next table, from beneath which it stared at her with large, round, bright eyes, like green lamps. "Obstinate brute!" Miss Kilronan ejaculated. "How anybody can pretend to be fond of cats!"

Sylvie had poured some milk into a saucer, but her mother interfered. "Don't, dear, when you know Aunt Sophy doesn't like it."

"I really don't see how it can possibly affect Aunt Sophy one way or another from a distance of five yards!" said Sylvie, quietly, handing the saucer to her brother, who hesitated.

"We can feed it afterwards, can't we?" he growled awkwardly.

Sylvie did not look at him, but got up herself, and set the saucer down on the floor near the window. The cat, pleasantly conscious of Miss Kilronan's annoyance, at once ran to it with a little mew.

Aunt Sophy's lips drew in, but she pretended to take no notice.

"I'd better go and give Graf his breakfast, too," said Sylvie, tranquilly. "I suppose you and Aunt Sophy, mamma, will be able to choose rooms? Brian and I needn't go?"

"Why? I love looking for rooms!" her brother cried.

"Brian can come with me, if you like, Lucy," said Miss Kilronan, pointedly ignoring her niece.

"Mamma and I will take Graf for a walk."

"That will be another complication!" Miss Kilronan suddenly remembered, with renewed impatience. "It's really getting beyond a joke!"

“He can sleep in my room.”

“They’ll find a place for him all right, Aunt Sophy,” Brian interposed. “If they don’t, we’ll jolly well know the reason why! You just look at them the way you looked at the cat a minute ago, and I’d like to see the Italian who’s going to refuse to take in half a dozen dogs!”

“Brian!” his mother exclaimed, with a nervous glance at her sister. But Aunt Sophy, handsome and distinguished, did not appear to be displeased.

CHAPTER XVI

ALLINGHAM came down feeling stale and fagged, and he determined to spend the morning in the open air. With this purpose he drove out through the white, sunlit streets to the Jardin des Plantes. He had already decided—a little prematurely, perhaps—that he did not like Paris. There was too much noise; there were too many people. The life, from the exceedingly brief glimpse he had had of it, struck him as ugly and second-rate, devoid of all that, for him, made life worth living. The whole, glittering, splendid city seemed meretricious and unsatisfactory. Its cynicism, its effrontery, its selfishness, its hard superficial gaiety, both disgusted and bored him. The ceaseless rush and hooting of the motors seemed typical of its spirit. It had no gentleness, no humanity; it welcomed you only in so far as you could pay for your welcome. It might be superficially polite, but it watched you all the time with hard rapacious eyes while you put your hand in your pocket. Under the veil of a high and complex civilization it was really slightly unintelligent, and everywhere it flaunted its appeal to the vulgar tastes of jaded pleasure-seekers.

The Jardin des Plantes seemed to him very preferable to the boulevards ; the Jardin des Plantes was, in fact, "all right." Here at least were trees and shady walks, nurses and children ; above all, here were animals, and in his present mood Allingham felt infinitely in sympathy with zebras and giraffes, camels and antelopes. In any mood he would have preferred them to Parisians, but just now, their grave, dreamy eyes, their simplicity and nobility, were positively revivifying, seemed to bring him back into possession of his soul. Their soft, delicate, gentle lips and noses, mumbling the food he offered, appealed to him deliciously. Only in the monkey-house, amid the chatter and squabble over a few grapes he had brought there, was he reminded of the Paris outside, so he left the monkey-house as quickly as possible. He fed the demure hippopotamus with buns, which this large creature dreamily appreciated ; he fed the philosophical rhinoceros, and the naïve elephant. There were two or three young lions, not many weeks old, under the care of a large dog, who had been engaged as a kind of wet nurse. These little creatures were in the open air, running over the grass, making frantic rushes at the keeper's boots and the hems of his trousers. Allingham was admitted into the enclosure, where he had the privilege, in his turn, of being worried and bitten, to the delight of a juvenile audience backed by appreciative mothers and nurses.

On his way home he felt less pessimistic. He had an idea that if fate should ever compel him to take up his

abode in Paris, a good deal of his spare time would be spent in the Jardin des Plantes.

He had told the man to drive slowly, and as he looked about him, his attention was attracted to a shop in whose windows a great variety of photographic apparatus was displayed. Allingham called out to the chauffeur to stop. After a few minutes he emerged from the shop, bearing with him a camera and all the additional paraphernalia that had been suggested to him as likely to be of use to a young photographer. He arranged these parcels carefully on the front seat of the car, and drove on to his hotel.

It was quiet enough now—deceptive spot! Allingham, looking mistrustfully into the green court, could hardly imagine the disturbances of the past night, so peaceful and serene it appeared. After lunch, feeling more enterprising, he decided to visit the galleries of the Louvre. He contented himself, nevertheless, with a scrutiny of those pictures which happened to have chairs in their immediate vicinity, and as these were not numerous, he was able to bestow a good deal of time upon each. He lingered longest before a canvas of Watteau's, the *Embarquement pour Cythère*. The gracious suavity of the picture, its atmosphere of a rich poetry, appealed to him. He felt as if he, too, would like to be setting sail for that happy island. Its drowsy fascination grew more and more insistent. The winged loves hovered in the air; the light turned to bright burnished gold where it caught the peak of a remote mountain; the narrow stretch of water

widened gradually as it reached out and out towards a golden haze that hid what strange enchantments beyond! Close at hand was a bust upon a pedestal entwined with flowers, a sloping lawn, a gay delicate company; far away, behind that golden cloud, lay the land of dreams, the unknown. . . .

On coming out of the gallery he crossed the river and took a chair at a café at the corner of the Pont du Saint Michel. He ordered a bock, which he did not drink, and with his elbows on the little round table he sat smoking a cigarette and looking at the scene before him. A crimson flush was in the sky. All along the river wall the booksellers were closing their boxes. Trams passed incessantly; pedestrians—a thin but endless stream—mostly of the shopkeeping class, out now to taste the fresh air and the brightness of the streets, and talking, talking; men and women, stout, animated; boys in loose white blouse suits, hanging on their mothers' arms, their brown smooth legs showing above short socks and below wide knickerbockers. . . .

Gradually the sky turned to gold, barred with purple clouds, against which the trees and the tall buildings along the river bank were silhouetted. Then the gold, too, died away. Allingham recrossed the river and strolled back to the gardens of the Tuilleries, that were gray and delicate in the gathering dusk. He continued his walk on through the Bois de Boulogne. There, beside a pond, on which some children were sailing toy boats, he came to a standstill. Through the trees a

stone god watched, frozen, silent. Dead brown leaves twirled about his pedestal, and a humming of wind passed overhead, like the murmur of an æolian harp. In the middle of the pond a fountain rose against the darkening sky. A faint white light seemed to drop down upon the whiteness of the children's boats. The scene had a remote, ghostly quality : it was as if he had imagined it, and by merely turning away his thoughts could draw a veil over it again : and all the time a wind music passed and repassed in thin arpeggios among the rustling leaves. . . .

The children played like dream children, and in Allingham's mind the whole picture took on a strangely poetic quality, a quality as of something re-enacted in the spirit, that had happened long ago. His mind was filled with memories. They hovered before him, and their soft wings brushed his face, like the wings of moths. His life seemed to stretch out behind him in a long perspective, tranquil, unbroken—a pattern woven in a tapestry, slightly worn, yet still amazingly clear, in a high, bright light that revealed every detail. To no one but himself could these details have afforded much food for reverie. Few existences, he felt, could have been less eventful, less romantic. The most that could be said for it was that it had been safe. Its tranquil monotony had grown up about his soul, like a dense high hedge composed of all the little trivial habits of days and years, across which he was now half startled to hear the voice of romance sounding a perhaps mocking invitation. He listened to it

—listened though it disquieted him and left him undecided.

Nevertheless, when he came back to his hotel, he asked for a railway-guide and began to look out the trains to Florence. He could catch a night train which had a sleeping-car attached to it. With the guide in his hand, he went to consult the hall porter, and to answer the questions of the little American boy, who wanted to know why he was leaving so soon, and if he would like to be introduced to his "poppa," though he admitted himself that it was hardly worth while now, unless Allingham was really very keen.

CHAPTER XVII

ON reaching Florence, he found no difficulty in getting the room he had before occupied on the Lungarno, close to the Ponte Vecchio, for the season was not yet properly begun, and visitors were few. It was with a feeling of keen pleasure that he looked out of his window at the yellow, sluggish river, and at the backs of the long line of irregular houses on the farther shore. The quiet waters of the Arno lapped against the basements of these mouldering edifices, coloured, in their decay, to a faint and faded yellow, with brown roofs and green shutters. Here and there, articles of clothing were hanging out from upper windows to dry, yet it was astonishing how even these homely garments adapted themselves to the general tone of picturesqueness. The whole scene was so mellow and soft, so richly romantic, that he found himself lingering to gaze at it, and to speculate on how long it would be before the ancient, rotting dwellings crumbled down under the water. He was perfectly aware that his enjoyment of it all was largely due to a sense of being once more near his friends. He did not know their address, but Florence was small, and it could only be a matter of hours,

at the most of a day or two, before he came across one or another member of that charming family. It was odd, the mysterious attraction he felt towards these young folk. They "suited him," as he prosaically put it, and, though his nature was not misanthropic, he had come across remarkably few persons who fulfilled this function. He had never been much in sympathy with his own people, and time and separation had made them almost strangers to him. Long ago, Allingham had decided that, for these to whom it really means anything, friendship is a matter of spiritual sympathy, and not of consanguinity. Blood might be thicker than water, but it was not, in his case, thick enough to awaken any ardent desire to visit households he was certain to find uncongenial, and where, now, he could be nothing but a name. As an extremely small boy, he remembered having been reproved for a similar lack of enthusiasm by an indignant and unknown aunt, who had descended one day upon the nursery, dropping, as it were, out of the blue. Upon that memorable occasion shyness had been pleaded for him in excuse, but the aunt, unmollified, had declared that "he ought to know his own flesh and blood." An ingenuous reply to the effect that he might know it, but that he didn't like it, had mysteriously aggravated the offence, with the result that he had been sent there and then, in tearful and clamorous disgrace, to bed. Well, they couldn't send him to bed now, and even the alternative punishment of "no pudding" was out of the question. One thing alone caused him a pang of uneasiness; his

uncertainty as to how he should be received by Sophy Kilronan. Sophy had been extremely cordial in her first greeting of him, but it would have taken more optimism than Allingham possessed to have discovered much cordiality in her manner when they had last met. To Sophy, his turning up again so soon might savour of the conduct of a person who comes to a party without the advantage of having received an invitation. In the present instance, moreover, the invitation appeared to have been purposely withheld. Yet he had always intended to spend the winter in Florence, and he did not see why he should allow Sophy's caprices to alter his plans.

He closed the shutters and descended the stairs upon carpets whose luxurious velvet was at present hidden by economical brown linen. In the off-season everything and everyone seemed to be encased in brown linen—whether it was the carpets, or the chairs, or the dark-eyed boy who controlled the elevator, and whose smile was so radiant that Allingham felt guilty of an impoliteness in refusing his services.

He went out into the vivid sunlight, which still, at the end of September, had something of the heat of summer in it, and turned down the long shady arcade of the Uffizi Palace. He mounted the many steps leading to the picture galleries, and passed through a turnstile at the top into a world of gentle madonnas and angels. In the emptiness of the long, still corridors and rooms, whose pictured walls seemed to welcome him dreamily and beautifully, he wandered, content. A music and

rapture of colour were in the air, and sank refreshingly into his spirit through byways of senses a little fatigued by the long dusty railway journey.

He passed from one favourite to another, from the lovely *Annunciation* of Simone, hanging in the corridor, to the less significant *Annunciation* attributed to Botticelli, where the angel seems poised in some moment of arrested flight, like a great coloured butterfly upon the marble floor. There was wonder and significance enough in the *Magnificat* hanging close by, in the *Birth of Venus*:—and gold everywhere; gold in the hair, in the wings of angels; gold in the very grass and trees; and everywhere the poetry of motion. . . .

He paused before a little *Annunciation*, by Lorenzo di Credi, and decided that it, too, had a sweetness of its own, a sweetness tempered by an exquisite fastidiousness. It had a grace, a lightness of touch! Allingham liked the warm bright colour, the embrowned flesh-tints, the simple design. He liked the curving line always noticeable in Lorenzo's pictures, and especially noticeable in the extreme plumpness of the children, to whom the slightly drooping corners of their mouths lends a last refinement of charm.

He wandered from room to room, in the happiest of moods, ready to find beauty where he had never found it before. He declared to himself that modern art had little to set beside these pictures, and regretted not having a companion to argue the point with. But companion or no, argument or no, he lingered till the closing hour had struck.

Coming out into the Piazza della Signoria, he made his way in the direction of the Duomo, through narrow streets, and with no very distinct object in view, unless it was to gaze at Giotto's tower, which, in its coloured gaiety, more than ever struck him as resembling some huge Chinese toy transplanted by a Ginn of the *Arabian Nights*. He was conscious, poor Allingham, of not admiring this structure so much as he ought to, and when passing through the square he always stopped to gaze at it, in the hope that the overwhelming beauty it possessed for everybody else might in some fortunate hour flash upon him. That hour had not yet struck apparently, and what he arrived at was merely the old conclusion that he preferred the broad simplicity and bareness of many a rough, unfinished, brick façade, not to be mentioned in the same breath. Such things—things like the fact of his preferring several earlier artists, lamentably deficient in tactile values, to the great master, Giotto, whose *Madonna* in the Academy, for instance, seemed to him to be even slightly vulgar—were not to be spoken aloud; and Allingham, indeed, pondered them in silence as he pursued his way.

He had turned up the Via Tornabuoni with the intention of buying another volume of the works of Mr. Berenson, whose re-attributions and naïve theories fascinated him, when he nearly collided with a red-haired boy coming out of Alinari's shop and still gazing at the photographs in the window. They both stopped, and the red boy raised his hat, smiling with

that peculiar charm which was the main constituent of such doubtful personal beauty as might be conceded to him. He even laughed, a little, happy laugh, as he held out his hand. "I'm awfully glad you've come, you know," he said, balancing himself first on one foot and then on the other. "Somehow, I didn't half think you would—at least not so soon. I sent you a lovely picture-postcard yesterday."

"To Bruges? I didn't get it."

They walked on down the street in the direction of the river, and Allingham forgot about his Berenson. "How are you all?" he inquired.

"We're flourishing, thanks. Mamma and Sylvie and Graf have gone shopping. I've only just left them. Aunt Sophy is at home."

"Where are you staying?"

"In rooms at the other side of the river, quite close to the Pitti Palace. Come back with me now and have tea. Aunt Sophy will be delighted to see you; she is all alone."

Allingham was not so sure of the delight, but it might be better to see Sophy first, as he would be able to judge from her manner whether he had done right or wrong in following them. He accepted the invitation therefore, and they turned to the left, by the Lungarno.

"This is where I have put up," he said, as they reached his hotel. "Will you wait for a moment; there is something I want to get?"

He pushed aside the linen portière that kept the

interior cool, and disappeared behind it. When he emerged, Brian was sitting on the low river wall, kicking his heels against the stones.

"This is for you," said Allingham, producing the camera he had bought in Paris.

Brian's face flushed. "But——"

"I hope it isn't too late. I mean, I hope you haven't already got one."

"No; but— Thanks awfully . . . It's frightfully good of you. I don't know what to say."

"It doesn't seem an occasion for speech," Allingham replied, pensively. "I happened to see the thing in a shop on my way home from the Zoo. It was really the influence of the giraffe. He was an excellent and delightful giraffe, with an ingratiating manner."

"And he reminded you of me? That was nice of him. . . . It's what I've been wanting for ages," he added. "I never pass a shop where they sell them without going in and prying about twenty."

"Do you know how to work it? The man assured me it was perfectly simple."

"Oh, I can work it all right."

"Well, I hope it's the kind you wanted. It would have been wiser, though not so surprising, to have let you choose one for yourself."

"I'm very glad you didn't. I would never have dared to choose one nearly so good."

Allingham laughed. They had passed the Ponte Vecchio, and on their left rose the rugged square of the Pitti Palace.

“Along here,” said Brian, directing his companion to the right; and a minute or two later they paused before a tall white house. “Here we are. This is Casa Grimshaw.”

CHAPTER XVIII

“ I SUPPOSE you are surprised to see me again, Sophy,” Allingham apologised, when they were alone. He accepted the cup of tea she had poured out for him, and took a low chair close to the table where she sat.

“ You speak as if you feared the surprise might not be a pleasant one, Bennet.”

Allingham looked out into the square garden, where some pigeons had alighted on the basin of a waterless fountain. A large black cat watched them with benevolent eyes and a twitching tail.

“ I don't know that I've any right to count on its being particularly pleasant,” he said at last.

“ Not even after all my kindness ? ” Miss Kilronan suggested, smiling.

“ What I want you to do is to be kind in the future, Sophy. The past is over.”

“ And what *I* want *you* to do, is not to spoil the children. I told you that before ; yet to-day you come to them laden with gifts ! ”

“ Why shouldn't I ? I like young people. . . . They have not travelled so far towards the west.”

“ What does that mean exactly, Bennet ? ”

“It means whatever you like, dear Sophy.”

“That you think I have become a very worldly person—isn’t that it?”

“I hope not. You used to be the only person I could turn to for sympathy when I was feeling unworldly.”

“One can’t go on doling out sympathy all one’s life.” She was silent a moment. Then she said; “I wonder if it ever occurred to you to ask yourself whom *I* had to turn to?”

“Hadn’t you me?” he suggested, penitently. “I suppose I *was* horribly selfish,” he added, as she made no reply.

“You sometimes were, a little.”

“But I always looked upon you as a tower of strength!”

“It was a good working hypothesis.”

He fancied there was a shade of bitterness in her voice, and he was surprised. “Let me be perfectly honest, Sophy. I feel that I must have done something to offend you, but really I don’t know what it is. Tell me.”

She looked at him long, earnestly, till gradually a softer expression came into her eyes. “It is nothing, Bennet, except that I have grown old and sour, and have not your capacity for renewing my youth in the youth of others.”

“We are both older.”

She sighed. “No, you are not. That is what I feel. That is my tragedy.” She laughed, but some-

how her laugh was even more melancholy than her sigh. "You will always be a boy, and always live in a fairy-tale—a very delightful thing to do; but one that I can't imitate."

She seemed a little tired, and he wondered if she wanted him to go.

"You have never really told me what you did during all those years after you left home," she said slowly.

"One of the things I did was to write to you."

"That didn't last long."

"Only because I had nothing to say—just as I have nothing to tell you now. There is not so much in life as I used to think. There has not been much in my own life, at any rate—except the mere outward routine that you already know of. Before I was twenty I had selected a few ideas, a few prejudices, a few desires; and ever since, I have simply stared at them very hard—that is all."

"Is it all?"

"Very nearly. The only quite clear duty that nature impresses upon people like me, I haven't fulfilled."

"What is that?"

"Our duty to the next generation."

"Yet I used to look upon you as a genius!"

"It was very kind of you. . . . At least I know you meant it kindly, Sophy, though the only genius I ever met was a particularly odious person."

It had grown dusk, and he had risen to his feet. But she kept him still. "Won't you dine with us,

Bennet ? ” she asked, and he knew from her tone that she really wanted him to stay, though he could not understand her mood.

He hesitated, but next moment he heard Sylvie’s voice, and then Brian calling out eagerly, “ Look what Mr. Allingham has brought me ! ”

He resumed his seat.

CHAPTER XIX

"DON'T you want me to bring Graf in, Mr. Allingham?" Sylvie asked, when they had come back, after dinner, to the drawing-room. "Just to see how he has improved," she added; and Allingham having expressed a suitable interest in this example of canine advancement, she went in search of her protégé.

Presently a patter of feet was heard in the passage, the door opened, and Graf entered, smiling apologetically as he wagged his tail heavily against the legs of chairs and tables. "He will give you a paw, Mr. Allingham, if you ask him to," said Sylvie. "Won't you, Grafums?"

Allingham shook hands with the obliging animal, who had sat down on the end of Miss Kilronan's dress, but had promptly been dislodged from that position. He bore the rebuff good-humouredly, wandering over to his mistress, who put her arms round his shaggy neck and began to coax him. "This is far nicer than drawing horrid carts about Bruges, isn't it Grafums? Tell Mr. Allingham whose old pet you are. Tell him who's going to take your photograph to-morrow. Uncle Brian, isn't it?"

Graf wagged his tail self-consciously, glancing at the visitor with his absurd smile.

“Do you think of staying long in Florence, Mrs. Grimshaw?” the visitor inquired.

Mrs. Grimshaw at once became vague. “I don’t quite know. The children think we should stay at least two months. . . . Brian dear, I haven’t seen you studying to-day. Mr. Allingham will excuse you. I’m afraid this moving about from place to place is getting you into idle habits.”

Brian was lounging in a low chair, his hands deep in his pockets. He sighed as he listened to his mother’s words. “If you were a philosopher, mamma, you would recognise in quietude the intensest kind of activity. I have so often pointed that out to you! Why don’t you believe it? It would show, too, a pleasing confidence in your son, which at present is lacking.”

“We expect Mr. Grimshaw to come out to us here in a week or two,” the lady went on, turning her faded prettiness to Allingham. “He says he will come as soon as he can spare the time. He will bring a tutor for Brian with him, I hope; but it seems very difficult to get anybody suitable—I’m sure I don’t know why.”

“It’s because your standard is so high. I could get a tutor for myself easily enough.”

“I want somebody to teach me Italian,” Sylvie declared. “The young priest who took us all over the Annunziata was quite nice.”

This suggested a really brilliant idea to Mrs. Grimshaw. "You should take singing lessons. One always reads of people coming to Italy to study music, and now you are here, you may as well take what advantages you can."

"Do you sing, Miss Sylvie?" Allingham asked. "I have never heard you."

"You could sing something now, dear, couldn't you?"

"No; I'm as hoarse as a crow. And Mr. Allingham is very critical."

"I think you might risk it," he murmured.

"'Warble child; make passionate our sense of hearing,'" Brian encouraged her. He had risen from his chair and was wandering about the room. "Somebody has taken my books. How can one keep up an enthusiasm for study, when one's books are forever disappearing?"

"I put them into your bedroom," said his mother. "You leave them lying about everywhere. I wish you would learn to be a little tidier."

"Do you really want me to sing, Mr. Allingham, or is it only politeness?" Sylvie asked.

"I really want it."

"Then you must come and help me to look for a song." She went to the piano and began to turn over a heap of music on a table beside it.

"I think you might leave poor Mr. Allingham in peace," Miss Kilronan interposed.

Sylvie smiled back at him over her shoulder, "Mr.

Allingham, I leave you in peace. To-night you are allowed to be lazy, on account of your travels. But if I sing, you must promise to take me somewhere to morrow. I can't get the others to walk, and I hate driving behind miserable, half-starved horses."

"We'll walk then," Allingham promised.

She sat down at the piano, and Allingham, lying back in his chair, watched her as she sang. A tall lamp beside her, lit up the beauty of her face, which he could see only in profile. The songs she sang were simple and tuneful, probably not very good; but her voice was soft and clear, and to Allingham, who had no great knowledge of music, it was delightful to listen to her. As he sat there he thought how pleasant it would be to have somebody to sing to him like this every evening, and a vision of life, tranquil, intimate, secure, rose before him. A woman seated at a piano; her hands on the white and black keys; her face beautiful in the soft light of a lamp; himself listening. . . . And to have that vision stretching on and on; to have others akin to it, so that they might embrace every hour of his life. . . . All the pleasure he had looked forward to when setting out for Europe, the pleasure that was to come from the contemplation of art, from the romance of strange old cities—all that seemed now singularly poor and thin. . . .

He sank into a reverie, unconscious of Sophy Kilronan's gaze, which was fixed upon him. . . . "Nothing except what is human matters," he muttered to

himself, "whether it is in this world, or in a dream of another."

And Sophy, watching him, wondered what was passing through his mind.

CHAPTER XX

THAT night, instead of going home, he strolled down a narrow street to the Piazza della Signoria. The empty square was silent in the moonlight, and in the shadow of the Loggia dei Lanzi the forms of statues gleamed dimly. The little café to which he had sometimes come was now closed. There was not a soul abroad so far as he could see save himself. Allingham sat down on the stone ledge below the wall and lit a last pipe. Before him rose the dark, impressive pile of the Palazzo Vecchio, with its square tower set oddly to one side. He tried to reconstruct, with the help of the lonely night, a picture of the past, to re-people the square with figures from old times, to imagine some famous nocturnal masque, like Piero di Cosimo's *Triumph of Death*, which he had read about that morning in Vasari. But his efforts were unavailing. The masque, he was sure, had been, like most deliberate excursions into the macabre, a little childish, and the famous Piero was probably a silly old ass. Allingham recalled the ridiculous story of how he had lived upon eggs, which he had cooked in batches of fifties to save time. Somehow, he felt out of sympathy with the old world. The

visions appropriate to the hour and the place refused to arise, and he was haunted instead by a picture of a lamp-lit room, and of a girl singing. All Piero's bogies seemed of a sudden infinitely foolish. He got up, and as he smoked paced slowly round and round the square—that famous square in which Savonarola had been burned. But his thoughts were not of Savonarola; they were of Sylvie and to-morrow.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the early afternoon they mounted the steep winding path that leads to San Miniato.

"I hope I'm not tiring you, Mr. Allingham," Sylvie said. "We might just as easily have taken a tram?"

"How should a young person who spends half the night wandering romantically about the streets be tired?" Allingham asked vivaciously. "At the very most he can be only slightly dusty." He had winced ever so little, all the same, at her remark, which had seemed to place him definitely with the older generation, the generation of her mother and Aunt Sophy.

"I believe you *are* romantic, Mr. Allingham, really; although you like to make fun of everything."

"Make fun of everything!" Allingham exclaimed.

"Yes, you know you do."

"My fun must be of an involuntary order. I had no idea even of its existence. . . . But of course I am romantic; also sentimental, and everything else that is old-fashioned."

"I'm not to blame for your midnight ramble this time at any rate," Sylvie declared.

"No. I have come to the conclusion that these

things are largely a question of ghosts. Old towns are full of ghosts, and they roam abroad after dusk and put ridiculous ideas into foolish heads."

"Is that how they treated you last night?"

"Exactly. They led me mooning about the streets, whispering that I was young enough to permit myself such imprudences. It was only when I tried to get out of bed this morning that I discovered how basely they had lied."

"And what else did they whisper?" Sylvie asked.

"Some very odd things about the present being better than the past. I'm not sure that they didn't even suggest this pilgrimage to San Miniato. Should you think they did?"

"No, I shouldn't. . . . *We* expected you this morning. Brian wanted to take your photograph. He took us all."

"I wasn't very far away. I was in the Pitti."

"All alone?"

"All alone."

"Poor Mr. Allingham."

They had emerged on the Piazzale Michelangiolo, and had paused before the famous *David*.

"Do you like him?" Allingham asked, with his slow smile.

"Amn't I supposed to?"

"Of course you are; at least I expect so, though I never know about these things."

"Does that mean that you *don't* like him?"

Allingham considered, "No; I think it only means

that his head seems rather big. Have we any justification for that in the Scriptures, Miss Sylvie ? . . . One can have tea here," he added, "and look at the *David* all the time. Should you care to do that ?"

"Perhaps we'd better get our climb over."

"It's not much further."

Sylvie appeared to be reflecting upon something. "I don't believe you're a good person to look at things with, Mr. Allingham," she brought out at last. "I'm sure you're prejudiced; and I don't know enough about them myself to see when you are and when you aren't."

"You're quite mistaken, Miss Sylvie. I'm the most unbiassed person of your acquaintance."

"But I want to see the things that are really famous."

"You're like Mr. Halvard. He has gone all the way to Chillon to see the 'seven pillars of gothic mould.'"

"You are always making fun of poor Mr. Halvard. But he's quite right. I don't want to go home and have people asking me if I've seen this and that and the other, and find that I haven't. I believe you like to like things all by yourself. Now don't you ?"

"Of course I do; but I'll promise faithfully never to pass a double star without at least telling you of its magnitude. Is that fair ?"

"I suppose it is, if you keep your promise."

"In the church of San Miniato there is a miraculous crucifix; the merciful knight story, you know. There are also frescoes by Spinello Aretino."

"And what have we come to see ?"

"Why, both these splendid sights, of course."

"I'm sure we haven't; only now you're frightened to tell me."

"There is an *Annunciation* by Alessio Baldovinetti that is not bad."

"I knew there must be something of that sort."

"Of what sort, Miss Sylvie? Don't condemn it unseen. Alessio happens to be an artist in whom I am rather interested, because he started his career in exactly the same way as I did."

"In what way?"

"His father wanted him to go into business, and Alessio wanted to be a painter, that was just what happened in my case. The only difference is in the subsequent behaviour of the parents, which I am sorry to say is all to the disadvantage of mine. . . . Here we are at the gate of Michel Angelo's fortress. Two stars, Miss Sylvie."

"You needn't think that is going to prevent me from looking at it, Mr. Allingham, for it isn't."

They rang a bell, and were admitted to the courtyard, through which they passed. Before them, full in the afternoon sun, rose the striped black and yellow marble façade of the church, with its huge bright mosaic of Christ Enthroned. Below, in the valley, the gray towers and red domes of Florence stood up above a mass of gray and brown houses, like tall flowers in a crowded garden. On all sides of the city were sparsely wooded hills, with white villas gleaming amid olive and cypress. The landscape, under the open blue sky, had a beauty

of its own, but it was a beauty, to Allingham's sense, without atmosphere, without imagination, beginning and ending in itself, dependent for its charm almost wholly on the gray crumbling buildings that here and there dotted the hillsides.

"It is difficult to imagine the people of such a country being what they were," he murmured, as, from the terrace in front of the church, they looked down upon the scene. "It is difficult to imagine such a country haunted by spirits, unless they are the spirits of deceased market-gardeners."

"I think it is lovely," said Sylvie, reproachfully.

"No, no, that is not the word. Come and I will show you something that is really lovely, and you will see the difference."

They entered the church, and he led her to the side chapel where Alessio's half-ruined *Annunciation* still lingers with a delicate and ghostly life, though worms have eaten, and are eating, holes in the wood on which it was painted. What remains is but the soul of the original picture, something faint and flickering as the echo of a note of music. The beautiful brown-skinned angel, with his solemn face and fair neatly-braided hair, kneels in a grassy meadow. His wings, eyed like a peacock's wings, are ready to lift him into strong flight, and his hands are folded on his breast. A red band is bound across his forehead. Only a streak of faint gold still lingers in his dress, to tell of its old glory, but his face and his beautiful folded hands are almost uninjured. The whole painting has an adorable innocence and

simplicity. Allingham felt, though she said nothing, that the girl beside him was somehow missing it. She looked at it attentively—too attentively—as if trying to discover what he saw in it ; but it was obvious that she would never know. He felt disappointed, and even regretted having shown the picture to her.

“ Let us go out and sit on the terrace,” he said. “ We can look at the Spinelloes another day.”

“ I’m afraid I’m not an apt pupil,” Sylvie murmured, apologetically. “ I know I always like the wrong things, but I can’t help it, can I ? ”

“ Of course it is absurd to expect everybody to like the same things.” He smiled. “ Still, one does expect it,” he added.

“ But you wouldn’t like me to pretend to admire pictures that I don’t admire ? ”

“ Of course not.”

“ Have there been any great artists among women ? ”

“ I don’t know. . . . There is Emily Bronté—and the somewhat remote Sappho. . . . ”

“ I meant painters. They were writers. Of course I know women can write just as well as men. . . . I once began a novel myself.”

Allingham laughed.

“ I don’t see why you should be amused ! In fact I think it’s rather rude of you. I only wrote four chapters. Then something happened—I forget what. —Oh yes, it was the tennis tournament ! I put my manuscript away and forgot all about it. Just before

we left home I discovered it and read it over. . . . The queer thing was that I hated writing it ; it bored me excruciatingly."

" Why did you do it then ? "

" From mercenary motives. I had been reading a novel about a girl who had written a story and made thousands of pounds. She only wanted enough to pay her brother's college expenses, but she made a fortune, and became famous all over the world. Wouldn't you love to live in a novel, Mr. Allingham ? Everything turns out so nicely in the end, and exciting things are always happening."

" I don't know that I want anything very exciting to happen," Allingham laughed. " When may we expect this work to appear, Miss Sylvie ? "

" What work ? Mine ? I'm not going to finish it at all. I got over all the story part far too quickly. I don't see how it could possibly go on for more than another two chapters. The heroine is engaged already."

" But can't she break it off ? When I was a youngster I used to weep over my failures. It was a damp and dreary struggle, for I never had time to do anything decent."

" You have time now."

" Now ? "

" Well, haven't you ? "

Allingham shook his head. " It is too late now."

" But why ? "

" I am too old," he said.

His dark eyes rested upon her. Sitting there on the

broad white terrace in the afternoon sun, she made a picture that delighted him. The white of her dress against the yellowish white of the stone, the setting sun casting a rich glow upon her face, making the fair skin almost transparent, her black-gloved hands folded in her lap, her gray serious eyes, under the wide brow, gazing out at the hills towards Fiesole—these were things that would have required a greater skill than his to render, yet he could see in them the inspiration for something fine.

The girl was silent for what appeared to him to be a long time. Then, when she did speak, her words astonished him. “Are you religious, Mr. Allingham?” she asked softly. “You do not mind my asking such a question, do you? I don’t know whether it is right or not.”

“Why should I mind, Miss Sylvie?” he answered.

“Why do you call me Miss Sylvie?”

“I shan’t do so in future.”

“And you will answer my question?”

Allingham hesitated. “It is not an easy question to answer,” he said, at last, in a tone which he tried to make as grave as hers. “In the ordinary sense of the word I don’t know that I *am* very religious.”

“Why?” Her eyes rested gently on his.

He shook his head. “On the other hand I seem to have a most illogical affection for all the things I have ceased to believe in. I mean, any kind of militant scepticism jars upon me.”

“Naturally.”

“But I don’t know that it is natural,” he smiled. “Why should I object to hear people speak disrespectfully of what I have ceased to believe in? I’m afraid it could be reduced to a mere matter of sentiment.”

“And—aren’t you sorry for being like that?”

“Sorry that I haven’t a more definite creed?” He smiled again. “Well, you see, I’m afraid I don’t think about it a great deal. . . . Besides, I have a little religion of my own, about making the most of this present life.”

“But not selfishly?”

“Some people might call it selfish.”

“What do you mean by ‘making the most of life’?”

Allingham laughed out. “Living with the best people, in the pleasantest surroundings. I am not fond of walking through slums, for instance; nor do I find so much charm in the unfortunate and uneducated as in the fortunate and cultivated. All this, I know, sounds dreadfully brutal and callous; but you asked me to tell you.”

Sylvie had listened with an immense seriousness. “Oh, yes, I would rather you spoke quite frankly. Only, if there are unfortunate people, isn’t it the duty of those who are more fortunate to help them as far as they can?”

Allingham marvelled at the magic of youth, which could cast a glamour over the dullest platitudes. “I admit that,” he said gently. “I can’t see any way

out of it, in fact. I'm sorry to say that I solve the problem by leaving it to others."

"What I meant more when I began to talk about these things," said the girl, slowly, "was something rather different. It was more like this:—If you wanted a thing very much, would you pray for it? Would you think it any use praying for it?"

Allingham had been praying that she wouldn't ask him this question, yet he answered, "I'm afraid not."

Sylvie unclasped her hands and plucked a blade of grass that had found root-hold in a cranny in the wall, but she said nothing further, and presently they rose to go. As they made their way down the dusty, zig-zag path, they talked little. Once the girl stopped to gather some delicately-tinted leaves growing by the road-side, and before they separated she gave them to Allingham with her bright, soft smile. He carried the leaves carefully back with him, but they were already faded when he reached his hotel.

CHAPTER XXII

HE laid them down on his table, and when he had opened wide the shutters, which had been closed to the heat of the day, he leaned out to enjoy the breeze. The last rays of sunlight stretched in blood-red streaks along the yellow, sluggish water. He took up a novel which he had bought that morning. In this work there was a character, middle-aged, tedious, pompous, absurd—an uncle of the heroine. Allingham had found one or two scenes in which he had appeared distinctly entertaining, but now, at a turn of the page, he suddenly discovered him to be some six years younger than himself. He stopped reading, and sat gazing thoughtfully at the fading light. . . .

After dinner he was again alone at his open window. Night had closed in, and below the Ponte Santa Trinità lights glittered, shining down into the black, oily water, like long-stemmed, golden lilies. The pale houses opposite were broken with squares of ruddy light. Allingham smoked a cigar and reflected. The middle-aged uncle of his novel glided about these cogitations with a malicious leer upon his face as he whispered derisively, "I'm six years younger than you. I'm six

years younger than you." Allingham found himself wondering if he looked his age, and then was disgusted at the fatuity of such speculations. He could not see the faded leaves that lay upon the table, but he knew they were there. And Sylvie had given them to him ; he knew that too. . . .

Through the night there rose the twang of a stringed instrument. Allingham lit another cigar, but still sat in darkness. All at once the sound of mandolines and guitars burst upon the night with a splash of sensuous melody, shallow, yet curiously vivid and expressive. An orange moon was creeping up the sky, and the glittering music seemed strangely fitted to the place and hour. The acoustic properties of the Lungarno are marvellous, and the voices of a man and a woman now soared triumphantly above the thrumming of the instruments in a rapturous love-duet. Allingham listened to its hackneyed phrases, that were yet so thrillingly dramatic. The man's voice, especially, had an impassioned vibration, a power and sweetness. If only he would not clear his throat and spit between his lyrical outbursts. Allingham went downstairs to have a closer look at the wonderful singer, and discovered him to be a fat person with a squint. He wore a small battered straw hat on the back of his head, and he gave Allingham a dazzling smile, and a "Grazie, signore," in return for his lira.

And Allingham strolled on down to the Ponte Vecchio and across that old bridge in the direction of Casa Grimshaw.

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT night Sylvie, instead of going to sleep, found herself lying in the darkness, thinking of her conversation with Mr. Allingham, trying to elaborate and complete the ideas that what he had told her of himself had suggested. Had she been wrong, she wondered, to speak to him about religion? Did she really know him well enough for that? And she had spoken to him also of her silly novel! Not that it mattered; but she had never breathed a word about it to anybody else, and somehow it seemed to show that they must have become very intimate. She closed her eyes and began to count one—two—three, up to a thousand, but this employment only bored her without making her in the least sleepy. She got up, put on a dressing-gown and a pair of fluffy slippers, and went to the drawing-room to look for a book. As she passed Brian's door it occurred to her that he might be awake, so she knocked softly. The answer came in a sort of drowsy grunt, so drowsy that it filled Sylvie with remorse: "Who's there? Come in."

She opened the door. "It's me—Sylvie."

"What's the matter? What do you want?"

“Nothing, Brian dear. . . Only, I couldn’t go to sleep.”

“What a splendid plan to wake up everybody else, then! Have you been round the others?”

“Don’t be horrid, Brian. . . . I’ll go away if you don’t want me.”

“Oh, you can stay now you’ve come—that is, if you think it won’t create a precedent.” His voice growled at her good-humouredly through the darkness, and Sylvie sighed.

“How unsympathetic you are! If you had come to me——”

“It would have been ever so different, wouldn’t it? Well, switch on the light.”

“No, I don’t want any light. I’m only going to give you a kiss, and then go back.”

“You’d better go back first. Oh, I say, don’t be so silly,” he grumbled, as he felt her lips touch his cheek.

Sylvie sat down in a chair beside the bed.

“I thought you said you were going back?” the red boy murmured, after a pause. “I hope you’re not sitting on my clothes.”

“I’ll not do them any harm. Did Mr. Allingham ever tell you about his wanting to be an artist when he was young, Brian?”

“No.”

“He wasn’t allowed to be one. He told me all about it this afternoon. His father made him go into business. Then he got delicate and had to live abroad.

He was only a boy like you at the time, or perhaps a year or two older."

"Is that what you came in to tell me?"

"Why won't you talk, Brian? I think it's lovely sitting here together just like this, with no one to hear us."

"What's lovely about it?"

"Oh, you are horrid."

Brian laughed. "Well, fire away. I'll listen as long as I can keep awake."

Sylvie paused. "Don't you think it queer that Aunt Sophy should have kept his photograph all these years?" she presently said.

"Whose photograph?" asked Brian, drowsily.

"You know quite well whose," said Sylvie, giving him a little shake.

"What's queer about it, then? Do you think she ought to have burnt it?"

Sylvie reflected. "It's not, somehow, like Aunt Sophy, is it?"

"What isn't like her?"

"Oh, Brian, don't be so stupid!"

"Aunt Sophy's all right."

"I know she's all right. But she's so—hard, sometimes—and they're so different from each other!"

"What's that got to do with it? Why can't you say what you're really thinking about, instead of everything else?"

"I *am* thinking about the other things," Sylvie returned. "Sometimes I wonder if Aunt Sophy

really cared for him—if there was ever anything between them? There are little things I've noticed now and then, haven't you?"

"No; but then I haven't your observant eye. And if you say they were only kids——"

"Well, you might have."

"Might have what? Observed?"

"I'm not joking. It did occur to me."

"Well, I don't see that it's our business, in any case."

"You're very boyish, Brian dear." Sylvie felt for his hand on the bed-clothes and took it between her own two hands, where he allowed it to remain. "I'm not really as romantic as you are; only you think you oughtn't to talk about such things."

"I don't think any such nonsense. I would talk about them fast enough if I had anything to say. What I don't understand is why you can't tell me what *you* think, and have done with it."

But this made Sylvie hesitate. "I don't think anything," she decided softly.

"Oh, Sylvie!"

"Suppose they were to make it up again."

"But make what up? It seems to me you're doing all the making up!"

She pushed his hand away. "You're only pretending not to understand. You know very well what I mean."

Brian laughed. "I don't, really. All I know is that you've invented a story about them, and for some

reason want me to guess what it is. I'm not in Mr. Allingham's confidence; I wasn't out with him this afternoon; and I wasn't dreaming about either him or Aunt Sophy when you woke me up."

"I didn't wake you up, and I haven't invented any story; I only made a suggestion."

"That they have been in love with each other for about thirty years without realising it. Then suddenly Mr. Allingham has a bright idea, and takes the next boat home."

"Well, you know neither of them has ever married," said Sylvie, dreamily.

"You ought to make up cinematograph plots, Sylvie. I believe that must be the hidden talent we've all been waiting so long and so anxiously to discover. You get paid for them, you know—the plots, I mean—and what you've invented about Mr. Allingham and Aunt Sophy is exactly the kind of thing they want. You'd better send Mr. Allingham to the goldfields. Goldfields are particularly popular. Then one day he finds a nugget—about the size of a turnip—so that they can see it from the back row. He comes to the camp and takes an old photograph album out of a box. He has never parted with this album even in his hardest days, though he once went so far as to ask his 'uncle' how much he would give him on it. But the reply was discouraging. . . The sun is setting. The band begins to play softly. . . . It's damned good."

"It might be true all the same," said Sylvie. "And you needn't swear; it isn't really manly."

“Isn't it just? Well, I vote we leave the rest till the morning. You'll probably have developed it a good deal more by then.”

“You're not a bit nice, Brian. Some day, when you fall in love yourself, or somebody falls in love with you——”

“What will happen? *You* haven't fallen in love, have you?”

“You'll look at things differently. Good-night.” She stooped over him and kissed him once more.

“Here, I say!” cried Brian indignantly. “You've nearly deafened me! Just right on my ear!”

Sylvie laughed hysterically. “I couldn't help it. It's so dark, I had to guess. I didn't do it on purpose really, Brian.”

Her kinsman grunted unbelievably as she left him in peace to return to his slumbers.

CHAPTER XXIV

ONE afternoon Allingham was crossing the river after spending an hour with Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel, when he saw in front of him the familiar figure of Mr. Halvard. The young clergyman was walking in the same direction as himself, but much more slowly ; in fact, a moment or two after Allingham had caught sight of him, he came altogether to a halt, and stood gazing down the Via Tornabuoni with an interest which that street seemed scarcely to merit, and which implied that he had arrived but recently in Florence. Dangling from a strap passed over his shoulder was the well-known opera-glass in its shiny black leather case, without which appendage Allingham had never yet seen him venture forth, even were it only as far as the post-office to buy stamps. As he came up with him now he felt a strong inclination to clap him on the back, but he recollected Mr. Halvard's keen sense of propriety, and refrained. In the direction of familiarity he risked nothing further than the laying of a friendly hand on the young man's shoulder ; an action which had the effect of making him jump.

“ Ah, how do you do ? ” Mr. Halvard smiled,

with a touch of austerity that revealed his distaste for boisterous salutes.

“ I’m flourishing, thanks. How long have you been here ? ”

“ Not very long. . . . In fact, I’ve just arrived.”

This speech was somehow characteristic enough for Allingham, apparently, to find it amusing. “ So I thought. Have you discovered an hotel yet ? ”

“ No ; I left my baggage at the station, so that I might be more free to look for a suitable place. It saves the expense of a carriage, and also I find it easier to get away if the rooms are not just what one wants.”

“ That’s very knowing of you. I never thought of such a dodge. What about having a look at my hotel ; it’s quite close ? ”

“ I shall be delighted to stay there if it is suitable.”

Allingham laughed. “ Well, don’t commit yourself. But come round and have a look at it.”

“ How warm it keeps,” Mr. Halvard suggested, as they walked on.

“ Yes. Not too warm for me though.” He felt inclined to add that if Mr. Halvard would only adopt a more secular costume, instead of clinging to the insignia of his profession, he would probably find himself more comfortable ; but he was sure the young clergyman had definite views upon this subject. “ That’s the Ponte Vecchio in front of you,” he said. “ The place where the jeweller’s shops are.”

Mr. Halvard paused to gaze upon the Ponte Vecchio.

“It is one of the noted bridges, is it not?” he inquired.

“Yes; it’s on most of the postcards. And here is our hotel.”

Mr. Halvard entered and, accompanied by Allingham and the manager, proceeded to look at rooms. He examined several, hesitating between one facing a court at the back, at eight lire, and one looking on the river, at ten. Finally he declared for the former.

“I think you are making a mistake,” Allingham said, when they were alone. “It’s worth the two lire extra to have a decent view; and, besides, the room is better.”

“But it is two lire a day.”

“Even so; you’ll find it much pleasanter. It’s delightful looking out at those old houses and the river.”

Mr. Halvard wavered. Finally he rang the bell and asked the manager to show him the front room again. This second inspection took longer, and it ended in Mr. Halvard’s keeping to his original choice. “The river seems to be of a rather bilious colour,” he remarked, in explanation.

Knowing Mr. Halvard’s circumstances, Allingham was somewhat surprised, and he was still more surprised when, half an hour later, the young clergyman tapped at his door and, coming in, said: “I thought perhaps you would allow me to sit here, if it does not disturb you?”

“Not in the least.”

“As you say, it is certainly a charming view,” Mr. Halvard admitted, seating himself in Allingham’s armchair by the window, and producing from his pocket Grant Allen’s *Florence*, which he proceeded to study.

Allingham, over the top of his Tauchnitz, now and then cast a wondering glance at him. He was surprised by this strange little trait in Mr. Halvard’s character, which the choice of rooms had elicited, and which was still further revealed, now that he had a clue to it, by the carefully preserved paper wrappings on the covers of his Grant Allen and his Baedeker, and by the disfavour with which he regarded Allingham’s proposal that he should detach the street map from the latter volume, as being more convenient to carry than the whole book.

“If you adopt my plan of leaving your luggage at the station and getting the hotel people to send for it,” Mr. Halvard presently observed, “you must be careful to see that they do not, all the same, charge you for the use of the hotel bus in your bill. They tried to do so with me at Milan. It was either one franc, or one-fifty.” He drew a bundle of bills from his pocket and glanced through them to verify the item. “One-fifty, indeed, I find it to have been.”

“Did you stop at Milan?”

“For a day. They were doing an opera at the Scala which I wished to hear. I am very fond of music. And I also wanted to see Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, and the Cathedral.”

“ Did you like them ? ”

“ I thought the cathedral very fine, though there was a young American in our party who compared it to a wedding-cake.”

“ The simile wasn't original,” said Allingham, good-naturedly. “ Besides, I don't see why one shouldn't admire a wedding-cake, do you ? ”

“ I thought the remark in rather bad taste ; especially as there was a lady with us who was on her honeymoon.”

He returned to Grant Allen, and Allingham watched him with an emotion approaching to awe.

CHAPTER XXV

THAT evening he presented Mr. Halvard at Casa Grimshaw. They found the whole family there, with the exception of Brian, who presently entered, a shawl wrapped round his throat.

“ ‘A salt and sorry rheum offends me,’ ” he said, as he shook hands with Allingham. “ ‘Lend me thy handkerchief.’ ”

“ You don’t mean to say you haven’t got one ! ” Mrs. Grimshaw exclaimed. “ Run and get one at once.”

Mr. Halvard stared.

“ It’s only Shakespeare, mamma. I have a ‘ wipe ’ all right.”

“ A what ? I can’t think where you pick up such expressions ! ”

“ Shakespeare again, mamma.” He shook hands with Mr. Halvard, who regarded him with uncertainty.

Their meeting amused Allingham, and he watched them while listening to Mrs. Grimshaw, who spoke in a confidential undertone. “ I’m afraid he must have caught cold yesterday when we were out driving. There was an east wind, though we didn’t feel it till

we were coming home. . . . He was very ill some time ago," she added, in a still lower voice, "and the doctor told me then that we mustn't run any risks."

"The only time mamma ever gets seriously angry with me is when I catch cold," Brian grumbled, as if he had guessed what she had been saying.

"It is because you are so careless, dear!"

"One cannot change one's nature."

"I am sorry to hear you proclaim that doctrine," Mr. Halvard interposed, in the tone of slightly heavy jocularly he adopted as a means of "getting into touch with young people." Nevertheless, as he said it, and smiled, he looked very handsome, and very like Mantegna's *Saint George*.

"It is true, isn't it, Mr. Allingham?" Brian answered, turning to his friend.

"I'm afraid so."

"Can the Ethiopian change his spots?" Mrs. Grimshaw quoted brightly.

"There you put it in a nutshell, mamma."

Mr. Halvard's dark blue eyes, with their peculiar, veiled expression, rested upon Allingham. The lamp-light touched the gold of his hair. "Do you think it is true?" he asked.

"Very nearly, at any rate," Allingham smiled. "I remember, when I was a little boy, reading about a cat who fell in love with a prince. She persuaded a good-natured witch to transform her into a beautiful lady, and in the end she married the prince. All went well until one evening when they gave a dinner-party.

But in the middle of the festivities a mouse unfortunately happened to come out and play on the floor. The guests were charmed with the little creature's antics, and sat very quiet so as not to frighten it. But nobody sat half so quiet as the hostess, who actually gripped the sides of her chair, so intent was she on not making the slightest movement. And her lovely big green eyes grew very large and very bright ; larger and larger, brighter and brighter. At last the mouse indulged in a particularly aggravating frisk, and the lady, letting go the sides of her chair, made one pounce. . . . The story is painful, of course, but it has always struck me as keeping remarkably close to life."

He paused, and Mr. Halvard said gravely : " Yet all religion is based on the great truth that a man's nature *is* capable of complete transformation."

These astounding words, uttered very quietly, fell upon them like a bombshell. Allingham, crushed beneath them, glanced round helplessly at the others, but at once became conscious that they had elicited a little wave of sympathy from at least two members of the party. He could have dropped on his knees and begged the young clergyman for mercy. Mrs. Grimshaw, indeed, with the air of one exercising a miracle of tact, immediately changed the subject, and began to question Mr. Halvard concerning his travels. This was more than Allingham could stand. " Damn it," he said to himself, " you would think I had been coming off with an improper story ! " And in his irritation he left Sylvie and her mother to discuss

Mr. Halvard's impressions of foreign cities and customs, and addressed himself to Miss Kilronan, whom he saw watching him with a mocking expression in her black eyes. But as he talked he could not help listening to what the others were saying. Mr. Halvard was describing the opera he had heard in Milan, and presently Allingham noted that the conversation had developed into a tête-à-tête between Sylvie and the young divine on the subject of music. It appeared that Sylvie had the score of the particular opera Mr. Halvard had heard. She crossed the room, followed by him, and they began to turn over a heap of music beside the piano. Allingham tried to talk intelligently to Sophy Kilronan, but he found himself answering at random.

"Yes—yes," he murmured, mechanically, as Sophy paused.

"'Yes—yes' . . . I wonder, Bennet, if you realize how rude you are! If you don't want to listen to what I am saying, please don't pretend to do so."

Allingham was profuse in apologies. "I'm very sorry, Sophy; but you made a remark a moment ago that happened to suggest a train of thought——"

"What did I say a moment ago?"

"Alas, only what it suggested now remains."

"Bennet, you're a humbug."

"I'm very sorry. It shan't occur again."

But all the same he could see that Sophy was annoyed. Meanwhile, Sylvie and Mr. Halvard were bending over the open score of the opera; they were trying to find

a particular passage, and Mr. Halvard hummed it while Sylvie turned the leaves.

The conversation of the others languished. "While the young people are at their music we might perhaps have a game of bridge," Mrs. Grimshaw proposed.

Allingham again felt a vague irritation.

"Mr. Allingham and I will play against you and Aunt Sophy," said Brian.

They had played on several other evenings, though on these occasions Mrs. Grimshaw's place had usually been taken by Sylvie; but now it seemed to be regarded as a matter of course that the girl should entertain Mr. Halvard. Brian pulled forward a small card-table, and they drew in their chairs.

"Perhaps we had better draw for partners." The suggestion came from Mrs. Grimshaw, who had played with Aunt Sophy before.

"No; you and Aunt Sophy against Mr. Allingham and me would be fairest. Aunt Sophy's the best."

"Very well, dear; but I play so seldom."

"Aunt Sophy won't scold you if you make mistakes. . . . They're your cards." He proceeded to deal them for her, while Allingham wrote "We," "They," at the top of the marker.

Mrs. Grimshaw, after a great many hesitations and glances at her partner, decided to begin at Spades; and the bidding went round till it finished with Brian.

"Goodall's are the people who make baking-powder, aren't they?" Mrs. Grimshaw innocently remarked, as they waited for Miss Kilronan to lead.

“Mamma, it’s my impression that you have the ace of Spades.”

His mother looked up quickly, with a little, guilty smile. “How do you know what I have? I expect you would like me to tell you!”

“Not at all. At this stage of the game, and after Aunt Sophy’s hesitation, one naturally knows where the cards lie.”

“What nonsense!—‘at this stage of the game!’ Why, we haven’t begun yet!”

“Besides, if you had had any other ace you’d have mentioned it, seeing that the ace of Spades is the lowest. If you’d had the ace of Hearts, for instance——”

“That just shows!” Mrs. Grimshaw triumphed. “Because as a matter of fact I happen——”

“My dear Lucy, if you’re going to tell them everything you have in your hand, there’s not much use playing,” Miss Kilronan interrupted, patiently.

“I’m not telling them,” Mrs. Grimshaw protested.

“Don’t listen to Aunt Sophy, mamma; she’ll only put you out. Play your own game.”

“I think there’s too much talking,” Allingham suggested, diplomatically.

But Mrs. Grimshaw’s mind hovered like a butterfly about the room, alighting on the game only when it was her turn to put down a card. “Who *is* Mr. Halvard?” she presently asked, under cover of the piano.

“I really don’t know a great deal about him, except that his father is a brewer—Halvard’s Ale, you know.

I came across him in Bruges, where he was stopping at my hotel. He seems a nice boy."

"I suppose they're very well off, if they're brewers?"

"Probably. . . . He is an Oxford man."

The game went on, Brian and Allingham winning.

"Spades," Brian announced, after a new deal.

"Clubs," said Miss Kilronan.

"He's very good-looking," murmured Mrs. Grimshaw.

"Yes. I believe he has been working in the East End of London, somewhere."

"Really! And yet he seems to be so musical!"

"Clubs," Miss Kilronan repeated, ominously.

"Oh—er—let me see. Hearts," Allingham declared.

"Diamonds," said Mrs. Grimshaw, after a hurried scrutiny of her cards.

Sophy Kilronan sighed, and her sister looked at her timidly through her pince-nez.

"You know you can't go Diamonds, Lucy."

"You have to go something higher than Hearts, mamma. Two Diamonds, for instance; or better still, two No Trump."

"Two No Trump," declared Mrs. Grimshaw, obediently.

"I'll double two No Trump," Brian said, glancing through the side of his eyes at Aunt Sophy.

"Attend to the game, dear," his mother reproved him. "What are you laughing at?"

"I'm not laughing—at least only a little. It's your call, Aunt Sophy."

Miss Kilronan had laid down her cards.

"I think we'd better begin again," said Allingham, who read signs of trouble in Sophy's indifference. "Sophy, you said Clubs. I say Hearts, Mrs. Grimshaw, two Diamonds. Now, Brian?"

"I'll double two Diamonds."

"Dear, do stop laughing."

"I ca- can't help it. Besides, we're here to amuse ourselves."

"Pass," said Miss Kilronan, icily.

"Pass."

"Pass. . . . I think there's always a something about a young fellow who has been at Oxford—something rather distinguished, don't you think? It's quite different from Cambridge in that way."

"I'm afraid I'm not an authority on the subject."

"Well, it's my lead; and mamma has gone a sporting two Diamonds—doubled by her son."

"Two Diamonds!" cried Mrs. Grimshaw, alarmed. "No Trump, I thought it was!"

"Two Diamonds is what you said," Miss Kilronan dropped, spreading out a Diamondless hand on the table.

"*Two* Diamonds! But I haven't any—I mean, Diamonds is my worst suit! I can't have said it."

"It's Aunt Sophy's fault, mamma. She and Mr. Allingham rushed you into it. You wanted to go No Trump."

"Yes, I'm sure I didn't say Diamonds."

“ You’ll have to play it now, at any rate,” Sophy insisted.

“ Well, I’m sure we shall lose if it depends upon me. . . . I should like Brian to go to Oxford, but Mr. Grimshaw wants him to go into the business as soon as we get home.”

“ Mr. Allingham wasn’t at Oxford,” said Brian.

“ You have made quite a conquest of Brian, Mr. Allingham. We hear nothing but Mr. Allingham’s praises from morning to night. Everything is what Mr. Allingham says, or what Mr. Allingham does.”

Brian blushed crimson. “ You don’t hear anything of the sort,” he blurted out, angrily.

“ Don’t contradict, dear. We *do* hear it. There is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“ I’m not ashamed.”

“ Whatever else Oxford did for you, it might at least improve your manners,” Aunt Sophy remarked.

Allingham pretended to be deep in the study of his cards. From the other side of the room came Mr. Halvard’s tenor voice :

“ ‘ Who is Sylvia ? what is She ?
That all our swains commend her ? ’ ”

“ Don’t you think he’s getting rather personal ? ” Brian whispered, his brow unclouding.

Mrs. Grimshaw continued to babble on about Mr. Halvard, with whom she was evidently very much struck, and placed one of her all too few Diamonds upon Dummy’s ace of Clubs in the second round of that suit.

“ Really, Lucy ! ”

“ Why ? . . . Oh, I forgot ! ”

“ I don’t see how you can expect to play two hands and talk at the same time ? ”

“ I keep on thinking it’s No Trump. . . . No, dear ; I shall have that back.” (This to Brian, who had gathered up the trick for her).

“ Well, I think the rest are ours,” said Allingham, a minute or two later. “ Four down in doubled Diamonds.”

“ We shouldn’t have lost, I’m sure, if it had been No Trump. I’ll not take any more suggestions from other people.”

“ Right, mamma. Suggestions lead to disaster. Yours was a moral victory, and if we possibly could, we’d give you something above the line for it.”

“ We’re four-eighty-four to the good,” Allingham announced. “ It’s your deal, Sophy.”

“ Don’t you think we’d better have a little supper before we go on ? ” Mrs. Grimshaw hastily interposed. “ The others seem to have come to an end of their music. Brian, dear, ring the bell. . . . I suppose you hear a great deal of music in London, Mr. Halvard ? ” she asked, as the young clergyman approached the card-table.

Mr. Halvard smiled gravely. (“ He’s just stinking with Oxford,” whispered Brian, in admiration.)

“ Yes, a good deal. I find something like that to be almost necessary, with the work I am doing. I usually

take one day a week off, and if there is a concert or an opera I go to hear it."

"How nice that must be for you!"

Allingham joined Sylvie, who had gone to the window, and was looking out into the dim garden. She glanced round at him, laughingly. "There's not much to be seen, is there? We must rig up some Chinese lanterns and make it more picturesque."

"An admirable idea."

"Mr. Halvard has a beautiful voice, don't you think?" She drummed with her fingers against the glass for a moment.

"He seems to sing very nicely."

"And he was reading most of the things at sight. He reads awfully well. He has promised to come tomorrow afternoon to practise duets. I love duets, and it's so hard to get anybody to sing with."

"I suppose there's no use offering you either tea or coffee at this hour of the night, Bennet?" Miss Kilronan called out.

"Have a ha'penny orr'nge, Mr. Allingham?" said Brian, approaching with a dish of that fruit.

And Mrs. Grimshaw's voice was raised: "Sylvie, dear, have you that photograph of the Bargello you bought yesterday? I want to show it to Mr. Halvard."

"It's upstairs. I can get it in a minute."

"I'm going to eat my orange over here beside you, Mr. Allingham," the red boy said, when his sister had gone in search of the photograph. "It's too dark

in this corner for Aunt Sophy to see me, and I'm going to eat it vulgarly. Do you mind?"

"Not if you don't make a noise."

"But I do. That's just where the vulgarity comes in. You must drown the noise by conversation. I think, on the whole, you'd better recite something."

He proceeded to cut a slit in the rind, and into this he squeezed a lump of sugar. "There seems to be precious little juice," he murmured. "The noise will be something terrific, if I'm to get it out at all." He turned his face to the window and raised the prepared fruit to his mouth. But Miss Kilronan's piercing eye had already detected these manœuvres.

"*Brian*, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, Aunt Sophy. . . 'Where the bee sucks, there suck I,'" he added in an undertone.

But Miss Kilronan came straight across to them. "How can you be so disgusting?"

"It's the only way I like oranges," her nephew grumbled, "and I asked Mr. Allingham's permission."

"Mr. Allingham had no right to give you permission, then. Get a plate and a knife at once, and behave like a gentleman."

Brian frowned, but obeyed, and Miss Kilronan sat down beside her old friend.

"Why have you chosen this dark corner, Bennet? One would think you had been put here in disgrace!"

Sophy's reproof to Brian had, in fact, made Allingham *feel* in disgrace. He knew that the tone of camaraderie that marked his relations with that young

gentleman was mentally condemned by Miss Kilronan, and even by Mrs. Grimshaw. They saw in it a want of dignity, doubtless. Had not Sophy told him that he would never grow up? He did not quite understand the change that had come over Sophy, and he wondered what had altered her. It was only now and then that he recognised the old Sophy of his boyhood, though even in those days she had wanted to "boss" everybody.

"'A cœur blessé—l'ombre et le silence,'" he murmured in answer to her remark.

"Poor Bennet! Who has wounded your heart?"

"All of you have helped. I feel that I am supplanted. Nobody wants to show me photographs of the Bargello."

"But you know the original?"

"What difference does that make? And then, to crown all, I am exhibited as a horrible person who imbibes whisky and soda—incidentally setting a bad example to Brian—when everybody else is rejoicing in coffee. It was you who betrayed me, Sophy."

"It would have served you right if I hadn't betrayed you. Wait till next time."

"Next time it won't matter. My reputation is lost. What do you think of the beautiful youth?"

"I think he's very nice."

"Do you think he has a sense of humour, Sophy?"

"He may have some qualities that are more important."

“ I’m sure he has. He makes me feel, sometimes, as if he must have them all,” Allingham sighed.

“ Don’t you like him ? ”

“ I do like him—as much as I can. But I feel that I ought to like him so far more than I do—yet, somehow, I don’t. . . . How does my new conversational style strike you, Sophy ? ”

“ It seems a little involved.”

“ An increase of subtlety ; the grammar will come with practice. What I mean is, that my opinion of Mr. Halvard is of no value at all ; I don’t understand him.”

“ Yet he seems to be simple enough. A little priggish, perhaps, just now.”

“ Guileless, Sophy, I daresay ; but certainly not simple. You and I are both very much simpler than the beautiful youth. My first impression of him was quite wrong. My second impression isn’t formed yet, and, so far as I can see, it never will be.”

“ Probably he finds you just as strange.”

“ There I think you are mistaken. I should be surprised if I presented the slightest difficulty to him—except when I talk about cats and princes—while there is an entire side of life which *he* knows of, and which we *don’t* know of, and never *will* know of.”

“ You keep classing me with yourself, Bennet ! ”

“ That’s to give myself courage. The only persons in this room that I really understand are the red boy and his mother.”

“ The red boy ? ”

“Your nephew.”

“But surely *they're* not at all alike!”

“Not very. But I understand them both. I know where I am with them; we belong to the same world. . . . And they're not really so very unlike. The main difference is that one is clever and the other isn't.”

“Do you think you did right, then, to bring such a very enigmatic person as Mr. Halvard here?”

“Why not? He is, at least, a gentleman. What I did wrong was to discuss him after I *had* brought him.”

“But that's what you enjoy, isn't it? I almost imagined that that was what you brought him for.”

“You're very unkind, Sophy. But I *do* like it. I'm getting nearly as bad as an analytic novelist. All the same, it is a weakness, a very deplorable one, really. Shall we join the others and put ourselves out of temptation?”

“I think perhaps we'd better.”

“Even if it's only to pick up material for a further discussion,” Allingham added as he followed her.

CHAPTER XXVI

"THEY are charming people," Mr. Halvard said, as he and Allingham walked home.

"I am glad you liked them."

"It was very good of you to take me—a stranger, without credentials." He smiled. More than ever, in the dim soft moonlight, he reminded Allingham of Saint George; and yet, more than ever, his beauty seemed remote, mysterious, almost inhuman. "You have known them for a long time, I suppose?"

"I have known Mrs. Grimshaw and her sister all my life. Grimshaw himself I have never seen. The marriage took place after I had gone to America. How did you like the young people?"

"Miss Grimshaw is delightful—so unaffected. I was perhaps not quite so favourably impressed by the brother."

"What is the matter with him?" Allingham asked, laughing. "It's not his red hair, is it?"

"No—no. . . . I thought perhaps. . . . Oh, it is really nothing. . . . It is very pleasant to get a peep into the intimacy of a home like that—especially for

us priests, who can enjoy such glimpses only from the outside."

Allingham laughed again. "I don't quite know what that last remark may imply, but it appears to hint at something very dreadful. So far as I have observed, clergymen are just as able and ready to form homes as other people."

"It depends, I should say, on what idea they may have of their calling. To me, personally, it seems obvious that a priest should remain unmarried."

"But why?"

"For the sake of his work; for the sake of an ideal."

"That is a very cold ideal, surely? And need the fact of a man's having a wife and children prevent him from working?"

"It prevents him from giving himself entirely to his work. I should have thought you, even as an artist, would have agreed with me there. A clergyman's parish is his family."

"Well, for myself, I should prefer a smaller one; but, as you say, it is a matter of taste."

"With me it is a matter of conviction."

"Aren't you very young to hold such austere views? Or perhaps that may be partly why you do hold them."

"I have never held any other view, and it has been strengthened since I came abroad. An atmosphere of Catholicism brings home to one the extraordinary power of religion. The churches, the pictures—all tend to bring it out."

“Do you really care so greatly for that sort of thing? Don't you think one can have too much of it?”

“I don't know what sort of thing you are referring to.”

“Well, to medievalism in general. You mentioned the pictures, but it seems to me that if you leave out the subject of the mother and child—which, I suppose, is about as domestic a one as you could find—what remains of religious art would be rather appalling.”

“You mean, I suppose, all that is connected with the saints? I do not find it so.”

Allingham frowned. “But it is not good, you know—that sort of stuff. It is abnormal. One cannot live a life like that, and remain mentally and physically healthy.”

“Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Angela of Foligno lived for years without taking any other food than the consecrated Host. They were both perfectly healthy,” said Mr. Halvard, quietly.

“You really believe that?”

“One has no choice but to believe it. It is not a poetic fiction, I assure you; it is an historic fact.”

“It did not strike me as being poetic,” said Allingham, dryly.

“It requires some time, I daresay, before one gets to see the full beauty and truth that lie at the heart of mysticism.”

“I'm afraid I shall never see it.”

“Have you read the *Fioretti* of Saint Francis?”

“ I have, and I don't like them.”

Mr. Halvard was kindness itself. “ That is very interesting. I should have thought they would have appealed to everyone: they are so charming, so natural, so simple.”

“ But they're not,” returned Allingham, impatiently. “ In the story of Saint Francis preaching to the birds, when the birds drop into line and fly away across the sky in the form of a gigantic cross—does that strike you as natural, as simple? If you are charmed by it, you'll have to find another reason. To my mind it is morbid in the extreme, like everything else in the book.”

Mr. Halvard was perfectly unruffled. “ Even granting that it is—and I don't grant it—may it not be that in certain states of mind, which the materialist would describe as morbid, we have a keener vision of the truth than at any other time?”

“ I am not a materialist.”

“ You remember the famous saying of Saint Hildegarde: ‘ Le Seigneur n'habite pas dans les corps sains et vigoureux?’ ”

“ I never heard it before, but I'm glad to be warned against Saint Hildegarde. She is evidently one of the worst of her class.” And suddenly his annoyance leaped to the surface. “ It is just nonsense of that repulsive sort that I am objecting to. The whole literature of the saints—if you can call it a literature—is steeped in it. It reeks of the hospital and the charnel-house. . . . My dear young friend,” he went on, more quietly, “ at the risk of seeming fatuous, I

cannot help thinking that your enthusiasm for it must be of very recent date, and that you will leave it behind you. Of course, I know that such suggestions are always irritating——”

“ They are not in the least,” Mr. Halvard smiled.

“ It isn't merely that, personally, I find it distasteful, but that I don't believe any fine thing ever came to flower in such an unsavoury soil. A genius may, I suppose, succeed in throwing a deceptive glamour over the unnatural, but he can never make it natural. Even from your own point of view, from the most strictly religious point of view, don't you see how futile it must be ? You may chloroform your intelligence with the ideal and the mystical, but all that will do very little for you in the practical difficulties of life. So far as keeping a healthy mind is concerned, a day out in the woods, or by the sea, is better than the dimmest of cathedrals. The wind is a better tonic for the soul than incense, a plunge in the river than half-an-hour in the confessional.”

Allingham was disagreeably conscious of this speech as a somewhat “ balanced ” effort. He hadn't intended it to come out like that. Mr. Halvard made no reply to it whatever, and, indeed, both of them knew that the argument, from the beginning, had been hopeless. Allingham even felt that in the young man's silence there was a certain disdain. He was annoyed with himself, above all, for having been betrayed into a more heated manner of speech than he cared to adopt about anything. It was amazing how the blood of

Presbyterian forbears clamoured within him at such moments. He supposed Mr. Halvard regarded him as dead to the spiritual side of life, as a materialistic and cynical person, without religion, without imagination, possibly even without good manners. All that the discussion had done, though it had done this most effectually, was to bring to the surface a latent but essential antagonism between them—an antagonism of mind, of spirit—which he now saw had been there from the beginning. He saw also how feeble his falling back for support upon the fact of his superior age must have appeared to Mr. Halvard, implying, as it did, if it had any meaning whatever, that he had at one time passed through a similar phase of feeling. Mr. Halvard knew perfectly well that he had never passed, and never would pass, through any such phase. They separated with a bare, and not particularly cordial, “good-night.”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE October days slipped by, but Allingham's plan of showing Florence to Sylvie had not been carried out quite as completely as, nor quite in the manner that, he had intended. This was largely due to the unexpected activity displayed by Mr. Halvard in organising excursions in which the whole party shared. Mr. Halvard had become indispensable. It was he who arranged the drives to Fiesole, to Prato, to Pistoia; it was he who brought flowers to the ladies (a testimony of regard which, had they known him as well as Allingham did, might have astonished them not a little); it was he who turned the homely little evenings at Casa Grimshaw into delightful concerts. Nor was his advent signalled only by such triumphs as these. Since his appearance, Sophy had visibly relaxed in her attitude towards everybody. She was now always in good humour, and Allingham found himself dropping back more or less into his old relation to her. He was her particular cavalier upon most of the excursions, and his chair was usually beside hers when they talked the day's adventures over in the drawing-room after dinner.

If he had fewer chances of being alone with Sylvie, he, at all events, saw her in the company of others; and this, in the meantime, was sufficient for his happiness. He liked, it must be confessed, to watch the girl in relation to other people. He liked to observe her with a kind of odd, tender, half-humorous observation—a sort of mingled pride and affection. Her impulsiveness and candour pleased him, the unaffectedness of all she did and said, her apparent unconsciousness of her own beauty, the unspoiled pleasure she took in all things. He liked the generosity and simplicity of her nature, the absence of self-consciousness. Each time he saw her, her fresh, radiant youth delighted him anew, and it delighted him this morning as he perceived her coming out from the old church of Or San Michele, where she must have been attending Mass.

She did not at first see him, owing to a number of people that were between them—for the most part women of the poorer class, with a sprinkling of children. He watched her draw near, and a smile passed from his dark eyes to his fine, clean mouth.

Sylvie approached him, her eyes cast down, as if she were lost in grave meditation; then, when she was almost beside him, she looked up. The smile of recognition that came into her face was like a soft revelation of all its sweetness, and Allingham felt that deep strange happiness which any meeting with her brought him. This happiness was very clearly expressed in his slow, drawling voice, as he asked her if she had been to church.

“ Yes,” she answered simply. “ I go almost every morning now.”

“ And you have the courage to confess it to a staunch Protestant like me ! I’m not at all sure that we approve of going even to our own churches on week-days, let alone to dreadful strongholds of Papistry ! ”

“ I’m afraid it would shock some of my friends at home much more than it shocks you.”

“ You quite underrate my capacity for being shocked. You always have done so.”

“ I only go because I like to be quiet for a little, sometimes. A Protestant church would do quite as well, if they would let me in.”

“ You are sure you are not becoming High-church even ? The interesting influence of Mr. Halvard hasn’t been secretly at work ? ”

“ Are you never serious, Mr. Allingham ? ”

“ I am extremely serious now. This outward flippancy really covers an intense anxiety. You simply *must* have discussed church doctrines with Mr. Halvard. Nobody can avoid it.”

“ Of course I have.”

“ I thought so ! And you know in what points the Church of Rome is wrong and he is right ? ”

“ He does not believe in the infallibility of the Pope.”

Allingham laughed out. “ He believes in his own, though. He fasts and goes to confession, is much attached to the saints, and even hears confessions himself.”

“ Only the confessions of little boys.”

“ And they’re the last little animals in the world he could ever understand. Aren’t they ? ”

“ He told me that fasting agreed with him, that his mind was clearer when he fasted, that he could do more work and better work. Mr. Halvard thinks that if one is to influence other people spiritually, one should live as spiritual a life as one can oneself.”

“ He’s a delightful boy. Don’t you find *him* almost serious enough, Sylvie ? ”

“ I don’t think you are fair to him. He is very young.”

“ Not so young as you are.”

“ I don’t feel young a bit. Sometimes I feel horribly old.”

“ That is a privilege of youth. Later on one daren’t realize such things. . . . What is the matter ? ” he added, for as they drew near the Ponte Vecchio they saw a crowd gathered there, a crowd that was increasing every moment as fresh arrivals tried to push their way towards the river amid wild shouting and gesticulation. The commotion increased rapidly, and Allingham and his companion were soon obliged to come to a standstill.

“ If they weren’t Italians one might imagine something had happened,” Allingham murmured. “ Probably a hat has fallen into the river.”

But the hubbub grew ever louder and wilder, till all at once it developed into frantic cheers, led by those in favourable positions along the river wall. Allingham and Sylvie pressed forward unavailingly.

“If one only understood the language, there are plenty of explanations going on,” he said. “It can hardly be a hat after all, with these screams of joy!”

For the cheering still continued, and had now spread to those who were quite as unable as themselves to make out what was happening.

“See, they’re getting a rope!” Sylvie cried. “Somebody must have fallen in.”

A rope was passed from hand to hand over the densely packed people; then a man emerged from a sea of shoulders and heads, waist-high above them.

“He’s on the wall!” Sylvie cried. “He is going over!”

The man disappeared, and there followed a few seconds of silence; then a renewed and terrific outburst of cheering.

“They’re hauling him up,” said Allingham, who was craning his neck and standing on his toes. “He must have got something. Here he comes!”

At last the crowd divided, surging and swaying to either side, under the frantic protests of policemen. Allingham and Sylvie caught a swift glimpse of a limp figure being borne along, with dark hair hanging loose, and wet clothes that hung and dripped about her. Then the figure disappeared through the door of a shop, which the police were obliged to hold against the onrush of the eager crowd, thirsting to see, and trying to force an entrance.

“Is she drowned?” Sylvie asked. “What are they still cheering about?”

A man appeared at an upper window of the shop and began to shout.

"He says she lives, Signorina," a white-haired Italian politely explained, with the eagerness of his race to talk English. "They now cheer her saviour."

The excitement among the crowd had indeed only at this moment attained to its full height. There was a wild waving of hats and handkerchiefs, and once more the swaying and surging of two heavy masses of people trying to separate.

"Why it's Brian!" Sylvie cried hysterically. "Brian!" she called out, half laughing, half crying.

The boy turned, while admiring Florentines made a path for him, and then closed in about the little group in a far-reaching circle that was like a swaying field of corn. Brian was very white, but he smiled, as his glance met Allingham's. He was bare-headed, and in his shirt and trousers, from which the water streamed, forming a pool about his feet.

"I seem to have brought most of the Arno with me," he said, regretfully.

"La sorella! La sorella!" screamed the crowd, as Sylvie made an impulsive movement to clasp him in her arms.

Brian drew back with great presence of mind.

"Stop—Don't be idiotic! They're all looking at you."

"But are you hurt? Are you all right?" Sylvie quavered, laughing through her tears.

“Of course I’m all right, if they’d only let me alone. . . . I wonder who’s bagged my jacket? It’s just like them! I suppose I’ll never see it again! My hat’s gone too. I forgot to take it off before I jumped.”

Allingham, meanwhile, was bestowing his card upon an important person in uniform.

“I say, we must get out of this at once,” the boy murmured, as the smiling, excited people pressed in upon him, shaking hands, some of the women even attempting, like Sylvie, to embrace him. “They’re all mad. Did you ever see such a lot? Here’s my jacket at last!” But before he could put it on a stout, laughing, young woman had enveloped him in her arms, and imprinted a resounding and garlic-perfumed kiss upon his cheek, to the intense joy of the spectators. Only the policeman, trying to clear a path for them, were beginning to get angry.

“I hope you won’t catch cold,” said Sylvie, anxiously, as the policemen did their best to keep back the hero’s admirers.

But the more thoughtful of these had begun to realize the situation for themselves, and in a trice Brian would have been stripped and clothed in dry garments had he not resisted manfully. With infinite difficulty a way was at last made for them, and they proceeded as quickly as they could across the bridge.

“I wonder if the girl is all right? She wasn’t really very long in the water.”

“But you might have been drowned!” Sylvie murmured, reproachfully.

“ Well, it wouldn't have been my fault. I waited as long as I decently could for somebody else to go in, but there was no competition.”

“ And you actually dived off the bridge? How could you?”

“ I couldn't. That was what spoiled it. The dive was a failure.”

“ Didn't she struggle?”

“ Of course. After all, I don't see that I had any right to interfere. She jumped in on purpose . . . I'm afraid most of the drowning took place after I caught hold of her, and while I was trying to lug her ashore. Nobody seemed to think of getting a boat. That would have been too practical, besides spoiling the show. It's just occurred to me that we might have waded out. I wonder what depth it really is? Don't be saying anything to mamma and Aunt Sophy.”

“ Such nonsense! Of course they must be told.”

“ It will be in all the papers to-morrow,” said Allingham, “ with a description of how it happened—in the English papers too.”

“ Well, don't say anything to mamma till I get changed, or she will want me to go to bed and drink things all afternoon.”

“ You must take a hot drink. I'll bring one up to you.”

They had at last reached the house, and Brian had begun to climb the stairs, accompanied by Allingham.

“ I'll bring the drink up in a minute,” Sylvie called

after them. "And you'll have to get your clothes dried."

Allingham followed the red boy to his room, but when they were alone Brian sat down suddenly on the side of the bed. "I thought I'd never get out," he murmured. "My foot slipped just when I was jumping, and I hurt myself going in."

"Are you all right now?" Allingham asked, for his face was very white.

"Oh, yes. But it wasn't easy. If I hadn't had the good luck to get a grip of the girl so that she couldn't put her arms round me, I wouldn't have had an earthly."

He fumbled at the lace of his shoe without succeeding in untying it.

"Let me," said Allingham. "I really think you'd better get into bed," he added, as he happened to glance up, and saw the boy's half-closed eyes.

"No; I'll be all right in a minute. I don't want mamma to make a fuss. She always sends for a doctor if she thinks there's the slightest thing the matter with me."

But as he got on his feet, he suddenly stumbled, and Allingham had just time to catch him before he fell. He lifted him on to the bed, as there came a tapping at the door, and Sylvie's voice speaking from the other side.

"Brian, you're to drink this while it's hot; and if you give me out your wet clothes I'll take them down and have them dried for you."

Allingham went to the door, and opened it.

“What is the matter?” Sylvie asked. Next moment she saw her brother lying white and still and ran to him.

“He has fainted,” Allingham said. “I think I had better go for a doctor.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Allingham. Mamma and Aunt Sophy are both out, but I can get Maria to help me. We must put him to bed at once, and get some hot jars and flannels.” She had already rung the bell. “Don’t be frightened. I have seen him like this before and know what to do in the meantime.”

She was perfectly self-possessed; swift and sure in her movements; and Allingham saw that he need have no misgivings about leaving her alone. As he went out Maria bustled in.

When he came back, Brian was safely in bed, and appeared to have recovered marvellously. Sylvie glanced at Allingham and he nodded in reply.

“I’m awfully sorry, Mr. Allingham,” Brian smiled from between his blankets. “I know it’s perfectly idiotic behaving in this way, but I couldn’t help it. . . . The only thing I can’t quite understand is why I’m being scalded to death.”

Allingham laughed. There was really something extraordinarily nice about Brian, altogether apart from the mere natural charm of his youth and good temper. He could not have described what it was, but it was there, and he counted it to his own credit that he had recognised it from the beginning.

"Are the jars too hot?" Sylvie asked, hastening forward.

"Oh, I daresay I can stick them. You'd better explain to Mr. Allingham that this sort of performance is quite in my line. It occurs whenever anything exciting takes place. It occurred when I was going to be vaccinated—just while the doctor was getting things ready. It occurs if anybody mentions an interesting internal organ, such as a heart, or a liver—particularly a heart. It's not in the least serious."

"You must lie still all the same," Sylvie said gently. "The doctor is coming. He will be here in a few minutes."

Brian made a face expressive of disgust. "All this fizzling out after heroic adventures is very tedious."

"I think perhaps I'd better go and see how the girl is," Allingham suggested.

The boy smiled. "You'll come back of course?"

"As soon as I can."

"Thanks awfully. It's rotten giving you so much trouble."

Sylvie came with him to the door. "He will be all right now," she whispered. "And if the doctor is gone before mamma comes back, I don't really think we need say anything about it. Mamma gets so nervous."

"Doesn't it depend on what he says when he *does* come?"

"Oh yes, of course. But I mean if he says there is nothing the matter."

Allingham was doubtful about the wisdom of this policy, but he made no objection. The crowd had quite dispersed when he hastened to the shop into which he had seen the girl carried. He had had but a glimpse of her face, yet it had been sufficient for him to believe that he had recognised it. He was almost certain that she was the girl who had shared in the séance at Bruges.

When he reached his destination, he learned that she had recovered sufficiently to be taken home, and that a man who claimed to be her father had removed her in a carriage. Nobody could give the address, though doubtless he would be able to get it if he inquired of the police ; but everybody was eager to discuss the adventure with him in broken French, eked out by still more broken English. He found himself powerless to remove the impression that Brian was his son. They seemed to want it to be that way. Everyone in the room—and it was crowded—shook hands with him, and all were eager that he should partake of refreshment. He escaped as soon as he could, but not before he had formed at least a score of new friendships.

On returning to Casa Grimshaw, he learned that the doctor had paid his visit, and had decided that there was nothing serious the matter with the patient. He had ordered him to lie quiet for a few hours, but that was all. Allingham told his news and described where he thought he had seen the girl before. They sat talking together, Allingham beside the bed, Sylvie

by the window, waiting for Mrs. Grimshaw and Aunt Sophy to come in.

"Do you know," Allingham remarked after a little, "I was planning on my way back a trip to Siena. I shall stay there for about a week perhaps."

At this the patient immediately pricked up his ears. "When do you want to start?"

"I'm not sure. I hadn't settled that. But probably to-morrow or the day after. It doesn't really matter when."

"Whenever I can come, do you mean?"

"That is the idea. How did you guess?"

"Oh, I can guess harder things than that. What about Mr. Halvard? We don't want him, do we?"

Sylvie looked up as her brother put this question, and, her eyes meeting Allingham's, a sudden blush dyed her face.

"I hadn't thought of asking him," said Allingham, quietly.

"Ah well, that's all right then," Brian smiled. "I'll take my camera and we'll have a good time."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALLINGHAM and Brian sat on the long stone bench by the hospital wall. Before them was the deserted square, bright in the sunshine of the early Sunday afternoon, with the black and white marble façade of the Cathedral rising up against a cloudless sky. For a week they had been here in Siena, that strange, beautiful, old city, which, after the noise and modernity of Florence, seemed still sleeping in some tranquil dream of the Middle Ages. For a week they had been wandering about its steep, crooked, little streets, into which the sun never penetrated, so high were the dark houses on either side, with roofs almost meeting overhead, beneath a sky that showed like a narrow streak of dark blue velvet. The place was amazingly quiet, all the life and traffic seeming to confine itself to one main thoroughfare, from which our two friends plunged down on romantic explorations by precipitous alleys or steep flights of steps. At night the streets were very dark, the gas-lamps being few and dim ; but in the daytime they were only cool and gray and shadowy, with coloured houses and vast stone palaces standing side by side. Their walks at first had been

full of the charm of the unexpected. In that maze of narrow streets, set at eccentric angles, they were forever plunging down, or mounting up, forever making discoveries. They caught glimpses of people walking above their heads, or below their feet, and every now and again a sudden turn, a dive down a flight of steps, would bring them out on to the ancient ramparts, from which the open country dropped away in a steep green valley, splashed with olive and dotted with cypress. Over this extended plain they could see for miles. Here and there, it swelled into little mounds, where monasteries nestled ; and, far away, the outline of vaster mountains ridged the sky. Across the calm distance the low sound of bells sometimes floated, and in the evenings the whole plain became a well of coloured light, with the dark church of San Domenico, standing out on its hill-top, watching over all.

Allingham and Brian spent a good deal of time loitering by these old ramparts, in that delicious atmosphere of peacefulness, which stretched out across the plain, like a veil of shimmering gold dust. They loitered, too, in the fan-shaped, brick-paved square. Motionless and very old, the great, dark, red and brown houses closed them in as if in a dreaming city, while the vast pile of the Palazzo Communale, with its red and white tower, cast a broad shadow at their feet. Within those sombre walls were delicate dreams of loveliness, fixed there long ago by Simone and his school. There they saw the city of Siena itself, outlined against a sky of burnished gold. All around,

the hills, olive-green and gray, stood bathed in a golden light which floated and lingered in an endless sunset. Down into the hollow of the hills, where, by some strange fancy, the tomb of the Virgin has been placed, Christ sweeps, attended by cherubs, whose flight on red and gold wings follows the curve of His flight. The Virgin, in a dark robe of gray and black, starred with gold, has risen to meet Him, and the Apostles and Saints gaze in wonderment into an empty grave. And as the light waned outside, the fresco, in its extraordinary richness, seemed to gather into itself all that remained of the fading afternoon, in a kind of supernatural glory which held them silent and awed.

This painting of Taddeo di Bartolo, the paintings of Simone and Duccio, of Matteo di Giovanni, seemed, in the setting of the ancient city, like burning jewels in a rare old casket. If Florence could boast more treasures, it could offer no such unity of effect as Siena. Here all was one delightful whole ; there were no discordant notes. To come into the church of San Domenico ; to pull aside a blind and discover the mystic golden glory of Matteo's Saint Barbara—how different that from wandering among numbered and labelled masterpieces in a chilly Florentine museum ? Here the thing was in its natural setting, and in the loneliness of the great church its mysterious loveliness had a dim glow as of something not of this earth.

Allingham and Brian had put up at an hotel overlooking the public gardens, and in the evenings, if they

cared to, they could stroll out under trees and listen to a band playing Bellini or Leoncavallo.

At such times Allingham turned slowly over and over again the problem he had come away to solve. The red boy's presence by his side reminded him of Sylvie ; and Sylvie's absence left him freer to look at the question more fairly. The point was not whether he had at last fallen in love—that had been decided for him long ago ; but whether his love could, or should, be returned. And somehow the fact of Brian's being so content to be with him there, reassured him, for he imagined that in temperament the brother and sister must have at any rate a little in common. The dream that lingered in Allingham's mind was intensely beautiful. It seemed to breathe upon him a benediction of happiness, a kind of happiness he had never even hoped for. Yet, was it right that he should claim it ? He felt sure that Sylvie need fear no disillusionment. As he had showed himself to her, so he was. Only the happiness she might share with him would perhaps seem somewhat humdrum in the light of what she might have pictured now and then after reading a poem or a novel. Behind that again was the certainty that a marriage with him would be regarded by the girl's family as far from brilliant. He was not wealthy, he was not young, he was not in any way distinguished. He endeavoured to look at these things from a point of view which should not be too selfish ; they were present to him now, as he sat on the stone bench beside Brian and puffed leisurely at a long thin Tuscan cigar, whose

principal virtue was its inexpensiveness. They had not spoken for maybe five minutes. It had always been a sign of the reality of their intimacy that they could keep silence together in this way without feeling bored. From time to time one or other of them dropped a remark into the lazy stillness, and it was in this casual manner that Brian presently said: "I expect papa will come next week. Mamma said so in her letter."

Allingham received the news with a vague feeling of uneasiness. He was not, if the truth must be told, looking forward with any eagerness to this oft-referred to visit of papa. Mr. Grimshaw, so far as he knew, was about his own age, but he was almost certain to be an infinitely more important person, from whose robust prosperity Allingham, in anticipation, and from the point of view of a prospective son-in-law, shrank not a little.

"I hope you'll tell him that you don't think it would be a good thing for me to go into the business for another year," Brian added.

"Do you imagine he'll consult me on the point?"

"He consults everybody about everything."

For a moment Allingham had a strong temptation to take Brian into his confidence, but he feared that, if the boy did not care for the idea, it might spoil his pleasure in the remainder of their little excursion. It would not be fair to him. He would wait till they got back.

Some tourists entered the square—Americans—

splashing noisily into its silence as a spaniel splashes into a pond. Our friends recognized them, for they had watched them in the morning attempt the impossible task of driving a motor car through the streets, and coming, almost at once, to a deadlock, amid the intense excitement of the natives. Later they had had the pleasure of seeing them come in to lunch at their hotel, where they aroused an obsequious politeness in the bosoms of waiters and managers which Allingham and his companion had wholly failed to kindle. The ladies were exquisitely dressed, rustling and radiant visions; the men, dark and lean and sallow, followed languidly in their wake, as they passed through the high door of the Cathedral. And as they disappeared, the silence closed in again, liquid and lazy and sleepy, full of afternoon sunlight and the beauty of old crumbling stone.

“Doesn't it strike you that we've loafed a tremendous lot since we've been here?” Allingham murmured, and his voice was as drowsy as the afternoon.

“I thought we came to loaf. Besides, I've taken heaps of photographs. I'll take one now, if you think it's the proper thing to do.”

“You haven't developed them. You're a lazy young scamp. And I should have painted at least two water-colours a day.”

“But we'll be back again. When papa comes I'm going to ask him for another six months' leave. If the others want to go home, I'll knock about with you.”

“You're far too much my own kind of traveller to

keep me up to the mark. You set me a wretched example. I require somebody like Mr. Halvard, or I miss all the 'noted' things."

"Mr. Halvard would have been in the way. He's not really in our line."

"What is our line, do you think?"

"The line of least resistance. I'm not awfully keen on Mr. Halvard."

He was silent till he began to hum to himself in his gruff, boyish voice :

" ' Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages ;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages :
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.' "

"You were singing that when I first saw you, in the Béguinage."

Brian did not reply ; he seemed to have sunk into a reverie.

"What are you thinking about?" Allingham asked.

"Something extraordinarily deep. I was thinking that it is rather stupid how much depends on chance—I mean where getting to know people is concerned. It had never occurred to me before. . . . You only get to know a few people whom you go to school with, or who are your relations, or something of that sort, and then a few others you happen to meet. But it is very unlikely that you will ever come across the people most suited to you. A great many people must never come across anybody at all they really care for. . . .

There was a lady I liked rather," he went on, suddenly blushing, "when we met her in Holland—a Mrs. Leslie. She was very nice. Mamma, in her letter, says that she has turned up in Florence since we came here."

"You must introduce me."

"I will," Brian promised. "Sylvie didn't like her; but then she seemed to dislike her on purpose."

Allingham laughed.

"Sylvie said that she shouldn't have spoken to us. It was jolly decent of her taking any notice of us. And you can see she's not the kind of person who goes about joining on to everybody. She's awfully bright and lively; but really she's very melancholy. She was married when she was too young, and before she had met anybody. It was her people who made her marry. And she has always felt lonely—as if there was somebody somewhere—a kind of twin-soul, I think she said—with whom she could be in perfect sympathy. She says Byron and Shelley felt just the same kind of thing all the time. One evening, when we were alone together, she got frightfully sad about it, and I couldn't think of anything that seemed to cheer her up. She said I was one of the few people who had ever come near to understanding her."

He stopped suddenly and turned his clear bright eyes to Allingham, who continued to smoke, without offering any comment on Mrs. Leslie's confidences.

The Americans emerged from the Cathedral, and passed on out of the square, disappearing down a flight of stone steps.

“ Why have American men always such tired-looking eyes, I wonder ? There’s something about them that I rather like.”

Allingham got up. “ Let us go and have tea in the gardens and listen to the band. I can hear it in the distance.”

“ You won’t say anything about what I told you ? ” Brian murmured, uneasily. “ I don’t know whether I ought to have mentioned it. Perhaps it was breaking a confidence. Do you think it was ? ”

“ I don’t think you need worry about it. If it had been a confidence that mattered, you would have kept it to yourself. No harm will come of it, at any rate : I shan’t tell your secrets, Brian.”

CHAPTER XXIX

RETURNING next morning by an early train to Florence, Allingham separated from his companion at the door of the hotel. He lunched alone, and after lunch, when he had read one or two letters which had arrived during his absence, he went out to stretch his legs. He would have paid a visit to Casa Grimshaw, only he rather thought Mr. Halvard must be there. Why this should have deterred him from going he did not ask himself, any more than he asked himself why, latterly, it had always been with a sense of relief that he had noticed Mr. Halvard's non-appearance at the little table they shared in the hotel dining-room.

Strolling in the direction of Santa Maria Novella, it occurred to him that he might as well go in and compare the Rucellai Madonna with the famous Duccio at Siena. When he had accomplished this, he still lingered in the church, wandering from chapel to chapel, and by and by passing out to the cloisters, where the ghosts of Uccello's frescoes glimmered wanly, faint as a breath on a mirror. It was as if before his eyes they were sinking back again into the mind that had long

ago conceived them, and that was now drawing them back into its endless dream.

Allingham walked slowly round the cloister till he reached the open door of the Spanish Chapel. Here, on the threshold, he paused, for his attention had been caught by two persons within. Their backs were turned to him, and they were standing in front of the vast Crucifixion on the centre wall. Something in their attitude held him motionless. What it was he could not have said, for they simply stood there side by side, not even particularly close to each other, not even looking at each other. Yet his fancy seemed to see them enveloped by an atmosphere of intimacy that isolated them from all the world. He tried to shake the impression from him; he told himself that it was absurd; but it persisted; it prevented him from going in; it held him rooted to the ground, motionless and almost breathless. The thing was strange in the extreme, and suddenly he awoke to the oddness of his position. He did not know how long he had been standing there. Probably only for a minute or two, but it might have been much more. His impulse, even now, was to steal away before the others had seen him. He made a step with this intention, but at that moment Mr. Halvard turned, and their eyes met. For the fraction of a second, in the dark, ice-blue eyes of the young clergyman Allingham felt something coldly antagonistic; then, even as he noticed it, it had melted into a smile of welcome.

“So you’ve got back again!” cried Mr. Halvard;

and at that Sylvie also turned, and they both came forward to meet him.

“ You’ve arrived at the most opportune moment,” Mr. Halvard continued, in a tone Allingham had never heard him use before. “ Miss Grimshaw is fascinated by this chapel, and I was afraid I should have to leave her here, as there is some work I must attend to before dinner. I suppose I may leave you in Mr. Allingham’s hands, Miss Grimshaw ? ”

“ I don’t know that I require to be left in anybody’s hands,” Sylvie returned, but it struck Allingham that she was a little vexed. “ I came here by myself, and I daresay I can manage to go home by myself.”

“ Well, you must settle that between you,” Mr. Halvard called back gaily, waving a farewell. “ Au revoir.”

He was gone almost before Allingham had time to realise what was happening, and he gazed after the retreating, the strangely altered figure, in bewilderment. “ What is the matter ? ” he asked, in a voice whose bated breath did not really very much exaggerate his impression. “ He seems to be transformed ! What can have happened in a week ? ”

“ Transformed ? ” Sylvie’s manner was amused, even bantering, but he knew that she knew what he meant.

“ Yes ; he has grown almost secular. . . . His exit was in the best vein of modern light comedy ! ” He turned to her with a half sad, half whimsical expression in his dark eyes.

He was really asking her to be sincere, to meet him as she had always met him ; but she only laughed. "What nonsense ! I'm glad, however, that you've come home in such good spirits !"

"Good spirits ! You've noticed them already ?"

"Brian told us that you'd both had a splendid time. *He* certainly had."

They turned to complete the inspection of the chapel, but Allingham could not get rid of the idea that the chance which had led him out into the cloisters had not been a happy one. He felt uncomfortable ; he felt as if somebody had told him a lie—a lie which, in spite of their united efforts to the contrary, had at once revealed itself for what it was. A growing uneasiness took possession of him. Why had Mr. Halvard rushed away like this ? And why had Sylvie assured him that she had come here alone ? He had often enough seen her in Mr. Halvard's company without discovering anything disquieting in the situation. Why should he find it disquieting now ? Why, above all, should he not be able to shake off the feeling that he was an intruder ? For he had that feeling. It had been awfully nice when he was there, of course, and they were very glad to see him back again ; but hadn't it perhaps been awfully nice without him ? Hadn't it, maybe, he asked himself pathetically, in this latter case, even been awfully nicer ? At all events, Sylvie's interest in the Spanish chapel, which Mr. Halvard had so strangely remarked upon, appeared to have completely vanished. She inspected the remaining frescoes apathetically,

while she asked Allingham for an account of his trip to Siena, with what he fancied to be an equal indifference. Once he even saw her put up her small, beautifully gloved hand to conceal a yawn. The yawn was unconscious, almost imperceptible, yet abominably discouraging. He felt that he had grown dull. His attempts to talk lightly seemed to arrive from an abysmal distance, as if they were being pumped up, and with a horrible creaking of machinery. The well of his vitality was suddenly choked, and the stream that issued from it was a weak and flat trickle. He recalled his journey to Siena with a distressing sense of its futility. The day-dreams he had indulged in during the past week glittered now mockingly as from the high sun-touched summit of an unscalable mountain.

Meanwhile he continued to speak of their trip—his and Brian's—he even found an amusing story to tell. And Sylvie laughed, and the story was not really amusing.

They came away.

“Do you remember that Mrs. Leslie I told you about in Bruges? You know—Brian and the handkerchief?” the girl asked.

Yes, he remembered.

“Well, she's actually turned up here and is coming to dine with us to-night. Poor mamma one day, when she was all alone, met her in the street, and of course had no chance against her.”

“Brian mentioned that she was here when we were at Siena.”

“ What did he say ? ”

“ He had had a letter from your mother telling him that Mrs. Leslie was in Florence.”

“ But did he not say anything about her ? ”

“ He said he rather liked her when he met her before.”

“ And nothing else ? ”

“ He also said that you *didn't* like her.”

“ You won't either ; but you'll soon be able to judge for yourself.”

They walked on, and, as he listened to her chatter, gradually the feeling of suspicion passed from Allingham's mind, quite as inexplicably as it had come there. It was like the lifting of a shadow, the fading of a morbid dream. They walked slowly along the river bank, and Sylvie told him that they had had a visit from Flamel. She began to talk of the girl, how Miss Kilronan had twice gone to try to see her, but on each occasion had been met by Flamel himself, with some excuse for not allowing her to go in.

Abruptly, after a minute or two of silence, she said : “ I think I must have misled you, Mr. Allingham, by a remark I made when we were down there in the cloisters. Mr. Halvard knew I was going to Santa Maria Novella this afternoon, and, though he did not come with me, I expected to meet him there. Of course the matter is of no importance, and I'm sure I don't know why I should refer to it again, except that it struck me at the time that the particular words

I used might have made you think I had met him by chance.”

Allingham had a sudden feeling of relief. “ You are very honest, Sylvie,” he answered.

CHAPTER XXX

SYLVIE, as she came in and removed her outdoor garments, felt vaguely dissatisfied with what had taken place that afternoon. She had a pang of conscience for the irritation with which, mentally, she had greeted Allingham's unexpected appearance at the Spanish chapel. Of course she had not shown it in her manner—at least, she hoped she hadn't—but Mr. Allingham had always been so kind, and somehow, just before he had left her, he had looked so tired and sad, that she felt guilty towards him. Compared with Mr. Halvard's, his life seemed so lacking in purpose, so empty, that one could not help pitying him. Mr. Halvard lived in a perpetual atmosphere of high thinking; he had a work to do in the world, an ideal constantly before him, a seriousness of purpose which even those who were not in sympathy with him must admire. And to set over against all this Mr. Allingham had his water-colours!

She came into the empty drawing-room, bringing with her the book Mr. Halvard had lent her. It was a volume of Pater, and Sylvie sat down to read the romance of Hippolytus. The perhaps over-scented

beauty of the writing meant little to her, was even detrimental to the interest she took in the story ; but Hippolytus himself, as she pictured him, had the gold hair of Mr. Halvard. He had also Mr. Halvard's clear, delicate skin, his finely-moulded features, his beautiful forehead, his dark blue eyes, and his graceful form. And there was, somehow, a good deal in the story that helped to make the likeness more complete—that element of idealism in the character of the pagan youth, that power of renunciation, the renunciation of one's personal pleasures for the love of a spiritual beauty.

She sank into a dream from which she was aroused by Aunt Sophy, whose entrance she had been too absorbed to notice. Yet Aunt Sophy appeared to have been watching her, to have been reading her thoughts.

“ Was it Mr. Halvard who recommended that book to you ? ” she asked.

Sylvie coloured as she answered, “ Yes.”

“ I met him this afternoon. He told me that he had left you and Bennet Allingham in Santa Maria Novella, looking at pictures.”

“ Yes.”

“ Is Bennet coming here to-night ? ”

“ I don't think he said so. I suppose he will be coming. . . . Why are you gazing at me like that, Aunt Sophy ? ”

“ My dear child, you must have a guilty conscience if my looking at you makes you feel uncomfortable.

It was odd that you should all have chosen to visit the same church on the same afternoon. Had you arranged to meet Mr. Halvard there ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Why couldn't he have come here for you ? ”

“ It is out of his way.”

“ Is he so loath to go a little out of his way ? ”

“ I really don't know.”

“ One can hardly imagine him taking Brian to Siena for a week ! ”

Sylvie raised her eyebrows as she fidgeted nervously with her book. “ I'm afraid I don't quite see the connection. Why should he take Brian to Siena ? ”

“ Why shouldn't he—as well as Bennet Allingham ? ”

“ I don't suppose there is any particular reason except that Mr. Allingham has nothing very much to do. At any rate, Brian wouldn't have wanted to go with Mr. Halvard.”

“ I can quite believe that.”

“ I don't exactly see the point of all these remarks, Aunt Sophy. I suppose they must have some meaning.”

“ I had better make it a little plainer, then. Do you prefer Mr. Halvard to Mr. Allingham ? ”

Sylvie flushed again, this time with annoyance. “ Really, Aunt Sophy, you ask the most extraordinary questions !—questions that I don't see that you have any right to ask.”

“ Don't answer them then. You needn't if you don't want to.”

Sylvie, with very bright eyes, returned to her book, while Aunt Sophy, with her elbow on the mantel-piece, seemed lost in thought.

Suddenly she broke silence with the remark: "My dear niece, you are making a mistake."

"Am I?" Sylvie murmured.

"It is always a mistake—well, perhaps I should say a misfortune—when one fails to appreciate; and you must have failed to appreciate Bennet Allingham. You are putting the lesser before the greater thing. It is only from a distance that one can care for people because of the work they happen to be doing."

"Has it never occurred to you, Aunt Sophy, that perhaps *you* may have failed to appreciate *Mr. Halvard*?" Sylvie asked, with elaborate irony.

But irony when levelled against Aunt Sophy was apt to fail.

"Never," she replied. "And it wouldn't matter if I had."

"Why should it matter about me and Mr. Allingham, then? In any case I have always liked Mr. Allingham very much indeed, so that your remarks seem a little unnecessary."

"Mr. Halvard doesn't like him, which is significant."

"Has he ever told you that he doesn't?"

"He doesn't like me either," Aunt Sophy pursued, "and he detests Brian."

"Oh, but you're only imagining all this!" cried Sylvie, impatiently. "Nobody could possibly detest Brian, even if they wanted to."

“ He likes influencing people—which is odious.”

Sylvie might have retorted that it is a clergyman's business to influence people, but she didn't think of this till half an hour later. In the meantime she sought refuge in the tragic fortunes of Hippolytus.

“ It is the old contest between clericalism and humanism. Mr. Halvard in an earlier age would have broken statues and burned books, in spite of his *Greek Studies*. Brian, you know, is a pagan.”

Sylvie rose to her feet. “ If you want to abuse my brother, I don't think you need choose me for your audience.”

Aunt Sophy watched her sail out of the room with the air of an insulted princess.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHEN Allingham arrived, rather late in the evening, he saw Mrs. Leslie at once. She was seated near the fireplace, and he was taken up to be introduced to her. He was vividly conscious of a painted mouth, of eyes that seemed veiled by a kind of dewy darkness, and of a peculiarly feminine quality, something subtle and indefinable, yet insistent as a perfume. Before she spoke he knew exactly how she *would* speak—that way of appealing, with parted lips and wondering innocent eyes, that way of throwing little soft notes into her voice, like a coaxing child. Allingham was certain that she had been coaxing Mr. Halvard for at least half an hour, for the young clergyman's handsome face was slightly flushed, and his smile self-conscious. But Mrs. Leslie was full of attentions for everybody. Her manner seemed to say: "I delight in you all, you dear creatures. If you will only let me love you, how happy I shall be." Mrs. Gregg, the elderly, spectacled companion, who sat stiffly garbed in beaded black, the outline of her stays prominent beneath her bodice ("Every time she moves she creaks," whispered Brian), was included in this invita-

tion ; and now that Allingham had entered it was extended to him also. But it was to Mr. Halvard, above all, that she appeared to turn. Allingham wondered if, like the red boy, he understood her ; if she had found in him, too, a tower of manly strength.

He crossed the room to speak to Sophy Kilronan, who, under the influence of the Mrs. Leslie *motif*, had assumed a certain martial air. Sophy looked handsome and formidable in her cloudy, lustreless, black lace gown, with its scarlet trimmings. Her black, snapping eyes, her florid colouring, her commanding air, and by no means inaudible tones, furnishing an odd contrast with Mrs. Leslie's fluted softness. Sophy was herself to-night, he saw ; and Sophy was never more herself than when in the presence of somebody very different.

Allingham stood before her. " This is a new work, is it not ? " he drawled, pleasantly, looking at the framed, hand-tinted photograph of a saint, which hung on the wall above her head.

" It is a present from Mr. Halvard to Mrs. Grimshaw."

" Priceless thing ! " whispered Brian, lounging up, and standing a little behind Allingham, his hands in his pockets.

" It may not be to your taste," said Aunt Sophy, " but as a rule one does not criticize presents. It was very kind of Mr. Halvard to get it."

" If it had been anybody but Sassoferrato," murmured the nephew. " Sassoferrato isn't kind. . . .

Besides, one does criticize presents, Aunt Sophy. Perhaps one oughtn't to, but it is done. There is no use pretending that I am the first."

"I see you're admiring my picture," Mrs. Grimshaw called out to Allingham, with her vague little laugh. "Mr. Halvard gave it to me. Isn't it a beautiful head?"

"Charming—charming," Allingham murmured, and Brian smiled at him ironically.

"You're a nice pair!" said Miss Kilronan. "You're very nearly as bad as Brian is, Bennet."

"What have I said, dear Sophy?" Allingham asked, with the surprise of innocence.

"It's not what you said: or, rather it is. You know you don't think it charming."

"But what can I call it? You don't want me to call it vile?"

"There was no need for you to take any notice of it at all, in the first place."

Seeing that so much attention was being bestowed upon a work of art, Mrs. Leslie rose from her chair, with a pretty little, "Oh, may I see? How perfectly sweet!"

Mr. Halvard tried to look as if he had had nothing to do with the picture, but everybody now gathered about it. Mrs. Gregg inspected it solemnly through very large, very round, and very golden spectacles, heaving one of those creaking sighs which Brian had referred to. ("It's either her jet ornaments or her stays; but it's an awfully rummy sound.")

"Do tell me about her?" Mrs. Leslie appealed to

Mr. Halvard in infantile accents, turning her dewy eyes from Saint Cecelia to the young man. "I know you know all about her, and all about the other saints too. I am so interested, but I am so ignorant. I want to find out. I think they must have had such beautiful natures! Hadn't they? Do tell me that they had!"

"Without doubt some of them had very beautiful natures," Mr. Halvard replied, solemnly.

"Oh, I'm so glad you say so, because I know you know."

"Mr. Halvard knows more than that about them," cried Brian. "He's a hagiographer."

"A what?" Mrs. Leslie's eyes grew more wondering than ever.

"I'm sorry I can't enter into further details in mixed company, but it's a fact."

Allingham and Miss Kilronan laughed, but Mr. Halvard was annoyed, and darted a cold glance of dislike at the boy.

"He's raging because we're so vulgar," Brian whispered.

"Mr. Allingham says Mr. Halvard himself is like Saint George," Mrs. Grimshaw volunteered, with her little laugh.

Mrs. Leslie pounced on the comparison. "Saint George? How interesting! Really, Mr. Allingham? A picture? Can I see it in the gallery?"

Mr. Halvard blushed.

"If you go to Venice," said Allingham, indifferently.

“The picture Mrs. Grimshaw means is by Mantegna. It happened to occur to me that there was a slight resemblance, but probably I am maligning Mr. Halvard—that is, if he doesn’t admire Mantegna.”

“Aunt Sophy thinks I’m like one of Perugino’s angels,” said Brian, softly.

But Aunt Sophy was grim and unflattering. “If you’re like a work of art at all, it is one of those gargoyle creatures one sees on the roofs of cathedrals.”

Allingham glanced at Sylvie, who alone had not joined the group before the picture. The girl seemed grave and preoccupied. There was something strange in her manner, which he put down to the presence of Mrs. Leslie. She had never cared for Mrs. Leslie, he knew, but her former cause for dislike did not seem to be in operation to-night, since, so far as he could make out, that lady was not taking the slightest notice of Brian. Indeed, she had once more drawn Mr. Halvard to a chair beside her own, and was apparently entering on an eager conversation concerning the saints.

“I was an awful ass about what I told you in Siena,” Brian whispered to him, disgustedly, under his breath. “Of course you knew that at the time, but I am just finding it out.”

“What has enlightened you?” asked Allingham, gently.

“The saints, I think. They were the finishing touch, at any rate. She wanted to commiserate with me, too, when Aunt Sophy said I was like a gargoyle.”

He made an expressive grimace. "I am going to talk to Gregg."

Allingham laughed, but Brian went over and sat down beside the expansive and creaking lady, who turned her large, glittering spectacles upon him, and addressed him, suspiciously, as "young sir."

It was not till she had risen to say good-night that Mrs. Leslie broached the subject of an excursion to the Certosa, which she wished, it appeared, to undertake in the company of the others. They were to drive to the monastery and come back to lunch with her.

"You will come, dear Mrs. Grimshaw, won't you?" she begged prettily, and Mrs. Grimshaw of course thought it would be very nice, though her last words came out in an extraordinary frozen gurgle, owing to the ferocious signs of refusal which Sylvie had begun to make behind Mrs. Leslie's back. The poor lady's eyes were fastened upon her daughter, and the little smile with which she had welcomed the proposal died gradually into a fixed and startled stare as she concluded her acceptance of it. But after this, the others were obliged to accept too; and the excursion, in spite of Sylvie, was arranged for the next day.

CHAPTER XXXII

MRS. LESLIE had wondered a great deal as to how she ought to dispose her guests in the two conveyances that were waiting before the door of her hotel, but when it actually came to the point, she solved the problem by taking possession of Mr. Halvard and Mrs. Grimshaw for her own carriage.

Allingham, at least, had no fault to find with this arrangement, and Brian was to go on the box beside the coachman. Then, at the last moment, Mrs. Gregg discovered that, for reasons which remained deeply mysterious, she could not come. She stood in the porch and watched them depart, with an expression of resentment on her large and gloomy countenance. A gold locket, rising and falling upon her capacious bosom, glittered in the sun.

“I’m sure she has a photograph of Gregg, now happily deceased, in that locket,” said Brian. “I’m going to ask her to show it to me.”

Their drive, once they had passed the Porta Romana, lay along a monotonous high road, and Sylvie, who had not disguised her unwillingness to join the expedition at all, now made no pretence of being pleased

with it. Her brother's supplications to her to "cheer up" produced an exactly contrary effect. Allingham had never seen her in this mood before, and it perplexed him. She seemed lost in melancholy, but Aunt Sophy presently applied another epithet to it.

"If you're going to sit and sulk all the time, you would have done much better to have stayed at home."

"I'm not sulking, and I *would* have stayed at home if you and mamma hadn't made such a fuss. Anything is better than being nagged at."

"Nobody made a fuss but yourself. You ought to be ashamed—behaving like a spoiled child."

Sylvie relapsed into unfathomable silence, nor did she open her lips during the remainder of the drive.

After a time, where the narrow path to the monastery mounts up, they all got out, but Mr. Halvard was still Mrs. Leslie's companion, and Mrs. Leslie, who had remarkably pretty feet, had stopped to have her shoe tied.

The monastery, with its bell-tower, stood out against the clear sky, a little above them, at the top of the hill. Brian, in high spirits, slinging his camera over his shoulder, passed his arm through Miss Kilronan's.

"May I take your arm, Aunt Sophy; or do you think it sentimental?"

"I think it exactly what it is," his aunt replied, shaking him off.

At the gate they had to wait for Mr. Halvard and Mrs. Leslie to come up with them.

"The monastery, which is approaching dissolution," Brian read aloud from Baedeker, "and

contains a few inmates only, was founded in 1341 by Niccolo Acciajuoli, a Florentine who had settled at Naples and there amassed a large fortune by trading. The porter (1-2 persons, 50 centimes) shows the church, or rather the series of chapels of which it consists, and the monastery with its various cloisters.' . . . At this point, Sylvie, ring the bell."

Sylvie was about to do so, when her mother stopped her.

"Nonsense, dear; we must wait for the others. . . . though I'm sure I don't know why they're taking so long."

"Here they come!" Brian cried. "Ring, Sylvie!"

In answer to their summons a monk in a white robe appeared, and conducted them up a long flight of steps to the chapel. They followed him with the slightly sheepish air characteristic of such parties, Brian still reading from Baedeker.

"Magnificent pavement and fine carved stalls (of 1590); over the altar, Death of Saint Bruno, a fresco by Poccetti.' Have you got it, mamma?"

Mrs. Grimshaw peered about her with a bewildered air. "Yes. . . . At least, I suppose that is it over there," she added doubtfully.

Mrs. Leslie turned round to ask Mr. Halvard's opinion, but she found only Allingham, to whom she gave one of her sweet appealing smiles. Mr. Halvard had dropped behind, and, with Sylvie, stood gazing at an uninteresting altar-piece, while the monk smiled patiently as his little flock straggled after him. He

addressed most of his remarks to Brian and Mrs. Grimshaw, who alone appeared to thirst for information. Allingham could hear the boy's voice in the distance, still reading aloud to his mother, with a note of high enjoyment.

“ ‘ A staircase to the right descends to a chapel with the tombs of the Acciajuoli. . . . Three marble slabs, that of a Young Warrior by Donatello.’ Have you got them, mamma ? ”

“ No—unless these are they ? ”

“ Unless those is them, you mean.”

“ Hush, dear, remember you are in a church.”

They came out into the cloisters, which surrounded a garden of fruit-trees and flowers and vegetables, with an old well in the centre. The monk took them into one of the little red-roofed houses. It had two small rooms, and at the back a kind of verandah from which they had a view of the whole sweeping valley, with its vineyards and olives, its winding stream. On the hill-tops were bell-towers softly coloured to the landscape, and a streak of blue smoke curled up lazily against the sky. It was all very old and quiet and peaceful, though they suddenly came into touch with the outer world again, when their cicerone directed them to a room where liqueur was sold. Our travellers, under the influence of the mild blandishments of the monk in charge, purchased bottles of this preparation with a confidence which subsequent investigation proved to have been misplaced.

Coming out, they loitered in the little turreted court,

Brian insisting on taking a photographic group. It was only then that they discovered Sylvie and Mr. Halvard to be missing. When they reached the carriages they found them there, waiting; they had gone on ahead, it appeared, while the others had been making purchases. The girl was radiant with a beautiful happiness which shone in her eyes and in her smile. Mr. Halvard, too, seemed to be in excellent spirits. His expression was strangely softened, and the formality of his manner had miraculously given place to an unaccustomed boyishness that was infinitely more attractive. He and Sylvie declared their intention of walking back to Florence, but Mrs. Leslie immediately nipped this scheme in the bud.

“You’re all to come to lunch, you know, and if you walk you’ll be dreadfully late. It’s really much farther than you imagine.”

It was impossible to insist. Moreover, it appeared that they were to drive home in the same order as they had come. Again, Miss Kilronan and her nephew did most of the talking. Sylvie, her eyes fixed dreamily on the slowly passing landscape, scarcely spoke, and Allingham too was silent. But the girl’s quiet was very different from that which had held her on their drive out. In her expression now there was a deep and wonderful happiness, something that lent an exquisite quality of tenderness to her beauty. She had never yet, Allingham thought, looked so lovely. In her eyes was a kind of strange, hushed wonder that filled him with awe. No man could be worthy of that look

—neither he, nor Mr. Halvard, nor anybody else. And yet he felt that Mr. Halvard had inspired it. . . . An intense sadness took possession of him, not wholly selfish, for it was without bitterness. . . . And the others noticed nothing, or seemed to notice nothing. Well, he had discovered at last the answer to his question. He was too old. Twenty years ago he might have found happiness, though twenty years ago he would not have understood.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DURING the next two or three days Allingham seemed to have been seized with a sudden zeal for painting. He went out early in the morning, and remained out all day. On one of these occasions he had been accompanied by Brian, but on the others he had gone alone. His search for subjects, moreover, seemed to lead him far afield, and on his return he was apparently too tired to pay his usual visit at Casa Grimshaw. Nor, during all these days, had he once set eyes upon Mr. Halvard. He had gone out before the young clergyman had come down in the morning, and had gone to bed before he had returned at night. On the evening of the fourth day he met him. Mr. Halvard had come back earlier than usual, and they met in the hall. Allingham was astonished at his altered appearance, and still more by the alteration in his manner. The measure of this latter change he could gauge from the fact that it no longer struck him as being in the least ecclesiastic. On the other hand, it was not boyish, as on that morning of their excursion to the Certosa; it was simply irritable and nervous. He had no chance to achieve a more particular analysis, for Mr. Halvard

almost at once pleaded a letter that must be written, and that he had come home early on purpose to write. Though the interview had been brief, Allingham, nevertheless, as he sat alone in the smoking-room, found in it abundant food for thought.

The result of his meditations did not appear to be particularly inspiring. The main thing that emerged from them was a sense that they ought to have taken place several days earlier. The whole matter was a dubious one, and he wished he could have claimed to be disinterested ; but to delay longer, now that he had so tardily realised his peculiar responsibility, would be positively wrong.

He got up and went to the writing-room. Only a single lamp was turned on, just above the table at which Mr. Halvard sat staring into the darkness of the great empty room ; but it revealed with a startling vividness the young man's face, and it was not the face of a happy lover.

"Have you finished?" Allingham asked ; for Mr. Halvard was not writing, though a sheet of blank paper lay before him, and he held a pen in his hand.

"No," Mr. Halvard replied, in a tone that did not invite further interruption.

"You might let me know when you have," said Allingham softly. "There is something I want to talk to you about."

"To talk to *me* about?" Mr. Halvard frowned. "If it's not of vital importance, perhaps it will do in

the morning. I'm tired, and I'm busy. At any rate, I won't have finished for another hour."

"I shan't keep you long," said Allingham, sitting down. "It will do at the end of an hour."

"Are you going to wait *there*?"

Allingham leaned back in the armchair and stretched his legs. "Why not? I have nothing particular to do."

"You are surely very eager to have this conversation!"

"Yes; I am rather eager."

Mr. Halvard flung down his pen with a nervous petulance. "If it matters so much as all that, you had better tell me what it is at once, and I can do my writing later."

"Well, you see, in my opinion, it *does* matter. It matters a good deal," Allingham said. "It is about a talk you and I had on a certain occasion—the evening, in fact, when I first took you to the Grimshaw's. It was on our way home that we talked. Perhaps you remember what we said?"

"I can't say that I do," Mr. Halvard replied coldly.

"You were telling me about your views in regard to the celibacy of the clergy."

"Yes?" And Mr. Halvard flushed.

"I merely want to know if you still hold the same views?"

There was a pause for perhaps half a minute, during which Allingham did not remove his eyes from the face

of the young man before him. Then Mr. Halvard said, " Might I ask why ? "

" I think you can guess why."

" I'm sorry that I can't. In fact, I can't even guess how it concerns you at all what views I may hold upon any subject."

The discourtesy of this remark was so uncharacteristic that Allingham felt a little pang of pity for its author. " I am concerned," he said quietly, " because it was I who first took you to Mrs. Grimshaw's house."

" And what has that to do with it ? "

" It has a great deal to do with it. In fact so much that, if you have not already told Mrs. Grimshaw what you mentioned to me, I am afraid I shall be obliged to tell her myself. I am going there to-morrow evening."

Mr. Halvard had turned very white. And then, whether they were tears of rage or not, Allingham, with an odd little pang of compassion, saw tears spring to his eyes. He looked away as the young clergyman replied, " Miss Grimshaw knows my opinions on all such questions."

" Her mother must know too," Allingham persisted, wearily. " Of course, if you have altered your opinion, it is another matter. . . . Well, that is what I had to say. . . . Good-night."

He lingered for a minute or two before he went out, but Mr. Halvard made no reply.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THEY did not meet next morning, but in the afternoon he overtook the young clergyman at the corner of the Ponte Vecchio. He was rather surprised to see him at this particular hour, apparently on his way back to the hotel. Their greeting was cold, but, as both were proceeding in the same direction, they could not avoid walking together. They had not gone many yards, however, when a dark, dingy figure confronted them, emerging from the shadow of a doorway, and standing directly in their path. Allingham looked at the white face, with its ugly, lipless mouth, at the little glittering eyes that shone under bushy eyebrows, at the thick long body and short legs. He had not seen him since the night of the séance, and here, in daylight, Flamel seemed, somehow, both more shabby and more ordinary than he had imagined him to be.

“Gentlemen,” he began, but Mr. Halvard, who had darted a single glance at the Medium, shook him off, without returning his salute. Most illogically, this procedure, which he would himself have adopted at another time, now awakened in Allingham a desire to let Flamel have his way.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

The plan was not successful, for Mr. Halvard simply stepped on to the road and continued his way, leaving Allingham to confront the Medium alone.

Flamel gazed after the retreating figure of the young man with a curious and not at all attractive expression in his little eyes. Then he hurried after Allingham, who had begun to walk on again. Instead of returning to the hotel, however, the latter made his way to the café in the Piazza della Signoria, where they sat down. Their walk had been accomplished in silence, and now, still in silence, they faced each other across a table.

The Medium, to Allingham’s surprise, would accept only a cup of tea. “I suppose you are astonished to see me in Florence,” he began, in his deep rich voice. “And I remember our last meeting was a little unfortunate. Since then I have made the acquaintance of your friends—all except the brave young man who saved my daughter’s life. I went to see him once, but he was not there. I shall try again, for I must thank him personally.”

“It is quite unnecessary,” said Allingham. “In fact, I am sure he would much rather you said nothing about it.”

“I must go; I must go,” Flamel repeated, his bright little eyes fixed on his companion’s. They seemed curiously, uncannily alive and alert in the white, dead mask of his face, and Allingham, characteristically, began to speculate on the nature of the soul that inhabited so unshapely a body. He had an instinctive

desire to prevent the Medium from going near either Brian or Sylvie. It was not that he imagined they could suffer any harm from him ; it was difficult to know what his feeling was. And Flamel went on :

“ You were prejudiced against me. You did not believe in the manifestations.”

“ Hadn't we better leave all that kind of thing alone ? It really does not interest me. When I came to your séance it was merely to accompany my friend.”

“ And he—has he lost his interest ? ”

“ In spiritualism ? Yes, I think so.”

The Medium sighed. “ He is interested in the beautiful young lady. I have seen them together. I have *watched* them.”

He paused, and, with his fat hands folded on his stomach, studied his companion in quietude. Allingham found this inspection distinctly offensive. It was apparently a trick of Flamel's ; perhaps a part of his trade. It was as if he were searching for some breach by which he might enter the mind of his interlocutor and read his secret thoughts and desires. But at the end of it all what he actually said was, “ You would like me to tell you about myself ? ”

“ I had no intention of asking you to do so,” Allingham replied in astonishment.

The Medium smiled. “ You know why we came here ? We came to give séances to some scientific gentlemen ; but they were sceptical, and at the second

sitting thought they had discovered trickery, and refused to go on."

"And your daughter?"

"Naturally it affected her very painfully. The distrust—you can understand—she brooded over that. To a sensitive nature such things mean much. And my daughter, especially, cannot live except in the vibrations of love. To be turned out of the house; to hear her father called a cheat, an impostor—she could not bear it. Yet if she had been drowned I do not suppose these Americans would have considered themselves guilty of murder! Fortunately she has quite recovered."

"Why don't you give it all up?" said Allingham, gravely. "I take you to be an intelligent man. Surely you could find some less precarious means of existence."

"You do not understand. It is the work, the glorious work, that calls us. We are ready to accept martyrdom. The Nazarene Himself met with unbelief. I do not deny that at present we are in difficulties, financial difficulties. I do not deny that a temporary loan—even should it be a small one—would be gratefully accepted."

Allingham took out his pocket-book and drew from it a note, which he placed on the table beside the Medium's empty tea-cup. "I cannot renew this," he said.

But Flamel apparently had not even observed his action. He was bending slightly to one side. "Thank you, dear ones," he murmured. Then he looked at Allingham with a smile. "They are always with me,"

he said softly, "breathing encouragement, breathing love-messages. I feel them near. It is comforting in a strange city."

A couple of loud raps at that moment exploded behind Allingham's back, and irritated him intensely. He got up, and the Medium also rose on his short legs, holding out an unclean hand, which for some reason, quite other than that of its dirt, Allingham felt a strong aversion from touching. But he conquered his reluctance, though as he walked away he felt an unaccountable depression that was almost a disgust of life.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON coming down to dinner he was not greatly surprised to find Mr. Halvard's place vacant. Probably the young man had gone out to dine at a restaurant in order to avoid him. If that were so, the sooner they separated the better; and he wondered when Mr. Halvard would be returning to England. After all, his six weeks could not last for ever. In the meantime, what Allingham had got to do was to speak to Sophy and come to a clear understanding of the whole situation.

When he had finished his lonely repast he wandered into the smoking-room, and listlessly turned over an illustrated paper. He had flung it aside and was just lighting another cigar, preparatory to going out, when the door opened and Brian entered. The red boy came straight across the floor to where Allingham sat. Without speaking, he took a chair close by, and laid his straw hat, with an appearance of great carefulness, on the carpet beside him. As Allingham watched him, he knew that something had happened, but Brian seemed in no hurry to tell him what it was.

"Papa is not coming after all," he began, and

then immediately added, "Can we talk here all right?"

"How do you mean?"

"Will anybody come in?"

"I shouldn't think so. It is not an attractive spot." This was true, the room and all its furnishings being dismal as a dentist's parlour.

"He's put it off again. We had a letter to-day."

Allingham glanced at his own letters—two or three of a highly uninteresting appearance, which the hall-porter had just brought him, and which he felt no impatience to open. "What is the matter?" he asked.

"With papa?"

"No; with you."

Brian gazed at him solemnly before he replied, and his reply took the form of a question. "Where is Mr. Halvard?"

Allingham started. A wild idea, which he instantly recognized as absurd, flashed across his mind.

"I don't know. . . . I haven't seen him since this afternoon."

"And he didn't tell you anything."

"Tell me anything? . . . He never tells me anything."

"About going away. . . . He's gone. . . . He left this afternoon."

"But what for——?"

Brian shook his head. "He's gone to Pisa. I asked your porter here when I came in, and he told me he had

left for Pisa two hours ago. . . . He wanted to be recommended to an hotel there, and the porter wired to engage a room for him."

On this Allingham's eyes met Brian's in a long, searching gaze. "But do you mean that he's gone—not to come back?"

Brian nodded.

The further question that rose to Allingham's lips died without having been spoken, and the boy went on hurriedly, "We didn't know anything about it till this afternoon, or this morning—I'm not sure which. . . . I didn't see him: I was out. Not that I wanted to see him. I always hated him."

His face had flushed, and his eyes shone with an expression of mingled rage and contempt, which revealed a good deal to Allingham. As often before, so now, in the silence that ensued, there seemed to pass between them all, or more than all, that words could have conveyed.

"Perhaps he was obliged to go," Allingham suggested lamely. It was only a little tribute to appearances, for he knew that Brian knew.

"They won't tell me anything," the boy pursued, speaking quickly, in a low voice. "Nobody says anything when I am in the room. When he called, when he said good-bye, he did not see anybody but Sylvie. That is, if he *did* call. He may only have written to her. It was Aunt Sophy who told us—about his having gone away."

"Are they—is everybody——?"

“ I haven’t seen Sylvie, except at dinner to-night. . . . She doesn’t say anything. Don’t you see how horrible it must be for her ? How can she explain ? And mamma keeps on talking and wondering, though Aunt Sophy tries to stop her. Everybody really understands except mamma, who keeps suggesting that we might ask him over to Ireland when we go back. It is all horrible for Sylvie.”

“ But how do you *know* ? ” asked Allingham, nervously.

“ I know—I know. You will know, too, when you see her.”

“ See Sylvie ? Is she—— ? ”

Brian regarded him absently. “ What ? . . . You must come to-morrow. You will be able to talk to her. The others are different. . . . ”

“ How can *I* talk to her ? I am comparatively a stranger.”

“ You’re not,” the boy protested passionately. “ You’re the only one really who isn’t a stranger. You understand. She knows you understand. I am no use, and must pretend that I see nothing. . . . And I had even stopped saying that I disliked Mr. Halvard,” he finished, with a strange little laugh.

Allingham suddenly found words. “ What do you *know* about Mr. Halvard ? ” he demanded, with a certain harshness.

Brian gazed at him mournfully for a moment or two before replying.

“ I know that he has run away ; that he has drawn

back. But he might have gone sooner; he might have gone without first having made sure that—that we wanted him to stay.”

“You think he doesn’t care?”

“Not enough, I suppose. We are different, I dare say, from the people he has been accustomed to. We haven’t been to Oxford. We aren’t grand or rich or—I don’t know what it is. . . . Perhaps it is Mrs. Leslie. He has been to see her nearly every day, and they talk about things together. She pretends that he has shown her a new way of looking at life.”

“How do you know?” Allingham mechanically repeated, though he was conscious that the question had now begun to sound like a refrain.

“I know what I’ve heard and seen in our own house. I’m not a fool. She’s going to Pisa too, if she hasn’t already started.”

“How do——Who told you that?”

“Nobody told me. I feel it. She’ll go; she’ll go.”

Allingham was silent while he looked at his young companion with a dawning perception that they were talking too freely. He hesitated on the words he was about to utter, but he had already gone so far, and Brian seemed to have guessed so much, that there was little use in keeping them back. “I may as well tell you that Mr. Halvard mentioned to me once that he believed a clergyman had no right to marry.”

Brian was not astonished,

“That is what they talk about,” he said, dejectedly, —“ he and Mrs. Leslie. She tells him what a beautiful soul he has ; what a beautiful life he leads ; how she has been ever so much better since she has known him. She said the same kind of thing to me, and I was only a kid—and not even a particularly nice kid. Of course, with me it wasn’t about religion she talked, but—— You remember the sickening stuff I made you listen to that Sunday in Siena ! Well, you can imagine what it was like when I was with *her* ! When she had done yarning to me I used to lie awake and think what a fine chap I must be. And on the last evening of all—— Phh !” His disgust was inexpressible.

Allingham, however, was thinking of something else. “Supposing he really——” He stopped short, and then went on with a curious impatience : “ I don’t believe he cared a straw for Mrs. Leslie. He only went to see her because he was worried, and wanted to have his conscience bolstered up, poor devil ; not because he had any high opinion of her. He had more insight than that. . . . And somehow his having left in such a hurry seems even to prove——” He paused again, as if he hadn’t quite decided yet what it *did* prove. “ He may have gone simply to turn the question quietly over in his own mind. He may intend to come back.”

“ Oh, he won’t come back,” said Brian with conviction. “ Don’t you see that even if Sylvie knew he cared for her she could do nothing to bring him back. She would even help him to go. She would tell him to

go, she would make him go, if she believed he believed it was his duty. She is that sort. I know what she's like."

Allingham said nothing, and the boy went on, as if he had been thinking it all over for days back. "She has a way of idealizing people, and the more rotten they are, the more she likes to trust them. Just because Mr. Halvard was so full of himself, and talked such a lot, she thought him wonderful. I don't understand why that sort of thing should have gone down with her, but it did. She's got an idea about him now, that nothing will ever alter. You and I don't count. We're not great men with great souls. He tried to talk to me once in that fashion, about something he called Purity. He seemed to take it for granted that I had a rather nasty mind, and must be warned of all the dangers it was pretty sure to lead me into. He nearly made me sick, and I pretended I didn't know what he meant, until he got mad and was almost going to hit me. But he never tried it on again. . . . In a way I can't help feeling frightfully *glad* that he's gone. That is, sometimes I'm glad, and sometimes I'm angry."

Allingham looked at him doubtfully, but he could think of nothing to say. It seemed to him that Brian must know of his own attachment to Sylvie, or he wouldn't have spoken as he had spoken. But if he knew, for how long had he known, and how had he guessed it? Had he guessed it at Siena—or even earlier? Had anybody else guessed it?

"I must go back," the boy said, "or they will wonder what has happened to me, and ask questions."

"Shall I come with you?"

"Whatever you like. Mamma, of course, will be there."

"Well, I will come part of the way in any case."

They went out together, and Allingham went all the way, though he did not go in. It would be better to wait till the morning, when he could see Sophy by herself. Besides, he wanted to think things over. Brian, for some reason, now that he had poured out everything to his friend, had suddenly become so shy and reserved that Allingham could scarcely drag a word out of him.

But as they stood on the door-step he abruptly asked: "Will you be going to the Boboli Gardens to-morrow, Mr. Allingham?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Sylvie will be there, I am sure. She often goes there with Graf, and I am sure she will go to-morrow."

"At what time?"

"In the morning. Any time before lunch."

CHAPTER XXXVI

HE did not in the least expect to receive a letter from Mr. Halvard, though on coming downstairs, after a restless and sleepless night, he went to the office to inquire if one had arrived. There was nothing, and when he had finished his coffee it was still too early to go to Casa Grimshaw. His fellow-guests, indeed, were only beginning to straggle down, singly or in couples, with their Baedekers in their hands or pockets, their opera-glasses and umbrellas, all ready for the passionate pursuit of art. Allingham, reclining in a wicker arm-chair in the hall, his soft black hat tilted over his eyes, must have presented an odd enough appearance at this hour, which was an unusual one to choose for a siesta.

At ten o'clock he decided that he might pay his visit, and went out. He wanted particularly to see Sophy, and he congratulated himself on his good luck when he found her alone. She was standing at a table, arranging flowers in a vase, snipping their stems with a pair of scissors, and looking very much as usual.

"I'm glad you called, Bennet," she said. "We have missed you during the last few days, and were beginning

to think all our friends had deserted us. Don't mind my hat ; I'm not going out. I have just come in. I went to buy these flowers at the little English shop at the corner—you know the one. They're rather dilapidated, I'm afraid, but they were all I could get. I asked the woman—more in the way of conversation than anything else—if they were fresh, and she answered, “ I shan't deceive you ; they are not.” What is one to do when people are so distressingly honest ? I felt I simply *had* to buy a few, though I knew they'd worry me every time I looked at them. An Italian would have told me that she'd gathered them herself, five minutes ago, in her own garden, and I should have been perfectly happy.”

“ I was afraid I was too early,” said Allingham. “ I had no idea you were so energetic in the mornings.” He picked up a yellow-covered railway-guide that was lying on the table, and regarded it dejectedly, with its suggestions of Pisa and Mr. Halvard.

“ What have you been studying this for ? ” he presently asked, conscious of a nervousness he had not anticipated.

“ I don't know. I rather like railway-guides. Besides, we have been talking of wintering in Rome.”

He stared. “ In Rome ! ”

“ Yes.”

“ I thought you were going to winter in Florence. Your plans seem always to take me by surprise.”

“ Oh, we'll not be so sudden about this as we were about Bruges. We'll have, for one thing, to get these

rooms off our hands. . . . I suppose you know that Mr. Halvard has departed ?” she added, with a snip of her scissors.

“ Yes, but I only found out last night. He didn’t say good-bye to me.”

Sophy administered another snip, and then stepped back to contemplate her floral decorations. “ It is evidently not his custom to bid farewells,” she said, with her head on one side. “ He hadn’t even the civility to say good-bye to us, though he lunched here the day before he left. Sylvie appears to have had a note from him ; that is all we know.”

“ Perhaps he was called away suddenly,” Allingham proposed, without conviction.

“ So that is the last of him,” Sophy concluded, ignoring this half-hearted suggestion.

“ Do you think he isn’t coming back, then ? ”

“ I do.”

“ Why ? ”

“ For one thing, because Sylvie says he isn’t ; and for another, because he ran away. That is what I like least about the business. Nobody could have forced him to stay against his will. He might have gone perfectly naturally, the recipient of all our blessings ; but this other manner of sneaking off is unpleasant ; it is even suspicious. It makes one feel inclined to count the spoons.”

“ What do you suspect, Sophy ? ”

“ That he said more than he intended to, and then took this brilliant way of getting out of it.”

Allingham gazed at the fussy little gilt clock on the mantelpiece. It had always irritated him. "Is that why you are leaving Florence?"

"You mean, are we going in pursuit? No, Bennet. The idea is a beautiful one, and does infinite credit to your delicacy, but it had not occurred to us."

"He was always here, wasn't he?" said poor Allingham, dismally.

"Yes; not quite so much latterly. But that week when you and Brian were in Siena he was never out of the house. Of course, we encouraged him. There is no use pretending we didn't. But our encouragement was very innocent, and he must have been a fool if he thought he had to run away from it."

"I don't think he was a fool."

"Then do you think we weren't innocent? Well, I don't think he was a fool either, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt."

Allingham made a movement of impatience, or perhaps of some stronger feeling.

"You do not like all this, Bennet? Yet I suppose you came to hear it."

"I didn't know what I should hear," he answered.

"Well, don't get cross. The really unfortunate thing is that the child seems to have cared for him. She has said nothing; but she looks wretched. . . . Of course she is young, and has plenty of time to get over it; but she looks positively ill. . . . Still, it is better that he should discover his mistake now, I suppose, than later on."

“ His mistake ? ”

“ Well, if he doesn't really care for her as much as he imagined he did, what else can you call it ? ”

Allingham groaned.

“ But she won't tell us anything. She pretends to regard the whole thing as perfectly natural, perfectly what everybody had expected; to treat it as if it were just such a matter as your and Brian's trip to Siena. Last night she went to bed early, but this morning she has gone out to give Graf his walk just as usual.”

“ You knew Mr. Halvard's views on marriage, I suppose ? That he didn't think a clergyman ought to marry ? ”

“ How in the world should I know his views ? I fancy, if he left the child, it wasn't on account of his views.”

“ I don't know. I don't think you understood him.”

“ But then you never think I understand anybody, Bennet.”

“ He was, in some ways, remarkable. I am inclined to believe that he *does* care for her. On that day of Mrs. Leslie's excursion I was certain of it. What does her mother say ? ”

“ The less her mother says about anything the better, as at present she seems only capable of saying the wrong things. Lucy never had a great deal of sense; but just now she is positively amazing. She keeps planning to ask him to the house as soon as they

get home. I think she was half in love with him herself. I must confess I liked him, too—in a way. We all liked him.”

“ Brian didn’t.”

“ Oh, but Brian likes nobody. He doesn’t count.”

“ I fancy he likes most things that are worth liking.”

“ Well, if that is another way of saying he likes you, we’ll let it pass. *You* liked Mr. Halvard, didn’t you ? ”

“ No ; I detested him.”

Sophy turned round at this. “ What on earth did you drag him about with you for, then ? ” she demanded sharply.

“ We got on very well till he came to Florence ; but here we saw too much of each other.”

“ Well, it can’t be helped now,” she sighed, relinquishing her flowers and sitting down in a chair opposite Allingham’s.

“ I feel in a way responsible for all this,” Allingham went on. “ It was I who brought him here.”

“ Oh, don’t start that, Bennet ! I have quite enough to worry me. And at any rate you warned us. I remember your talking to me about him on the very first night.”

“ What I didn’t do, and what I should have done when I saw him coming here so often, was to tell you of these extraordinary views he held.”

“ I don’t think it would have made the slightest difference. Sylvie, poor child, is as obstinate as a mule ; and her mother would never have forbidden him the house.”

“ A word from you, if it had come soon enough, might have made a great difference.”

“ Well, there’s no use going back over it all now. What is done can’t be undone. We must leave it to time. And if we go to Rome——”

“ I don’t believe in this plan of going to Rome,” said Allingham, impatiently. “ What do you expect Rome to do for you ? ”

He had risen, and he listened to the rest of Sophy’s explanation while he grasped the handle of the door. “ It will be a change, a distraction,” she said ; “ there will be more to do. There’s absolutely *nothing* to do here, except look at pictures. Sylvie herself wants to go. I could see that when I mentioned it this morning. . . . But I hear Lucy in the distance. You’d better fly while you have still time. Come and dine with us to-night, and we can talk things over.”

Allingham turned the handle and held the door slightly ajar. “ I’ll come if I can,” he said, “ but I won’t promise. If I don’t come to-night, I’ll try to come to-morrow. You’ll not be doing anything before then, I suppose ? ”

“ No, of course not. Don’t be silly.”

“ Good-bye, Sophy.”

“ Good-bye ; and for goodness’ sake don’t worry about your responsibility, as you call it. You had no more to do with the matter than the Man in the Moon.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

HE passed down the stone stairs and out into the street, where a few minutes' walk brought him to the Boboli Gardens. Here he proceeded at random along the quiet, winding, somewhat dingy paths, under the nearly naked chestnut trees, by dry fountains and discoloured statues. He appeared to have the place almost to himself, save for a few children who were playing about the amphitheatre terraces. The melancholy of approaching winter hung over everything ; was in the dampness of the air, in the bareness of the trees, in the faded tints of the draggled, neglected grass. If Sylvie were in the garden he could hardly miss her, he thought ; but he was by no means sure that she would be here. Moreover, would she want him ? He had nothing but Brian's word for it, and Brian might be quite mistaken.

He reached an open glade, carpeted by thin yellow grass, and surrounded by chestnut trees, whose fallen, unswept leaves rustled beneath his tread. And there, on a stone bench, he saw her, with Graf lying at her feet. In the stillness of the gardens she had heard his step, and her grey eyes looked straight into his as, in defiance of all regulations, he came to her across the

grass. Graf rose lazily and wagged a languid tail, recognizing a friend, but one of minor importance, who did not live in the house.

“I’m afraid I’m disturbing your solitude,” Allingham said. “Do you mind?”

“I am very glad. . . . I have not been here long. They happened to be opening the gates when I was passing, so I came in.”

Her face was pale, but he had been prepared for this, and what really struck him about her more than anything else was an impression of an extraordinary courage in the face of life. It was there in the soft, wonderful smile with which she greeted him, it was there in the way she met his eyes, so frankly, without embarrassment, though she must have known he knew. Allingham was glad she did not mention Mr. Halvard’s name, for he had feared that she might think it necessary to do so. All he wanted was to make her feel that she was perfectly safe with him, that there was no need to pretend to be bright and gay, no need to pretend anything; and it seemed to him that the only way he could do this was by talking to her quietly and simply of the things they had always talked about together. It was curious how his own tardy love affair had dropped into the background. It was there still, but he could cover it over with the deep tenderness that her unhappiness awakened in him.

“You find it cold? Shall we walk a little?” he asked, as Sylvie shivered slightly.

“It is rather cold.”

They got up and walked down a narrow path between tall laurel hedges that grew high above their heads. The sun at that moment came out from behind a cloud, and gilded the faded grass and trees, the weather-stained marble of a broken urn.

"If we go to Rome, Mr. Allingham," Sylvie said suddenly, "won't you come too?"

"You haven't decided to go, have you?"

"Mamma and Aunt Sophy were talking about it. I don't mind whether we go or stay; but when we do go, I want you to show Rome to me, as you did Bruges and Florence—that is, unless you have something to keep you here."

"No; there is no reason why I should be here any more than anywhere else. That is the rather dubious position I am always in."

"You promise, then?"

"Yes, I promise."

"I suppose we ought to see Rome before we go back. I don't know when we shall be going back. We only came away for six months."

"You should wait till the end of spring."

"Should we? I am getting rather tired of it. If we were going home for Christmas I think I should be quite glad. I don't think the others would be really sorry either—except Brian. But it would be hardly fair to him, when he enjoys it so much, would it? It is different, of course, if you are very fond of pictures and all that; but I don't think I really can be. I like looking at them now and then, but I know I don't

like them in the way you do, or in the way Brian does. And then, there's nobody to take care of papa. If I could only get mamma and Aunt Sophy to stay on with Brian and allow me to go home by myself, I think that would be best of all."

"But it would be a pity, when there are so many places you haven't seen yet. Rome and Siena and Venice and Assisi, and some of the little hill-towns—they are all as different as possible from each other and from Florence."

They turned into the main path, and at the same moment saw two ladies coming in the opposite direction—Mrs. Leslie and Mrs. Gregg. Allingham raised his hat and Sylvie bowed. The girl would have passed on, but Mrs. Leslie, with a brilliant smile at Allingham, stopped her, holding out her hand.

"How fortunate!" she fluted. "I so wanted to see you, Miss Grimshaw, to ask you to bring your mother and Miss Kilronan to tea this afternoon. And Brian; you must bring Brian: he's such a dear boy, and so amusing! I'm afraid he's angry with me about something. I met him yesterday, and he would hardly speak to me. What do you think I can have done, Mr. Allingham, to offend him? I'm sure I can't guess, but I'm so sorry, whatever it is. Do tell him that I'm sorry, Miss Grimshaw, and make him come."

"I'm afraid I mustn't promise for him," Sylvie replied, quietly. "He usually has innumerable plans that nobody else knows anything about. But I will

tell him. I am sorry if he was rude to you. I am sure he did not intend to be."

"Oh, of course he wasn't rude," Mrs. Leslie cried in dismay. "I never for a moment intended you to think such a thing. I can't imagine him being rude. But he is cross with me about something. I know he is. He is charming when he is cross—it somehow suits his red hair. You don't mind my calling his hair red, do you? You know I simply dote on red hair, and I would dye my own if it weren't black. But I'm afraid it wouldn't take the colour. Do you think it would, Mr. Allingham? It is you who are rude, Mr. Allingham—dreadfully rude." Her dark, dewy eyes reproached him, and her painted lips formed a little pout. "Why do you never come to see me? You haven't been once. I think you are very unkind. Mr. Halvard was the only one who came without waiting for a special invitation. I so admire Mr. Halvard—spiritually. There is something so bracing about him, so austere. I'm sure *you're* not a bit austere, Mr. Allingham; but still I'll forgive you. Only you mustn't be cynical and sarcastic. It's not good for me: I enjoy it too much. Don't you think Mr. Allingham is dreadfully cynical, Miss Grimshaw?"

"I can't say I've noticed it," Sylvie replied. At the mention of Mr. Halvard's name she had blushed painfully.

"Well, perhaps he isn't to you. He must keep it for me. I don't think that's fair of him. Mr. Halvard told me he was cynical. Perhaps that has influenced me. I'm so easily influenced. I may count on you all

then for this afternoon? Do tell me that I may. And I really think Brian ought to forgive me."

"I'm sorry I can't accept for the others; I have no idea, you see, what engagements they may have."

"Well, *you* will come at all events, Miss Grimshaw—Sylvie? May I call you Sylvie?" she appealed charmingly. "I think we've known each other quite long enough for that. I always say that a week abroad is worth a year at home, so far as getting to know people is concerned. And you'll come too, Mr. Allingham, I hope? Now, don't say you can't, because I won't listen to you if you do. I'm sure you're going to invent some fib. I can see it in your eyes, and I warn you beforehand that I shan't believe it."

"Then I needn't perjure myself any further," Allingham laughed.

"Well, if it's not to-day, remember it must be to-morrow or the day after, for I don't know how long I shall be staying in Florence."

With Mrs. Gregg in her wake she passed on gaily, leaving a faint perfume of heliotrope behind her.

"You've let yourself in for it, I'm afraid," said Allingham, his dark eyes resting on the girl's face. "Why on earth didn't you say you couldn't go? You know you don't want to."

"I can never think of excuses when she talks like that. She makes me feel as if my head was going round and round. But if she imagines I'm going to call *her* by her Christian name!"

Allingham laughed softly. "I shouldn't think there was any necessity."

Sylvie was silent a moment.

"I promised, didn't I?"

"To call her by her Christian name?"

"No; promised to go to see her this afternoon."

"I'm afraid you did. But I should back out, if I were you. Send her a wire. I'll send one for you."

"I couldn't do that."

"Why not? You're certain to chuck her sooner or later, and you may just as well do it now."

"I never 'chuck' anybody, Mr. Allingham."

"Well, you can't go on being bosom friends with Mrs. Leslie, no matter what you say. You're too different."

"I was never bosom friends with her," said Sylvie, indignantly.

He smiled. "It's what she wants, all the same."

"I don't think so. What she wants is to ask questions."

"Then why go this afternoon? No acceptance of an invitation is valid unless the inviter leaves a reasonable loophole for escape."

"You wouldn't act on that principle yourself, Mr. Allingham."

"I never act on any other; and I'm going to act on it in this case."

"No; you refused."

"I told a lie."

Sylvie gave a little laugh. Slowly they retraced their steps, Graf pacing solemnly beside them. When

they reached their stone bench they again sat down. And suddenly Allingham saw that the girl's eyes were filled with tears, and that she was struggling against them, biting her lips. He took her hand very gently between his two hands, and they sat for a long time in silence. He had an immense desire to comfort her, to draw her to him, to stroke her hair, to let her cry upon his shoulder; but he could do none of these things.

"I am sorry," she said, when she had regained self-possession. "Mr. Allingham, I want to talk to you—I want to tell you—I *must* tell somebody. . . . It is horrible—it is killing me. . . ."

"I know—I know," he murmured. "There is no need to tell me."

"No, you don't know; it's not that," she wailed. "You think it is because he has gone away. . . . But it isn't. I could bear that. It is something far worse. . . . Mr. Allingham, it was I who drove him away. . . . I knew what he thought about—about getting married—that it was wrong for clergymen. And I asked him to give up his convictions. Do you understand? I asked him deliberately to do what he thought to be wrong! Oh, it was dreadful! And then—and then he left me." Her face was covered with a burning blush of shame. "I shall never forget it," she said. "Nobody else would have done such a thing. It was odious! unspeakable! How he must have despised me!"

"Nonsense," said Allingham, his face darkening.

"If he wants to despise anybody, he hasn't very far to look for an object."

"But *he* did nothing. You are not just to him. You don't understand," she moaned. "It was all my fault. I had talked with him about his ideals; I had sympathized with him; I had told him how beautiful I thought them. . . . And then, to come down to that. . . . Only I thought he cared; I thought he cared more than he did, and that I could help him, and that the other idea of keeping always alone, of being different from everybody else, was wrong. Why should he not be happy the way other people are happy? What harm would it do to his ideal?"

"Damn him!" said Allingham, briefly.

"No—no," she cried. "If you are like that I am sorry I told you anything. He was right. It was I who was wrong. I was selfish. I made him miserable. I pretended to him that I sympathized with everything. And I thought I did. I didn't realize the truth until he began to talk of going back to his work. Then I knew. And I couldn't let him go. Something made me—made me say things to him. But as soon as I had spoken I saw that it was all wrong. Only it was too late then. Oh, it was dreadful! horrible! If only I could have died just at that moment. But now—now I will never even see him again. I don't want to see him again. I couldn't, after what has happened. He knows he cannot trust me; he knows what I am like. And I might have gone on being friends with him; we might always have been friends, just the way you and

I are. That is what he wanted ; he had often spoken about it."

Allingham sat silent. He still held her hand, and from time to time he gently stroked it. He saw that a passion of shame was torturing the girl as much as, or more than, anything else ; but the words of consolation that rose to his lips were so feeble and banal that he could not utter them. Yet he felt that the mere fact of her having unburdened herself to somebody had brought her relief. For a long time they sat there, with the sun on the faded grass before them, and Graf lying asleep at their feet.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE train for the past two hours had been rushing through the darkness, and when he emerged from the station at Pisa, it was into a dimly-lit city that seemed almost uninhabited. He hailed a carriage, and drove through roughly-cobbled, empty streets, of which he could see little, for the Pisans evidently retired early to rest, and seized the opportunity to economize in the matter of light. Illumination, so far as Allingham could judge, appeared to be left largely to the moon, who was performing her task erratically, from among floating wreaths of fantastic cloud. They crossed a bridge and turned to the left along the river front. The Arno once more, but, at this hour, black and unrecognizable.

Allingham dismounted at the hotel, and from inquiry learned that Mr. Halvard was still there. He had gone out after dinner, the man informed him, and had not yet returned. Whether there were any other visitors it would have been difficult to guess from the empty and shrouded appearance of the place. Allingham was shown through a series of lofty, vast, untenanted rooms, in one of which he allowed the porter

to leave his bag. The electric light formed a circle of radiance about the tall, curtained bed, but the rest of the huge apartment was lost in shadow, and when he opened the doors, of which there were two, it was to peer into other vast dim chambers exactly like his own. The room was airy and intensely quiet ; and through everything else Allingham had a vision of the exquisitely consoling stillness of a night passed there. The silence, deep and sleep-inviting, was already all about him, like a great, still bath, and he felt a temptation to allow himself to sink down into it there and then, so soothingly it caressed his nerves, jarred by several wakeful nights, and by the jolting and rattle of the railway journey. The huge pale bed had the sleepy suggestion of some gigantic poppy ; the deep wide soft pillows seemed drowsy with long, dreamless slumbers. But it was only a little after nine o'clock, and Allingham felt that he ought not to put off the performance of his task. He sighed, washed the dust of his journey from his face and hands, and went out to stroll about the town for an hour, by which time Mr. Halvard would surely have come back.

He turned to the right, almost at random, following what appeared to be the one illuminated and animated street. Quite suddenly it ended, and he came out into the open space of the Piazza del Duomo, having left the town behind him ; and in the moonlight he walked over faded grass that was like a soft gray carpet beneath his feet. Before him was the Cathedral, on his left the Baptistery, and on his right, white and ghostly

against a black velvet sky, rose the famous Leaning Tower. Whatever it might prove to be in daylight, it was now strangely impressive, with its many columns mounting up, tier upon tier, into the darkness. The thing, to Allingham's sense, had a beauty, a loneliness, and in its intense quiet seemed to throw back the sounds coming from the street as rocks throw back the sea. Often enough he had seen it pictured, when it had struck him as little more than a gigantic ivory toy; but now, in the night, it had an immense white stillness that awed, that almost overwhelmed. It stood there, like some symbol of eternity watching an ephemeral world, proud, indifferent, gazing on into a shadowy future.

Allingham passed slowly over the faded, silver-gray meadow, that was like some visionary garden of sleep. In the soft drowsiness of the night air he could, or imagined he could, taste the salt of the sea. And behind the three marvellous buildings that brooded over this dreamy solitude was the long white wall of the Campo Santo. It was as he approached this enclosure that he became conscious that he was not the only noctambulist wandering here. His fellow-loiterer, who was also alone, was leaning against the wall. There was something familiar in the outline he presented, which caused Allingham to draw closer in the hope of finding him to be Mr. Halvard. Nor was he deceived. It was indeed Mr. Halvard, and he returned Allingham's greeting indifferently, without any surprise in his voice, but with a coldness, an aloofness, that revealed how little he relished this interruption of his lonely thoughts,

In the moonlight his face was strikingly pale, and his whole appearance was listless and woebegone in the extreme.

“I may as well tell you at once that I have followed you here,” Allingham said. “The fact that you made no secret of where you were going to seemed to imply that you were indifferent in the matter. Of course my conduct may strike you as officious and impertinent, but it is not primarily on your account that I am here.”

“I don’t know why you are here, I’m sure, and I don’t think I very much care. You can have nothing to say to me that I haven’t already said to myself a thousand times.”

“I am here because I have a very deep regard for Miss Grimshaw,” said Allingham, simply.

Mr. Halvard broke into a harsh and unexpected laugh. Then he turned away impatiently. “There is no use in discussing the matter. You yourself told me that I could not stay on in Florence. What else was there for me to do, then, but go?”

“In that case I don’t know why you stayed so long,” returned Allingham, bitterly. “In other ways you seem to have no difficulty in making up your mind.”

“I am ready to admit that I was weak—miserably, criminally weak—if it gives you satisfaction to hear me say so. You can call me by any name you like and I won’t resent it. You don’t imagine that I am here for my happiness. I suppose even *you* can see that! The easiest thing for me to have done would have been

to stay ; the easiest thing for me to do now would be to go back."

" Will you tell me one thing ? Did you stay on after you knew Miss Grimshaw cared for you ? "

" How do you know she cares for me ? And what business is it of yours, anyway ? " Mr. Halvard asked, a light suddenly kindling in his eyes. But he recovered himself immediately, and it was in a tone almost of meekness that he said : " I came away as soon as I saw that we were not strong enough to be content with the only kind of love that it is right for me to give or to receive. Before that I believed that we might have enjoyed a higher type of friendship."

" Higher ? What can be higher than the natural love of a man for his wife ? "

Mr Halvard made no reply, but in his attitude there was expressed an infinite weariness of the whole scene.

" And you would have been willing to allow her to sacrifice herself to you and your precious ideals ?—to waste her life in that sterile, inhuman atmosphere, which nobody but a monster could breathe without suffocation ? Do you think she was born for nothing better than to grow old discussing fusty religiosities with you when you were tired and felt the need of admiration and encouragement ? My God, what a mind you must have ! You must either be mad or the most cold-blooded egotist that ever lived ! "

" I gave you permission to abuse me," said Mr. Halvard, " and now that you have done so, perhaps

you will go away. It is impossible for you to understand; therefore I do not blame you. Only, if you really think I am what you say, I do not see why you should have troubled to come after me, or why you want me to go back."

"You might have left before it was too late."

There was a moment's silence. Then Mr. Halvard said: "I could not go back now, even if I knew that to be true."

"Do you really care for her?"

The young clergyman swung round, his face very white. "I do not know by whose authority you are here, but, judging from the unspeakably bad taste of the idea, I should say it was your own. And now I beg of you to leave me. I have always disliked you intensely. Perhaps, if you understand that, you will see how unbearable the present conversation must be to me."

"Your liking or disliking me has nothing to do with the matter," answered Allingham, in a low deep voice. "I saw her to-day. She has altered, even in the few hours since you left her. If you do not love her, then I have nothing more to say: but if you do, and are sacrificing your own happiness and hers to a fanatical idea, then it is my duty to try to make you see your wickedness."

"You have no right to talk to me like this," said the young man passionately. "Do you think Miss Grimshaw would welcome such ill-bred meddling? I ask no more of her than I ask of myself. I never made

love to her ; nothing of that sort ever passed between us. I have nothing to reproach myself with, except that I estimated human nature too highly. I did what I could as soon as I realized the danger." He broke off with a little groan, and all at once Allingham became conscious of his extreme youth.

He was silent. He felt powerless. Never before had he comprehended how utterly two natures might fail to touch each other at any point, to understand each other even dimly. There was an icy barrier which he could not pass, and behind this barrier the soul of the young man beside him lived and suffered, moved by influences he could never feel, by an ideal he could never grasp, by thoughts and convictions and sympathies he could never comprehend. He could see them ; he could gaze at them from every side ; but he could never really know them. The soul that had conceived them appeared to him strange and distorted, but he had no standards by which to judge it. It was alien to him as the soul of a water-sprite, or as that of a being from another planet. He felt angry in a kind of hopeless way, but he was no longer sure that Mr. Halvard was heartless and selfish. He might be neither of those things ; and certainly the strange beauty of his face seemed incompatible with any sort of baseness. Even the little mannerisms, the primness and sedateness, that on their first acquaintance he had found rather attractive, had dropped away. He saw that they had been only superficial ; for there was nothing to suggest them in the man beside him now. On the

contrary, what was suggested was a strength, a singleness of purpose, apparently invulnerable, and which, under other conditions, Allingham could quite conceive of himself as admiring. He did not even think that Mr. Halvard had done what he had done for the sake of his own soul. The motive lay much deeper than that. At that moment, oddly enough, he found himself liking his enemy better than he had liked him for a long time. He was suffering, and Allingham did not want to see him suffer—he was too young.

“Do you mind if we say good-night here?” Mr. Halvard asked suddenly, with an unexpected mildness. “And I think it had better be good-bye.”

“I have heard your last words then?”

“I can't see that it will do any good to repeat them.”

“None, if a mere theory is more to you than human happiness. It is only a pity that the other person should have no such consolation to fall back upon. . . . I had, perhaps, better warn you that I am staying to-night in your hotel, but we need not see each other, and to-morrow I shall go back to Florence.”

Mr. Halvard did not answer. He seemed once more to have become wrapped in his own thoughts, and after a brief pause Allingham turned away, leaving him all alone.

CHAPTER XXXIX

HE breakfasted in his own room, and, coming out into the mild, still air, made his way again in the direction of that corner of the city which he had visited on the previous night. To be sure he found it less impressive now, but it had, this morning, a tranquil, melancholy beauty that perhaps made up for more awe-inspiring qualities. The time-toned, marble buildings, mellowed and coloured to the softest whites and grays, rose from the green meadow in a kind of dreamlike loveliness. Allingham did not enter either the Cathedral or the Baptistery, nor did he climb the many stairs of the Leaning Tower. He had not lingered in Pisa to make a closer acquaintance with its monuments, but simply to be quiet with his own thoughts. He had no need, indeed, to hurry back to Florence, for he had no tidings to bring. His journey had failed of its object as completely as ever journey had; yet on the whole he did not regret having made it, and it would always be a secret. Possibly it was the influence of the spirit of this place, from which all the turmoil and passion of life had retreated, like an ebbing tide, that had caused his mood to fall into a sort of grave tranquillity that

might, had he examined it, have seemed hardly in keeping with the failure of his mission. But was not that just the last, subtle, intangible charm of Pisa—that it would deal gently with all kinds of failure, that it would round off the sharp, raw edges of life, and soothe the sense of sorrow by sinking everything into a dreamlike haze? And as he wandered over the sunny meadow he had an odd feeling that he had been here before, long ago, and that he would return at some later date. It came to him, this strange intuition, as if by a reversal of memory, enabling him to look into the future, as he looked into the past—with the same sense of familiarity, of recognition.

The brown houses, with their green shutters and red roofs, the empty, mouldering, sun-baked palaces, the empty squares and vacant streets, had all contributed to this effect, were all, somehow, as well known to him as if they had been built within his soul. The damp, languid, placid air floating up from the sea; the yellow waters of the Arno; the outline of the hills that sheltered the city, no less than its high walls, from boisterous winds—all melted into an atmosphere of peace.

He entered the Campo Santo and loitered within its shadowy cloisters that were built in delicate stone arches about an open, grassy court. The court just now was a well of sunlight, and Allingham had it to himself. He did not look at the famous frescoes—he was in no mood for frescoes—but he abandoned himself simply to the mellow tranquillity of the place, its

somnolent air, its charm of a vague and dreamy past. Time seemed to have dealt gently and lovingly with this little watching, listening city; each stain, each fleck of mossy green or gold, seemed to have been laid there like a caress. And if Pisa had the air of watching and listening, it was for very attenuated ghosts, for the faintest of faint echoes, that the attentive, the sympathetic visitor could only become aware of by suffering himself to acquiesce in its languor, by allowing his thoughts and feelings to tone themselves to the minor, melancholy key in which all was cast. The attentive visitor would choose such a warm, sunny corner as Allingham had chosen, and bask there like a lizard.

“The sun is set; the swallows are asleep;
The bats are flitting fast in the gray air;
The slow, soft toads out of damp corners creep——”

So, he remembered, Shelley had written of it, but it was not thus that it appeared to him. He sat down on the sun-warmed steps, and gazed at two slender cypresses in black silhouette against the pale marble, and his spirit in a moment was at Florence, among those who were, after all, the one true interest of his life. For he knew well enough that the life he might live at Pisa would not be really life, but only a ghostly haunting of the threshold of the world, and charming only if he could leave it at will. In itself it would be cold as death, its poetry would quickly fade—at the best it would be but the drowsiness that preceded the final sleep. . . .

And he sank into a dream. Without his being conscious of it, all that had intervened between his arrival at Florence and his interview with Mr. Halvard last night dropped away. The whole episode of Mr. Halvard disappeared and had no part in the visions that glided softly before him in the morning air, and in the silence—that intense Italian silence—never broken by the song of a bird. His thoughts hovered over the future, brushing it with soft wings that gleamed and glimmered in the sunshine. His love was there with him, happy and perfected, as love is in dreamland, where all is innocent and beautiful and unspoiled, where no harm can be done or suffered, and the pain of life is forgotten.

CHAPTER XL

SYLVIE sat with an open book before her on her knee. The glow of the fire lent a beautiful but deceptive colour to her white face, and she seemed to be wrapped in thoughts that were suggested by the softly dancing flames. In reality she was only wondering if Allingham would come that evening; for he had not come last night, nor this morning, nor this afternoon. . . .

“ I wonder if Bennet Allingham will be round to-night,” Miss Kilronan said suddenly, breaking the silence.

Brian looked up from the books that were spread out on the table before him. “ I'd better go and hunt him up, perhaps ? ”

“ You've got your work to do, dear,” his mother murmured from behind the pages of her magazine. Her pretty, faded face, perfectly expressionless, was lifted for a moment before she returned to her story. She read everything indifferently, so long as it was something that could not possibly be taken seriously, but she remembered nothing of these eternal, sugared tales of idiotic lovers. Her method at home of getting a book was to ask Mr. Bell, her favourite librarian, for

something "really nice." And Mr. Bell was always able to find something "nice," and also to remember if Mrs. Grimshaw had read it before, since she had an unfathomable but pronounced prejudice against re-reading.

"Work!" Brian exclaimed. "What is work compared with Aunt Sophy's desire for a game of bridge? Send me to fetch Mr. Allingham, Aunt Sophy."

"I'm sure, for all he's likely to do!" Miss Kilonan declared. "You may dismiss this farce of Brian's studies from your mind, Lucy. Until you get someone who has more control over him than anybody seems to have at present, he will do nothing."

"What's the use of my killing myself studying when I'm going to be planked down in a rotten office in another month or two, with a fortnight's holidays in the year?"

"You should want to study for its own sake," said Mrs. Grimshaw, not very convincingly. "Because you are in business, that is no reason why you should allow yourself to lapse into a state of ignorance."

"You have too high an ideal of your son, mamma. Chaps in business don't study, unless they happen to be freaks. When I come home in the evenings I shall have my dinner and then go *out*. It won't be to classes at the Technical Institute either. It will be to knock about the streets, theatres, music-halls, billiard-rooms, smoking Woodbines, talking to girls in tobacconists' shops, missing the last tram, and coming home late."

His mother gazed at him with mingled astonishment and alarm.

“Run and get Mr. Allingham,” said Miss Kilronan.

“I wonder what made him say all that?” Mrs. Grimshaw murmured, after Brian had disappeared.

“I don’t know,” Sophy replied. “Very likely most of it is true,” she added tartly. “But, you needn’t let it worry you. Brian isn’t a fool. He is the only result of your marriage I have ever envied you.”

“You do say nice things, Sophy, at times!”

“I’m not mealy-mouthed, if that’s what you mean; and, please God, I never will be.”

Mrs. Grimshaw retired to the shelter of her magazine, feeling that everybody had been very “queer” for the past day or two.

Sylvie, lost in her own meditations, had paid no attention to what was going on. She was not even aware that her brother had been sent to fetch Mr. Allingham, though she was waiting for him and hoping he would come. Somehow, she felt safe with Mr. Allingham, felt the relief that springs from having nothing to conceal.

And her thoughts relapsed into that dreary little circle wherein, ever since Mr. Halvard’s departure, they had revolved. “Yes; he had done right to go!” she repeated to herself, with a pitiful lack of conviction, as she sank deeper and deeper into the unhappy reverie against which, all day long, she had been struggling. But there were so many things to remind her of him—and she was so tired. . . .

She remembered the day, the hour even, when she had first known how much she loved him. It had all been vague and unrealized before. But on that late afternoon, coming down from Fiesole in the drizzling rain, it had suddenly seemed to sweep over her in a great wave that had borne her out and out, over fathomless depths, far beyond any possibility of return. She remembered his face, a little pale ; and in his dark blue eyes something, some restless unspoken thing, that faltered and pleaded, trembled and hesitated. . . . And all around, the darkness of approaching night seeming to draw them closer together. . . .

CHAPTER XLI

SHE had not heard her brother go out ; she did not hear him come back ; but on his entrance the others looked up and saw that he was alone.

“ He’s not there,” the boy said quietly, and proceeded to gather up his books.

“ Where are you going, dear ? ” Mrs. Grimshaw asked him, while Miss Kilronan, who had pulled out the bridge table in anticipation, looked disappointed and even annoyed.

“ I think I’ll work in my room,” Brian answered.

He went out with his books under his arm, but when he reached his own room he simply tumbled them in a heap on the dressing-table, and, without turning on the light, lay down on his back on the bed. He had lain there perfectly still for perhaps half-an-hour, when he heard the sound of light footsteps in the passage outside, followed by the noise of a door opening and closing. Instantly he sat up, but for another minute or two made no further movement. Then he slid slowly to his feet and went to Sylvie’s door.

She was standing in the middle of the room when he entered, as if she had come upstairs for something and had

forgotten what she had come for, or been fascinated by the darkness that seemed from outside to press and surge against the window with a sinister suggestion of life. Absorbed by whatever it was that held her, the girl did not look round at the sound of the opened door.

“Sylvie!” he said.

At that she turned, and a faint flush came into her cheeks.

“Are you going to bed?” he asked.

“No; it is quite early, isn’t it? I just came upstairs for some note-paper.”

Brian had walked over to the window, and he now pulled down the blind. With his back to her he said softly, “Mr. Allingham will not be coming to-night.”

“Not coming! How do you know? He is sometimes later than this.”

“Yes—but I went to the hotel for him. Aunt Sophy wanted him to play bridge. He was not there.”

There was something in the gentleness of his voice that touched Sylvie extraordinarily, and for a moment, as she realised the delicacy and loyalty of his affection for her, even the figure of Mr. Halvard, and all his beautiful words and thoughts, faded. Her eyes rested on her brother. “Did they tell you where he was?” she asked.

“No.”

Then, in the silence that followed, suddenly she blushed crimson, for it seemed to her that Brian knew and that he had told her, that he had cried aloud, “He has gone to Pisa, to Pisa.” Yet nothing had been

spoken, he had not even looked at her, his eyes were fixed on the carpet at his feet as he sat there on the side of the bed.

Her blush passed slowly, but the boy had seen it, and he had coloured too. If only he had not been a boy, if only he had been her sister, then she could have flung her arms round his neck and cried ; and the relief, the relief that that would have been ! But instead, they could only sit there side by side, while the room seemed brimmed up with all that was unspoken. A touch, and the whole thing would have come crashing down upon them ; but that touch was not given ; and hours and hours seemed to pass, and yet Brian, when she looked up, was still there, the light shining on his red hair, as he sat gazing down at the carpet, his hands, on either side of him, on the pale counterpane.

“ Are you going downstairs again ? ” he asked, “ or shall we read something ? Let us read something aloud.”

“ What shall we read ? ” She glanced at the table where two or three books lay ; an odd assortment ; the Pater Mr. Halvard had given to her, Mason’s *At the Villa Rose*, the October number of *The Royal Magazine*.

“ I have a book of Mr. Allingham’s here. I don’t know whether you will like it—it is poetry.”

He took it from his jacket pocket, where he had been carrying it all day. “ Mr. Allingham lent it to me when we were going to Siena. Shall I read some of it ? ”

Sylvie nodded, and he began :

“ ‘Sailorman, I’ll give to you
My bright silver penny,
If out to sea you’ll sail me
And my dear sister Jenny.’

‘Get in, young sir, I’ll sail ye
And your dear sister Jenny,
But pay she shall her golden locks
Instead of your penny.’

They sail away, they sail away,
O fierce the winds blew !
The foam flew in clouds,
And dark the night grew !

And all the wild sea-water
Climbed steep into the boat ;
Back to the shore again
Sail they will not.

Drowned is the sailorman,
Drowned is sweet Jenny,
And drowned in the deep sea
A bright silver penny.’”

He read on and on, one poem after another, and Sylvie, sitting with folded hands, appeared to listen. She knew he was trying to amuse her, and she did her best to follow the words, but her attention faltered, and both their meaning and their music escaped her. She had never cared for poetry ; in the form of literature, at all events, it had no existence for her. But her brother was too young to understand that. To him beauty was a thing we can always share—above all, with those we love ; since who should comprehend it if not they ?

CHAPTER XLII

ALLINGHAM had been away on little sketching tours several times, and for this reason he had hoped that his expedition to Pisa would not excite remark ; nevertheless, as he went next morning to call at Casa Grimshaw, a number of difficulties occurred to him which he had not thought of before, and which he did not see very clearly how he was to avoid. Moreover, if the truth by any chance should come out, he was afraid they would think he had taken too much upon himself, that his plan, however well-intentioned, had been unfortunate, and merely humiliating to the girl on whose behalf it had been devised.

As he reached the corner of the street, he saw Miss Kilronan and Brian coming out of the house, and he hastily retreated into a picture-shop which happened to be close at hand. He sought refuge in the remotest corner of this establishment, and looked at ugly, ill-done copies of pictures by Raphael and Andrea del Sarto with a distracted eye till he thought the coast must be clear. By that time he had been obliged to purchase one of these works, he was not quite sure

which. He paid for it, gave his address, and came out into the street again.

He hoped Sophy had not seen him, but he wasn't a bit sure that she hadn't—she had very sharp eyes. He would not have avoided her in this ridiculous fashion, he told himself, had he not been taken un-awares. But Sophy had a way of springing questions upon you, which, if you were the artless possessor of a secret, was positively unnerving, and immediately suggested either lies or flight. Allingham, at sight of her, had suddenly discovered that *his* lies were not ready. He did not know why, exactly, but the entire episode of his pursuit of Mr. Halvard had begun to press upon his conscience with an alarming heaviness, and he had even begun to ponder the advisability of making a clean breast to Sophy of the whole thing.

It struck him that his early visit would appear rather aimless. It *had* no particular aim, other than an intense desire to see Sylvie. For he had nothing to tell her, nothing except a rather weak and silly story of a sketching tour, which at present, he perceived, could hardly fail to appear singularly unconvincing. He found her alone, seated close to a newly-lit fire, that crackled and flamed in the huge grate. She looked up on his entrance, and he was shocked at the white face she turned to him, so listless and lifeless it had become, though as soon as she recognised him a faint flush stained its pallor. Her wide gray eyes met his, and he wondered if she had guessed where he had been, for he thought he read a timid question in them, a

question that she could not put into words, and that he feared to answer. But she smiled, and her voice had all its old grave sweetness as she wished him good-morning. Now was the time for his sketching-tour story ; yet he only sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the hearth and said nothing. . . .

Mrs. Grimshaw bustled in, with a fussy, "Aren't you going to get ready, Sylvie?" She caught sight of Allingham, who had risen. "Oh, good-morning, Mr. Allingham ; I didn't see you at first. I'm so blind!" She shook hands with him in an absent-minded fashion, and began to move about the room, peering here and there, pulling out drawers, turning over magazines.

"What are you looking for, mamma?" Sylvie asked, at length.

"My book ; I can't find it anywhere."

"What book is it?"

"I forget the name. It's one I got yesterday. I began it last night, and I know I left it here when I went to bed." She lifted and replaced again the two or three volumes that lay upon the table and which she had already examined several times. Sylvie was bent down a little over the fire, her hands spread out to the blaze.

"I wonder what has become of it?" Mrs. Grimshaw repeated, querulously. "*Somebody* must have taken it."

"Did you ask Aunt Sophy?"

"Aunt Sophy's out. Besides, I *know* it is here." She opened the piano, and even looked behind the curtains,

“Do you want it now?”

“I want to know where it *is*,” Mrs. Grimshaw replied, petulantly. “Are you *cold*?” she went on, turning to where Sylvie sat huddled close to the fire. “It seems to me to be quite mild to-day. Aren’t you going out?”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” the girl replied.

“I’m sure it wasn’t worth while lighting the fire. You needn’t bother about me if Mr. Allingham wants you to go anywhere. I can easily go alone. . . . Oh, I forgot about the dressmaker! . . . You might get up a minute, dear, when you see me looking everywhere. That is the chair I was sitting in last night.”

Sylvie got up, but the book was not in the chair. The girl thought for a moment. “Perhaps Aunt Sophy took it back to the library. She and Brian were going there.”

“It’s too provoking of her if she did! She might have known I couldn’t possibly have finished it.”

“But if she took it at all, it must have been by mistake; and, at any rate, you can easily get it out again.”

“How can I get it out again when I don’t know its name, or who it was by?”

“The man will have a note of it,” Allingham interposed. The extraordinary triviality and lack of imagination displayed by poor Mrs. Grimshaw were beginning to get upon his nerves, and his voice betrayed his impatience.

But Mrs. Grimshaw was only half satisfied, and decided to have another search.

Allingham stood twirling his hat. "Well, I must be off," he jerked, seeing no possibility of getting the girl by herself.

"You're not going, are you, Mr. Allingham?" Mrs. Grimshaw cried at once. "Why not come shopping with us? We have an appointment with the dress-maker, but it won't keep us very long. I'm sure you must think us dreadfully inhospitable!"

He smiled. No anger could survive the invariable kindness of Mrs. Grimshaw's manner. "Not at all," he said. "I only came in for a few minutes. I knew you would be going out."

"I must get ready," said Sylvie. "Good-bye for the present, Mr. Allingham."

"Good-bye." He followed her with his eyes as she went from the room.

"Did Sylvie tell you that we had decided about Rome?"

"No; we were not speaking of it."

"Sophy and Brian have gone this morning to see about sub-letting our rooms. Sylvie says you're coming too. I do hope you will."

He stood uttering commonplaces for a little longer, and then made his escape.

CHAPTER XLIII

By the early afternoon post he received a letter from Sylvie, the first letter she had ever written to him. It was short, but it gave him great pleasure. It ran as follows :

“DEAR MR. ALLINGHAM,—You must have thought me very strange to have received you as I did this morning, though I know you will forgive me. I want you to come to-night, because we have quite decided about Rome, and will be going as soon as ever we can. I want you to come too, as I told you that day in the Boboli Gardens. Didn't you promise? Excuse this scribble, but mamma is getting impatient, and is still talking about her book.

“Yours affectionately,

“SYLVIE GRIMSHAW.”

Yes ; he would go to-night. And in the meantime he would take a long walk.

CHAPTER XLIV

WHEN Allingham returned to the hotel his boots were white with dust, and he felt agreeably tired. . . . His feeling of restlessness had gradually worn off during the long tramp from Fiesole, and at dinner he held an animated and cheerful conversation about Rome with the head-waiter, who turned out to be a native of that city.

The night into which he stepped was fine and starry, and he did not hurry, so that it was almost nine o'clock when he found himself mounting the stone staircase at Casa Grimshaw. He had not reached the second flight, however, when he saw Brain running down to meet him. The boy stopped him.

"Don't go in yet," he said excitedly. "I was waiting for you. I would have gone to meet you only I thought I might miss you. . . . I wanted to tell you. Mr. Halvard is here ; he is up there now."

Allingham stood aghast, his hand clutching the black iron baluster, a darkness surging up before him. In one sickening flash of disappointment he understood that he had not really wanted Mr. Halvard to come back, and with its crumbling into dust he saw, too, how

all that day and all the previous day he had suffered himself to build up a new hope on the flimsy fabric of the young clergyman's renunciation. He understood the feeling of peace that had come upon him in the Campo Santo at Pisa on the morning following the failure of his mission ; he understood the restlessness that had led him to walk so many miles that afternoon. Face to face with the naked truth at last, he felt a sense of desolation so complete as to be almost stupefying. For a moment he faltered, for a moment his impulse was to turn, then and there, and go back the way he had come ; but in the end he rose to the situation. He could hear Brian's unspoken trouble in his voice, and the boy's presence somehow braced him as he mounted the remaining steps, his hand on his shoulder.

He was struck, though it may only have been a creation of his fancy, with the air of brilliancy the room presented as he crossed the threshold. That same brilliance seemed to be reflected in all the faces that were turned to him as he advanced. Sylvie ran to meet him. " I'm so glad you came," she said, a beautiful blush sweeping across her face. She was utterly transformed as she held him there before he could pass on to the others ; her whole welcome of him seemed to beg him to be happy in her happiness. It was difficult to believe that it was the same Sylvie he had seen crouching over the fire that morning. Her beauty had recovered its old radiance, her happiness had a kind of innocent, childish frankness, unashamed as the sunlight. And he knew she was looking for a reflection of

it in his face, and he could only hope that his effort to deceive her was successful. It came to him that perhaps she had understood his errand, and was thanking him in the one way that it would ever be possible for them to allude to it. But she would never understand anything more than that. He had always known it, but he knew it now more than ever, as he pressed her hand softly and returned her smile, with his dark, sad eyes fixed on hers. All this occupied but a few seconds; then he was shaking hands with the others, with Mrs. Grimshaw, who was fussily elated, and with Sophy, who, too, seemed bent on offering slices of fatted calf to the returned prodigal. Only in the handsome face of the prodigal himself, in his clear, ice-blue eyes, as he turned to Allingham and took his hand, did the latter read a note of hostility. It amazed him; it even caused him to falter a little. And in the background Brian hovered uneasily.

Every time the boy's glance fell upon Mr. Halvard, Allingham saw a look of angry dislike come into his face. He understood it and regretted it; but even had they brought the best will in the world to bear upon the matter, he knew that it was hardly likely that Mr. Halvard and his prospective brother-in-law would ever get on well together. Allingham was glad that at that moment, in the full flush of the young clergyman's triumph, he himself should be so frankly relegated to the position naturally allotted to unimportant persons, for he felt unable to produce intelligible conversation. He was too bewildered by this return. He saw in it

nothing of weakness. As much as ever he recognized Mr. Halvard's strength. Against that particular kind of strength the generous, fiery indignation of the red boy, the brother, would be as nothing. And suddenly Allingham felt that he detested it. With a strange bitterness he thought how he had been the means of bringing about what he now dreaded more than he had at first dreaded the girl's suffering. Better that she should suffer than that she should be sacrificed to this spirit of cold and arid fanaticism. He had an overwhelming vision of his own sentimental stupidity, a sickening conviction that he had made a mistake. He prayed that he might be making one now, but as he sat there he was tortured by the idea that he was assisting at the first act of a tragedy he had himself been the means of setting in motion. Over its development he could have no control. It had already passed out of his hands. He would never even *see* the development, for he could not imagine himself a guest in Mr. Halvard's house.

Suddenly he became aware that they were discussing the visit to Rome, discussing the possibility of Mr. Halvard's being allowed an extension of leave. Mr. Halvard himself thought he might manage another week or ten days.

"Mr. Allingham is coming too," Sylvie cried, but he no longer detected in her voice, despite its eager friendliness, any urgent need for his presence.

"I think not," he heard himself saying. "There are one or two business matters which have cropped up

most annoyingly, and which may even take me back to America. It's a wretched nuisance, but what can one do? . . . I really ought to say good-bye now," he added, "for I haven't an idea when I may sail, or how busy I may be during the next few days."

But Sylvie would not hear of this.

"Well, if it's not good-bye," he said, smiling, "it must at least be good-night."

"But you've only just come!"

"I know I have. Appearances are invariably against me. Still, I thought I'd better look in to tell you about Rome. Of course if I change my mind—one never knows."

"You *must* change it, Mr. Allingham—if you possibly can."

"If I possibly can," he promised.

In the general excitement no very serious attempt was made to detain him, but Sylvie came with him to the door.

"I hope you will always be happy," Allingham said, as he lingered with her on the threshold, out of sight and hearing of the others. "I may say that, may I not?"

"Why, of course! It is very good of you. Those are my first congratulations." She smiled up at him.

He held her hand between both his for a moment as he answered, "At least you will get none that are more sincere." And suddenly he wondered if he might kiss her once, now, for the first time and the last, before

he went. He hesitated ; then he turned from her and passed down the dimly-lit staircase.

When he reached the street he heard somebody running behind him, and he knew that it was Brian.

“ I want to walk part of the way with you,” the boy said hurriedly.

He slipped his arm through Allingham's, and they walked in silence. When they had passed the Ponte Vecchio and were almost at the hotel, Brian said, “ You will write, won't you ? ”

“ Yes.”

They stood without speaking for a few moments by the wall of the river. “ Good-bye,” Brian then said, holding out his hand.

“ Good-bye.”

CHAPTER XLV

As he came in a man rose from where he had been sitting in shadow in the hall, and advanced to meet him. It was Flamel. The electric light fell directly on his large white face, and Allingham made a movement of impatience, even of anger. Why should he be dogged by this odious person, who appeared now to have been haunting him ever since that first evening when he had gone to his house? He felt a sudden rage against Mr. Halvard, who had, as it were, thrust the Medium upon him, while taking from him everybody else. He knew that Flamel's little black glittering eyes had already detected the mental agitation in which he was plunged, and under their impudent scrutiny he made a stride to the elevator, but the Medium followed him.

“What do you want?” Allingham asked, in a low voice.

Flamel began to apologise, but Allingham cut him short. “Say what you have to say at once. I can only give you two minutes.”

He took out his watch, and at the same time he felt the eyes of the hall porter and one of the waiters fixed

upon him with scarcely veiled curiosity. As Flamel still kept silent he rang the elevator bell.

"This is my address," the Medium murmured, holding out a card, which Allingham refused with a gesture. "Perhaps some other time I shall find you disengaged. . . . I have always hoped you would become interested. . . . If you do me the honour to call upon me—there are other things that might——"

Allingham stepped into the lift without looking round, and signed to the boy to start it.

He entered his room and switched on the light. There was a parcel lying on his table, and mechanically he opened it. It was the copy he had bought that morning of Andrea del Sarto's salmon-pink Saint John. He flung it from him, and sat down in a chair, without removing either his hat or the light overcoat he wore.

He sat there for a long time without changing his position, though it was not one which to an observer would have suggested comfort. As the hours passed, the lights in the rooms all round him were extinguished, till presently his alone burned, and a passer on the road below would have wondered who was sitting up so late. All sounds within the hotel had ceased long ago, and Allingham himself, for all movement he made, might have been asleep. But he was not asleep. In the uneasy, noisy night, broken every now and again by the voices of strayed revellers, or the rattle of a carriage, or the hoot of a motor, he went back over all the pleasant days he had spent since that morning in Bruges when he had found Brian drawing the gate-

way and singing as he drew. And then Sylvie had come in, and they had gone, all three together, through the old grass-grown streets, and the bright joyous spring of youth had seemed to come with all its generous warmth into his life. The room was full of memories that drifted before him as he sat there in the crude white light. He listened to Sylvie's voice; he gazed into her eyes: treasured words, treasured hours, returned to him, and he opened his heart wide to them; he pressed them to him, he clasped them and clung to them, for they were all he would ever possess. And even as he grasped at them they were already fading, slipping from him, eluding him; and a feeling of intense loneliness shut them out, as a cloud shuts out the sun.

His foot touched something: it was the pink Saint John, all glistening with varnish. He made a movement as if to get up, but his purpose wavered, and he sank back once more into his chair. His life seemed to have drifted away from him without his having attained anything. It was not so much that he had missed happiness, as that he had missed everything else as well. What a waste of time it had all been! —of precious years, frittered away, hour after hour, week after week, with absolutely nothing to show at the end of them, with nothing to look forward to but a lonely old age passed among strangers who would not care if he cut his throat so long as he did not do it on the premises, and had paid his bill first. What folly had been in that idea of coming to Europe, as

if by changing his sky he could change his soul! He recalled the visions and ambitions of his boyhood—the bright, foolish dreaming that had ended in this. “No more—no more,” he whispered, and an immense sadness descended upon him. He opened wide the shutters and looked into the darkness. “I shall never dream again,” he thought, as he leaned over the window-sill, while the night air blew in his face. “Nothing will ever happen again that matters. . . . There will never be anything more—never anything more.”

CHAPTER XLVI

“The sun is set; the swallows are asleep;
The bats are flitting fast in the gray air;
The slow, soft toads out of damp corners creep——”

It was true, true on this March afternoon. The air was gray; the sun, if it had not set, was at least invisible; the swallows, if they were not asleep, were dead; a cold mist had settled over everything, blurring the outlines of buildings and leaving their stones dripping with moisture. Allingham, crossing the bridge, walked quickly on his way back to his rooms, which he had left, only an hour ago, in the forlorn hope that it might be going to clear up. He now knew that it wasn't, and he felt depressed and infinitely bored.

“Within the surface of the fleeting river
The wrinkled image of the city lay,
Immovably unquiet, and for ever
It trembles, but it never fades away——”

That also was true. He put up his umbrella, for the mist was turning to rain, and as he did so he came face to face with another waterproofed and umbrellaed pedestrian, who, like himself, seemed hurrying homeward. At the corner of the market-place, however, her confidence apparently forsook her, for she

stood still, looking up and down the river, in evident uncertainty as to which direction she ought to take. Allingham advanced to her assistance, but at that moment she lifted her umbrella, and their eyes met.

“Bennet!” she cried gladly. “How perfectly extraordinary! I never even knew you were here! I thought you had gone back to America, and I shouldn’t have been here myself if Brian hadn’t worried me into it. Why did you not answer my letter?”

He smiled and coloured like a boy. In his surprise, and as he welcomed her, the weary expression passed from his dark eyes. “I intended to write, but I kept putting it off, in my usual way; just as I put off America itself, for that matter. . . . However, I really *do* sail next week.”

He spoke a little shyly, but Sophy was so genuinely pleased to see him that his feeling of uneasiness vanished.

“And you have been in Pisa all these months?” she asked, while she contemplated his slightly stooping figure with clear, kind eyes.

“Yes. . . . It is not as a rule so dismal as it looks to-day.”

“Extraordinary!”

He laughed. “Come in, Sophy, and let me give you some tea. I know you want tea, and my rooms are just here. They are over this shop.” His voice, his way of speaking, seemed to have grown quieter than ever.

“Do you know, I went to your hotel the very next morning, and found that you had gone and had left no address. It wasn't kind of you.”

“I sent them my address afterwards,” he said penitently.

Inside, a fire was burning, and a kettle puffed clouds of steam. Sophy took off her damp waterproof, and for a moment or two stood by the window-seat, looking out at the misty Arno.

Then she turned round to where Allingham was busying himself with the tea-pot. She took it from him and made the tea herself.

“How long have you been here?” he asked, following her movements with his eyes.

“We only arrived last night, on our way home—Brian and I, that is. The others left a month ago. We go on to Turin to-morrow morning.”

“And where is Brian now?”

“I expect he is waiting for me at the hotel. He went out after lunch to the picture gallery. I didn't go, because I am absolutely sick of pictures—you may as well know it first as last, Bennet. I have been buying novels to read in the train. The book-shops are quite good.”

“Yes. It is a University town. I suppose that makes a difference. . . . Haven't you been to see any of the sights yet, Sophy? Or are you sick of sights, too?”

“I am, though I still try to do my duty. We climbed the Leaning Tower this morning, and looked

round the other places. Our hotel is quite close. If we had only known you were here! Brian will be delighted. Didn't he write to you? I told him to."

"He did. I also wrote to him—twice, I think."

"He never said a word to us."

"He ought to have told you. I'm sure I must have sent messages."

She sat silent.

"Won't you take off your hat, Sophy, and make yourself comfortable?"

"I'm quite comfortable, thanks. Besides, I'm going back as soon as I've finished my tea, and you're coming with me."

He said nothing, but bent forward to stir the fire.

For a little, and while they drank their tea, they spoke of the others, and he listened to an account of their adventures in Rome. Then Sophy put down her cup. "Bennet," she asked abruptly, "why are you going away?!"

"Going away?" he echoed.

"Going back to America. Have you anybody to go to?"

He shook his head.

"Why don't you stay, then?"

"Stay here? In Pisa?"

"Not necessarily in Pisa; but stay with us. Come back with us to-morrow and stay with the Grimshaws. They'd be delighted to have you, and you can go and see your own people from there; and you can come to see me. I will write to them to-night."

He did not reply for a moment. Then he said softly : " But it would only be putting it off, wouldn't it ? I shall have to go back some time."

" But why ? Is there really any reason ? "

Again he sat silent before he answered : " No, not really."

" Why not stay with us altogether, then ? " Her voice had a gentleness that he had very rarely heard in it.

He looked up. " But——" he hesitated. Then he said simply : " Stay with *you*, do you mean, Sophy ? "

" Yes, with me."

Allingham's eyes turned to the window, where the light was fading. " I can bring—I can give so little," he faltered, at last.

" You are lonely. When I first saw you, you looked dreadfully lonely and—and tired. . . . It has all been so stupid ! " she continued impatiently. " I can't bear to think of your going on like this permanently. . . . Can't we be friends ? "

" We have always been friends."

Her voice softened. " Yes—from the very beginning. . . . We have that at least."

There was a silence.

" But you know—you know everything, Sophy ? "

" Yes, I think I know everything."

" And you would still be willing to take me ? "

She paused. Her eyes rested, with a beautiful and unwonted tenderness, on his dark, thin face. " I think we might build up something together," she

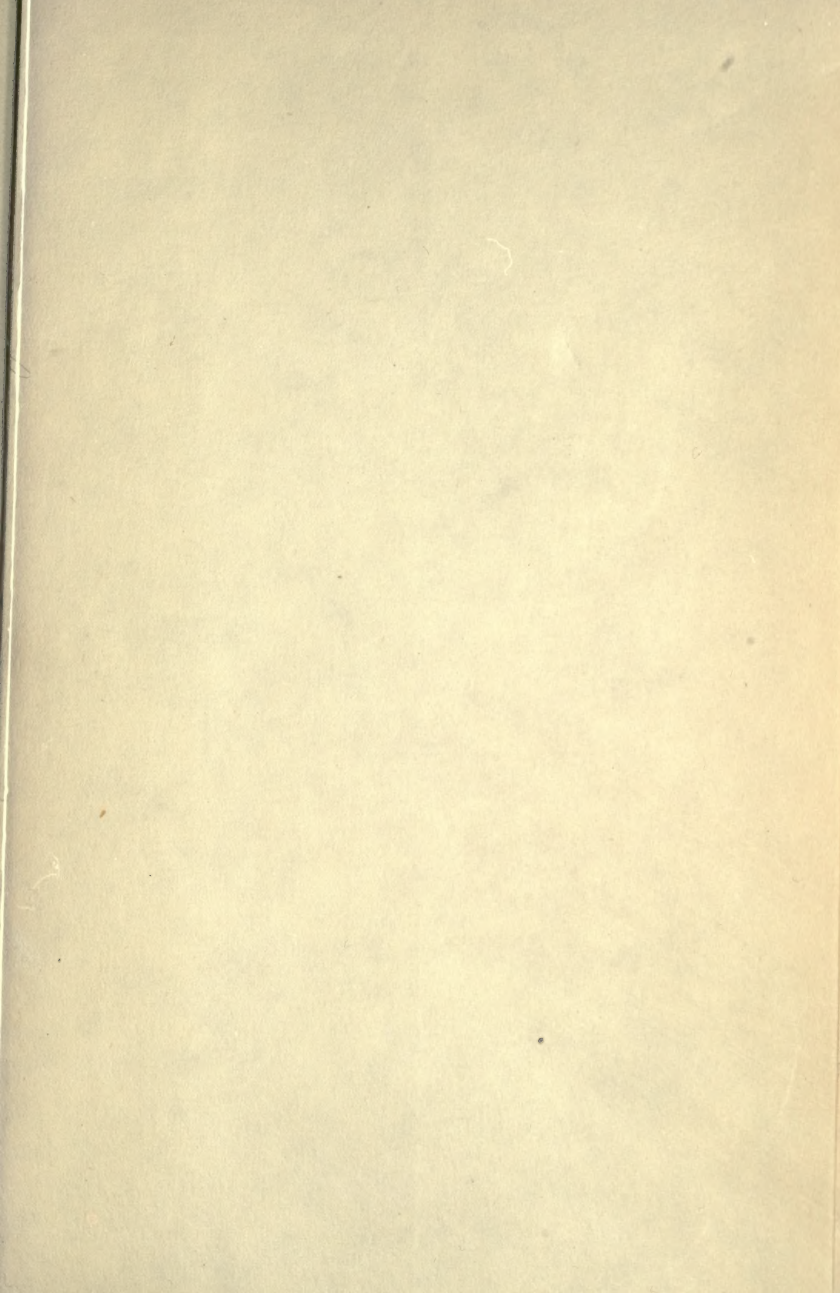
said slowly, "that would be much nearer to happiness than anything either of us is likely to find alone."

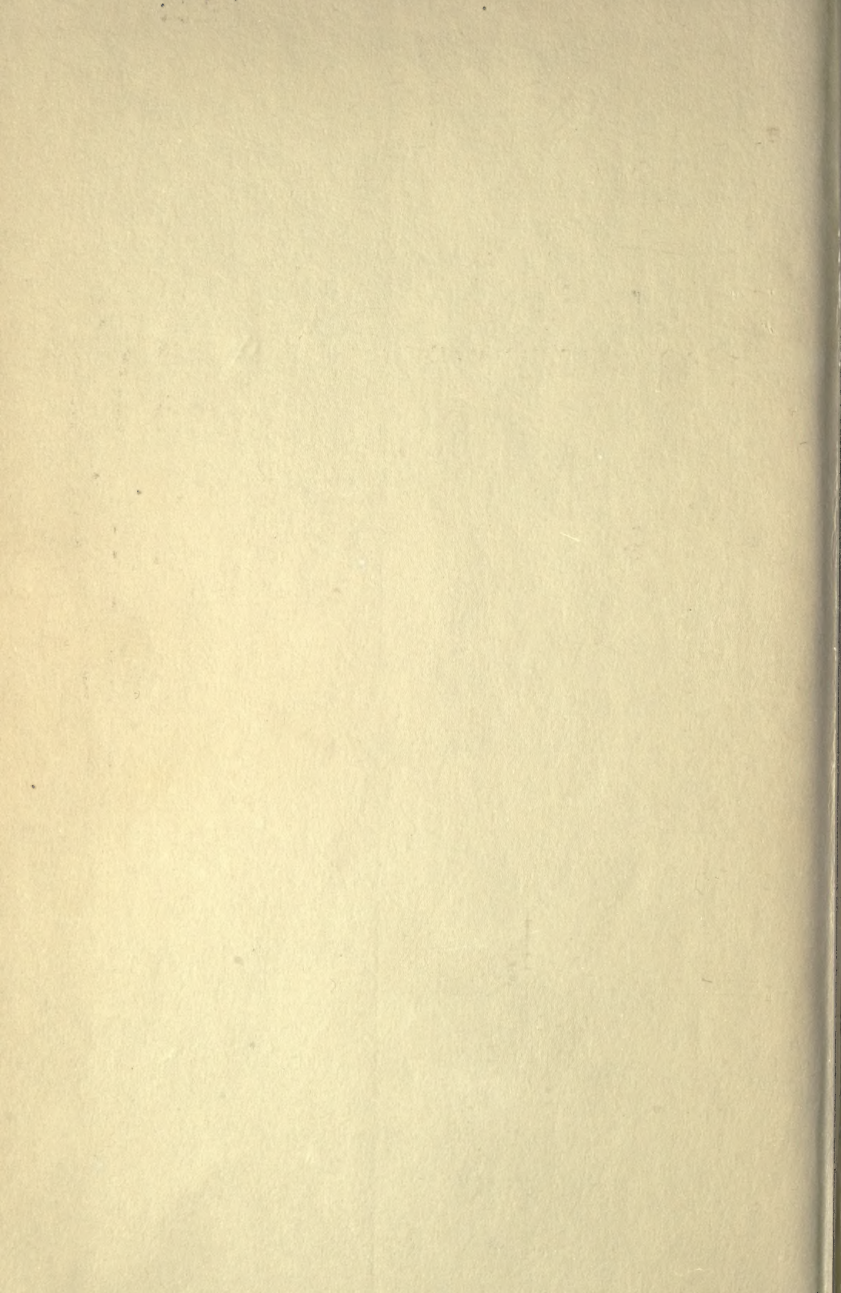
"I think so, too," he answered gravely.

She held out her hand, and, as he took it, it was as if they had sealed their compact. For a few minutes they sat without speaking. Then Sophy rose from her chair. "Come," she said, more lightly. "Let us go and find Brian. He will be wondering what has happened to me."

THE END







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